

A systematic review of humor use in romantic relationships

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Abstract: Previous studies show that there is a significant relation between the use of humor and quality of romantic relationships. Nevertheless, the literature on this subject is really poor and, regarding the previous systematic reviews on humor and romantic relationships, we were unable to find recent data. This present study is intended to elucidate the role of humor in the context of romantic relationships in the recently researched literature, in order to provide relevant information for future directions of study. The following databases and electronic journal collections were searched for articles that were published between 2005 and 2015: PsychInfo® and PubMed®, full text, peer-reviewed. The studies included were published empirical ones, of any design, measuring and reporting in the English language. Sources, study populations, data on study design, variables, methods of measurement, types of tool, study outcomes and limits were extracted from each study. The 12 studies included in this review were almost exclusively linked to humor styles and relationship quality. Other investigated variables were generally linked to stress, communication/ -couple conflicts and, -humor functions. Among all the studies included, only two were experimental based designs. Despite the interest in humor within romantic relationships, we still have a small amount of information about the importance of the use of humor in relationships or regarding which are the best ways to assess it. Studies using more advanced approaches to evaluate the relevance of humor for romantic relationships are required in order to inform us more properly.

Keywords: humor, romantic relationships, directions of study, systematic review

1. Introduction

Within interpersonal relationships, humor has been researched through various contexts: in romantic relationships, in friendship ones, in the workplace environment, within family relationships, etc. Related to the manner in which it is used, humor can lead to initiating interpersonal relationships, so that it can maintain or dissolve them. Previous studies have reported that couples generally considered humor as an important part of a happy marriage (Lauer et al., 1990).

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Regarding interpersonal relationships, Bippus (2000) even suggests the term of "bonding humor" that strengthens dyadic relations. Various researchers have already proven the important role that humor plays when it comes to choosing a specific life partner (Buss, 1988; Goodwin, 1990), intimacy and interpersonal attraction (Cann, Calhoun, & Banks, 1997), minimizing conflicts in tensed interactions (Jacobs, 1985). While meeting for the first time, individuals do not know each other, so they use humor to share experiences, which can lead to a greater bond between the people involved (Fralely & Aron, 2004).

In those couples with distress signals, partners have used less humor in their interactions, they agreed, smiled and laughed less with their partners, compared with happy couples (Birchler & al., 1975). Humor has a calming effect on interpersonal relationships, being used as a form of power from one partner to fight against the other partner's complaints (Cloven & Roloff, 1993). The ability to use positive affects, such as humor or kindness, is essential to a relationship's health (Driver & Gottman, 2004).

Previous research (Alberts, 1990) suggests that couples who used benign forms of humor (jokes about oneself or about their partner, being done in a gentle manner) were more satisfied with their marriage, unlike couples who used humor in an aggressive manner (eg. Sarcasm toward their partner). Couples that are satisfied with their relationship usually confess using humor in a gentle or friendly manner, unlike couples who are dissatisfied with their relationship (Ting-Toomey, 1983). There is evidence (Huston & al., 2001) showing that even if there may be negative relational patterns in couples, before and after marriage, couples can be relatively satisfied with their relationship, which suggests that relational distress is not indispensable when negative relational patterns are present.

Most previous studies (Ziv, 1988, Rust & Goldenstein, 1989; Raniseski, 1998; De Koning & Weiss, 2002) suggest the fact that similarity within couples regarding their humor styles can predict relationship satisfaction. Other studies (Priest & Thein, 2003) found relevant associations in identifying the same stimuli as funny, but did not find any significant link between the similarity of humor appreciation of both partners and their relational dissatisfaction. Hall (2013) encompasses a synthesis of previous research and identifies four main positive functions of humor in romantic relationships: 1. sharing positive aspects, the feeling of happiness,- and the ability to deliver a more easy-going relationship with their partner, 2. expressing inner states 3. communication features: the role of humor as a mechanism of coping and conflict-resolution 4. forgiveness.

