

## Humor Use in Romantic Relationships: The Effects of Relationship Satisfaction and Pleasant Versus Conflict Situations

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**ABSTRACT.** In this study, the authors explored the use of positive, negative, and avoiding humor in 2 types of situations by individuals in romantic relationships. Participants ( $N = 154$ ) rated their frequency of humor use in either a typical conflict scenario with their partner or a typical pleasant event. Participants also indicated their overall degree of romantic relationship satisfaction. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that individuals who were more satisfied with their relationship reported higher levels of positive humor use and lower levels of negative and avoiding humor use. Furthermore, lower levels of negative and avoiding humor use were reported for the conflict situation. Last, a significant 2-way interaction revealed that individuals who were high in relationship satisfaction reported significantly lower levels of negative humor use in a conflict situation as compared with a pleasant encounter. In contrast, individuals who were low in relationship satisfaction reported the same high levels of negative humor use regardless of whether they were in a conflict situation or a pleasant encounter. The authors discuss these findings in terms of the need for further research to clearly delineate the factors that may influence the complex use of humor in romantic relationships.

Keywords: conflicts, humor, pleasant events, relationship satisfaction, romantic relationships

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HUMOR IS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT of many romantic relationships (Goodwin & Tang, 1991). As one example, Lauer, Lauer, and Kerr (1990) found that wives and husbands considered humor to be among the more important ingredients for a successful marriage. Similarly, researchers have found that individuals place a great deal of importance on humor when selecting a mate (Buss, 1988; Goodwin, 1990; Murstein & Brust, 1985). In addition, greater humor appreciation has been linked to positive relational processes, such as increased intimacy and interpersonal attraction (Cann, Calhoun, & Banks, 1997; Hampes, 1992).

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Research on the use of humor in close relationships has suggested that individuals in romantic relationships generally use humor in three main ways with their partners (Alberts, 1990; De Koning & Weiss, 2002; Jacobs, 1985). *Positive humor* is used to feel closer to one's partner and to ease tension, whereas *negative humor* is used to express hostility toward one's partner (De Koning & Weiss; Jacobs; Ziv, 1988). Last, *avoiding humor* is used to either minimize or avoid conflict entirely, often by changing the focus of conversation (Alberts; De Koning & Weiss).

In the present study, we explored how positive, negative, and avoiding humor use might relate to two other important relational constructs: (a) the degree of relationship satisfaction and (b) the type of situation involved (conflict situation vs. a pleasant encounter). We first describe how individuals in close relationships report using humor and then delineate how both relationship satisfaction and the type of situation might pertain to humor use in romantic relationships, including the proposal that these two constructs might interact to predict humor use.

### *Humor Use in Romantic Relationships*

With regard to positive humor, several researchers have shown that individuals in romantic relationships may use humor to feel closer to one another and to help them cope with various aspects of their lives (Alberts, 1990; Bippus, 2000; Lefcourt & Martin, 1986; Ziv, 1988). For example, after interviewing 61 couples about humor use in their relationships, Ziv found that the most frequently reported role of humor in marriage was to enhance closeness and bonding. In a similar fashion, Bippus interviewed young couples about their conceptualizations of humor and found that bonding, a relationship-specific category of humor, emerged as an important positive use of humor. Bonding serves as a form of communication within the relationship, to both increase warmth and strengthen closeness between couples. Last, De Koning and Weiss (2002) asked married couples to report on their own and their partner's uses of humor by answering a self-report questionnaire that assessed the functions of humor in marriage. They found that participants endorsed items indicating that humor can play a positive role in relationships when couples appreciate each other's humor and when humor is used to bring couples closer to each other.

Individuals in romantic relationships also sometimes use negative humor with each other. For example, in an examination of adjusted and maladjusted married couples during conflict interactions, Alberts (1990) found that humor can be used between partners to provoke conflict by allowing them to conceal hostility or to allow for hostility without the negative consequences of overt behavior. In support of this notion, De Koning and Weiss (2002) found that their sample of married couples indicated on a self-report questionnaire that they sometimes used humor as a form of aggression or manipulation against their partner. Similarly, by asking married women to self-report on their humor use with their partner, Jacobs (1985)

also identified a negative aspect of humor in the context of marital relationships, namely, the expression of hostility and creation of distance.

