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## **Humor as a character strength among the elderly: Theoretical considerations**

Ruch, Willibald; Proyer, Rene T; Weber, Marco

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00391-009-0080-2>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-25836>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Ruch, Willibald; Proyer, Rene T; Weber, Marco (2010). Humor as a character strength among the elderly: Theoretical considerations. *Zeitschrift für Gerontologie und Geriatrie*, 43(1):8-12.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00391-009-0080-2>

Z Gerontol Geriat 2010 · 43:8–12  
 DOI 10.1007/s00391-009-0080-2  
 Eingegangen: 27. August 2009  
 Akzeptiert: 18. Oktober 2009  
 Online publiziert: 11. Dezember 2009  
 © Springer-Verlag 2009

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# Humor as a character strength among the elderly

## Theoretical considerations

**Humor plays a key role in people's lives and studies are needed to illuminate its role among the elderly. However, before humor (or the sense of humor) among the elderly can be studied, a clear definition of the subject is needed. While progress has been made in the study of humor since psychology regained interest in humor in the 1970s [3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 22, 24], there is little agreement in the scientific community about such a definition [22]. Cultural differences along with different disciplinary backgrounds and research traditions have led to various viewpoints and theoretical approaches.**

As research is often based on concrete measurement tools, one needs to be aware of the specific theoretical foundation of the measurement tools used. Regrettably, these occasionally lack an explicit foundation (i.e., there is no clear definition of what is being measured) and perhaps do not take the appropriate measurement approach (i.e., ability to be witty is measured via a questionnaire but not a performance test). To make matters even more complicated, humor plays into different domains of psychological functioning and, hence, it is not surprising that humor has been conceptualized as a personality trait, a world view, an attitude, a coping mechanism, an emotion-based temperament, an aesthetic preference, an ability and competence, a virtue, and more recently also as a strength of character. Indeed, with the rise of *positive psychology* as a new discipline

within psychology, research on and application of humor might have found a new home.

— Within this framework, humor is understood as a morally valued trait, as a character strength.

Thus, humor is seen as something potentially virtuous. This theoretical paper presents humor in a positive psychology framework in a lifespan environment.

### What is positive psychology?

While psychology has focused for years on pathological aspects of human functioning, the main focus of positive psychology is on emotions, traits, and institutions that make our lives most worth living [30]. It is aimed at helping people to cultivate what is best in them. Based on empirical research, it provides methods for learning more about individual strengths or talents and offers strategies for fostering these. From a historical perspective, psychologists were initially interested in both pathology and in research on the fulfilling and positive aspects of life (e.g., giftedness). This changed, mainly in the United States, with World War II, when more and more veterans but also civilians needed treatment because of trauma, loss, and psychological disorders. Over the last few decades, psychology as a scientific discipline has been very successful in the development of treatments for a variety of pathological conditions. However, even though movements such as hu-

manistic psychology tried to shift the perspective again, the main focus remained on pathology, diseases, and treatment.

Martin E.P. Seligman devoted his presidency of the American Psychological Association (APA) to establish positive psychology and initiated a reaffirmation of research and exploration in positive psychological functioning. This does not indicate that the pathological aspects of human living are abandoned but it is argued that positive aspects need to be studied as well.

— Thus, building what's strong is equally important to fixing what's wrong.

One of the main characteristics of this approach is that it is based on an empirical foundation and that it is research oriented. The main themes of positive psychology are the following: (a) positive subjective experiences/emotions (e.g., happiness or pleasure; the study of contentment with the past, happiness in the present, and hope for the future); (b) positive individual traits (e.g., character strengths or talents); and (c) positive institutions (e.g., families or schools) [16]. Thus, positive psychology is not a "happyology" but a scientific approach to study the best in people.

### Positive aging ... or adding more life to years and not just more years to life [31]

Rowe and Kahn [21] pointed out in their influential studies that age-related losses have been exaggerated in a wide range of

studies and that there are modifying effects opposing these losses, for example, exercise or personal habits. They suggest that the avoidance of disease and disability, maintaining high physical/cognitive functioning, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities are keys to successful aging. For Carstensen and Charles [2], social scientists should “identify inevitably deficits and exploit potential opportunities to build a society that optimizes the likelihood that all individuals will live healthy and productive lives well into old age” (p. 83). They argue for balanced research that studies the strengths but also aims for an understanding of the problems of elderly persons. Recently, Seligman [29] proposed the field of positive health (related to biological, subjective, and functional variables) that is supposed to have an impact on (better) mental health in aging.

