Inside the Lives of Male Stand-Up Comedians: How the Past Influences the Present

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Abstract

Research is limited in regards to comedians and minimal data currently exist examining the effects family, coping mechanisms, and personal self-views have on comedians’ lives. Poor family dynamics and distant parental relationships have been associated with comedians’ childhoods. The levels of self-esteem and the need for attention have not yet been examined throughout the comedian population. The following study investigated the family dynamics of comedians. Low self-esteem, negative self-beliefs, and the need for attention were also explored. This qualitative study utilized personal interviews, completed with five professional male stand-up comedians. Common themes were gathered and analyzed as part of the research data. The results indicated that overall the comedians admitted to having favorable childhoods. All comedians reported the need to measure their own self-worth through their career success. In the discussion, the comedians’ childhood experiences are explored. Their need to seek attention and their characteristics related to narcissistic individuals are discussed. Discussion of the comedians’ identity of themselves is also considered.

Keywords: Comedians; Self-esteem; Attention; Self-beliefs; Narcissism; Identity.

Introduction

A career as a stand-up comedian is a difficult job. It requires dedication to travel, puts strains on relationships, and causes stress. It has been suggested that the choice to become a comedian was strongly influenced by the child’s relationship with their parents [1]. According to Fisher and Fisher [2], comedians often had heavy demands placed on them from an early age, causing them to strenuously seek approval from their parents. Thus, concluded that comedians became comedians as a way to seek control and gain approval from family and friends and prove they are worthy [3].

Family dynamics and relationships seem to play a large role in the comedians’ childhoods and the development of the comedians’ careers. Some researchers have looked into the family dynamics of comedians. Janus [4] found that comedians’ early childhood experiences were marked by feelings of deprivation, isolation, and suffering. In conjunction, humor-oriented individuals were found to have come from distant family relationships as well as experienced more conflict within the family relationships [5]. One theory is that individuals from this background use humor as a coping mechanism, and thus become interested in comedy as a career [6].

Research describing the comedians’ self-esteem is nonexistent, but the authors of one article examined the rate of narcissism among comedians [7]. Narcissism is defined as the hatred of the true self, not the love for oneself; thus, strongly suggesting that narcissistic individuals would have negative or low self-esteem [8]. Young and Pinsky [7] found comedians to be second only to actors in being the most narcissistic. These findings suggested that comedians may have low self-esteem, although their actions may speak otherwise.

The overarching problem is that the research surrounding comedians is scarce. Given that there is minimal information on the comedian population, there are many areas to explore. Primarily, this qualitative study was designed to contribute to the overall body of research on the population of comedians, as well as add to the research on family dynamics and its relationship to the development of self-esteem. This study also included an exploration of areas of future research in regards to the comedian population.
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The goal of the study attempted to answer the question of whether or not the dynamics of the comedians’ families affected their psyche and their choice to become a comedian. In addition, this study addressed comedians’ use of illicit substances and alcohol and the reasons why. Lastly, this study was designed to explore the comedians’ self-esteem, self-images, and need for attention.

Family Dynamics & Humor as a Coping Mechanism

Family backgrounds of nationally-known comedians were studied and it was discovered that participants’ early lives were marked by isolation, suffering, and feelings of deprivation. Many of the participants stated they felt a pervasive sense of depression, which they admitted to battling throughout their entire lives [4]. These findings suggested that the effects from early family experiences and relationships can last into adulthood. Recent research has found that comedians often came from families where they felt misunderstood, discouraged, and did not have a strong relationship with their parents [1]. Individuals coming from conflictive backgrounds may find it difficult to manage the stress of their families. Humor and comedy have been a way for some individuals to make themselves feel better while also freeing themselves of anxieties. Freud believed that humor was a defense mechanism used to release anxiety and to express unpleasant feelings [9]. This may explain why many comedians use humor as a coping mechanism hoping to rid themselves of any negative feelings.

Family Relationships and Child Outcome

Child upbringing and family relationships often play a large role in shaping the personality characteristics of an individual [10-12]. The emotional relationship between parent and child was significantly related to the child’s personality characteristics [13]. Marital conflict, including partners who are hostile, withdrawn, detached, and displayed high conflict were associated with children who have poor peer interaction, conduct problems, poor health, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and attachment insecurity [14]. Conflict between parents, specifically low father involvement and high ridiculing humor from the mother were also seen to negatively impact the adolescent [10].

In subsequent studies, McHale and Rasmussen [11] found family relationships to also be significant in the child’s development. High hostility, competitiveness, low family harmony, and discrepancies in parenting were strongly correlated with the child behaving in an aggressive, controlling and uncooperative manner. Adolescent personality influences were seen to come from the parents and greatly impacted the adolescent’s future social relationships as well [15].

