Full Length Article

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Perceived partner humor use and relationship satisfaction in romantic pairs: The mediating role of relational uncertainty

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Abstract: This study investigated relational uncertainty as a mechanism through which perceived partner humor use affects recipient's relationship satisfaction. Two hundred individuals completed measures of their partners' perceived positive and negative humor use, their relational uncertainty and relationship satisfaction. Results reveal that perceived partner's positive relational humor use predicted greater relationship satisfaction, and perceived partner's negative relational humor use predicted diminished relationship satisfaction. Further, relational uncertainty mediated relationships between perceived partner positive humor and satisfaction and perceived partner negative humor and satisfaction.

Keywords: positive humor, negative humor, relational uncertainty, relationship satisfaction

1 Humor and uncertainty

As a valued trait in a romantic partner (Bressler et al. 2006; Lundy et al. 1998; Ziv 1988), a “sense of humor” has been associated with such positive relational outcomes as marital satisfaction (Ziv and Gadish 1989), intimacy (Hampes 1992, 1994), and comforting (Bippus 2000). Humor is not, however, an unalloyed good (Ford et al. 2015; Willis 2009). As with any other skill, inappropriate humor use can result in decreased satisfaction (Besser et al. 2012), and even relational termination (Saroglou et al. 2010). Coupling this range of effects with a definition of humor as a receiver's interpretation and response (Meyer 2000), it is not surprising that

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perceptions of a partner's humor use are especially pertinent to relational outcomes (Cann et al. 2011; Weisfeld et al. 2011; Ziv and Gadish 1989).

Unarguably, a great deal of couples' humor involves messages intentionally employed to produce particular effects, such as "smiling and laughing" (Ziv and Gadish 1989, p. 761), sharing "positivity, happiness, and levity" (Hall 2013, p. 274), and meaning "pleasure, delight and/or surprise" (Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield 1991, p. 206). Explanations for how humor produces these effects, especially in romantic relationships, are somewhat nebulous. Ziv and Gadish proposed that one partner's humor and the other's response "contribute to a pleasurable atmosphere" (p. 761). Hall suggested that a partner's humor style facilitated more specific humor functions, such as creating a playful and positive environment, expressing affection and releasing tension associated with conflict and apology-negotiation. Saroglou et al. (2010) argued that a partner's positive humor styles express a dependable self, and a "concern for interpersonal bonds" (p. 96), while negative styles diminish self and others. To support this, they cited research on the personality of the humor stylist.

Across this sampling of studies, there seems to be some consensus that one partner's humor fosters a positive communication climate, but such an explanation begs the question of how that climate, existing at the level of the dyad, translates into satisfaction for recipient partners. That is, the processes internal to the partner have remained largely a black box, with the positive climate a placeholder for an understanding of how recipients make sense of, and attach meaning to, their partner's humorous action and utterances. With this in mind, it is not the case that no explanations can be found. Ziv and Gadish (1989) pointed to cognitive-emotional responses involving feelings of mastery and pleasurable emotion regulation. Meyer (2012, 2015) suggested that appreciating another's humor shows that we share common scripts about the world as well as what is funny about script violations. Such explanations posit some kind of cognitive process within the receiver that responds to the humorous utterance and translates that into an evaluation of the relationship itself. Such a mechanism should be responsive to what is conveyed, allowing the recipient to draw inferences about what that conveyance means for one's relationship.

Relationship uncertainty is proposed as one such mechanism, insofar as it focuses on the "general sense of ambiguity about participating in a relationship" (Knobloch and Satterlee 2009, p. 108). Addressing fundamental questions and concerns is paramount to one's ongoing and continued involvement in a relationship, and perceptions of a partner's humor, we argue, is an important aspect of relational maintenance. For example, it should be reassuring to perceive that one shares an understanding of the world with someone else, or that one's partner is relaxed and emotionally stable, or even that one's partner knows one well enough to

coin a “pet name” for one. Conversely, perceiving that one’s partner is hostile, emotionally distant, and has little respect for you likely raises concerns about one’s continued investment and commitment. It is these uncertainty-related appraisals that, in turn, affect one’s evaluation of the relationship itself (i.e., one’s relational satisfaction). Based on these considerations, this study was designed to examine relationships among perceived partner’s humor use and relational uncertainty, as well as testing uncertainty as a mediator in predicting relationship satisfaction.

