

Clinical Implications of Humor Styles and Their Effect on Intimate Partner Conflict

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Regulating and resolving conflicts between intimate partners is a central component to relationship satisfaction. Conflict can result in a wide range of feelings and possible relational consequences, and is also associated with higher physiological arousal. Humor has garnered increasing research support as a factor that can exacerbate or placate conflict between intimate partners. Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir, (2003) delineated four qualitatively different humor styles (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor). This categorical breakdown of humor styles allows an exploration in this article of how affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor affect conflict, and what implications this has in a counseling setting.

Keywords: humor, conflict, arousal, humor styles, affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, self-defeating, teasing.

Introduction

Conflict, often described as a perceived incompatibility of actions or goals, (Myers, 2012) can be a common occurrence within human interactions. Intimate partners inevitably experience conflict because they have extended interactions, shared actions, and reliance to some extent. Stated differently, couples often share goals, activities, living spaces, children, finances, sexual intimacy, and other key life aspects. With such high levels of shared life experiences, interactions, and decision-making, conflicting viewpoints and actions are likely to arise.

Conflicts are critical events within relationships. If handled incorrectly, the conflict can induce intense emotions, feelings, and relational consequences. Gottman (1994) believed that successfully navigating conflict is crucial to intimate relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, constructive conflict resolution can have positive and stabilizing effects on intimate relationships. Conflict in intimate relationships can have profound positive and negative effects on the intimate relationship itself, and on mental, physical, and family health (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Moreover, several studies indicated that the way couples resolve conflict is a key predictor of marital satisfaction (Cramer, 2000; Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002).

Interpersonal conflict is generally associated with a heightening of physical and emotional processes. This heightening of physical processes can take the form of alteration of pituitary and adrenal hormones and other mechanisms (Malarkey, Kiecolt-Glaser, Pearl, & Glaser, 1994). Heightening of emotions can reveal itself through processes such as increased anxiety (McNulty & Walters, 1962). Conflict tends to be a time when escalation can occur rather quickly, and affective and physiological arousal is high. Levenson and Gottman (1985) found that intimate relationships rated lower in satisfaction if the couples experienced heightened physiological and affective levels during conflict.

Saper (1987) defined humor as an “affective, cognitive, or aesthetic aspect of a person, stimulus, or event that evokes such indications of amusement, joy, or mirth as the laughing,

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smiling, or giggling response” (p. 364). Humor has accrued increasing research support and attention as a variable that affects intimate partner satisfaction in general (Ziv & Gadish, 2001). More specifically, humor has the potential to affect incidences of intimate partner conflict positively or negatively (Butzer & Kuiper, 2008).

Researchers have examined individual differences in humor, and have attempted to define different humor styles. The concept of humor styles assumes that humor falls into qualitatively different categories. Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir, (2003) delineated four qualitatively different humor styles in the development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ). These four styles were identified as affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor.

Affiliative humor pertains to gentle forms of humor that “enhance one’s relationships with others” (Martin et al., 2003, para. 1). Affiliative humor is often used to reduce conflict and entertain others, and to improve relationships. Sometimes affiliative humor can be self-disparaging, but users of affiliative humor are generally self-accepting, and do not take themselves too seriously. For example, a person may make fun of himself or herself to elicit laughter out of his her partner, but they do not integrate the self-disparaging comment into their psyche. It would not be damaging to that person using that humor. Self-enhancing humor involves gentle forms of humor that “enhance the self” (Martin et al., 2003, para. 1). This type of humor is in line with Sigmund Freud’s concept of defense mechanisms, and relates to using humor to cope with negative or undesired life events. A person may perform poorly on a task, and think of something funny to laugh it off. Aggressive humor is humor that “enhances the self at the expense of others” (Martin et al., 2003, para. 1). Aggressive humor is hostile and puts others down. Some examples include sarcasm, insults, condescending comments, and other forms of humor that are intended to hurt the other person. Self-defeating humor is humor that “enhances relationships at the expense of the self” (Martin et al., 2003, para. 1). This differs from humor deployed in affiliative humor, in that it tends to be overly self-deprecating, and puts people in a one-down position among others (Martin et al., 2003).