Despite the fact that humor is often implied, most of the time its importance fades away and we cannot have appropriate insight on it. Considering the previous systematic reviews on humor and couple relationships, we could not

identify any in the consulted specialized literature. The current systematic review is not an update previous reviews, but it rather follows a relatively new approach. This present study is intended to clarify the role of humor in the context of romantic relationships in the recent research literature in order to provide relevant information for future directions of study.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

The following databases and electronic journal collections had been used to search full text articles published in peer review journals between 2005 and 2015: PsychInfo® and PubMed®. The studies included were published empirical ones of any design, measuring and reporting in the English language. We searched databases using keywords, such as: “humor and couple”, “humor and partner”, “humor and personal relationship”, “humor and spouse”, “humor and marriage”. The search fields were the abstract of the article and its title. The last search was run on 14 January 2015. Additional fields have been keyed out by contacting the experts in the area. We have reached the author Rod A. Martin, a well-known professional figure in recent research on humor.

2.2. The selection of studies

We selected only those studies that specifically stated that they analyzed humor uses in romantic relationships. Studies were excluded if they belonged to different interest areas besides those related to the field of couples and family psychology or if they were related to different types of dyads than that of a couple itself. We also included only adults in our research, because in children, teenagers and elderly’ cases, their relationships differ, and humor can sometimes barely be seen or even dissimulated. Studies on participants that weren’t heterosexual, which analyzed mixed race groups or studies that had a deep individual approach and did not analyze the couple’s relationship were also excluded – so that we could obtain relevant data with slight biases. All studies were published in English, and we identified 61 potentially relevant studies through database searching and other sources.

2.3. Measures

For reporting and synthesizing data, we started from PRISMA protocols (Liberati & al., 2009). Sources, study populations, data on study design, variables, methods of measurement, results and limits were extracted from each study.

Source. We included here the authors and year of publication, the extended information being detailed at the end of our paper.

Study population. All study participants were adults. The included studies focused on a total of 2112 participants.

Study design. We selected all types of relevant studies on humor and couple relationship in order to have a broader perspective on study possibilities for further research.

Variables. We focused on humor as a variable and its implications in couple relationships.

Methods of measurement. We noted all the instruments and methods we considered relevant for the study. Additionally, we also included instruments we worked with just for the use of validating other instruments (discriminant-validity), as these seemed useful in the perspective of including them for further inquiry. For instruments that were repeatedly found in multiple articles, we preferred a brief annotation on a second apparition in the text. We did not include information, such as authors for instruments that had been used, and for further details one can directly consult the specific articles.

Results. For reporting the results, we mainly focused on articles related to humor and its importance for couples.

Limits. Besides the limits that were directly reported in the articles, we likewise added the limitations that came into one's care. For example, if the sample consisted only of students, we recorded "homogenous sample". The reviewed studies used various analytical procedures.

3. Results

As we previously mentioned, the searches returned 61 potentially relevant studies, identified through database searching and through other sources. After removal of duplicates, 12 studies (Table 1) which met the inclusion criteria (Figure 1) were selected for further evaluation. We first eliminated the duplicates (6 of them), after that we started verifying the rest of the articles (n=55). From 55 articles, we excluded 32 articles in the first phase, as, after a careful observation of the abstract, these clearly did not meet our criteria. Thus, a total of 23 articles was retrieved for detailed evaluation, of which 11 studies did not meet the defined inclusion criteria. After application of inclusion criteria, 12 studies were eligible for inclusion. The 12 studies included in this review were almost exclusively linked to humor styles and relationship quality. Other investigated variables were generally linked to stress, communication/couple conflicts and, humor functions. Among all the studies included only 2 of them were experiments.

Starting from the 12 studies, according to the available outputs, we also extracted the effect size, a total of 17 sizes of effects for 4 modalities in which we could use humor (humor styles), all of them included in the analysis. We

chose the fixed effect model and measured the effect size with Hedges' g indicator. In the studies retrieved for analysis, all participants in each study (women versus men) were in a couple relationship.