Last, researchers have found that individuals in romantic relationships may also use avoiding humor with each other to minimize conflict or avoid it entirely. As one illustration, De Koning and Weiss (2002) found that some couples self-reported using humor as a way to diffuse negative feelings during tense interactions. Similarly, Jacobs (1985) found that humor could be used in the context of marital relationships to manage conflict by reducing tension and Alberts (1990) found that romantic couples sometimes used humor as an avoidance tactic to move the conversation away from the matter at hand.

In summary, our review suggests that humor is used in three main ways in romantic relationships: in positive, negative, and avoiding manners. Accordingly, our goal in the present study was to determine (a) the extent to which individuals in romantic relationships report using humor in each described manner with their partners, and (b) how this use may relate to both the type of situation involved (pleasant event vs. conflict) and the degree of relationship satisfaction.

### *Humor Use and Relationship Satisfaction*

Relationship satisfaction can have important implications for individuals in romantic relationships. Considerable research has shown that couples who report lower levels of satisfaction generally behave less positively toward each other, exhibiting higher levels of negative affect and lower levels of relationship stability (Gottman, 1994; Schaap & Jansen-Nawas, 1987). Consequently, an examination of the association between relationship satisfaction and humor use in romantic relationships was one of the goals of the present study. Prior research with married couples offers some initial insights concerning potential links between relationship satisfaction and the differential use of humor.

Ziv and Gadish (1989) administered a self-report questionnaire assessing humor creation and appreciation to 50 married couples and found that higher levels of these positive uses of humor were related to greater marital satisfaction for husbands. In addition, in her examination of married couples during conflict interactions, Alberts (1990) found that couples who were more satisfied with their marriage were more likely to use benign forms of humor (e.g., jokes about the self, relationship, or partner made in a gentle manner), whereas unsatisfied couples were more likely to use hostile humor (e.g., humor that joked about the partner in a negative way, such as sarcasm). Furthermore, satisfied couples report using friendly teasing with their partners, whereas unsatisfied couples do not (Ting-Toomey, 1983). Finally, both greater self-reported positive humor use and increased perceptions of the use of positive humor by one's partner have been linked to higher marital satisfaction (De Koning & Weiss, 2002; Jacobs, 1985). In contrast, fewer researchers have focused on romantic relationship satisfaction and negative uses of humor. However, the researchers who have examined these

relationships have found that lower marital satisfaction is related to greater self-reported negative humor use and greater perceptions of one's partner's use of negative humor (De Koning & Weiss; Jacobs).

In summary, prior research with married couples has suggested that individuals who are more satisfied with their relationship may use more positive humor, whereas individuals who are less satisfied may use more negative humor. Despite these intriguing findings, two limitations of this research are that these studies (a) have not directly compared how different situations, such as a conflict situation versus a pleasant encounter, may have a different impact on humor use and (b) have not examined how relationship satisfaction may be associated with differences in humor use for each of these two situations. Type of situation is an important relational construct to consider because the ways in which married couples interact with each other during conflict situations is a strong predictor of marital quality and longevity (Gottman, 1994). Thus, in the present study, we examined (a) how the humor used in a typical conflict situation may differ from the humor used in a pleasant encounter and (b) how the degree of romantic relationship satisfaction may be differentially associated with humor use in each of these two types of situations.

#### *Humor Use in Conflict Versus Pleasant Situations*

Previous researchers have found that the escalation of conflict situations is generally associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction, whereas greater conflict resolution is associated with higher levels of satisfaction (Billings, 1979; Gottman, 1979; Pike & Sillars, 1985). In addition, researchers have found that humor is used in conflict situations by individuals in romantic relationships for a variety of positive or negative reasons (Krokoff, 1991), such as to de-escalate the conflict (Alberts, 1990), or to express hostility or create distance (Jacobs, 1985). Thus, it appears that both the type of situation, particularly the presence or absence of conflict, and the degree of relationship satisfaction can have significant implications for how humor is used in romantic relationships.

