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An observational study of humor use while resolving conflict in dating couples

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Abstract

This research focused on whether affiliative and aggressive humor use was associated with relationship satisfaction and with greater perceived closeness, problem resolution, and emotional distress following a conflict discussion task. Ninety-eight dating couples from a large Texas University participated in this research. Both partners independently completed questionnaires about their relationship perceptions, participated in a videotaped conflict resolution task, and then answered some additional questions. The results revealed that individuals whose partners used more 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. These results highlight the importance of both positive and negative forms of humor in the regulation of close relationships.

A number of researchers and theorists have proposed that humor plays an important role in the formation, maintenance, and regulation of close interpersonal relationships (e.g., Lefcourt, 2001; Shiota, Campos, Keltner, & Hersteinstein, 2004; Ziv & Gadish, 1989). Indeed, most people see a sense of humor as a very desirable characteristic in a potential friend or romantic partner (Goodwin & Tang, 1991; Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Strangers who share humorous experiences and laugh together during a first encounter tend to report greater feelings of closeness and attraction to one another than do those who share an equally enjoyable but nonhumorous experience (Fraley & Aron, 2004). In more established relationships, the positive emotions associated with humorous communication and laughter between partners

can also presumably reinforce mutual feelings of affection, strengthen attachment, and contribute to greater relationship satisfaction (Shiota et al., 2004; Smoski & Bachorowski, 2003). Besides enhancing positive feelings and bonding in relationships, humor can also serve to stabilize a relationship during times of disagreement or conflict. For example, humor can communicate underlying feelings of affection despite overt disagreements, to relieve tension during an argument, or as a means of backing down gracefully from a confrontation (Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977; Long & Graesser, 1988). Friendly teasing can also communicate mild criticism in a face-saving manner (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001). In sum, as [Ziv \(1984\)](#) expressed it, humor “greases the wheels of relationships” (p. 3).

On the other hand, humor can be used in more negative ways that may be detrimental to close relationships. For example, people may use aggressive forms of teasing to disparage, ridicule, intimidate, or indirectly manipulate others by means of humor (Kowalski, Howerton, & McKenzie, 2001; Long & Graesser, 1988). A humorous response may also be an indirect way of dismissing a partner’s concerns or refusing to

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engage in constructive discussion about a problem in the relationship. These negative uses of humor are particularly detrimental to a relationship because they make it difficult for the partner to take offense, since the humor initiator can always claim to be “only joking.” Qualitative research on humor in dating relationships has indicated a distinction between humor that serves a bonding function and more negative forms, such as aggressive, inappropriate, and overbearing humor that may be harmful to the relationship (Bippus, 2000).

Despite the theoretical importance placed on the role of humor in the context of close relationships, and particularly in conflict resolution, empirical research on this topic has been quite limited, and the little research that has been done has tended to focus on positive rather than negative uses of humor. Some correlational studies have examined associations between trait measures of humor and several variables that are relevant to intimate relationships. For example, prior research has demonstrated that various self-report sense of humor scales are positively correlated with measures of intimacy (Hampes, 1992), empathy (Hampes, 2001), social assertiveness (Bell, McGhee, & Duffey, 1986), and interpersonal trust (Hampes, 1999). Studies of dating and married couples have also shown that the more individuals perceive their partner to have a good sense of humor, the more they tend to be satisfied with the relationship (Rust & Goldstein, 1989; Ziv & Gadish, 1989). People who are happily married also tend to attribute their marital satisfaction, at least in part, to the humor they share with their spouse (Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990; Ziv, 1988). Researchers observing styles of interaction between married spouses during discussions of problems in their marriage have found that spouses who are more satisfied with their marriage, as compared to those who are unhappily married, show higher levels of benign, nonsarcastic humor, and more reciprocated laughter during the problem discussions (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Gottman, 1994).

Indications of potentially more negative aspects of humor in close relationships have also emerged in a few studies. In an investigation of humor in marriage, Lefcourt and Mar-

tin (1986) found that, among women, a self-report measure of coping humor positively correlated with both marital satisfaction and positive engagement in a problem discussion between spouses. Among men, however, higher humor scores were associated with lower marital satisfaction and greater rated destructiveness (negative affect and verbal negativity) during the problem discussion. A more recent study of newly married couples also found that when husbands expressed more humor during a problem discussion there was a greater likelihood of the couple being separated or divorced 18 months later, particularly when the couple was experiencing high levels of major stressful events (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997). The authors of this study suggested that husbands' use of humor during times of stress may be a way for them to deflect problems temporarily and avoid anxiety but without actively confronting and resolving the problems, leading to greater marital instability in the longer term.

In examining the role of humor in close relationships, then, it appears to be important to investigate potentially detrimental as well as beneficial uses of humor. Past research in this vein has been rather sporadic and lacking in a theoretical framework, and thus, a need for more systematic research exists. Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) have recently introduced a model of humor styles incorporating both positive and negative uses of humor, which may be a useful framework for investigating humor in close relationships. This model posits four main styles of humor, two of which are considered to be relatively healthy or beneficial to personal well-being and relationships (affiliative and self-enhancing humor) and two that are thought to be relatively unhealthy and potentially detrimental (aggressive and self-defeating humor).