Bowlby described attachment as a lasting connection between two human beings. The earliest bond is formed between the parent and the child, and this bond has a tremendous impact on the child throughout his life. Researchers have found that children who have not been able to create a secure attachment with a parent or caregiver during infancy are significantly more likely to develop unhealthy relationships and attachments later in life [16]. Insecure attachments in childhood were determined to be detrimental to the individuals’ cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of future relationship quality. Additionally, unhealthy childhood attachments often led to more negative associations with general satisfaction in future relationships, connectedness, and conflict [17]. Feldman and Downey [18] provided evidence that individuals who were raised in troubled, distant, and rejecting environments were notably more likely to develop avoidant and ambivalent attachment patterns. Avoidant and ambivalent attachments are characterized by sensitivity, insecurity, and vulnerability to maltreatment when in any relationship or when trying to form any type of attachment to another person. These findings were also congruent with the Katz and Woodin [14] who concluded that hostile, withdrawn, detached, and high conflict parental figures were associated with attachment insecurity.

Narcissism and Self-Esteem

In relation to personality characteristics, one researcher explored the prevalence of narcissism in comedians. Narcissism is commonly misunderstood as an excess of love for oneself. However, in reality, narcissism involves an excess of hate for the true self and an obsession with the opinion of others. The narcissist is willing to give up his true self to become the type of person who strives to receive approval from others [8]. In other words, an individual with narcissistic personality traits possesses a low self-esteem and self-worth, although his actions may present differently. Young and Pinsky [7] evaluated the degree of narcissism among creative types (e.g., celebrities, writers,
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comedians) and found comedians to be the second highest to actors in being the most narcissistic.

Given that narcissism is a true dislike for oneself, it is certain that, although a narcissist may appear to be confident, he truly has low self-esteem and often negative self-views of himself. Researchers have studied how narcissism and self-esteem correlate. After interviewing narcissistic clients, Fischer [19] found that patients admitted that their relationship needs were never satisfied by their parents. In adulthood, all patients admitted they needed attention from others to sustain their need to feel special, and their own self-worth appeared to be determined by others admiration and approval. It was also found that patients had an inability to self-regulate their own sense of inner worth and were dependent on others for their self-esteem and self-confidence. Self-esteem was shown to be a significant factor for all of the narcissistic clients [19].

Fischer [19] explained the strong connection between narcissism and one’s self-esteem and self-worth. Given that the Young and Pinsky [7] study was accurate and reliable, comedians are at high risk for having low self-esteem and negative self-views of themselves.

Self-Esteem and Family Dynamics

Family dynamics not only help to shape one’s personality characteristics as previously stated, but they also contributed to one’s self-esteem, how negatively or positively one views himself. Tesser [20] studied family dynamics and how they contributed to the maintenance of self-esteem. Sibling identification, sibling friction, and the closeness of parent-child relationships were explored. It was concluded that closeness of the parents and siblings influenced whether one had low self-esteem. Individuals with no close family relationships were more likely to develop lower self-esteem [20], and children who felt neglected or rejected by their parents were more likely to have low self-esteem [21]. Baldwin and Hoffmann [22] added that shifts in life events and family cohesion greatly contribute to self-esteem as well.

Parker and Benson [23] investigated adolescent outcomes in relation to parental support and monitoring. It was found that greater self-esteem and lower risk behaviors were correlated with high parental support and parental monitoring [23]. In other words, the more the parents were involves and supported their children, the more likely the children were to develop higher levels of self-esteem.

Most recently, famous comedian and actor Robin Williams died due to suicide by asphyxiation. Fernandez [24] reported that Williams was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in 2013 with moderate symptoms, and he and his wife had been experiencing marital problems causing them to sleep in separate bedrooms. Williams also had previous problems with drugs and alcohol causing him to enter treatment programs, and he had been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, and was experiencing feelings of compulsion and paranoia. Williams was found with cuts on both his wrists, suggesting multiple attempts at suicide. When asked about Williams’ death, one reporter stated that Williams was unhappy, but he was like most comedians, he “lived in a dark place” [24]. Stewart and Thompson [25] conducted a study examining elite comedians compared to their relatively less funny counterparts. Elite comedians were determined based on subjective scores of being hilariously funny compared to relatively funny by study investigators. It was found that elite comedians (i.e., those deemed more funny) were at increased risk for a premature death. Mental health issues and personality characteristics that help shape their comedic talent and success may also explain their reduced longevity.

