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ABSTRACT

THE FUNCTION OF HUMOR IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

By

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This thesis presents data from an exploratory study of the impact of sense of humor and functional use of humor on romantic attraction. Questionnaire data were obtained from 58 romantically involved couples. Analyses were consistent with hypotheses concerning sex differences in humor usage and the importance of humor for relational satisfaction. Implications of these findings for established and developing relationships are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The interactions of romantic partners provide an abundance of information for researchers focusing on interpersonal issues. From initiation and escalation to de-escalation and dissolution, romantic relations offer countless opportunities for scholarly inquiry. For example, researchers have looked at love (Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, 1981), conflict (Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Redmun, 1983), the impact of social networks (Parks & Adelman, 1983), attraction (Berscheid & Walster, 1979), and self-disclosure (Levenger & Snoek 1972) in the context of romantic relationships. One topic which has received little attention in the relational literature, however, is humor. This paper presents a review of the humor literature as it relates to close relationships and proposes several hypotheses concerning humor and its use in romantic relationships. These hypotheses are then tested using questionnaire data.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Although humor is a pervasive phenomenon in our culture, it has received comparatively little research attention. In particular, little effort has been made toward broadly applying humor to practical situations. Perhaps the biggest road block to humor research has been the preoccupation with the development of reliable and valid measures of sense of humor. As recently as 1984, Martin and Lefcourt criticized extant measures of sense of humor as limited in focus and as ignoring the dimensions proposed by Eysenck (1972): (a) conformity--the degree of similarity between people's appreciation of humorous material, (b) quantity (appreciation)--how often a person laughs and smiles, and (c) production--the extent to which the person amuses others.

Those researchers who have assumed humor to be measured satisfactorily and have moved on to other concerns can generally be divided into two groups. The first group has concentrated primarily on correlating humor with personality traits such as trait anxiety (Blank, Tweedale, Cappelli, & Ryback, 1983), self-monitoring (Turner, 1980), and aggression, and need for approval (Hetherington & Wray, 1964). The second group has focused on isolated functions of humor, such as facilitating disclosure (Avant, 1982), buffering stress (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983), promoting

psychological well-being (Mannell & McMahon, 1982), managing impressions (Rosenfield, Giacalone, & Tedeschi, 1983), and subtly conveying malice (Burma, 1946). Collectively, these studies suggest that the functions of humor have wide applicability, yet few studies have taken such a global approach.

A study that does examine several humor functions was conducted by Graham (1988). Through a literature search and pilot study, Graham generated a list of 27 functions of humor in interpersonal relationships. These items loaded on three factors: (a) positive affect (e.g., entertainment), (b) expressiveness (e.g., expressing feelings), and (c) negative affect (e.g., demeaning and belittling others). Similar data were obtained by Marshall (1988). Respondents indicated functions of humor in their romantic relationships, producing a list of 15 unique functions. Data also suggested that males and females differ in the reasons they use humor. Females were significantly more likely to report using humor for fun and relaxation, teasing their partner, bonding, and laughing at their own or their partner's mistakes; whereas males reported that they were significantly more likely to use humor to cause conflicts or appear attractive to their partner. These two studies suggest that humor promotes a wide array of goals in interpersonal and romantic relationships and that significant sex differences exist in the purposes for which humor is employed.

Although the work of Graham and Marshall is provocative, many questions remain unanswered. In particular, is the use of humor in relationships constructive in the sense that it promotes relational satisfaction and allows couples to deal effectively with relational issues? Earlier research on isolated functions of humor suggests this hypothesis. The remainder of this chapter concentrates on reviewing research findings that posit behaviors persons must perform to develop and preserve intimate relationships. It is argued that humor facilitates the performance of many of these acts. As these comparisons are made, additional hypotheses are developed.

Phase 1: Getting Started and Staying Happy

When seeking to initiate a romantic relationship it is first necessary to attract a desirable partner. When individuals are asked to generate traits they seek in potential romantic partners, sense of humor is mentioned frequently (Sindberg, Roberts, & McClain, 1972). In the Marshall (1988) study, 71% of the respondents indicated that sense of humor was either a very desirable characteristic or the most important characteristic they look for when choosing partners.

Moreover, romantic partners who appreciate similar types of humor report greater liking, loving, and predisposition to marry (Murstein & Brust, 1985), indicating that a sense of humor similar to one's own contributes to interpersonal attraction. This leads to the hypothesis that

couples similar in their appreciation of and use of humor will report greater romantic attraction.

To examine this hypothesis, it is necessary to explicate what is meant by similarity. In the study by Murstein and Brust (1985), the authors fail to define similarity, but measure it by having partners rate a sample of 25 cartoons, comic strips, and jokes on 9-point scales ranging from "extremely funny" (9) to "just isn't funny" (1). The absolute difference between a couple's scores was taken as a measure of similarity, smaller scores indicating more similar senses of humor. This measure implies that partners are similar if they are equally amused by various types of humorous stimuli, but it overlooks potentially important situational factors. For example, a husband and wife may agree that, in an abstract sense, a particular joke is funny and both rate it highly, but if asked to rate the same joke if it were told at a funeral, their ratings might differ. The content of the humorous stimuli as well as the situation in which it is delivered combine to impact the degree to which partners are able to interact humorously without initiating humor-based conflict. Both of these factors will be considered when evaluating similarity in the current research, as will similarity in the partners' use of humor.

Another concern is whether actual similarity or perceived similarity contributes to relational satisfaction. One might anticipate that one partner's perceptions of the

other are in part the product of the individual's actual characteristics, but also contain error derived from a variety of other sources (e.g., personal preferences, stereotypes). Although the perception may be inaccurate, it should have a stronger impact on the perceiver than the partner's actual traits, given the simple causal string from actual similarity to perceived similarity to romantic attraction is correct. If this model is accurate, the similarity of a couple's evaluation of and use of humor will be less important to romantic attraction than the couple's perception of degree of similarity.