2 Humor and relationship satisfaction

Several studies have examined aspects of humor (e.g., sense of humor, humor production, humor styles) as an influence on relationship satisfaction (Bippus 2000; Bippus et al. 2011; Cann et al. 2008; Cann et al. 2011; Hall 2013; Vela et al. 2013; Weisfeld et al. 2011; Ziv and Gadish 1989). A meta-analysis by Hall (2017) supported a link between humor and satisfaction, tempered by three more specific claims. First, perceptions of partner’s humor use produce stronger relationships than self-reported humor use. Although humorous messages are enacted in individual conversational moments, “judgments of an individual’s humorousness can be viewed as a summary statement concerning that person’s relevant acts of humorousness” (Craig and Ware 1998, p. 76). Thus, when individuals are asked to report on their partners’ humor usage, it is assumed that they are able to abstract from those unique interactions to assess their partners’ general abilities to produce laughter and amusement. Given that relationship satisfaction refers to feelings that the relationship is rewarding and meets interpersonal needs, this suggests that one’s own ability to produce amusement in partners, or to appreciate humor more generally, is not as relationally satisfying as experiencing positive affect directly from one’s partner.

Second, statistical relationships are stronger for measures of relational humor use (as measured, for example, by the Relational Humor Inventory, De Koning and Weiss 2002) compared to measures not specific to the relational context (e.g., the Humor Styles Questionnaire, Martin et al. 2003). Hall (2017) noted some of the weaknesses and inconsistencies of existing humor measures. For example, he distinguished between shared humor and evaluative humor. Shared humor is truly relational in the sense that it involves partners “laughing together” (p. 308), as well as sharing jokes and funny stories. Evaluative humor measures the degree to which one’s partner’s humor use is “skillful, enjoyable, attractive, and capable of eliciting laughter” (p. 308). Although conceptually distinct, there is likely a large degree of empirical and practical overlap. In classifying the scales, Hall placed both the relational and evaluative subscales of the Relational Humor Inventory (RHI) under the “Positive” category (see Hall, Table 1, pg. 313). In his meta-analysis

results, both subscales evidenced similar effect sizes with satisfaction: $r = 0.64$ for relational humor, and $r = 0.65$ for evaluative humor. Most likely, if individuals have partners who make them laugh, they often reciprocate with some contribution of their own. Thus, perceptions of a partner's humor use are likely not entirely independent of one's own actions, but following Craik and Ware (1998), those evaluations are still rooted in things the partner says and does that are humorous.

Finally, the results reaffirm the importance of considering different types of humor, in particular the distinction between positive and negative forms of humor. Positive and negative humor are distinct constructs that increase and decrease satisfaction, respectively (Cann et al. 2009). Positive humor is affiliative (Martin et al. 2003), unifying (Meyer 2000), bonding, and playful. Partners in romantic relationships typically seek one another out to have positive and playful interactions (Aune and Wong 2012; Hall 2013) that typically include shared humor (Meyer 2012). Joking around and developing idioms and inside jokes are important ways of fostering solidarity and connection (Bell and Healey 1992; Bruess and Pearson 1993; Fine and De Soucey 2005). Additionally, partners who share humor and laugh at the same things affirm common ground and shared understandings of the world (Averbeck 2013). Several authors have argued that humor use in close relationships serves important maintenance functions (Bressler et al. 2006; Hall 2013, 2019). In line with Hall's (2017) meta-analysis, partner's positive humor use should be associated with more positive relationship evaluations.

H1: Perceived partner positive humor is positively related to relationship satisfaction.

Negative humor is aggressive (Martin et al. 2003), differentiating (Meyer 2000), biting, and destructive. Among the functions accorded to negative humor are enforcing norms, creating distance, and disparaging others. Humor that puts others down often capitalizes on negative stereotypes and outgroups characteristics (Ford et al. 2015). Such humor can render its user less likable to strangers (Strain et al. 2015) and an embarrassment to one's partner (Hall 2011). In terms of creating distance, Williams (2009) found that men reported using humor to avoid discussing personal issues with other men; similarly, Miczo et al. (2009) found aggressive humor was associated with greater self-reported attachment avoidance. In line with Hall's (2017) meta-analysis, a partner's negative humor that embarrasses, demeans, denigrates, and deflates the self should lead to negative relationship evaluations.

H2: Perceived partner negative humor is negatively related to relationship satisfaction.