Depending on the humor style used, both positive and negative effects on the self and others can occur. When utilizing different types of humor during intimate partner conflict, the same varying effects are also present. Gentler forms of humor are associated with seeing a situation as less hostile and threatening in interpersonal relationships, and this leads to decreased negative emotion and increased positive emotion (Samson & Gross, 2012). Also, gentler humor in situations is associated with a decrease in physiological arousal (Shurcliff, 1968). Conversely, more abrasive humor tends to have the opposite effect, and tends to breed increased provocation and aggressive and reactive behavior. (Berkowitz, 1970; Baron, 1978)

It is important to note that the receiver determines the impact humor has within a conflictual situation. Relationship patterns and overall relational satisfaction can change the lens from which humor is interpreted in relationships. For example, Alberts (1990) found that among well-adjusted couples, humor was a stronger predictor of conflict termination than among dissatisfied couples. Alberts asserted that relationship patterns and overall satisfaction are higher predictors of humor’s effects on conflict than the humor itself. Research also confirms that distress and anxiety levels (Winterheld, Simpson, & Orina, 2013), and attachment styles (Winterheld, Simpson, & Orina, 2013; Howland & Simpson, 2014) influence how a recipient responds to humor.

The aforementioned research creates a clear path of exploration on how different types of humor can effect situations of intimate partner conflict. Below, a review of research on the

effects of affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor on intimate partner conflict is put forth. Afterward, clinical implications are considered.

Affiliative Humor

As previously mentioned, affiliative humor is humor that tends to enhance interpersonal relationships. It is no surprise then that overall, affiliative humor can have a soothing, de-escalating effect on intimate partner conflict, and a few of these studies to be reviewed here demonstrate this. Saroglou, Lacour, and Demeuere (2010) found that when comparing married and divorced couples' use of humor, affiliative humor was related to increased relationship satisfaction and decreased likelihood of divorce. This effect of affiliative humor on satisfaction and likelihood of divorce was especially marked among men.

In a behavioral observation study of 96 dating couples, affiliative humor was well received by partners during couple conflict, and had a positive effect on the conflict (Winterheld, Simpson & Orina, 2013). Positive effects took the form of increased laughter and approval of conflict resolution, and decreased anger. These effects were observed across attachment styles and distress levels. Positive effects were especially prominent when the receiver of humor was more distressed. Additionally, Winterheld, Simpson, and Orina found that if one partner was both highly anxious and highly distressed during conflict, their partner would use affiliative humor more often than other humor types. One could gather that the partner who utilizes humor during conflict sometimes adjusts his or her use of humor based on the current state of the recipient.

In another study, Campbell and Moroz (2014) observed the behavior of 116 couples, and found that positive humor (similar to that of affiliative humor) predicted better conflict resolutions. In a behavioral observation study of couples' discussions pertaining to social support, Howland and Simpson (2014) found that the use of affiliative humor led to a decrease in negative mood by the end of the discussion. Campbell, Martin, and Ward (2008) observed couples navigating a conflict resolution task, and found that couples that used higher levels of affiliative humor in problem discussions believed their discussion was more helpful.

Self-Enhancing Humor

When comparing the humor used within married and divorced couples' relationships, it has been found that self-enhancing humor (i.e., gentle forms of humor that enhance the self) is related to increased relationship satisfaction and decreased likelihood of divorce, especially among men (Saroglou, Lacour, & Demeure, 2010). Bippus, Dunbar, and Liu (2012) found that when someone was listening to a speaker that used self-enhancing humor, listeners rated the speaker lower on credibility and likability, but there was less reactive arguing with the speaker. Cann, Davis, and Zapata (2011) found that the more self-enhancing humor was used; there was a decrease in reported conflict in 82 couples as indicated by self-report questionnaires.

