Organizational Humor: A Review

Tay Lee Chin[1*] Hon-Wei Leow[2]

[1]*Faculty of Accountancy, Finance and Business, Tunku Abdul Rahman University College, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*
[2]*School of Accounting and Finance, Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*
[*]*Corresponding author's email: lctay@tarc.edu.my.*

ABSTRACT

Organizational humor is the common and universal phenomenon. Organizational humor has implications for interpersonal relationships in the organizations. Humor could create bonds between managers and subordinates. Hence, organizational humor is attracting growing interest from organizational studies and becomes the latest management topic. The empirical findings usually showing organizational humor's pervasiveness at works and ability to influence the work processes ranging from relationship, employee health and group dynamic. However, researchers have lagged behind in understanding organizational humor as there has yet to be a comprehensive review of organizational humor. Furthermore, the extant literature scatters around the diverse field of studies, making the organizational humor difficult to access and understand. Thus, this paper aims to review the literature of organizational humor. This paper begins by defining humor. It is then review dimensions of the humors, the role of positive humors in the workplace and theories of humors. It is hoped that the review helps the researcher gain better understanding about organizational humor.

Keywords: organizational humor, humor, communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is one of the important components in the workplace [1]. This can be explained by faster internet connection and digital technologies (e.g mobile apps, smartphones), which make the employees easily connected [2]. Hence, regardless of different jobs or positions, organizational members communicate with each other in the meeting and presentation. Unfortunately, huge workload and work stress restricted organizational communication [3]. Employees can express their messages in harsh when employees perform under demands and tight deadlines (i.e work stress). It leads to hurt feelings, misunderstanding and conflicts among the employees [3]. Organizational humor, mutually amusing communicative activity [4] is reported to solve the work stress [5]. Previous studies [6] [7] have begun devoting attention to the use of organizational humors in reducing work stress. Recent empirical evidence [8] [4] also indicate the benefits of organizational humors on organizational creativity, group productivity and organizational culture. Although empirical studies [9] [10] of organizational humors have been conducted, nevertheless the comprehensive reviews of organizational humors are yet to be found.

Furthermore, the extant literature of humors are scattered around other fields of studies such as psychology and communication [6]. [11] [12] explore the association between humors and couples' romantic relationship. As a result, it can be difficulties and challenges for researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of organizational humor. To fill this void, the paper aims to review the literature of humors in the organizational context. Thus, the paper begins by defining humor. It is then review dimensions of the humors, the role of positive humors in the workplace and theories of humors. By doing so, this paper provides the helpful guide for organizational researchers to gain deep understanding about organizational humors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of Humor

Literature [13] [14] [15] exists various definitions of humor. For example, Berger [15] view humor is a type of communication that builds a relationship between person, places, things and presented in a way that causes laughter. Similarly, Robert and Yan [14] consider humor is an intentional form of communication delivered by a producer toward an audience. In a similar vein, Wijewardena et al. [4] reveal humor is a verbal (e.g wit and jokes) or non-verbal communication (e.g facial expression, body language) created by an organizational member for other organizational members that intends to be amused. Humor is an amusing social interaction as it involves communication between individuals, which leads to the individuals to laugh. Since the definition of Wijewardena et al. [4] most related to the focus of this study, which is the

positive humor in the workplace. Hence, the definition of Wijewardena et al. [4] is employed.

2.2. Dimensions of Humor

Thorson and Powell [16] suggest that humor has four dimensions in their multidimensional sense of humor scale. These four dimensions include being a humorous person, recognize others' humor, appreciate humor and use the humor as the coping and adaptive mechanism. Being a humorous person refers to the individual has a sense of humorous, such as telling jokes and funny stories. Meanwhile, recognition of others humor define as humorous person is expected to say jokes or funny stories during intense times. Appreciating humor is responds to the jokes of the individual by laughing. Using humor as the coping and adaptive mechanism means humor able to help individual to relax when dealing with difficult situations.

In a similar vein, Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Gray and Weir [17] develop four dimensions of humor, which is about individual differences in using humor. These four dimensions are the use of humor to enhance itself (i.e self-enhancing), relationships with others (i.e affiliative), itself at the expense of others (i.e aggressive) and relationships at the expense of itself (i.e self-defeating). The use of humor to enhance itself refers to the humor facilitates reducing stress and relief tension. The use of humor to enhance the relationships with others (i.e affiliative) means using humor to strength the ties between individuals and reduce conflict with each other. The use of humor to enhance itself at the expense of others (i.e aggressive) includes acts of excessively disparaging and teasing others. The use of humor to enhance relationships at the expense of itself (i.e self-defeating) is an attempt to ingratiate oneself by doing or saying funny things at one's own expenses.

In contrast, Martin and Lefcourt [18] only include coping dimension in their situational humor response questionnaire. Coping dimension refers to the extent to which individuals use humor to cope with stressful situations. Besides, Ziv [19] argue humor has two dimensions namely humor appreciation and humor creativity. Humor appreciation is the strength in understanding the humor whereas humor creativity relates to the ability to communicate humor to others. Furthermore, in the context of teacher and student, Bieg, Grassinger and Dresel [20] suggest four humors: course related, course unrelated, self-disparaging and aggressive. Course related humors mean the use of humor to explain the current class topic. Course unrelated humors on the other hands refer the use of humors, which is not connected to the current class topic. Self-disparaging define as the teacher use amusing things about him and her. Aggressive humors are the use of humor to ridicule the students who create the negative emotions (e.g angry, embarrassing) of the students.

2.3. The Role of Positive Humor in the Organizations

Since the humor has two categories which are positive and negative humors, therefore this paper only focuses in the positive humors contribute to the organizations. Positive humor improves organizational creativity [9] [19]. Positive humor encourages creative thinking by viewing the established practices and norms from new perspectives [21]. Simply stated, humor makes the organizations think beyond the well-established common practices and norms. This may promote divergent, unconventional, innovate and creative thinking of organizations [21].

Besides, positive humor serves as a stress reliever which, leads to organizational creativity [22]. This elevates the positive mood of the employees within the organizations [9]. A positive mood greatly changes employees within the organizations' thinking and attitudes [23]. Employees within the organizations thus become motivated in brainstorming new ideas and enthusiastically in searching the creative solutions [9]. This result organizational creativity. Peng, Lei, Guo and Qiu [24] found that humor enhances employees' creativity because humor makes employees less stressful and facilitate them to exchange new ideas and explore new methods. In a similar vein, Logacheva and Plakhotnik [25] confirm that humor enables employees in the banking industry to interact with external stakeholders (e.g., suppliers, community, clients) and accept their suggestions and opinions, thus fostering employees' innovation behavior (i.e., creativity) to meet customers' various needs.

Positive humor enhances social interaction of the employees within organizations [26] [27] [28]. Humorous jokes and funny stories contribute to the higher level of rapport between employees within organizations [28]. Under this situation, employees within the organizations share understandings, cooperation, cohesion and strong bonds, which may promote social interaction [28].

Furthermore, employees use humor to express dissatisfaction of works or organizations [13]. Humor contains ironic tone and ambiguous messages [29]. The ironic tone allows the employees to deliver works dissatisfaction messages based on indirect means, whereas ambiguity makes the humor content as evidence of work dissatisfaction difficult to find [29]. Thus, retaliation can be avoided. Not only that, humor enables groups to be more productive [30] when humor improves physical and psychological energy [30] which results group members put extra effort in completing tasks.

Furthermore, humor shapes organizational culture [5]. Humor considers as an important weapon to communicate organizational values and norms [5]. Humorous jokes and stories describe the desirable and undesirable organizational values and norms [5]. It enhances the awareness of the employees for not practicing undesirable values, which indicate in humorous jokes and stories. Meanwhile, desirable organizational values and norms are formed without creating the hurtful feeling among the employees [5].

2.4. Theories of Humor

Prior literature [32] [33] have proposed several humor theories: arousal and arousal reduction theory, superiority and disparagement theory, incongruity resolution theory and comprehension and elaboration theory. Overall, these theories explain the reason behind the individuals expresses humors and the process individuals evaluate humors.

First, according to arousal and arousal-reduction theories, humor reflects a release of negative emotions during employees' tension times [34] [35] [36] [37]. As pointed out by Collinson [34], humorous jokes prove to produce endorphin, a hormone to reduce negative emotions (e.g tensions, anxiety and depression) and results positive employees' well-being. It can be seen that polices and firefighters make jokes based on murder, suicide and dead bodies, whereas multinational corporation employees laugh about retrenchment.

Second, superiority and disparagement theories claim that humor is used to gain control [36] [38] and feeling superior by laughing at people or things. In other words, laughter about other people's misfortunes, deformities and ignorance develop humors. For instance, seeing an employee scold by his or her manager is funny because he or she suffers.

Third, the incongruity resolution theory is introduced by Suls [37]. Incongruity resolution theory claims that uncommon things or situation generate humors [34] [39]. A male employee, for example walks into female restroom. Uncommon situation had occurred when things or situations deviant our expectations [40]. This can be described through a structure of a joke. According to Suls [40], a joke consists of setup and punch lines. The setup line is the first part of the jokes that reveals the target of the jokes [41]. The setup line leads individuals to think instead to make individuals laugh [41]. Whereas, punch line is the second part of the jokes, which follows set up line [41]. The setup line creates sudden surprise and make individuals laugh since punch line incongruent with the setup line. Consider the following jokes that illustrate incongruity between setup line and punch line:

Customer: do you mind if I try the skirt in the window?
Sales assistant: Wouldn't it be better to use in the fitting room?

Finance manager: can you cut down the budget for employees' entertainment?
Finance executive: you should use the knife to cut the budget.

Fourth, Wyer at al. [32] develop comprehension and elaboration theory. Comprehension and elaboration theory explain the degree to which individuals enjoy humors, which based on comprehension level of the humors and cognitive elaboration after comprehending the humors [32]. In terms of comprehending the humors, individuals think more about the humors by considering issues such as the rationale behind the individuals that tell the jokes, whether the jokes are relevant to the situation and whether the jokes

hurt other individuals [32]. Besides, in cognitive elaboration process, individual reacts to the jokes by laughing if the joke is relevant and appropriate to the situation [32]. In contrast, individuals may not laugh if the individuals find the humor is hurtful and undesirable motives [32].

3. CONCLUSION

The humor literature review scatter around various fields, resulting absence comprehensive understanding in the organizational context. Becoming as starting point, this study reviews organizational humor. In a nutshell, this paper further enhances the understanding of the use of humors in the organizations. Thus, organizations can use self-enhancing and affiliative humors to improve organizational outcomes (e.g creativity and group productivity). However, organizations should avoid negative humors. Humors generate contradict emotions of the employees and inhibit organizational outcomes [17]. Aggressive humors diminish self-esteem of the employees or group which evokes negative emotions [17].

Employees or group can take legal actions against those who use ethics, sexist or racist humors. Manager that uses the humors frequently influences manager's credibility [42]. Besides, humors are culturally based [43]. It means employees with different cultures and religions may view humors differently. As Lewis [44] argued, what is funny for French but not for Arabs and Chinese. Therefore, it is realized that in the organizations especially multinational, managers should learn all the employees' social norms, values and culture. This is to ensure the use appropriate humors based on employees' culture and religions.

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