Affiliative humor involves saying funny things, telling jokes, and engaging in spontaneous witty banter in order to amuse others, to facilitate relationships, and to reduce interpersonal tensions in a way that is affirming of both oneself and others. This type of humor presumably enhances interpersonal cohesiveness and attraction (e.g., making someone laugh, particularly if they feel sad or distressed).

Self-enhancing humor refers to the use of humor to regulate one's own emotions and cope with stress by maintaining a generally humorous and cheerful outlook during times of adversity and by a tendency to be frequently amused by the incongruities of life (e.g., making oneself feel better by seeing humor in life's daily events). Although these two types of humor are similar in many respects, Martin and colleagues (2003) posit that self-enhancing humor has a more intrapsychic focus, whereas affiliative humor has a relatively more interpersonal focus. The finding that self-reports of affiliative humor use are more strongly positively correlated with self-reports of extraversion than are self-reports of self-enhancing humor (Martin et al., 2003) support this notion.

Aggressive humor is the use of humor for the purpose of disparaging or manipulating others, as in sarcasm, teasing, ridicule, derision, or disparagement humor. Martin and colleagues (2003) describe this type of humor as a means of enhancing the self at the expense of others and relates to the tendency to express humor without regard for its potential impact on others (e.g., using humor to criticize or put someone down without regard for their feelings). Finally, *self-defeating humor* involves the use of excessively self-disparaging humor, attempts to ingratiate oneself and amuse others by doing or saying funny things at one's own expense, and laughing along with others when being ridiculed or disparaged. On the one hand, individuals who tend to use this style of behavior may appear to be witty or amusing (e.g., "class clowns"), but the use of this type of humor stems from emotional neediness, avoidance, and low self-esteem (Fabrizi & Pollio, 1987; e.g., excessively making fun of one's own weaknesses, blunder or faults, or allowing other to do so, in an effort to be liked by others).

Martin and colleagues (2003) developed a self-report measure, the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ), to assess individual differences in the tendency to use each of the four styles of humor. In the context of close relationships, recent research indicates that it is affiliative and aggressive humor styles in particular that are most strongly related to measures of overall relationship quality. For example, Puhlik-Doris

(2004) asked university students in dating relationships to rate their own and their partners' humor styles using the HSQ, as well as their satisfaction with the relationship. Self-ratings and partner ratings of affiliative humor were associated with greater relationship satisfaction, whereas greater use of aggressive humor in oneself or one's partner predicted greater dissatisfaction with the dating relationship. In contrast, self-enhancing and self-defeating humor were not consistently associated with relationship satisfaction. Similarly, in a study of humor styles in same-sex friendships, Ward (2004) found that individuals who reported engaging in more affiliative and less aggressive humor had friends that rated them to be more enjoyable to interact with and fulfilling more positive friendship functions, such as companionship, intimacy, emotional security, and affection. The results of these studies suggest that the use of affiliative humor may be especially beneficial for relationship satisfaction, whereas aggressive humor in a partner seems to be particularly associated with relationship dissatisfaction. The results of these studies also suggest that use of self-defeating and self-enhancing humor have little or no association with measures of relationship quality.

Studies using the HSQ are limited, however, by a reliance on self-report trait measures of humor styles and an exclusively correlational methodology. These methods do not allow for a more process-oriented approach to examining the role of different types of humor in actual interactions between partners in a relationship. In addition, the use of self-report measures of both humor styles and relationship satisfaction may produce inflated correlations between these variables due to common method variance.

The purpose of the present study was to extend this previous research in several ways. First, we wished to investigate whether independent observers could reliably observe the humor styles that comprise the HSQ, particularly the two styles of humor that previous research suggests are linked with relationship quality, in naturalistic conversations between relationship partners. Thus, rather than relying on self-reports, we made use of an observational rating system for addressing the degree

to which dating partners used different types of humor during a videotaped discussion about an unresolved problem in the relationship. Consistent with the findings of past research with the HSQ, we also expected moderate positive correlations among the humor style usage, since individuals with a greater overall sense of humor are likely to use both positive and negative humor to some degree. Nonetheless, we expected that the positive and negative humor styles would be distinct enough to produce differential correlations with other variables.

A second major purpose of the study was to examine associations between the observed uses of humor and indicators of relationship quality. Our hypotheses focus primarily on affiliative and aggressive humor use, given previous studies with the HSQ suggests that these two humor styles were most consistently related to relationship evaluations. We make no specific hypotheses involving self-defeating or self-enhancing humor. In particular, given that prior research suggests that people feel more satisfied with their relationships when they report that their partners use more affiliative, and less aggressive, forms of humor, we predicted that individuals who report greater satisfaction with the relationship would have partners who are observed to display greater use of affiliative humor and lower use of aggressive humor during a problem discussion.