Aggressive Humor

A substantial portion of research on humor in relationships focuses on the effects of aggressive humor (i.e., humor that enhances the self at the expense of others) on relationships. Gottman, (1994) classifies aggressive humor as contempt, which is one of his four horsemen of the apocalypse, and is characterized by "intention to insult or psychologically abuse" (p. 45). Of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, contempt is the strongest predictor of divorce (Gottman, 1994). Other researchers have confirmed that aggressive humor is a predictor of divorce and low

relationship satisfaction (Saroglou, Lacour, & Demeure, 2010). In general, aggressive humor has been found to increase reactive arguing with the speaker (Bippus, Dunbar, & Liu, 2012).

The aforesaid observational study by Campbell and Moroz (2014), found that couples that employed negative humor generally had less positive conflict resolution. Also, the use of aggressive humor has been found to increase negative mood of the recipient partner (Howland & Simpson, 2014). Campbell, Martin, and Ward (2008), found that partners of aggressive humor users felt more distant to their partners and less satisfied with conflict resolution during disagreements. Moreover, perpetrators of aggressive humor in this study felt more emotional distress after a disagreement. In general, couples in this study who used less aggressive humor were more satisfied.

Winterheld, Simpson, and Orina (2013) also found that recipients of aggressive humor of their partners were less satisfied with conflict outcomes. This decreased satisfaction was observed across partner attachment styles and distress levels. Despite this decrease in conflictual outcome satisfaction, the use of aggressive humor did not have a significant effect on the recipient partner's anger. Researchers attributed this finding to the variability of the aggressive humor recipient.

The Teasing Caveat

Shapiro, Baumeister, and Kessler (1991) define teasing as a communication that "synthesizes elements of aggression, humor, and ambiguity" (p. 459). Keltner, Young, Heerrey, Oemig, and Monarch (1998) further posit that teasing can be subdivided into being prosocial and antisocial in nature. Prosocial teasing is characterized by "reduced face threat and increased redressive action" (p. 1233), and antisocial teasing involves "elevated face threat and low levels of redressive action" (p.1243). Put another way, a prosocial teaser would tease in ways that have minimal threats to the receiver's self-image, and would make amends for any offense the receiver takes. Conversely, an antisocial teaser would tease in ways that threaten the receiver's self-image, and would not make amends for any offense the receiver takes.

Interestingly, teasing may serve useful functions in relationships, despite falling into the realm of aggressive humor. Teasing can be a less conflictual way to express hurt or dissatisfaction in relationships, and can be covered up by saying "I was only teasing" (Alberts, 1982). DiCioccio (2001) points out in regards to teasing that "when a relationship is non-distressed and stable, joking communication is accepted to reflect more intimate and personal issues of the relationship" (DiCioccio, 2001 p. 259). Other researchers have purported the functional importance of teasing in relationships. Hopper, Knapp, and Scott (1981) saw teasing to be a source of playful intimacy among couples. Furthermore, Ting-Toomey (1983) through analyzing couples' communications, found that happier couples used teasing, and unhappier couples did not.

Conversely, some research has discovered harmful effects of teasing in relationships in certain contexts. Kruger, Gordon, and Kuban (2006) found that the target of teasing in intimate couples generally viewed the teasing more negatively than the teasing perpetrator. Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, and Shannon (1990) examined self-reports of wives in violent and non-violent marriages, and found that their husbands engaged in significantly more teasing in recent disputes when they were perpetrators of domestic violence than non-violent husbands. The power dynamics among couples where domestic violence is occurring tends to skew the lens through which humor is delivered and received. Keltner et al. (1998) highlighted that "in situations in which a more powerful person is endowed with an asymmetrical freedom to tease a less

powerful person... the powerful person will find greater pleasure in those interactions than the less powerful person, who will find them more aversive” (Keltner et al., 1998, p. 1244).

This relationship context can explain why some studies have found teasing to be beneficial in relationships, and other studies have found teasing to be harmful. Kruger, Gordon, and Kuban (2006) posit that the current environment in relationships is paramount in accounting for variability in teasing outcomes. Relationships that are distressed (i.e domestic violence occurring) are far different than well-functioning, non-distressed couples, and this affects teasing dynamics.

