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## **Couples Who Laugh Together A Coorientation Approach to Positive Humor Use in Relationships**

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## Abstract

This investigation of public and private positive humor use in long-term relationships suggests that the value of humor depends upon where it is used and who uses it. For men, relational satisfaction is positively associated with positive humor use in private, but negatively associated with positive humor use in public. For women, humor use is unrelated to relational satisfaction. For men and women, greater perceived use of positive humor in private by one's partner is positively related to humor's importance. For women, greater perceived use of humor in public is negatively related to humor's importance.

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## Couples Who Laugh Together:

### A Coorientation Approach to Positive Humor Use in Relationships

Humor is a form of communication that is highly contextual. Humor depends upon the joker, the joke, the audience, and the relationships between all three (Provine, 2004). In the context of a long-term relationship, the effectiveness of humor is dependent on its reception. For example, humor used during conflict is only beneficial when both partners believe that it is funny and appropriate (Bippus, 2003). Studies have demonstrated that similar uses and perceptions of humor predict marital satisfaction (Hall & Sereno, 2010; Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990; Raneseski, 1998; Ziv, 1988; Ziv & Gadish, 1989). Studying humor in relationships is challenging because there are many different functions of humor and even more types of humor. Relational humor, or warm or positive humor shared within the context of a relationship, has been identified as one type of humor use (Bippus, 2000; Crawford & Gressley, 1991; de Koning & Weiss, 2002; Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992). In order to more clearly understand how positive relational humor might benefit the couple's well being, it is important to make the distinction between the humor shared in the private context of the relationship, and humor used outside of the dyad, or in public. The present research focuses on the use of private and the use of public humor in long term relationships with the intent of a more clear understanding about how positive humor affects relational satisfaction and the overall value of humor in relationships.

#### *Humor in Relationships*

Humor plays a role throughout the development of a relationship. Having similar humor preferences is related to liking another person (Murstein & Brust, 1985), and Rubin (1970), in development of his Romantic Love Measure, found that smaller differences on humor appreciation scores correlated with higher love and liking scores. When seeking long-term

partners, both men and women emphasize a potential partner's reception of humor, even though men tended to value reception, over production, of humor in a partner (Bressler, Martin, & Balshine, 2006). Once committed to a relationship, humor continues to play a role. Couples that share a sense of humor often find each other more attractive (Cann, Calhoun, & Banks, 1997), humor is often identified as an important part of marital adjustment (Rust & Goldstein, 1989), and humor often strengthens marital ties (Ziv, 1988). Furthermore, the vast majority of older adults confirm that possessing a sense of humor is very important part of a strong marriage (Lauer et al., 1990; Sparks-Bethea, 2001). However, it is less clear which types of humor are valuable to relationships. In addition, there is a growing body of research demonstrating humor's differential benefits for the joker and the audience.

Humor requires an audience, and in a marriage or long-term relationship the audience is often one's partner. Humor is valuable when it is appropriate to the nature of the relationship between the two communicators (Bippus, 2000; Ziv & Gadish, 1989). Laughter and mirth may be the desired outcome of humor, but the audience may feel distanced or even disdainful (Hay, 2000; Lynch, 2002). The value of a joke does not lie in its objectively humorous qualities, or even the intention of the joker, but in the reception it evokes. This means that a partner's assessment of the other partner's behavior may be better able to predict humor's value than an individual's own rating of its use or value.

Research on humor in relationships confirms that the link between humor use and relational satisfaction varies depending on who is using it and how it is received. In one of the first studies on humor in relationships, Ziv and Gadish (1989) found a strong correlation between wives' marital satisfaction and wives' perception of their husbands' humor creativity, and between husbands' marital satisfaction and husbands' perception of their wives' humor creation (Ziv &

Gadish, 1989). Ziv and Gadish (1989) reported that one's own and the perception of one's spouse's humor explained a remarkable 70% of the variance in marital satisfaction (p. 766). Raneseski (1998) expanded on the use of perceptions and metaperceptions in her investigation of humor and marital well being. The more a husband perceived himself to use humor the less marital well being he reported, but the more he perceived his wife using humor the greater well being he reported (Raneseski, 1998). For wives, the perception of humor use for herself and for her husband was unrelated to marital well being (Raneseski, 1998). More recently, de Koning and Weiss (2002) found that the respondent's perception of his/her spouse's positive humor use was a stronger indicator of marital satisfaction than the respondent's own use of humor.