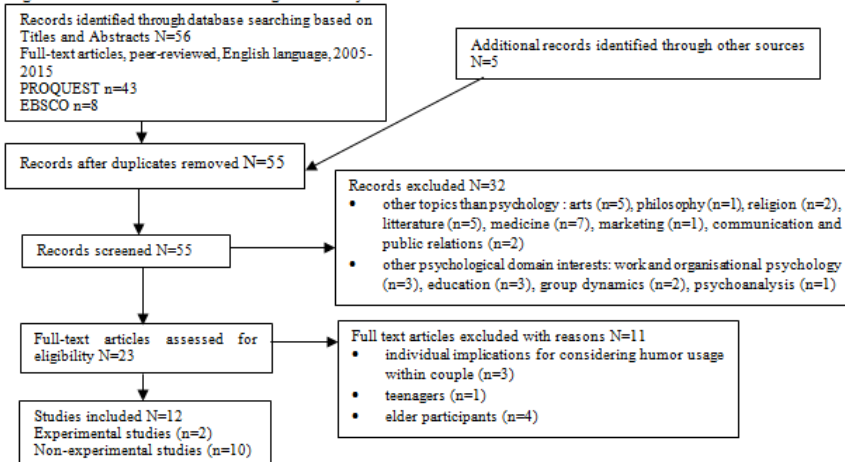
Affiliative humor: The effect size of the comparison between partners in affiliative humor ($N = 5$) was small $g = .340$; 95 % CI [.213; .467], with an insignificant value of the heterogeneity test $Q(4) = 4.008$, $p > .10$, indicating a low level of heterogeneity from the effect size.

Self-enhancing Humor: The effect size in the self-enhancing humor ($N= 3$) applied on the two groups of participants (men versus women) was small $g = .182$; 95 % CI [.019;.346], $Q(2) = .163$, $p > .10$.

Aggressive Humor: The comparison of the partners on the use of aggressive humor ($N= 5$) showed a medium effect size $g = .519$; 95 % CI [.390; .648], $Q(4) = 16.343$, $p = .003$, suggesting an increased heterogeneity of the effect sizes.

Self-defeating Humor: For the self-defeating humor style ($N = 4$), the effect size was small for the 2 groups of participants $g = .225$; 95 % CI [.083; .367], $Q(3) = 7.44$, $p = .059$ and it showed an increased heterogeneity of effect size.

Figure 1. Results of Searches and Screening of Potentially Studies



In the table below (Table 1), we can find an enlarged picture on the data that we included for review:

Table 1. Summary of the included studies

Source	Study design	Variables	Methods of measurement	Results	Limits
Caird & Martin 2014 n=136	longitudinal correlational	-humor styles -satisfaction vs dissatisfaction in the relation	-DailyHSQ (Humor Styles Questionnaire) -PANQ (Positive & Negative Quality in Marriage Scale) - Diary methods -Demographic Information Questionnaire	Affiliative humor (within & between) was positively associated with relationship satisfaction and negatively predicted dissatisfaction.	Information obtained only from one partner Non-experimental design Homogenous sample (students)
Bippus & al. 2011 n=96	observation predictive	-perceived humor -relationship satisfaction -conflicts (escalation/progress) -gender	-Norton's 6- items marital quality index (adapted for partners) -Bippus 14 seven-point items conflict escalation - Videotaped interactions	The frequency with which participants perceive humor usage predicts relationship satisfaction (not regarding their spouses as well) and is negatively associated with escalating conflict-beliefs.	Homogenous sample (students) Frequent usage of positive humor in videotaped interactions Laboratory study Limited time of couple interaction (5-15 min.)
Cann & al. 2011 n=164	predictive	-humor styles -relationship satisfaction	-HSQ -RAS (Relationship Assessment Scale) -QRI (Quality of Relationships Inventory) -Demographic Information Questionnaire	Similarity within couples on humor styles does not predict relationship satisfaction. Perceptions of a partner's humor style predict relationship satisfaction	Little similarity within couples on humor styles
Campbell & al. 2008	observational predictive correlational	-humor styles -relationship satisfaction	-PRQC (Perceived Relationship	Participants whose partners used more	Non-experimental design

