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# A preliminary investigation of sense of humor and purpose in life

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A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION OF  
SENSE OF HUMOR AND PURPOSE IN LIFE

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Gerontology

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

for the Degree Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Sandra Batten

December, 2002

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,  
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A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION OF SENSE OF HUMOR  
AND PURPOSE IN LIFE

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University of Nebraska, 2002

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It was hypothesized that sense of humor is related to purpose in life. A convenience sample of 136 undergraduates completed the Modified Purpose in Life test (Chang & Dodder, 1983-84) and the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (Thorson & Powell, 1993). The overall correlation between the two scales in this sample was .30 ( $p < .001$ ). The sub-scales of the MSHS that related most robustly to purpose in life were Coping ( $r = .31, p < .001$ ) and Attitude Toward Humor and Humorous People ( $r = .45, p < .001$ ).

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

“Like hope, *humor* permits one to bear and yet to focus upon what is too terrible to be borne” (Vaillant, 1977)

In his book *Adaptation to Life* (1977), George Vaillant refers to humor as the most elegant of the defense mechanisms. Classifying defenses into four levels (psychotic, immature, neurotic, and mature), he includes humor among the mature mechanisms, along with altruism, suppression, anticipation, and sublimation. More recently (Vaillant, 2002), he has described the processes of maturation and notes that the uses of humor increase over time in the mature personality. “Mature humor allows us to look directly at what is painful. Humor permits the expression of emotion without individuals’ discomfort and without unpleasant effects upon others” (2002, p. 63). He compares the safety of humor to the safety of dreams during sleep; it transforms pain into the ridiculous.

While Vaillant has written about uses humor and coping, others have pointed to other facets of individual *sense* of humor. Thorson and Powell (1991) for example, in an analysis of several frequently-used sense-of-humor scales, argued that personal sense of humor is multidimensional and it contains at least six elements: 1) humor production or the creative ability to be humorous, to identify and recognize the funny thing in a situation, to use wit and to create that which amuses other people; 2) a sense of whimsy or playfulness and the ability to have a good time, being good natured; 3) the ability to use humor to achieve social goals, or to use humor as a social lubricant,

to let interaction flow more freely or ease the tense situation; 4) personal recognition of humor and life's absurdities as well as recognition of the self as humorous; 5) the appreciation of humor itself and of humorous people and situations; and 6) the use of humor as an adaptive mechanism, coping through the uses of humor, being able to laugh at problems or to master difficult situations through the uses of humor (Thorson & Powell, 1991, p. 701).

Investigations into the psychology of humor began at least as early as Freud (1916, 1928), and were advanced by research by Eysenck (1942), Obrdlik (1942), and Luborsky and Cattell (1947). An International Society for Humor Research was founded in 1987, and its *International Journal of Humor Research* is now in its fifteenth volume. Other sociology and psychology journals have become increasingly receptive to accepting scientific studies of the sense of humor, and there are currently at least half a dozen different scales available to the researcher investigating various aspects of humor and sense of humor (Kohler & Ruch, 1996).

Humor and sense of humor have been found to, variously: moderate stress outcomes between men and women (Abel, 1998), relieve stress generally (Cann, Holt, & Calhoun, 1999); increase productivity on the job (Decker & Rotondo, 1999); relate positively to generativity (Hampes, 1993), intimacy (Hampes, 1995), and trust (Hampes, 1999); relate positively to creativity (Humke & Schafer, 1996; Kovac, 1998); facilitate coping (Moran & Massam, 1999; Vaillant, 2002); relate negatively to depression and contribute positively to mental health (Thorson & Powell, 1994);



Thorson, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller, & Hampes, 1997), and perhaps contribute to longevity (Yoder & Haude, 1995).

In a 1987 article, Harvey Mindess argued that humor was related to the meaning of life itself:

That the terms *re-creation* and *recreation* are synonymous seems germane to what I am saying. Humor provides us with recreation, which is actually re-creation, a restructuring of our thoughts and feelings, our attitudes toward ourselves and our perception of the world. Now, perhaps you can see why I said that this article should be called 'The Panorama of Humor and *the Meaning of Life*.' In pursuing an analysis of humor, we have come across a pattern that seems fundamental to existence. A great impersonal force appears to be at work, a force that destroys old patterns of being in the creation of new ones, and the structure of humor reflects the workings of this force. (P. 94)

Persuasive as Mindess is in presenting the idea of a relationship between meaning in life and personal sense of humor, he unfortunately presents no data or empirical evidence to bolster his argument.

