

A Review of Organization Humor: Concept, Measurement and Empirical Research

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Abstract

Along with the development of researches on Organizational Behavior, more and more scholars pay attention to the organization humor. This article firstly reviews the concept and measurement of organization humor, and then mentions some relevant researches. In the fourth part, this article lists some further advice which may be studied in the future.

Keywords

Organization Humor, Employee Attitude, Organization Effects

1. Introduction

Currently, more and more organizations have begun to focus on the atmosphere of team. Chan (2010) noted that pleasant working environment was conducive to the formation of positive organizational climate to attract and retain employees. Levine (2005) has showed that 18 - 25 years old persons inclined to work happy. In social activities, humor created a positive state of mind. People use humor to facilitate communication between the two sides. Humor can increase team cohesiveness, stimulate team creativity (Holmes, 2007) and promote organization development (Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). Warren and Fineman (2007) proposed that humor was an important means for the fight against organization silent. It has become part of the organization's benign climate regulation. At the same time, organization humor and leadership effectiveness are closely related. If the leader can correctly use humor, the leader will be considered as a "good" leader.

Although most researchers have shown that humor has played an important role in

all aspects of the organization, the empirical applications of “humor” in the workplace are still relatively small. It may be that previous studies have overlooked and limited by the situations factors (Westwood & Johnston, 2013). Nowadays, more and more companies are committed to building relaxed working environment, so it is important and significant to expand on the Organization Humor studies.

2. The Concept and Measurement of Organization Humor

2.1. Organization Humor and Humor

As early as 1972 year, Martineau has explained humor as that those interesting communication is humor. But Crawford believed that humor was a conversation which has positive impact on the audiences’ emotional and cognitive activities. Early scholars found that appropriate humor can help increase happiness (Kuiper & McHale, 2009).

Cooper (2005) pointed out that “organization humor” referred to the complex and interesting phenomenon among individuals for the purpose of understanding each other, but such an interesting exchange often with deliberate color. Romero and Cru-thirds (2006) is defined “organization humor” as an interesting communication and can have positive effects among individuals, teams and organizations. They further according to the “joke” divided by Dewitte and Verguts (2001) analogy for the organization humor division. They noted that successful organization humor have not only novelty but also within an acceptable range, as well as, they stressed focusing on the audience understanding of the nature of humor (Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). Lang and Lee (2010) showed that humor was an indirect and uncertain form of communication related body gestures and facial expressions composing the tacit knowledge common to the people involved.

Organization humor is as humor’s derivatives, it has covered humorous features such as both included an interesting communication, had positive impact and with certain novelty, but also it has its own characteristics. One situation is that humor is not the same due to different organizations have different organizational cultures. Second, organization humor is as a means of adjusting the organizational climate, positive organization humor can not only help companies create good organizational climate, but also to promote their own growth. But it is worth noting that not all humor can have a positive effect (Decker, Yao, & Calo, 2011). Sarcastic jokes of those words tend to adversely affect the efficiency of organization (Kauffeld & Lehmann, 2012). Based on this, combined with the above definition predecessors made, we defined “organization humor” in this study as that in certain situations, members of the organization want adjust organizational climate made some novel or interesting communication behaviors to affect other members’ emotion and cognition activities.

2.2. The Measurement of Organization Humor

Humor is a single structure at the early times, it also has grown tendency to explore the dimensions of multi-level on humor with further research. Due to different research

purposes, measuring on humor would be different. Depending on whether the humor is in favor of communication between leaders with employees, [Decker and Rotondo \(2001\)](#) divided it into positive humor and negative humor, [Martin et al. \(2003\)](#) designed HSQ scale (Humor Style Questionnaire) that divided into affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, Aggressive humor, and self-defeating humor. [Cann et al. \(2014\)](#) projected HCQ scale (Humor Climate Questionnaire) on the purpose of measuring the humor atmosphere of organization.

Humor Style Questionnaire compiled by [Martin et al. \(2003\)](#). He noted that humor consists of the following four dimensions: 1) affiliative humor referred to the story of those who organize social interesting, internally to understand jokes or well-inattention joke, humor usually sent message that these individuals will be considered non-threatening individuals, mainly for the amusement of others to enhance relationships; 2) self-enhancing humor was those individuals with an optimistic attitude towards life and they would not be frustrated in the face of the inevitable suffering; 3) aggressive humor was often hostile nature. In this kind of humor, it derived mild aggressive humor. It meant that others observed behavior which is the correct behavior but still humiliated, it will increase the cohesion of the team; 4) self-defeating humor, that is, those who wish to get others to accept but with the original purpose contrary to the humor, such groups typically self-deprecating, excessive self-deprecating ([Romero & Cruthirds, 2006](#)). This classification overcomes the past weakness that researchers have only considered the single dimension. This classification was more reasonable and reality ([Martin et al., 2003](#)).

[Martin et al. \(2003\)](#) extracted 60 items from previous studies. And after 485 subjects administered test, he eventually formed 32 items after data processing. There are eight items under each dimension. Items are such as that “I usually don’t laugh or joke around much with other people”, “If I am feeling depressed, I can usually cheer myself up with humor”, “If someone makes a mistake, I will often tease them about it”, “I let people laugh at me or make fun at my expense more than I should”. As [Romero and Arendt \(2011\)](#) pointed out that it was positively correlated between employees’ affiliative humor with colleagues’ satisfaction, while as aggressive humor was negative. [Martin et al. \(2012\)](#) found that it has been significant correlation between the using of the humor style with narcissistic personality disorder and Machiavellianism.

[Cann \(2014\)](#) designed HCQ scale which focused on how humor was perceived in the workplace as well as humor in interpersonal interaction. After 199 subjects were administered test, finally they formed sixteen items by four dimensions. Items are such as “Humor is often used to encourage or support coworkers”, “The humor used by my coworkers can often make someone in the group feel bad”. Four dimensions, respectively was positive humor, negative humor, out-group humor, and supervisor support. Internal consistency coefficients were 0.81 and 0.87, 0.83, 0.89. Cann further found that the higher the negative humorous was, the lower job satisfaction by using this scale. However, supervisor support can significantly predict employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment as a positive factor. Compared to the other two scales,

HCQ scale has been further developed, therefore, the application on HCQ scale required further studying. The two scales were put in the appendix.

3. The Effects of Organization Humor

Currently, empirical researches on organization humor are increasing more and more. It provides more theoretical support for managers and practitioners. Throughout the past literature, we can find that humor in organizational behavior studies is major on the individual level and organizational level. On the individual level, it focused on employee attitudes, perceived leadership effectiveness, and the relationship between leaders and staffs. On the organizational level, it pointed on creativity, team performance, cynical culture and dysfunctional resistance.

3.1. Organization Humor on the Individual Level

Hughes (2009) thought that although humor in many disciplines have been got great concern, but organizational behavior scholars had down little on humor. So he used humor as a moderator variable to explore the relation between transformational leadership and employee attitudes such as trust, organizational commitment and job satisfaction. After collected data from different sectors, He found that humor would moderate the relation between transformational leadership with employee trust and organizational commitment significant, but in the sense of identity and employee satisfaction is not significant. Kim (2013) investigated Seoul six hospitals, he found that humor can improve nurses' job satisfaction, so as to reduce turnover. But the role of humor on the working pressure was not significant, and this may be cause that the nursing profession itself has high risk and tension (Kim, 2013). Not only communication satisfaction, humor can promote performance. Jalalkamali (2016) has surveyed 375 employee and their supervisors in two of the biggest joint ventures in Iran. He found that humor have significant positive effects on contextual and task performance as well as on informational and relational communication satisfaction.

In the workplace, the impact of humor is also reflected on the assessment of leadership. Priest and Swain (2002) showed that there was high correlation between leaders' kindness humor with leadership effectiveness. Meanwhile, due that women began to enter into the workplace, the role of gender on organizational behavior researches had been more and more. Decker and Rotondo (2001) showed that the gender of managers will moderate the use of humor and subordinates' perceived leadership effectiveness.

LMX (leader-member exchange) theory has been stressed on the quality relationship between leader and employee, both in the work environment will form a special kind of social relationships. Wisse and Rietzschel (2014) did two studies to explore the relationship between the style of humor and LMX. They used Martin et al. (2003) humor style questionnaire to survey 88 leaders and 257 subordinates (to pair with), they found that employees own affiliative humor and aggressive humor can predict their relationship quality with leaders. Those people who often jokes more like their superior and respect their boss than the general staff, as well as, they would more spare no effort to

achieve organizational goals.

3.2. Organization Humor on the Organization Level

Organization humor and organizational creativity has also been empirical studies proved. [Lang and Lee \(2010\)](#) divide three dimensions according to the function of humor: liberating humor, stress-relieving humor and controlling humor. Lang surveyed 400 subjects and recovered 324 questionnaires. She found liberating humor and control humor with organizational creativity were significantly correlated, the former was positive and the other was negative. But the stress-relieving humor is not significant. [Szabo \(2003\)](#) compared humor and exercise with the psychological pressure, and she found that rather than exercise, humor had played an important role on relieve psychological pressure, but current whether it helps stimulate team creativity need to be further discussion.

Comprehension-elaboration theory emphasized that an individual would send humor signal depends primarily on how to understand the humor, the second depends on the audiences' behavioral responses after understanding humor ([Cooper, 2008](#)). A special sense of humor first need causing unpleasant reactions, in turn triggered cognitive activity after individuals understand, at the same time, the individual will be more profound thinking of the humor in this event. This theory can be applied to different environmental background, especially in the contemporary workplace under complex conditions. Not only organizational creativity, [Gozukara \(2016\)](#) has showed the effect of humor styles on the group cohesiveness of managers in terms of their gender. He found that the liberating humor, controlling humor and stress-relieving humor are positively associated with group cohesiveness. The relationship between stress-relieving humor and group cohesiveness among males are stronger when compared with females.

Organizational cynicism refers to negative attitudes towards employing organization, and along with these negative emotions, it may harm organization. [Gkorezis et al. \(2014\)](#) investigated the mediating effect of LMX in leader's positive humor and organizational cynicism. After collected the data of 114 employees, using multi-linear regression to find the result confirmed the hypothesis. Thus that the leaders' positive humor significantly negative predicted organization cynicism, leaders' positive humor will reduce cynicism attitude significantly, while LMX played an mediating role in the relationship between positive humor with cynicism.

[Romero and Cruthirds \(2006\)](#) pointed that aggressive humor can cause dysfunctional resistance in teams and organizations. [Goswami and Grossenbacher \(2015\)](#) concluded that: in the organization, the abuse leadership would have negative impact such as enhancing the dysfunctional resistance of subordinate. They included leaders' aggressive humor as moderating variable, designed a model of mediation moderation. After tested 235 full-time workers in the survey, they found that aggressive humor is moderated significantly in abusive leaders with employees' dysfunctional resistance, but the indirect effect is not significant, it may be that abuse leadership already contains most of the negative impact on the organization, so in this model the indirect effect was not significant.

It is worth noting that neither of individual or organization, researchers' on the distinguish of positive humor and negative humor has not stopped, as Malone said, "Humor is a double-edged sword".

4. Future Research Orientation

Although most researches on the organization of humor have demonstrated the importance of humor in organizational behavior, it comes with some limitations. Therefore, we believed that it should be studied deeply in the future.

First, the current research on organization humor is established under the Western cultural background, and the localization to fit countries' different culture has become a top priority. Secondly, humor in positive organizational behavior needs to be further deepened. Researchers in the past are mainly issued by motivation of employees or from personal characteristics of leaders, but the settings factors cannot be neglected. Third, discussion on negative humor also needs to strengthen, especially on the attention of the negative humor impacting on human relationships, thus affecting the efficiency of the entire team. Finally, previous studies have focused on leader's humor impact on the organizational relationship. In considering the top-bottom (leader to employee) relationship, we should also explore the transverse level (employee to employee, leader to leader) or bottom-up (employee to leader) organization humorous effects.

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