3 Uncertainty and relationship satisfaction

Uncertainty, as the inability to predict a future state of affairs, has a long and distinguished career in interpersonal communication research (Afifi 2010; Babrow 2001). Uncertainty is typically held to be a negative affective state, even though motivations to reduce it are variable (Brashers 2001; Sunnafrank 1986). Uncertainty reduction theory (Berger and Calabrese 1975) focused on initial interaction between strangers, arguing, among other things, that reciprocal self-disclosure was shaped by partners' needs to alleviate unpleasant feelings of uncertainty by increasing knowledge and predictability of one another. Further, the reward value of reduced uncertainty resulted in increased liking for the partner. Subsequent research has established that uncertainty arises even in established relationships (Planalp and Honeycutt 1985), prompting an increased focus on uncertainty management approaches.

One of the key issues facing romantic relationship partners involves negotiating issues of involvement, interdependence, and influence (Kelley et al. 1983; Reis 2012; Schutz 1966). The relational uncertainty construct (Knobloch and Solomon 1999; Solomon and Knobloch 2001) was initially developed to explore periods of uncertainty as partners moved toward greater involvement, interdependence and commitment, but has subsequently been extended to relationships more broadly. Relational uncertainty involves the degree of confidence in one's involvement in a relationship, as well as one's ability to understand and explain actions and attitudes of both self and partner (Knobloch 2010; Solomon and Knobloch 2004). In this approach, there are three sources of uncertainty in particular that partners must manage. Self-uncertainty addresses self-relevant concerns about one's own desire to continue the relationship. Partner uncertainty involves concerns about the partner's desire to remain. Relationship uncertainty stems from doubts about the future viability of the partnership itself. Numerous research studies have established the deleterious consequences flowing from concerns about the definition and future of one's relationship (Knobloch 2010). Being unsure of one's involvement, one's partner, or one's self (i.e., experiencing greater uncertainty), ought to undermine or call into question basic relational definitions surrounding compatibility and interdependence, resulting in lower subjective evaluations of the relationship itself.

H3: Uncertainty is negatively related to relationship satisfaction.

4 Humor and uncertainty

As a form of indirect communication, humor, more often than not, ought to produce uncertainty in relationships. After all, partners who engage in humor trade on ambiguity, double meanings, and partial resolution. However, such an assumption presumes the humorous mode involves the absence of the rational ordering and rules of Gricean conversations. Although it differs from the *bona-fide* mode of serious communication (Raskin 1985), the *non-bona-fide* mode has its own rules and structure and, more importantly, virtually all interactants can be assumed to understand the distinction between the two modes (Mulkay 1988). The ambiguity of humor is not inherently problematic, even if the humor is not always understood or appreciated (Bell 2015). Moreover, the motivations and consequences of humor can be serious (Mulkay 1988), and once again, most interactants can engage in the necessary inferential work, even though their interpretations may not always be successful (a situation that can also be true of the *bona-fide* mode).

There is, therefore, no necessary reason why humor usage in close relationships should produce uncertainty. In fact, the argument that humor can be a means of reducing uncertainty has been advanced (Meyer 2015). Focusing on initial interactions, Graham (1995) posited that people generally seek positive outcomes from interactions and that reduced uncertainty is one such positive outcome. Humor is a low-risk strategy for expressing thoughts and ideas, both as regards self-revelation and for creating openings to gauge a partner's responses. Sharing humorous moments also begins to create a shared relational history. Beck (1997), for example, found that nurses recalled humorous experiences with patients even years after the exchange. In Graham's study, high sense of humor individuals had partners who reported greater reduction of uncertainty and a greater desire for future communication.

Craik and Ware (1998) discussed four functions that humor serves for personality development and expression. First, humor provides an effective coping mechanism for dealing with stress. Second, humor allows the expression of uncomfortable topics in a socially acceptable fashion. Third, humor depends on a certain set of social and cognitive skills. Fourth, humor can signal a humorous outlook, or playful approach to the world. Insofar as humor tends to be a social phenomenon, with the production and appreciation of humor observable to others, all of these functions have effects on relational partners. Regarding the first function, using humor to cope has been related to less stress and conflict in couples where one partner was a police officer (Horan et al. 2012). Similarly, regarding the second function, research has examined how humor can facilitate discussions of sex and safe-sex practices (Adelman 1991). Third, individuals higher in humor

orientation, the ability to produce prosocial humor (Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield 1991), were perceived as more socially attractive and less lonely (Wanzer et al. 1996). Finally, several studies have examined the impact of play, including humor, in contributing to intimacy and satisfaction (Aune and Wong 2002, 2012; Baxter 1992).

