# "It hurts when I laugh!": Humor in the Workplace

Within Affective Events Theory Framework

Introduction

Affective Events Theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) is now well-recognized as an overarching framework for emotion in the workplace as it impacts on workplace attitudes (cites) and behaviors. By now, many portions of the AET model have been substantiated showing its validity as an overarching framework for how affect impacts both workplace attitudes and behaviors. For example (give brief overview of key AET studies). Humor [in the workplace] has natural emotional concomitants and yet has been largely understudied for workplace outcomes in general and certainly in concert with emotion constructs in the workplace. It is our aim in this manuscript to provide an overarching perspective of how humor in the workplace can be mapped onto Affective Events Theory. To that end, we suggest key areas within the humor empirical literature which provide both insight and guidance for how it may manifest in the work environment. As such, we explain how we view humor in the workplace specifically mapping onto each of AET's primary constructs.

Affective Events Theory

Affective Events Theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) provides a comprehensive and testable model for how emotions and moods (affect) may ultimately impact workplace attitudes and concomitant behaviors. We reference the model below and briefly explain each component:

AFFECTIVE EVENTS THEORY
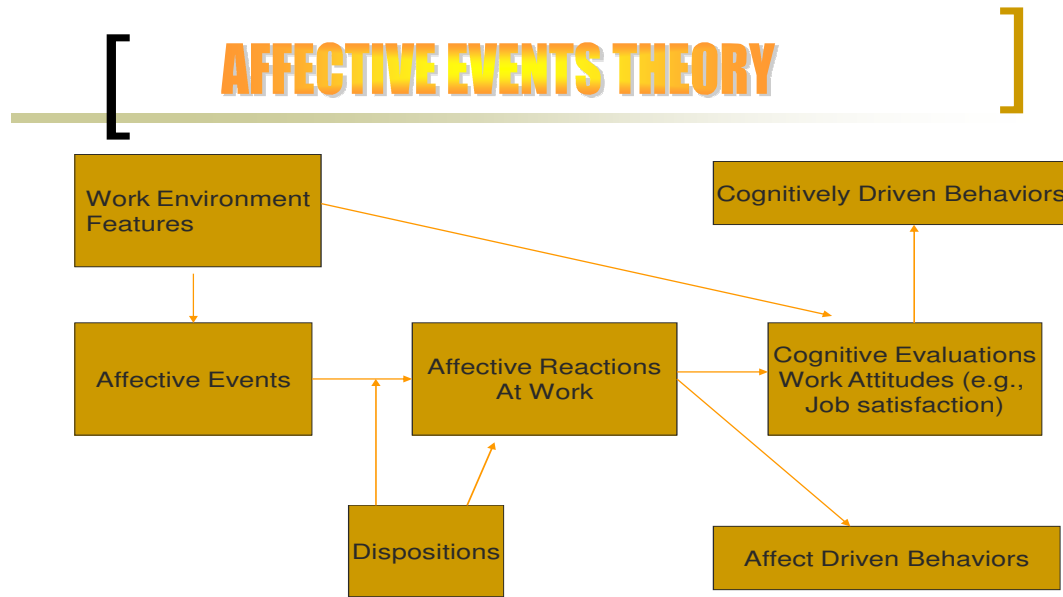
(Adapted from Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996)

First are the work environment features which provide the context proximally for events, and more distally, for attitudes and behaviors (specifically, job satisfaction). Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) suggest that …blah blah blah

These work environment features then lead to (or not) a series of 'Affective Events.' Affective events can be either minor (e.g., the copy machine is out of toner and one needs his/her document immediately), or more impactful (e.g., an employee just receives notice that she is not getting the raise she had planned on). The main point is that most work events have some emotional tone to them, and the work environment will greatly shape this tone. So the (work environment) context sets the stage for workplace events, and these partially determine hedonic tone (i.e., positive or negative emotions, generally), and intensity of emotions experienced.

Yet, individual differences can greatly impact how these events are noticed, processed, interpreted, and responded to…or can *moderate* how employees generally react to the events. Greatly fitting in with the bulk of psychological reasoning (based on Lewin's B=f(P,E):

Behavior is a function of the person and environment – <mark>give cite</mark>), most psychologists agree that both the context (environment) and the individual (person) *collectively* determine behavior in any given situation. As such, AET argues that individual differences such as …cite Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) should impact how people interpret and respond to the aforementioned category of affective events.