Self-Defeating Humor

Self-defeating humor (i.e., humor that enhances relationships at the expense of the self) tends to enhance relationships with others at the expense of the self in the moment, but can lead to relationship discontentment. Saroglou, Lacour, and Demeure (2010) found that self-defeating humor was a predictor of not only marital satisfaction, but conversely, also of divorce. Perhaps short-term satisfaction is maintained through avoidance of conflict by self-deprecation, but long-term dissatisfaction can occur. Winterheld, Simpson, and Orina (2013) found that self-defeating humor stimulated negative reactions (i.e., less laughter and more anger) from their partners when the receiver of humor was highly distressed. Additionally, they found that couples that used self-defeating humor were less happy with conflict outcomes.

Gender Differences in Humor Styles

Researchers have frequently investigated how humor is employed among men and women during conflict. One study found that the more often men and women use one style of humor, the more likely they are to use other styles of humor in couple interactions (Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008). Lefcourt and Martin (1986) discovered that among women, more use of humor was associated with positive engagement in problem discussions. However, among men, more use of humor was associated with more destructive behavior in problem discussions. Additionally, Cohen and Bradbury (1997) found that heterosexual couples were more likely to get divorced if the husband used high levels of humor during conflict. Conversely, one study found that men use more affiliative humor (i.e., humor that is intended to enhance interpersonal relationships) than women (Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008).

Women tend to respond more favorably to affiliative humor than men, and also experience higher levels of negative emotion than men when aggressive humor is used. For example, Winterheld, Simpson, and Orina (2013) found that women laughed more and were less angry when their male partners used affiliative humor. They also found that men laughed more when their female partners used self-defeating humor. Also, female partners rated themselves as feeling angrier when they used aggressive humor in conflict with their male partners. Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, and Monarch (1998) in their analysis of heterosexual couple teasing, found that women tend to feel more aversive and respond to teasing more negatively than men.

Summary

In summary, the research presented above tends to indicate that affiliative humor (i.e., humor that is intended to enhance interpersonal relationships) has desirable and calming effects on couples' conflict (Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008; Saroglou, Lacour, & Demeure, 2010; Winterheld, Simpson, & Orina, 2013; Campbell & Moroz, 2014; Howland & Simpson, 2014). Research supports that affiliative humor tends to lead to increased laughter and decreased anger

and negative emotions in conflict. Additionally, affiliative humor seems to lead couples to have a higher perceived positive outcome of conflict, and the use of better conflict resolution methods. Affiliative humor seems to be especially beneficial in conflict among anxiously attached people.

Few of the studies presented here sought to measure self-enhancing humor (i.e., gentle forms of humor that enhance the self) and self-defeating humor (i.e., humor that enhances relationships at the expense of the self) in conflictual situations. The studies that have incorporated self-enhancing humor tend to demonstrate that this type of humor increases relationship satisfaction, and decreases conflict, though it sometimes can lead to negative perceptions of the self-enhancing humor user (Saroglou, Lacour & Demeure, 2010; Cann, Davis, & Zapata, 2011; Bippus, Dunbar, & Liu, 2012). Conversely, limited research on self-defeating humor seems to substantiate that it has negative effects on relationships and conflict. Less satisfaction with conflictual outcomes, more negative emotions, and an association with eventual divorce has been observed in relation to the use of self-defeating humor (Saroglou, Lacour, & Demeure, 2010; Winterheld, Simpson, & Orina, 2013). Researchers have often found it elusive to observe self-defeating humor and self-defeating humor in observational studies of couple conflict (Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008).

Overall, most of the research reviewed for this article indicates that aggressive humor (i.e., humor that enhances the self at the expense of others) in intimate partner conflict tends to have negative effects on conflict resolution and tends to escalate conflict (Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008; Winterheld, Simpson, & Orina, 2013; Campbell & Moroz, 2014; Simpson & Howland, 2014). Namely, higher levels of aggressive humor in general are associated with decreased relationship satisfaction, less satisfactory conflict resolutions and methods, increased negative affect, distress, and feelings of distance during conflict, and higher incidence of divorce.