An important limitation regarding previous research is that researchers have focused either on how humor is related to relationship satisfaction or on how humor is used in conflict situations but not on both. Thus, prior researchers have not examined, in one study, how both situational context and romantic relationship satisfaction may contribute to humor use. To illustrate, Alberts (1990) found that couples engaging in a conflict discussion tended to use more hostile humor when they were not satisfied with their relationships. However, Alberts did not compare these couples with couples in other pertinent situations, such as engaging in a pleasant event.

Thus, in the present study we examined how both the type of situation and individuals' relationship satisfaction may be related to positive, negative, and avoiding humor use by individuals in romantic relationships. In particular, we

examined both the individual effects of the type of situation and relationship satisfaction when predicting humor and how these two constructs might interact to predict humor use. The fact that other research on romantic relationships has demonstrated major implications of both the type of situation and relationship satisfaction reinforces the importance of simultaneously investigating these two relational constructs in one humor study.

### *Overview and Hypotheses*

In the present study, we asked university students who were involved in a romantic relationship for 3 months or longer to report on their relationship satisfaction and their use of positive, negative, and avoiding humor with their romantic partner, for either a typical conflict situation or a pleasant encounter. We assessed positive humor using self-report items (described in more detail in the Method section) that involved the use of humor to increase closeness and relieve tension. We assessed negative humor with items reflecting the use of humor to express hostility toward one's partner. Last, the items for avoiding humor reflected the use of humor to avoid discussing a topic.

Based on well-established and validated procedures used in both survey research (Alexander & Becker, 1978) and the literature on romantic relationships (e.g., Jackson & Ebnet, 2006), we used brief descriptive vignettes to tap both a conflict situation (dealing with jealousy issues) and a pleasant encounter (having an enjoyable lunch with one's partner). We then used hierarchical regression analyses to examine how both (a) the degree of relationship satisfaction and (b) the type of situation (conflict vs. pleasant encounter) predicted positive, negative, and avoiding humor use. In addition, we tested the possible combined effects of relationship satisfaction and type of situation in predicting humor use by examining the two-way interactions between these constructs. Thus, this study is the first to incorporate an experimental manipulation of the type of situation involved, thus allowing for the simultaneous examination of the individual and interactive contributions of both the type of situation and relationship satisfaction in predicting humor use.

*Hypothesis 1 (H<sub>1</sub>).* On the basis of previous research suggesting that married individuals who are more satisfied with their relationships use more positive humor and less negative humor than do those who are less satisfied with their relationships, we predicted a significant main effect of relationship satisfaction for each of our regression analyses. In particular, we expected that higher levels of romantic relationship satisfaction would be significantly related to more positive humor use, less negative humor use, and less avoiding humor use. Such a pattern would reflect the possibility that more satisfied individuals use humor in a way that is most appropriate to support and foster their romantic relationships. Thus, we expected that these individuals would engage in more positive humor use with

their partners to help increase closeness and ease tension, but less negative humor use to ensure that they do not overly criticize or put down their partner. In addition, we expected that these individuals would engage in less avoiding humor use, to ensure they do not thwart the expression and sharing of true thoughts and feelings with their partner or hamper effective conflict resolution.

*Hypothesis 2 (H<sub>2</sub>).* On the basis of research suggesting that individuals in romantic relationships often use humor to both increase closeness and de-escalate conflict, we hypothesized a significant main effect of type of situation. We expected that individuals would report more positive humor use in the conflict situation in comparison with the pleasant encounter. We also expected that individuals would report less negative and avoiding humor use in the conflict situation when compared with the pleasant encounter. Such a pattern would reflect the proposal that individuals in conflict situations with their romantic partners generally try to use humor to minimize relationship discomfort and conflict. This would result in a heightened use of positive humor in the conflict situation to enhance closeness and ease tension, a minimal use of negative humor to reduce the possibility of hurting one's partner, and a reduction in the use of avoiding humor to facilitate the expression of true feelings and effective conflict resolution.