Researchers have neglected to investigate the rise in substance use and suicide rates among comedians. A career in comedy is the ninth highest for suicide [26], and it is shocking this would not be an immediate justification to conduct further research in this area. Countless comedians have been tragically addicted to substances and died as a result [27]. Researchers should be exploring comedians’ use of substances through any context (e.g., suicides, depression, social anxiety); yet, minimal articles exists.

This qualitative study explored the lives of comedians through in-depth interviews. The interview questions were structured to examine the comedians’ family dynamics, relationships with substances, and views of themselves, their self-esteem, and their need for attention. All queries were directed at determining if any correlations existed among current research, as well as adding to the literature on the comedian population.

Methods
Participants and Procedures

This research design was a qualitative study utilizing in-depth interviews. This study has been designed to examine the family dynamics of comedians as well as self-esteem and self-beliefs. This design was chosen primarily because qualitative research has been shown to be more effective in exploring areas in which more explanation needs to be given on a topic. The purpose of this study was to explore the comedians’ experiences with open-ended questions, allowing them the opportunity to elaborate on their answers, rather than forcing them to choose a yes or no response. All previous research surrounding comedians has been quantitative, where data about the participating comedians was collected and analyzed, and a hypothesis was proved or disproved. This qualitative study did not seek to prove a specific hypothesis. Rather, it investigated important themes and processes in an in-depth format.

This study was created to discover the personal histories and present struggles of professional male stand-up comedians. The study allowed the participants to express firsthand who they were and what life events they have encountered, as well as helped the participants create an identity for themselves and for the researcher. The participant was not considered a data statistic but a discreet human being with a story to tell.

This study utilized samples selected on the basis of their availability and accessibility. Male comedians were verbally asked to participate, and if unwilling or unavailable, were not used in the research study. The researcher approached the comedians by first explaining why they would be a fit for the study, and provided them with a brief description of the study. The comedians were then voluntarily given the opportunity to participate in the study. The participants were provided with the researcher’s contact information to set up a time and secure and confidential location to meet if they wished to participate. At the scheduled meeting, the participants were presented with the informed consent and the opportunity to withdraw from the study if they wished to do so.

The population for this study was taken from the region of Southern California. The participants were adult male stand-up comedians, consisting of five English-speaking males, aged 35 to 55. In addition, participants agreed to have their interviews audio recorded. If the participants declined to be audio recorded, they were not used in the research study. Audio recordings were collected from every interview to ensure objectivity and standardization.

The participating comedians were first given an informed consent to participate. Once the comedians understood the limits of confidentiality, their right to participate, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, they made the choice to sign the informed consent. The participants were given a copy of the informed consent which contained referrals in the instance of emotional discomfort resulting from the interview. If the participating comedians acknowledged and signed the informed consent, the researcher then began the interview. During the interview, all comedians were given an identification number, ensuring confidentiality.

Measure

The in-depth interview was created by the researcher and included original questions. The interview began by asking the comedians about their relationships and families, tapping into the aspects of their family dynamics. Questions about the relationships with their partners, children and close friends were explored. Relationships between the comedians and their mothers, fathers, and siblings were also examined. The interview questions took into consideration the situation of the any comedian’s lack of a mother, father, or siblings and explored these effects as well. The interview also included self-esteem and attention-seeking behavior questions and searched for how the comedians viewed their own self-esteem, what beliefs they had about themselves, and their attitudes towards receiving attention. Interview queries about the comedians’ beliefs of their anxieties about themselves in relation to others were also investigated. Items asking about the comedians’ feelings towards themselves explored their self-attitudes and views, and questions inquiring about the need for attention were addressed. All questions were phrased in a neutral, unprejudiced way as to not bias the comedians’ responses.
The in-depth interview was the main instrument used in this research study and examined a detailed perspective from the comedians’ point of view. All interviews were scheduled with participating comedians in advance and took place in private, confidential settings. Confidentiality was crucial for both the researcher and the participant, thus no interviews were performed in public location. For the purpose of this research study, the interviewer created an organized list of questions to effectively answer the purposed research questions. During the interview process, the researcher maintained professionalism and attempted to build genuine rapport with the comedians. The researcher completed hand written notes, and an audio recording was taken of the interview.

Interview tapes were transcribed by computer and placed in folders requiring a password to obtain. The transcribed data was used in collecting relevant and consistent themes and patterns throughout all interviews. The objective was to ultimately identify themes within the comedian interviews.

Results

The following results present a detailed description of selected professional male stand-up comedians’ reported family dynamics, views of their self-esteem, and reported self-beliefs. One significant theme, which is vital to discuss before outlining the data, is the inconsistencies the participating comedians demonstrated throughout the interviews. These inconsistencies suggest that the comedians may not have been completely honest in their responses. For example, one of the first questions in the interview asked about any current mental health issues and suggestions were given such as depression, anxiety, trouble sleeping, etc. One comedian initially stated “No, nothing” when asked this question, then reported at the end of the interview that he has anxiety and it is his primary struggle. Additional inconsistencies will be discussed throughout the results as well as in the discussion.