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n=196		-conflict situations -perceived closeness	Quality Components Scale) -IOS (Inclusion of Other in Self Scale) -Diary methods -Videotaped interactions -Post videotape self-report measures -Behavioral Ratings -Demographic Information Questionnaire	affiliative and less aggressive humor during the discussion were more satisfied with their relationship and reported an increase in perceived closeness and better problem resolution following the discussion.	No observation records were made for self-enhancing and self-defeating humor. Homogenous sample (students) A majority of the raters were male (impact of gender differences in humor evaluation)
Alberts & al. 2005 n= 20	longitudinal observational	-relationship satisfaction -couples' communication -conflicts -perceived understanding	-ENRICH (Evaluating and Nurturing Relationship Issues, Communication, Happiness) Inventory (communication, conflicts and marital satisfaction) -10-item questionnaire (communication, perceived understanding) of Cahn & Shulman (1984) -Tape-recorded (wireless microphones) -Demographic Information Survey	Among 13 communication behaviors identified in couples with high degrees of relationship satisfaction, humor recorded a percentage of 3% (rank 9).	Results can not be generalized (small sample and unit of time) Some aspects of couples' conversations were impossible to be captured. Data desirability
Hall 2010 n=222	explorative correlational predictive experimental (2x2)	-humor styles -embarrassment -gender	-HSQ -Big 5 Factor Inventory (emotional instability) -Seven-item Likert-type scale	Aggressive humor was related to partner embarrassment whereas self-defeating	There weren't used any observational methods or recorded data regarding negative

			(embarrassment caused by partner)	humor with feeling embarrassed by one's partner.	humor.
McGee & Shevlin 2009 n=180	experimental (3x2)	-sense of humor (no sense of humor/ average/ good) -gender -physical attractiveness -suitability as a long-term partner	-Vignettes to describe hypothetical potential partner -Seven-item Likert-type scale (attractivity and suitability)	Higher ratings of attractiveness and suitability were related with targets with a good sense of humor.	Homogenous sample (students) Cultural norms may interfere with participants' preferences. The study refers only to a potential partner without taking into consideration a real partnership.
Butzer & Kuiper 2008 n=154	explorative predictive	-humor styles -relationship satisfaction -couples' situations (conflict vs pleasant encounter)	-Humor use items (Seven-item Likert-type scale which encompasses other previous humor scales) -RAS -Situations described in scenarios	Participants who reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction also reported using more positive humor with partner and lower levels of negative and avoiding humor.	Homogenous sample (students) Data were retrieved only from one partner.
Saroglou & al. 2010 n=292	correlational predictive	-humor styles -relationship status (married/ divorced) -attachment orientations -relationship quality -gender	-HSQ -Experiences in Close Relationships (Seven-item Liker-type scale adapted from previous research) -DAS (Dyadic Adjustment Scale)	The positive humor style was related to higher levels of relationship satisfaction and with non-divorced status. Negative humor style predicted divorce and was related to lower levels of	Non-experimental study Married partners could have communicated with each other when providing their responses, unlike divorced partners.

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Campbell & Moroz 2014 n=232	predictive observational	-humor styles -conflict behaviours (positive/negative)	-RHI (Relational Humor Inventory) -Kansas Marital Conflict Scale -Video-taped interactions	relationship satisfaction. Positive humor used by both partners predicted higher levels of positive conflict resolution than negative humor. Couple similarity with regard to sense of humor was unrelated to relationship quality.	Non-experimental study Laboratory study.
Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra 2010 n=228	correlational predictive	-sense of humor -relationship quality -gender	-TLS (Triangular Love Scale) -WIQ (Waring Intimacy Questionnaire) -MSHS (Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale)		No distinction was made between positive and negative humor. Non-experimental study.
Winterheld & al. 2013 n=192	observational correlational predictive	-humor styles -attachment orientations -relationship conflicts -stress -care-seeking -gender	-HSQ -AAQ (Adult Attachment Questionnaire) -Big 5 (for discriminant-validity purposes) -Relationship Satisfaction Scale (for discriminant-validity purposes) -Distress scale (observer-rated) -Satisfaction with the conflict resolution (observer-rated) -Responses to Humor Behavior -Care-Seeking (observer-rated) -Videotaped interactions	Aggressive humor elicited negative responses from partners who sought more care and so did self-defeating humor regarding highly distressed partners. Affiliative humor was received positively by highly distressed partners.	Non-experimental study

