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## Humor at the work site: An exploration of relationships among sense of humor and supervisor subordinate age, gender and type of humor

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**HUMOR AT THE WORK SITE: AN EXPLORATION OF RELATIONSHIPS  
AMONG SENSE OF HUMOR AND SUPERVISOR/SUBORDINATE  
AGE, GENDER AND TYPE OF HUMOR**

**A Thesis**

**Presented to the**

**Department of Communication**

**and the**

**Faculty of the Graduate College**

**University of Nebraska**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Masters of Arts**

**University of Nebraska at Omaha**

**by**

**Susan Stibal**

**December 2000**

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## THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts,  
University of Nebraska at Omaha.

## Committee

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Robert E. Carlson  
Chairperson

Date

10/6/00

HUMOR AT THE WORK SITE: AN EXPLORATION OF RELATIONSHIPS  
AMONG SENSE OF HUMOR AND SUPERVISOR/SUBORDINATE  
AGE, GENDER AND TYPE OF HUMOR

Susan Stibal, MA

University of Nebraska, December 2000

Advisor: Dr. Robert Carlson

This thesis attempted to replicate the results of the Decker and Rotondo (1999) study by using a similar survey, but testing in three different work settings using a broader age demographic. The results of this study confirm many of the findings by Decker and Rotondo (1999), as well as the findings of Thorson and Powell (1993, 1996, 1997) concerning the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS).

The present research revealed that the MSHS scores were age and gender neutral, suggesting that sense of humor in people does not vary according to gender or age. The research also showed that the use of “positive” humor by the subordinate was significantly affected by their MSHS score, as well as the supervisors’ use of “positive” humor. The use of “negative” humor by the subordinate was significantly affected by the supervisors’ use of “negative” humor, the supervisors’ gender and the subordinates’ age. A correlation was found between the MSHS and the use of “positive” humor by the subordinate. Additionally, this research suggested that male supervisors used more “negative” humor than female supervisors.

Finally, there was no significant difference found between gender, age and the use of “positive” or “negative” humor. However, there were significant differences between companies with respect to the use of “positive” humor used by the supervisor and two of the subscales within the MSHS.

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## **Chapter 1 – Body**

### **Introduction**

Humor research is a, "developing field in search of both a theory and appropriate methods for examining this complex phenomenon" (Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990, p 257). Literature in the field of organizational communication has attempted to define situations where humor could be beneficial in the workplace. Understanding what role humor plays in organizations may help managers who use humor to be more effective and thereby contribute to their subordinate's job satisfaction (Decker, 1987). There are many studies that have suggested humor may have useful managerial applications; however, research is lacking on the possible relationship of subordinates' and supervisors' use of humor. There is also little research on how the generations and the genders differ in personal sense of humor. Humor research is significant and necessary because of its interdisciplinary uses and its potential to help explain and understand the behavior of both men and women of various ages with various senses of humor in the workplace.

In a recent study, Decker and Rotondo (1999) surveyed alumni of Salisbury State University's Perdue School of Business about humor in the workplace. The study examined the relationships between subordinates and supervisors. Both subordinates' characteristics (age, sex and Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale score ((Thorson & Powell, 1993)) and supervisors' characteristics (the supervisors' use of humor and sex) were tested as possible predictors of the subordinates' use of humor at work. Studies concerning humor and gender within the work environment, especially those focusing on manager gender and characteristics, are rare (Decker & Rotondo, 1999). In addition, both positive (non-offensive) humor and negative (sexual and insult humor) were investigated to determine if the predictors differed depending on the nature of the humor involved.

The present thesis uses an instrument similar to the instrument used by Decker and Rotondo study (1999) to see if their results can be replicated. However, in this thesis, the study surveys people in their workplace, instead of a group of business school alumni, which gives the respondents' immediate references from which to answer the survey questions. The survey also was given to employees of a wide variety of ages and examines more age categories than in the Decker and Rotondo study. This thesis also includes a comprehensive and critical look at literature on organizational humor, including functions and effects of humor in the organization, self-effacing and sexual humor, as well as male-female differences in relation to humor.

## **Literature Review**

### **Historical Perspective and Semantics**

Humor is a complex phenomenon. It is difficult to fully understand and study because humor is situation-specific and cannot be detached from the social context in which it occurs (Duncan & Feisal, 1989). In addition, humor is such an integral part of the ongoing life process that trying to record its occurrence makes a person feel self-consciousness about something that is usually regarded as natural and spontaneous (Linstead, 1985).

Many definitions of humor have been offered including: "Humor is a verbal and nonverbal activity which elicits a positive response from listeners" (Crawford, 1994, p 11); "Humor and joking behavior can refer to any communication with a witty or funny intent that is known in advance by the source" (Duncan, 1985, p 557); "Intentional verbal and nonverbal messages which elicit laughter, chuckling, and other forms of spontaneous behavior taken to mean pleasure, delight, and or surprise in the targeted receiver" (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991, p 205); and "Humor is any type of communication

that intentionally creates incongruent meanings and thereby causes laughter" (Duncan & Feisal, 1989, p 19).

It is clear that these definitions have some definite similarities and differences. Many of the definitions recognize a sender and receiver with some sort of response that is trying to be elicited. It is unreasonable to work backward from the laughter and assume the stimulus for the laughter was intentional. In two of the definitions, nonverbal and verbal messages are specifically mentioned in the definition of humor. The other obvious similarity in these definitions is the reference to jokes and laughter.

Radcliffe-Brown (1940) discussed humor and laughter in terms of kinship relations in non-Western primitive civilizations (Zijderveld, 1983). Humor was defined by Radcliffe-Brown as a joking relationship between two people in which "one, by custom is permitted, and sometimes required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required not to take offense" (As cited in Zijderveld, 1983, p 90). This definition is also known as the Superiority Theory which views laughter as the "triumph of one person over other people and the resulting varieties of humor that can occur" (Duncan, 1985, p 558). Most of the early humor research done in industrial settings was from an anthropological and psychological perspective. That is, the emphasis was on the individual and the role humor played in understanding individual behavior (Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990).

The present thesis considers humor, joking and laughter to be synonymous and uses the Booth-Butterfields' humor definition when referencing humor, because it recognizes a sender and receiver, refers to humor as intentional, and qualifies specific types of laughter to mean humor.

The notion of joking relationships has been broadened since the anthropological use and applied to the sociological and communicative study of modern industry. However, recent humor studies done with organizational management could still be classified as using a superiority theory approach (Duncan, 1985). For example, the superiority theory of

humor can help explain how individuals with a sense of humor are able to achieve cohesiveness. Members of one group see humor as an identifier of their group. These group members feel superior to members of another group for that reason. Sharing laughter is a means of including or excluding members of the group (Scriven & Hefferin, 1998). Vinton's (1989) study illustrates this point through the study of humor in a small family-owned business. She found that humor creates bonds between the employees and lessened the status differentials that existed among the employees.

Radcliffe-Brown's other significant research revolved around symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships. A symmetrical relationship is where two persons are able to tease and poke fun at each other, for example co-workers. An asymmetrical relationship is where one of two persons is able to tease and make fun of the other while the other cannot or should not retaliate. An example would be an employee/supervisor relationship. Duncan's (1984) research, which used self administered questionnaires in nine diverse work groups, revealed that managers are not often the subjects of jokes (asymmetrical relationship), unless they are also accepted as friends and perceived to be occasional initiators of jokes. When managers involve themselves in the humor network by initiating jokes they can expect to have jokes directed at and about them as well. Limited research has looked at how sex and age differences might affect the supervisor/subordinate relationship.

### Functions of Humor in the Organization

One area of study focuses on the functions of humor. That is, what role does humor play or could humor play in an organization to help or hinder members?

Humor can be utilized to accentuate and define power and status (Vinton, 1989). Joking that is aimed at people fulfills a social function that defines and redefines the different social groupings, reinforces the ranking of group members and clarifies the status

of one group to another (Lundberg, 1969). Humor can also reduce the status differences between employer and employees (Duncan, 1984). Oftentimes these relationships will develop into friendships (Vinton, 1989).

The most frequently examined issue, according to Duncan (1984), is humor and how it relates to power or status structures in small groups. One theory on power is the Triad Theory. When there is humor, three social actors have been identified, the initiator of the joke (I), the target (T), and the audience (A). A joke is defined as successful when the audience responds to the initiator through laughter. The appearance of laughter in a joking situation can be easily predicted if the relative power of A, T, and I is known (Dwyer, 1991). Many studies illustrate that humor patterns are related in predictable ways. For example, Lundberg (1969) examined the way in which person-focused joking was related to social rankings in an electric motor repair shop. He found that within status groups, the humor was similar, however between the groups it was surprisingly different.

