

Empathy, Styles of Humor and Social Competence in University Students

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Social competence is an important field of study as it encourages the development of important factors that support an individual to become a mature and productive member of the society. The research investigated whether empathy and styles of humor are the predictors of social competence in University students. Another objective was to find out gender differences in empathy, styles of humor and social competence. The sample included 186 university students, both male (n=93) and female (n=93) via multi-stage sampling technique. It was hypothesized that social competence can significantly be predicted by empathy (fantasy empathy, empathic concern, perspective taking empathy, personal distress) and styles of humor (affiliated humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating humor). Correlational design was used to infer the proposed hypotheses. Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980), Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin, Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) and Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis 1988) assessed empathy, styles of humor and social competence. Hierarchical regression analysis revealed that empathic concern and self-enhancing style of humor significantly predict social competence. No significant difference across gender was found in empathy and social competence among university students. However, “maladaptive styles of humor” were used more by male students as compared to female students. Implications for forthcoming research are hereby discussed.

Keywords: styles of humor; empathy, social competence, gender

Social competence is an umbrella term that requires more than social skills. It helps in initiating and sustaining interactions and positive relationships with others. Social competence promotes individuals to adjust and work effectively (Stichter et al., 2012). It is important to study social competence as it lays ground for a mature and conducive social life that is fulfilling and productive. Social competence is needed to live in this complex interconnected world and to remain socially adaptive and resourceful. The primary focus of the study was to investigate predictors of social competence in university students. Previous research endorses that understanding the emotions of others (empathy), and a sense of humor evokes positive attitudes in people; that are required for social competence (Yip & Martin, 2006). It is imperative to study social competence as it helps to deal with emotional management, conflict resolution, ability to maintain relationships, etc. Emotional management, conflict resolution, and ability to maintain relationships are important in all spheres of life, especially in maintaining positive social relationships at home as well as at work life (Yip & Martin, 2006).

Empirical evidence from numerous researches endorses that styles of humor, social competence and empathy are positively associated (McAndrew & Frank, 2018; McGee & Williams, 1991; Stump, Ratiff., Wu, & Hawley, 2009). Socially competent youth is empathetic and tries to communicate by involving cognitive and affective components. Empathy is “the ability to identify diverse emotions, to take another’s emotional perspective, and to feel with that person, or respond emotionally in a similar way” (Berk, 2013, p. 417). In fact, use of humor during interaction is in itself a type of social skill that increases social competency and facilitates positive interactions (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992; Martin et al., 2003). Social

competence has found to relate with constructs like humor (Masten, 1986; McAndrew, 2018), intimacy (Mutthaya, 1987), trust (Hampes, 1999), and ability to sustain healthy marriage (Ziv, 1988). To sum up substantial empirical evidence suggests a positive association between humor and empathy.

Social competence was studied in a sample of 136 young people aged 16 and 22 years. The theoretical framework utilized by the researchers was drawn on a social problem-solving model related to the model provided by Crick and Dodge (1994). According to this theoretical framework, young people identified as socially competent had better ability to understand and adopt the view point of the other person, this was the reason they tend to score higher on empathy (Bach & Kratzer, 2016).

Rogers (1980) defines empathy as a tendency to identify and understand cognitions and emotions of others. Empathy according to Rogers is an ability to identify and understand the emotional state of the other person. Empathy predicts the core factor involved in diverse human behaviors, including pro-social behaviors like altruism (Batson, 1987; Hoffman, 1997). Rogers (1980) further explains that dimensions of empathy are associated with social competence. Among these dimensions, the major focus is on how one can sense the feelings of the other person and how they comprehend thinking and feelings of the other person. According to Roger empathy is basically based on comprehending feelings and intentions of others within a frame of reference, by understanding assumptions implicitly, in other words to give meaning to what the person says and does. Thomas, Jansch, and Niedermaier, (2006) presented their integrated working model of empathy that specifies cognitive factors that influence emotional process that in turn lead to the development of empathy (Hoffman., 2001). Shamay-Tsoory (2009) highlighted cognitive components and elaborated empathy as an emotional reaction that was concerned with the other person’s situation as compared to that of one’s own situation. Various tools have been developed to measure empathy. For example, Davis (1980) formulated a questionnaire that measured empathy. According to him empathy is more focused on person’s feeling of care, regard and consideration. Empathy is based on the warmth that is shown towards the people especially when they are under distress

and are facing stressful situations. Among the subscales of the measure of empathy, the “perspective-taking scale” of the tool measures the degree to how much a person can comprehend and assume another person’s view. The “Personal Distress Scale” (Davis, 1980) is helpful to measure one’s own level of anxiety and uneasiness when she/he notices another person in a stress provoking situation.