All of these studies point to the value of a particular type of humor, positive relational humor. Honeycutt and Brown (1998) suggest that jokes told in private are particularly relevant to the study of humor in relationships. Warm, affectionate, and playful behaviors are often associated with positive private humor. These sorts of behaviors can be used to create relational solidarity (Bippus, 2000), become more united (Lauer et al., 1990; Ziv, 1988), and sustain long-term intimacy (Alberts, Yoshimura, Rabby, & Loschiavo, 2005). Taken together, these findings lead to the first set of hypotheses:

*H<sub>1a</sub>: An individual's perception of his/her partner's use of private humor will positively predict relational satisfaction.*

*H<sub>1b</sub>: An individual's report of his/her own use of private humor will be unrelated to relational satisfaction.*

### *Public Humor Use*

The present research attempts to take these distinctions between what is shared within a couple and what is performed for others outside of the relationship. In development of the

humor-orientation scale, Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) note that those with a higher humor-orientation are more willing to tell jokes in all sorts of audiences. It is expected that those who are more willing to be funny in the context of a relationship are more likely to tell jokes outside of the relationship, but it is unknown whether public humor use will positively or negatively affect relational satisfaction or the value of humor in the relationship. Humor is highly contextual, and there is little evidence to guide predictions about the potential impact of public humor on private outcomes. One study that contrasted public uses of humor with private humor use focused on negative or inappropriate humor (Hall & Sereno, 2010). For both partners negative humor used in public had a negative impact. For men, negative humor used in public was negatively related the value of humor in relationships, and for women, their own negative humor use in public was negatively related to their overall relational satisfaction. Since the focus of the present investigation is on positive humor, rather than inappropriate humor, it is difficult to predict whether positive humor used in public will be similarly related to negative outcomes. This investigation will be guided by the following research question.

*RQ<sub>1</sub>: For long-term couples, what effect does public humor use have on relational satisfaction?*

#### *Humor's Value*

Finally, the present investigation advances another variable of interest: the value of humor to the relationship. Couples who value and appreciate humor find greater satisfaction in marriage (Hall & Sereno, 2010; Lauer et al., 1990), which suggests that humor use may indirectly impact relational satisfaction through increasing the value of humor. If humor is not considered important, then it is unlikely to impact overall relational satisfaction. It is because humor is valuable that it can positively affect relationships. Although research suggests that most long

term couples value humor (e.g., Sparks-Bethea, 2001), it is not clear what types of humor used affect its value. Is it that humor is valuable only in private, or that being a humorous person both within and out of the relationship increases its value in relationships? To clarify these questions, we propose the following research questions:

*RQ<sub>2</sub>: For long-term couples, what effect does private humor use have on humor's importance in the relationship?*

*RQ<sub>2</sub>: For long-term couples, what effect does public humor use have on humor's importance in the relationship?*

## METHOD

### *Sample*

One-hundred and twenty-three male-female couples completed the survey instrument on the use of various types of humor within and out of the relationship. The median highest level of education completed was vocational school/community college, and the sample was 60% Caucasian, 18% Asian American, 13% Latino, and 2% African American, and 7% Arabic American and other. The average age was 36 (range 18 to 69), and the respondents had been in their relationship for an average of approximately 12 years. The relational status of couples indicated that 89% of the couples were married and 11% were living together.

### *Procedures*

The respondents were solicited by asking students in an introductory communication course at a mid-sized private university to request that their parents or other married adults to complete the instrument over a holiday weekend. No course credit was offered in exchange for a completed survey, and participation was completely voluntary. No identifying information was collected, and all data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

## Materials

*Instrument.* The instrument assessed the participant's use of humor, how the participant felt about the use of each type of humor, the participant's perception of his/her spouse's use of humor, and the participant's relational satisfaction and perceived importance of humor in the relationship. Private and public positive humor items attempted to capture relational humor types, (i.e., silly behavior, humor unique to your relationship), and more socially appropriate humor types (i.e., PG-rated jokes, political jokes). Although other measurements of humor use exist, the items used in this study were chosen in accordance with Honeycutt and Brown's (1998) suggestion that joke telling and making comments intended to be funny is most associated with production of humor (also see Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991). These items were scaled on a 5-point Likert-type scale ("Never" to "All of the time"). The five items assessing marital satisfaction ("How satisfied are you with your relationship?" and "Overall, how satisfied are you with your spouse or partner?") were scaled on a 5-point semantic differential scale format ("Very satisfied" "Not at all Satisfied"). The four items assessing the importance of humor in relationship ("How important is the use of humor to your satisfaction in the relationship?" "Overall, how do you judge the effect of the use of humor in your relationship?") were scaled on a 5-point semantic differential scale format ("Very good" "Very bad").