A final comparative issue concerns how important it is for partners to be aware of their partner's perceptions of humorous material. In studies of understanding in relationships, Sillars (1984) found that understanding (being able to predict a partner's response accurately) was related negatively to relational satisfaction. Understanding was computed as the partial correlation between the spouse's rating and the subject's estimate of the spouses rating, controlling for the subject's own rating. This result implies that respondents who are better able to predict the amusement ratings of their partners will have lower satisfaction scores. The counter-intuitive nature of this result suggests that Sillars' findings may be constrained by the fact that he was studying relational conflict. Conflict is likely to increase communication among the conflicting parties, and communication is, in

turn, likely to promote understanding. This understanding, however, is a clarification of the fact that the parties disagree. Whether this dynamic occurs outside of the context of relational conflict is questionable.

Just as communication is important for understanding conflict, it is also important for understanding a partner's sense of humor. The more the partner expresses amusement or says what she finds funny in the presence of the respondent, the more likely the respondent will be to predict the partner's responses accurately in the future. Additionally, awareness of a partner's responses to humor allows one to target her humorous messages toward those tastes, and avoid potential humor-related conflict. Whereas conflict typically weakens a relationship, humorous communication generally strengthens the relationship. It is thus hypothesized that greater understanding of humor between partners will be associated with greater romantic attraction.

Although it is tempting to hypothesize that couples will report greater romantic attraction and relational satisfaction if they are similar in their production of humor, research by Sindberg, Roberts, and McClain (1972) suggests that a complementary relationship, in which one partner serves as the generator and the other partner serves as the appreciator of humor, may prove more satisfying. Specifically, these researchers found that couples matched by a computer who had subsequently married were

significantly more complementary in their responses to the item "witty-placid" than were couples computer matched but unmarried. Those relationships in which partners indicated similarity in humor production were significantly less likely to marry than their complementary counterparts. Thus, it appears that although relationships that lack humor are not successful, neither are those in which both partners compete for the humor spotlight, such that couples in which both partners report similar levels of humor production report lower satisfaction than complementary couples.

Phase II: Taking Care of Business

Once prospective partners identify one another, they need to communicate their mutual interest and exchange personal information for the relationship to escalate. Berg and McQuinn (1986) note that the more couples self-disclose, the more likely they are to stay together. As Derlega (1984) notes, however, this disclosure of information is necessary but presents the possibility of several undesirable outcomes: (a) the rejection of self-concept, (b) the realization that the other person is not interested in having an intimate relationship, (c) the use of information to gain power in the relationship, (d) betrayal of information to others, (e) breaking of relational boundaries by disclosure to other network members, and (f) inequity derived from lack of reciprocal disclosure. Miller (1967) notes that humor reduces the risk of self-disclosure because disclosures that are not welcomed or reciprocated can be

dismissed as not being serious. Thus it is expected that couples who use humor to facilitate self-disclosure become more intimate more quickly than couples not using humor to serve this function.

Another chore necessary for relational stability is successful conflict management (Argyle & Henderson, 1985). Burma (1964) describes humor as a valuable conflict management device because of its applicability to a wide variety of subjects and its potential for conveying malice subtly. In addition, although Argyle and Henderson suggest tolerance, listening, and mutual accommodation in managing relational conflict, these strategies do not provide transitions from the somber overtones of conflict to the lighter post-resolution relational atmosphere. Humor can provide this transition. These arguments suggest that couples who use humor to deal with relational conflict will report greater relational harmony and satisfaction.

Alternatively, humor can serve an abrasive and conflict-initiating function (Martineau, 1972). Humor-based conflict typically occurs in one of two situations: (1) when a joke is taken "too far" by one member of the dyad and the other member reacts unfavorably, or (2) when one partner either delivers or appreciates a joke in a situation that the other partner deems inappropriate. It is hypothesized that couples who score similarly on the appreciation of humor measure experience less humor-based relational conflict and hence report greater satisfaction because they

are less susceptible to the aforementioned conflict situations.

In sum, it has been suggested that humor may serve a variety of functions in romantic relationships. Primarily, it should facilitate the performance of necessary relational development tasks, and allow the couple to deal with potentially difficult situations (e.g., conflict) in such a way as to reduce relational strain and enhance satisfaction of the dyad. The use of humor to accomplish these goals may depend on the compatibility of the partners' orientations toward humor. The frequency of humor use and the ends to which it is employed change as the relationship develops and the couple is faced with different tasks. For example, couples should report using humor to break the ice more frequently in the early stages of a relationship, whereas using humor for bonding should be infrequent until a relationship has become more intimate. The tests of the hypotheses generated in this review are detailed in the remainder of this thesis.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were 58 heterosexual romantic dyads in which both members were involved exclusively with the partner. They were recruited from introductory communication classes at a large midwestern university. One member of each couple was contacted during class time and asked to sign up for an experimental session convenient to both members of the dyad. Respondents received extra course credit in exchange for their participation.

Experimental Materials

A packet of questionnaires was provided to each participant. Each packet contained the four measures described below.

The sense of humor measure was composed of 14, 5-point Likert items measuring three factors of humor (see Table 1). Items included in the instrument, developed by the Marshall (1988), addressed each of Eysenck's dimensions of sense of humor: appreciation, conformity, and production of humor. A pretest using 253 respondents produced reliabilities (coefficient alphas) for these dimensions of .66, .81, and .77, respectively.