Humor also helps to build group cohesiveness and preserve social structures. Shared laughter reflects a "social benchmark" of the group's common perspective. Joking relationships generate common understanding and strengthen group norms and bonds. Similarly, directing humor at people outside the group can enhance solidarity. Pogrebin and Poole (1988) explore the role of humor in groups by exploring how police patrol officers incorporate humor as a strategic activity to ensure the integrity of their occupational work group. Through an ethnographic study, they found that patrol officers relate and interpret work experiences to reinforce their own perspective of policing.

Another function of humor is that communication is better accepted between source and receiver when the message is softened by humor. Humor eases hostility by enabling people to say things that if said directly would hurt feelings and relationships (Kahn, 1989).

Some researchers suggest that productivity can be increased through the use of humor. Although the research is limited, many of increases in productivity are related to

decreases in stress through humor. Duncan and Feisal (1989) suggest that, since joking improves group cohesiveness, it is likely that it also indirectly influences group performance. A cohesive group with a high performance norm will have a great influence on individual behavior and productivity. Kramer and Kleiner (1992) believe humor is an extremely efficient vehicle to increase worker motivation and improve employee morale. Humor is a cheap way to help people enjoy their jobs and most humor is universally understood. Through a participant observer study, Vinton (1989) found humor appeared to create bonds among employees that facilitated the accomplishment of work tasks. Not all research suggests positive effects on productivity. One researcher has suggested that too much humor can lead to goofing around that actually decreases productivity (Kramer & Kleiner, 1992).

Another function of humor is its effective use in presentations and speeches. Chang and Gruner (1985) suggest that humor produces a positive audience reaction toward the speaker, enhances how interesting the speech is, influences the effectiveness of the speech, and may produce better long-term recall.

Humor also functions as a teaching and socialization mechanism of culture in organizations. Culture is learned when new people come into the business through jokes (Vinton, 1989). During socialization, new employees learn not only about their task, but also how the group gets along together socially (Vinton, 1989). Humor helps sustain an organization's shared identity and culture, just as language, rituals and stories do. Linstead (1985) did a participant observation study of the ELS Amalgamated Bakeries. He found that humor played an important role in both changing organizational cultures and reinforcing existing cultures. Berger (1967) suggests that all forms of humor are ultimately related to culture. Identifying what members of a group consider funny provides insights into that group's values (Duncan & Feisal, 1989). Dwyer (1991) believes that humor has no "essence," it only has cultural compatibility. Certain jokes may be regarded as

appropriate by some and at other times not as appropriate. Humor will only be perceived as funny if it reflects the social structure and culture in which it occurs. Kahn (1989) contends that humor is a means by which organization members increase and decrease psychological distance to the organization.

### Effects of Humor in the Organization

A second area of research focuses on the effects of humor. This section looks at the results of humor and how humor affects the organization. The research on the results or outcomes of joking behavior is more diverse than the functions of humor and lacks a single unifying theme (Duncan & Feisal, 1989). However, effects research seems to be the recent trend. The effects literature will be examined by focusing first on the psychological effects and then on the physical effects.

Much of the literature (Bradney, 1957; Linstead, 1985; Pogrebin & Poole, 1988) shows that humor has positive psychological effects on people in organizations. For instance, humor is often used as a coping mechanism. Although in this thesis coping is classified as an effect, it could also be considered as a function of humor. Through humor, people become psychologically detached from certain aspects of their situation, thereby helping them to step back and adopt perspectives different from those they normally maintain (Kahn, 1989). Coping helps people to deal with things like employee boredom, tension and stress on the job (Bradney, 1957). Employees literally "make fun" to keep from becoming as automated as the routine nature of their job (Kahn, 1989). Bradney's study (1957), performed through participant observation of a store clerk in a department store, specifically looked at joking relationships. She found that the department store is able to "avoid tension and disagreement that would be likely to occur as a result of the difficulties inherent in its formal structure. In so doing, it also gives the employees a source

of positive enjoyment in carrying out their routine activities and incidentally, renews their energy to cope even more adequately with their routine problems" (p186). Humor can also be used as a coping strategy in managing a variety of forces. For example, humor helps to normalize crises by couching the threatening situations as routine occurrences (Pogrebin & Poole, 1988).

Humor helps people deal with change by reducing the resistance to the idea and indicating a path for producing the change (Kahn, 1989). This is also referred to as compliance gaining. An example of compliance gaining occurred when people were arriving late to work everyday. The manager sent out a memo to "All Italian Trains" (people who arrive late to work). The boss wanted the employees to act like "Swiss trains" (that typically arrive on time) instead of "Italian trains." The use of humor helped the people receiving the message deal with the information to change their behavior. The information was also introduced in a setting that was not threatening to the employees. It simply suggested a change in a humorous manner. Humor allows reframing of relationships because people are able to step back and look at things in a different light (Ullian, 1976; Kahn, 1989).

Other effects include humor-oriented people reporting less loneliness (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1996). In Wanzer and the Booth-Butterfields' study (1996), using self-report and acquaintance perceptions of communication, is a view of "relational attraction which is predicated, at least in part, upon the perception of one as amusing and entertaining" (p 49). They concluded, among other things, that there is no liability in being a highly humor oriented individual and that it is only if someone can relate to your humor style will they be attracted to you.

The researchers also agree that humor helps people physically, but to what extent is still under debate (Kramer & Kleiner, 1992). Along with relaxing one's muscles, humor increases the oxygen that gets to the brain, speeds up heart rate, raises blood pressure and



accelerates breathing. According to Long (1987), whether it's the arousal, the relaxation or both, laughter may reduce the risk of heart disease, depression, and other stress-related conditions. Humor also allows the release of nervous energy, through laughter thereby serving as a cathartic function. If one looks beyond the immune system to other body processes, laughter does show measurable effects. Collier (1992) refers to Norman Cousins's book *Anatomy of an Illness* (1979) which describes laughter as one of the most powerful medicines available to us. Cousins watched funny movies and took large doses of vitamin C, eventually recovering from a disabling rheumatoid condition. It is unclear of the role (if any) of humor in the recovery process (Long, 1987). Humor can have a great deal of impact on our physical and mental well being. Although the links to these physical improvements are somewhat weak, it is important that future studies be emphasized in this area (Long, 1987).

### Female-Male Differences in the Use of Humor

A third area of study is the use of humor by females and males. This is one of the more heavily researched areas (Decker & Rotondo, 1999). There are differences in both the way men and women develop relationships using humor and in the way men and women use and appreciate humor. In addition, other characteristics like culture have been introduced when studying gender differences.

Cox, Read and Van Auken (1985) investigated male-female differences in communicating humor as a behavioral response pattern in socially awkward situations at work. The results showed that the male humor response was significantly higher than the female response. However, the females had a significantly higher helping response. Much of what is hypothesized by the literature is that humor seems to be less a part of the female's communicative patterns, but that there is value in using humor in business situations.

Duncan et al. (1990) reports that men have been shown to appreciate and use most, but not all, types of humor more than women have. However, there have been few consistent empirically verified gender differences for non-sexual, non-hostile humor.

Vartabedian and Vartabedian (1993) suggest that perhaps it wasn't the lack of humor that caused a lack of status for women in business, but a lack of status which caused a lack of humor. Grotjahn, in 1957, suggested that women frighten men when they demonstrate their wit (As cited in Duncan, et al., 1990). However, it is not unreasonable to believe that humor appreciation or usage has changed since the 1950s. Older females may be influenced less than younger females by the feminist movement that made being humorous less thought of as a male characteristic. Females are becoming more similar to males in appreciation of humor (Decker, 1987). Decker's (1987) study of workers' job satisfaction and impressions of supervisors showed that older females downgraded supervisors who used sexual humor, while younger females and males did not.

Sykes (1966) suggests that joking can be a substitution for intimacy in the workplace. However, a joking relationship can also indicate that certain people are potential sexual partners, while an avoidance relationship between people indicates that a sexual relationship between them is prohibited. Vartabedian and Vartabedian (1993) say that it is all right for there to be joking, even obscene joking, between young men and older women and older men and young women because they understand that they are not sexually available to each other. However, in comparison the joking between young men and young women is much less obscene in nature because they are sexually available to each other. In a Glasgow printing works, Sykes found obscenity and horseplay only between those men and women who were not potential sexual partners, whereas relations between the young men and young women were much more formal. This type of relationship maintained modesty and restraint and there was an avoidance of open obscenity (Sykes, 1966).