Next, these events (moderated by individual differences/dispositions) will largely determine the affective reactions (discrete emotions such as anger, joy, guilt; or more diffuse moods) that people will have. And these affective reactions will both immediately and over time largely contribute to workplace attitudes and behaviors. Immediately, emotion may drive 'short-term' reactions (e.g., quitting the job in the 'heat of the moment'), whereas more distally, both affect and cognition are likely to play a strong role in more considered behaviors (e.g., I quit after being unhappy for months and carefully examine and explore my alternatives). As well, attitudes, such as job satisfaction are likely greatly influenced by the interactive influences of both affect and cognition.

While AET is no longer considered a recent conceptualization of the job satisfaction process, it has shifted [helped to] the direction of job satisfaction research quite dramatically in the last two decades, both theoretically and psychometrically. <mark>Finish this thought</mark>

Humor in the Workplace

Humor in the workplace remains a largely underexplored area with little theoretical backbone, and even less empirical work. To be fair, there are certain subcategories within this broad concept (e.g., leadership and humor; coping with stress and humor) that have reasonable amounts of empirical exploration, but there are only a select few. Humor has natural

coalescences with emotion; after all, humor is a means to some end, and most inevitably an emotional one: humor to diffuse tension; humor to make people feel happy or not feel sad or angry; humor as 'put-down' to make someone feel inferior. So perhaps since emotion in the workplace has only just gained prominence and momentum in the last two decades, this contributes to why there is such scant attention paid to humor: a specific emotion-eliciting stimulus.

It is true, however, that scholars have been recently thinking about how humor may manifest importantly in the workplace. For example, in a relatively recent article, Romero and Cruthirds (2006) discuss the development of their *Organizational Humor Model* (pg. 66) and argue that humor is a "multifunctional management tool that can be used to achieve many objectives" (pg. 58) such as improved group cohesiveness and communication. Primarily, in this writing, the authors view humor as an underutilized tool for managers. They suggest that through assessing the situation astutely, that managers can choose the appropriate humor style for the context which includes consideration of individual demographics (e.g., gender, race). Yet this model has a particularly focused lens on use of humor by a manager or leader (as organization's representative), while not explicitly integrating humor in the workplace with affect in the workplace.

Affects employees attitudes - job satisfaction; empowerment (Gkorezis, Hatzithomas, & Petridou (2011)

one of the most important functions of humor was the construction and maintenance of good relations with fellow workers. Such workplace collegiality is often constructed and maintained through extended sequences of humor – Holmes, (2006; pg. 26)

signalizes power relationships (Dwyer, 1991)

Duncan, Smelzer & Leap (1990) interest has been "sporadic" pg. 255

Kahn (1989) useful for organizational diagnosis –almost like a Freudian notion of subconscious

statements about groups, relationships, organization may not be able to make in other ways.

Can increase cohesiveness in groups;

there is little shared understanding as to the role of humor in the workplace; Second, meta-analysis is used to explore the possibility that positive humor is associated with: employee health (e.g. burnout, health) and work-related outcomes (e.g. performance, job satisfaction, withdrawal); with perceived supervisor/leader effectiveness (e.g. perceived leader performance, follower approval); and may mitigate the deleterious effects of workplace stress on employee burnout. Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, Viswesveran (2012) *Findings* – Results suggest employee humor is associated with enhanced work performance, satisfaction, workgroup cohesion, health, and coping effectiveness, as well as decreased burnout, stress, and work withdrawal. Supervisor use of humor is associated with enhanced subordinate work performance, satisfaction, perception of supervisor performance, satisfaction with supervisor, and workgroup cohesion, as well as reduced work withdrawal.

Research limitations/implications – Profitable avenues for future research include: clarifying the humor construct and determining how current humor scales tap this construct; exploring the role of negative forms of humor, as they likely have different workplace effects; the role of humor by coworkers; a number of potential moderators of the humor relationships, including type of humor, job level and industry type; and personality correlates of humor use and appreciation.

Practical implications – The authors recommend caution be exercised when attempting to cultivate humor in the workplace, as this may raise legal concerns (e.g. derogatory or sexist humor), but efforts aimed at encouraging self-directed/coping humor may have the potential to innocuously buffer negative effects of workplace stress.

Originality/value – Although psychologists have long recognized the value of humor for general well-being, organizational scholars have devoted comparatively little research to exploring benefits of workplace humor. Results underscore benefits of humor for work outcomes, encourage future research, and offer managerial insights on the value of creating a workplace context supportive of positive forms of humor

Robert & Yan (2007) The study of humor has a long tradition in philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and communications. Evidence from these fields suggests that humor can have effects on creativity, cohesiveness, and performance, but organizational scholars have paid it relatively little attention. We hope to "jump-start" such a research program. To do this, we first outline the theoretical rationale underlying the production and appreciation of humor, namely, its motivational, cognitive, and emotional mechanisms. Next, we review the literature linking humor to creativity, cohesiveness, and other performance-relevant outcomes. In particular, we note how this literature is theoretically well-grounded, but that the empirical findings are largely correlational and/or based on qualitative research designs. Finally, we go beyond the current humor literature by developing specific predictions about how culture might interact with humor in organizational contexts. Throughout the paper, we discuss possible research directions and methodological issues relevant to the study of humor in organizations.

Humor Encapsulated Within Affective Events Theory

Here, we present our overall model or view of how we envision humor in the workplace mapping onto Affective Events Theory.

Humor as Context within Work Environment Features - Duncan (1982) match context/situation and be careful

Leadership and Humor - Romero and Cruthirds (2006) styles of humor: affiliative; self-enhancing; aggressive; mild-aggressive; self-defeating. Aff and s-e promote close relationships and ability to cope; Holmes & Marra, 2002 – supportive and collaborative ; R & C (2006) talk about maintaining leader's power by using humor; suggest leaders use aggressive power to do prior; use self-enhancing power to achieve power; use self-defeating humor to put others at ease (fine line with lowering own status that way); can reduce social distance; R& C recommend using affiliative with moderate self-defeating to reduce social distance; Newstrom (2002) also writes it's a manager's job (no empirical, just thoughts) to make work environment fun ; Avolio et al (1999). Leadership style to performance was moderated by humor Contends that Herb Kelleher, founder of Southwest Airlines, has been pivotal in crafting a distinctive organizational culture (based on the values of humor, altruism, and "luv"). Cultural values become the platform for specific and concrete actions designed to meet difficulty and challenge. It is suggested that the underlying values and elements of an organizational culture are usually buried beneath a wide range of social behaviors and artifacts. The cultural elements below the social surface (e.g., in the case of a tough-talking executive) are not necessarily unsavory or unacceptable. – from Quick, 1992 abstract; Decker (1987) – survey study of manager's use of humor found subordinates more satisfied with managers with a high sense of humor compared to low; subs model sups humor, negative (sexual and insult); FAR; self-report survey study Decker & Rotundo, 1999; see Duncan, 1982 above for matching humor to situation; Gkorezis, Hatzithomas, & Petridou (2011) leader's humor 101 – waiters and

waitresses (?); survey st. influences empowerment of employees; - positive humor (affiliative and moderately self-defeating) positively related to empowerment; negative humor negatively impacts empowerment (aggressive; teasing and belittling) – "induces hostility and anger" pg. 87

Selection and Humor

One important organizational function that has received little attention in the realm of humor research is that of employee selection. As organizational attraction is the first concern for any company trying to cultivate a productive workforce it is important to convey a positive impression about the organization's culture to prospective talent as early as possible. As demonstrated by Carless & Imber (2007) characteristics of the interviewer play a pivotal role in in attracting candidates to the organization. The five characteristics studied in their research (one of which being humor) showed to have significant effects on applicants' job choices as well as their anxiety levels. Expanding on this evidence we feel that using humor during the interview process can help to put applicants at ease, allow for less defensive communication on the part of the interviewee, and disseminate information about the organization's culture in an interesting and fun manner. Just as organizations are searching for the best employees, workers are also constantly searching for the best companies to join. For this reason we believe that it would be equally beneficial for the interviewees to reciprocate any instances of humor initiated by the interviewer.

As evidenced by Cable & Judge (1997), interviewers frequently pay special attention to the perceived person-organization fit while evaluating potential candidates as well as later when making hiring recommendations. As these recommendations are closely linked to job attainment, it is important for applicants to be able to portray their own perceived level of fitness within the desired company to the interviewer. One way candidates can achieve this is by using

humor. Utilizing humor in a way that facilitates ingratiation and self-promotion can greatly improve the chances of being rated positively by an interviewer thus increasing the likelihood of being hired (Proost, Schreurs, De Witte, & Derous, ?). As previously mentioned, because the interview process is likely a candidate's first glimpse into the organization's culture, we feel that the importance of humor in this process has been greatly overlooked by researchers as an affective event within the work-environment.

Things highlighted were used without full access to the entire article

Workgroups and Humor - Romero and Cruthirds (2006); Duncan (1982)

Another aspect of the contemporary work environment is the increasing use of teams to solve complex problems. Although many studies have analyzed group dynamics in terms of group size, demographic composition, and team strategies very little research has explored the use of humor within groups and how this tactic may impact overall performance. Romero and Pescosolido (2008) are quick to point out that it is not only the nature and type of work that have undergone dramatic changes but also the typical employee. As the baby-boomer generation begins to ease into retirement, younger adults are entering into the workforce to take their places. Although highly motivated and eager to contribute to the organizational community, this new labor force harbors vastly different expectations of the work environment from their predecessors. As demonstrated by companies such as Google, The Boston Beer Company, and Best Buy many industry giants have begun structuring the work setting in a way that stimulates employee creativity and encourages collaboration and communication between workers. The facilitation and encouragement of these social functions is imperative to group performance (Romero and Pescosolido, 2008), particularly now as the labor pool continues to become more diverse.

While the authors of this study do not suggest that increasing diversity is an organizational problem by any means, it is certainly an issue that deserves attention in the realm of humor research. The concern is obvious if one were to stop and think intuitively. After all, what may be amusing to one employee may be interpreted by another as offensive or attacking, thus creating the opportunity for negative affective events. As such, it is imperative that team members be vigilant to guard against using humor in a manner that could be construed negatively by another. Congruent with the proposal made by Romero and Pescosolido (2008), it is our assertion that when utilized correctly, the use of humor creates an overall positive group mood that is conducive to increasing agreement and facilitating more effective communication between members of the work team. Though this is all useful toward our explanation of humor as an affective event in small groups, there is at least one other way that humor has been shown to impact group functioning.

Another function of humor in small groups is the ingratiation of group culture and member status (Vinton, 1989). In her study Vinton (1989) examines the use of humorous anecdotes that utilize self-effacing comedy. The research describes how self-ridicule is commonly used as a means of communicating the values of a particular member (or members) in a work group. Furthermore, it was hypothesized in Vinton's research that managers may use this particular brand of humor as a way of signaling to subordinates that they are inviting their employees to make jokes at their expense (Vinton, 1989). It has been demonstrated that in doing so, managers and team leaders are more easily accepted by their subordinates as potential friends (Duncan, 1984; Vinton, 1989) Applied to a small group setting, it is assumed that group leaders would have similar success using this technique to facilitate a more efficient style of communication and to break down member defensiveness.

In addition to the use of self-effacing humor, Vinton (1989) also has demonstrated how the use of teasing humor in work groups can increase member productivity and motivation. Using this tactic, higher-status individuals can make demands on lower-status employees while maintaining a friendly mood. As long as leaders can phrase their requests to perform in a humorous, non-threatening way group member motivation will increase while preventing either party from being perceived as pushy or lazy, respectively. Using teasing humor in this way has not only been shown to increase motivation and performance in work groups but also increase member cohesion. When leaders begin to demonstrate their sense of humor within task-oriented work groups they may often find themselves the butt of jokes more frequently but research shows this does not usually occur without positive relationships being previously established (Duncan, 1984).

Task Demands of Job – Emotional Labor and Humor

Affective Events

Culture influencing humor and affective events Schein's model **– surface elements – stories told reflect values and norms; style used and/or tolerated reflect organization's value system** Holmes and Marra 2002 – type/style of humor reflects org's culture, subcultures, etc…qualitative study – four groups; Romero and Cruthirds (2006); R & Cruthirds using humor ineffectively can create negative repercussions; newstrom w/ managers making work fun and see below; Linstead (1985) – "appropriateness of the joke to the social situation" can restore troubled social relationships or exacerbate them depending on org. context; see above re: subs modeling suprs use of negative humor (Decker & Rotundo, 1999)

Leadership influencing humor and affective events Romero and Cruthirds (2006); individuals with high humor orientation more socially attractive by their acquaintances – Wanzer Wanzer, M.B., Booth-Butterfield, M. & Booth-Butterfield (1996)

Individual Differences influencing humor and affective events Romero and Cruthirds (2006)

Dispositions or Individual Differences

Demographic diffs – gender; race as per Romero & Cruthirds suggest men using affiliative humor w/ women and women use self-enhancing w/ men; decker (1987) older women less happy with managers who used sexual humor; Duncan (1982); see below in sense of humor men like sarcasm more; Goodchilds or cooper? age - Gkorezis, Hatzithomas, & Petridou (2011 – really use positive w/ new employees; really avoid negative with older employees

PA/NA

Optimism

Sense of Humor Romero and Cruthirds (2006); "Similarly, individuals with a clowning, rather than sarcastic, sense of humor were judged to be more popular group members Goodchilds, 1959). Although sarcastic individuals were judged to be relatively less popular, this effect since men were more likely to find people with a sarcastic wit funny. In other words, sarcasm was more likely to be a reinforcing, rather than punishing, event for men in this study as compared to women. For those who saw it as a reinforcing event, they also judged the sarcastic source to be more popular with others." Cooper, 2008, pg. 1102; Wanzer, M.B., Booth-Butterfield, M. & Booth-Butterfield – verbally aggressive people less socially attractive; also, high humor orientation enact more jokes, puns, etc…more socially attractive

Sensitivity Levels – Ability to laugh at self

Affective Reactions

Cooper, 2008 – "humor manipulates affect" through and Affect Reinforcement process; humor can serve as either positive reinforcement or punishment to social interactions and communication.; Locke – ethnographic study of pediatricians – use humor to manage families' emotions – anxiety, fear, despondence

Type of Humor influencing affective reactions Romero and Cruthirds (2006); ingratiatory humor (Cooper, 2005); Wanzer, M.B., Booth-Butterfield, M. & Booth-Butterfield – verbally aggressive people less socially attractive; Locke (1996) "**Sociability comedy, Mastery comedy, Celebratory com-edy and Magical comedy are the four performances that were reliably initiated by physicians in response to feelings of patient families at various junctures in the service delivery process." Pg. 46 They The comedies presented in Table 1 are presented roughly in order of appearance in the service delivery drama. Sociability comedy takes place in the opening scene of the drama between physicians and client fami-lies, both in their first encounter at the institution and when the service delivery process is reconstituted at each subsequent visit. Client families enter the en-counter with some anxiety and fear about what they will learn about the course of their children's illness. Sociability comedy is characterized by a generally brief performance initiated at the onset of face-to-face con-tact. By far the most prevalent form, it usually occurs when individuals first see each other at the beginnings of consultations and routine clinic visits, on rounds, and as physicians and client families cross paths in hallways. Sociability comedy is usually quite fleeting, and it is acted with hardly a break in the work stride. The script of such encounters is highly variable, serving as a vehicle for the exchange; however, some sugges-tion of familiarity is often present. Mastery comedy takes place between doctors and client families during clinic encounters as physicians perform a medical exam or procedure. Given the client families' concerns and fears about how their children will respond to physicians' physical investigations, this comedy arises at the dramatic moment when physicians "lay hands" on patients' bodies. This comedy is specific and localized. Its essence lies in physicians being able to act as if they are "just playing" with the children when they are in fact conducting medical procedures. Celebratory performances are enacted at high points in the**

medical drama. Responsive to client families' ongoing anxiety about the course of illness, this com-edy is occasioned by achievement markers in the diag-nostic and treatment process. It usually unfolds with exaggerated gestures, its content includes specific ref-erences to the diagnostic and treatment process, and its exuberance often builds during the performance as physicians and client families underscore that their wishes have been granted in the optimistic outlook for their children's recovery. In contrast, Magical comedy is constituted at low points in the medical service drama in the deliberate effort to draw into a moment of fun and lightness members of client families in whom the troublesome; feeling of despondence is indicated. Frequently, some form of disengagement is evident in target individuals, and the content of this performance is designed to elicit their involvement in the comedic episode. Magi-cal comedy is generally characterized by close interper-sonal proximity, careful monitoring on the part of performing physicians, and a contained and modulated affective display. A richer and more detailed account of each comedy follows that explores the transformation from negative to positive emotions made possible by each perfor-mance and gives an account of its impact on the service delivery process.; ingratiation – cooper, 2005 – can elicit attraction from target; improve relationships between the two and increase positive affect of both target and humor user

Individual Differences influencing affective reactions

Cognitive Evaluations

Humor as Coping

Arguably one of the most widely researched areas regarding the utilization of humor is the strength it may possess as a coping mechanism to stress and illness. These effects have been examined under many different circumstances and situations, most leading to the same conclusion; humor promotes well-being (Carrol & Schmidt, 1992; Martin &Lefcourt, 1983; Plester, 2009). Research has revealed that people with an above average sense of humor, as measured by the Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (SHRQ), show lower rates of self-reported indicators of illness than those people who display a below average sense of humor (Carroll & Shmidt, 1992). Prior to this body of research, the introspective case study of Norman

Cousins had helped to lay the foundation for the acceptance of humor as a viable remedy for physical ailments.

If his name doesn't sound familiar, Norman Cousins is the author of *Anatomy of an Illness* (1976), one of the earliest pieces of literature proposing the healing benefits of humor from a first-hand perspective. In 1964, Cousins was diagnosed with Ankylosing Spondylitis, a debilitating and painful disease that causes the eventual fusing of spinal and pelvic bones. Although his chances of recovery were slim at best, Cousins was determined to do all he could to improve his situation. Upon learning of the theorized link between negative cognitions and physical ailments, he arrived at the conclusion that positive emotions may be able to produce an inverse affect. After completely immersing himself in humorous cartoons, literature, and movies Cousins was able to leave the hospital and return home, reportedly symptom-free following regular "treatments" of humorous material (Seaward, 2012). The suggestions throughout Cousins' book caught the attention of many research scientists prompting a surge in studies involving the serious business of humor and health.

In terms of the cognitive benefits of humor, research by Millicent Able (2002) provides evidence to support the possible spill-over. Able's study shows that there is a strong link between a person's sense of humor and his/her ability to cope with stress. Utilizing survey data from measures assessing stress, everyday problems, state and trait anxiety, sense of humor, and coping, Abel revealed some interesting findings regarding humor as a defense mechanism against stress to promote mental well-being. The results of the study indicate participants with a high sense of humor are impacted less by similar (both quantitatively and qualitatively) stressful events than are those with a low sense of humor. He suggests that one of the reasons humor acts as such a good buffer against the negative outcomes of stress and stressful events is because

individuals undergo a "cognitive-affective shift" as they appraise the situation (Abel, 2002 pp. 377). To put it simply, people that use humor to cope with stress take a cognitive assessment of the stressor and frame it in a manner that is both less threatening and more realistic. This in turn leads to experiencing fewer negative emotions associated with expecting unreasonable outcomes (Abel, 2002). More research has taken this movement further into the realm of organizational development.

With all the research alluding to the benefits of using humor to cope with stress, how can industry profit from these concepts? The use of humor among coworkers for example, has been shown to relieve tension and reduce stress (Plester, 2009) as well as lessen the impact of negative events on individuals (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983). Although many theories have been utilized to explain the relationship between humor and work stress, we will focus on Lazarus' two-stage process. Admittedly, Abel (2002) and Martin and Lefcourt (1983) had based his original hypothesis for his research on the findings of theory. In essence, Lazarus's theory posits that whenever people are faced with any situation, they go through a two-step appraisal process. The first step in the sequence before acting is a cognitive appraisal of the events that are occurring. Individuals assess how they will be impacted as well as what may have led to the situation to occur. The second step involves the activation of an emotion that has been selected to act as a coping device. By using this same two-step model we will demonstrate that humor can be used as an affective coping skill to buffer against the negative of work stress. In addition to the implications for employee morale, productivity, and communication we feel workers that use humor to cope will experience physical and mental health benefits that can save organizations a great deal in sick days and health care

Affect-Driven Behaviors

  Choice of Humor Manifested – Humor to defuse or bolster

Cognitive-Driven Behaviors

  Actively using humor to deal with stress and dissatisfaction (attitudinal-driven behaviors)

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