*Hypothesis 3 (H<sub>3</sub>).* On the basis of research suggesting that individuals who are highly satisfied with their romantic relationships are motivated to reduce conflict and maintain a healthy relationship with their partner, we predicted a significant two-way interaction between relationship satisfaction and type of situation for positive, negative, and avoiding humor use. Specifically, we expected that individuals who were high in relationship satisfaction would indicate using significantly more positive humor, less negative humor, and less avoiding humor in the conflict situation than in the pleasant encounter. This pattern would reflect a heightened emphasis by these individuals on nurturing and maintaining an amiable and satisfying relationship with their romantic partner by using humor to increase closeness and relieve tension, while also reducing the use of humor that might hurt their partner or thwart the expression of true feelings. In contrast, we did not expect that individuals low on relationship satisfaction would be as oriented toward this goal. Thus, we expected that these low-satisfaction individuals would not as readily discriminate between the two situations, resulting in equivalent levels of humor use across the two situations.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Participants were 155 undergraduates, recruited through the Introductory Psychology participation pool at our university. They received course credit for

their participation. To take part in this study, participants were required to be in a romantic relationship lasting at least 3 months, a standard commonly used in the romantic relationship literature (e.g., Campbell, Lackenbauer, & Muise, 2006). The mean length of the relationship for our participants was 15.6 months ( $SD = 12.5$  months). Data for 1 participant was omitted due to an extremely inconsistent response pattern, leaving 154 participants (108 women, 46 men), with a mean age of 19.10 years ( $SD = 1.57$  years).

### *Measures*

*Typical conflict and pleasant situations.* Using procedures typically employed in the romantic relationship literature (e.g., Jackson & Ebnet, 2006), we created two separate vignettes for this study: One reflected a typical conflict situation that could be experienced with one's partner, and the other reflected a typical pleasant situation. University students report jealousy issues as one of the most frequent problems that they encounter in their romantic relationships (Knox & Wilson, 1983; Zusman & Knox, 1998). Thus, we created a conflict situation to reflect this common problem. We asked participants to imagine a situation in which their partner was upset with them because they had had lunch with an opposite-sex friend. Participants were further asked to imagine that they were discussing the issue with their partner, with each partner expressing their views on the situation.

We created the typical pleasant situation on the basis of previous research indicating that describing the events of a previous day elicits more positive affect and less negative affect for romantic couples than does discussing an area of conflict (Gottman, 1979). Thus, we asked participants to imagine a situation in which they had not had an opportunity to speak with their partner for an entire day. Participants were further asked to imagine that on the following day they and their partner had a pleasant conversation over lunch regarding the events of the previous day.

*Humor use items.* On the basis of a review of the ways in which humor may be used in romantic relationships, we selected and appropriately modified a number of items from previous humor scales (Alberts, 1990; DeKoning & Weiss, 2002; Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992; Jacobs, 1985) to tap the positive, negative, and avoiding uses of humor in romantic relationships. After reading one of the two vignettes (either the conflict or pleasant situation), participants indicated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*frequently*) how often they would use positive, negative, and avoiding humor with their partner in that situation. All items were identical for the conflict and pleasant situations, with instructions indicating, "Picturing yourself in this situation with your partner, please indicate how often you would use humor to . . ." We measured positive humor use using 8 items, such as, "make you and your partner feel closer as a couple" and "ease the tension of the situation." We measured negative humor use with 5 items, such as,

“put your partner down” and “highlight your partner’s weaknesses, blunders or faults.” Last, we measured avoiding humor use with 11 items, such as, “avoid letting your partner know what’s really on your mind” and “change the subject.”

To ensure that these items actually assessed positive, negative, and avoiding humor use, we conducted two principal components analyses: one with only the participants in the conflict situation ( $n = 77$ ), and the other with only the participants in the pleasant situation ( $n = 77$ ). Both of these analyses were conducted with a varimax rotation, with the items being forced into three factors. The extractions for the conflict and pleasant situations each revealed the expected three factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1.0. Items with a loading of .40 or higher on a single factor were considered to load onto the factor and contribute to its interpretation. Items that had a factor loading of .40 or higher on more than one factor were considered ambiguous, and we excluded them from further consideration. To arrive at a final set of factors that were interpretable for both situations, we retained only those items that loaded onto the same factor for both the conflict and pleasant situations. By following these selection rules, we excluded three positive humor use items, one negative humor use item, and seven avoiding humor use items from the final set of scales.