Despite the various studies of humor focusing on gender differences, there is little data on changes in sense of humor during adulthood (Decker & Rotondo, 1999). And, there are few studies looking at the sex and age differences in employees' use and interpretation of humor (Decker & Rotondo, 1999).

### Specific Types of Humor

A fourth area of study focuses on specific types of humor. The two types of humor reviewed include self-effacing humor and sexual humor.

As well as being a form of entertainment, Vinton (1989) found in her study of the QRS company that self-ridiculing jokes could be a device that tells other members of the organization that the joke teller has a sense of humor and is willing to participate (Vinton, 1989). Self-effacing humor helps to create a positive common bond with the person they are trying to be humorous with. Most of the research suggests that self-effacing or self-disparaging humor is effective if it does not offend the values of the audience and if it is not used too much. One author suggests that women have a much greater preference to watch self-disparagement humor than do men (Crawford, 1994). Kramer and Kleiner (1992) suggest that whenever possible, people should use self-effacing humor. However, they warn that people should not continuously make themselves the target of jokes.

Sexually oriented humor and sexual harassment humor is another type of humor that researchers have recently focused on. The preference of men for sexual humor is well documented; however it has been found that in jokes depicting both genders, women are more frequently the victims of aggressive humor and the objects in sexual humor than are men (Duncan, et al., 1990). The sexual harassment literature describes the frequency that sexual harassment occurs in the workplace, through the use of humor, and warns of the harms and consequences from it. Duncan, et al. (1990) discusses Freud's belief that humor

is intimately bound up with sex and aggression. "A joke is funny, according to this view, because it allows the hostile and libidinous wishes of the unconscious to leap uncensored into awareness" (p261). The courts and arbitrators continue to wrestle with what constitutes illegal harassment and when does humor that is a part of everyday work turn into harassment and discrimination.

### Strengths and Weaknesses of Research

There are many strengths in the humor literature. First, research on the functions and beneficial uses of humor has been extensive and thorough. It is easy to understand how we can use humor to help us in the organization. Some of this ease of understanding comes from the abundance of qualitative research studies that have been done.

Second, the longevity of study as well as the interdisciplinary approach to studying humor gives the topic a great amount of credibility and significance for study. Although in depth study has not occurred because of the many approaches in different disciplines, discussions of humor have existed for 2000 years. Specific research on organizational humor has a much shorter time frame.

Third, the universal nature of the topic makes humor research applicable to a wide audience. Although much of humor research is context and situation-specific, the sense that everyone encounters humor in organizations everyday makes the topic extremely valuable.

Finally, humor research directed toward power issues, including differences between men and women, has been well developed through the use of theories and participant observation research studies.

Weaknesses in the research include not having any source-oriented humor studies. All the research looks at the impacts on the receivers rather than source encoding and

transmission processes (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1995). It is important to do source oriented research because it permits us to look at communication from a dynamic perspective. When people use humor, they demonstrate communication intelligence because they think that using humor will accomplish important functions and goals.

Second, humor is generally accepted as an artifact of an organization's culture rather than being outside and separate from the culture (Vinton, 1989). We assume that humor must be looked at as a part of the organization, rather than distinct from it. Attempting to separate it could provide some valuable insight on humor's impact and relation to culture.

Third, humor data collected has been primarily qualitative and relies on techniques like participant observation and content analysis of written media, rather than quantitative studies that could include self-administered questionnaires. Surveys are less often used in the study of humor and hold a greater potential of providing new methodological insights than do older more familiar approaches. Also, surveys provide important first-hand perceptions of the subjects themselves and do not require additional interpretations by the observer (Duncan, 1984). Few attempts have been made to collect quantitative information about the perceptions of work group members themselves (Duncan & Feisal, 1989).

Fourth, little research has been devoted to specific issues of humor within the work environment, specifically those related to sex and characteristics of the management. In addition, research has focused on how managers use humor and its appreciation in the work environment by subordinates (Decker & Rotondo, 1999).

### Conclusion

Further study of humor will provide a better understanding of the rules governing humorous interaction and communication. A better understanding of what role humor plays

in organizations should help subordinates and supervisors become more effective communicators while maintaining a positive organization. Humor is an important field because of its interdisciplinary uses and its potential to help explain and understand the behavior of people in organizations and businesses.

### **Statement of Purpose**

This study will examine the age, gender, and sense of humor (Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale score) of individuals in work settings and their relationship to different types of humor (positive/negative) used by the supervisor and the subordinate.

Two aspects of humor make studying it appropriate. First, if subordinates understand the impact of humor on their relationship with their supervisor, they can craft their communication to be more effective. In contrast, supervisors could utilize humor as an effective management tool (Malone, 1980). Second, understanding differences in gender, age, work site communication and sense of humor as related to differences in the use of humor at work can also lead to more effective supervisor and subordinate communication.

This study will examine the respondents' self-reported sense of humor scale score (Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale, Thorson & Powell, 1993) and its relationship to age and gender. Subordinates' characteristics (age, gender, and Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale score) and supervisors' gender will be tested for possible relationship to subordinates' use of humor. Further, both positive (non-offensive) and negative (sexual and insult) humor will be investigated to determine if the characteristics of the supervisors and subordinates differed depending on the nature of the humor involved. Humor can be used as a diagnostic tool because it is a means by which organization members both consciously and unconsciously express themselves, their relationships, their groups and their organization (Kahn, 1989).

Therefore, it seems possible that analysis of the communication of humor and related characteristics of the superior and subordinate would better enable management and employees to understand and appreciate each other. A self-administered survey was used to gather response data addressing the following research questions:

- RQ1) Is the respondents' sense of humor (score on the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale) associated with the age and gender of the respondent?
- RQ2) Are subordinates' age, gender, and sense of humor and supervisors' gender predictors of the subordinates' use of positive and negative humor at work?
- RQ3) Do the personal variables of gender, age and workplace have an association with the situation variables of the use of "positive" and "negative" humor at work by both the subordinate and supervisor?



## **Chapter 2 - Methodology**

### **Participants**

Sixty employees from a state government agency, thirty employees from a manufacturer and thirty employees from a telecommunications firm, made up of men and women of ages 20 to 65, were participants in this research. The participants were personally requested to complete the survey by another employee of their organization based on access and opportunity. A follow up email by the contact person was sent to the survey recipients at the state agency and the telecommunications firm reminding them to return their surveys. The contact person at each company collected the surveys and mailed them to the researcher within a designated time period. The individual survey results are being kept confidential. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained by the researcher before this study was undertaken (see Appendix A).

### **Procedures**

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to examine characteristics of supervisors and subordinates in the workplace and situational variables, such as subordinates' and supervisors' use of "positive" and "negative" humor at work. The self-administered surveys were distributed and returned to a single point of contact within the company to guarantee a high response rate. This response rate was achievable based upon the accessibility of the respondents. The survey was given to employees of a state agency, employees of a large telecommunications company and employees of a large manufacturing company to ensure that the distribution included a variety of work tasks of both genders and a variety of ages.

This research is similar to a study done by Decker and Rotondo (1999). Replication of this research will test the reliability and consistency of their results, that is the degree to which they were measuring accurately what they say they were measuring. However, the present research surveyed respondents within three distinct businesses and emphasizes a variety of ages of respondents. The Decker and Rotondo study used a homogeneous group of business school alumni.

### Measurement

The self-administered questionnaire included a demographic section (see Appendix B, items 1 to 6) upon which respondents report organization, staff or manager status, age range and gender, as well as the gender of their manager.

This is followed by a 24 item Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (see Appendix B, items 7 to 30) developed by Thorson and Powell (1993a, 1993b). These questions represent different concepts including creativity, coping, social uses of humor, liking of humor, and appreciation of humorous people. Questions 7 to 16 represent items related to generation of humor and uses of humor to achieve social goals (designated "Genh"). Questions 17 to 23 represent items that deal with coping or adaptive humor (designated "Coping"). Questions 24 to 27 and 30 represent items on attitudes toward humorous people and uses of humor (designated "Attit"). Finally, questions 28 and 29 represent items on appreciation of humor (designated "Apprec"). Items on the scale are scored 0 (strongly disagree) through 4 (strongly agree).