Finally, we sought to examine associations between the use of affiliative and aggressive humor during the problem discussion and subsequent changes in individuals' feelings of perceived closeness to their partners, their perceptions of the degree to which they resolved the conflict, and their self-rated negative emotions following the discussion. These analyses would allow us to take a more process-oriented approach to study the relations of different humor styles on relationship variables. Specifically, people primarily use affiliative humor to reduce interpersonal tensions and increase cohesiveness, and thus we predicted that individuals would report increased feelings of closeness to their partners, greater perceived resolution of the conflict, and lower levels of distress following discussions when their partners used more affiliative humor. People pri-

marily use aggressive humor, on the other hand, to ridicule or disparage others, and thus, we predicted that people would feel less close to their partners, report that the conflict remains unresolved, and report greater levels of distress following the discussions when their partners used more aggressive humor.

Method

Participants

Ninety-eight heterosexual dating couples (98 men and 98 women) from Texas A&M University, a large University located in College Station, Texas, participated in this study. College Station has a population of over 100,000 and is located between Houston and Austin. We used this convenience sample of university students because we did not have the financial resources available to obtain a random sample from the local population. To ensure that they were involved in fairly well-established relationships, all couples had to have been dating for a minimum of 3 months to participate. On average, couples had been dating for 17.45 months ($SD = 13.87$). The average age of participants was 19.63 years ($SD = 1.33$) for men, and 18.90 years ($SD = 0.87$) for women. Students who were enrolled in the Introductory Psychology course earned partial course credit for participating in this study (i.e., a small portion of their final grade for the class). All participants received a coupon for a free ice cream and were enrolled in a lottery to win a free dinner for two at a local restaurant in return for their participation.

Procedure

The study consisted of three phases. In Phase 1, groups of up to eight couples initially completed some questionnaires regarding their perceptions of themselves, their partner, and their relationship. We placed men and women in separate rooms to complete these questionnaires. In the second phase of the study, participants completed daily diaries regarding events in their relationship for a period of 14 days. Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, and Kashy (2005) presented the results of the diary

portion of this study, and because they are not the focus of this research, we will not discuss them further.

Following the diary period, each couple returned to the lab to discuss and try to resolve the most serious unresolved conflict they had experienced during the diary period. We seated both members of each couple at a table facing each other, and we gave them 5 min to choose a specific unresolved conflict to discuss. We instructed them to “choose the most serious or prominent conflict that occurred during the 14-day diary period that was not completely resolved.” If a couple could not identify a conflict from the diary period (this occurred in approximately 10 couples), we asked them to select an unresolved conflict that was currently ongoing in their relationship. Every couple selected an area of conflict in their relationship without difficulty. After choosing a specific conflict issue, we informed partners that they had 7 min to discuss the conflict while being videotaped (with the prior consent of both partners) by a dual-camera, split-screen video system. We asked them to discuss the conflict as if they were trying to resolve the conflict, but we told them that they may or may not actually resolve the conflict in the time allotted. Immediately following each discussion, we placed partners in separate rooms and asked them to report the degree to which they felt the conflict had been resolved, how distressed they felt, and how close they felt to their partners. We then thanked them provided a full debriefing.

Measures

The general background questionnaire, administered during the introductory session, asked participants to provide basic demographic information (i.e., gender, age, dating status, number of months dating). After completing these questions, we asked participants to complete the following questionnaires.

Perceived Relationship Quality Components Scale (PRQC). We assessed relationship quality during the initial testing session with Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas’s (2000) 18-item PRQC. Participants rated each item on

a 7-point scale (anchored 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). We averaged responses to all items to form a global index of relationship quality, with higher scores indicating greater perceived relationship quality (α s = .92 for men, .89 for women).

Inclusion of Other in Self Scale (IOS). The IOS (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) assesses the degree to which people include their romantic partners in their self-concept. It measures behavioral and subjective facets of closeness and correlates with relationship satisfaction (Aron et al., 1992). We asked participants to complete this question two separate times—once during the introductory session and once immediately following the discussion of the relationship-based conflict.

Postvideotape self-report measures. Immediately following the videotaped discussion, we asked participants to answer two questions (privately and in a different room than their partners) regarding the extent to which they felt they had resolved their problem, and how productive they felt the discussion was toward resolving their differences. Participants rated each item on a 9-point scale (anchored 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*), and we averaged responses to both items to create an index of self-perceived resolution (r s between the two items = .65 for men, .55 for women).

We also asked participants to answer three questions about how distressed they felt while discussing the conflict (i.e., the degree to which they felt upset, anxious, and stressed). Participants rated each item on a 9-point scale (anchored 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*), and we averaged responses to all items to create an index of self-perceived distress (α s = .89 for men, .83 for women).