On the basis of the results of the principle components analyses, we measured the use of positive humor using five items that reflected humor used to get closer to one’s partner and to ease tension. We measured the use of negative humor with four items that involved using humor in a more aggressive or maladaptive fashion, such as using humor to put one’s partner down. Last, we measured the use of avoiding humor with four items that involved the use of humor to avoid the situation or topic at hand, such as using humor to change the subject. Reliability levels were acceptable for each of these scales, with Cronbach’s alphas of .77 for positive humor, .76 for negative humor, and .77 for avoiding humor. Furthermore, the three scales were generally distinct from one another, with positive and avoiding humor use being unrelated ( $r = -.10, ns$ ), and positive and negative humor use showing only a very modest negative relation ( $r = -.16, p < .05$ ). Negative and avoiding humor use were positively related, but at a moderate level ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ).

*Relationship satisfaction.* We used Hendrick’s (1988) seven-item Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) to measure individuals’ overall satisfaction with their relationship. Participants responded to items such as, “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” and “To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?” on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all/poor*) to 7 (*a great deal/extremely good*). We averaged responses across items for each participant, with higher mean scores indicating greater relationship satisfaction. Prior work has indicated acceptable levels of reliability and validity for the RAS (Hendrick; Inman-Amos, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1994). In the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha for the RAS was high (.88), indicating good scale reliability.

### *Procedure*

We tested participants in small groups of up to 10 individuals and randomly assigned them to receive a questionnaire booklet containing one of the two situations (typical conflict or pleasant encounter). We instructed participants to imagine that the described situation had happened between themselves and their partner. After reading about the situation, participants then provided ratings indicating how frequently they would use positive, negative, and avoiding humor if they were involved in such a situation with their partner. After completing the questionnaire booklet, participants also completed the RAS (Hendrick, 1988). All participants received a written debriefing form at the conclusion of the study.

## **Results**

### *Means and Standard Deviations*

For our entire sample of individuals in romantic relationships ( $N = 154$ ), positive humor was reported as being used the most frequently ( $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ), negative humor was used the least often ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ), and avoiding humor was used moderately ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ). In addition, the participants reported being generally satisfied with their romantic relationships ( $M = 5.68$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ).

### *Regression Analyses*

We performed a separate hierarchical regression analysis for each of the three criterion variables: positive, negative, and avoiding humor use. For each analysis, we entered situation (coded as 1 = conflict situation, -1 = pleasant encounter) and the mean-centered value for romantic relationship satisfaction as the predictor variables in Step 1. We entered the two-way interaction between situation and relationship satisfaction as the predictor variable in Step 2.

The unstandardized regression coefficients for all three regression analyses are presented in Table 1. For positive humor use, the predicted significant main effect of relationship satisfaction emerged. In support of  $H_1$ , this main effect revealed that higher levels of relationship satisfaction predicted higher levels of positive humor use.  $H_2$  was not supported, however, because the main effect of type of situation was not significant. In other words, there was no evidence that individuals reported more positive humor use in a conflict situation than in a pleasant encounter. Coupled with the further finding that the interaction term was also nonsignificant (thus failing to support  $H_3$ ), this pattern suggests that the type of situation (pleasant vs. conflict) is not a relevant factor when considering positive humor use. Rather, those individuals with a high degree of romantic relationship satisfaction use more positive humor overall than do those individuals with a low degree of satisfaction, regardless of the situation.

