

# A Correlational Study of the Relationship Between Sense of Humor and Positive Psychological Capacities

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**Abstract:** The constructs of sense of humor (Lefcourt, 2002) and positive psychological capacities (PsyCap; Luthans, 2002a) have been heralded as important phenomenon within the growing field of positive psychology, especially within the organizational sciences. Additionally, a sense of humor has been found to be related to positive affective experiences. Leaders can develop followers' confidence, hope, optimism and resiliency for what Avolio and Luthans (2006) called sustainable, veritable performance. The hypotheses presented and tested here will advance the theoretical and empirical discussion of leadership in organizations by linking several emerging constructs of interest, both in academe and practice. This study marks an initial step in the study of linkages between one's sense of humor and positive psychological capacities.

## INTRODUCTION

The constructs of sense of humor (Lefcourt, 2002) and positive psychological capacities (PsyCap; Luthans, 2002a) have been heralded as important phenomenon within the growing field of positive psychology, especially within the organizational sciences. Additionally, a sense of humor has been found to be related to positive affective experiences. Leaders can develop followers' confidence, hope, optimism and resiliency for what Avolio and Luthans (2006) called sustainable, veritable performance. The

hypotheses presented and tested here will advance the theoretical and empirical discussion of leadership in organizations by linking several emerging constructs of interest, both in academe and practice. This study marks a first step in the study of linkages between one's sense of humor and PsyCap. The theoretical and empirical underpinnings of sense of humor are offered, followed by a discussion of PsyCap and its component psychological states. Study findings are followed by a discussion of management implications.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous discussion of humor in the workplace has been constructed primarily at the leader level of analysis. For example, scholars have suggested humor as a tool for effective management (Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1994) and between humor style and perceived effectiveness of leaders (Decker & Rotondo, 2001). Perhaps the key study of leader humor use and performance outcomes considered followers' ratings of a leader's use of humor (frequency), which was found to moderate the effects of leadership style on performance outcomes (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999). However, little evidence has been presented in support of the follower's sense of humor and how it may influence positive workplace outcomes (see Vinton, 1989, for exceptions). In this study of workers from a cross section of industries, I have endeavored to exhibit how the followers' perspective of humor has value to managing people at work.

Research on PsyCap has yielded evidence of its effect on various outcomes (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007; Luthans, Norman, Avolio, & Avey, in press). However, its relationship to one's sense of humor has not been examined. A goal of this paper is to offer research findings in support of the linkages between sense of humor and PsyCap. In this section, a review of relevant literature is presented along with a series of hypotheses.

### Sense of Humor

A variety of positive effects of humor at work have been suggested, including its use as an effective persuasive device (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2002), as ingratiation behavior (Cooper, 2005), to

reduce social distance between managers and employees (Fox & Amichai-Hamburger, 2001), and as a management tool (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Additionally, a growing body of empirical work has revealed humor's positive effects at work (Avolio et al., 1999; Hughes, 2005; Rizzo, Booth-Butterfield, & Wanzer, 1999; Vinton, 1989).

Here, I am most interested in discussing one's *sense of humor*, which was defined by Martin (1998) as trait-like individual differences in the perceptions, expression, or enjoyment of humor. As an individual difference variable, with potential for development (Lefcourt, 2002), sense of humor is associated with a variety of positive outcomes not limited to coping (Masten, 1982), social attractiveness and a positive self-concept (cf. Roeckelein, 2002).

### PsyCap

Positive organizational behavior (POB; Luthans, 2002a) and PsyCap (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004) were introduced shortly after the inception of the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology, unlike the traditional study of the human psyche, focuses on optimal human functioning. Luthans (2002b; see also Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007) helped to bring the notion of positivity to the disciplines of leadership and organizational behavior by extending the construct of POB, which he defined as "the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be *measured, developed, and effectively managed* for performance improvement in today's workplace" (59; italics added).

Within POB are a variety of developable states in addition to a higher-

order construct labeled PsyCap (Luthans et al., 2004; Luthans & Youssef, 2004). PsyCap is comprised of the positive psychology constructs of self-efficacy, or confidence (Bandura, 1997; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), hope (Snyder, Irving, & Anderson, 1991), optimism (Seligman, 1998) and resiliency (Masten & Reed, 2002). Individually, each construct has been shown to be a causal agent of worker performance. Together, the four are proposed to have a synergistic impact on positive workplace outcomes (Avolio & Luthans, 2006).