Behavioral ratings. After the completion of the study, we recruited five trained raters (four men and one woman) from the University of Western Ontario, located in London, Ontario, Canada, to view each of the videotaped interactions and make ratings regarding the degree to which each partner used different types of humor during the discussions. During an initial training session, all of the raters met

with the authors to discuss in detail each of the four humor styles discussed previously. We then provided each rater with a written description of the humor styles (see the Appendix) and asked them to view 10 conflict discussions by themselves without making any ratings, but to look for examples of the use of each style of humor. We then met with the raters as a group to view some video clips highlighting the use of each style of humor. It was a general consensus among the raters that study participants were not engaging in the use of self-defeating or self-enhancing styles of humor, or were doing so very infrequently, when discussing their relationship-based conflict (we discuss possible reasons for this in the discussion section). Therefore, we asked the raters to focus primarily on the use of affiliative and aggressive humor during the discussions (types of humor that were consistently present in the discussions). We then asked raters each to rate the humor use of both partners in all of the couples in a random order, starting with couples that they had not already viewed. Raters rated the degree to which each partner used affiliative and aggressive humor during the discussion using 7-point scales (anchored 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). In addition, they rated how funny each partner was overall using the same 7-point scale. Previous research has indicated that globally rated behavior displayed across an entire interaction period, such as the ratings made in the present research, produces data that are as reliable and valid as behavioral assessment at a microlevel (e.g., categorizing each single turn of speech; see, e.g., Julien, Markman, & Lindahl, 1989; Weiss & Tolman, 1990). We assessed interrater reliability by means of Cronbach's alpha, treating the ratings from the five raters like items on a scale (when all raters provide ratings for all study participants on each item, Cronbach's alpha yields results identical to the intraclass correlation). Interrater reliability was high for the affiliative humor rating ($\alpha = .88$ for men, .84 for women), the aggressive humor rating ($\alpha = .87$ for men, .86 for women), and the overall funniness rating ($\alpha = .86$ for men, .84 for women). We therefore averaged ratings across the five raters for each participant to generate indexes of affiliative

and aggressive humor, as well as overall funniness, with higher scores representing greater use of each humor style during the interaction or greater funniness.

Data analytic strategy

The Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) strongly influenced our data analytic approach. The APIM suggests that when individuals are involved in an interdependent relationship, their outcomes depend not only on their own characteristics and inputs but also on their partners' characteristics and inputs. As an example, consider how an individual's self-reports of distress following the conflict discussion may be associated with the use of humor during the discussion. These perceptions may be associated with an individual's own use of humor, such that people feel less distressed when they themselves use more affiliative humor (an actor effect). A person's perceptions of distress may also be associated with his or her partner's use of affiliative humor during the discussion such that people feel less distressed when their partners use more affiliative humor (a partner effect). Including partner effects in the model allows one to test for the mutual influence that might occur between individuals within a relationship, and controls for variance in individuals' outcome scores that could be associated with their partners' predictor variable scores.

We tested all of our models using multi-level modeling, also known as hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), following the suggestions of Campbell and Kashy (2002; see also Kashy, Campbell, & Harris, 2006; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) regarding the use of HLM with dyadic data. In the dyadic case, HLM treats the data from each partner as nested scores within a group that has $n = 2$. We effect coded gender (-1 for men, 1 for women), and we centered all continuous predictor variables on the grand mean.

To illustrate how we estimated our models, below we present a prototype equation, using HLM notation (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002),

for testing the Level 1 model with self-reported distress following the conflict resolution task:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Y = & \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{actor affiliative humor}) \\
 & + \beta_2(\text{partner affiliative humor}) \\
 & + \beta_3(\text{actor aggressive humor}) \\
 & + \beta_4(\text{partner aggressive humor}) \\
 & + \beta_5(\text{actor relationship quality}) \\
 & + \beta_6(\text{partner relationship quality}) \\
 & + \beta_7(\text{gender}) + d + e
 \end{aligned}$$

This equation predicts the value of the self-reported distress (Y) for a given couple from an average level term (b_0 , the intercept), the individual's observed use of affiliative and aggressive humor (b_1 and b_3), the individual's partner's observed use of affiliative and aggressive humor (b_2 and b_4), the individual's own self-reported relationship quality (b_5), the individual's partner's self-reported relationship quality (b_6), gender (b_7), an error term (d) that reflects variation across couples (i.e., a random intercept), and error (e). We also entered the interactions between the gender and the actor and partner effects of affiliative and aggressive humor but no significant interactions with gender emerged. Therefore, all of the results for the following models are presented pooled across gender.

The Level 2 models, using HLM notation, are:

$$\beta_0 = \gamma_{00} + u_0$$

$$\beta_1 = \gamma_{10}$$

$$\beta_2 = \gamma_{20}$$

$$\beta_3 = \gamma_{30}$$

$$\beta_4 = \gamma_{40}$$

$$\beta_5 = \gamma_{50}$$

$$\beta_6 = \gamma_{60}$$

$$\beta_7 = \gamma_{70}$$

In the first model, the intercept for the dyad is a function of both a fixed (γ_{00}) and a random (u_0) component. The fixed component provides an estimate of self-reported distress for

couples when all other predictor variables equal zero. The random component estimates the degree to which self-reported distress varies from dyad to dyad after controlling for the effects of the other predictor variables. The second through seventh models suggest that the actor and partner effects are constant across dyads given that there is no random component in any of the models, a required constraint given the fact that each dyad involves only two individuals (see Kenny et al., 2006). We used the Satterthwaite (1946) approximation to determine the degrees of freedom for the intercept and slopes, meaning that the degrees of freedom for each mixed predictor variable is some value between the number of dyads less 1 and the number of individuals less 2 (Kenny et al., 2006).