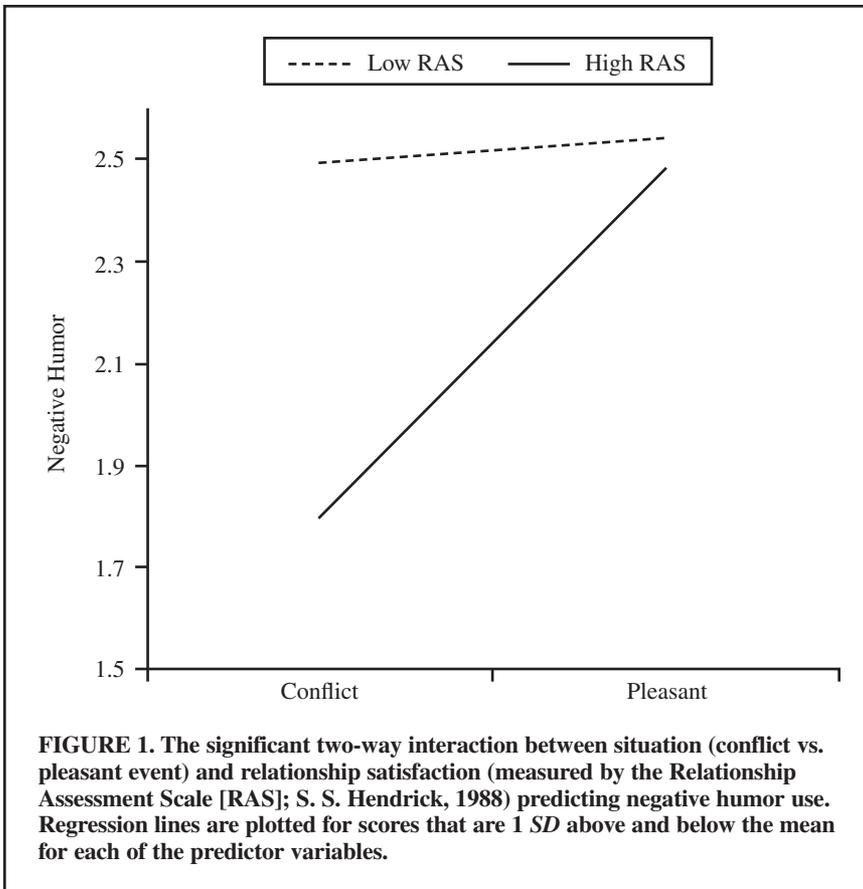
**TABLE 1. Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Positive, Negative, and Avoiding Humor Use as Predicted by Situation, Relationship Satisfaction, and the Situation  $\times$  Relationship Satisfaction Interaction**

Predictor variable	Criterion variable					
	Positive humor		Negative humor		Avoiding humor	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Situation	.04	.07	-.18**	.07	-.21*	.10
RAS	.19**	.07	-.20**	.07	-.19*	.10
Situation $\times$ RAS	.00	.07	-.16*	.07	-.03	.10

*Note.* All effects are reported as unstandardized regression coefficients. Significance levels are given for each variable at the initial point of entry in the regression equation. Situation was coded as 1 = conflict situation, -1 = pleasant encounter. RAS = relationship satisfaction (S. S. Hendrick, 1988).  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

When predicting negative humor use, significant main effects emerged for both relationship satisfaction and the type of situation. Thus, in support of  $H_1$ , individuals with low levels of satisfaction reported significantly more negative humor use than did those with high levels of satisfaction. Furthermore, in support of  $H_2$ , individuals reported less negative humor use in the conflict situation than in the pleasant encounter. Last,  $H_3$  was supported by the significant two-way interaction between type of situation and relationship satisfaction. This interaction is plotted in Figure 1 and, as predicted, shows that individuals who were high in relationship satisfaction reported using lower levels of negative humor in a conflict situation as compared with a pleasant encounter (simple slope test,  $\beta = -.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, individuals who were low in relationship satisfaction reported consistently high levels of negative humor use, regardless of whether they were in a conflict situation or a pleasant encounter (simple slope test,  $\beta = -.02$ , *ns*).

In the final regression analysis, both  $H_1$  and  $H_2$  were supported for avoiding humor use, as the predicted significant main effects emerged for both relationship satisfaction and type of situation. Congruent with  $H_1$ , individuals with lower levels of relationship satisfaction reported using more avoiding humor than did those with higher levels of satisfaction. In support of  $H_2$ , individuals reported using less avoiding humor in the conflict situation than in the pleasant encounter.  $H_3$  was not supported, however, because the two-way interaction between type of situation and relationship satisfaction was not significant. Thus, there was no evidence that individuals who were high in relationship satisfaction would report using less avoiding humor in a conflict situation versus a pleasant encounter,



whereas individuals who were low in relationship satisfaction would report equivalent levels of avoiding humor use across these two situations.