Childhood

Researchers suggested comedians’ childhood experiences were not favorable and they grew up in environments which were unsupportive [2,4,5]. However, the responses given by most comedians revealed otherwise. All except one comedian reported having a “good” childhood and could not identify one thing they wish they could change about their past. Without the researcher priming the comedians of a hypothesis, three of the five (60%) comedians made a specific point to say he was not the average stereotype and instead he had a good childhood.

One comedian reported his childhood as “good”. However, when he was later describing it, he reported that he witnessed physical abuse and his father developed a psychiatric condition which affected his entire family. Another comedian reported his childhood as “great”, later describing his father’s severe gambling addiction and living in poverty. He also added that he witnessed his parents fighting “a lot” and he spent time in a neighborhood gang.

A third comedian reported his childhood as pleasant but refused to share any significant details; although, he revealed witnessing verbal abuse and experiencing divorce. Another comedian stated he had a “happy childhood”, and then later explained that his parents divorced at the critical age of six, and he was verbally abused briefly by his stepfather. It is important to recognize that none of the comedians believed these experiences to be traumatic or made an impact on their lives, even when asked if they felt these events had changed them in any way.

Only one comedian admitted to an unfavorable childhood. He stated that growing up was “awful and horrible”. The researcher mentioned that other comedians reported having great childhoods and this comedian argued, “They’re lying. All comics have bad childhoods. Something was missing in their childhood. There’s always a story.” Furthermore, he talked about a fellow comedian, who was not interviewed during this research study, and how he had a particularly bad childhood as well, one of which the participating comedian could relate to. He talked about the struggles he faced growing up with an absent father and a mother who was addicted to drugs and alcohol. He reported both physical and emotional abuse and identified this period of his life as “torture”. He described witnessing severe violence and murder. When asked if he felt this had an impact on his adult mental health, he stated, “I think it really stripped away my emotions. I have a guard up. It’s like I’m completely detached. I can’t feel like a normal person. I also have a hard time forgiving when people make mistakes.”

Career Pressure

There is limited research presented on why or how one chooses to become a comedian; although it is hypothesized that comedians’ career choice was strongly influenced by their relationship with their parents [1]. However, it has been stated throughout research articles that comedians reported comedy as a career which they have always wanted to pursue [28]. As for the comedians who were interviewed, the data revealed them wanting to follow this career path their whole lives. Despite that all participating comedians stated they knew comedy was their calling; none of the comedians pursued this career path as their first choice. All participants settled in another job unrelated to comedy before finally starting their career as a stand-up comedian.

One comedian reported he was a law enforcement officer for more than 10 years before finally pursuing his lifelong dream. Another comedian discussed being highly invested in sports and striving to become a professional BMX racer. A third comedian admitted to wanting to pursue comedy in high school, but because of pressure from his father; he went to a four-year college for a business degree. This comedian reported dropping out of college senior year and never graduating to commit to comedy full time. Similarly, another comedian went to a four-year college to pursue a degree in law. However, this comedian reported graduating and working for two years before making the comedy scene his main priority and career. Lastly, one comedian stated he had no idea what he wanted to do with his life. After working multiple jobs and hearing others confirm that comedy was a career he should consider; this comedian settled into a career in comedy.

Marriage

Marriage appeared to be one of the least currently studied topics in regards to the comedian population. Although outdated, Richards [29] found that many comedians believed marriage to be a bleak and depressing experience that should be avoided at all costs. However, Janus [4] interviewed a large number of comedians and described them as usually devoted to marriage. Fisher and Fisher [2] talked briefly about marriage in their book *Pretend the world is funny and forever: A psychological analysis of comedians, clowns, and actors*, and portrayed the marriages comedians engage in to be mostly positive.

While analyzing the research data, it was found that marriage and attitudes about marriage seemed to be a common theme among the interviews. Not all comedians interviewed were divorced, but they had surprising comments to say about their feelings towards their marriages and their interactions with their spouses.

The first comedian interviewed stated that he had been married for 26 years and immediately added that, "being married sucks" and he feels they are “stuck” together because of their children. This comedian admitted he and his wife bickered often, and he referred to her as a “leech”, because she does not work. He also revealed he was not happy in the relationship. The second comedian declared he had been married for 11 years and described his relationship as “great”. However, he later stated that the two of them would exchange statements such as, “Fuck you, I hate you”, and they would constantly threaten each other of ending the relationship over a petty fight. He also expressed that she will often criticize him and make him feel inadequate.