This instrument has demonstrated high levels of reliability. Specifically, Thorson and Powell (1993) report on the process of the development of the scale, through various iterations, to three large samples and the subsequent factor analysis and discarding of items. The first round achieved a Cronbach alpha of .93 and the last round a Cronbach alpha of

.92. Each time the items clustered into four factors: creation and performance, uses of humor for coping, attitudes toward humor and humorous people, and social uses of humor. In another study (Thorson, Brdar, & Powell, 1997), using the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale, the responses of 401 Croatian university students were compared with those of a sample similar in age and sex from Omaha, Nebraska (N=242). The Cronbach alpha for internal consistency for the Croatian respondents was .88, for the American sample it was .91. Similarly, Thorson and Powell (1996) used the Multidimensional Sense of Humor scale with 426 respondents aged 18 to 90. Again, they found that the Cronbach alpha of reliability of their scale was .91. In a review of humor scales, Kohler and Ruch (1996) report a Cronbach alpha for their German translation of the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale of .91. The scale also appears to be age and gender neutral (Thorson & Powell, 1993).

Various approaches to measuring sense of humor have been developed, such as Martin and Lefcourt's Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (1984) and Svebak's Sense of Humor Questionnaire (1974). However, many of these scales designed to measure likelihood to laugh, which is not an especially good way to measure sense of humor as an overall construct, or to perceive humor have been combined and represented as comprehensive sense of humor scales (Thorson & Powell, 1993). This leaves the reader unsure as to what is actually being measured. In addition, many scales measure only one element of what researchers believe to be a multidimensional construct (Thorson & Powell, 1993).

The questionnaire also includes seven questions (see Appendix B, items 31 to 37) on the respondents' perceptions of their own enjoyment of humor and use of humor at work, followed by seven questions (see Appendix B, items 38 to 44) on the respondents' perceptions of their supervisors' enjoyment and use of humor. These questions are similar to the ones used by Decker & Rotondo (1999). These questions were rated on a five point

Likert-Scale of agreement scored as 1 (strongly disagree) through 5 (strongly agree).

When testing for the research questions, unless otherwise noted, three questions reflecting the subordinates' use of "positive" humor were totaled and taken as a scale score. These were "At work I use humor to communicate information to others," "I frequently tell jokes at work," and "I use humor which is non-offensive at work" (labeled "possubord"). Two items were totaled and used as a measure of the use of "negative humor." These were "I use sexual humor at work" and "I use insult humor at work" (labeled "negsubord"). Three items were totaled and used as a measure of the subordinates' perception of the supervisors' use of "positive" humor. These were "At work my supervisor uses humor to communicate work related information to others," "My supervisor frequently tells jokes at work," and "My supervisor uses humor which is non-offensive at work" (labeled "possuper"). Two items were totaled and were used as a measure of the subordinates' perception of the supervisors' use of "negative" humor. These were "My supervisor uses sexual humor at work" and "My supervisor uses insult humor at work" (labeled "negsuper"). This follows the same data analysis procedure done by Decker and Rotondo (1999).

An introduction on the survey provided background and confidentiality guarantees, as well as directions concerning the survey (see Appendix B).

### Data Analysis

The 24-item Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS) tests for four different dimensions of sense of humor. It is scored on a five point Likert scale, with negative statements reversed in scoring. Blanks are scored as neutrals. The lowest possible score is zero and the highest is 96. Mean scores and the standard deviation were computed for the male respondents, female respondents, and in each age range.

The first research question asked, “Is the respondents’ sense of humor (score on the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale) associated with the age and gender of the respondent?”

A group t-test was used to examine the impact of gender on the MSHS and subscales. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess the impact of respondents’ age on the MSHS and subscales. Differences in humor were also assessed by means of an analysis of variance using respondents’ sex and age as independent variables and comparing them to the MSHS and subscales.

The second research question asked: “Are subordinates’ age, gender and sense of humor and supervisors’ gender predictors of the subordinates’ use of humor, both positive and negative, at work?” The independent variables were the respondents’ perceptions of the supervisors’ use of “positive” or “negative” humor, the supervisors’ sex, the respondents’ age, sex, and overall score on the Multidimensional Sense of Humor scale. The dependent variables were the “positive” and “negative” humor responses used by the respondents.

Two regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between relevant subordinates’ characteristics, supervisors’ characteristics and the subordinates’ use of humor at work. The first regression analysis looked at the subordinates’ use of “positive” humor and the second regression analysis examined the subordinates’ use of “negative” humor. A group t-test was used to examine the impact of supervisor gender on uses of “positive” and “negative” humor by the subordinate and supervisor.

The third research question asked “Do the personal variables of gender, age and workplace have an association with the situation variables of the use of “positive” and “negative” humor at work by both the subordinate and supervisor?”

A group t-test was used to examine the impact of gender as the independent variable and the use of “positive” and “negative” humor by the subordinate as the dependent

variable. For this test, the comparison was with both the sum of the “positive” humor questions, as well as with each individual “positive” humor question. The same was done for the “negative” humor questions. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also used to assess the impact of respondents’ age on the use of “positive” and “negative” humor.

Pearson correlations were run between the MSHS/subscales and use of “positive” and “negative” humor to examine this relationship. Finally, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine differences between respondents’ companies and their score on the MSHS, subscales and the use of “positive” and “negative” humor.

## **Chapter 3 – Results**

### **General Results**

Of the 120 surveys that were sent to employees in the three designated companies, 88 were returned, which represents an overall response rate of 73 percent. Of the 88 respondents 48 were male, and 40 were female. Although not a large sample, the variables of the respondents showed a great deal of diversity.

In terms of other sociodemographic variables, respondents were asked to identify themselves by company, position, age, and education level. They were also asked to identify their supervisor's gender.

When identifying their company, 57 (64.8%) reported that they were from Company A, 16 (18.2%) reported that they were from Company B and 15 (17%) reported that they were from Company C. Respondents were also asked their employment position. Twenty-seven (30.7%) reported that they were a manager and 61 (69.3%) reported that they were a staff member.

Age of the respondents included 11 under the age of 25, 9 between 26 and 30, 7 between 31 and 35, 7 between 36 and 40, 14 between 41 and 45, 17 between 46 and 50, 11 between 51 and 55, 10 between 56 and 60 and 2 that were 60 and older. For clearer analysis and due to the small cell sizes, age was clustered into three groups that resulted in 34 respondents under 25 to 40, 31 respondents 41 to 50 and 23 respondents 51 and over.

Educational levels last attained by the respondents included 15 completing high school, 11 completing technical school, 40 completing college and 21 completing a higher degree.

Respondents also reported the gender of their supervisor as 55 males and 32 females.

The results of the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS) score ranged from 39 to 90, from a possible range of 0 to 96. The mean was 66.3 with a standard deviation of 9.5. This mean score was similar to the findings of Decker and Rotondo(1999) who had a mean score of 66.6. The Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale is made up of four factor subscales. The first subscale represents items related to generation of humor and uses of humor to achieve social goals (designated “Genh”). The second subscale represents items that deal with coping or adaptive humor (designated “Coping”). The third subscale represents items on attitudes toward humorous people and uses of humor (designated “Attit”). The fourth subscale represents items on appreciation of humor (designated “Apprec”). Means and standard deviations are reported for the MSHS scale and its subscales in Table I.

Additional scales used in this research include items on the use of “positive” humor by the respondent (labeled “possubord”), the use of “negative” humor by the respondent (labeled “negsubord”), the use of “positive” humor by the supervisor as perceived by the respondent (labeled “possuper”) and the use of “negative” humor by the supervisor as perceived by the respondent (labeled “negsuper”). For the first scale, three questions reflecting the subordinates’ use of “positive” humor were added together. These were “At work I use humor to communicate information to others”(Q31), “I frequently tell jokes at work” (Q32), and “I use humor which is non-offensive at work”(Q33) (possubord). Two items were added together and used as a measure of the subordinates’ use of “negative humor.” These were “I use sexual humor at work” (Q34) and “I use insult humor at work” (Q35)(negsubord). Three items were added together and used as a measure of the subordinates perception of the supervisors’ use of “positive” humor. These were “At work my supervisor uses humor to communicate work-related information



to others,” “My supervisor frequently tells jokes at work,” and “My supervisor uses humor which is non-offensive at work” (possuper). Finally, two items were added together and were used as a measure of the subordinates’ perception of the supervisors’ use of “negative” humor. These were “My supervisor uses sexual humor at work” and “My supervisor uses insult humor at work” (negsuper). This follows the same data analysis procedure done by Decker and Rotondo (1999). Means and standard deviations for each scale are presented in Table I.