Studies have also indicated gender differences in empathy (Salovey, Mayer & Caruso, 2002). Hoffman (1977) was of the opinion that empathy can best be described as an emotional response that acts as a mediator between one’s own and feelings of another person and is more commonly seen in women compared to men. Women have greater ability to detect emotions and sense cognitive and spatial perceptions of another person. These researchers identified the basic difference between men and women on the basis of affective and behavioral components; women have greater ability to enter into the world of the other person and feel their emotions, while men believe in helpful behaviors.

Socially competent individuals are found to have more empathy (Salovey, Mayer & Caruso, 2002) as well as humor (Yip & Martin, 2006). Humor is a multi-dimensional construct and not a single trait. Humor has been found to be a persistent trait of personality, and not a state (Martin, 2005; Ruch, 1998; Yip & Martin, 2006). Humor has been defined in different ways by researchers, some believe that it is a cognitive ability involving creativity. Feingold and Mazzella (1993) identified humor as a creative and reproductive ability that depends on cognitive processing. Ruch and Hehl (1998) defined humor as an aesthetic response and named it enjoyment humor. Few researchers are of the opinion that humor is a typical behavior pattern including skill to laugh, amuse others or get amused by others (Craik, Lampert, & Nelson, 1996). Ruch and Kohler (1998) define humor as a temperamental trait which is related to one’s emotion e.g. Cheerfulness. Few other researchers are of the opinion that humor is a positive response (Svebak, 1996) still others of the opinion that it is a coping style or a defense mechanism to overcome stress (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986).

Freud (1928), Allport (1961) and Maslow (1954) have theorized that typical styles of humor can affect psychological and social functioning of an individual (e.g., affiliative or perspective taking humor) while sardonic or avoidant humor can be damaging for the individual. Adaptive or adjusted forms of humor play vital role in inducing positive mood. Moreover, adaptive form of humor is linked with optimism, satisfaction with relationship, self-esteem and availability of social support. On the contrary, non-adaptive or maladjusted styles of humor are associated with negative mood, relationship dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and non-availability of social support (Martin, 2007; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003).

Martin et al., (2003) categorized humor styles as four distinct dimensions, in which “affiliative” and “self-enhancing styles of humor” were found to enhance well-being, whereas aggressive and self-defeating styles were potentially considered as unfavorable types of humor associated with poor wellbeing. The affiliative style of humor is the tendency to be humorous with others by telling them hilarious stories, comments, jokes which in return facilitates in building relationships. Self-enhancing style of humor is basically a positive viewpoint towards stressful situations, it is an adaptive strategy for coping with stress and stressful situations. “Self-defeating humor” is the ability to use humor at one’s own expense, through self-disparaging and being mocked by others. On the

contrary, aggressive humor is an individual’s predisposition to demean or degrade others by making fun of them.

Leung (2007) conducted a study in Hong Kong to find out association among four types of humor styles as proposed earlier by Martin et al. (2003), namely “affiliative”, “self-enhancing”, “aggressive” and “self-defeating”. “Humor styles Questionnaire” (HSQ) and “Cross Cultural (Chinese) Personality Assessment Inventory-II” were used in the study. The study was conducted on a sample of 130 students (60 male and 40 female university students) from Hong Kong’s City University. Results highlighted significant gender differences on aggressive humor, greater use of aggressive humor was found in male university students.

Empathy and humor are linked with healthy interpersonal and social relationships. Empathy has been found to help sustain interpersonal relationships, as it is a major factor of emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Salovey, Mayer & Caruso, 2002). Humor enhances the ability to initiate and maintain friendships and other social relationships (Izard et al., 2001).