George Vaillant published several landmark studies on positive aging. Based on longitudinal studies (for an overview, see [32]), he identified predictors of successful aging. These were: *not* being a smoker (or having quit < age 45), *not* having a history of alcohol abuse, normal weight, regular exercise, years of education, stable marriage, and use of mature defense mechanisms. Humor is one of these mature defense mechanisms, also defined as adaptive coping strategies (“humor permits the expression of emotion without individual discomfort and without unpleasant effects upon others” [31] p. 63)). Vaillant [31, 32] suggests that these mature coping strategies (e.g., humor, altruism, sublimation, or suppression) increase with age, while negative strategies decline (e.g., passive aggression or dissociation). Fernández-Ballesteros [5] argues that positive aging serves two main purposes: increase successful aging and search for positive conditions of aging.

### Positive psychology and humor in the elderly

Peterson and Seligman [20] introduced a classification of 24 strengths of character (with humor being one of them) that are composed to six universal virtues. The strengths can be seen as the underlying processes and mechanisms that are nee-

ded to exert or display a virtue. To be included into the classification, a potential strength had to fulfill ten criteria (e.g., it is fulfilling; it is morally valued in its own right; its display does not diminish other people; it should be trait-like). The 24 character strengths and their assignment to the virtues are presented in **Tab. 1**.

It is shown that three to five strengths are assigned to a virtue. The assignment of the strengths to the virtue categories was based on theoretical considerations as opposed to being empirically determined. The classification provides ground for further developments, such as intervention programs or behaviors that aim at positive aging. The strengths can be reliably measured with the Values-in-Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). This is a 240-item questionnaire that is widely used in research and practice (see [17] for an overview).

### Humor as a strength of character

Humor (playfulness) is one of the 24 strengths listed in the VIA classification. Peterson and Seligman [20] refer to its moral good character for “making the human condition more bearable by drawing attention to its contradictions, by sustaining good cheer in the face of despair, by building social bonds, and by lubricating social interaction” (p. 530). However, humor seems to be covered by all six virtues of the VIA classification to some degree [1].

The VIA-IS has been used in a broad variety of studies that allow conclusions on how humor (within a framework of positive psychology) relates to other variables. Most importantly, there seems to be a stable relationship between humor and subjective well-being. When character strengths are rank ordered according to their correlation with satisfaction with life (highest to lowest), humor usually is among the higher ranked (around sixth to tenth) indicating a high relation with subjective well-being [15, 19, 27]. A similar result was found for the VIA-Youth, the assessment tool for 10–17 year olds [14]. The VIA-IS has been used in a wide range of studies, e.g., in cross-cultural comparisons (with high mean scores, around seventh out of 24, in most regi-

Z Gerontol Geriat 2010 · 43:8–12  
DOI 10.1007/s00391-009-0080-2  
© Springer-Verlag 2009

### W. Ruch · R.T. Proyer · M. Weber Humor as a character strength among the elderly. Theoretical considerations

#### Abstract

Positive psychology is a scientific approach within psychology that focuses on research on what is best in people. Within this framework, humor is understood as a character strength. The article gives a brief overview on positive psychology and implications for aging (positive aging, successful aging) with an emphasis on the contribution of humor. Humor as a strength of character and its measurement by various approaches are discussed. It is argued that there is a lack of empirical data about humor in the elderly. Potential benefits of considering humor in research but also in practice are discussed.

#### Keywords

Aging · Character strength · Humor · Positive aging · Positive psychology

### Humor als Charakterstärke bei älteren Menschen. Theoretische Grundlagen

#### Zusammenfassung

Positive Psychologie ist ein wissenschaftlicher Ansatz innerhalb der Psychologie, der sich in der Forschung damit beschäftigt, was das Beste im Menschen ist. In dieser Forschungsrichtung wird Humor als Charakterstärke verstanden. Der vorliegende Artikel gibt einen kurzen Überblick über die Positive Psychologie und Implikationen, die sich für das Altern (positives, erfolgreiches Altern) ergeben. Dabei wird das Hauptaugenmerk auf den Beitrag gelegt, den Humor leisten kann. Humor als Charakterstärke und Möglichkeiten der Messung werden diskutiert und im Überblick, gemeinsam mit anderen Ansätzen zur Messung von Humor, vorgestellt. Es wird argumentiert, dass es zum Humor älterer Menschen zu wenige empirische Daten gibt. Weitere Diskussionspunkte sind mögliche positive Auswirkungen für Forschung und Praxis.