As a construct of interest, PsyCap is rapidly gaining momentum in the organizational sciences both in research and in publications. Conversely, and despite the facts that humor is such a large part of all peoples' lives and it is a construct that has seen some recent attention in the management sciences (cf. Cooper, 2005, and Romero & Cruthirds, 2006), a focused effort to study its value to managers and leaders is imperative. There are empirical and theoretical linkages between sense of humor and the various PsyCap components.

**Confidence and sense of humor.** Confidence is based on Bandura's (1997) theoretical development of self-efficacy. In the context of organizational behavior, self-efficacy has been defined as one's beliefs in her or his ability to "mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to successfully execute a specific task in a given context" (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Stajkovic and Luthans offered meta-analytic evidence that self-efficacy and performance are strongly related, finding a 28% performance gain for workers with high efficacy beliefs over those with low efficacy beliefs.

A number of studies have revealed positive relationships between humor and high self-esteem (Martin, 1998; Overholser,

1992; Thorsen et al., 1997). Although, self-efficacy is conceptually distinguishable from self-esteem, its relationship with sense of humor is an important gateway in that both are attitudes about the self. Other research includes findings that humor is associated with mastery beliefs (Martin, 1998) and the discovery that people with a greater sense of humor were more confident in a subsequent task (Masten, 1982).

**Hope and sense of humor.** Snyder et al. (1991) defined hope as a "positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency [goal directedness] and (b) pathways [planning]" (287). Both components are necessary for hope to exist. Hope research has yielded significant relationships with performance and job satisfaction (Luthans et al., 2007), and organizational commitment (Peterson & Luthans, 2003). Although research on hope is emergent, but limited, there is empirical evidence that it is related to humor. Westburg (1999) found that participants in a humor condition scored higher on the Hope Scale. Furthermore, humor's relationship to coping lends support to the pathways component of hope, or that there is a "way" to fulfill the agency beliefs resident in hope.

**Optimism and sense of humor.** Luthans et al. (2004) suggested that optimism is a positive attribution of events based on a strong sense of reality. This is an objective assessment of what can be realistically accomplished with available resources in a specific situation (Peterson, 2000). Empirically, optimism was significantly and positively related to sales (Seligman, 1998) and job performance (Luthans, Avolio, Walumbwa, & Li, 2005).

Humor is not an emotion (McGhee, 1979), but it reliably manipulates emotion

states (Moore & Isen, 1990). Overall, people with a greater sense of humor tend to possess a more positive orientation towards life (Kuiper, Martin, & Dance, 1992; Martin, Kuiper, Olinger, & Dance, 1993). Given that optimism is an affective phenomenon, we can safely suggest that a positive outlook, tempered by the ability to maintain this outlook in the face of adversity, will allow one to augment positive emotions and mitigate negativity (cf. Kohler & Ruch, 1996, and Thorsen & Powell, 1994). In other research, participants with a high sense of humor also indicated a high level of optimism (Thorsen, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller, & Hampes, 1997), and humor and optimism both moderated the negative effects of stress on self-esteem and that high levels of humor and optimism were associated with social support strategies (Fry, 1995).

#### ***Resiliency and sense of humor.***

Luthans (2002a) defined resiliency as the "capacity to rebound ... from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure, or even positive change..." (702). Resiliency is not simply muddling along or surviving a negative event, but is characterized by a positive response, or development as a result of the event. Luthans et al. (2005) found a significant relationship between resiliency and job performance of Chinese factory workers. In other research, resiliency was found to be related to performance and satisfaction (Luthans et al., 2007). People exhibit their resiliency when they respond to potentially stressful situations with humor or laughter, rather than with fear or anger; by doing so they avoid these unproductive emotions. In fact, one of the most highly touted benefits of a positive sense of humor is the ability to cope with adversity, including job stress (Lefcourt, 2001). In measuring humor,

copying has been found to be a consistent factor (Martin & Lefcourt, 1986; Thorsen & Powell, 1993).

## **HYPOTHESES**

The previous review of extant research supports linkages between humor and the PsyCap components, thus lending support to a set of testable hypotheses. First, I suggest that one's sense of humor and PsyCap are positively and significantly related (Hypothesis 1). Additionally, I suggest that sense of humor is positively related with each of the four PsyCap states: confidence (Hypothesis 2a), hope (Hypothesis 2b), optimism (Hypothesis 2c), and resiliency (Hypothesis 2d). Furthermore, the relationship in Hypothesis 1 is suggested to be more positive than any one of the relationships between sense of humor and the individual PsyCap states (Hypothesis 3).