The purpose of the present study is to test his theory. A statistically adequate sample of respondents will complete a multidimensional sense of humor scale and a purpose in life scale. It is hypothesized that there will be a positive relationship between scores on the two scales. Correlational tests will also be conducted to determine possible relationships between gender, age, meaning in life, overall sense of humor, and coping humor.

## Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

### I. Purpose in Life

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (Frankl, 1959, p. 65).

It might be argued that the beginning of inquiry into the concept of purpose or meaning in life began with the publication of Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy — A Revised and Enlarged Edition of From Death Camp to Existentialism* (1959). A stark account of Frankl’s experiences in the concentration camps of World War II, the book deals with hopelessness, hope, and Frankl’s system of therapy designed to combat what he calls noogenic neurosis, a crisis of the lack of meaning in life:

Let me explain why I have employed the term ‘logotherapy’ as the name for my theory. *Logos* is a Greek word which denotes ‘meaning.’ Logotherapy or, as it has been called by some authors, ‘The Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy,’ focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man’s search for such a meaning. According to logotherapy, this striving to find a meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force in man. That is why I speak of a *will to meaning* in contrast to the pleasure principle (or, as we could also term it, the *will to pleasure*) on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centered, as well in contrast to the *will to power* stressed by Adlerian psychology. (1959, Pp. 96-97)

Frankl contends that noogenic neurosis arises as a response to an emptiness of purpose in life. The problem is seen as existential frustration, a vacuum of perceived meaning in modern day life. Frankl’s contention is that the essence of human motivation is a *will to meaning*, and when meaning is not found, the person becomes

frustrated.

An effort to quantify the existential concept of purpose or meaning in life was done by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964), with the construction of their Purpose in Life (PIL) test. This was a scale developed to assess responses to the degree to which individuals experience purpose in life. As an example, one item of the PIL asks people to rank their attitude: "I am usually: completely bored (at one end of a Likert scale) to exuberant and enthusiastic" (at the other). Originally using 25 items, the scale was pilot tested and about half of the items were thrown out. The final Crumbaugh and Maholick PIL scale with replacements consists of 20 statements. It was tested with 225 individuals in two nonpatient and three patient samples and had what the authors maintained was satisfactory reliability and validity. Evidence for the scale's construct validity was further confirmed in a factor analysis published by Reker and Cousins (1979). Another analysis of the PIL (Chamberlain & Zika, 1989) indicated the same factor structure and level of reliability.

Since that time the PIL has been used in hundreds of studies. Since its genesis was in the study of existentialism, it is reasonable to assume that many of these research efforts have involved matters of existence, and this is indeed the case. The PIL has been a popular instrument for studies of death anxiety and bereavement. For example, Amenta (1984) studied hospice volunteers who persisted with the hospice program and those who dropped out. Persisters were shown to be higher in purpose in life and lower in death anxiety. Durlak (1972) and Bolt (1978) found negative correlations

between PIL score and measures of death fear. Ulmer, Range, and Smith (1991) demonstrated that persons high in purpose of life had a better experience with bereavement. Similar results between scores on the PIL and bereavement adjustment were published by Robak and Griffin (2000).

Not surprisingly, the PIL has been a popular instrument for use by those studying various aspects of religiosity or spirituality. Gerwood, LeBlanc, and Piazza (1997) for example, found that the PIL correlated positively with an index of spirituality among their sample of 118 elderly persons. Lewis, Lanigan, Joseph, and de Fockert (1997) used the PIL in a study of religiosity and happiness. Molcar and Stuempfig (1988) found a relationship between purpose in life and a personal belief in God.

The PIL scale has also been used in many studies of well-being. For example, a paper finding a negative relationship between purpose in life and depression was published in 1997 by Carr. Similar findings were found by Lyon and Younger (2001). Other concepts have been shown to be correlates of PIL score. Carney, Dobson, and Dobson (1988) demonstrated that PIL score increased using pre and post-tests among school-based volunteer grandparents. A negative correlation was found between PIL score and loneliness in a Norwegian sample (Bondevik & Skogstad, 2000). Finally, Ebersole and Quiring (1990) found only a slight relationship between scores on the PIL and the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale in a sample of 132 undergraduates.

