

# Effect of Humor on Marital Relationships

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This study explored the motivation for and the type of humor used by married couples from the perspective of dyadic interaction, and examined the effects of motivation and dyadic humor patterns on marital quality. Data were collected from 390 married couples in Greater Taipei area. The measurement included motivations for humor, types of humor, marital quality (satisfaction and regret), and control variables. Factor analysis, latent profile analysis and hierarchical linear models were applied. The main results showed that (1) the motivations for humor were divided into three categories: altruistic, relational, and self-interested; the types of humor were categorized into three types: self-deprecating (oneself as a joke theme), ridiculing (others as a joke theme) and jocosity (words as a joke theme). Husbands had higher scores than wives on relational and self-interested motivation, and used jocosity more often. Husbands also reported higher levels of marital quality than wives. (2) The dyadic humor patterns could be identified as Husband Jocosity and Self-deprecating, Dual Multiplicity, Dual Rarely Use and Wife Ridiculing and Self-deprecating. The four patterns had proportions of about 25%, 25%, 14%, and 35%, respectively. (3) Couples who reported higher relational motivation reported more satisfaction. The Wife Ridiculing and Self-deprecating couples reported lower marital quality than the Husband Jocosity and Self-deprecating and Dual Rarely Use couples. Moreover, the interaction terms of gender and dyadic humor pattern and of humorous motivation and dyadic humor pattern showed significant effects on marital satisfaction. These results highlight the role of traditional culture and traditional gender roles in the humor patterns of marital couples.

**Keywords:** *Taiwanese married couples, type of humor, motivation for humor, marital quality, hierarchical linear model*

## Summary

Humor is often regarded as the lubricant of interpersonal relationships, allowing individuals to deal with adversity and face life in a positive and optimistic manner. However, the study of humor in marriage is limited. Some studies have indicated that humor can reduce the impact of marital conflict and enhance relationship maintenance, but others have found that humorous interactions have potentially damaging effects on long-term relationships. The positive and negative effects of humorous interactions on marriage vary according to the type of humor used and the situations it is used in.

Furthermore, the meaning and function of humor may be very different in relationships structured by Chinese social values and traditional culture. Although

some studies have examined humor in Taiwan, none have explored the role of humor in marital relationships. A few studies have examined the way husbands and wives in foreign countries use humor, but their content and coverage have been quite limited. In addition, the scales used to measurement humor often mix the motivation for using humor and the type of humor used. For example, of the four dimensions assessed by the Humor Styles Questionnaire (self-enhancing, affiliative, aggressive, and self-defeating), the first two dimensions measure the motivation for using humor and the last two measure different forms or types of humor (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003).

People have different motivations for using humor, such as entertaining others, promoting relationships, reducing interpersonal tension, self-improvement, situational or stress response, manipulating others (teasing

or pandering), and receiving compliments. These can be categorized into three main motivations: altruistic (benefit for others), self-interested (benefit for oneself), and relational (benefit for relationships). The types of humor include funny things, jokes, witty puns, sarcasm, bullying, teasing, vulgarity, ridicule, self-deprecating, self-mockery, etc. They can be categorized into three main types: self-deprecating (oneself as a joke), ridiculing (others as a joke), and jocosity (words as a joke theme).

Most people have a tendency to use a specific type of humor, and each marital couple has a unique pattern of humor use. In the study of marital subsystems, a husband and wife are not treated as two separate individuals. Whether their styles are in agreement, complementary, or contradictory, each couple has characteristics that define the couple and it is necessary to explore the pattern of humor at the dyadic level.

Using data collected from married couples, this study has three purposes: to develop scales to measure the motivations for and types of humor used by married couples, to build a typology of married couple humor, and to examine the effects of motivation and dyadic humor patterns on marital quality.

## Methods

The participants were 390 married couples who were part of a longitudinal study of family relationships and marriage in Taiwan. The couples had been married an average of 17.09 years ( $SD = 9.44$ ), and their ages averaged 45.89 (husbands) and 43.40 (wives).