The third comedian had reported he was recently divorced from an older woman who was also a comedian. He reported finances being one of the main topics of their arguments. The comedian reported conflict being the primary reason for their separation. The fourth comedian stated that he had been committed for 16 years before divorcing a woman he married spontaneously during a drunken night in Las Vegas. This comedian was able to truthfully express that this marriage, along with his subsequent romantic relationships, were unhealthy.

The final comedian reported he had never been married but he was in a relationship with another female comedian for the past year. Unfortunately, he was reluctant to share any information regarding intimate details of the relationship. Regardless, it is fascinating to note that this was the third comedian who discussed dating a fellow comedian. One comedian specifically discussed how common it was for comedians to date, not only other comedians, but also their groupies. In this comedian’s opinion, dating other comedians and groupies was the cause of failed relationships.
Worth Measured by Success

One of the most prevalent themes throughout the comedian interviews was their incredible need to measure their own self-worth by their career success, and none of them had trouble admitting it. One comedian began the interview by stating he is not as happy as he used to be, because he presently makes less money, causing him to feel unworthy. He also added he has never felt useless as a person until he became a comedian. A second comedian disclosed how disrespected he feels within the business and stated how important it is for him to be liked by other comedians. He revealed how he and another comedian often use a technique they refer to as “pulling rank” in which he can say certain things to others to prove his success and cause others to treat him in a more positive way. This comedian also admitted to measuring his self-worth through his success and agreed he was not happy with where he currently was in his career.

It is likely that the comedians were disinclined to share specific information that may have suggested low self-esteem. One comedian would not report on most of the self-esteem questions, and gave answers that were neither negative nor positive. However, this comedian still admitted to measuring his worth by his success in the business. Another comedian reported only positive answers and listed mostly good qualities about himself. It is important to note that he communicated that people refer to him as cocky, and he stated to the interviewer, “I’m perfect” when asked if he had any negative self-images of himself. Similarly, he also added that he feels the best about himself when his career is going great, and reported being significantly happy because he recently signed with a “big manager”.

Finally, one comedian undoubtedly had no problem discussing the negative aspects of his self-esteem. As expected, this comedian specified that he defines his own self-worth through the success of his career. This comedian divulged that he constantly looked for approval in others and had a “significant need” to be liked by others. He believed this to be an obvious response for all comedians given the profession. In addition, he added that he believed all comedians “have low self-esteem and no love. They need attention from strangers, which is creepy. They’re addicted to that. It’s like a high. If I can be on stage, killing it, to a hundred thousand people it would be better than sex.”

Attention-Seeking

Given the career and the business of comedy, it could be assumed that comedians are attention-seeking. Previous researchers have not yet examined attention-seeking qualities in comedians. However, considerations have been made in exploring comedians’ levels of shyness. It has been noted that comedians were assessed as being introverted (e.g., shy, quiet, unsocial) on the examination of the Big Five personality traits [6]. Additionally, higher levels of shyness were found in those comedians who used humor as a way to positively enhance their relationships with others [30].

During the comedian interviews, only one comedian openly admitted to seeking attention from others. He stated, “I look for attention from strangers [in regards to his stand-up career]. I’m telling jokes for a living. That’s pretty brutal. I obviously don’t feel fulfilled.” Although only one of five comedians blatantly revealed his need for attention, there were other themes that presented themselves throughout the interviews which may suggest attention-seeking behaviors in the other comedians.

One prominent theme presented itself during every interview with the comedians: overt bragging. It has been suggested that certain individuals brag about themselves and their accomplishments as a way to seek positive attention [31]. One of the comedians made an effort to boast every chance he could get by speaking of the many famous people he has met and worked with, all the names of which he mentioned to prove their worth. He described the credible jobs he had completed and was still planning on receiving, and he discussed the new manager he signed with and his desirability. Another comedian bragged about the several jobs he has previously booked and he distinctly stated, “I’ve done over 4,000 sets as a comedian. That’s another thing. Every comedian you interview will not have taken note on how many sets they have done or as many as me. No, I’m over 4,000.” As previously mentioned, one comedian admitted to specifically boasting about certain career achievements as a way to develop positive relationships with other individuals. This same comedian also reported not needing to seek attention from others.

Another common theme arose during the interviews. All the comedians discussed once being the “class clown” when they were in grade school. Butler [32] suggested that class-clown persona indicated a desire to be the center of attention. Furthermore, in a random sample of eight-grade students, one study compared non-clown classmates with students identified by peer nominations to be class clowns. Through the bases of teacher ratings and student self-esteem measures, class clowns were found to be seen by their teachers as significantly higher in attention-seeking behaviors [33].