Martin Pinquart (2002) has recently published a meta-analysis of studies of

purpose in life, which he calls a defining feature of mental health. He compiled findings from 70 different empirical studies, finding a small age-associated decline in purpose of life. Purpose in life showed a strong correlation with social integration, in particular with the quality of relationships. Higher purpose in life was related to better health, everyday competence, socioeconomic status, being employed, and being married. Negative associations were found between purpose in life and depression, and strong positive associations were found between purpose in life and psychological well-being. There were no comparative studies of purpose in life and sense of humor presented in Pinquart's meta-analysis.

Finally, a recent book by Argyle (2001) argues that happiness is key to well being throughout life, and that it is made up of traits such as optimism, purpose in life, internal control, and having appropriate goals, as well as humor, money, and socialization. No tests of humor or sense of humor and purpose in life, however, are presented.

## **II. Sense of humor**

Most of the early researchers who worked on sense of humor focused on personality and the appreciation of humor (Eysenck, 1942; Freud, 1916 and 1928; Landis & Ross, 1933; Luborsky & Cattell, 1947). This vein of research has continued in the work of Willibald Ruch and his colleagues (Kohler & Ruch, 1996; Ruch, 1988; Ruch & Hehl, 1983; Ruch, McGhee, & Hehl, 1990). Others have researched the

effects of humor on coping with life stress (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986; Martin & Dobbin, 1988; Martin & Lefcourt, 1983; Nezu & Nezu, & Blisset, 1988; O'Connell, 1960; Overholser, 1992; Rin, 1988; and Yovetich, Dale, & Hudak, 1990). Still others (Martin & Lefcourt, 1984) have sought to assess sense of humor by measuring one's likelihood to laugh, although subsequent researchers have indicated that there is very little relationship between funniness and overt laughter (Gavanski, 1986; Porterfield, Mayer, Dougherty, Kredich, Kronberg, Marsee, & Okazaki, 1988; Riccelli, Antila, Dale, & Klious, 1989; Thorson, 1990).

In more recent years, the trend has been to abandon unidimensional approaches to the assessment of sense of humor and cumbersome and difficult-to-score tests of creative response, such as cartoon caption writing. Instead, most researchers now use one or more of the scales that seek to measure multiple elements of personal sense of humor (Kohler & Ruch, 1996).

Thorson and Powell (1993a) argued that sense of humor is multidimensional, and that individuals have a personal *humor repertoire* that they call upon, to one degree or another, as varying situations demand. Their concept was that people are stronger or less strong in the various elements making up an individual humor repertoire, according to such things as personality, individual aggressiveness, and the demands of the particular social situation they find themselves in. Some of the elements that might be present in different peoples' individual humor repertoires include:

1. Recognition of oneself as a humorous person.

Depending on successes (and failures) of previous attempts to *be* humorous, individual motivations vary in attempting to be a humorous person. Some people *try harder*, perhaps because of personal needs. If the individual perceives rewards for humorous attempts, he or she may seek to expand such efforts and develop greater creative abilities in terms of humor production and performance.

## 2. Recognition of other's humor.

One may have a facility for getting the joke, and positive rewards in this regard may also stimulate further development and recognition of subtleties and of unintended humor. On the other hand, those who have a hard time perceiving the humor in a situation may never seek to get better at getting the joke. There is no positive reward attached, so why try?

But, both of these first two elements pay off for those who try harder. They are both related to level of motivation. How hard does one wish to try to either generate or recognize humor? The person's level of motivation probably is influenced by understandings of past successes and associated rewards.

## 3. Appreciation of humor itself.

Similar to recognition of others' humor, appreciation of humor depends on attitudes. Feelings toward humorous people are closely related to attitudes toward humor itself. They may also relate to level of psychological maturity or, perhaps, pathology. The person who says, "People who joke around are trying to manipulate me," is indicating a level of paranoia. Conversely, people who seek out funny and

amusing entertainment are indicating that they want to be happy. One might conclude that in contemporary American society appreciation of humor is normative.

#### 4. Laughing.

Laughter is one possible response to humor. However, it may also be the case that humorous people, those who get the joke or those who create the joke in the first place, may have a dead-pan delivery. Further, those who don't get the joke may heartily join in the laughter merely for social reasons, or perhaps just because they're nervous.

