

2014 Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship Proposal

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Risky Business: How Humor Increases Status and Trust

Research Objectives

Status is one of the defining characteristics of our professional and personal interactions (Anderson and Kilduff, 2009). Compared to low status individuals, high status individuals have greater access to resources, greater reproductive success, and greater physical and psychological well-being (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001; Marmot, 2004; Pettit & Sivanathan, 2012; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Not surprisingly, prior work has found that people are willing to invest substantial resources and take great risks to attain greater status (e.g., Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Pettit, Yong, & Spataro, 2010; Willer, 2009). In this work, we explore a novel approach to attaining status: the use of humor.

Humor is both pervasive and important (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Humor is a powerful ingratiation behavior and affords an accessible tool to increase influence (e.g. Cooper, 2005; O'Quin & Aronoff, 1981; Strick, Holland, van Baaren, & van Knippenberg, 2012). The benefits of humor are believed to be a result of cognitive and affective factors; it distracts from negative information (cognitive) while increasing positive emotions (affective) (Strick, Holland, van Baaren, & van Knippenberg, 2012). Despite its interpersonal significance, little research has taken humor seriously, reflecting an important omission in the decision making literature.

Our initial studies have demonstrated a link between humor and status. Across multiple jokes and different scenarios (e.g. interview, weekly meeting), we have found a consistent boost in perceived status when a low-status individual tells a funny joke in the workplace. The use of humor, however, is risky. How targets react to humor attempts profoundly influence the relationship between humor and status. Humor attempts that are not well received harm perceptions of status. We find that perceptions of competence mediate the link between humor and status. We are currently extending this research into investigating how humor impacts perceptions of trust.

While there are inconsistent findings with regards to whether humor increases liking of the joke teller, it is generally agreed upon that humor induces positive affect. Prior research has demonstrated how incidental emotions and moods can have an impact on judgments, with emotions with a positive valence, such as happiness, increasing trust and those with a negative valence, such as anger, having the reverse affect (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005). Consequently, the positive affect induced by humor should increase trust, regardless of whether or not humor also increases liking of the joke teller. However, humor that is viewed as overtly offensive should induce negative affect and make negative information more apparent, resulting in decreased trust.

Whereas prior research has focused on the positive affect that humor can create, it has not examined that impact that this emotional induction has on trust. Furthermore, given the inconsistent findings of whether or not humor increases liking, I plan on examining both the cognitive and affective components of trust. I hope to demonstrate that there is a significant relationship between humor and trust.

Methods

Our primary research method will be conducting Wharton Behavioral Lab and Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) studies¹. We plan on extending our research by conducting a lab experiment in April, where we will be using behavioral measures to investigate how humor can increase interpersonal influence. During the summer, we plan on conducting additional experiments demonstrating the boundary conditions of the impact of humor on status and trust. When lab time is not available, we will be continuing to push our research forward using MTurk. Furthermore, we have received approval from the Internal Review Board to examine the relationship between humor, status, and trust in a classroom.

Reasons for Seeking Funding

I am requesting the \$4000 of funding primarily for travel. I have submitted the working manuscript of this research for three conferences: Behavioral Decision Research in Management (BDRM) in London, England; International Association of Conflict Management (IACM) in Leiden, Netherlands; and Academy of Management in Philadelphia. Additionally, I plan on submitting our research to the Society of Judgment and Decision Making Conference in Long Beach, CA this fall.

These conferences would be a great opportunity for me to present our Decision Processes research, as leading scholars in the decision making community will be in attendance. However, the cost of travel to and from the international conferences will be very expensive, and will far exceed my student travel budget of \$800. Consequently, funding from the Risk Center would greatly help me in advancing this project and presenting the results of my research to the decision making scholars in the psychology, management, and marketing communities.

Advisor: Maurice E. Schweitzer



¹ The 2013 funding from the Wharton Risk Center aided us in conducting two laboratory experiments and over fifteen Amazon Mechanical Turk studies since last June.