Collectively, these impacts of more positive forms of humor should affect the three types of uncertainty. If the partner uses humor to produce affectively pleasant and positive interactions, the sort that serves the need to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995), the individual should desire to continue the relationship. This is consistent with social exchange approaches, whereby partners assess the rewards and costs of relationships and prefer rewards to outweigh costs (Rolloff 1981; Thibaut and Kelley 1959/1986). If the partner is able to use humor to skillfully address sensitive topics and express viewpoints about issues, individuals should feel that they know the partner and where the partner stands. This is consistent with communication privacy management theory (Petronio 2002), which states that individuals make decisions about revealing private information. In this case, humor is the means allowing information to be revealed. Finally, if the partner shows a willingness to engage in playful interaction, the individual should feel that the relationship itself is a secure base. This is consistent with attachment theory (Bowlby 1982), wherein a person has to feel secure before they are comfortable enough to engage in play and other exploratory behavior. These considerations lead to the following hypothesis:

H4: Perceived partner positive humor is negatively related to relationship uncertainty.

On the other hand, negative humor also has functional effects on individual personalities and relationships. Humor has been associated with costs, in terms of partner embarrassment (Hall 2011), less skillful conflict resolution (Campbell and Moroz 2014) and perceptions of less progress made in conflict discussions (Bippus et al. 2011). These costs may influence an individual to doubt their own feelings about the relationship. In a qualitative study of negative humor use, Anderson and DiTunnariello (2016) found that respondents reported using such humor to cover up issues, a usage consistent with the literature on topic avoidance. Generally, topic avoidance is associated with greater uncertainty and reduced satisfaction (Bevan et al. 2006; Dailey and Palomares 2004; Sargent 2002). When humor is used to avoid topics, individuals may feel they do not know their partner as well as they would like. Finally, several studies have found that attachment insecurity is related to less positive and/or more negative humor use (Besser et al. 2012; Cann et al. 2008; Miczo et al. 2009; Winterheld et al. 2013). A relationship characterized by use of negative humor forms such as sarcasm, irony, and teasing generated by

Figure 1: Mediated relationship for perceived positive humor.

an insecure partner may cause one to doubt the viability of the partnership. These considerations prompt the following hypothesis:

H5: Perceived partner negative humor is positively related to relationship uncertainty.

According to Knobloch and Solomon (2005), one of the central challenges of relationships is “translating ambiguous signals into conclusions about the state of a relationship” (p. 352). Humor, as has been noted, is frequently an ambiguous message type (Landreville 2015), requiring some degree of inferential work to ascertain its meaning (or range of meanings). Even though frequently understood, the interpretation of a partner’s humorous messages, particularly their positive or negative function, should affect conclusions regarding compatibility, confidence and understanding of self and partner. Those interpretations, in the form of uncertainty, should therefore provide one means by which humor exerts its effects on relationship satisfaction. This argument is in line with the theoretical propositions of Solomon et al. (2016) that positive communication should reduce relational uncertainty, while negative communication should amplify relational uncertainty. The proposed mediation model

Figure 2: Mediated relationship for perceived negative humor.

is illustrated conceptually in Figures 1 and 2 for perceived partner positive and negative humor, respectively. Based on those conceptual diagrams, the following hypothesis is offered:

H6: Relational uncertainty mediates associations between perceived partner humor usage (positive and negative) and relationship satisfaction.

5 Methods

5.1 Participants

Participants were 200 college students enrolled in communication classes at a medium-sized Midwestern university. The sample was 35.5% male ($n = 71$) and 64.5% female ($n = 129$), ranging in age from 18–51 ($M = 21.49$, $SD = 4.42$, with three participants not providing responses). Ethnic classification was 62.5% White/Caucasian, 27.5% Black/African-American, 7% Hispanic/Latin American, and 3% Other. Juniors (37.5%) and seniors (32%) formed a majority of the sample, with smaller numbers of sophomores (16.5%), freshmen (13.5%) and post-graduate students (0.5%).

Participants also provided data on their romantic relationship. They had known their partners for approximately 3 years and 5 months ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 3.37$, range 0–24 for years; $M = 4.62$, $SD = 3.43$, range 0–11 for months). They had been a couple for approximately 2 years and 4 months ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 2.45$, range 0–22 for years; $M = 4.07$, $SD = 2.95$, range 0–11 for months). When asked if friends and family viewed them as a couple, 81% ($n = 162$) responded in the affirmative, 14.5% ($n = 29$) were unsure, and 4.5% ($n = 9$) replied in the negative. Asked to classify their relationship, the majority of participants were either seriously ($n = 115$, 57.5%) or casually ($n = 67$, 33.5%) dating, with smaller numbers engaged ($n = 9$, 4.5%) or married ($n = 9$, 4.5%).