#### Schlüsselwörter

Altern · Charakterstärke · Humor · Positives Altern · Positive Psychologie

**Tab. 1** The Values-in-Action (VIA) Classification of six core virtues and 24 strengths of character [17]

<p><b>Wisdom and knowledge</b> (cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge)</p> <p>(1) <i>Creativity</i> (thinking of novel and productive ways to do things)</p> <p>(2) <i>Curiosity</i> (taking an interest in all of ongoing experience)</p> <p>(3) <i>Open-mindedness</i> (thinking things through and examining them from all sides)</p> <p>(4) <i>Love of learning</i> (mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge)</p> <p>(5) <i>Perspective</i> (being able to provide wise counsel to others)</p>
<p><b>Courage</b> (emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal)</p> <p>(6) <i>Bravery</i> (not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain)</p> <p>(7) <i>Persistence</i> (finishing what one starts)</p> <p>(8) <i>Honesty</i> (speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way)</p> <p>(9) <i>Zest</i> (approaching life with excitement and energy)</p>
<p><b>Humanity</b> (interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others)</p> <p>(10) <i>Love</i> (valuing close relations with others)</p> <p>(11) <i>Kindness</i> (doing favors and good deeds for others)</p> <p>(12) <i>Social intelligence</i> (being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others)</p>
<p><b>Justice</b> (civic strengths that underlie healthy community life)</p> <p>(13) <i>Teamwork</i> (working well as member of a group or team)</p> <p>(14) <i>Fairness</i> (treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice)</p> <p>(15) <i>Leadership</i> (organizing group activities and seeing that they happen)</p>
<p><b>Temperance</b> (strengths that protect against excess)</p> <p>(16) <i>Forgiveness</i> (forgiving those who have done wrong)</p> <p>(17) <i>Modesty</i> (letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves)</p> <p>(18) <i>Prudence</i> (being careful about one’s choices; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted)</p> <p>(19) <i>Self-regulation</i> (regulating what one feels and does)</p>
<p><b>Transcendence</b> (strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning)</p> <p>(20) <i>Appreciation of beauty and excellence</i> (noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life)</p> <p>(21) <i>Gratitude</i> (being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen)</p> <p>(22) <i>Hope</i> (expecting the best and working to achieve it)</p> <p>(23) <i>Humor</i> (liking to laugh and joke; bringing smiles to other people)</p> <p>(24) <i>Religiousness</i> (having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life)</p>

ons of the world), to study post-traumatic growth (higher scores in humor for those who recovered from physical illness), to study the genetic influence on character strengths (lowest additive genetic influence of all 24 strengths for humor), or to study strengths of character in a military context (for an overview see [16, 17]).

It should also be noted that positive psychology is not only about strengths and virtues. Other concepts were also shown to be relevant for the prediction of positive outcome variables such as subjective well-being. For example, Peterson et al. [18] suggested that a good life is constituted by three orientations to happiness, namely, the life of pleasure (hedonism), the life of meaning (eudaimonia), and the life of engagement (related to flow-experiences). A pleasurable, an engaged, and a meaningful life represent three different routes or orientations to happiness. While the first two date back to a rich philo-

sophical tradition, the third one was newly introduced and is related to works on flow experiences. Studies conducted so far indicate that all three orientations are related empirically to satisfaction with life [18, 19]. All three routes to happiness can be measured by an 18-item questionnaire (Orientations to Happiness Scale, OTH), which demonstrated good psychometric properties in the previously mentioned studies. The VIA-IS humor scale primarily correlated with life of pleasure (US:  $r=0.36$ ; CH:  $r=0.38$ ) [19], which is not surprising as humor involves positive affect and enjoyment. Nevertheless, humor also correlated with life of engagement (US:  $r=0.27$ ; CH:  $r=0.29$ ) and life of meaning (US:  $r=0.27$ ; CH:  $r=0.21$ ), suggesting that high scorers in this conceptualization of humor not only are oriented towards pleasure, and the impact of humor on satisfaction with life is not only mediated by positive affect and pleasure.