These results were then factor analyzed. As evidenced by the correlations between the factors shown in Table 2, the three dimensions are relatively independent. The

second-order unidimensionality of the model was tested by utilizing a forth factor measuring general orientation toward humor to make the model over-identified. Results suggest that the three factors are not second-order unidimensional (see Table 3), indicating that, while there may be three approaches to measuring sense of humor, these approaches are not addressing the same underlying concept. The internal consistency of the second-order structure was not altered appreciably with the deletion of the fourth general factor. Interestingly, the appreciation factor of this measure correlates .46 ($p < .01$) with Martin and Lefcourt's measure of appreciation of humor when corrected for attenuation due to error in measurement. While this correlation is statistically significant, it is quite low when one considers that the two measures are purported to measure the same construct. One possible explanation for this result is the focus of the two measures. The Martin and Lefcourt measure asks respondents to indicate how amused they would be in specific typically non-humorous situations (e.g., after failing a test or having hot soup dumped on them); whereas the Marshall measure asks respondents for their reactions to humorous situations (e.g., exposure to jokes or comedians). Although both measures have common appreciation content, the divergence in other content may account for the low correlation.

The functional uses measure was composed of two 15-item segments (see Table 4). In the first segment respondents

rated their own use of humor and in the second they evaluated their partner's use of humor. Strategies used in the measure were generated from a literature search, a pilot study conducted by Marshall (1988), and a pilot study conducted by Graham (1988). Respondents were asked to indicate how often they use a strategy, the frequency of use in an average month, and the usual outcome of the humor. Whether the respondent evaluated self or partner first was determined randomly.

The romantic attraction measure was developed by Bessell (1984), and was adopted because it compares the responses of romantic couples. The scale contains 60 items and is scored on a 5-point Likert format. Bessell reports a predictive accuracy of 90% in using the scale with students and with couples in relational counseling.

The appreciation of humorous stimuli measure was designed to assess both the content and situational factors influencing appreciation of humor and to determine the extent to which partners are similar in their perceptions about humorous stimuli. The scale contains 12 jokes, puns, and cartoons. Each of the first 10 items are followed by two questions, one asking the respondent to evaluate how funny she finds the item and the other how funny she believes her partner will find it. The final two items are followed by a series of questions that ask the respondent to indicate how funny she would find the item in a variety of different situations (at a party, at a funeral, in class, at

a family dinner, and in church). The respondent then makes similar predictions about her partner. This measure permits examination of understanding as well as similarity.

Procedures

Participating couples reported to the testing room in groups of 20 to 30. They were greeted by an E and instructed to read and complete research consent forms, after which the E read the following statement:

> Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. We are interested in investigating the role of humor in romantic relationships. Today we will be asking each of you to complete a series of questionnaires about the role of humor in your relationship. Each of you will be completing the questionnaires separately. At no time will we reveal any of your responses to your partner, so feel free to be as honest as you possibly can. At this time, we will distribute the packet to each of you. Be sure that, if you are male, you receive a blue packet and, if you are female, you receive a pink packet.

At this time males and females were taken to separate quadrants of the research room and a sliding divider was positioned between the two groups. Participants then completed the questionnaire packet.

After all participants completed the questionnaire, males and females were reunited and the E read the following statement:

As we told you earlier, we are interested in the role of humor in romantic relationships. The questionnaires you just filled out should give us important information about the functions that humor serves. We will be comparing your responses to the responses of other participants and to the responses of your partner. Hopefully this information will help us to determine just how important humor is in a romantic relationship. Are there any questions?

At this time the E answered any questions, and dismissed the participants.

RESULTS

Quality of Measures. Two of the measures used in this research were intended to be summed, either in their entirety (the romantic attraction measure) or by their component sub-scales (the production, appreciation, and conformity dimensions of the sense of humor measure). These scales were submitted to confirmatory factor analysis to check the factor structure. Results of these analyses are reported below.

The original 60-item measure of romantic attraction was tested for unidimensionality. Examination of factor loadings, internal consistency, and parallelism, as well as deletion of items that many participants noted were difficult to answer because of their ambiguity, yielded a final 40-item measure of romantic attraction. Romantic attraction scores ranged from 40 to 112 (mean = 66.22, s.d. = 16.55). Coefficient alpha for the scale was .95.

The 14-item measure of sense of humor was subjected to confirmatory factor analysis using the hypothesized three-factor structure. Examination of factor loadings, internal consistency and parallelism resulted in the deletion of two items, item one from the conformity subscale and item three from the production subscale. Conformity scores ranged from 5 to 15 (mean = 9.65, s.d. = 2.47), production scores from 5 to 15 (mean = 9.88, s.d. = 2.27), and appreciation scores

ranged from 6 to 21 (mean = 11.22, s.d. = 2.78). Obtained coefficient alphas for the conformity, appreciation, and production dimensions, respectively, were .86, .68, and .73. Factor intercorrelations are shown in Table 4.

The two remaining scales (functional use of humor and appreciation of humorous stimuli) were intended to be analyzed using item-by-item comparisons for members of each dyad. Thus the important question was not one of scale reliability but rather the reliability of summing the item discrepancy scores for all items in a component subscale. This process is detailed below for each of three comparisons: similarity, perceived similarity, and understanding. Separate analyses were conducted for the functional use measure, the general joke appreciation measure, and the situational joke appreciation measure.

Similarity was measured as the comparison of one partner's response to a given item with the other partner's response to the same item. All responses were converted to z-scores, and similarity was computed as the absolute value of the discrepancy between the two z-scores, higher values indicating lower similarity. These scores were then summed to create a 16-item measure of similarity in functional use, a 10-item measure of similarity of humor appreciation, and a 10-item measure of similarity in situational humor appreciation. Coefficient alphas for these measures were .65, .28, and .34, respectively.