5.2 Procedure

Following approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, an online survey using Qualtrics software was made available to students enrolled in Communication classes. Participants completed items measuring relational uncertainty, then rated their perception of their partner's uses of humor. This was followed by a measure of relationship satisfaction. The final set of questions was demographics (Participants also completed measures not pertinent to the present investigation). The majority of students received extra credit from their course instructor for their participation.

5.3 Measures

5.3.1 Perceived partner's positive and negative humor use

Two subscales of the relational humor inventory (De Koning and Weiss 2002) were used to assess perceived partner's humor use. The partner positive humor subscale contains five items assessing attractiveness and enjoyment of partner's humor usage (e.g., "I think one of the attractive things about my partner is her/his sense of humor"); the partner negative humor subscale contains seven items measuring partner's use of humor to hurt the respondent or avoid facing issues (e.g., "My partner uses humor to avoid facing issues that concern us," "I can feel really hurt by some of my partner's jokes"). All items were assessed with 5-point Likert-type scales with endpoints 1 = "Strongly disagree" and 5 = "Strongly agree." The two subscales evidenced marginal reliability: Perceived partner positive humor ($\alpha = 0.66$ after eliminating one item; $M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.71$) and perceived partner negative humor ($\alpha = 0.71$; $M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.68$).¹

5.3.2 Relationship uncertainty

Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) relational uncertainty scale consists of 12 questions assessing the three sources of uncertainty: self (e.g., "How you feel about the relationship?"), partner (e.g., "How your partner feels about the relationship?"), and relationship ("The current status of this relationship?"). All items were assessed with 6-point Likert-type scales with endpoints 1 = "Completely or almost completely uncertain" and 6 = "Completely or almost completely certain." The items were preceded by the stem "How certain are you about ..." and were coded so that higher scores reflect greater uncertainty. A composite variable combining all three subscales in a global measure of uncertainty was reliable ($\alpha = 0.95$; $M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.07$).

5.3.3. Relationship satisfaction

The quality marriage index (QMI; Norton 1983) contains six items assessing global evaluations regarding the quality of one's romantic relationship (e.g., "We have a good relationship"). All items were assessed with 5-point Likert-type scales with endpoints 1 = "Strongly disagree" and 5 = "Strongly agree." QMI scores were reliable ($\alpha = 0.89$; $M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.82$).

¹ The full scale is available in De Koning and Weiss (2002). The eliminated item was "My partner has little difficulty making me smile or laugh."

Table 1: Correlations among perceived partner’s humor use, relational uncertainty, and relationship satisfaction.

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Partner’s positive humor use	–			
2. Partner’s negative humor use	–0.23**	–		
3. Relational uncertainty	–0.43**	0.34**	–	
4. Relationship satisfaction	0.54**	–0.35**	–0.72**	–

N = 200; ***p* < 0.01.

Table 2: Partner’s humor use as mediator of uncertainty and relationship satisfaction.

Predictor	Uncertainty			Satisfaction			CI
	Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>	
Partner’s positive humor	–0.64	0.10	0.00	0.33	0.06	0.00	
Uncertainty	–	–	–	–0.46	0.04	0.00	(0.20, 0.39)
Predictor	Uncertainty			Satisfaction			CI
	Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>	
Partner’s negative humor	0.53	0.10	0.00	–0.15	0.06	0.01	
Uncertainty	–	–	–	–0.52	0.04	0.00	(–0.41, –0.16)

6 Results

Hypotheses one through five were examined with correlation analyses, presented in Table 1. Perceptions of partner’s positive humor use was positively correlated with relationship satisfaction (H1; $r(200) = 0.54, p < 0.01$) and negatively correlated with relational uncertainty (H4; $r(200) = -0.43, p < 0.01$). Relationship satisfaction was negatively correlated with relational uncertainty (H3; $r(200) = -0.72, p < 0.01$). Perceptions of partner’s negative humor use was negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction (H2; $r(200) = -0.35, p < 0.01$) and positively correlated with relational uncertainty (H5; $r(200) = 0.34, p < 0.01$). Thus, hypotheses 1–5 were supported.