**TABLE I**  
**Mean and Standard Deviation of Scales and Subscales (n=88)**

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>
MSHS	66.31	9.52	.86
GENH	25.07	4.93	.85
COPING	20.30	4.36	.86
ATTIT	14.45	3.46	.81
APPREC	6.49	1.16	.74
POSSUBORD	9.95	1.60	.51
NEGSUBORD	3.51	1.44	.53
POSSUPER	8.73	2.93	.83
NEGSUPER	3.50	2.21	.93

Reliability analysis was also completed for each scale and subscale. For the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale, the reliability analysis (Cronbach’s alpha) yielded the resulting alpha = .86, which was slightly lower than the alpha of .92 reported in the Thorson and Powell (1993) study (see Table I).

The first subscale of the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale dealing with generation of humor and uses of humor to achieve social goals (Genh), yielded the resulting

alpha of .85. The second subscale dealing with coping or adaptive humor (Coping), yielded the resulting alpha of .86. The third subscale dealing with attitudes toward humorous people and uses of humor (Attit), yielded the resulting alpha of .81. Finally the fourth subscale dealing with appreciation of humor (Apprec), yielded the resulting alpha of .74 (see Table I).

The scale concerning the use of “positive” humor by the respondent resulted in a Cronbach alpha of .51, and the scale concerning the use of “negative” humor by the respondent resulted in a Cronbach alpha of .53. The scale concerning the use of “positive” humor by the supervisor as perceived by the respondent resulted in a Cronbach alpha of .83, and the scale concerning the use of “negative” humor by the supervisor as perceived by the respondent resulted in a Cronbach alpha of .93 (see Table I).

### **Results of Analysis for RQ1**

**RQ1) Is the respondents’ sense of humor (score on the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale) associated with the age and gender of the respondent?**

A group t-test was performed to examine the impact of gender on the MSHS and subscales. The mean MSHS score for males in this sample was 64.7 (SD = 9.1) and for females 68.2 (SD = 9.7), a difference that was not statistically significant ( $t = -1.736$ ,  $df = 81.09$ ,  $p = .09$ ) (equal variances not assumed). It is interesting to note that females scored slightly higher than males. In comparison, Decker and Rotondo (1999) found males to score significantly higher than females. Most users of MSHS have found overall scores to be gender neutral (Thorson, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller & Hampes, 1997). There was a significant difference between men and women on the third subscale dealing with attitudes toward humorous people and uses of humor with females scoring higher ( $t = -2.62$ ,  $df = 84.47$ ,  $p = .01$ ). The results are presented in Table II.

**TABLE II**  
**Group t-test of Gender and MSHS**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Subset</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>MSHS</b>	Males	64.71	9.14	-1.74	81.09	.09
	Female	68.23	9.72			
<b>GENH</b>	Males	24.92	5.14	-.32	85.00	.75
	Female	25.25	4.73			
<b>COPING</b>	Males	19.90	4.63	-.95	85.83	.34
	Females	20.78	4.02			
<b>ATTIT</b>	Males	13.60	3.43	-2.62	84.47	.01
	Female	15.48	3.26			
<b>APPREC</b>	Males	6.29	1.24	-1.79	85.99	.08
	Female	6.73	1.04			

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess the impact of respondents' age on the MSHS and subscales. There were no significant differences for mean scores for the MSHS or the subscales at the  $p \leq .05$  level. Means for each of the three age groups included under 25 to 40 = 67.47, 41 to 50 = 66.61, and 51 and over = 64.17. Although not statistically significant, it is interesting to note that younger respondents scored higher than the middle aged respondents, and the middle aged respondents scored higher than the older respondents. This tendency in scoring between age groups is consistent with those obtained by Thorson, et al.(1997). The analysis is reported in Table III.

**TABLE III**  
**One-way Analysis of Variance for Impact of Age on the MSHS and Subscales**

	Source	df	MS	F	p
<b>MSHS</b>	Between Grp	2	76.73	.85	.43
	Within Grp	85	90.91		
	Total	87			
<b>GENH</b>	Between Grp	2	28.70	1.18	.31
	Within Grp	85	24.24		
	Total	87			
<b>COPING</b>	Between Grp	2	8.83	.46	.63
	Within Grp	85	19.26		
	Total	87			
<b>ATTIT</b>	Between Grp	2	22.62	1.93	.15
	Within Grp	85	11.73		
	Total	87			
<b>APPREC</b>	Between Grp	2	1.25	.92	.40
	Within Grp	85	1.36		
	Total	87			

Differences in humor were also assessed by means of a two-way analysis of variance using respondents' sex and age as independent variables and comparing them to the MSHS. There was no significant difference when testing between subjects. Sex and age did not interact ( $df = 2$ ,  $ms = 70.01$ ,  $F=.77$ ,  $p = .46$ )

### **Results of Analysis for RQ2**

**RQ2) Are subordinates' age, gender, and sense of humor and supervisors' gender predictors of the subordinates' use positive and negative humor at work?**

Two stepwise regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between relevant subordinates' characteristics, supervisors' characteristics, and the subordinates' use of humor at work. Age was dichotomized for use as an independent variable for regression analysis. This was done in such a way as to form two groups nearly

equal in size. There were 48 respondents in the age category “under 25 to 45” and 40 respondents in the age category “46 to 60 and over”.

The first analysis examined the use of “positive” humor and the second focused on the use of “negative” humor. Three items reflecting the subordinates’ use of positive humor were totaled for each respondent to form a dependent variable denoted as “positive” humor. Two items reflecting the respondents’ use of “negative” humor were totaled and used as a dependent variable denoted as “negative” humor.

The independent variables for both regression analyses were the supervisors’ use of “positive” (or “negative”) humor as perceived by the respondents, the supervisors’ sex, the respondents’ age, sex and score on the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale.

For the first regression analysis, the results suggest that subordinates’ use of “positive” humor at work is significantly associated with their scores on the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale ( $B = .56, p < .001$ ) and the supervisors’ use of “positive” humor ( $B = .23, p < .01$ ).  $R^2$  for the “MSHS” and “possuper” model was .39. This is in exact agreement with Decker and Rotondo’s (1999) findings. Results are summarized in Table IV.

For the second regression analysis, the results suggest that subordinates’ use of “negative” humor at work is significantly associated with their supervisors’ use of negative humor ( $B = .53, p < .001$ ), supervisors’ gender ( $B = -.31, p < .01$ ) and age ( $B = -.21, p < .01$ ).  $R^2$  for the “negsuper,” supervisors’ sex and subordinates’ age group model was .25. While Decker and Rotondo (1999) found similar results in that the supervisors’ use of “negative” humor had a significant positive association with the subordinates’ use of similar humor, they also found that the individual’s MSHS test score and sex were significantly associated with the use of “negative” humor. Table IV reports the findings of the present study.

TABLE IV

**Regression Results for Subordinates' Use of Positive and Negative Humor**

Independent Variables	Subordinates Use of Humor at Work	
	Analysis 1: Pos. Humor $F_{2,85} = 27.00^{**}$ B Standardized	Analysis 2: Neg. Humor $F_{3,84} = 9.35^{**}$ B Standardized
<b>MSHS</b>	.561**	.040
<b>Subordinates' Age</b>	.134	-.211*
<b>Subordinates' Sex</b>	-.163	-.105
<b>Supervisors' Sex</b>	-.055	-.313*
<b>Supervisors' Use of Pos (1) or Neg (2) Humor</b>	.225*	.533**
<b>Constant</b>	2.609	3.873

\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .001$

Significant correlations between the score on the MSHS/subscales and positive/negative humor use are presented in Table V. There is a significant correlation between the MSHS and the use of "positive" humor by the subordinate, as well as a significant correlation between the subscales "Genh" and "Coping" and the use of "positive" humor by the subordinate. In addition, there is a significant correlation between the subscale "Coping" and the use of positive humor by the supervisor.