#### 5. Coping.

Thorson and Powell (1993a & 1993b) argue that the use of humor as a coping mechanism is admirable. Freud (1916) had said that humor can be a type of response to a crisis wherein the individual is able to focus upon the true meaning of the problem, but to dismiss its importance. Laughing at a problem, or laughing off a problem, then may be a kind of armor against the problems and misfortunes inevitably encountered in life.

#### 6. Perspective.

Individual outlook might be seen as an element of personal sense of humor as well, especially when the outlook includes an appreciation of life's absurdities. One can laugh at a silly situation, and one can laugh at oneself. Outlook might include such things as being good-natured, tolerant, broad-minded, and generous. These are things that are consistent with being good-humored (Thorson & Powell, 1993a).



Having outlined these elements of a humor repertoire, and having previously listed their thoughts on elements of a multidimensional sense of humor, Thorson and Powell (1991) published the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS) (Thorson & Powell, 1993 and 1993b). Factor analyses of the MSHS have found several consistent elements: creativity and social uses of humor, coping through uses of humor, appreciation of humor, and appreciation of humorous people. Kohler and Ruch (1996) found the MSHS to be somewhat higher than other humor scales in terms of validity and reliability, and the scale has been used in a large number of studies and has been translated into 15 different languages. Of greater importance in the present setting, it has also been shown to be easy to administer in large groups and is clear and easily understood .

In conclusion, Mindess has argued that purpose in life and sense of humor are related, but he presented no data to prove his point. While there are numerous studies of purpose in life, and almost as many studies of various elements of sense of humor, no previous empirical study was found that assessed both sense of humor and purpose in life. It would seem that the two concepts might be related in that those who lead the genuinely good life presumably have the ability to laugh at life (and themselves) while maintaining a high level of personal purpose. Those who are good-natured might seem to also have appropriate perspective in terms of recognition of life's goals and the importance of achieving those goals. Being on good terms with life must also include being on good terms with other people. And being on good terms with other people must surely include having a good sense of humor.

The objective of the present study is to take two standardized psychological scales to assess purpose in life and sense of humor in a convenience sample large enough to give acceptable statistical power, and to test for relationships between the two concepts.

### Chapter 3 - Methodology

The present study assessed purpose in life and sense of humor in a sample of undergraduates and looked for correlations between overall humor score and purpose in life score as well correlations of purpose in life with several sub-scales of the sense of humor test.

**A. Assumptions.** It is assumed that research participants provided honest, complete answers, and that the instruments used were valid and reliable.

**B. Limitations.** This is at best a preliminary study with a convenience sample. The researcher did not have the means to draw a random sample or to draw a sample from a broad geographical area.

**C. Definition of terms.** For the purposes of this study, scores on the Modified Purpose in Life Scale (MPIL) (Chang & Dodder, 1983-84) are equivalent to “purpose in life,” and scores on the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS) (Thorson & Powell, 1993a) are equivalent to “sense of humor.”

**D. Hypotheses.** It was hypothesized that there is a positive correlation between scores on the MPIL and the MSHS that is significant at the .05 level. It was also hypothesized that there is a positive, significant, correlation between scores on the Modified Purpose in Life Scale and the Coping Humor Sub-Scale of Thorson & Powell’s Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale.

**E. Description of instruments.** The scales used in the present study include the Modified Purpose in Life Scale (Chang & Dodder, 1983-84) and the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (Thorson & Powell, 1993a).

The purpose in life scale appears as Items 25 through 31 in the questionnaire attached in Appendix A. Chang and Dodder (1983-84) took the original 20-item Purpose in Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) and reduced it to 10 items according to response categories consistent with the original test. This 10-item scale was then validated through item analyses using two cross-national studies, one of 177 persons from Oklahoma and another of 202 people in Taipei, Taiwan. They concluded that just seven items in fact were adequately representative of the concepts central to the scale. A factor analysis of the resultant seven-item scale resulted in three factors: emptiness of life, boredom and lacking goals, and satisfaction and purposeful life. The seven item scale had a Cronbach alpha of .79 in Chang and Dodder's study. The MPIL was used because it is short, convenient, and easily scored.