Hampes (2010) explored association between humor and empathy. He investigated the association between different types of empathy and diverse styles of humor in a sample of 103 undergraduates (28 male students, 75 female students). These undergraduate students were assessed with humor style questionnaire and interpersonal reactivity index. Significant positive association was found between affiliative humor and empathic concern. Self-enhancing humor and empathy were found to be positively related with each other. Moreover, a negative association was found between self-enhancing humor and personal distress. Likewise, a negative association was found between “aggressive humor” and “perspective-taking” and also between “empathic concern” and “personal distress”.

Researchers from the field of social psychology have highlighted that interpersonal competence and social skills are required for proper social functioning. (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg & Reis, 1988). Argyle (1967) was of the opinion that social skills are needed for socially competent behavior within all types of interpersonal interactions. It is important that verbal and nonverbal information must be clearly sent, received and controlled for fruitful social interactions (Riggio, 1986).

Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg and Reis (1988) identified five types of interpersonal abilities associated with psychosocial functioning. According to these researchers starting interactions and maintaining relationships, assertiveness in one’s rights, processing of information of personal nature, emotional support of close ones and conflict management in interpersonal relationships were associated with proper psychosocial functioning.

Schuler and Barthelme (1995) tried to figure out the difference between social competency i.e. direct and indirect. Schuler and Barthelme argued that social competency that is direct includes the ability to synchronize and solve conflicts and work in harmony. Indirect social competency on the other hand is associated with empathy, sensibility and interpersonal flexibility. Blunt (2005) established varied fundamentals of social competence like resilience, sense of humor, empathy and empathetic concern in maintaining relationships with family and friends.

Yip and Martin (2006) examined associations between “humor”, “emotional intelligence” (EI) and “social competence”. The researchers took a sample of one hundred and one undergraduate students. Positive humor and cheerfulness were found positively related with different dimensions of social competence. Results

further revealed that negative styles of humor and bad mood as a trait were negatively associated with social competence.

Wong (2010) studied humor, loneliness and social competence among 338 young adults from Hong Kong and Hangzhou. "Humor Styles Questionnaire" (Martin et al., 2003), "Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire" (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988), and the "Emotional and Social Loneliness Scales" (Wittenberg, 1986) were used to assess the study variables. Young adults living in Hong Kong were found to use more maladaptive humor styles as compared to their counterparts from Hangzhou. More maladaptive styles of humor were utilized by men compared to women. A positive association was found between adaptive styles of humor and social competence, both these constructs had a negative relationship with loneliness. "Affiliative" and "self-defeating styles of humor" mediated the association between loneliness and social competence use of maladaptive and the effect of social competence on loneliness was moderated by self-defeating humor.

McGhee and Duffey (1987) investigated predictors of humor in a sample of 446 college students. Bem Sex-Role Inventory and measures of social skills/orientation were used. Self-monitoring of expressive behavior and assertiveness turned out to be significant predictors of humor. Social self-esteem, machiavellianism, masculinity and femininity did not turn out to be significant predictors of humor.

Considering the literature at hand (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992; Martin et al., 2003) and the theoretical perspective provided by Bach and Kratzer (2016). The study was designed to investigate whether social competence can be predicted by empathy and styles of humor in university students. The secondary objectives of the study were: 1) to find out the relationship among empathy, humor and social competence; and 2) to investigate differences across gender among the variables of the study.

Hypotheses

H1: There is positive relationship between social competence and affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, empathic concern and perspective taking empathy.

H2: There is negative relationship between social competence fantasy, personal distress, aggressive and self-defeating humor.

H3: Social competence in university students is significantly predicted by empathy, personal distress, and styles of humor.

H4: There are significant gender differences on empathy, adaptive styles of humor, social competence and maladaptive humor.

Method

Research design

The study employed a correlational research design.