The possible exception to these findings on aggressive humor is a proper use of teasing in relationships that builds intimacy and allows a less hostile expression of hurt. Response to teasing and aggressive humor varies based on the receiver of that humor and the type of teasing utilized. Antisocial teasing and teasing in dysfunctional and distressed relationships seems to be unhealthy, while prosocial teasing and teasing in stable and healthy relationships seems to be more desirable.

It is also important to consider gender differences relating to intimate partner conflict and humor styles. Most research suggests that higher uses of humor in women are beneficial to conflict (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986), and that more use of humor in men is associated with poorer conflict and relationship outcomes (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986; Cohen & Bradbury, 1997). In general, women respond more favorably to affiliative humor than men (Winterheld, Simpson, & Orina, 2013), and have more intense negative emotional experiences surrounding using and receiving aggressive humor (Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch 1998).

Clinical Implications

Not surprisingly, couples counselors tend to encourage the use of affiliative humor and discourage the use of aggressive humor. McBrien (2013) supports the use of “assigning the experience of healthy humor at home as well as in counseling” (McBrien, 2013, p. 124). Other prominent counselors also support using affiliative humor to their advantage in couples’ counseling (Mosak, 1987; Salameh, 1987). All in all, a review of relevant research seems to support this approach, with the caveat that teasing can sometimes serve useful purposes for intimate partners.

Salameh (1983) discusses the potential of humor to be harmful and or helpful in the therapeutic process. Misplaced and ineffective humor can alienate clients, and timely, well-placed humor can strengthen the therapeutic relationship and positively affect the course of therapy. Helping professionals would be wise to examine current couple power dynamics and receptivity to introducing more humor in therapy and conflictual situations. Couples seeking counseling for their relationship difficulties may be more sensitive to teasing and humor that could be interpreted as hurtful or threatening to self-image. In relationships where abusive behavior is occurring, utilizing humor may exacerbate conflict and hurt, due to power dynamics.

Counselors should also explore couple attachment styles and distress levels during conflict when considering the utilization of humor. Howland and Simpson (2013) found that anxiously attached individuals were more devastated by his or her partner's use of aggressive humor. Likewise, Winterheld, Simpson, and Orina (2013) suggested that aggressive humor is most damaging when "one's partner is vulnerable and actively seeks reassurance" (p. 506), and when avoidant attachment-styled individuals are the recipient of aggressive humor. They also found that affiliative humor was better received and self-defeating humor more poorly received when the recipient of humor was in a state of higher distress. Additionally, anxious and avoidant attached recipients of humor showed an aversion to the humor style that they themselves most often used.

Therefore, anxious and avoidant attached individuals may respond to humor in unique ways, and use of humor in couples therapy should be tailored to those responses. In many modalities of therapy, couple communication and conflict patterns are explored and defined. Some of these conflictual patterns will be more suitable for the utilization of certain types of humor. For example, if one partner is consistently responding to conflict with high levels of distress, use of self-defeating humor should be discouraged, and affiliative humor encouraged.

The research presented here also seems to indicate that blocking aggressive humor between couples in certain instances definitely seems to be a worthwhile therapeutic endeavor. When therapists see aggressive humor being used in a way that damages the recipient, identification of the use of aggressive humor and blocking should occur. Additionally, when the therapist observes teasing exacerbating couple difficulties and conflict, encouraging prosocial teasing and discouraging antisocial teasing can be undertaken. Among couples that are particularly distressed (i.e. domestic violence is occurring), teasing should be discouraged in general.

Some counselors advocate prescribing humor exercises to couples. Odell (1996) describes prescribing affiliative humor to break up repetitive and non-productive conflict cycles in conflicts. He advocates prescribing unorthodox "silliness factor" exercises to disrupt conflict cycles. He relays that prescribing humorous exercises to couples will change their conflict patterns regardless of whether they actually perform the exercise or not. As Odell (1996) puts it: "If they follow the directive, they are forced to do something silly that will make it difficult for their pattern to be maintained. If they don't follow the directive, their decision to not do so also will affect their pattern because their behavior has been framed differently by the rationale. Either way, the problematic pattern is likely interrupted" (p. 73).