Perceived similarity was measured as the comparison between one's response to an item and one's prediction of partner's response to the same item. Perceived similarity was computed as the absolute value of the discrepancy between the two z-scores, higher values indicating lower levels of perceived similarity. These scores were then summed to create a 16-item measure of perceived similarity in functional use, a 10-item measure of perceived similarity of humor appreciation, and a 10-item measure of perceived similarity in situational humor appreciation. Coefficient alphas for these measures were .75, .66, and .83, respectively.

Sillars (1984) suggests that understanding be assessed by the partial correlation of one partner's prediction of the second partner's response to a given item with the second partner's actual response to that item, controlling for the former's own response. Sillars suggests that this method eliminates the possibility of a couple obtaining an inflated understanding score because they are highly similar.

Conceptually, Sillars is testing a model wherein he postulates that there are two correlated variables (own attitude and other's attitude) that are simultaneous causes of a third variable (own prediction of other's attitude). Statistically, he attempts to isolate the impact of other's attitude on own prediction of other's attitude by computing a partial correlation. However, as Pedhazur (1982, p. 110-

111) notes, for such models, "partial correlation is inappropriate, as it may result in partialing too much of the relation." The more appropriate statistic for testing such models is the path coefficient, or beta weight, for the desired relationship. The understanding measure used in this study avoids the problem of partialing too much of the relationship while addressing Sillars' concern that similarity may be inflating understanding scores.

Understanding was computed as the absolute value of the discrepancy between the z-score for the first partner's prediction of the second partner's reaction and the z-score of the second partner's actual reaction. Separate understanding scores were computed for males and females. Perceived similarity scores were then summed to create a male and female version of the 16-item measure of understanding of functional use, a 10-item measure of understanding of humor appreciation, and a 10-item measure of understanding of situational humor appreciation. Coefficient alphas for the female measures were .57, .44, and .60, respectively, while coefficient alphas for the male measures were .73, .49, and .47, respectively.

To address Sillars' concern that similarity scores may be inflating understanding scores, multiple regression was used with self rating and predicted other rating as the independent variables and actual other rating as the dependent variable. For similarity to be responsible for an obtained understanding score, the beta weight for the

regression of actual other rating onto predicted other rating would be significant, while the partial correlation of predicted other rating with actual other rating when controlling for self rating would be zero. Of the 72 understanding beta weights, 12 were significant at the .05 level (six functional usage, four joke appreciation, and two situational joke appreciation weights). Of the 12 significant beta weights, two did not produce significant partial correlations. Both of these were items tapping male understanding of female joke appreciation (betas = .29 and .36, partials = .27 and .27, respectively). These results suggest that, while understanding was not particularly prevalent, that understanding which did exist was not primarily due to similarity.

Sex Differences

T-tests for independent groups were conducted to determine if males and females differed in sense of humor and functional use of humor. Means, standard deviations, and t-values for all comparisons are shown in Table 7. Analysis of the sense of humor sub-scales revealed a significant tendency for males to produce more humor than females [$t(114) = -1.99$, $p < .05$, $r = -.18$]. Females showed a tendency to be more conforming in their sense of humor than males, although this difference failed to reach statistical significance at the .05 level [($t(114) = 1.86$, $p < .07$, $r = .17$]. There was no sex difference in appreciation for humor [$t(114) = .13$, n.s., $r = .01$].

Significant sex differences were obtained for a number of the functional uses of humor. Males were significantly more likely than females to use humor to talk about sensitive topics [$t(112) = 2.00$, $p < .05$, $r = .19$], to break the ice [$t(114) = 2.30$, $p < .05$, $r = .21$], and to avoid talking about sensitive topics [$t(114) = 2.18$, $p < .05$, $r = .20$]. Males also showed a tendency to use humor more for cheering up their partners [$t(113) = 1.95$, $p < .06$, $r = .18$] and for causing conflict in the relationship [$t(114) = 1.93$, $p < .06$, $r = .18$]. Females showed a tendency to use humor more for bonding purposes than males [$t(113) = -1.82$, $p < .08$, $r = -.17$]. No other comparisons approached statistical significance.

Functional Use and Sense of Humor

The focus of these analyses was whether different dimensions of sense of humor were more closely related to using humor to accomplish certain goals. Hence, correlations were computed among the three dimensions of sense of humor and the 16 functional uses. Using the reliabilities of the sense of humor sub-scales, these correlations were then corrected for attenuation due to error in measurement. Results suggested that the production dimension of humor was the most important for determining functional use. Individuals high in production were significantly more likely to use humor to pick on their partners, settle conflicts, relieve stress, have fun, cheer up their partners, express affection, break the ice, laugh at

problems and mistakes, express feelings, and tease their partners (see Table 8). Individuals high in appreciation were significantly more likely to use humor to relieve stress, have fun, and cheer up their partners. Individuals high in conformity were significantly less likely to use humor to pick on their partners or to stimulate humor-based conflict in their relationships.

Stages of Development and Functional Use

The questionnaire contained four measures of relational development: a) a categorization of the relationship as dating casually, dating seriously, engaged, or married; b) number of months they had known one another; c) number of months they had been romantically involved; and d) an indication of how intimate their current relationship was in comparison to relationships in which they had previously been involved. These four measures were then correlated with the functional uses of humor.

Results indicated few significant changes in humor across relational stages (see Table 9). As relationships progressed from casual dating to marriage, couples became significantly less likely to use humor to break the ice ($r = -.25$, $p < .01$). The longer a relationship progressed, the less likely the couple became to use humor for fun and enjoyment ($r = -.22$, $p < .05$) and the more likely the couple became to use humor to insult one another ($r = .25$, $p < .01$). The last relationship was even more pronounced when the number of months the couple had known one another was

considered ($r = .31$, $p < .001$). Finally, as the relative intimacy of the relationship increased, couples became less likely to report that their use of humor caused conflict in their relationships ($r = -.19$, $p < .05$).