*Measures.* Two confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted in order to determine whether the items created to measure marital satisfaction (five items) and importance of humor in the relationship (four items) were a good fit to the latent construct. The initial test of reliability performed prior to the CFA yielded good results ( $\alpha$  for importance = .88,  $\alpha$  for relational satisfaction = .87). Using the LISREL 8.54 program, a two factor oblique model reported a  $\chi^2$  value of 68.9, which was significant ( $df= 18, p = .00$ ). Although the  $\chi^2$  value was significant it

was significantly better than the null ( $\chi^2 = 1983.9$ ,  $df = 55$ ). Additionally, the  $\chi^2/df$  rule-of-thumb was below the recommended value of 5 ( $\chi^2/df = 3.8$ ), and the CFI was 0.97, indicating a good fit (Byrne, 1998).

The items measuring positive uses of humor were identified. Participants were asked to rate how they believed their spouse feels about their use of each type of humor, and how they felt about their spouse using each type of humor on a five point semantic differential scale (“Very positively” to “Very negatively”). If the mean score was at or above 3.0 for both questions and for both participants and their spouses, it was considered to be a positive type of humor. Six items (i.e., Silly behavior, Humor unique to your relationship, G-rated or PG rated jokes or stories, “Dirty” jokes or stories, Political put-down jokes, and Occupation put-down jokes) were considered to be positive private types of humor, and five items (i.e., Silly behavior, Humor unique to your relationship, G-rated or PG rated jokes or stories, Political put-down jokes, and Occupation put-down jokes) were considered public positive types of humor. Two alpha scores were calculated for the private and public positive humor items, and the reliability was acceptable (private  $\alpha = .71$ , public  $\alpha = .70$ ). A sum score was then created for both public and private humor use (see Table 1).

## Results

To examine the difference between partners’ self reported humor use, two two-tailed t-tests were conducted. The results indicate that men report using positive humor more than women report using in public,  $t(246) = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ , and in private  $t(246) = 2.59$ ,  $p < .01$ . A second set of two two-tailed t-tests were conducted to test the difference between the amount of public and private humor men and women reported their partners using. Consistent with participants’ rating of their own humor use, women reported their partners using more public,

$t(246) = 2.27, p < .05$  and private humor,  $t(246) = 3.12, p < .01$ , than men reported their partners using. Men and women both agree, by self-assessment and by assessment of their partners, that men use more humor in public and private than women. Four additional two-tailed t-tests were conducted to test differences between self-report and partner report. Women reported using humor significantly more than their partners perceived them to in public,  $t(246) = 2.79, p < .01$ , but reported using less than their partners perceived them to in private, but not significantly less,  $t(246) = 1.39, ns$ . In addition, men reported using humor significantly more than their partners perceived them to in public,  $t(246) = 2.42, p < .05$ , but significantly less than their partners perceived them to in private,  $t(246) = 2.05, p < .05$ . Both women and men believe themselves to be using significantly more positive humor in public, but less positive humor in private than their partners perceive they are using.

### *Relational Satisfaction and Importance of Humor*

The first set of simple regression analyses determined whether participants' humor use or the perceived partner use were related to their own relational satisfaction. For men, none of the variables predicted relational satisfaction. For women, their own private ( $\beta = .19, SE = .29, p < .05$ ) and public ( $\beta = .23, SE = .30, p < .05$ ) humor use was significantly positively related to relational satisfaction. The multiple regression analyses yielded different results. For men, their self-reported public humor use was a significant negative predictor of relational satisfaction ( $\beta = -.48, SE = .56, p < .05$ ), while their self-reported private use was a significant positive predictor of relational satisfaction ( $\beta = .54, SE = .53, p < .05$ ). That is, more self-reported public use of humor negatively predicts men's relational satisfaction, and more private use positively impacts men's relational satisfaction, holding each type of humor use constant. For women, their self-

reported public use was a marginal positive predictor of relational satisfaction ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $SE = .70$ ,  $p = .09$ ), but no other variable yielded significant results (see Table 2).

