Humor and Intimate Relationships

What can humor say about your relationship?
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Abstract
The present study investigated the link between similarity in sense of humor and overall relationship quality, as well as whether humor is a viable avenue for conflict resolution in romantic couples. We asked both members of a romantic couple to respond to online survey items addressing humor styles and intimacy. We hypothesized that partners with greater similarity in sense of humor would report higher relationship quality than couples who were less similar to each other in sense of humor. Participants also completed a qualitative conflict resolution measure to determine whether humor is an effective method for conflict resolution. We expected affiliative humor to be more conducive than aggressive humor for resolving conflict in romantic relationships. We will be using a zero-order correlation (Pearson's r) to determine whether the relationship between humor styles and relationship satisfaction exists. Because the conflict resolution section is more of an exploratory experiment, we simply plan to observe the results to see if there is anything that would suggest delving deeper into the subject.

Introduction
Humor is a universal aspect of human experience (Lefcourt, 2001). Although standards may vary, humor is one of the few things every culture in the world has in common. It may not seem as important as other mechanisms for survival, such as the development of critical thinking or executive functioning. However, evolutionary researchers have proven that there are specialized brain circuits for humor and laughter in human beings, suggesting that they are an essential part of being human (Gervais & Wilson, 2005). Considering the way that humor is often used between humans (and primates), the assumption can be made that its evolutionary function pertains to play and development of social ties and relationships. There are many goals of humor, some of which include extending play, gaining attention, and even confronting others.

In the context of intimacy, humor is often used as a technique to attract partners and sustain relationships. According to Murstein & Brust (1985), sense of humor is an important facet for people seeking companionship because it is indicative of interests, values, intelligence, etc. However, more recent studies have concluded that humor within intimate relationships has been overrated because there is no correlation between two partners’ similarity in humor styles and their relationship satisfaction (Barelts & Barelts-Dijkstra, 2010; Cann, Zapata, & Davis, 2011).

In this study, we are attempting to further investigate the conclusion of whether humor is or is not an essential feature of romantic relationships. We are also hoping to initiate the conversation of whether humor is an important factor in couples’ conflict resolution styles through the use of an exploratory questionnaire.

By examining this field, we hope to illuminate the influence of humor in relationships as well as generate a better understanding of the role humor plays within relationships.

Method
Participants
- Sample size of 110 total participants, only 4 couples.
- Students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire
- At least 18 years of age; no upper age limit
- Recruited through electronic sign-up system

Measures
  - 32 items, 7-Point Likert Scale
  - Determines what style of humor the participant uses
    - Affiliative
    - Self-enhancing
    - Aggressive
    - Self-Defeating
- Relationship Assessment Scale – S.S. Hendrick (1988)
  - 7 items, 5-point Likert Scale
  - Measures general relationship satisfaction
- Conflict Resolution Questionnaire – Researcher-designed (Below)
  1. Think of a recent disagreement you have had with your significant other. Describe it in a few sentences.
  2. How long did this specific conflict last?
  3. How would you rate the severity of this conflict?
  4. Was this conflict ever resolved?
  5. Explain how this conflict was resolved. Or if this conflict was not resolved, explain why not.

Procedures
- The survey was self-administered online by participants through the University’s survey administration system.
- 51-item survey took respondents approximately 15 to 30 minutes, depending on how extensive their answers were.
- After completing the survey, participants were debriefed on the nature of the research question.

Results

Results cont.

Humor Styles
- This was the primary research objective;
- However, due to the low recruitment of couples, statistical analyses were irrelevant.
- Of the four couples that did complete the study:
  - 3 couples had similar humor styles, and 1 couple differed.
  - The couple with different humor styles ultimately had a lower relationship quality than each of the three couples with similar humor styles.

Conflict Resolution
- Of the 115 responses, 93 of the conflicts were resolved
- 29 of these conflicts were resolved using some type of humor
- As the severity of the conflict increased, the instances of humor decreased
  - 37% used humor when conflict was not severe
  - 31% used humor when the conflict was somewhat severe
  - Nobody used humor if the conflict was more than somewhat severe

Discussion
Limitations
- Extremely low representations of couples
- Homogenous sample
- Novel measure for Conflict Resolution, lacking psychometric data
- Correlational data, does not support causal inferences
- Matching participants’ responses severely limits the amount of useful results, at least for Humor Styles comparisons

Future Research
- Consider a more in-depth look at how humor operates in romantic relationships
  - Sex differences in humor
  - Giving humor vs. receiving humor
  - Analyzing personality traits
  - Attachment Styles
- Explore humor use in other methods of communication, not only conflict resolution (i.e. decision making, persuasion)
- In terms on conflict resolution, validate the theory that the method of resolution may depend on the severity of the conflict

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