Odell (1996) elaborates on two particular prescriptions of humor in couples' therapy that can serve to help practitioners conceptualize utilizing humor. Summaries of these examples are provided below:

Example 1. Frustrated husband arrives home from a job he doesn't like and wife tends to bring up her difficulties and stresses right as he walks in the door. This had led to arguing and conflict.

Prescription. Husband given assignment to wear Groucho Marx "nose glasses" and clown shoes when he first came in the door. This dramatically improved their conflictual pattern.

Example 2. Couple fighting late at night in bedroom. Long intense fights, no progress or solutions came. Therapist picked up on fact that they both craved intimacy.

Prescription. Once realization occurs that fight is starting, one member of the couple went and set the kitchen timer for ten minutes. If they had not resolved the fight by the time the timer went off, they were both to take off all of their clothes, go directly to the bathroom, get in the tub, and continue their argument there.

Both of these prescriptions (as long as the husband in the first example has the ego strength to not be adversely affected) are composed of affiliative humor, and maximizing affiliative humor can be a valuable undertaking in therapy. In the second example, Odell (1996) conveys that that particular couple did not implement the prescription of humor. However, the thought of how funny the prescription was when they fought in their bedroom from that point on made their arguments less intense. This highlights the rationale of patterns being disrupted and interactions being reframed by merely prescribing humor.

Audia (2012) describes having couples use affiliative humor to externalize issues and problems in their disagreements. She states that in her therapy office, she has a "big red ball of blame" (p. 1). She conveys that when couples or a person in the couple start to exhibit blaming and hostile behavior, she has the couple hold the big ball of blame briefly to bring the unwanted behavior into awareness. She also sometimes "places (the big red ball of blame) between the couple and points to it saying, "Your partner is not the problem. It's this blaming defensive cycle that is the problem...this "thing" is what is coming in between the two of you" (p. 1). She relates that this helps couple transition from a "you verses me adversarial perspective to a more collaborative, us verses the problem stance" (p. 1). Prescribing humor for couples (such as the examples above) may serve to disrupt recurring and/or perpetual conflicts.

Areas of Future Research

The current research regarding humor styles used during conflict largely focuses on affiliative and aggressive humor. Research on the effects of self-enhancing and self-defeating humor is sparser, and needs more attention. Self-enhancing and self-defeating humor is sometimes subtle, and more difficult for researchers to concretely capture and document in couple interactions. Accounting for and measuring the effects of self-enhancing and self-defeating humor styles in couples' interactions will add to the research.

As previously mentioned, the receiver of humor in couples' conflict is a large factor in determining the humor's effect on conflict. It may be helpful if future research more often controlled for humor appreciation and the humor style of the receiver when exploring the effect of different humor styles on conflict. Previous studies that factored in variables like attachment styles and level of anxiety were able to provide specific insight into humor receptivity among individual couples. The inclusion of these factors in research analysis may provide valuable information. For example, if a spouse has elevated levels of depression, they may respond less favorably to any type of humor during conflict.

The aforementioned studies focus almost exclusively on conflictual dynamics between heterosexual couples. There is a dearth of research in regards to the LGBTQ population.

Gottman et al. (2003) found that among gay and lesbian couples, increased use of humor in conversation and conflict was associated with higher relationship satisfaction. Research may become more generalizable if researchers explore the use of humor styles in conflict among non-traditional populations, such as the LGBTQ population.

In regards to applying humor with couples in counseling, relatively little research has been conducted. Some therapists support the use of humor in session with couples in their practice, and encourage couples to use humor to their advantage in their interactions. However, little formal research has explored the development and efficacy of clinical interventions within couples therapy involving humor (Franzini, 2001). Specific couples counseling techniques that incorporate humor to manage conflict need to be further investigated for efficacy.

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