

Humor in marital adjustment¹

JOHN RUST and JEFFREY GOLDSTEIN

Abstract

It has often been postulated that humor plays a part in emotional well-being. The converse of this should therefore follow: states of emotional distress should be associated with impairment of humor. This study examines the importance of humor appreciation in marital adjustment. Two groups of subjects, one with marital problems and one representing the general population, rated their appreciation of their partner's sense of humor as well as filling out the Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State (GRIMS). It was found that there was less humor appreciation in the distressed group, and that appreciation of partner's humor correlated significantly with the general state of the marriage. Failure to appreciate one's partner's sense of humor seems to be a significant indicator of marital distress.

The vast majority of research on humor can be divided roughly into three types, depending upon the principal focus. The first is an attempt to understand the dynamics of humor and laughter: what makes us laugh? The second is a search for the correlates of humor, its relationship to intelligence, personality, social group membership, and culture. Third, research has attempted to examine the consequences of humor and laughter: does humor reduce stress, influence attitudes, promote health? In nearly all of this research, individuals are presented with jokes and cartoons, or are themselves asked to produce humorous material, which then serves as a measure of their sense of humor (see McGhee and Goldstein 1983, for reviews of this traditional literature). Occasionally, people are asked to indicate how they appreciate the humor of someone else. In the present research, we examine the appreciation of one's spouse's sense of humor and its relationship to marital adjustment.

Despite occasional statements to the contrary, it is widely believed that humor and laughter promote health, reduce stress, and generally promote personal and interpersonal well-being. Elsewhere one of us has charted the role of humor and laughter in physical well-being and recovery from illness (Goldstein 1987). In the present paper, our concern is with the role that the perception of humor may play in close personal relationships.

As with so many analyses of humor and laughter, this area, too, has a long history, though one that empirical researchers frequently overlook. As long ago as 1710 the English essayist, critic, and playwright, Richard Steele (1672–1729) argued that good cheer and a benign, sympathetic sense of humor were essential to a good marriage (see Leites 1981). Steele believed that humor enabled a couple to achieve emotional independence from objective circumstances, and that it permitted them to rise above mundane problems and conflict. Further, he wrote that humor benefited individuals by putting them in a similar state of mind to one another.

Is there any empirical evidence that humor plays a significant role in close relationships? The evidence is surprisingly sparse. It has occasionally been noted by family therapists and marriage counselors that humor promotes positive feeling and smooths the way for negotiating conflict (for example, Beavers 1984; Cade 1986; Zuk 1963, 1964). However, only one study could be found that examined humor and its role in marital relationships. Jacobs (1985) studied 102 women in New York State who had been married for between 2 and 43 years. Marital adjustment, as measured by the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier 1976), and the women's responses to a humor questionnaire were analyzed. Factor analysis of humor responses resulted in a distinction between positive uses of humor, those that helped to regulate intimacy and manage interpersonal conflict, and negative uses of humor, which expressed hostility or increased social distance between the partners. A similar distinction was also noticed by Steele and has been made in many literary analyses of humor (for example, Charney 1978; Kincaid 1971) as well as in social science research. Jacobs reports that more-successful marital adjustment is related to a greater degree of positive humor use and that less-successful marital adjustment is associated with a greater degree of negative humor use. Furthermore, there was evidence that the way a couple uses humor accounts for a greater proportion of marital-adjustment variance than does biographical information.

In the research reported here, we explore a couple's self-reported appreciation of their partner's sense of humor and its contribution to marital adjustment. The present research arose during the construction and validation of the Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State (GRIMS) (Rust et al. 1986, 1987, 1988). The construction of the GRIMS involved the development of a test specification by a group of marriage and family therapists. This test specification was based on the experience of therapists in the clinic and on the particular issues and difficulties they had identified through their clinical experience. A common observation among them was that, for a marriage to succeed, it seemed important that the partners could laugh together and could appreciate each other's sense of humor. Consequently an item assessing this ability was entered into the questionnaire in the pilot study, and the item analysis supported its inclusion in the final GRIMS scale. It reads, "I really appreciate my partner's sense of humor." Each partner responds on a four-point scale, "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," or "strongly agree."

The present study looks at the relationship between this item and the rest of the scale, which has a total of 28 items but no other humor-related items. Data was obtained from two separate samples comprising 266 individuals.

Method

Data were obtained from two groups of subjects. Group I (97 men and 96 women, some of them couples) was a group of presenters at marital and sexual dysfunction clinics throughout England, particularly in London and Sheffield. Group II was a sample of 26 men and 47 women, all married or cohabiting, appearing at a general practice clinic. Both groups represented part of the validation sample for the GRIMS (Rust et al. 1988). Both groups were culturally diverse, representing the varied cultural backgrounds (British, West Indian, Asian, and African) to be found in an English inner-city area.