The variables examined in this study included motivation for humor, types of humor, and marital quality. The motivation for humor scale included 12 items, which examined the reasons why wives and husbands used humor. The answers were based on a 4-point Likert-type scale. These motivations were divided into three categories: altruistic (e.g., "I often use humor to entertain my friends"), relational (e.g., "When we quarrel, I will use humor to ease the tension"), and self-interested (e.g., "If I am feeling upset or unhappy, I usually try to think of something funny about the situation to make myself feel better").

The type of humor scale, which measured the way humor is expressed or used, also included 12 items. Answers were on a 4-point Likert-type scale. The types of humor were categorized into three types: self-deprecating (e.g., "I treat my shortcomings as the subject of jokes"), ridiculing (e.g., "I laugh at my spouse with jokes or sarcasm"), and jocosity (e.g., "I use homonyms of words to produce funny jokes").

The marital quality scale included 14 items (2 subscales including satisfaction and regret), and demographic variables including educational level, years of marriage, number of children, and monthly income of family.

## Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the three scales. Repeated *t*-test analyses were used to test the differences between husbands and wives. Husbands had higher scores than wives on relational and self-interested motivation, and used jocosity more often. Husbands also reported higher levels of marital quality than wives. These findings were consistent with the results of previous studies.

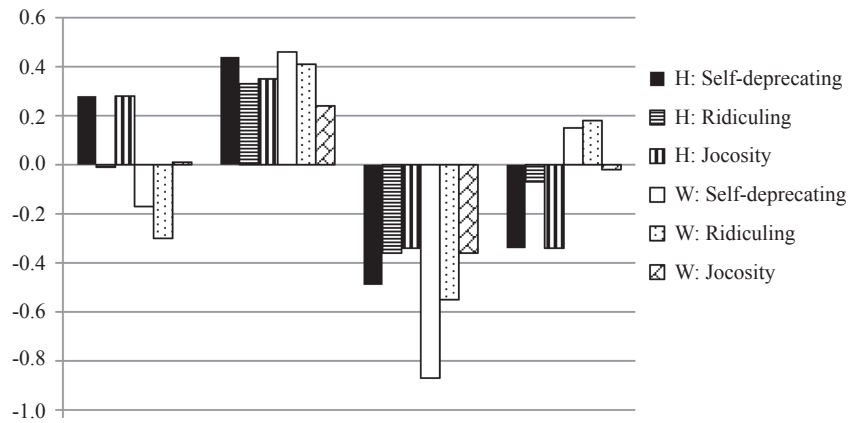
A latent profile analysis was used to characterize the pattern and distribution of married couples' dyadic humor. Based on the fit statistics and the distinct patterns of married couples' dyadic humor patterns, a four-class model was selected as the best fit. The first category, husband jocosity and self-deprecating, consisted of husbands who reported higher scores in ridiculing and jocosity than their wives. In the second category, dual multiplicity, both husbands and wives reported high scores in multiple types of humor. In the third category, dual rarely use, both husbands and wives reported low scores in all type of humor. In the fourth category, wife ridiculing and self-deprecating, wives reported higher scores in self-defeating and ridiculing humor than their husbands. The four patterns had proportions of about 25%, 25%, 14%, and 35%, respectively. The results are shown in Figure 1.

Finally, hierarchical linear models were used to test the effects of humorous motivation and dyadic humor

**Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and husband-wife differences in humor and marital quality instruments**

		Husbands		Wives		t-value
		M	SD	M	SD	
Motivation for humor						
Altruistic	1 ~ 4	2.85	0.59	2.77	0.60	2.22*
Relational	1 ~ 4	2.47	0.59	2.32	0.60	4.14***
Self-interested	1 ~ 4	2.74	0.56	2.69	0.54	1.57
Type of humor						
Self-deprecating	1 ~ 4	2.29	0.61	2.30	0.63	-0.27
Ridiculing	1 ~ 4	2.07	0.58	2.05	0.60	0.50
Jocosity	1 ~ 4	2.60	0.58	2.51	0.58	2.36*
Satisfaction	1 ~ 4	3.37	0.55	3.24	0.60	4.70***
Regret	1 ~ 4	1.51	0.54	1.65	0.58	-4.92***

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**Figure 1. Dyadic humor patterns of married couples.**

Note. Pattern 1: husband jocosity and self-deprecating; Pattern 2: dual multiplicity; Pattern 3: dual rarely use; Pattern 4: wife ridiculing and self-deprecating.

patterns on marital quality. Three different two-level hierarchical linear models were used as follows.