The MSHS's construction and validation is detailed in articles by Thorson and Powell (1993a and 1993b). It consists of the first 24 items on the appended questionnaire. Respondents are asked to agree or disagree on a Likert scale to various self-descriptive statements. A recent administration of the MSHS found it to have Cronbach alphas of .91 with 357 white respondents and .89 with 116 black respondents (Thorson, Powell, & Samuel, 2001).

**F. Sample.** The sample was made up of undergraduates at the University of Nebraska at Omaha asked by their professors to cooperate in a study of feelings and attitudes. A minimum of 120 usable questionnaires were to be completed.

**G. Data collection procedures.** The instruments were to be distributed during regular class time, and the participants were asked to complete them as quickly as possible.

Pilot tests found that the questionnaire can usually be completed in less than ten minutes. A cover letter (see Appendix A) assured anonymity and told those who might be bothered by the questionnaire or its contents in any way to please just turn in a blank instrument. Approval of the study was requested (and granted) from the University of Nebraska Institutional Review Board.

#### **H. Treatment of data**

Individual questionnaires were to be scored and scores entered into a statistical package for analysis. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were to be calculated comparing overall scores on the MPIL and the MSHS, as well as correlations, presented in a matrix, between sub-scales of the MSHS that are suggested by Thorson and Powell's earlier factor analysis (1993b) in addition to age and gender. Purpose in life scores and sense of humor scores were also to be presented as means and standard deviations for both male and female subjects and the results compared by *t* test.

## Chapter 4 - Results

The purpose of the present study was to examine correlations between purpose in life and various dimensions of sense of humor. The seven-item Modified Purpose in Life Scale (Chang & Dodder, 1983-84) and the 24-item Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (Thorson & Powell, 1993a & 1993b) were administered to three large classes of undergraduates at the University of Nebraska at Omaha during the Fall Semester of 2002. The questionnaire (see Appendix A) contained a cover letter telling participants to turn in a blank instrument if any of the questions asked bothered them in any way. The study was approved by the University of Nebraska Institutional Review Board. Items were scored from 0 to 4 on Likert scales, with negatives reversed in scoring.

A total of 141 questionnaires were distributed, and usable responses were received from 136 individuals: 55 men and 81 women. Ages of respondents ranged from 18 to 51 years (Mean = 21.6 years,  $SD = 6.1$ ; males' mean age was 21.4,  $SD = 4.2$ , and females' was 21.7,  $SD = 5.5$ ).

The MSHS can be reported as sub-scales, using elements of sense of humor suggested by factor analyses of the scale; the sub-scales are titled: Creation and Performance, Uses of Humor for Coping, Social Uses of Humor, and Attitudes Toward Humor and Humorous People. Table 1 contains the items and their respective numbers (as they appeared on the appended questionnaire) grouped by sub-scales. In this narrative and in subsequent tables, these MSHS variables will be referred to as "Creation," "Coping," "Social," and "Attitude," and scores on the Modified Purpose in Life Test will be referred to as "Purpose."

Table 1. MSHS Sub-Scales

---

I. *Creation and Performance*

- 6. Sometimes I think up jokes or funny stories.
- 5. Other people tell me that I say funny things.
- 9. I can often crack people up with the things I say.
- 12. I can say things in such a way as to make people laugh.
- 15. People look to me to say amusing things.
- 18. I'm regarded as something of a wit by my friends.
- 24. My clever sayings amuse others.

II. *Uses of Humor for Coping*

- 2. Uses of wit or humor help me master difficult situations.
- 6. I can use wit to help adapt to many situations.
- 13. Humor is a lousy coping mechanism.
- 16. Humor helps me cope.
- 19. Coping by using humor is an elegant way of adapting.
- 20. Trying to master situations through uses of humor is really dumb.
- 22. Uses of humor help to put me at ease.

III. *Social Uses of Humor*

- 3. I'm confident that I can make other people laugh.
- 7. I can ease a tense situation by saying something funny.
- 17. I'm uncomfortable when everyone is cracking jokes.
- 21. I can actually have some control over a group by my uses of humor.
- 23. I use humor to entertain my friends.

IV. *Attitudes Toward Humor and Humorous People*

- 4. I dislike comics.
- 8. People who tell jokes are a pain in the neck.
- 10. I like a good joke.
- 11. Calling somebody a "comedian" is a real insult.
- 14. I appreciate those who generate humor.