**Additional notes on the theory of humor and its measurement**

A consensus on the definition of humor seems to be impossible at this point. *Humor* is used as one of many terms in the field of the funny in a variety of ways. Two should be emphasized. First, humor is used to denote a cognitive-affective style of dealing with situations and life in general. This style allows us to derive a positive or light side from adverse and serious situations, to remain cheerful and composed, and even to smile about them, i.e., at least find them marginally amusing. Another current use of humor, almost incompatible with the first, is its role as an umbrella term for all phenomena of the funny, including the capacity to perceive, interpret, and enjoy, but also to create, nonserious, incongruous communications [22]. In the latter sense, humor is used as a neutral term. Additionally, we also speak of a “sense of humor,” this we do when we refer to a disposition or personality characteristic. Like humor as an attribute or state, also humor as a trait can be of different flavor or quality. For example, wit is a more cognitive ability akin to creativity, to produce a comic effect and make others laugh.

**➤ Humor is used as one of many terms in the field of the funny**

Ruch [23] reviewed different instruments for measuring humor (more than 60 different ones). From the beginning joke/cartoon tests or questionnaires were used but occasionally also methods like humor diaries, informant questionnaires and peer reports, behavioral observations, experimental tasks or interviews. A few instruments should be mentioned here as they have received more attention in research and practice (for a more thorough review, and for validation studies see [9, 22, 23, 24]). Craik and collaborators [4] developed the Humorous Behavior Q-sort Deck (HBQD), which is composed of a set of 100 non-redundant statements. These can be aggregated to a set of ten humor styles (e.g., socially warm versus cold or reflective versus boorish). The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) by Martin et al. [10] considers two positive humor styles

(affiliative and self-enhancing humor) but also aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. Ruch et al. [26] postulate that cheerfulness, seriousness, and bad mood are the traits forming the temperamental basis of humor. Their State-Trait Cheerfulness Inventory (STCI) measures this basis as enduring traits and temporary states or frame of mind. Additionally, there are tests for humor appreciation that assess the individual's "taste" in humor (participants typically rate a set of jokes, cartoons and/or limericks for degree of funniness). However, not only questionnaires are used. For example, humor creation, or wit, is typically measured with performance tests (participants are asked to write as many funny captions as they can to caption-removed cartoons). It is superfluous to say that the VIA-IS humor scale will not cover all of the diverse aspects of humor mentioned above. As a unipolar strength one might assume that it will be related to a cheerful temperament and a socially warm and competent humor style. In prior studies most humor scales were located in the quadrant defined by the axes of trait cheerfulness and (low) seriousness, with those scales that involve an entertainment aspect [8, 25] having higher negative loadings on seriousness. Humor as a strength needs to be studied in the context of the above-mentioned conceptualizations of humor.

To date, most work in humor uses students, or the working population. Hence little is known about humor in old age. An early book dealt with humor and aging [13]; however, this was not followed by much additional research (see, for example, [12]). The emergence of positive psychology and the focus on a good life will give new impetus to study humor in relation to successful aging.

## Conclusion and unresolved questions

Thus far, there is no comprehensive study published on age-related differences in humor from a positive psychology perspective. Results communicated so far indicated either no differences or a tendency for higher scores among younger participants. This is of interest, as strengths would be expected to develop and incre-

ase over time. If humor is a set of learned skills one will have to explain why during certain age spans this skill is not practiced that often. Thus, to pursue this question further, first a clearer description of age-related changes is needed with smaller time intervals. Then, the causes and consequences of changes in humor will need to be investigated. Furthermore, it will be of special interest to know how humor is developed among the elderly, e.g., what function it plays, what expression humor takes, what components are salient or in the background. Furthermore, the relation between humor and satisfaction with life and the orientations to happiness have not yet been studied from a lifespan perspective.

— Thus, it is not known whether humor contributes to subjective well-being equally well across the lifespan.