### Discussion

Our results provide considerable empirical support for the proposal that humor is used in three main ways in romantic relationships (Alberts, 1990; De Koning & Weiss, 2002; Jacobs, 1985). In particular, individuals reported that they would use positive humor the most frequently with their romantic partner, avoiding humor with medium frequency, and negative humor the least frequently. This pattern supports prior work suggesting that although humor is often used positively in romantic relationships to increase closeness and ease tension, individuals do occasionally use humor to change the topic of conversation or to put their partners down. Accordingly, these findings support a multifaceted concept

of humor use that encompasses both positive and negative elements (DeKoning & Weiss; Jacobs; Klein & Kuiper, 2006). Thus, it is not simply the case that humor is used only to enhance one's romantic relationship.

Our findings also support the proposal that the degree of relationship satisfaction is associated with humor use in romantic relationships. In accord with  $H_1$ , we found that individuals who reported being more satisfied with their romantic relationships also reported that they would use higher levels of positive humor with their partners and lower levels of both avoiding and negative humor. This pattern is congruent with the possibility that individuals who are more satisfied with their romantic relationships will primarily engage in the use of humor that is more beneficial for the functioning of their relationship (Alberts, 1990; De Koning & Weiss, 2002; Jacobs, 1985). Our findings extend previous work by showing this to be the case, even after taking into account two very different types of situations. In particular, regardless of whether they were in a conflict situation or a pleasant encounter, individuals who were more satisfied with their romantic relationships reported higher overall levels of positive humor use and lower levels of avoiding and negative humor use than did individuals who were less satisfied with their romantic relationships. This pattern clearly highlights the importance of relationship satisfaction as a central construct that pertains to differential patterns of positive humor use in romantic relationships.

A further novel aspect of our study is that it is among the first to include an experimental manipulation of the type of situation involved (conflict vs. pleasant encounter) when examining humor use in romantic relationships. In this regard, we found that individuals used lower levels of avoiding and negative humor in the conflict situation than in the pleasant encounter. Contrary to our expectations, however, we did not find that higher levels of positive humor were used in the conflict situation in comparison with the pleasant encounter. Overall, this pattern suggests that individuals feel more comfortable pushing the boundaries of negative humor use with their partners during typical pleasant interactions than when faced with conflict. These findings further suggest that instead of increasing the use of positive humor to further enhance closeness and ease tension with their romantic partners during conflict situations, individuals seem to reduce their use of negative and avoiding humor in these situations to try to avoid any further escalation of the conflict with their romantic partner.

The final novel aspect of our design is that it allowed for an empirical test of how relationship satisfaction and the type of situation may interact in predicting humor use in romantic relationships. We found a particularly interesting pattern for negative humor use. Specifically, individuals who were not satisfied with their romantic relationships did not readily distinguish between being in a conflict situation with their partner or engaging in a pleasant activity. In other words, they appeared oblivious to this fundamental distinction and continued to use high levels of negative humor, regardless of the situation involved. However, individuals who were more satisfied with their romantic relationships significantly

reduced their use of negative humor in a conflict situation relative to their use during a pleasant encounter. We interpret this shift in humor use as part of a strategy that is used by those with high relationship satisfaction to avoid further escalation of conflict with their romantic partners. This proposal is in accord with prior studies demonstrating that the escalation of conflict situations is generally associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction, whereas greater conflict resolution is associated with higher levels of satisfaction (Billings, 1979; Gottman, 1979; Pike & Sillars, 1985).