Means and standard deviations for the MPIL scores and the sub-scales of the MSHS, as well as the total score on the MSHS (identified as “Humor”) are reported, by gender, in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations, by Sex, for MPIL and MSHS

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>
<b>Purpose</b>	Males	23.7	3.1	.82 (n.s.)
	Females	24.3	4.3	
<b>Creation</b>	Males	19.4	4.6	2.89 ( $p < .01$ )
	Females	16.9	5.1	
<b>Coping</b>	Males	20.8	4.3	.66 (n.s.)
	Females	20.3	4.4	
<b>Social</b>	Males	14.6	3.1	3.18 ( $p < .01$ )
	Females	12.8	3.4	
<b>Attitude</b>	Males	17.0	2.9	.68 (n.s.)
	Females	16.6	3.3	
<b>Humor</b>	Males	69.1	11.9	2.20 ( $p < .05$ )
	Females	64.2	12.9	



As these data indicate, the 81 women in the sample scored slightly higher in Purpose in Life, a difference that was not significantly different. The 55 male respondents scored higher in every element of sense of humor where significant differences were found on the Creation and Performance sub-scale of the MSHS as well as the Social Uses of Humor sub-scale. Total score on the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale was also significantly higher for males. These differences in humor score by gender were consistent with Thorson and Powell's (1993b) earlier sample, but the total scores were somewhat lower in the present study (*cf.* males = 72.5 and females = 71.5 in the 1993 group). Males in 1993 were also higher in Creativity humor, but females in that sample were somewhat higher than males in uses of Coping humor. MSHS scores on the present sample were more consistent with those more recently reported by Thorson, Powell, and Samuel (2001) for a UNO sample of 357 students (67.7 for males and 67.2 for females).

Table 3 presents correlations between scores on the Modified Purpose in Life Scale, the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale, and the two demographic variables. The participants in the present study were coded as males = 1 and females = 2 for scoring purposes. Thus it can be seen in the first comparison presented, the dependent variable of Creativity and Performance of humor, there were no significant correlations by Purpose in Life or by age, but males were significantly higher than females ( $r = -.24, p < .01$ ), which is consistent with the *t* test comparisons presented in Table 2 and Thorson and Powell's 1993 sample.

There were no gender or age differences in the second comparison, uses of

Coping Humor, but there was a fairly large, positive correlation with Purpose in Life ( $R = .31, p < .001$ ); individuals with higher Coping Humor scores also scored higher on the Modified Purpose in Life scale.

Table 3. Correlations of Purpose in Life, Age, Gender, and Sense of Humor Scores

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sex</i>
<b>Creation</b>	.11	-.10	-.24**
<b>Coping</b>	.31***	.04	-.06
<b>Social</b>	.19*	-.02	-.27**
<b>Attitude</b>	.45***	.09	-.06
<b>Humor</b>	.30***	.01	-.18*

\*\*\* $p < .001$

\*\* $p < .01$

\* $p < .05$

In the third comparison of dependent variables, Social Uses of Humor, there was a significant relationship with Purpose in Life ( $r = .19, p < .05$ ), and a more robust correlation of Social Uses of Humor with gender ( $r = -.27, p < .01$ ). Males reported that they used social humor more than females.

The MSHS sub-scale assessing attitudes toward humor and humorous people gave the biggest correlation with Purpose in Life:  $r = .45 (p < .001)$ . As score on

Attitude increased, so did the score on the MPIL. There were no differences by age or sex with this variable.

Finally, the overall total score on the MSHS (“Humor”) correlated positively with Purpose in Life  $r = .30, p < .001$ ). As the total humor score increased, so did the score on the MPIL. There was no age difference in total humor score, but there was a gender difference: males scored significantly higher than females.

Based on these data, then, the two hypotheses of this study can be accepted: there is evidence upon which to suggest a positive relationship between purpose in life and sense of humor, and there is some data upon which to conclude that there is a positive relationship between purpose in life and uses of coping humor. The even larger positive correlation between purpose in life and attitudes toward humor and humorous people had not been hypothesized.

## Chapter 5 - Discussion

It would be presumptuous to make too much of one preliminary study with results from 136 college students. This cross-sectional study, utilizing a convenience sample, does not have much of an age range, and the study was conducted in just one geographic area. Generalizations from these data are thus limited. There were, however, fairly robust findings for a study of this kind, and some of them came as a surprise.