The comedians spoke about how they were the “funny” kid in class. One comedian stated that he was known as the funniest child in class and when he went onto his career, he became the “funniest cop”. Another comedian talked about being the most humorous of all his friends and could make anyone laugh. Making others laugh was an obvious common theme among the comedians.

Often class-clown persona is associated with misbehavior in the classroom setting. One comedian reported specifically remembering getting into fights as a child and adolescent, and stated that he had “anger problems”. Another comedian revealed that he remembered being disobedient and getting into trouble at school frequently when he was a child. Cothran, Kulina, and Garrahy [34] found that students most often attributed their misbehavior to a need for attention.

External Self-Images

An unexpected but common theme seemed to present itself throughout the interviews. During the self-esteem section, comedians were asked if they had any negative self-images of themselves. Every comedian gave answers that reflected external characteristics such as, “I wish I was taller;” or “I need to lose weight,” or they did not have any negative things to say. None of the comedians offered an internal response such as, “I frustrate easily;” or “I wish I was not so anxious”. The researcher clearly asked the comedian to try to consider internal traits, giving examples such as being funny or angry, which were specifically chosen to describe characteristics each individual comedian had previously mentioned, the comedians still chose to pick an external characteristic to describe themselves.

Although this could seem typical, researchers previously examined how individuals viewed themselves. It was found that, generally speaking, most individuals were able to give internal perspectives on themselves and use terms such as being open to experience or unstable [35]. It is vital to note that five out of five (100%) of the comedians interviewed had a peculiarly difficult time identifying internal characteristics about themselves even when being primed by the researcher.

Discussion

This qualitative study added to the limited research surrounding the population of professional male stand-up comedians. It examined the family dynamics, substance use, and self-esteem using personal one-on-one interviews with the comedians. One of the main concerns was the inconsistencies which presented themselves throughout four of the five comedian interviews. These inconsistencies have been reflected throughout the results section. It is important to consider the possibility that the comedians were not being honest or were withholding substantial amounts of information, causing the results of the following data to be skewed.

Family Dynamics

The data for this study showed that comedians reported having little to no childhood trauma and grew up in stable and healthy family environments. It is questionable whether or not these data findings are inconsistent with previous research stating that comedians’ early childhood experiences were recognized as being neglectful, isolating, and disadvantaged, and that comedians experienced more conflict within their families [4,5]. Most comedians in this study proclaimed they had close, strong relationships with their parents. The answers the comedians gave in regards to their happiness about their childhoods and the details of their actual childhood experiences were conflicted. The comedians reported “good” childhoods, and then described traumas such as abuse, divorce, substance use, and neglect. Furthermore, although these comedians stated their relationships with their parents were favorable, all comedians defied their parents by choosing a career path which their parents did not want for them. This could be argued that disagreements or disrespect between the parent and child reflected an unhealthy connection or a relationship which was in fact not close.
Comedians also described the difficult relationships and unhealthy patterns they have with their spouses. Researchers have indicated that there are significant impacts on marriage and family for individuals who travel often [36,37]. The findings from one study supported the idea that traveling for extended periods of time negatively affected the traveler’s spouse and puts added strain on the family [36]. Professional comedians travel frequently to various parts of the world to perform sets, shows, and auditions. Because of their work, comedians often have to leave their spouses and loved ones for extended periods of time. This alone could cause strain in the relationships the comedians are involved in. The lifestyle of comedians could easily lead to tension in any relationship, and may be one explanation why comedians appeared to have unhealthy romantic relationships.

Self-Esteem

The need to feel worthy through the succession of their career was one of the most common themes the comedians openly admitted to throughout all interviews. Not only did the comedians feel unworthy but they felt unhappy if they were not in a certain spot in their career or a certain place in comedy business.

The data also examined if the comedians had a need for attention. All except one comedian stated that he does not need attention and does not look for attention from others. Despite that, all comedians admitted to being the class clown in school, which researchers have shown is a characteristic of attention-seeking behavior [32-33].

Another common theme that presented itself within the self-esteem section was the comedians’ difficulties identifying internal characteristics about themselves. When asked if they could identify self-images of themselves, the comedians were only able to name external qualities such as height and weight and unable to name internal qualities such as their potential to care for others or ability to anger easily.

Narcissism

Narcissism is a term which is commonly misunderstood, and thus, its definition needs to be revisited. As previously mentioned, Glickauf-Hughes and Wells [8] discussed narcissism as the excess hate for one’s true self and the obsession with the opinion of others. Narcissistic individuals often present as those who are grandiose, cocky, and self-centered. Despite this, one who is truly narcissistic possesses low self-esteem, shame, and guilt [38], and looks to other to build their self-worth and identity.

As previously mentioned, comedians were found to be the second highest in being the most narcissistic [7], which suggested that comedians may possess low levels of self-esteem. Fisher and Fisher [2] discovered in their research that professional comedians tended to have lower self-esteem and would say bad thing about themselves. However, the data presented in this research showed that the comedians in fact mostly reported positive attributes about themselves and avoided appearing negatively.

The data inferred that comedians hold a low level of self-esteem. It is likely that comedians may also possess characteristics of those who are narcissistic. The low self-esteem that narcissists feel is externally reflected in multiple characteristics. The narcissistic characteristics presented by Campbell, Hoffman, Campbell, and Marchisio [39] will be examined below in relation to the presentations exhibited by each comedian.

One of the most common features of individuals with narcissism is their display of egocentric behavior. All comedians engaged in constant bragging about themselves throughout the interviews. It can be argued that, because this was a self-report interview, the comedians should be discussing themselves; however, all the comedians overtly boasted about whom they have met in the industry, which included name-dropping as well as making an effort to express how they were the most desired comedian. The comedians spoke in grandiose language by defending how they were better than other comedians and/or had booked bigger and better jobs, and how they had more talented managers. This information given by the comedians was offered solely by them and was not a question asked of them during the interview.

Another narcissistic quality viewed during the interviews with the comedians was lack of consideration about the consequences of their actions. The data revealed that three out of the five comedians fit this criterion. One of the comedians openly admitted to getting in trouble with the law and sentenced to jail time. The other comedians reported having a severe gambling addiction, which caused them injury due to fights and the loss of money, friends, and jobs. Individuals with narcissism also are easy to anger, and three out of five comedians revealed having a strong temper. Many of the comedians stated that it was easy for them to hold grudges, and one directly admitted he had a problem forgiving others, which is a common trait of narcissistic individuals. Characteristics of narcissists also include using sex as a means for control. The data revealed that over half of the comedians reported using sex in an unhealthy manner; although control was not reported as the specific reason for misusing sex.

Individuals with narcissistic traits are able to rationalize easily and they can twist conversations by controlling their language to change a topic. This serves narcissists well given that these individuals do not like to share feelings or emotions. It was prevalent throughout the interviews with the comedians that they were not open to sharing their feelings, they easily deflected questions, and they limited the information they provided. This could offer a limitation to the study. It is possible that the comedians did not feel a strong level of rapport with the interviewer to disclose ample amounts of information. The comedians only met the interviewer once and one interview was conducted; thus, a secure and trusting environment may not have been established quickly.

Lastly, a hallmark attribute of individuals with narcissism is their ability to put on a front or a persona to impress others. Many of the comedians possessed this quality. Researchers argue whether or not the comedians’ onstage persona is their authentic personality or a façade used to hide their true self [6]. Bonello [40] suggested that comedians’ use their performances to help them create their own cognitive and affective representation of themselves and discover their identity through their onstage performance.

**Explanation of Behavior**

Some of these comedians came from disruptive homes where substance use was present. Most gave the impression that there was something missing in their childhood. Many comedians may have felt abandoned due to never knowing their father, a divorce, or not being comforted by the other parent during physical or emotional abuse. This would cause them to long for attention, experience distrustful relationships, and develop insecure attachments. Psychodynamic theory explains the significance of the infant’s need for the parent to provide self-cohesion and self-regulation. The development of the child’s identity requires a parent to provide the child with a sense of cohesion, consistency, and resilience. Identity and personality are developed through the child’s internalization of relationships. When a child is unable to develop a trusting and secure relationship with their parent or caregiver, it leaves the child with a fragile and damaged identity.

Most of the comedians have had childhoods, which suggest poor parental attachments where only their essential needs were being met. Because of this, they never had the opportunity to develop the self or their identity and discover who they are. The identity of each comedian has now been developed and determined by the responses and reactions of the audiences they perform for and the individuals they interact with. Those who can find happiness and accept themselves regardless of their current career status, reflect individuals who have been able to achieve positive self-esteem and self-worth through establishing a strong identity, which none of the comedians demonstrated.

It is likely that the comedians have an intense lack of insight where they do not sincerely know who they are. They lack the ability to identify their own internal characteristics. Their ideas of themselves have been formed simply by the way they believe others perceive them. They only know themselves as comedians and identify themselves as others see them, and others can only identify them as comedians, which is why all admitted to measuring their worth by their success. If they are failing as a comedian, then they are failing as a person. The comedian’s only know identity is expressed when he is in front of an audience, but when he no longer performs as a comedian, he will lose his identity and who he is as an individual.