Hypothesis 6, that relational uncertainty mediates the impact of perceived partner humor on relationship satisfaction, was tested with Hayes’s (2018) Process analysis for SPSS (Model 4). The Hayes procedure uses bootstrapping analysis with 5000 samples to examine direct and indirect effects. The output provides a 95% confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effect and if zero is outside of that CI, the indirect effect is significant at $p < 0.05$. Separate analyses, reported in Table 2, were conducted for perceived positive and negative partner humor use.

In the first analysis, the direct effect of perceived partner positive humor use on relationship satisfaction was significant ($b = 0.33$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, perceived partner positive humor use was associated with relational uncertainty ($b = -0.64$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < 0.01$), and relational uncertainty was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction ($b = -0.46$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.01$). The indirect effect of partner positive humor use on relationship satisfaction through relational uncertainty ($b = 0.29$, $SE = 0.05$) revealed evidence of mediation (95% CI [0.20, 0.39]). The total effect was also significant ($b = 0.62$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.01$). For perceived partner positive humor, hypothesis 6 was supported; relational uncertainty mediated the connection between perceptions of partner's positive humor use and relationship satisfaction.

In the second analysis, the direct effect of perceived partner negative humor use on relationship satisfaction was significant ($b = -0.15$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, perceived partner negative humor use was associated with relational uncertainty ($b = 0.53$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$), and relational uncertainty was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction ($b = -0.51$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.01$). The indirect effect of partner negative humor use on relationship satisfaction through relational uncertainty ($b = -0.28$, $SE = 0.07$) revealed evidence of mediation (95% CI [-0.41, -0.15]). The total effect was also significant ($b = -0.43$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.01$). For perceived partner negative humor, hypothesis 6 is supported; relational uncertainty mediated the connection between perceptions of partner's negative humor use and relationship satisfaction.

7 Supplementary analyses

Additional analyses were conducted to explore the separate components of uncertainty as mediators of perceived partner humor use and satisfaction. Given strong intercorrelations between the three sources of uncertainty (ranging from $r = 0.71$ to $r = 0.85$), separate analyses were conducted for each source of uncertainty. Additionally, for ease of presentation, only the total, direct, and indirect effects are reported. For perceived partner positive humor use, the results were as follows: for self-uncertainty, the total effect was significant ($b = 0.62$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.01$), the direct effect was significant ($b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.01$), and the indirect effect ($b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.05$) revealed evidence of mediation (95% CI [0.22, 0.41]); for partner uncertainty, the total effect was significant ($b = 0.62$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.01$), the direct effect was significant ($b = 0.45$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.01$), and the indirect effect ($b = 0.17$, $SE = 0.04$) revealed evidence of mediation (95% CI [0.10, 0.25]); for relationship uncertainty, the total effect was significant ($b = 0.62$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.01$), the direct effect was significant ($b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.01$),

and the indirect effect ($b = 0.27$, $SE = 0.05$) revealed evidence of mediation (95% CI [0.19, 0.37]).

For perceived partner negative humor use, the results were as follows: for self-uncertainty, the total effect was significant ($b = -0.43$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.01$), the direct effect was significant ($b = -0.18$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.01$), and the indirect effect ($b = -0.25$, $SE = 0.06$) revealed evidence of mediation (95% CI [-0.37, -0.13]); for partner uncertainty, the total effect was significant ($b = -0.43$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.01$), the direct effect was significant ($b = -0.25$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.01$), and the indirect effect ($b = -0.17$, $SE = 0.06$) revealed evidence of mediation (95% CI [-0.29, -0.07]); for relationship uncertainty, the total effect was significant ($b = -0.43$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.01$), the direct effect was significant ($b = -0.13$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.01$), and the indirect effect ($b = -0.30$, $SE = 0.07$) revealed evidence of mediation (95% CI [-0.44, -0.18]).

8 Discussion

This study investigated relational uncertainty as a mechanism through which perceived partner humor use affected relationship satisfaction. The present results are in line with Hall's (2017) meta-analysis; that is, perceived partner's positive relational humor use predicted greater relationship satisfaction, and perceived partner's negative relational humor use predicted diminished relationship satisfaction. Further, relational uncertainty mediated relationships between perceived positive partner humor and satisfaction, and perceived negative partner humor and satisfaction. The discussion addresses links between relational humor and relational satisfaction, before turning to a consideration of relational uncertainty and alternative models.