## **METHODOLOGY**

A cross-sectional survey was undertaken for the purpose of studying the statistical relationships between sense of humor, and its dimensions, and PsyCap, and its dimensions. Surveys were administered to 92 participants from a wide cross-section of employers. The results were tabulated and descriptive statistics generated for the purpose of exploring linkages between sense of humor, humor orientation and positive psychological capacities.

## **Procedure**

During a presentation to small business leaders in the western U.S., the author requested access to their workplaces for the purpose of collecting

survey response data. Seventeen sites agreed to the request. Work contexts ranged from hospitality (motels and restaurants) to healthcare (temporary nursing services and an assisted living facility) to other service providers (bank and retail stores). The author met with members of these respective workplaces to explain the purpose of the study, however the participants were blind to the hypotheses. Those interested volunteered to complete the survey. Survey data and demographic information were collected. In sum, 92 people responded to the opportunity and 87 completed the surveys in full.

### Measures and Administration

Two measures were presented to the participants. One was the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS), a 24-item scale developed by Thorson & Powell (1993). The other scale was the PsyCap Questionnaire (PCQ-24). This 24-item scale has a history of reliable and valid measurement of the four dimensions of PsyCap (see Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007).

The MSHS is a measure of one's sense of humor, as comprised by one's attitudes toward and appreciation of humor, in addition to the propensity to employ humor as a coping mechanism or to produce humor. In this study, the MSHS was scored from "1" (strongly disagree) to "5" (strongly agree). Six items were negatively-phrased, then reverse coded for analysis. This scale measures four dimensions of one's sense of humor: humor creativity ("sometimes I think up jokes and funny stories"); using humor as a coping mechanism ("Humor helps me cope"); attitude toward humor ("Getting people to

lighten up by joking around is useless" [R], and humor appreciation ("I can ease a tense situation by saying something funny").

The PCQ-24 measures one's positive psychological capacities of confidence, hope, optimism and resiliency. The scales items are anchored from "1" (strongly disagree) to "6" (strongly agree). Example items include "I feel confident helping to set targets/goals in my work area" (confidence); "I can think of many ways to reach my current work goals" (hope); "When things are uncertain for me at work I usually expect the best" (optimism), and "I usually take stressful things at work in stride" (resiliency).

Alpha reliabilities in previous research have exceeded what Nunnally (1970) considered to be sufficient:  $\alpha = .70$ . The MSHS has been validated across a wide range of demographic variables consistently revealing reliabilities in excess of .90 across gender, race and age (cf. Thorson, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller, & Hampes, 1997). The PCQ-24 has been shown to be reliable ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and a valid predictor of performance outcomes in some samples (Luthans et al., 2005, 2007). This scale was constructed with items adapted from existing scales (see Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007, for a more thorough discussion of the development of this scale).

### Findings

Of the original 92 respondents, five sat through the process, but did not complete the surveys. These cases were removed from the dataset. Prior to conducting the analyses, the data were screened for the common assumptions of normality and randomness of the sample. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1 as are bivariate correlations

*Table 1.*  
Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities.

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Sense of humor, overall	3.88	0.71	(.94)					
PsyCap	4.11	0.70	0.30	(0.92)				
Hope	4.32	0.75	0.03	0.72	(0.85)			
Confidence	3.85	1.00	0.23 *	0.86	0.60	(0.77)		
Optimism	4.26	0.93	0.34	0.83	0.41	0.57	(.92)	
Resiliency	4.01	0.83	0.39	0.79	0.36	0.54	0.67	(.82)

*Note.*  $N=87$ ; values in parentheses are reliability coefficients. Correlations of .30 or greater are significant at  $p \leq .01$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$ .

between the variables. Alpha reliabilities are presented along the main diagonal.

Overall, these data were found to be relatively normal. Before exploring the individual hypotheses, we first established the validity of each of the composite variables: PsyCap and sense of humor. The PsyCap composite was significantly correlated with each of its states: hope, confidence, optimism and resiliency. Furthermore, all four states that comprise PsyCap correlated with each other at a stringent level of significance ( $p < .01$ ). Sense of humor was also highly correlated with each of its factors, and each factor correlated with the others at a stringent level of significance ( $p < .01$ ). The sample size was not adequate to conduct a meaningful factor analysis of either the PCQ-24 or the MSHS.

**Hypotheses.** A series of hypotheses were advanced earlier in this paper, all in reference to the various relationships between PsyCap and its dimensions and sense of humor. The correlations used to test these hypotheses are presented in Table 1.

The first hypothesis suggested that

overall sense of humor and PsyCap are positively and significantly related. This hypothesis was fully supported ( $r = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The second set of hypotheses asserted that overall sense of humor would share a positive, significant relationship with each of the four PsyCap factors. Optimism ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and resiliency ( $r = .39$ ,  $p < .01$ ) each shared a positive relationship with overall sense of humor. Although confidence shared a significant, positive relationship with sense of humor ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .05$ ), hope did not ( $r = .03$ , *n.s.*).

Additionally, I hypothesized that the relationship between these two higher-order constructs would be greater than any individual relationship between overall sense of humor and any of the individual PsyCap states. This assertion was not supported. Optimism and resiliency each shared a stronger, positive relationship with overall sense of humor than did PsyCap in the aggregate. Confidence also shared a significant, positive relationship with sense of humor. However, the relationship between sense of humor and hope was negligible.

Another finding was that resiliency

was positively and significantly related to all four MSHS factors: attitudes toward humor, humor creation, coping, and humor appreciation. Optimism was related only to one's attitudes toward humor and humor creation and confidence was related only to the humor creation factor. The hope dimension of PsyCap was not significantly correlated with any of the four sense of humor factors.

Although hypotheses related to the individual dimensions of sense of humor were not advanced, several *post hoc* findings are worthy of note. First, confidence was positively and significantly correlated with only the humor creation factor of the MSHS. There was no significant relationship between efficacy beliefs and the other dimensions of humor.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Leadership is a social influence process by which followers are somehow motivated to achieve a positive outcome (Yukl, 2006). There are implications for leading followers as evidenced by the relationships presented here. Although these linkages were offered from the perspective of the follower (i.e., *follower* sense of humor and *follower* PsyCap), both are developable states. And who better to develop the potential of followers than a leader?

Furthermore, the study of these constructs offers an avenue for future research. Both of the constructs discussed here have been considered in the research literature, therefore considerable groundwork has already been established. However, these constructs have not been extensively considered in relation to each other, at least in their present operationalization, despite the fact that all fall within the realm of positive psychology and scholarship.

Because the linkages between sense

of humor and the individual PsyCap components are theoretically and empirically related a logical next step is to study their interactive effects on proximal and distal outcomes such as positive emotions and creative performance (cf. Hughes, 2005). This framework is also a logical gateway into considering other outcomes such as job satisfaction and other positive psychology constructs such as flourishing and courage.

The most critical aspect of this area of study is the development potential of sense of humor and PsyCap. Research on PsyCap lends support to its development using micro-interventions (Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman, & Combs, 2006). Furthermore, sense of humor, specifically humor production, can also be developed, although there is little extant research supporting this fact (for exceptions see Lefcourt, 2002). If leaders focus on developing their followers' PsyCap and sense of humor the effects on important workplace outcomes will be considerably greater than relying on the trait aspects of each to somehow occur on their own.

The next step, of course, is to develop a stream of basic research in support of the findings offered here. There is no other research evident in publication, which explores all of the linkages made here. Much of the research cited here was conducted with samples of college students. In order to apply the findings of any future research on humor and PsyCap to industry, more samples of working adults must be solicited.

## CONCLUSION

There is a dearth of literature bridging the so-called research-practice gap and the poignancy of observation begs for

more attention. And future research should not only bridge the gap, rigorously and empirically, but also be interesting to scholars and practitioners, as evidenced in a recent survey by the Academy of Management Journal editorial board (Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006). Several reasons were offered for this need, including the notion that interesting work evokes learning and the probability that the work will be read in the first place. It is time to study what is interesting to the audience whom we, as academics, should be working to support: working managers and leaders. Besides, what is more interesting than that which amuses us?

The purpose of this paper was to deliver a set of hypotheses, developed on the basis of previous research from personality psychology and the organizational sciences, and findings in support of these assertions. Theoretical and empirical linkages between the two constructs were highlighted here and supported by evidence. This work is presented in the spirit of establishing a gateway through which future research on these important topics might be better informed.

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