These simple regression analyses were repeated with the importance of humor as the dependent variable. Men's report of their own public and private humor use, and men's perception of their spouse's humor use were all significantly related to the importance of humor in the relationship. The results for women were very similar: all variables were positively related to humor's importance. Again, the multiple regression analyses were revealing. For men, only their perception of their partner's use of positive humor in private was related to the importance of humor ( $\beta = .46$ ,  $SE = .37$ ,  $p < .01$ ), controlling for all other variables. For women, their perception of their partner's use of positive humor in private was also related to the importance of humor ( $\beta = .41$ ,  $SE = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The relationship between their report of their partner's public use of humor and the importance of humor approached significance ( $\beta = -.26$ ,  $SE = .30$ ,  $p = .08$ ).

### Discussion

The present investigation set out to explore public and private humor use in long-term relationships. The results suggest that the value of humor in relationships is dependent upon where it is used and who uses it. Both men and women agree, by self-assessment and by assessment of their partners, that men use more humor in public and private than do women, replicating findings of Crawford and Gressley (1991) and Hay (2000). Interestingly, both women and men report using significantly less positive humor in private than their partners perceive them using, and more positive humor in public than their partners them using. These reports may be a product of positive alter-casting (Murray, 2001). Given that regression analyses demonstrate a positive relationship between spouse's perceived private humor use and humor's value to the

relationship, a partner may be motivated to overestimate the amount of private humor use by the other partner because they want to view their partner in a positive light. The implications of these perceptual differences will become clearer upon further discussion.

Other researchers (e.g., Murstein & Brust, 1985; Priest & Thein, 2003; Ziv & Gadish, 1989) have documented strong links between humor use and relational satisfaction, and the results of the present investigation confirm that the effect of humor is dependent on sex. Men report higher levels of relational satisfaction when they report using more positive humor in private. However controlling for the amount of private humor used, more public positive humor use yields the opposite results for men – more public humor use leads to less relational satisfaction. When women report using more humor in public, they report marginally more relational satisfaction, but the amount they report using in private is unrelated to their relational satisfaction. These findings do not support either hypothesis. Participants' perception of partner's use of private humor did not predict relational satisfaction, but participants' report of their own use of private humor positively related to relational satisfaction for men, but not for women. These results do support Raneseski's (1998) finding that the more a husband perceived himself to use humor the less marital well being he reported, but for wives, the perception of humor use for herself and for her husband was unrelated to marital well being. Previous investigators typically do not make the distinction between public and private humor use. The results of this study suggest that that distinction is an important one. Positive humor used in private brings about benefits for the relationship that public humor does not. Therefore, in response to research question one, public humor used in excess of what one uses in private seems to have a negative impact on men's own relational satisfaction, but public humor use does not relate to relational satisfaction for women.

In response to research question two, the perception of private humor use in one's partner more directly relates to humor's value than does one's own production of humor. For men and women, their perception of their partner's use of positive humor in private was positively related to the importance of humor. For women, their report of their partner's public use of humor was negatively related to the importance of humor. These results point to the value of private over public humor use, and provide a response to the third research question. These findings also confirm similar results found by Ziv and Gadish (1989), which suggest that women are particularly sensitive to the type of humor they perceive their partner using. If women and men perceive their partner using more positive humor privately, they are more likely to value humor in the relationship. If women perceive their partner using humor publicly, in excess of what they use in private, it devalues humor in the relationship. This may explain why men would associate the use of public humor with greater relational dissatisfaction: when they use more public humor, it is negatively perceived by their partner, which creates more relational dissatisfaction.