The notion that one person's humor use is associated with a romantic partner's satisfaction because it creates a positive communication climate (Ziv and Gadish 1989) suggests a relationship-level phenomenon somehow arising out of the interaction between partners. That is, if it is assumed that a recipient partner who failed to respond appropriately (i.e., with smiling, laughter, and positive affect) would not perceive that a positive climate had been created, then that partner's appropriate response is part of what creates that climate. Evaluations of the relationship are not, in this explanation, based on the humor recipient's individual sense-making in response to partner humor, but on a dyadic construct implicating both partners (e.g., positive partner humor + positive receiver response = positive communication climate). As Berger (1993) argued, however, the "process of interpretation is, in the final analysis, an individual affair" (p. 53). When a person uses humor, that person's partner may or may not laugh, may or may not be

amused, and may or may not spend much time reflecting on the deeper meanings of a well-turned script opposition (Raskin 1985), but that person will engage in some kind of cognitive processing and draw implications for the self and the relationship. It may, in fact, be the case that receivers more typically employ general knowledge structures (e.g., humorous interaction = good relationship) rather than partner specific knowledge structures (e.g., humorous interaction = my partner and I have a shared understanding of the world). It may also be the case that reflection on the implications of a partner's humor for one's ongoing involvement and commitment may occur in between interactions. The point is that humor researchers have more often than not assumed rather than assessed recipients' cognitive processes. The results of the current study, therefore, argue for greater attention to be paid to the relationship-relevant cognitive processes operating within the perceived partner humor-recipient relationship satisfaction link.

8.1 Partner humor use and relationship satisfaction

Positive humor is affiliative and unifying, often playful and aimed at creating a pleasant affective environment (Meyer 2015). Prior research has established that perceiving a partner uses such humor is related to being more satisfied with the relationship (Hall 2017). A variety of explanations have been proffered that might explain this link, including the inherent positivity of laughter (Nikopoulos 2017), the potential of humor as a coping strategy (Lefcourt 2001), and the role of humor in creating common ground (Averbeck 2013). Empirical support for these pathways continues to accumulate as research has explored mechanisms linking these two phenomena. Hall (2013) found that humor enjoyment mediated partner humor use and satisfaction. Meyer (2012) found that humor arising from within the relationship itself (pets, the partner, self) was linked to relationship enhancement. Humor has also been found to play a role in specific contexts, such as comforting (Bippus, 2000) and conflict (Bippus et al. 2011; Campbell et al. 2008).

Negative humor is characterized as disparaging, dividing, and aggressive. Hall's (2017) meta-analysis found that such humor is linked to lowered relational satisfaction. Explanations typically center on the way such humor functions to devalue the partner, creating hurt feelings. Since much disparagement humor trades on stereotypes (Cundall 2012), directing such humor at a partner positions that person as an outgroup member. Then, consistent with prejudiced norm theory (Ford and Ferguson 2004), such humor may release further prejudicial behavior. Negative humor can also be used to avoid discussion of relational

topics (Anderson and DiTunnariello 2016), as well as creating distance between partners, thereby reducing the feelings of closeness and intimacy that fuel satisfaction.

The relationships examined here have become well established in the literature, as evidenced in Hall's (2017) meta-analysis. As such, support for the first two hypotheses was not unexpected. Nevertheless, additional issues remain to be interrogated. For example, this study examined perceptions of partners, which may be different from observer ratings. Also, specifically at the micro-level of interaction we do not know enough about what partners are doing and saying that lead to subjective evaluations of the relationship. How are they enacting humor that is perceived positively? Capturing these perceptions might increase the precision of humor's relational impact. Finally, the effect sizes were small, rendering it clear that additional relational behaviors, as might be expected, also influence satisfaction. Examining multiple measures of relational behavior would contribute to our understanding of humor's unique effects.

8.2 Relational uncertainty and partner humor

In order to fully understand the role of humor in relationships (romantic or otherwise) it is important to explore the social and cognitive mechanisms at work. Uncertainty is a good candidate for such a mechanism both because of its omnipresence in relationships (Knobloch and Satterlee 2009) and due to humor's ambiguity. That is, as an inherently ambiguous message, humor requires inferential work to decipher its meaning. However, as argued by Mulkay (1988), humor's ambiguity is part of a humorous mode with its own rules and logics. The fact that a partner uses humor may not, in itself then, lead to confusion, though inferential work to parse the serious or non-serious intent of the humor is still required. The type of inference, and therefore the impact on uncertainty, likely depends on the type of humor that is instantiated by one's partner.