Sample

Data were collected from students studying in three universities situated in the city of Lahore. A sample of 186 university students, with equal number of male and female, were included in this research. Age range for the participants varied from 18 years to 24 years. The participants, currently enrolled in graduate or post-graduate degrees, were taken from three private universities of

Lahore: Government College University (n= 56), Beaconhouse National University (n=60) and COMSATS (n=70).

Multi-stage sampling technique was used. Three universities were randomly selected from a list of all universities situated in the city of Lahore. In the next stage, a list of all departments was gathered from each university, and then three departments from each university were randomly selected. In the final stage, students who were willing and fulfilled the study criteria were contacted through their course coordinators. The course coordinators provided the date and time to the researcher to meet the students in their class rooms.

Measures

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). The Interpersonal Reactivity Index was structured by Davis (1980). This questionnaire assesses the participants on four scales, the empathic concern scale, the perspective-taking scale, the personal distress scale and the fantasy empathy scale; each scale consisting of seven items. Each item is responded on five options based on Likert-type format; "does not describe me well" (1) and "describes me well" (5). The alpha reliability for the current study was .84, .78 and .81 for EC Scale, PT Scale, PD and FS scales respectively. A few sample items are listed below:

1. "I daydream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me". (FS)
2. "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me". (EC)
3. "I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view". (PT)
4. "Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems". (EC)

The Humor Style Questionnaire (HSQ) was developed by Martin et al., (2003). This questionnaire consists of four sub-scales of humor: affiliative style, self-enhancing style, aggressive and self-defeating style, with each sub-scale containing eight items. Each item is responded on seven options based on Likert-type format from "Totally Disagree" (1) to "Totally Agree" (7). Two adaptive styles "affiliative and self-enhancing" and two maladaptive styles "aggressive and self-defeating" styles of humor are measured. The Cronbach alpha in the present research for the "affiliative humor", "self-enhancing humor", "aggressive humor" and "self-defeating humor" are .73, .73, .68 and .75 respectively. A few sample items are provided below:

1. "I usually don't laugh or joke around much with other people".
2. "If I am feeling depressed, I can usually cheer myself up with humor".
3. "I laugh and joke a lot with my friends".

The Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ) by Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg and Reis (1988) is a self-report measure comprising of five domains of "social competence": "initiating relationships, personal disclosure, negative assertion, emotional support, and conflict management". All subscales have eight items making up to a total of 40 items. The participants responded on 5-point rating scale by giving ratings per item, for themselves. These are a few sample items:

1. "Telling a companion you don't like a certain way he or she has been treating you."
2. "Revealing something intimate about yourself while talking with someone you're just getting to know"

Demographic Data Sheet. It included respondents' age, gender, educational level, family type, monthly income, father's designation, mother's designation, number of family member and number of siblings, birth order and etc.

Procedure

Permission to use the above mentioned scales in this research was obtained from their authors via email. Participants were recruited through multi-stage sampling: three universities (i.e., Government College University [GCU], Beaconhouse National University [BNU], and COMSATS) were randomly selected in the first stage. Further, three departments from each university (GCU: Department of English Literature, Department of Computer Sciences, Department of Economics; COMSATS: Department of Chemical Engineering, Department of Business Administration, Department of Architecture; BNU: School of Liberal Arts, School of Mass Media and Communication, School of Computer and Information and Technology) were drawn and institutional consent was sought from the heads of these Departments for the collection of data. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedure of the research. They were assured that their names/identification will be kept confidential.

Results

The SPSS was used for the data analysis. Regression analysis was carried out to determine the predictors of social competence. In

addition, Pearson- product moment correlation was applied to find out the association between study variables (i.e., empathy, styles of humor & social competence) and their sub-scales. A *t*-test was conducted to find out the gender differences of the participants on the study variables.

Results are divided into two parts, descriptive analysis and inferential analysis. The data were screened out, outliers were removed in the process that lead to performing the descriptive analysis in which means and standard deviations were computed to provide a preliminary profile of the sample characteristics and study variables. The mean age of the participants was 21.35 ± 1.34 and 80% of the sample had attained 14 years of education. 68% percent of the participants reported living in nuclear family system, whereas 31.7% lived in joint family system. In case of family size, 52.2% of the participants informed that they had more than 5 but less than 10 family members, while 36.6% reported having five family members and 9.1% had more than 10 family members.