Fisher and fisher [2] found that comedians had to take on a considerable amount of responsibility at a young age, and likely grew up in controlling environments with at least one non-nurturing parental figure. They offered an explanation for the link between early life experiences of the non-nurturing parent and the development of the comedian. It is suggested that the comedian's style of relating to people may mirror early childhood experiences where the child became an expert in reading his parent and “learns how to scan the world, looking for cues as to how to win approval and support” (p. 207). Many of the comedians appeared as if they never belonged in their family as a young child. Growing up, it was important for them to find a sense of belonging, and they found this within the world of comedy. All comedians interviewed were following unwanted career paths before being identified by others as funny. They were able to scan their environments and find a place where they could relate to others and find a sense of belonging in a community where they could fit in; a feeling they were never able to receive during childhood. The comic community gives the comedian a feeling of acceptance and identity.

Incongruences

Incongruent communication is a conversation pattern where that individual is giving conflicting messages on a verbal level and the listener is unsure of which response is correct. Fisher and Fisher [2] assessed comedians with interviews and inkblot tests and discovered that professional comedians seemed to put up a screen between themselves and the psychologists. Their responses to the inkblot tests reflected answers related to concealment, such as people wearing masks, creatures hiding, and mysterious objects. Considering this research finding in congruence with the inconsistencies found in the comedian interviews, there is a likelihood that the comedians may not have been completely forthright in the dialogue presented in this data.

Researchers have found that when individuals are asked to disclose personal information, it initially elicits shame and anxiety [41]. Comedians are considered public figures and could have wanted to present themselves in a more favorable light or as having an ideal life. Throughout the span of one’s life, all individuals have different degrees of conflict and hardships, because no one person’s life is perfect. Whether it was the shame felt when talking about the past or the need to be portrayed positively, the comedians had a difficult time discussing their personal histories and incongruent responses prevailed.

Previous research has suggested that morality may predict one’s intention to falsify information when being questioned. The researchers found that moral obligation and behavioral control were associated with participants failing to provide accurate responses [42]. Humor-oriented individuals have previously been shown to enjoy having a sense of control [43], and it was suggested that this was a result of the comedians growing up in controlling environments and mirroring the behaviors of the controlling parent. Researchers have found that comedians reported viewing themselves as controlling in the way they could dominate their audiences [2].

It should be noted that the comedians attempted to alter the researcher’s perception by censoring facts about themselves or concealing the truth. For many of them, they made an effort to make themselves appear as appealing as possible, even when their audience did not matter. If the comedians represented in this data reflected an honest and forthcoming population, then there would not have been an outright display of incongruences seen throughout the interviews. Thus far, only theory can predict why this type of behavior was exhibited.

Conclusion

Research on professional comedians is limited and it is apparent there are many avenues in pursuing further work. Enough evidence has not been gathered to support a strong argument that comedians are the product of distant and chaotic family backgrounds. It would also be important to examine comedians’ intentions to be honest in their responses and their motivations for not being sincere. Although the researcher’s experience was completely subjective, it was perceptible that the participating comedians gave the impression they were withholding details about their childhoods. Whether the comedians’ lack of sincerity was related to their need to keep their pasts a secret or their simple lack of rapport with the interviewer, this is an area to be further explored.

As previously mentioned, Stewart and Thompson [25] found that elite comedians are at increased risk for a premature death, and mental health issues and personality characteristics that help shape their comedic talent and success may explain their reduced longevity. With success also comes failure, and failure can be extremely difficult for some to process. The themes collected throughout the interviews confirmed that comedians measure their self-worth through their career success. If this is the case, imagine the anguish a professional comedian must face when he no longer holds any success. Further research should focus on looking at the precise reasons why elite comedians are at a greater risk for premature death, and consider how much is directly related to perceived success or failure.

No direct studies have been completed connecting comedians and attention-seeking behaviors. This study attempted to make association between childhood behaviors and made inferences about the comedians’ personality characteristics. Research should be done to find a correlation between the comedian population and a need for attention.

Young and Pinsky [7] were the only researchers to test comedians for narcissistic traits using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). The qualitative data revealed in the comedian interviews showed that the comedians possessed many characteristics similar to individuals with narcissism, although no generalization can be made with comedians and narcissism. Further research should continue to be done to see if there is a connection between comedians and narcissistic personality traits.

Lastly, there have been associations made between incongruent communication and a need for control [42], and it has been shown that humor-oriented individuals enjoy having a strong sense of control [43]. It would be important to further explore this area and assess both factors in relation to comedians. Further research could consider comedians’ eager need for control, as well as investigate how prevalent it is for comedians to be deceptive or present a false impression of themselves, as this could greatly influence future research with comedians.

Bibliography


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Inside the Lives of Male Stand-Up Comedians: How the Past Influences the Present