Results

Presented in Table 1 for descriptive purposes are the correlations between the study variables within and between partners, as well as the means and standard deviations for each variable for both partners. Within sex, the correlations between the observed use of each humor style were positive and significant, suggesting that the more men and women used one style of humor, the more likely they were to use the other style of humor as well. Positive and significant correlations between partners within each couple on the use of each humor style emerged, showing that observers rated partners within a given couple to use of each humor style in a similar fashion. Overall, men were observed to use more affiliative humor than women, whereas men and women used aggressive humor to an equal degree. The correlations between the use of each humor style and the overall funniness rating within partners were also positive and significant, indicating that observers who rated participants as being more funny also rated them as using the affiliative and aggressive humor styles to a greater extent. Lastly, observers rated men to be funnier than their partners during the discussion.

Relationship quality and humor use

We conducted the following analyses to determine if people used more positive or

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of study variables

Study variables	Study variables						M (SD)		t test
	1	2	3	4	5	6	Men	Women	
1. Affiliative humor	.66**	.53**	.84**	-.18	.08	-.16	3.35 (1.13)	3.01 (0.97)	3.90**
2. Aggressive humor	.65**	.61**	.69**	-.24*	-.08	-.16	2.96 (1.26)	2.87 (1.26)	< 1.0, ns
3. Overall funniness	.91**	.73**	.72**	-.25*	.07	-.16	2.58 (1.20)	2.25 (1.00)	3.94**
4. IOS-pre	-.20*	-.20*	-.20*	.41**	.54**	.60**	5.67 (1.11)	5.76 (1.19)	< 1.0, ns
5. IOS-post	.04	-.15	-.03	.41**	.58**	.58**	5.70 (1.26)	5.68 (1.41)	< 1.0, ns
6. Relationship quality	.01	-.10	-.06	.48**	.35**	.39**	6.18 (0.54)	6.07 (0.68)	1.72, ns

Note. The correlations for men appear below the diagonal, the correlations for women appear above the diagonal, and the correlations between partners appear along the diagonal. Degrees of freedom for the matched-pairs *t* test were 97. IOS = Inclusion of Other in Self Scale.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

negative styles of humor while discussing a relationship-based conflict if they, or their partners, were more or less happy with their relationship. We ran two models, one with observed affiliative humor use serving as the dependent variable and one with observed aggressive humor serving as the dependent variable. In each model, we entered the actor and partner effects of perceived relationship quality (as assessed prior to the discussion of the conflict) as predictor variables. Because affiliative and aggressive humor uses were positively correlated, we included the actor and partner effects of one humor style as predictor variables when the other served as the outcome variable. Additionally, we included gender as a predictor variable, as well as interactions between gender and the other predictor variables. No gender interactions emerged in these models, and we therefore removed from the final models.

In the model predicting the observed use of affiliative humor, a main effect of gender emerged showing that men used more affiliative humor than women, $b = -.17$, $t(95) = -4.17$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$. The actor effect of perceived relationship quality was not significant, but a significant partner effect of this variable did emerge, $b = .22$, $t(184) = 2.35$, $SE = .09$, $p < .05$. This partner effect suggests that people with partners who were more satisfied with the relationship used more affiliative humor (controlling for their and their partner's observed use of aggressive humor). A similar pattern of effects emerged in the model predicting the use of aggressive humor—no actor effect of perceived relationship quality emerged, but a significant partner effect did emerge, $b = -.35$, $t(190) = -3.03$, $SE = .11$, $p < .01$. Thus, people with partners who were more satisfied with the relationship used less aggressive humor (controlling for their and their partner's observed use of affiliative humor). Overall, people who were more satisfied in their relationships had partners who used more affiliative and less aggressive humor during a conflict discussion. These results, using observed indices of affiliative and aggressive humor use, are consistent with past research using self-reports of typical use of each humor style.

Humor use predicting changes in perceived closeness to the partner

In the next set of models, we tested the degree to which the use of affiliative and aggressive humor during the conflict discussion predicted perceptions of the partner and relationship immediately following the discussion. Our first model assessed changes in perceived closeness to the partner using the IOS scale. In this model, scores on the IOS following the discussion served as the outcome variable, with scores on the IOS assessed during the initial session serving as a predictor variable. Partialing initial IOS scores in this manner allowed us to test initial to postdiscussion change in perceptions of closeness to the partner. We then entered the actor and partner effects of both affiliative and aggressive humor use as predictor variables, as well as gender. Gender did not interact with any of the predictor variables in this analysis, and we therefore dropped these interactions from the model. We present the results of this analysis in Table 2. A marginally significant actor effect of affiliative humor emerged, showing that people reported feeling somewhat closer to their partner following the discussion when they themselves used more affiliative humor during the discussion. A significant partner effect of affiliative humor also emerged, suggesting that people felt much closer to their partners following the discussion when their

partners used more affiliative humor during the discussion. In addition, a marginally significant partner effect of aggressive humor emerged, showing that people felt somewhat less close to their partners when their partners used more aggressive humor during the discussion.