Examination of scatterplots revealed nonlinear tendencies for some comparisons. In these instances, nonlinear functions were fit to the data and correlations were recomputed accordingly. A quadratic function provided the best fit for the use of humor to express feelings as a function of months involved ($r = .25$, $p < .01$), suggesting that use of humor to accomplish this goal initially increases with length of involvement, but later decreases. A cubic function provided the best fit for the use of humor to cause conflict as a function of months involved ($r = .30$, $p < .01$), suggesting that humor-based conflict, while initially rare, increases rapidly for a period, levels off, and then increases rapidly again. This pattern was also consistent with the data on use of humor to cause conflict as a function of months known ($r = .23$, $p < .01$).

Impact of Similarity

To determine whether having similar appreciation for humor and using humor similarly were associated with greater romantic attraction, the discrepancy measures of functional use, joke appreciation, and situational joke appreciation were correlated with romantic attraction. The original correlations and the correlations corrected for attenuation due to error in measurement are shown in Table 10. Results

indicated that only joke discrepancy correlated significantly with romantic attraction ($r = .30$, $p < .05$), suggesting that couples who were dissimilar in their evaluation of the humorous material were significantly less romantically attracted to one another than their more similar counterparts.

Impact of Perceived Similarity

Perceived discrepancies in functional use of humor, joke appreciation, and situational joke appreciation were correlated with romantic attraction, and the original correlations and the correlations corrected for attenuation due to error in measurement are shown in Table 11. Results indicated that none of the perceived discrepancy measures correlated significantly with romantic attraction, although the correlation with perceived discrepancy in situational joke appreciation did approach significance ($r = .17$, $p < .09$), suggesting that individuals who perceived that their partners would react differently tended to express lower romantic attraction. Additionally, a significant correlation was obtained between perceived discrepancy in joke appreciation and perceived discrepancy in situational joke appreciation ($r = .57$, $p < .001$), suggesting that participants had generalized perceptions of similarity that covered both joke appreciation and situational joke appreciation.

Impact of Understanding

Understanding was analyzed separately for males and females and all discrepancy measures were correlated with indicators of male and female romantic attraction. The original correlations and correlations corrected for attenuation due to error in measurement are shown in Table 12.

The analysis produced significant correlations between the male and female scores for functional usage discrepancy ($r = .41$, $p < .01$), joke appreciation discrepancy ($r = .70$, $p < .001$), situational joke appreciation discrepancy ($r = .75$, $p < .001$), and romantic attraction ($r = .41$, $p < .01$), suggesting that the level of romantic attraction and understanding is typically shared in romantic relationships. In addition, male understanding of female joke appreciation correlated significantly with female romantic attraction ($r = .28$, $p < .05$), suggesting that females are happier in relationships where their partner can more accurately predict how amused they will be by particular jokes. Finally, female understanding of male joke appreciation correlated significantly with female understanding of male situational joke appreciation ($r = .28$, $p < .05$), suggesting that females who are in tune with their partner's joke appreciation are more accurate predictors of how this appreciation will be affected by situational variations.

Complementarity vs. Similarity

The key comparison in this analysis was between couples who were similar in their production of humor (either both high

or both low), and couples who were complementary in their production of humor (either the male was a high producer or the female was a high producer, but not both). At issue was whether or not romantic attraction varied with the production composition of the relationship. To conduct this analysis, a median split was taken for male and female production (the median for both groups was 10). A 2 x 2 table was then generated to represent the mean romantic attraction in the four possible couple production scenarios (see Table 13).

The data were then subjected to ANOVA. The initial analysis produced a sum of squares for the main effect of 990.99 with three degrees of freedom, resulting in an insignificant F-value of 2.10 ($p > .05$). An effect-coded model was then generated using contrasts of -1, 0, 0, and +1. This analysis produced a sum of squares of 811.08 with one degree of freedom, resulting in a significant F-value of 5.14 ($p < .05$). These results suggest that the couples reporting the greatest romantic attraction are those in complementary relationships wherein the male is a high producer of humor but the female is not. In contrast, the couples reporting the least romantic attraction are those in similar relationships wherein both partners are high producers. Complementary relationships wherein the female is a high producer but the male is not, and similar relationships where neither partner is a high producer make up the middle ground of romantic attraction.

DISCUSSION

This experiment sought to broaden the study of humor in romantic relationships beyond the examination of isolated functions. The results suggest that such an approach is fruitful and that the role of humor in romantic relationships is worthy of further study. The data were consistent with hypothesized differences in the tendency of males and females to use humor to serve various functions in their relationships. Males were significantly more likely to use humor to talk about sensitive topics, to break the ice, and to avoid talking about sensitive topics than were women. Males also tended to see humor as a source of relational conflict and as a technique for cheering up their partners more than females; whereas females tended to use humor for bonding purposes more than males. Although these differences varied across several dimensions of relational interaction, males appeared to show an overall preference for using humor to control when communication took place and the content of that communication, either through making initiation of communication easier or by allowing males to address sensitive issues when they were motivated to do so while avoiding these issues under other circumstances. Bonding, the only humor function that females reported using significantly more than males, is focused on communicating relational closeness, suggesting that females use humor more

to express feeling rather than dictate the ebb and flow of relational communication.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that couples who were similar in their appreciation of humor would experience greater romantic attraction. The data pertinent to this hypothesis were mixed. Partners reporting similar joke appreciation also reporting higher romantic attraction; however, similarity in situational joke appreciation was not significantly associated with romantic attraction. These results suggest that sharing in the appreciation of humor contributes to romantic attraction, perhaps by heightening the enjoyment the couple experiences together. Nevertheless, the results indicate tolerance for situational differences in humor appreciation, at least to the extent that such differences do not produce conflict sufficient to lower overall romantic attraction.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that perceived similarity is a more important determinant of romantic attraction than actual similarity. The data were not consistent with this hypothesis. Whereas similarity in joke appreciation correlated significantly with romantic attraction, none of the perceived similarity measures correlated significantly with romantic attraction, although the correlation with situational joke appreciation approached significance. Furthermore these correlations did not differ significantly from one another (largest $t = 1.53$, n.s.). One possible conclusion is that actual similarity is slightly more

important than perceived similarity for joke appreciation (r = .30 and .08, respectively); whereas, perceived similarity is slightly more important than actual similarity for situational joke appreciation (r = .17 and .04, respectively).

One possible extension of this explanation is that similarity in joke appreciation contributes to romantic attraction on a daily basis, and thus perceptions of similarity take on reduced importance. In contrast, the situational joke appreciation measure may have addressed situations that the couple had not experienced together. In such instances, each partner's perceptions of how the other partner would react must, by necessity, serve as the only determinant of romantic attraction. It is equally plausible that, in such ambiguous situations, partners use their level of romantic attraction as a basis for predicting their partners' responses. Thus, highly romantically attracted couples may use their mutual attraction to inflate their predictions of similarity in joke evaluations.

Hypothesis 4 proposed that as understanding increases, romantic attraction increases. The data pertinent to this hypothesis were mixed. Females reported significantly greater romantic attraction when their partners understood their level of joke appreciation. Understanding of functional use and situational joke appreciation did not contribute significantly to female romantic attraction, nor did any of the understanding measures correlate

significantly with male romantic attraction. Although the impact of understanding is smaller than anticipated, the results are consistent with other findings. In particular, the data suggested a significant tendency for males to produce more humor than females. To the extent that this production can be tailored through understanding to maximize the amusement of the female while minimizing humor-based conflict, it is not surprising that male understanding of female joke appreciation significantly impacted female romantic attraction. Because females produce less humor on average, the importance of understanding what their partners will find amusing is diminished.

Hypothesis 5 proposed that, in the realm of relational humor, more is not always better. Specifically, it was hypothesized that complementary couples in which only one partner was a high humor producer would experience greater romantic attraction than would similar couples in which both partners were either high producers or low producers. Results revealed that complementary couples in which the male was a high producer experienced the greatest romantic attraction whereas similar couples in which both partners were high producers experienced the least romantic attraction. Complementary couples with the female as the high producer, and similar couples in which neither partner was a high producer, attained similar and moderate levels of romantic attraction.

One possible interpretation of these findings is that complementary relationships are, by and large, happier. For some reason (e.g., because of the "frailty" of the male ego or because women just aren't funny) relationships in which the female is the predominant humor producer are less satisfying than those in which the male is the predominant producer. Perhaps more interesting, relationships in which both partners are high producers, and may in effect vie for the humor spotlight, are the least satisfying. In these relationships humor may take on too big of a role in the relationship, such that the partners are "never serious about anything" and thereby avoid dealing with relational issues that require serious discussion.

In addition to providing tests of these hypotheses, the data also provided information on changes in functional use across the development of the relationship. As anticipated, the use of humor to break the ice was more prevalent in casual dating relationships than in relationships categorized as engaged or married. Furthermore, the longer couples knew one another and were romantically involved, the more they tended to use humor to insult one another, perhaps reflecting increased relational comfort and freedom that often accompanies longer relationships. Finally, couples who saw their relationships as relatively intimate in comparison to other relationships in which they had been involved tended to see humor less as a source of conflict in their relationship. Overall, these results may suggest the

stability of many of the humor functions over time or may simply be indicative of the restriction in the range of relationships studied.

A final finding reported in the results section addresses whether certain dimensions of sense of humor (appreciation, production, or conformity) are associated with the use of humor to serve certain functions. Findings suggest that, not surprisingly, the production dimension is associated significantly with the use of humor to serve 10 of the 16 functions. Using humor to discuss sensitive topics, to avoid discussing sensitive topics, to insult one's partner, to make fun of people outside the relationship, and to bond with one's partner were the five functions not correlated significantly with any dimension of sense of humor. It appears that an individual's use of humor to accomplish these goals is not an outgrowth of sense of humor and that such goals are pursued equally by individuals regardless of their level of appreciation, production, or conformity.

CONCLUSION

As is common in many exploratory investigations, the current research generates many more questions than it answers. The results of this study are encouraging in that they support the view of humor as important in romantic relationships. Future research should go beyond the demonstration of this importance to search for and empirically evaluate explanations that can account for these findings.

APPENDIX

Table 1

Three-Factor Measure of Sense of Humor

(* indicates item is reverse coded, # indicates item was deleted from final measure)

Appreciation of Humor

1.* I rarely laugh at jokes I hear.

2. I think that most comedians are very entertaining.

3. Hearing a good joke brightens my whole day.

4.* I'm often not amused when someone tells me a joke.

5.* On the average, I prefer serious programs to comedies.

Conformity of Sense of Humor

6. I think my sense of humor is similar to the sense of humor of most people.

7.* I think my sense of humor is different from most people's.

8.* I have an unusual sense of humor.

9.# I rarely find that I laugh at things that other people don't find funny.

Production of Humor

10. I often make comments to amuse other people.

11. I often make up jokes to tell other people.

12. I am very good at making other people laugh.

13. People consider me to be a funny person.

14*# I rarely repeat jokes that other people tell me.

Table 2

Pretest Factor Intercorrelations and Reliability

(upper triangle contains corrected correlations)

	Apprec.	Conformity	Production	Alpha
Apprec.	1.00	.22	.75	.66
Conformity	.16	1.00	-.37	.81
Production	.53	-.29	1.00	.77

Table 3

Pretest Second Order Unidimensionality

(lower triangle = obtained, upper triangle = predicted)

	Apprec.	Conformity	Production	Residual
Apprec.	1.00	.36	.34	-.14(AC)
Conformity	.22	1.00	.50	.41(AP)
Production	.75	-.37	1.00	-.13(CP)
F loading	.50	.72	.68	

Table 4

Functional Use of Humor Questionnaire

(all items have the format shown for item one)

1.a) How often do you use humor to pick on your partner?

never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 constantly

b) How many times in the average month do you use humor to pick on your partner? _____ times.

c) How does your using humor in this way affect the relationship?

makes it much stronger 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 makes it much weaker

2. How often do you use humor to settle conflicts in your relationship?

3. How often do you use humor to relieve stress in your relationship? (e.g., during exams or after a fight)

4. How often do you use humor for fun and enjoyment in your relationship?

5. How often do you use humor to cheer up your partner?

6. How often do you use humor to express affection?

7. How often do you use humor to talk about sensitive topics? (e.g., sex)

8. How often do you use humor to break the ice or silence?

9. How often does your use of humor cause conflict in your relationship?

10. How often do you use humor to laugh at problems and mistakes that occur in your relationship?

11. How often do you use humor to avoid talking about sensitive topics? (e.g., sex, feelings)

Table 4 (cont.)

12. How often do you use humor for bonding with your partner? (i.e, using funny pet names)

13. When you are with your partner, how often do you use humor to make fun of people outside your relationship?

14. How often do you use humor to insult your partner?

15. How often do you use humor to express your feelings to your partner?

16. How often do you use humor to tease your partner?

Items on Part II of this questionnaire ask about identical topics but require subjects to report the degree to which their partner uses humor for these functions.

Table 5

Bessell's Romantic Attraction Questionnaire

(# indicates item was deleted from final measure)

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1. I feel very lucky to know this person.

2.# I felt like there was something unusual and very special between us at our very first meeting.

3. We often have a very good time even when we are not doing anything special.

4. I miss this person a great deal when we are apart.

5. This person's approval is very important to me.

6. I get a thrill from just looking at this person.

7. I want this relationship to be permanent.

8. I am happiest when we are together.

9. Being with this person is far more important to me than where we are or what we are doing.

10.# I enjoy this person in many ways other than sharing affection.

11. I feel that we were meant for each other.

12. My partner is a beautiful person.

13. I enjoy planning things that we will be doing together.

14.# I am curious about why and how much this person is interested in me.

15.# I want our attraction to be mutual.

16. I am no longer looking for another romantic partner.

17. I get something very special from this person that I do not experience with anyone else.

18.# I am willing to keep this relationship even if my partner makes no changes.

19.# I love to surprise this person with a card or gift.

Table 5 (cont.)

20.# I can forgive this person almost instantly.

21. I have a feeling of excitement when we are together.

22. I want to be very special in this person's life.

23. I would have to search a long time to find someone I enjoy so much and so consistently.

24. Physical affection with this person is very different and very special.

25. This person is a great companion.

26. My partner has an attractive personality.

27. I like doing things for this person.

28. Our relationship has something that is splendid and very hard to find.

29. This person is often on my mind.

30. There is something almost mystical in our eye-to-eye contact.

31. I experience unusual and pleasantly exciting feelings when I am with this person.

32.# I am very willing to continue this relationship in spite of all the unpleasantness.

33. When there are tasks to be done, I prefer that we do them together.

34.# I have made efforts to change in order to be more pleasing to my partner.

35. I enjoy discussing a wide variety of topics with this person.

36. This is my most favorite person to be with.

37. We have something that could be described as spiritual intimacy.

38. I get a very pleasant sensation when I meet this person unexpectedly.

39. I would become jealous if my partner became strongly interested in another person.

Table 5 (cont.)

40. I am, or could easily become, totally committed to this relationship.

41. I enjoy being with this person even when we are silent.

42.# I want this person to respect me for my abilities.

43. When things are going well between us, I have a feeling of completeness and well-being.

44.# It means a lot to me when my partner does something special for me.

45.# At times I wish my partner would know me and accept me completely.

46.# I would like to know what my partner finds attractive about me.

47.# I like to touch and be touched by this person.

48.# I am attracted in a way that others do not understand.

49. There are so many things I wish we could do together, if only there was enough time.

50.# If criticized by others, I would defend my partner.

51.# I am quite willing to do things for my partner without having to know the reason why.

52. I have a protective interest about my partner's well-being.

53. The pleasure I get from this relationship is well worth the price I pay.

54. This person has a great deal of influence over me.

55.# I often wonder what my partner is thinking.

56.# It's hard for me to say no to this person.

57.# I like to think up special surprises for my partner.

58. I am happy when this person is pleased with me.

59. This relationship is my strongest interest in life.

60. This is the person with whom I would prefer to grow old.

Table 6

Humor Factor Intercorrelations and Reliability

(upper triangle contains corrected correlations)

	Apprec.	Conformity	Production	Alpha
Apprec.	1.00	.09	.41	.68
Conformity	.07	1.00	-.46	.86
Production	.29	-.36	1.00	.73

Table 7

Sex Differences in Humor & Functional Use

(* indicates t-value is significant at .05 level, 113 df)