Pearson product moment correlation was employed to examine the relationship between study variables (i.e. types of empathy, styles of humor and social competence). All indicators of social competence except for self-disclosure showed a significant relationship with empathic concern. Self-enhancing humor was significantly correlated with every indicator of social competence except for perceived emotional support. Aggressive humor had a significant negative relationship with perspective taking empathy, empathic concern and perceived emotional support, whereas self-defeating humor had a significant positive correlation with initiating relationships and self-disclosure.

Table 2

Bivariate Correlation among Subscales of Empathy, Styles of Humor and Social Competence (N=186)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. IR	-	.63***	.65**	.44**	.60**	.05	.16*	-.04	.09	.11	.24**	.02	.22**
2. PES		-	.66***	.33**	.69**	.23**	.33**	.10	.12	.05	.10	-.17*	.00
3. NA			-	.41**	.57***	.05	.26**	.04	.04	.04	.24**	-.08	.07
4. SD				-	.44**	.06	.05	-.06	.03	.06	.23**	.11	.28**
5. CR					-	.12	.25**	.09	.07	.02	.25**	-.08	.09
6. FA						-	.12	.05	.21**	.02	.08	-.12	.06
7. EC							-	.23**	.27**	.04	.00	-.18*	-.03
8. PTE								-	.03	-.02	.10	-.18*	-.00
9. PD									-	-.04	-.14	-.00	.06
10. AH										-	.02	.09	.19**
11. SEH											-	.08	.33**
12. AH												-	.40**
13. SDH													-

Note:*** $p < 0.0001$ ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$ (two - tailed)

IR= Initiating Relationship, PES= Perceived Emotional Support, NA= Negative Assertion, SD= Self Disclosure, CR= Conflict Resolution, FA= Fantasy Empathy, EC= Empathic Concern, PTE= "Perspective Taking Empathy", PD= "Personal Distress", AH= "Affiliative Humor", SHE= "Self Enhancing Humor", AH= "Aggressive Humor", SDH= "Self Defeating Humor".

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression predicting Social Competence(N=186)

Predictors	ΔR^2	β
Step 1		
Control variables ^a	.05**	-
Step 2		
Fantasy Scale	.23**	.06
Empathic Concern		.25**
Perspective Taking		-.07
Empathy		
Personal Distress		.09
Affiliative Humor		.08
Self Enhancing Humor		.27**
Aggressive Humor		
Self Defeating Humor		-.09
		.06
Total R ²	.27**	
N	186	

Note. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed). ^aControl variables included age, gender, education, living, family type, number of family members.

A hierarchical regression analysis was carried out to find out the significant predictors of social competence after controlling for age, gender, education, type of family (nuclear or joint), number of family members (less than 5, 6-10, more than 10) and living (urban or rural). Results revealed that empathy (empathic concern) and

styles of humor (self-enhancing humor) predicted social competence. See table 3.

For model one $F(6, 177) = 1.44$, $p > .05$, and model two $F(14, 183) = 3.55$, $p < .001$.

Table 4
Gender Differences for Empathy, Styles of Humor and Social Competence(N=186)

Variables	Men		Women		$t(184)$	p	CI 95%		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Empathy									
Fantasy Empathy	22.12	6.68	23.59	6.27	1.54	.124	-3.35	0.41	-0.23
Empathic Concern	23.74	4.67	24.55	5.13	1.12	.263	-2.22	0.61	-0.17
Perspective Taking	21.73	3.92	23.27	7.40	1.77	.078	-3.25	0.18	-0.27
empathy									
Personal Distress	21.12	3.83	21.95	4.58	1.33	.185	-2.05	0.39	-0.20
Styles of Humor									
Affiliative Humor	29.68	7.89	29.14	5.23	0.54	.592	-1.41	2.46	0.08
Self enhancing	32.92	6.91	34.08	7.23	1.10	.271	-3.21	0.91	0.16
Humor									
Aggressive Humor	30.29	5.60	27.47	7.34	2.29	.004	0.93	4.71	0.44
Self defeating	33.44	8.04	30.13	8.07	2.80	.006	0.97	5.65	0.41
Humor									
Social Competence									
Initiating	3.33	.67	3.26	.89	0.61	.540	-0.16	0.30	0.10
Relationships									
Personal	3.16	.89	3.05	.79	0.88	.382	-0.14	0.35	0.13
Disclosure									
Negative Assertion	3.46	.76	3.38	.73	0.80	.424	-0.13	0.30	0.11
Perceived	3.54	.75	3.59	.81	-0.52	.582	-0.29	0.16	-0.08
Emotional Support									
Conflict	3.40	.67	3.38	.69	0.14	.893	-0.18	0.21	0.03
Management									

Note. ** $p < 0.01$, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit, CI = Confidence Interval

An independent sample *t*-test was carried out to test the gender differences between empathy, styles of humor and social competence. There was a significant difference across gender in the use of aggressive humor. Men reported using more aggressive humor than women with the low-medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.41$). The results also suggested a significant difference between men and women in the use of self-defeating humor with the low-medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.44$).

Discussion

Empathy and style of humor provide skills to improve social interactions, to facilitate personal disclosure, to cope with conflicts etc. People laugh, smile and show considerations towards others as a basic cognitive or physiological process regardless of their cultural orientation. However, every culture has its values, standards and implicit rules about the usage of humor or the level of empathy. Literature endorses that social competence is likely to be predicted by empathy and styles of humor (Bach & Kratzer, 2016; Batson, 1987; Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis 1988; Hoffman, 1997; Izard, Fine, Schultz, Mostow, Ackerman, & Younstrom, 2001; Masten, 1986; McAndrew & Frank, 2018; Stump, Ratiff, Wu, & Hawley, 2009).

The present study focused on addressing the factors associated with social competence. It aimed at investigating whether humor and empathy are predictors of a larger context of overall social competence, when important demographic variables (e.g. age, gender, education, type of family) are controlled. Research hypotheses were drawn based on the theoretical framework proposed by Bach and Kratzer (2016). The results of our study endorsed that empathetic concern and self-enhancing humor are significant predictors of social competence. The findings of our study are in line with earlier work done by many researchers (Martin, 2007; Masten, 1986; McAndrew, 2018; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Salovey, Mayer & Caruso, 2002). The study results are in line with the earlier work done by Yip and Martin (2006). These researchers endorsed that adaptive styles of humor like affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor are beneficial for initiating and building up social relationships with others and enhance self-disclosure (Yip & Martin, 2006). According to the current research, the use of self-enhancing humor significantly predicts presence of resistant social competence which is relevant to emotional management (Bach & Kratzer, 2016; Johnson & McCord, 2010). Individuals who employ self-enhancing humor can adequately handle situations that are embarrassing and involve stressful social interactions. Self-enhancing humor facilitates in confirming personal information that is not accepted or conformed by others, as an individual will be able to escape from being offended by saying "I'm joking" or merely distracting the situation by cracking jokes rather than handling the situation in a serious tone (McAndrew & Frank, 2018). Humor has been found to pave the way for constructive social interactions as well as acts as a coping style to buffer the negative effects of stressful social interactions (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003).

Hojat, (2011) and McAndrew (2018) addressed the viewpoint of Charles Darwin (1871) and declared that humans are biologically equipped to behave socially and cooperatively for the sake of their survival. Prosocial, sharing and helping behavior, as well as altruism and empathy are all overlapping concepts that have common social and developmental roots embedded in social interactions and competency (Hojat, 2011; McAndrew, 2018). In

our study empathetic concern was found to be a significant predictor of social competence. Research proposes that empathy is imperative for well-being, both emotional and social. Developmental perspective purports that social competence is predicted by empathic and pro-social styles of response (Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, MacNalley & Shea, 1991).

Warden and Mackinnon (2006) endorsed that empathy and pro-social behavior predicts social competence. Empathic concern is fundamentally the capability to show feelings of care, respect, warmth for those experiencing distress and trapped in stressful life situations. This form of empathy (empathetic concern) helps in facilitating and maintaining social relationships (Monahan, 1989). Relationship between empathy and social competence has been endorsed by researchers in the past (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Salovey, Mayer, & Caruso, 2002).