Humor use predicting perceived resolution of conflict following discussion

In the next analysis, we focused on individuals' perceptions of the degree to which the discussion helped to resolve their conflict. In addition to the predictor variables outlined for the previous analysis, we entered the actor and partner effects of perceived relationship quality as predictor variables in this model to statistically control for overall relationship satisfaction on the outcome variable. Once again, no gender interactions with the predictor variables emerged in this analysis, and we did not include these interaction terms in the final model. Presented in Table 2 are the results of this analysis. Overall, people who reported greater relationship quality also felt that the discussion assisted in helping them resolve their conflict. Although no actor effects of affiliative and aggressive humor emerged, partner effects of both affiliative and aggressive humor did emerge in this analysis. When people had partners who used more

Table 2. *Multilevel regression analyses for changes in perceived closeness, perceived resolution of conflict, and feelings of distress during the conflict discussion*

		Change in perceived closeness following discussion	Perceived resolution of conflict following discussion	Feelings of distress following discussion
Predictor variables	Source	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>), <i>df</i>	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>), <i>df</i>	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>), <i>df</i>
	Intercept	5.735 (.088), 91	5.504 (.183), 94	3.258 (.134), 94
	Gender	-.041 (.064), 91	-.197 (.119), 94	-.162 [†] (.091), 94
Affiliative humor	Actor effect	.179 [†] (.096), 180	.277 (.188), 187	-.226 (.141), 185
	Partner effect	.242* (.096), 180	.509** (.188), 187	-.446** (.141), 185
Aggressive humor	Actor effect	-.121 (.078), 186	-.178 (.153), 186	.296* (.114), 187
	Partner effect	-.139 [†] (.078), 187	-.399* (.153), 186	.031 (.114), 187
Perceived relationship quality	Actor effect	—	.453 [†] (.246), 186	-.163 (.184), 188
	Partner effect	—	.087 (.246), 186	-.28 (.184), 188

Note. We report all effects as unstandardized regression coefficients.

[†]*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01.

affiliative humor, they subsequently reported that the discussion helped resolve their differences. In contrast, when people had partners who used more aggressive humor, they subsequently reported that the discussion did not help them resolve their differences.

Humor use predicting feelings of distress following discussion

In this analysis, we used self-reported distress following the discussion as the outcome variable, using the same predictor variables as in the previous analysis. Once again, no gender interactions with the predictor variables emerged in this analysis, and we did not include these interaction terms in the final model. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2. A marginally significant gender difference emerged showing that men reported somewhat more distress following the conversation than did women. A partner effect of affiliative humor also emerged, indicating that people felt less distressed following the discussion when their partners used more affiliative humor. For aggressive humor, a significant actor effect emerged in this analysis, showing that people who used more aggressive humor during the discussion reported feeling more distressed following the conflict discussion.

Discussion

We had three broad goals in conducting this investigation. Our first goal was to determine whether, during a naturalistic conversation between partners in a close relationship, we could reliably observe the use of the different types of humor styles that Martin and colleagues (2003) introduced. We provided raters, current University students, with written descriptions of the humor styles along with some detailed verbal explanations of how these different uses of humor might be recognized and distinguished from each other. For affiliative and aggressive humor styles, the results revealed very good interrater, suggesting that raters readily observed these types of humor use in videotapes of partners involved in a discussion about a relationship-based

problem. Raters did not readily observe the use of self-defeating and self-enhancing humor, however, and thus, we did not obtain reliable ratings of the use of these styles of humor.

Although the mean ratings for affiliative and aggressive humor use were relatively low (most being at or below the midpoint on a 7-point scale), the results indicate that many individuals do seem to use both types of humor to some degree while discussing a relationship problem with a dating partner. This occurred even though the participants were unaware that humor was to be a focus of the study, and we made no mention of humor in the instructions. Indeed, discussions of a relationship problem (as opposed to a more positive and enjoyable type of interaction) might be a particularly good context for observing negative as well as positive types of humor in research on humor in relationships. The relatively high correlations among the two humor uses within participants reveal that individuals who use more affiliative humor are also more likely to use more aggressive humor. Presumably people who have a greater overall sense of humor tend to express humor in each of these ways to some degree. This finding is consistent with research using the HSQ, which has typically found moderate correlations among these two humor styles (Martin et al., 2003). In addition, the strong correlations of each use of humor with overall funniness suggest that people perceive both types of humor as funny and humorous, even though some of them (i.e., aggressive humor) may be detrimental to relationships. The strong correlations of humor uses between partners indicates that the degree to which individuals use each of these different types of humor in a conversation is strongly associated with the degree to which their partner uses them. The reported correlations between each type of humor use and overall funniness may be somewhat inflated due to shared method variance (i.e., each rater provided ratings for each behavioral index for each partner), suggesting that future research should replicate this pattern of correlations using other methods. Furthermore, because the use of each type of humor is strongly correlated between partners,

it is important to employ dyadic data analytic techniques, such as the HLM approach used here, to control for and test partner effects.

Our second main goal was to explore the overall link between relationship satisfaction and the observed use of positive and negative humor by examining correlations between perceived relationship quality and the use of affiliative and aggressive humor. Using HLM to control for and test partner effects on the outcome variables, we found that, as predicted, individuals who reported greater satisfaction with the relationship had partners who used more affiliative humor and less aggressive humor during the problem discussions. Thus, even though these two uses of humor are positively correlated and are both related to funniness, they show opposite associations with partners' relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, no association between individuals' relationship satisfaction and their own use of these humor styles emerged, indicating that these different uses of humor have more to do with partner satisfaction than with one's own satisfaction with the relationship. These results are consistent with those of previous self-report studies indicating that relationship satisfaction tends to be primarily related to perceptions of one's partner's sense of humor than to self-ratings of humor (e.g., Rust & Goldstein, 1989; Ward, 2004; Ziv & Gadish, 1989). Of course, we do not know the direction of causality from these correlations. It may be that more frequent use of affiliative and less frequent use of aggressive humor causes one's partner to be more satisfied with the relationship. Alternatively, it may be that having a partner who is highly satisfied may cause individuals to use more affiliative humor, whereas having a partner who is dissatisfied may cause them to use more aggressive humor in their interactions with the partner.

Our third main goal was to explore in a more process-oriented way the links between humor use and relationship outcomes. We did this by examining the association between the observed use of affiliative and aggressive humor during the problem discussions and individuals' feelings of closeness, perceived problem resolution, and emotional distress following the discussion. By statistically control-

ling for baseline closeness (using the IOS scale) in the analysis of postdiscussion closeness scores, we were able to examine the degree to which the use of each type of humor was associated with changes in this variable. Furthermore, partialing baseline relationship quality in the analyses of perceived problem resolution and distress allowed us to control for the influences of overall relationship satisfaction on these variables.

The results revealed that, as we predicted, participants whose partners used more affiliative humor during the problem discussion subsequently reported increased feelings of closeness to their partners, whereas those whose partners used more aggressive humor subsequently reported decreased feelings of closeness (though this effect was marginally significant). Thus, these positive and negative uses of humor may be an important method of regulating close relationships (Shiota et al., 2004). Similarly, individuals who used more affiliative humor and less aggressive humor reported the conflict with their partner to be resolved to a greater degree during the discussion. Thus, affiliative humor may facilitate problem resolution, perhaps by reaffirming underlying feelings of affection despite an ongoing problem, whereas aggressive humor may interfere with problem resolution, perhaps by accentuating the perceived differences and conflicting points of view of the partners.

With regard to self-reported emotional distress following the discussion, the two types of humor use revealed somewhat different patterns. Affiliative humor showed a partner effect, such that individuals reported less distress after their partners used more affiliative humor, whereas aggressive humor showed an actor effect, such that individuals reported greater emotional distress after they themselves used more aggressive humor in the discussion. The use of affiliative humor, therefore, may be a way of reducing distress in one's partner, whereas aggressive humor may serve to intensify one's own feelings of distress (although we cannot confidently conclude the direction of causality in these associations). Overall, these findings provide support for the view that positive uses of humor (i.e., affiliative) may play an important

role in the regulation of close relationships, contributing to feelings of affection, attachment, and general well-being, and helping to stabilize relationships during times of conflict (Shiota et al., 2004). On the other hand, the results are also consistent with the view that more negative uses of humor (i.e., aggressive) may be detrimental to close relationships, reducing feelings of satisfaction and closeness, and interfering with problem resolution.

Interestingly, although a few previous studies of married couples have suggested that humor in men may have more negative effects on relationships than humor in women (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Lefcourt & Martin, 1986), we did not find any interactions with gender in the observed effects in this study. Thus, the present investigation suggests that, at least in heterosexual dating relationships, affiliative and aggressive uses of humor by both men and women are associated in similar ways with partners' perceptions of relationship quality, closeness, conflict resolution, and emotional distress. Cohan and Bradbury's (1997) research, however, was a longitudinal investigation where the observed associations emerged over the longer term, whereas the present research is cross-sectional in nature. It is possible that affiliative humor use and satisfaction are concurrently associated but that men's humor use predicts negative change in satisfaction over time. In other words, the level of humor used is associated with current levels of satisfaction but too much use of humor in conflict situations is associated with declining satisfaction. Future research should test this possibility, thus helping to clarify the role of gender and humor use in predicting relationship outcomes.

In sum, this study extends previous research on the role of positive and negative uses of humor in close relationships. By employing observational ratings of positive and negative styles of humor during a discussion between partners in dating couples about a problem in their relationship, our results provide additional evidence for the importance of humor in predicting relationship outcomes. The use of observational rating rather than self-reports of humor ensures that the observed correlations between humor use and self-reports of rela-

tionship perceptions are not simply due to method variance. Further research is needed to explore in more detail the specific ways in which these positive and negative forms of humor influence individuals' perceptions, feelings, and attitudes and consequently affect relationship cohesiveness and stability. It would also be of interest to investigate the ways people express these humor uses in different types of interpersonal interactions or contexts (e.g., more enjoyable activities vs. conflicts), cognitive and emotional effects of the different types of humor in different contexts, and the ways these effects may vary at different stages of development of relationships and across different types of relationships.

The current research should be interpreted with some caveats. Given the nonexperimental nature of this research, causal inferences cannot be made. We do not know, for instance, if the use of different types of humor during the discussion caused people to feel closer, or less close, to their partners following the discussion. It is also possible that other relationship events that we did not assess between the testing sessions had a causal influence on both feelings of closeness to their partners and their humor use during the discussion.

Additionally, our research focused on the observed use of affiliative and aggressive humor but not self-defeating or self-enhancing humor. The latter two types of humor could not be reliably assessed in this research because the raters reported that participants were simply not engaging in the use of these humor styles during the discussions. Many possible reasons for why people did not use these two types of humor with great observable frequency during the discussion exist. For example, people tend to use self-defeating humor in order to gain social approval and interpersonal acceptance, and therefore, they may be more likely to use self-defeating humor in group settings with friends and or strangers. Additionally, individuals tend to use self-enhancing humor to amuse themselves when faced with life's challenges, but when discussing a conflict with their partners, our participants probably focused more on the affective state of their partners and acted

accordingly. It is also possible that participants privately used this type of humor to cope with the stress associated with their discussion, making it difficult to observe the use of this type of humor. Future research should focus on other contexts in which these two humor styles are more likely to be displayed in order to assess their possible links with measures of relationship quality.

One other limitation of this research is that a majority of the raters were male. It is possible that men and women view the use of humor differently, resulting in somewhat skewed ratings in our current research. Although the interrater reliabilities obtained in this research did not suggest any meaningful differences in the ratings based on rater sex, future research should have an equal number of male and female raters. Also, the pattern of reported findings should be replicated in other university contexts, in samples of older people with more established relationships, and in other cultural contexts to determine how generally applicable the results are. It is possible that the associations between humor use and relationship processes discovered in this research will vary in these other samples, particularly in cultures that are more laconic with humor use, and in cultures that differ in what is considered funny and when humor should be used.

These caveats notwithstanding, we feel the current research contributes to our understanding of the role of humor use in regulating relationship perceptions during interpersonal interactions. Specifically, this research provides the first empirical support for the notion that when people use more affiliative humor during a conflict discussion, their partners feel closer to them and feel that they were more successful at resolving their conflicts, but that when they use more aggressive humor their partners feel less close and feel that the discussion did not contribute to resolving the conflict. These results can educate people involved in romantic relationships, and relationship therapists, to the importance of understanding the differential effects of humor use in romantic relationships—being funny is costly if the focus of the humor is to put down their partner, but is beneficial if the focus of the humor is to alleviate partners' distress.

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Appendix. Descriptions of the four humor styles provided to raters (as described in Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003).

Affiliative humor

Individuals high in affiliative humor would:

- Use humor to enhance relationships with others and to reduce interpersonal tension
- Tell funny stories about themselves to make others laugh (not take themselves too seriously) but still maintain a sense of self-acceptance
- Easily and spontaneously think of witty comments when talking with other people
- Laugh and joke often with others

- Not have to work very hard at making others laugh
- Enjoy making others laugh
- Be the “life of the party”

Note: The focus of this type of humor is on amusing *other people* in a way that maintains a respectful attitude towards oneself and others.

Aggressive humor

Individuals high in aggressive humor would:

- Use humor to put down, disparage, or criticize others
- Use humor in a sarcastic and or ridiculing manner
- Use humor to tease others in an offensive manner

- Use humor in any otherwise offensive manner
- Be oblivious to (or not care about) the detrimental effects of their humor use on others (e.g., sexist or racist humor)
- Be unable to keep themselves from telling a joke or saying something funny even if the humor is offensive or inappropriate to the situation
- Use humor to manipulate others by implying a threat of ridicule
- Use humor to make themselves feel superior to others

Note: This type of humor reflects a lack of respect for other people.

Self-enhancing humor

Individuals high in self-enhancing humor would:

- Maintain a humorous attitude even when faced with problems, stress, or adversity
- Have a humorous outlook that protects them from developing negative feelings (unhappiness, depression, anger, anxiety)
- “Look on the lighter side” and be frequently amused by the incongruities of life
- Use humor to maintain a healthy perspective on potentially negative situations
- Be described as cheerful, upbeat, and not easily upset
- Notice and enjoy humor even when not with other people
- Use humor to give themselves a feeling of control over the situation

Note: The focus of this type of humor is on amusing *oneself* in a way that reflects a respectful attitude towards oneself and others.

Self-defeating humor

Individuals high in self-defeating humor would:

- Use humor in an attempt to make others like them, but do so by disregarding their own needs
- Use humor in a way that is childish, immature, or silly (e.g., the “class clown”)
- Be pitied by those around them for their excessive attempts to make others laugh, because people are usually laughing “at” them and not “with” them
- Engage in outrageous acts to get others to laugh
- Allow themselves to be the “butt” of others’ humor
- Say funny things at their own expense to ingratiate themselves or gain others’ approval (to an excessive extent)
- Use humor as a form of “defensive denial”; i.e., use it to avoid thinking about or dealing with negative feelings or problems
- Put on a humorous facade to hide their true feelings from others
- Use humor to cover up underlying emotional neediness and low self-esteem

Note: This type of humor reflects a lack of respect for oneself.