Dimension	Males		Females		t	r
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Conformity	10.07	2.21	9.22	2.66	1.86	.17
Production	9.46	2.18	10.29	2.30	-1.99*	-.18
Appreciation	11.26	2.21	11.19	3.27	.13	.01
Pick On Partner	4.96	1.49	4.60	1.63	1.24	.12
Settle Conflicts	3.89	1.78	3.55	.74	1.05	.10
Relieve Stress	5.00	1.69	4.95	1.61	.17	.02
Have Fun	6.04	1.13	5.93	1.17	.48	.05
Cheer Up Partner	5.77	1.20	5.31	1.34	1.95	.18
Show Affection	4.67	1.59	4.78	1.88	-.34	-.03
Discuss Topics	4.16	1.66	3.49	1.89	2.00*	.19
Break the Ice	4.91	1.44	4.24	1.70	2.30*	.21
Cause Conflict	3.08	1.75	2.52	1.41	1.93	.18
Laugh at Problems	5.07	1.34	4.84	1.51	.85	.08
Avoid Sens. Topics	3.26	1.91	2.53	1.65	2.18*	.20
Bonding	5.03	1.74	5.56	1.34	-1.82	-.17
Make Fun of Others	4.76	1.77	4.53	1.83	.69	.06
Insult Partner	2.67	1.77	2.89	1.84	-.66	-.06
Express Feelings	4.10	1.66	3.61	1.67	1.57	.15
Tease Partner	5.47	1.22	5.41	1.58	.20	.02

Table 8

Correlations: Humor and Functional Use

(* indicates correlation is significant at the .05 level with 113 degrees of freedom)

	Original Correlations			Corrected Correlations		
	Conf.	Pro.	App.	Conf.	Pro.	App.
Pick On	.24*	-.31*	-.09	.26*	-.36*	-.11
Settle	.01	-.30*	-.08	.01	-.35*	-.10
Stress	.08	-.24*	-.30*	.09	-.28*	-.37*
Fun	.17	-.24*	-.20*	.18	-.28*	-.24*
Cheer	.17	-.20*	-.22*	.18	-.24*	-.27*
Affect.	.12	-.23*	-.06	.13	-.27*	-.07
Sens.	.10	-.12	-.07	.11	-.14	-.10
Ice	.01	-.30*	-.07	.01	-.35*	-.09
Confl.	.26*	-.10	.02	.28*	-.12	.02
Prob.	-.03	-.20*	-.08	-.03	-.24*	-.10
Avoid	.04	-.14	.11	.04	-.16	.13
Bond	.12	-.15	-.07	.13	-.18	-.09
Make Fun	.10	-.09	-.06	.11	-.11	-.07
Insult	.06	-.08	.01	.06	-.09	.01
Express	.14	-.24*	-.09	.15	-.28*	-.11
Tease	.07	-.22*	-.13	.08	-.26*	-.16

Table 9

Correlations: Functional Use and Relational Status

(* indicates correlation is significant at the .05 level with 113 degrees of freedom)

	Category	Months Involved	Months Known	Relative Intimacy
Pick On	.00	-.01	.05	.02
Settle	-.16	-.05	-.00	-.05
Stress	-.10	-.10	-.01	.02
Fun	-.09	-.22*	-.15	.04
Cheer	.01	-.02	.03	.08
Affect.	.07	-.08	-.03	-.01
Sens.	.03	-.04	-.02	-.06
Ice	-.25*	.03	.05	.17
Confl.	.03	.17	.07	-.19*
Prob.	-.12	.15	.13	-.07
Avoid	-.13	.11	.16	-.17
Bond	.07	-.08	-.07	.10
Make Fun	.06	.14	.13	.07
Insult	.07	.25*	.31*	.03
Express	-.17	-.16	-.15	.04
Tease	.04	.17	.15	-.03

Table 10

Correlations: Similarity and Attraction

(* indicates correlation is significant at the .05 level with 54 degrees of freedom, upper triangle contains corrected correlations)

	F.D.	J.D.	S.D.	R.A.
Functional Discrepancy	1.00	.49	.17	.15
Joke Discrepancy	.21	1.00	-.10	.57*
Situational Discrepancy	.08	-.03	1.00	.07
Romantic Attraction	.12	.30*	.04	1.00

Table 11

Correlations: Perceived Similarity and Attraction

(* indicates correlation is significant at the .05 level with 104 degrees of freedom, upper triangle contains corrected correlations)

	F.D.	J.D.	S.D.	R.A.
Functional Discrepancy	1.00	.16	.10	.06
Joke Discrepancy	.11	1.00	.77*	.10
Situational Discrepancy	.08	.57*	1.00	.19
Romantic Attraction	.05	.08	.17	1.00

Table 12

Correlations: Understanding and Attraction

(* indicates correlation is significant at the .05 level with 47 degrees of freedom, upper triangle contains corrected correlations)

	FFD	FJD	FSD	FRA	MFD	MJD	MSD	MRA
Female Functional Discrepancy	1.00	.34	.17	.26	.64*	.45	.33	.26
Female Joke Discrepancy	.17	1.00	.55*	.30	.21	1.00*	.39	.17
Female Situational Discrepancy	.10	.28*	1.00	-.03	-.28	.39	1.00*	-.27
Female Romantic Attraction	.19	.19	-.02	1.00	-.06	.41*	.04	.44*
Male Functional Discrepancy	.41*	.12	-.18	-.05	1.00	.42	-.17	.13
Male Joke Discrepancy	.24	.70*	.21	.28*	.25	1.00	.38	.25
Male Situational Discrepancy	.17	.18	.75*	.03	-.10	.18	1.00	-.15
Male Romantic Attraction	.19	.11	-.20	.41*	.11	.17	-.10	1.00

Table 13

Complementary vs. Similar Production and Attraction

	Low Male Producers	High Male Producers
Low Female Producers	65.95 (15.33) N = 11 code = 0	58.25 (11.98) N = 10 code = -1
High Female Producers	62.80 (6.48) N = 5 code = 0	70.83 (12.03) N = 15 code = +1

ANOVA

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Signif. of F
TOTAL EXPLAINED	990.99	3	330.33	2.10	p > .05
Model	811.08	1	811.08	5.14	p < .05
Residual Explained	179.91	2	89.96	.57	p > .05
RESIDUAL	5834.99	37	157.70		
TOTAL	6825.98	40	170.65		

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