4. Discussion

The purpose of this article was to clarify the role of humor in the context of romantic relationships in the recent research literature, in order to provide relevant information for future directions of study. The obtained results do not surprise us, as they were already confirmed by previous studies. Higher rates of attractiveness and suitability were related to targets with a good sense of humor (McGee & Shevlin, 2009) as Cann, Calhoun & Banks (1997) has already proven. Overall, positive humor was positively related to relationship quality, whereas, negative humor was negatively related with relationship quality (Butzer & Kuiper, 2008; Campbell & al., 2008; Hall, 2010; Saroglou & al., 2010; Winterheld & al., 2013; Caird & Martin, 2014; Campbell & Moroz, 2014).

Regarding the use of humor in couple relationships, most studies jointly analyzed the 4 styles of humor identified in previous studies of Martin (2003): affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating. The results of the studies we analyzed showed the similarity of the partners on the positive humor dimension (affiliative and self-enhancing) and negative (self-defeating humor only) and a lower level of similarity regarding aggressive humor. The effects' size, where the outcomes allowed the data analysis, was a relatively low to medium one and sometimes the heterogeneity of the studies was a higher one. However, the low number of data, leads us into looking reluctantly at these results.

Couple similarity with regard to sense of humor was unrelated to relationship quality (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2010). On the other hand, the similarity within couples in humor styles does not predict relationship satisfaction, but it's only the individual perceptions regarding to the humor style that can predict the relationship satisfaction (Cann & al., 2011). Nevertheless, in previous studies (Ziv, 1988, Rust & Goldenstein, 1989; Raniseski, 1998; DeKoning & Weiss, 2002), it turned out that couple similarity, with regard to the sense of humor, was related to relationship quality. Other included studies also showed questionable results, regarding the associations between humor and relationship satisfaction (Alberts & al., 2011; Bippus & al., 2011).

Other investigated variables to consider were related to couple communication/conflicts. Among 13 communication behaviors, identified in couples with high levels of relationship satisfaction (Alberts et al, 2005), humor recorded a percentage of 3% (rank 9). The frequency with which the participants perceive humor usage was negatively associated with escalating conflict-beliefs. (Bippus et al., 2011). Also, the participants whose partners used more affiliative and less aggressive humor during the discussion, reported better problem resolution following the discussion (Campbell et al., 2008). In addition, positive humor used by both partners predicted higher levels of

positive conflict resolution than negative humor (Campbell & Moroz, 2014). Aggressive humor elicited negative responses from partners who sought more care as well as self-defeating humor, regarding highly distressed partners, whereas affiliative humor was received positively by highly distressed partners (Winterheld et al. 2013). Moreover, the positive humor style was related to non-divorced status, whereas negative humor style predicted divorce in Saraglou et al. (2010). We also paid particular interest for both measurement methods that were used in studies and also for research limitations, in order to provide eventual improvements for further research. Many of these studies did not assume causality. Regarding homogenous samples, we observed in the reviewed studies that, we could take into consideration a larger variety of samples in the studies to come. Another issue to be considered is data desirability. Thus, we might analyze couples' humor using both an individual and a dyadic approach. Other important limitations are related to: using a single type of humor for analysis (positive or negative), having a preference for laboratory studies rather than in vivo studies, regarding a limited time of interaction between partners, using only male or female raters (impact of gender differences in humor evaluation).

Despite the interest in humor within romantic relationships, we still know little about the importance of humor or how to find the most effective tools to measure it. Studies using more advanced approaches to evaluate the relevance of humor for romantic relationships are needed to inform us more properly.

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