### *Limitations, Further Directions, and Conclusions*

Although the present findings are interesting, they should be considered with several limitations in mind. First, the use of an undergraduate sample may have restricted the generalizability of our findings. It is possible, for example, that individuals from a different socioeconomic or cultural background, or those with a longer romantic relationship history (e.g., 10 years or more), may display different results. These possibilities could be tested in future research by involving older participants, moving to a community base, or considering cross-cultural distinctions that may pertain to humor use. Furthermore, because other fundamental personality constructs, such as agency and communion, have been shown to relate to the type of humor used (Kazarian & Martin, 2004) and to have effects on well-being (Kuiper & Borowicz-Sibenik, 2005), future researchers should also include a consideration of these additional personality dimensions.

Future researchers could also explore humor use in other types of relationships. As one illustration, Klein and Kuiper (2006) provided a detailed examination of how humor may impact relationships in middle childhood, including the use of different humor styles that may pertain to bullying. They detailed the complex nature of humor use, with some humor styles that are normally considered adaptive and positive (e.g., affiliative humor) being used indirectly in a negative fashion to further alienate a peer group against a victimized child. This more subtle use of humor may be difficult to capture in lab-based experimental or correlational research and may thus require the additional use of observational studies to document humor use in various real-life situations and relationships. Such observational work could also overcome some of the difficulties associated with an exclusive reliance on self-report. In the present study, for example, individuals may not have wanted to report high levels of negative humor use during a conflictual interaction with their romantic partner. Accordingly, examining actual conflict discussions between couples would help to clarify this pattern of humor use.

A further limitation of the present study is that it only focused on one of the individuals involved in the romantic relationship. Future researchers should examine the association between relationship satisfaction, type of situation, and humor use by both members of a romantic couple. Although such a study would necessarily introduce a greater degree of complexity, the benefit would be a

more thorough examination of the ongoing and dynamic nature of humor use in romantic relationships. For example, a study using both members of a couple could examine whether one partner's degree of relationship satisfaction is linked to the other partner's pattern of humor use during an actual conflict or pleasant situation. Such a study could also track how humor use unfolds across time, with the possibility that different implications or effects of humor use are evident at various stages of an interaction with one's romantic partner.

The inclusion of both members of a romantic couple could also help to clarify the precise impact of various uses of humor on both members of the couple. In this regard, it should be noted that the present research was not designed to assess whether the particular use of humor that was intended by the individual involved in the study would be perceived as such by their partner. It is possible, for example, that humor intended to be positive in nature may actually be perceived by the partner as being avoiding in nature or even negative. Similarly, humor generated to serve a negative use may be perceived by the partner as relatively benign or perhaps even positive. Thus, research that examines the degree of concordance between romantic relationship partners regarding each of the three main uses of humor would be of particular interest. Such research might also include other individual difference constructs that may pertain to both the sensitivity and accuracy of humor use (including both generative and receptive components). As one illustration, those with a low degree of empathy may have particular difficulty in determining the intent of their partner's humor, which, in turn, may lead to further misattributions and miscommunications that then hamper their relationship.

Despite these limitations, the present study offers some important insights into the use of humor in romantic relationships. At the most general level, the findings indicate that humor is not always used positively in romantic relationships and that individuals sometimes use humor to avoid issues and say negative things to their romantic partners. In addition, not all people use humor in the same way in their romantic relationships. Instead, individuals in romantic relationships report using humor in different ways, depending on their degree of relationship satisfaction and the type of situation involved. Individuals who were more satisfied with their relationship generally used humor in ways that would benefit their relationship as a whole and were more sensitive to the situation they were in when using humor that had the potential to hurt their partner's feelings. Thus, our findings are congruent with the notion that humor is one strategy that individuals can use in romantic relationships to achieve particular relational goals such as increased bonding, reduced tension, or avoidance of a certain topic of conversation. Of particular importance, however, is that not all individuals necessarily use humor in the same way in their romantic relationships. The present work suggests that the degree of relationship satisfaction and the type of situation involved are related to the pattern of humor use in important ways.

### AUTHOR NOTES

**Bethany Butzer** is a graduate student in social psychology at the University of Western Ontario. She conducts research on various aspects of romantic relationships, including humor use and adult attachment. **Nicholas A. Kuiper** is the director of the Clinical Psychology Graduate Program at the University of Western Ontario. He has published extensively in the areas of humor research, depression, and self-concept issues.

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