Results support this reasoning, in that positive humor resulted in less uncertainty and negative humor resulted in heightened uncertainty. One issue raised by these results is the relational meta-message of a partner's use of humor. That is, when partners use humor, what are they trying to do relationally? The meta-message of positive humor is enjoyment; people play with, and seek to please, those whom they like. As liking is a core component of desiring to persist in the relationship (Rubin 1974), positive humor enacted in the romantic relationship context by one's partner reduces one's own uncertainty about the relationship. Negative humor, conversely, sends a different meta-message, one of devaluation. Such messages may foster doubt – doubts about oneself, especially if the negative

humor targets factors such as physical appearance or competencies (as much teasing does, DiCioccio 2008); doubts about the relationship, insofar as the partner does not seem to want to move closer; and, doubts about the partner's relational personality.

Supplementary analyses of the components of relational uncertainty revealed that they were all separate mediators of perceived partner positive and negative humor use. This result is not surprising insofar as the components tend to be intercorrelated but it raises possibilities for future research. In their presentation of relational turbulence theory, Solomon et al. (2016) argued that self and partner uncertainty lead to relationship uncertainty, which in turn, created biased cognitive appraisals that affected one's own communicative engagement. The correlational design and use of other-report in this study preclude a strict test of this model, insofar as perceptions of partner's humor use and self-reports of relational uncertainty in a cross-sectional design share method variance. Observational and experimental studies might be better positioned to test the impact of variations in partner's humor use on specific components of relational uncertainty. For example, a partner's use of disparaging racist or sexist humor might be more strongly related to partner uncertainty, while ridicule or sarcasm directed at one's own behavior might have a stronger impact on self-uncertainty. The present investigation should be viewed as a stepping stone to more rigorous explorations.

Though this examination suggests an important pathway for humor's relational effects, additional questions remain. For example, does partner's positive humor use lead to pleasant interaction, or affirming shared values, and does this reduce uncertainty? A related issue has to do with distinguishing relational uncertainty from message uncertainty. In a study of satire, Landreville (2015) argued that message uncertainty refers to doubts about the implications of a message. She found that, compared to a regular news story, a satirical story resulted in more self-reported message uncertainty, and more subsequent expressions of uncertainty. Thus, attending carefully to a humorous message and its implications may increase message uncertainty. However, relational partners may not attend that carefully, or may only do so under certain circumstances. The positive form or context of a partner's humor may carry more weight in affecting levels of certainty (Craik and Ware 1998). Research could examine this issue by having partners attend to these different levels of operation, with the caveat that prompting a partner to focus on a messages' implications may generate uncertainty that wasn't there before.

9 Limitations

Several limitations must be borne in mind. Very few of the samples were married, meaning that this was an examination of humor among young, unmarried individuals. The sampling of college students carries limitations in terms of age but also cohort. That is, current generations of Millennials, emerging adults, and Gen Z have grown up in a cultural milieu drenched in humor, and in which humor is generally held to be a positive characteristic. High-profile cases of individuals who are censured for making public inappropriate humorous remarks (e.g., Roseanne Barr) may produce attributions of personal deviance rather than call into question the value of humor in the public sphere. Additionally, the correlational and cross-sectional nature of the data do not allow making strong causal claims. Alternative models remain possible. For example, individuals dissatisfied with their relationship might perceive their partners using more negative humor, which in turn, could contribute to heightened uncertainty.² Heightened uncertainty might also influence how a partner's humorous messages are processed (Knobloch and Solomon 2005). Finally, the measures chosen emphasized some aspects of the underlying constructs, but by no means all of them. Replication with more varied samples, using longitudinal designs and expanded measures is called for.

10 Conclusions

Humor is elusive insofar as the *non-bona-fide* mode of communication sets aside rational models of reality and goal pursuit. Yet, humor has been identified as a maintenance strategy, a form of affinity-seeking (Meyer 2015) and a means of handling conflict (Bippus et al. 2011), providing comfort (Bippus 2000) and attempting persuasion (Nabi et al. 2007). This begs the question of the utility of the *non-bona-fide* mode. Why does a non-rational, ambiguous form of communication prove so versatile in managing relationships? Perhaps, the affect regulation, perspective-taking and mental flexibility associated with humor keep partners from getting too serious, and too committed to one orientation to social reality. Insofar as these orientations are also bulwarks against anxiety and props for security, humor can also impact the feelings of certainty that have been posited as foundational to relationship stability and longevity. This is where the distinction between positive and negative humor comes into play. The positive humorist says “I will set aside social reality itself to play with you,” thus reassuring the partner regarding the quality

² We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

of the bond. Conversely, the negative humorist conveys “I will play at your expense,” undermining the caring and responsiveness fundamental to close relationships.

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