**TABLE V**  
**Significant Correlations with MSHS and Subscales and**  
**Use of “Positive” and “Negative” Humor**

	POS SUBOR	NEG SUBOR	POS SUPER	NEG SUPER
<b>MSHS</b>	.58**			
<b>GENH</b>	.58**			
<b>COPING</b>	.43**		.24*	
<b>ATTIT</b>				
<b>APPREC</b>				
<b>** - Significant at the .01 level</b>		<b>* - Significant at the .05 level</b>		

A group t-test was run to examine the impact of supervisor gender on “positive” and “negative” uses of humor by the subordinate and by the supervisor. The results are listed in Table VI. A significant difference was found between supervisor gender and the negative humor used by the supervisor ( $t = 2.11$ ,  $df = 78.99$ ,  $p = .04$ ).

**TABLE VI**  
**Group t-test of Supervisor Gender and Use of “Positive” and “Negative” Humor**

	<b>Super Gender</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Pos Subord</b>	Male	9.78	1.64	-1.17	69.34	.25
	Female	10.15	1.51			
<b>Neg Subord</b>	Male	3.60	1.40	.78	59.97	.44
	Female	3.34	1.54			
<b>Pos Super</b>	Male	8.36	2.35	-.91	77.12	.36
	Female	8.78	1.86			
<b>Neg Super</b>	Male	3.58	1.69	2.11	78.99	.04
	Female	2.91	1.30			

(n: males = 48, female = 40)

### **Results of Analysis for RQ3**

**RQ3) Do the personal variables of gender, age and workplace have an association with the situation variables of the use of “positive” and “negative” humor at work by both the subordinate and supervisor?**

A group t-test was run to examine the impact of gender as the independent variable and the “positive” and “negative” use of humor by the subordinate as dependent variables. The mean scores for the “positive” use of humor at work for males in this sample was 10.06 (SD = 1.66) and females 9.83 (SD = 1.55), a difference that was not statistically significant ( $t = .69$ ,  $df = 84.79$ ,  $p = .49$ ). The mean scores for “negative” use of humor at work for males in this sample was 3.65 (SD = 1.63) and females 3.35 (SD = 1.17), a difference that was not statistically significant ( $t = .69$ ,  $df = 84.19$ ,  $p = .33$ ).

A group t-test on each individual “positive” and “negative” question ( Q31, Q32, Q33, Q34, Q35) was also performed to examine the impact of gender on the uses of “positive” and “negative” humor. Similar results were obtained. There were no significant differences found between men and women on any of the positive or negative humor questions at the  $p \leq .05$  level. Analysis for each question is summarized in Table VII. However, it is interesting to note that men did score slightly higher in both the use of negative and positive humor at work. In comparison, Decker and Rotondo (1999) found a significant difference in men reporting greater usage of “negative” humor than women on both negative humor questions (“I use sexual humor” and “I use insult humor”), however they found no differences in the use of “positive” humor.



TABLE VII

## Group t-test of Gender and Use of “Positive” and “Negative” Humor

	Gender	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p
<b>Q31 (pos)</b>	Male	3.40	.79	1.05	85.01	.30
	Female	3.23	.73			
<b>Q32 (pos)</b>	Male	2.73	.87	.023	83.87	.98
	Female	2.73	.85			
<b>Q33 (pos)</b>	Male	3.94	.56	.46	75.21	.65
	Female	3.88	.69			
<b>Q34 (neg)</b>	Male	1.73	.94	.16	85.51	.87
	Female	1.70	.72			
<b>Q35 (neg)</b>	Male	1.92	1.07	1.46	77.56	.15
	Female	1.65	.62			

(n: males = 48, female = 40)

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess the impact of respondents' age on the use of positive and negative humor. There were no significant differences with respect to the use of positive or negative humor at the  $p \leq .05$  level. This was similar to the findings of Decker and Rotondo (1999) who found no significant differences in the use of “positive” or “negative” humor based on age. Analysis for each question is summarized in Table VIII.

**TABLE VIII**

**One-way Analysis of Variance for Impact of Respondents' Age on Use of "Positive" and "Negative" Humor**

	Source	df	MS	F	p
<b>Q31 (pos)</b>	Between Grp	2	3.29	.06	.94
	Within Grp	85	.60		
	Total	87			
<b>Q32 (pos)</b>	Between Grp	2	.68	.92	.40
	Within Grp	85	.73		
	Total	87			
<b>Q33 (pos)</b>	Between Grp	2	.44	1.16	.32
	Within Grp	85	.38		
	Total	87			
<b>Q34 (neg)</b>	Between Grp	2	.59	.83	.44
	Within Grp	85	.71		
	Total	87			
<b>Q35 (neg)</b>	Between Grp	2	1.60	2.00	.14
	Within Grp	85	.79		
	Total	87			

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine differences among respondents in the companies and their scores on the MSHS, subscales, and use of "positive" and "negative" humor. There were significant differences, as revealed by the Student-Newman-Keuls test, with respect to the use of "positive" supervisor humor, the "Attit" subscale and the "Apprec" subscale at the  $p \leq .05$  level. The results are summarized in Table IX.

TABLE IX

**One-way Analysis of Variance for Impact of Company on MSHS, Subscales and Use of "Positive" and "Negative" Humor**

	<b>Source</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>MS</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>MSHS</b>	Between Grp	2	157.60	1.77	.18
	Within Grp	85	89.01		
	Total	87			
<b>GENH</b>	Between Grp	2	18.42	.752	.47
	Within Grp	85	24.48		
	Total	87			
<b>COPING</b>	Between Grp	2	3.30	.17	.84
	Within Grp	85	19.39		
	Total	87			
<b>ATTIT</b>	Between Grp	2	52.68	4.78	.78
	Within Grp	85	11.02		
	Total	87			
<b>APPREC</b>	Between Grp	2	4.58	3.58	.12
	Within Grp	85	1.28		
	Total	87			
<b>POSSUBOR</b>	Between Grp	2	.64	.24	.01
	Within Grp	85	2.62		
	Total	87			
<b>NEGSUBOR</b>	Between Grp	2	4.46	2.22	.02
	Within Grp	85	2.01		
	Total	87			
<b>POSSUPER</b>	Between Grp	2	44.08	5.68	.01
	Within Grp	85	7.76		
	Total	87			
<b>NEGSUPER</b>	Between Grp	2	18.69	4.09	.03
	Within Grp	85	4.57		
	Total	87			

**Student-Newman-Keuls Results**

	<b>Work site</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>POSSUPER</b>			
	COMPANY A	8.11	
	COMPANY B		10.75
	COMPANY C	8.93	
<b>NEGSUPER</b>			
	COMPANY A	3.04	
	COMPANY B	4.63	
	COMPANY C	4.07	
<b>ATTIT</b>			
	COMPANY A	14.35	
	COMPANY B	12.88	
	COMPANY C		16.53
<b>APPREC</b>			
	COMPANY A	6.35	
	COMPANY B	6.31	
	COMPANY C		7.20

## **Chapter 4 – Discussion**

**RQ1) Is the respondents' sense of humor (score on the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale) associated with the age and gender of the respondent?**

The answer to this question is “no.” The mean MSHS score for males in this sample was 64.7 (SD = 9.1) and for females it was 68.2 (SD = 9.7), a difference that was not statistically significant (see Table II). Most users of MSHS have found overall scores to be pretty much gender neutral (Thorson, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller & Hampes, 1997). There was a significant difference between men and women in the third subscale dealing with attitudes toward humorous people, with women scoring higher than men. Thorson and Powell (1996) found that men typically score higher on the first factor subscale (humor creativity and social uses) and women typically score higher on the second factor subscale (coping). The greatest difference in the construction of sense of humor comes through the element of creativity (Thorson, et al., 1997). The third factor requires much less creativity and more development of attitudes about other people's creativity.

When one looks at age difference in the MSHS score, there were no significant differences in mean scores for the MSHS or the subscales (see Table III). It is interesting to note that younger respondents scored higher than the middle-aged respondents, and the middle aged respondents scored higher than the older respondents. This tendency in scoring between age groups is consistent with results obtained by Thorson, et al., (1997), who explain that there is some evidence that the factor of creative humor, as measured by the MSHS, differs between the young and the old, or at least that it is understood differently by the young and old. In the present study, the ages ranged from under 25 to over 60. For clearer analysis and due to the small cell size, age was clustered into three groups: under 25

to 40, 41 to 50 and 51 and over. A broader range of ages and larger cell sizes might have shown a significant difference in MSHS scores.

This research did find the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale to be highly reliable with a Cronbach alpha of .86, which was only slightly lower than the alpha of .92 reported in the Thorson and Powell (1993) study.