In our study besides self-enhancing humor and empathic concern, type of family system (i.e. joint family system as the control variable) significantly predicted social competence. Roopnarine and Hossain (1992) indicated that joint family system has a major influence in the socialization process of children (as cited in Jambunathan & Counselman, 2002). Living in a joint family and being surrounded with so many people right from the birth, facilitates the child in initiating and maintaining social relationships. The exposure to greater number of social interactions not only enhances empathy, it is also likely to facilitate self-disclosure. Living within a larger family unit helps in understanding and managing conflict and in turn likely to improve perceived emotional support (Davis, 1980).

In our study women scored higher on all four dimensions of empathy, however the differences were not found to be statistically significant (see table 4). Eisenberg and Lennon (1983) suggested that the gender difference may be due to the demand characteristics; women may think they are expected to be more caring towards other people, and so are more likely to endorse it. On the other hand, Hampes (2010) reported that actual level of empathy may not differ between gender.

Monahan (1989) conducted a study to explain the relationship of empathy with gender role orientation. The study indicated that it is a cultural stereotype that women are more empathic than men and this has been upheld even by the theories and researches as diverse as psychodynamic, developmental, social, personality, and feminist psychology.

In the current study men reported greater use of aggressive humor compared to women. Issue of status hierarchy can describe the phenomenon, in which men use aggressive humor to establish their authority and status at the expense of other people, while self-defeating humor may act as a technique to assert their status by amusing others at the expense of oneself (Kazarian & Martin, 2004). Likewise, Tannen (1986) suggested that conversational goals of men and women differ from one another; women aim at intimacy, whereas men look forward to self-presentation. As men use maladaptive humor styles like aggressive and self-defeating humor to create their personal identity, it is likely to be reflected in the way they use humor. This stance is supported by earlier researchers (Izard, Fine, Schultz, Mostow, Ackerman, & Younstrom, 2001).

Buhrmester et al., (1988) indicated that men are more socially competent compared to women; however, the findings of our study are contrary to the available evidence. Non-significant gender differences on social competence were found in our study. Male and female university students had equal level of social competent in

our study. Social competence is a learned phenomenon and researchers including Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, MacNalley and Shea, (1991) endorse that men get more socially skillful when they enter into practical lives. Non-significant differences on social competence between male and female university students can be attributed to the fact that male and female students more or less get equal opportunities for enhancement of social skills and hence attain similar level of social competence. Our study was conducted on a sample of student population; hence the results are not applicable to diverse populations. This is recommended that other studies can be carried out in this area involving a wider age range of participants.

Implications

The significant findings of the present study regarding empathy, humor and social competence can contribute to the empirical evidence for studies in Pakistani context, as not many studies have previously pursued this important area of study for investigation. The finding that empathy and styles of humor influence our social competence, provides useful indications for therapeutic interventions. Further as some university students reported maladaptive forms of humor, namely aggressive humor and self-defeating humor, interventions to teach adaptive forms of humor can be carried out to enhance adaptive humor styles in students. The results also provide guidelines for student counselors.

Limitations and Suggestions

Given that this study was conducted only with university students, the findings of this study are not applicable to a wider population. Future research with these variables should employ experimental methodologies for effectively exploring casual relationships between the variables. In Pakistan, more research should be done in this area involving different age groups so that the findings can be extrapolated to a larger population. Future studies should also be focused on developing culturally valid measures for the indigenous populations to study social variables, like social competence.

Conclusion

It is pertinent to study social competence as it is associated with social ties, acceptance and friendships student need to become a cohesive part of social fabric of their educational institutes. It is associated with a successful university experience. Our study endorses that empathic concern and self-enhancing style of humor significantly predict social competence in university students. As far as male students are concerned they use more of "maladaptive styles of humor" compared to female students. Unlike the available empirical evidence, male students were found to have same level of social competence as female students. The findings provide useful guidelines for student counselors and psychologists while dealing with mental health issues of university students. The study is a door way for future research.

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