The subjects in group II were intended to represent the general population, and it should be stressed that those who took part were not attending the clinic for sexual or marital problems. The investigation was carried out over a six-month period. As it is estimated that over 40 percent of those registered with a GP visit the clinic in that period of time (Shepherd et al. 1966), the sample should have been fairly representative

of the practice, which was situated in inner London. The occupations of those who took part were wide, ranging from unskilled manual workers to professional/managerial level. The average age of the men and women, respectively, was 35.0 (s.d. 13.10, range 18 to 67) and 31.8 (s.d. 9.67, range 18 to 59).

The questionnaire

The Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State (Rust et al. 1988) is a short unidimensional questionnaire designed to assess, separately for men and women, the extent of marital discord. The scale items are the same for men and women, and there are no sex differences, these having been eliminated during test construction. The GRIMS has 28 items and is answered on a four-point scale from "strongly agree" through "agree" and "disagree" to "strongly disagree."

The reliability of the GRIMS is .91 for men and .87 for women. The correlation between male and female partners' total GRIMS scores when both fill in the questionnaire has been found to be .77 (Rust et al. 1986). The validity of the GRIMS has been demonstrated by a comparison between clinical and general population samples and by a correlation of change in GRIMS score during therapy with therapists' blind ratings of degree of improvement (Rust et al. 1988).

Procedure

For both groups the questionnaire administration was carried out by psychiatric or psychological researchers, and each lasted about 15 minutes. As would be expected, there was a very low refusal rate for the clinic presenters in group I. The GRIMS was administered to the clients while they were sitting apart in the waiting area prior to being seen by the therapist. Unlimited time was given, and a person was available to answer any queries.

In the general-practice group about 18 percent of those asked in the waiting room refused to take part; however, they did not generally know at this time that the questions were to be about their marriage. Only a few subjects subsequently refused to take part on the basis of this knowledge, representing about 7 percent of the sample.

Table 1. Comparison of marriage-guidance-clinic and general-practice clients' responses to the question "I really appreciate my partner's sense of humor"

Response	Group 1: marital clinic (%)	Group 2: general practice (%)
Strongly disagree	9 (4.7)	1 (1.4)
Disagree	38 (19.7)	5 (6.8)
Agree	115 (59.6)	49 (67.1)
Strongly agree	31 (16.1)	18 (24.7)

N=266, Chi-square=9.54, $P < .03$.

Results

Let us look first at the responses to the item concerning appreciation of the partner's sense of humor. The results are given in Table 1. It can be seen that a high proportion (24.4 percent) of those in group 1, those seeking help for their marriages, show little appreciation of their partner's sense of humor. This compares with 8.2 percent in group 2, the general-population group. Analysis of variance on this item score by group and sex shows that this effect is significant at the .003 level ($F=9.09$, $d.f.=1,262$). There is no sex difference on this item ($F < 1$); neither is there any sex-by-group interaction ($F < 1$).

An adjusted total GRIMS score was calculated for each group by omitting the sense-of-humor item. The overall correlation between this humor item and the total adjusted GRIMS score was $-.44$, which was significant at the .001 level ($N=266$). This item was then correlated with the total score separately for men and women in each group, and again all these correlations were significant, ranging from $-.27$ to $-.54$; none differed significantly from the others.

Discussion

It thus seems that failure to appreciate one's partner's sense of humor is an important element in marital discord. Indeed, knowing this information is sufficient to predict 20 percent of the variance in GRIMS scores. The direction of causality for this effect is not known, but in either direction it leads to interesting speculation. For example, it may be that a decline in the appreciation of one's partner's sense of humor is an early

and significant indicator of growing marital dissatisfaction. Likewise, an increase in appreciation of the other's humor may be a signal of progress in family therapy. Of course, these hypotheses need further scrutiny. In particular it would be interesting to know how perception of humor in marital distress evolved, and how this related to the evolution of the perception of other traits in the partner.

It could be argued that the result may have come about as a result of a negative-appreciation effect. That is, people in poor marriages fail to appreciate, among other things, their partner's sense of humor. However, this explanation is less plausible when it is recognized that the humor item is construed positively, rather than negatively. The GRIMS scale itself carefully balances positive and negative items, so that it is relatively free from negative-bias artifacts. Further, in the construction of the GRIMS, the humor item was in competition with 300 others, and humor itself clearly emerged from this analysis as a significant element in its own right.

Humor researchers have often noted that humor is in the eye of the perceiver and not in some object or "humor stimulus." They have also stressed the importance of the relationship between the humorist and his/her audience, particularly their attitudes to one another. Theorists, such as LaFave (1972) have been concerned with the attitudes and group membership of audiences in relationship to the implied attitudes of jokes, but they have not focused specifically on individuals involved in close relationships. The present study provides further evidence that the perception of another's sense of humor is a function of the state of the relationship between two people, and that this holds for close relationships as well.

University of London

Note

1. Requests for reprints should be addressed to John Rust, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, University of London Institute of Education, 25 Woburn Square, London WC1H 0AA, England.

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