It might well be that humor as a coping device allows one to stay happy when facing age-related adversity. However, it might also be that other, e.g., health-related factors increasingly gain predictive power lowering the relative amount accounted for by humor. Regarding the known orientations to happiness, it has not yet been studied whether humor is mainly enjoyment, an instant way of inducing positive emotions that might contribute to a longer lasting good mood, or maintenance of good mood in the face of adversity. Does humor also imply that one may use this strength to nurture others, put them at ease or cheer them up when needed? Humor might help to see the "bigger picture", the unimportant role one plays in the universe combined with the insight that nothing is endless. Those associations between humor and orientation to happiness might differ across the lifespan. Humor among younger people might reflect more playful enjoyment, but life experiences might add a component of wisdom or transcendence to humor with increasing age. Overall, it needs to be studied whether the relation between humor and well-being is mediated by (one or more of) the three different orientations to happiness—and it is unclear whether humor contributes to satisfaction with life beyond to the degree of the three orien-

tations to happiness. Ruch et al. [28] provide the first empirical data on these research questions.

Of course, once it is verified that humor correlates with life satisfaction, it will be of interest to see whether improving humor through systematic training will also positively affect satisfaction with life. Such training will consider what orientations to happiness humor may serve and whether there is a direct impact on humor not mediated by those orientations. There are already some sources that help practitioners on how humor might be used in working with elderly persons [7, 33]. However, humor in the elderly is still an under-researched topic and its potential uses need to be described in scientific terms but also in a way that makes applications in practice possible.

## Conclusion

**Positive psychology provides a framework and techniques that can enrich the understanding of and work with elderly people. Interventions that focus on specific strengths (e.g., on humor) can strengthen satisfaction with life and overall well-being. Measures developed in this line of research enable practitioners to focus on the resources of their clients or patients. These might be a starting point for setting up a (working) relationship or enriching daily work and communication. There is empirical evidence that using one's signature strengths (i.e., those with the highest expression) in a new way improves satisfaction with life.**

**Thus, living one's strengths at work (e.g., through humor or optimism) might be a good strategy for improving one's well-being.**

**A German version of the Values-in-Action Inventory of Strengths is available online via <http://www.charakterstaerken.org>. Participants obtain free immediate written feedback on their strengths.**



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**Conflict of interest.** The corresponding author states that there are no conflicts of interest.

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Telemedizin zum Anfassen

Zu den Highlights der CeBIT (02.-06.03.10, Hannover) gehört in diesem Jahr für Ärzte und Gesundheitspersonal die Sonderschau FutureCare innerhalb der TeleHealth, die in Halle 9 stattfindet.

Die Vernetzung unterschiedlicher medizinischer Bereiche wie Prävention, Diagnose, Röntgenaufnahmen, Therapie, Nachsorge etc. verlangt eine reibungslose Weitergabe von unstrukturierten Informationen und Daten und ist heute in der Medizin von entscheidender Bedeutung. Anhand verschiedener realer Anwendungen wird auf der FutureCare gezeigt, wie sich Ärzte und weitere beteiligte Berufsgruppen in der Zukunft durch eben dieses vernetzte Arbeiten noch mehr um den Patienten kümmern können. „Für fast jede Fachgruppe gibt es große Möglichkeiten für einen Einsatz von Telemonitoring zum Vorteil von Patienten, und die Investitionen liegen nahe null“, meint Professor Harald Korb, Beiratsvorsitzender der TeleHealth.

Verschiedene Rundgänge zu Themen wie dem Einsatz telemedizin-gestützter Tertiärprävention, integrierter Versorgung in Kliniken oder Nutzung elektronischer Notfalldaten in einem akuten Notfall zeigen, wie Daten über den gegenwärtigen gesundheitlichen Zustand des betreffenden Menschen Auskunft geben und wie diese Daten für weitere Entscheidungen für eine optimale gesundheitliche Versorgung rechtzeitig zur Verfügung stehen.

Kostenlose E-Tickets für Leser der „Ärzte Zeitung“

Für die CeBIT steht der „Ärzte Zeitung“ als Medienpartner der begleitenden Messe TeleHealth ein Kontingent kostenloser E-Tickets zur Verfügung, die Haus- und Fachärzte, aber auch Kliniker und andere Heilberufler in Anspruch nehmen können. Die Karten berechtigen zum einmaligen Besuch von CeBIT und TeleHealth.

Die Tickets sind registrierungspflichtig. Ein Link auf [www.aerztezeitung.de](http://www.aerztezeitung.de) im Kasten „TeleHealth / CeBIT 2010“ in der Navigationsspalte rechts führt zur Registrierung. Nach Registrierung wird das Ticket an die angegebene E-Mail-Adresse versandt. Der Ausdruck genügt für den Eintritt.

Quelle: *Ärzte Zeitung*, [www.aerztezeitung.de](http://www.aerztezeitung.de)