For the basic purposes of the study, the evidence was sufficient to support the hypotheses, and Harvey Mindess (1987) seems to have been right when he said that there is a relationship between sense of humor and purpose in life. Apparently, the variance lies in the elements assessed by the MSHS sub-scales for Uses of Humor for Coping and, especially, Attitude Toward Humor and Humorous People.

Further analyses by scale item might reveal *which* particular items correlated best with purpose in life, and thus give a better perspective on the concepts involved in these relationships. Table 4 lists the MSHS items and their correlation with the MPIL.

Table 4. Humor Items and Correlations with Purpose in Life

MSHS Item	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Sometimes I think up jokes or funny stories	.03	
2. Uses of wit or humor help me master difficult situations.	.13	
3. I'm confident that I can make other people laugh.	.11	
4. I dislike comics.	.26	.002
5. Other people tell me that I say funny things	.16	
6. I can use wit to help adapt to many situations.	.25	.003
7. I can ease a tense situation by saying something funny.	.17	.05
8. People who tell jokes are a pain in the neck.	.36	.000
9. I can often crack people up with the things I say.	.05	
10. I like a good joke.	.28	.001
11. Calling somebody a "comedian" is a real insult.	.31	.000
12. I can say things in such a way as to make people laugh.	.16	
13. Humor is a lousy coping mechanism.	.40	.000
14. I appreciate those who generate humor.	.43	.000
15. People look to me to say amusing things.	-.06	
16. Humor helps me cope.	.13	
17. I'm uncomfortable when everyone is cracking jokes.	.20	.05
18. I regarded as something of a wit by my friends.	.10	
19. Coping by using humor is an elegant way of adapting.	.06	
20. Trying to master situations through uses of humor is really dumb.	.33	.000
21. I can actually have some control over a group by my uses of humor.	.03	
22. Uses of humor help to put me at ease.	.32	.000
23. I use humor to entertain my friends.	.11	
24. My clever sayings amuse others.	.16	
Total MSHS	.30	.001

The first three sense of humor items do not correlate significantly with the group's score on the MPIL, but Item #4, "I dislike comics," does have a significant relationship with the purpose in life score. It is one of the "Attitude Toward Humor and Humorous People" items (it correlates with that sub-scale of the MSHS at the rate of  $r = .70$ ).

Note that all negatively-phrased items of the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale are reversed in scoring, so in all cases high item score means higher sense of humor score. So, people who *like* comics are higher in purpose in life.

The next item with a significant MPIL correlation is #6 “I can use wit to help adapt to many situations.” This is one of the Coping Humor items; it has a correlation of .71 with the Coping Humor sub-scale of the MSHS. The next item, “I can ease a tense situation by saying something funny,” is one of the Social Uses of Humor items; it has a small but significant correlation with MPIL score.

“People who tell jokes are a pain in the neck,” one of the attitudinal items (it correlates with the Attitudes Toward Humor and Humorous People sub-scale at the level of  $r = .79$ ) has a robust relationship with purpose in life ( $r = .36, p < .000$ ). So does item #10 (“I like a good joke.”), another attitudinal item. Similarly, #11, “Calling somebody a ‘comedian’ is a real insult,” is another attitudinal item with a relatively high correlation to purpose in life score ( $r = .31, p < .000$ ). People who like comedians have higher purpose in life.

The next item with a relatively high correlation with MPIL score is #13, “Humor is a lousy coping mechanism.” This is one of the items that is related both to Coping Humor ( $r = .57$ ) and Attitudes ( $r = .67$ ). The next one, “I appreciate those who generate humor,” also has a high correlation with MPIL as well as with Coping ( $r = .61$ ) and Attitudes Toward Humor and Humorous People ( $r = .74$ ).

Interestingly, a straight Coping Humor item (#16 “Humor helps me cope,”) is not significantly correlated with MPIL score. But #20, “Trying to master situations through uses of humor is really dumb,” does have a significant MPIL correlation ( $r =$

.33,  $p < .001$ ). It is one of the items that can be taken to be both a Coping Humor item or a Social Uses of Humor item, or even an attitudinal item. At any rate, the less one agrees with this statement, the higher one scores on purpose in life.

The only remaining MSHS item to correlate significantly with MPIL score is #22, a Coping Humor item.

In total, the correlation of sense of humor score with purpose in life score for these respondents was .30 ( $p < .001$ ). The pattern emerges, however, that it is not the person who creates humor or uses humor as a social lubricant or control mechanism who has a higher purpose in life. MPIL score in the present study is more highly related to liking comics, using humor to adapt to many situations, enjoying people who tell jokes, appreciating comedians, admiring humor as a coping mechanism, appreciating those who generate humor, being comfortable while others are cracking jokes, mastering situations through the use of humor, and being put at ease through the uses of humor.

It is apparent, then, that the good-spirited or good-natured individual is the person likelier to score higher on the Modified Purpose in Life Scale. Evidently, one does not need to be a comedian to like comedians. Outlook on life, then, seemingly is the construct most similar to both sense of humor and purpose in life. Future research suggested by this finding might seek to find relationships between optimism and purpose in life. The individual most positive in Attitudes Toward Humor and Humorous People is the likeliest to also be highest in purpose in life.

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## Appendix A

October 24, 2002

Sandra Batten  
Gerontology, Annex 24  
UNO - VIA COURIER

**IRB#:** 335-02-EX

**TITLE OF PROTOCOL:** Sense of Humor and Purpose in Life

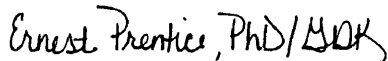
Dear Dr. :

The IRB has reviewed your Exemption Form for the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46:101b, category 2. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines. It is also understood that the IRB will be immediately notified of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project.

Please be advised that the IRB has a maximum protocol approval period of three years from the original date of approval and release. If this study continues beyond the three year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,



Ernest D. Prentice, Ph.D.  
Co-Chair, IRB

EDP/gdk



Dear Participant,

On the following pages are a number of questions concerning your attitudes and feelings. Please complete your responses to these statements with the first response that comes to mind. The questionnaire is self-explanatory. It should take less than ten minutes to complete all the items.

This is a research project for a graduate degree at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The scales we're asking you to complete are relatively innocent, but if you feel at all uncomfortable in any way about responding to any of these items, simply turn in a blank questionnaire.

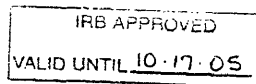
Your participation in this survey has no influence, positive or negative, on your grade or standing in this class. Note that there are no identifiers of any kind on the questionnaire, and we do not need your name; thus the study is completely anonymous.

Again, thanks for helping me by participating in this study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Sandra Batten'.

Sandra Batten  
Graduate Student





Please check the appropriate response to each statement, from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Give the first answer that comes to mind, and don’t leave any items blank.

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>				<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1. Sometimes I think up jokes or funny stories.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Uses of wit or humor help me master difficult situations.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. I’m confident that I can make other people laugh.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. I dislike comics.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. Other people tell me that I say funny things.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. I can use wit to help adapt to many situations.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
7. I can ease a tense situation by saying something funny.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8. People who tell jokes are a pain in the neck.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
9. I can often crack people up with the things I say.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
10. I like a good joke.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
11. Calling somebody a “comedian” is a real insult.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
12. I can say things in such a way as to make people laugh.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
13. Humor is a lousy coping mechanism.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
14. I appreciate those who generate humor.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
15. People look to me to say amusing things.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
16. Humor helps me cope.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
17. I’m uncomfortable when everyone is cracking jokes.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
18. I’m regarded as something of a wit by my friends.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
19. Coping by using humor is an elegant way of adapting.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
20. Trying to master situations through uses of humor Is really dumb.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Strongly  
Disagree**

**Strongly  
Agree**

- |  |       |       |       |       |       |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 21. I can actually have some control over a group by my uses of humor. | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 22. Uses of humor help to put me at ease.                              | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 23. I use humor to entertain my friends.                               | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 24. My clever sayings amuse others.                                    | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 25. I am usually completely bored.                                     | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 26. In life I have no goals or aims at all.                            | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 27. My personal existence is very purposeful and meaningful.           | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 28. If I could choose, I would prefer never to have been born.         | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 29. My life is empty, filled only with despair.                        | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 30. In thinking of my life, I often wonder why I exist.                | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 31. Facing my daily tasks is a source of pleasure and satisfaction.    | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Thanks for answering these questions. Now, please indicate below your age and sex:

\_\_\_\_\_ years

\_\_\_\_\_ male

\_\_\_\_\_ female