RQ2) Are subordinates' age, gender, and sense of humor and supervisors' gender predictors of the subordinates' use of positive and negative humor at work?

The answer to this question is "yes." However, individual variables differed in significance based on the use of either "positive" or "negative" humor. Additionally, the reliability of the scales concerning the use of "positive" and "negative" humor varied greatly.

The scale concerning the use of "positive" humor by the respondent resulted in a Cronbach alpha of .51, and the scale concerning the use of "negative" humor by the respondent resulted in a Cronbach alpha of .53. Since this survey was given at work, there were likely varying levels of "certainty of anonymity" that might have affected the reporting of the use of "positive" and "negative" humor. In contrast, the scale concerning the use of "positive" humor by the supervisor, as perceived by the respondent, resulted in a Cronbach alpha of .83, and the scale concerning the use of "negative" humor by the supervisor, as perceived by the respondent, resulted in a Cronbach alpha of .93. Respondents' perceptions of their supervisors' use of humor were much more reliable than respondents' perceptions of their own use of humor. It is unclear why there is such a distinction.

Through regression analysis, it was determined that subordinates' use of "positive" humor at work is significantly associated with their scores on the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale and the supervisors' use of "positive" humor. This is in exact agreement

with Decker and Rotondo's (1999) findings. This is important because it validates Decker and Rotondo's (1999) findings and their idea that characteristics of the individual seem to provide a stronger association than characteristics of the environment on the use of "positive" humor (see Table IV).

Through another regression analysis, it was determined that subordinates' use of "negative" humor at work is significantly associated with their supervisors' use of "negative" humor, supervisors' gender and personal age. While Decker and Rotondo (1999) found similar results in that the supervisors' use of "negative" humor had a significant positive association with the subordinates' use of similar humor, they also found that the individual's MSHS test score and sex were significantly associated with the use of "negative" humor. Decker and Rotondo (1999) suggest that characteristics of the environment have a stronger association on the use of "negative" humor than do characteristics of the individual. The present study validates that assumption. The difference in other variables from the Decker and Rotondo (1999) study, contributing to the use of "negative" humor, might be explained by a more diverse age range (under 25 to over 60) and Mid-western respondents as opposed to a sample of Business School Alumni that are likely primarily Maryland residents (see Table IV).

Pearson correlations revealed significant relationships between scores on the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale and the use of "positive" humor by the subordinate, as well as a significant correlation between the subscales "Genh" and "Coping" and the use of "positive" humor by the subordinate. In addition, there was a significant correlation between the subscale "Coping" by the subordinate and the use of "positive humor" by the supervisor. These results tend to confirm the findings of the first regression analysis that the use of "positive" humor by the subordinate has a relation to high MSHS scores and subscale scores for the subordinate. The correlation between the subscale "Coping" by the respondent to the use of "positive" humor by the supervisor

could be illustrating the influence “positive” humor by the supervisors has on subordinates and how subordinates respond (see Table V).

Finally, a t-test found a significant difference between supervisor’s gender and the negative humor used by the supervisor. It revealed that male supervisors scored higher on the use of “negative” humor than did female supervisors. This is somewhat consistent with Decker and Rotondo’s (1999) findings that men use more “negative” humor than women at work; however their findings were not specific to male supervisors (see Table VI).

Overall, subordinates’ use of “positive” humor seems to be derived more from their personality and who they are as an individual than from the surrounding environmental influences, while the use of “negative” humor has more to do with what is going on around them, over who they are individually. The perception of the supervisors’ use of both “positive” and “negative” humor at work seemed to influence the subordinates’ similar uses of humor on both accounts, more significantly though through the use of “negative” humor. This suggests that subordinates might look to their supervisor for cues or permission as to appropriate uses of humor, especially when using negative humor. The t-test revealed that male supervisors scored higher on the use of “negative” humor than did female supervisors. If a supervisor is using more “negative” humor than another supervisor based on gender, and the use of “negative” humor by supervisors seems to have an influence on subordinates, then it may be possible to assume, like this research found, that the difference in supervisor gender plays a significant role in the “negative” humor used by the subordinate.

The finding of age, in this study, to have a tendency of relationship to the use of “negative” humor is also interesting. As we get older, our sense of humor changes and we may make increasingly different judgements about when it is appropriate or not to use “negative” humor based on our past experiences. This is logical. However, conflicting results were found through an analysis of variance used to assess the impact of



respondents' age on the use of "positive" and "negative" humor. The analysis revealed that there were no significant differences with respect to the use of "positive" or "negative" humor.

RQ3) Do the personal variables of gender, age and workplace have an association with the situation variables of the use of "positive" and "negative" humor at work by both the subordinate and supervisor?

The answer to this question is "yes" and "no." A group t-test on the uses of "positive" and "negative" humor by subordinates, using both the scale scores and the individual question scores, was performed to examine the impact of gender. There were no significant differences found between males and females on the use of "positive" or "negative" humor. However, it is interesting to note that men did score slightly higher in both the use of "negative" and "positive" humor at work (see Table VII). The tendency for males to score higher on the use of "negative" humor in the workplace was reported by Decker and Rotondo (1999); however, they found no differences in the use of "positive" humor. The differences in this study could be due to the fact it was given in the small Mid-western communities versus to the alumni of a business school in Maryland. The impact that culture might be playing between Midwest respondents and East Coast respondents is interesting. Do the cultural values of the East Coast allow men to express more "negative" humor than women? Are men in the Midwest more sensitive to the use and acceptability of "negative" humor in the workplace or do they have a different sense of humor? This survey was also given during work time, which could have mediated the more extreme responses.

An analysis of variance was used to assess the impact of respondents' age on the use of "positive" and "negative" humor. There were no significant differences with respect to the use of "positive" or "negative" humor (see Table VIII). This was similar to

the findings of Decker and Rotondo (1999) who found no significant differences in the use of “positive” or “negative” humor based on age.

An analysis of variance was used to examine differences between respondents’ companies and their scores on the MSHS, subscales, and the use of “positive” and “negative” humor. There were significant differences with respect to the use of “positive” humor by the supervisor, the “Attit” subscale (attitudes towards humorous people) and the “Apprec” subscale (appreciation of humor). The difference in companies is interesting. One company showed a significant difference in the use of “positive” humor by managers over the other two companies. A different company showed a significant difference in the subscales of appreciation of humor and attitudes towards humorous people (see Table IX). These results could be influenced by the different types of work environments that the companies (state agency, manufacturer, and telecommunications company) have. Other differences could be due to the varying sociodemographic characteristics of the survey respondents, like age, gender and employment level.

## **Chapter 5 – Conclusions**

This thesis attempted to replicate the results of Decker and Rotondo's (1999) study by using a similar survey; however, testing was done in three different work settings and included a broader range of ages. The results of this study confirm many of the findings by Decker and Rotondo (1999), as well as the findings of Thorson and Powell (1993, 1996, 1997) concerning the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale.

A primary goal of this thesis was to determine if the subordinates' sense of humor scores were associated with their age and gender. In the present study, the results revealed that the MSHS scores were age and gender neutral, suggesting that sense of humor in people does not vary much according to gender or a cross section of ages. While these findings were similar to past research, and a clear strength of the study, it becomes increasingly important to continue to test people with even broader age ranges to see if there are any differences in sense of humor scores.

Another goal of this thesis was to identify variables in supervisors and subordinates that would significantly effect the use of "positive" and "negative" humor by the subordinate. The research showed that the use of "positive" humor by the subordinate was significantly affected by their sense of humor score, as well as the supervisors' use of "positive" humor. The use of "negative" humor by the subordinate was significantly affected by the supervisors' use of "negative" humor, the supervisors' gender and the subordinates' age. Thus, for "positive" humor, individual characteristics had a stronger relationship, while for "negative" humor, characteristics of the environment (supervisors' use of "negative" humor) had a stronger relationship. It seems that "positive" humor is more from a person's personality, while "negative" humor is derived from the cues of other people. Decker and Rotondo (1999) suggest that a self-serving bias might be the

reason individuals attribute negative behaviors to external causes and positive behaviors to internal causes.

Some relationships were also found between the MSHS, subscales “Genh” (generation of humor) and “Coping” (uses of coping humor) and the use of “positive” humor by the subordinate. In addition, there was a relationship between the subscale “Coping” by the subordinate and the use of “positive” humor by the supervisor. Research also suggested that male supervisors used more “negative” humor than female supervisors.

Finally, this thesis sought to determine if gender, age and workplace have an association with the use of “positive” and “negative” humor at work by both the subordinate and supervisor. There was no significant difference found between gender, age and the use of “positive” and “negative” humor. There were significant differences between companies with respect to the use of “positive” humor by the supervisor and two of the subscales within the MSHS.

### Implications

The first implication of this research is that managers should be aware that their use of humor may have an impact on their subordinates. Research demonstrated that the use of “positive” and “negative” humor resulted in a similar humor usage by the subordinates, with “negative” humor having the biggest impact. It is important for both supervisors and subordinates to understand that individual characteristics (MSHS) had a stronger relationship for the use of “positive” humor on subordinates, while for “negative” humor, characteristics of the environment (supervisors’ use of “negative” humor) had a stronger relationship. These findings are another strength of the research.

Additional implications include the findings that subordinates perceive that male supervisors use more “negative” humor than female supervisors. This could be useful information for male managers to be aware of when working with subordinates. Also, the difference in the use of “positive” humor by supervisors, between the different companies, calls for more research to be done to see if industry type impacts or encourages the use of humor.

Finally, the finding that there was no significant difference between gender, age and the use of “positive” and “negative” humor has implications for countering stereotyping and past research that says males use more sexual and insult humor than women.

### Limitations

There were several limitations in this thesis. The first was the small sample size of (N = 88). Although the overall response rate was a high 73 percent, the small sample may have affected some of the results. Also the small cell size within in each age group might have affected the results, as well as the unequal numbers of respondents from each company. While scholars often call for more research to be conducted in the field, appropriate samples conducted at the work site may be difficult to obtain. Other sociodemographic characteristics that may have affected the results include testing in small Mid-western communities, and using various types of companies.

While the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (Thorson & Powell, 1993) has proved a reliable and valid instrument, using a more current version of the scale might have increased subscale reliability and provided stronger results. In addition, Thorson and Powell (1993) suggest that little can be concluded in terms of the developmental nature of the sense of humor without longitudinal methodologies.

The low levels of scale reliability on the use of “positive” and “negative” humor by the subordinate was also a limitation to this research. Decker and Rotondo (1999)

reported no reliabilities of their “positive” and “negative” humor scales. If the scales were to be used in future research, more development would be needed. For example, increasing the number of items to measure “positive” or “negative” humor of the subordinate might improve the results.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Even with the limitations established above, this study has illustrated some exciting possibilities for future research concerning the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale in relation to the use of “positive” and “negative” humor by supervisors and subordinates. The findings and new directions for research that this study has uncovered are an additional strength of the results.

Future research should survey both supervisors and subordinates to compare their perceptions of humor usage and their senses of humor. Are the supervisors’ perceptions of their uses of humor the same as the subordinates’ perceptions of the supervisors’ uses of humor? Do subordinates and supervisors have a better working relationship when their senses of humor are similar?

Other approaches could include comparing the humor differences in various industries to further explore if industry type has an effect on sense of humor or if different industries attract different types of people with similar senses of humor. Additionally, research looking at a more diverse cross-section of ages could better identify if there is a change in sense of humor between ages. Continued testing of people’s sense of humor as they get older can also help identify the developmental nature of the sense of humor. Other research possibilities include testing for differences in sense of humor between the mid-west and the nation, testing a more ethnically diverse sample, and doing random sampling versus a work site or an alumni group.

Research devoted to specific issues of humor within the work environment, specifically those related to sex and characteristics of the management, should also be continued, looking for practical applications such as improved employee job satisfaction, lower turnover and increased productivity. Research concerning how sex and age differences might affect the supervisor/subordinate relationship should also be pursued.

In addition to studying humor within the organization, it may be appropriate to examine the use of humor in the external communications of organizations, such as advertising, customer communications and public relations.

Finally, a multidimensional research approach needs to be undertaken when studying humor because of its contextual nature. Study methodology should include a combination of surveys measuring humor as a multidimensional construct, as well as direct observations and interviews. This variety of research strategies will likely gather more reliable information concerning humor usage, because the results can be compared and adjusted for differences found between research techniques.

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**Appendix A**

**Institutional Review Board Approval**



University  
of Nebraska

May 15, 2000

Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
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**IRB#: 217-00-EX**

**TITLE OF PROTOCOL: Use of Humor at Work by Supervisors and Subordinates:  
Characteristics and Perceptions**

Dear Ms. Stibal:

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 five years from the original date of approval and release. If this study continues beyond the five year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ernest D. Prentice".

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

lw

**Appendix B**  
**Humor Survey Questionnaire**

### Humor Survey

This survey is about humor in organizations. The survey will take you less than 5 minutes to complete and all employees have been given authorization to complete the questionnaire during work time. Please answer every question. The survey data will be used to complete a Masters Thesis at the University of Omaha.

Individual survey responses will be kept completely confidential and will only be seen by the researcher. Please return the survey as soon as possible to the designated contact in your company.

#### **Section 1: Demographics**

- 1) Place of employment \_\_\_\_\_
  
- 2) Would you classify yourself as a   A) Manager    or    B) Staff (Please circle one)
  
- 3) Circle your age range           a) 25 or under               f) 46 - 50  
   b) 26 – 30                   g) 51- 55  
   c) 31 – 35                   h) 56 - 60  
   d) 36 – 40                   i) 60 or older  
   e) 41 – 45
  
- 4) What is your Gender: a) Male or b) Female - (Please circle one)
  
- 5) Education Level last attained:   a) High School  
   b) Technical School (or 2 year degree  
   c) College  
   d) Higher degree  
   (Please circle one)
  
- 6) What is the Gender of your Supervisor a) Male or b) Female - (Please circle one)

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree,  
(Please circle the corresponding number.)

**Section 2:**

	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
7) My clever sayings amuse others	0	1	2	3	4
8) I can say things in such a way as to make people laugh	0	1	2	3	4
9) Other people tell me that I say funny things	0	1	2	3	4
10) I'm regarded as something of a wit by my friends	0	1	2	3	4
11) I'm confident that I can make other people laugh	0	1	2	3	4
12) People look to me to say amusing things	0	1	2	3	4
13) Sometimes I think up jokes or funny stories	0	1	2	3	4
14) I use humor to entertain my friends	0	1	2	3	4
15) I can often crack people up with the things I say	0	1	2	3	4
16) I can ease a tense situation by saying something funny	0	1	2	3	4
17) Uses of wit or humor help me master difficult situations	0	1	2	3	4
18) Coping by using humor is an elegant way of adapting	0	1	2	3	4
19) Humor helps me cope	0	1	2	3	4
20) Uses of humor help to put me at ease	0	1	2	3	4
21) Humor is a lousy coping mechanism	0	1	2	3	4
22) I can use wit to help adapt to many situations	0	1	2	3	4
23) Trying to master situations through use of humor is really dumb	0	1	2	3	4
24) Calling somebody a comedian is a real insult	0	1	2	3	4



25) I dislike comics	0	1	2	3	4
26) People who tell jokes are a pain in the neck	0	1	2	3	4
27) Getting people to lighten up by joking around is useless	0	1	2	3	4
28) I like a good joke	0	1	2	3	4
29) I appreciate those who generate humor	0	1	2	3	4
30) I'm uncomfortable when everyone is cracking jokes	0	1	2	3	4

**Section 3: Respondents' perceptions of their own enjoyment of humor and use of humor at work**

	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
31) At work I use humor to communicate information to others	1	2	3	4	5
32) I frequently tell jokes at work	1	2	3	4	5
33) I use humor which is non-offensive at work.	1	2	3	4	5
34) I use sexual humor at work	1	2	3	4	5
35) I use insult humor at work	1	2	3	4	5
36) I enjoy hearing jokes at work	1	2	3	4	5
37) I have a good sense of humor	1	2	3	4	5

**Section 4: Perceptions of the respondent's supervisors' enjoyment and use of humor.**

38) At work my supervisor uses humor to communicate work related information to others	1	2	3	4	5
39) My supervisor frequently tells jokes at work	1	2	3	4	5
40) My supervisor uses humor which is non-offensive at work	1	2	3	4	5
41) My supervisor uses sexual humor at work	1	2	3	4	5
42) My supervisor uses insult humor at work.	1	2	3	4	5

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 43) My supervisor enjoys hearing jokes      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 44) My supervisor has a good sense of humor | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |