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Cheerfulness represents an individual's actual (as a mood state) or habitual (as a trait or temperament) disposition for amusement and laughter and seeing the bright side of life including taking adversity less seriously. State and trait cheerfulness contribute to the good life by enabling individuals to positive emotions and maintaining them.

Approaches to Cheerfulness

Cheerfulness as a temperamental trait received theoretical and experimental attention by both German and American personality psychologists already at the beginning of the last century. Meumann regarded cheerfulness as one of twelve basic temperaments equal to the sanguine, choleric or melancholic temperament in 1913. He devised a two-dimensional framework in order to describe the concepts by the dimensions of pleasure-displeasure (separating cheerful from e.g., serious and grumpy) and shallow-profound nature (separating e.g., grumpy from cheerful and serious). Schneider on the other hand located cheerfulness on a general factor with a pleasure-displeasure dimension in 1950. He conceptualized seriousness as the first stage on the displeasure side, whereas cheerfulness and sadness were considered markers of the pleasure and displeasure sides, respectively. Lersch drew a distinction between cheerfulness and hilarity/merriment in 1938. In his phenomenological account, these two concepts share the elements of inner brightness, lightness, and relaxation. But while cheerfulness is contemplative, pensive, profound, calm and inward, hilarity is thoughtless, superficial, shallow and outwardly directed. When outlining his concept of cheerfulness, Lersch described associated behaviors and traits. For example, he claimed that a cheerful person has a positive attitude towards the world, is able to enjoy things, is sociable and meets fellow creatures with goodwill and benevolence. Cheerfulness and nervousness, but also envy, distrust, malice, and all sorts of aggression tend to exclude each other. Young generated first evidence in 1937 for the relevance of state cheerfulness when he found a positive correlation between retrospectively reported cheerful mood during the last 24 hours and laughter during that period.

More recently, Ruch and Koehler (1998) drew a distinction between *trait cheerfulness* as an innate affect-based temperament and *state cheerfulness* as a transient mood. They argued that the disposition for laughter and amusement varies both interindividually (i.e., between people) and intraindividually (i.e., across situations) and both are needed to account for individuals' readiness for positive emotions and laughter. In their "state-trait model of cheerfulness" (p. 204) both state and trait cheerfulness were operationalized with the help of facets or definitional components. Based on different sources (e.g., lexical studies, studies of prior literature and prior factor analytic work on humor questionnaires) they found that trait cheerfulness is composed of five intercorrelated components, namely a prevalence of cheerful mood (CH1), a low threshold for smiling and laughter (CH2), a composed view of adverse life circumstances (CH3), a broad range of active elicitors of cheerfulness and smiling or laughter (CH4) and a generally cheerful interaction style (CH5). While trait cheerfulness is a

one-dimensional concept, empirical evaluation also allows distinguishing between cheerfulness and hilarity, as sketched earlier by Lersch. The study of state cheerfulness involved the playful induction of different forms of positive mood (e.g., via jokes and cartoons, funny videos, humorous interactions, laughing gas) and the assessment of the resulting mood state via a comprehensive set of words relating to cheerfulness as a state. Empirical analyses suggested a differentiation in two highly correlated components akin to trait cheerfulness. State cheerfulness is defined by the presence of (1) a cheerful mood state, which is tranquil and composed, as well as by the presence of (2) hilarity, which is a merry mood state, shallow and outwardly directed.

The Measurement of Cheerfulness as Trait and State

In order to provide a reliable, valid, and economical assessment of cheerfulness as a trait and as a state, the State-Trait-Cheerfulness-Inventory (STCI) was developed Ruch, Koehler, and van Thriel by pursuing a rational-theoretical construction strategy. In addition to cheerfulness, the STCI measures also seriousness and bad mood as states and traits. The STCI is available in different versions for children and youth and adults. For the assessment of cheerfulness as a trait (STCI-T) a short and long form exist for both self and peer report. The STCI-S assesses state cheerfulness as a current mood state. However, also forms exist to describe predominant mood states of the last week, last month or last year. All versions use a 4-point answer format (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Psychometric properties of the scales are satisfactory and replicable across countries. Cronbach Alpha coefficients for the cheerfulness scale turned out to be high in different samples (.92 to .94 for the STCI-T and .93 to .94 for the STCI-S). While trait cheerfulness is relatively stable across the span of a month (retest-reliability yielded a coefficient of .84), a low coefficient (.33) was found for state cheerfulness, underscoring the fleeting nature of states. The STCI-S is sensitive to changes in the environment. When individuals are exposed to different situations (ranging from serious to humorous), their level of state cheerfulness changes accordingly. While trait cheerfulness is a desirable characteristic, the correlations between self- and peer-evaluation nevertheless turned out to be sufficiently high. There are no gender differences in cheerfulness and overall trait cheerfulness remains stable across the life span. However, one of the components (“composed view of adverse life circumstances”) changes across time. After the age of 40, individuals seem to adopt a more lighthearted view of the adversities they encounter in life and this tendency increases even more after the age of 60. The scale was translated in to the major Western languages and retained its psychometric properties.

The Relationship between State and Trait Cheerfulness and Their Role in the Induction of Amusement and Laughter

State and trait cheerfulness are related to each other in a variety of ways. Every person is in a cheerful state now and then; however, high trait cheerful individuals differ from low trait cheerful individuals with respect to frequency, threshold, intensity and duration of state cheerfulness. Experiments show that individuals high in trait cheerfulness are in a cheerful state more often. Moreover, they have a lowered threshold for coming into cheerful states; i.e., it takes less to bring about a cheerful mood. Furthermore, trait cheerfulness is a predictor of the intensity of state cheerfulness. Once induced, states of cheerful mood or hilarity are more intense and last longer among the trait cheerful individuals than among low trait cheerful individuals. Most importantly, trait cheerful individuals seem to have enhanced thresholds for antagonistic states; i.e., it takes more to bring them out of a cheerful mood. Cheerful states of high trait cheerful individuals are more robust. Several experiments show that trait cheerful individuals “keep their humor” when facing adverse situations, while low

trait cheerful people lose their humor and get grumpy or sullen. In case of a low cheerful state, high trait cheerful people regain a cheerful mood faster than low trait cheerful individuals do. In particular, the robustness of cheerful mood found among trait cheerful individuals suggests that trait cheerfulness lies conceptually close to “sense of humor”.

Furthermore, there is evidence that both state and trait cheerfulness are predictors of laughter and the intensity of positive affect. Experiments show that only individuals in a high cheerful mood smile and laugh more often to jokes in social situations, and the laughter of a model is only contagious for them. Trait cheerful individuals are more likely to laugh than individuals low in trait cheerfulness when involved into a silly interview, inhaling nitrous oxide or watching funny films. In one of the first experimental laboratory studies in differential psychology in 1919, Morgan, Mull, and Washburn demonstrated that cheerful people recall more pleasant terms (and less unpleasant ones) than depressed persons, who showed the opposite pattern.

The Role of Cheerfulness in Humor

Both theoretical and empirical accounts point towards cheerfulness' relevance for research on humor. Cheerfulness as trait and state explains individual differences in readiness for amusement and predicts affect based humor behavior like smile and laughter. Moreover, it does also account for a variety of phenomena, such as appreciation of types of humor, quantity of humor production, keeping or losing humor when facing adversity, and it has been shown to be a moderator to stress just as coping humor is. In order to approach the relation between cheerfulness and “sense of humor” more comprehensively, the relationship of self-report inventories of “sense of humor” and behavioral measures of humor was investigated. Joint factor analysis revealed that all available sense of humor scales and the facets of cheerfulness merge in a potent first factor. This broad factor comprises elements such as a prevalent cheerful mood, the tendency to smile or laugh and to be merry, coping humor and cheerful composedness, humor under stress, laughing at yourself, initiating humor/liking to entertaining others, enjoyment of humor, verbal humor, finding humor in everyday life and a positive attitude to things being related to cheerfulness and playfulness. This finding suggests that current measures of “sense of humor” actually account for cheerfulness rather than for humor.

Nevertheless, cheerfulness is not quite equivalent to “sense of humor”. As trait cheerfulness is a unipolar construct, its low pole can only partially account for the phenomena referred to as “humorlessness”. In fact, further empirical evidence suggests that the concepts of seriousness and bad mood may play a crucial role. As a consequence, it is postulated that cheerfulness, seriousness/playfulness and bad mood as traits form the temperamental basis of humor and cheerfulness/, seriousness/playfulness and bad mood as states represent intrapersonal varying dispositions for humor. While cheerfulness facilitates the induction of smiling and laughter, seriousness and bad mood impair it. The study of the relationship between the three concepts and sense of humor is limited by the nature of the sense of humor instruments utilized so far. However, only if inventories cover humorlessness as well, the whole range of sense of humor can be comprised.

Positive Outcomes of Cheerfulness

Cheerfulness as state and trait is relevant to the study of the good life. They seem to represent personal resources for positive mood and laughter. Trait cheerfulness is a predictor of satisfaction with life among children as early as in the ages between 10 and 14 years. Furthermore, trait cheerfulness is positively related to the life of pleasure (but also to a minor

extent to life of engagement and meaning) for this age group. Trait cheerfulness predicts life satisfaction even when the effects of the three orientations to happiness are being controlled for. This might be, in part, because trait cheerfulness is an antagonist to the effects of adversity on mood state. In fact, previous experimental studies showed that high trait cheerful individuals cope not only better with experimentally induced adversity, but also with stress in everyday life; they use healthier coping strategies such as relaxation to deal with stress than low trait cheerful people. Moreover, high trait cheerful persons report less psychosomatic disturbance such as headache, tonicity, or cardiac and circulatory troubles and react different to experimentally induced pain. All in all, cheerfulness contributes to the good life by bringing about positive affect and helping to maintain it when facing adversity.

SEE ALSO:

Humor, Sense of Humor, Laughter, Well-Being, Physical Health

REFERENCES:

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