The findings in the present study suggest that private use of humor positively impacts overall importance of humor in the relationship, and suggest that public humor may negatively impact the relationship both in terms of devaluing humor and reducing men's relational satisfaction. As suggested by other research, (e.g., Honeycutt & Brown, 1998), the type of humorous communication couples use in private plays a larger role in shaping the relationship outcomes than do humorous communications outside of the relationship. Moreover, it suggests that both positive and negative humor used in public may be detrimental (Hall & Sereno, 2010). Why are there differences between public and private humor use? It could be that private humor matters more because of its benefits to relational solidarity (Bippus, 2000) and relational maintenance (Alberts, et al., 2005). On the other hand, silly behavior, telling jokes, and being comical in

public are less clearly beneficial to the couple. Joke telling by one partner could go over well and reflect positively on the couple, or it could go over badly and embarrass both partners. Men report using more public humor than women, and their partners report them using even more than they say they do. Just in terms of raw amount, men's public joke telling has a greater chance to affect the couple than women's do, and the results of this study suggest that those public behaviors can devalue humor's value in the relationship, and adversely impact men's relational satisfaction.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

Theorists have sought to distinguish the various functions of humor and have generated taxonomies of type, use, and effect (Craik, Lampert, & Nelson, 1996; Crawford & Gressley, 1991; de Koning & Weiss, 2002; Graham et al., 1992). The items used in the present investigation represent one measurement of positive relational humor that focuses on jokes and humorous behaviors. Other typologies should be employed using similar methods to determine if other measures of positive humor that differentiate between public and private use would replicate the results in the present investigation.

Future research may consider the differences between public and private humor from a relationship perspective. Being a humorous person in private may help to reduce conflict, build solidarity, and have fun, but telling jokes and being silly in public may be an embarrassment (Hall & Sereno, 2010). The negative effects of public humor use reported here could be measured in more ecologically valid ways to explore specific outcomes, such as embarrassment, jealousy, frustration, or shame. All of these outcomes could lead to humor's devaluation or decreased relational satisfaction, but were not measured in the present investigation. In addition, these could be treated as negative outcomes in themselves, which would more directly examine

results of humor use in public. The conceptual link between a husband's public joke telling and his wife's devaluation of humor is conceptually straightforward. The second link – between her devaluation of his public humor use and the negative relationship with his relational satisfaction – is more conjectural. It seems unlikely that public joking alone should lead to men's relational dissatisfaction; public joking in itself is not a behavior associated with relationship dissatisfaction. However, it is unclear whether women's devaluation of that behavior is truly the mechanism that leads to men's relational dissatisfaction. If this relationship were reestablished in future research, this relationship should be directly explored by asking men and women whether their attitudes about humor are shaped by their partner's responses to it. Finally, the present investigation demonstrates differences in the impact of couple's private humor and couple's public performance of humor. Future research may do well to consider that a couple laughing together at home produces quite different relational results than being funny in public.

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Table 1

*Summary of All Means and Standard Deviations for Variables (N = 256)*

Items	Men		Women	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Public Positive Humor</b>				
Self	3.91	1.15	3.61	.89
Spouse	3.33	1.15	3.67	1.16
<b>Private Positive Humor</b>				
Self	4.27	1.26	3.89	1.02
Spouse	4.00	1.25	4.51	1.25
Importance of Humor	15.67	2.65	16.24	2.37
Relational Satisfaction	20.02	3.01	20.28	2.98

Table 2

*Self-reported and Perceived Partner Use of Humor Effects on Relational Satisfaction  
(Standardized Beta Weights)*

Variables	Simple Regression		Multiple Regression	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Men (N = 123)				
Public Use, Self	.00	.24	-.48*	.56
Private Use, Self	.13	.22	.54*	.48
Public Use, Partner	.07	.24	.09	.48
Private Use, Partner	.12	.22	-.08	.46
R <sup>2</sup>			.23	
Women (N = 123)				
Public Use, Self	.23*	.30	.36+	.70
Private Use, Self	.19*	.27	-.12	.62
Public Use, Partner	.09	.24	-.16	.40
Private Use, Partner	.15	.22	.12	.38
R <sup>2</sup>			.18	

Note: +  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 3

*Self-reported and Perceived Partner Use of Humor Effects on Importance of Humor  
(Standardized Beta Weights)*

Variables	Simple Regression		Multiple Regression	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Men (N = 123)				
Public Use, Self	.26*	.20	-.09	.43
Private Use, Self	.39***	.18	.29	.41
Public Use, Partner	.29**	.20	-.24	.38
Private Use, Partner	.42***	.18	.46**	.37
R <sup>2</sup>			.23	
Women (N = 123)				
Public Use, Self	.21**	.23	.27	.53
Private Use, Self	.37***	.21	-.04	.47
Public Use, Partner	.20*	.19	-.26+	.30
Private Use, Partner	.37***	.16	.41**	.28
R <sup>2</sup>			.18	

Note: +  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .