



Umbrella Summary

Humor

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is humor?

There are numerous definitions of humor in the research literature, with significant variety among them. A relatively simple definition of humor is something that is said or done to elicit levity or laughter (Dubinsky, Yammarino, & Jolson, 1995). Examples of the more complex aspects of other definitions of humor include expression, recognition, or appreciation of it; the purpose, nature, or target of it; and attitudes toward it. One way of summarizing some of the different perspectives is to define humor as being either (a) positive or negative and (b) directed inward or outward (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Positive humor directed inward serves to facilitate coping and manage stress, whereas positive humor that is directed toward others serves to improve interpersonal relationships (Martin et al., 2003). Negative humor that is directed inward involves self-disparagement, and negative humor directed at others involves teasing or ridiculing (Martin et al., 2003). In accordance with the many definitions of humor, there are numerous measures. Most require ratings of self-perceptions, whereas some require ratings about another person. A few measures are specifically designed to assess employees' perceptions of supervisors' or leaders' use of humor. Examples of items that assess the four types of humor described above include, "My humorous outlook on life keeps me from getting overly upset or depressed about things," "I laugh and joke a lot with my closest friends," "Letting others laugh at me is my way of keeping my friends and family in good spirits," and "If I don't like someone, I often use humor or teasing to put them down" (Martin et al., 2003). Example items for supervisors include, "Our leader uses amusing stories to defuse conflicts" (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999) and "My supervisor communicates with humor" (Decker and Rotondo, 2001).

Why is humor important?

In an employment context, different types of humor may be important for different reasons, but thus far, there has only been meta-analytic research on positive humor, due to insufficient research on negative humor. Positive employee humor, which includes both intrapersonal and interpersonal humor, is moderately and positively associated with employee coping effectiveness, workgroup cohesion, health, and work performance (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran (2012). It is also moderately associated with lower burnout and stress and modestly associated with lower work withdrawal (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Supervisor use of positive humor is most strongly associated with enhanced subordinate satisfaction, workgroup cohesion, and perception of supervisor performance (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). To a lesser extent, supervisor use of humor is positively associated with subordinate work

performance and satisfaction with supervisor (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Finally, supervisor humor is moderately connected with lower work withdrawal among subordinates (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Research on humor thus far has focused merely on assessing factors with which humor is associated, not on whether and how use of it actually influences workplace outcomes.

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Positive employee humor is associated with (a) higher employee coping effectiveness, workgroup cohesion, health, and work performance and (b) lower burnout, stress, and work withdrawal.
- ▶ Positive supervisor humor is associated with (a) higher subordinate satisfaction, workgroup cohesion, work performance, perception of supervisor performance, and satisfaction with supervisor and (b) lower work withdrawal.
- ▶ Further research is needed to better understand the role of negative humor in the workplace.
- ▶ Research is also needed to test whether and how humor actually influences workplace outcomes.

References

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