**Baseline model**

Level 1 (individuals):  $Marital\ quality = \beta_{0j} + \epsilon_{ij}$

Level 2 (couples):  $\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \delta_{0j}$

**Model 1: Main effect**

Level 1 (individuals):  $Marital\ quality = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}$   
(gender) +  $\beta_{2-4j}$  (motivation for humor) +  $\epsilon_{ij}$

Level 2 (couples):  $\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01-03}$  (dyadic humor patterns) +  $\delta_{0j}$

**Model 2: Interactive effect**

Level 1 (individuals):  $Marital\ quality = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}$   
(gender) +  $\beta_{2-4j}$  (motivation for humor) +  $\epsilon_{ij}$

Level 2 (couples):  $\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01-03}$  (dyadic humor patterns) +  $\gamma_{04-07}$  (demographic variables) +  $\delta_{0j}$

$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10-40} + \gamma_{k1-k3}$  (dyadic humor patterns),  $k = 1 - 4$

The main results indicate that marital quality was directly correlated with motivations and dyadic humor patterns. Couples who reported higher relational motivation reported more satisfaction. The wife ridiculing

and self-deprecating couples reported lower marital quality than the husband jocosity and self-deprecating and dual rarely use couples.

Moreover, the interaction terms of gender and dyadic humor pattern and of humorous motivation and dyadic humor pattern showed significant effects on marital satisfaction. For example, in couples in the husband jocosity and self-deprecating or dual rarely use categories, husbands were more satisfied than their wives, whereas the differences in satisfaction between husbands and wives were relatively smaller in the wife ridiculing and self-deprecating category. For dual multiplicity and dual rarely use couples, the altruistic motivation enhanced their satisfaction. In the higher relational motivation group, there was no difference in the satisfaction of the wife ridiculing and self-deprecating and husband jocosity and self-deprecating couples; however, in the lower relational motivation group, the satisfaction of husband jocosity and self-deprecating couples was higher than that of wife ridiculing and self-deprecating couples.

## Discussion

First, this study found that altruistic and relational motivations for using humor were more common among husbands, who also used more jocosity than wives; that is, husbands tended to use humor to enhance their relationships with others and their spouses, and to use jokes in a relaxed way. Studies have suggested that gender is a system of meanings that influences access to power, status, and material resources. If humor is conceived of as a mode of discourse and a strategy for social interaction, it is inferable that husbands hold a higher status and more material resources and power, so they have greater motivation to use humor. Future studies should examine the effect of marital power on couples' humor patterns.

Second, at the dyadic level, marital couples' humor patterns were classified into four distinct types based on latent profile analysis: husband jocosity and self-deprecating, dual multiplicity, dual rarely use, and wife ridiculing and self-deprecating. Each pattern displayed clear and specific features. In about 40% of the couples in this study, both parties either used or did not use humor

(dual multiplicity and dual rarely use), however, in more than 60% of the couples, the parties used different types of humor; that is, one party used a specific type of humor that was different than the type of humor commonly used by the other party. It is noteworthy that the wife ridiculing and self-deprecating couples comprised the largest group (35%), suggesting that the marital couples in this study might have had some distinctive characteristics.

The influence of motivations and types of humor on marital quality was interesting. Consistent with past studies, relational motivations enhanced couples' marital quality, demonstrating that using humor to manage relationships can promote marital satisfaction. Although altruistic and self-interested motivations have no direct effect on marital satisfaction, these two motivations may be beneficial in other ways; self-interest motivations may have stress buffering functions and altruistic motivations may be more beneficial in friendships.

Among the humor pattern categories, the husband jocosity and self-deprecating and the dual rarely use couples had the best marital quality, followed by the dual multiplicity couples, and finally the wife ridiculing and self-deprecating couples. Clearly, the use of humor was not necessarily associated with high marital quality, and wives' use of humor may have decreased satisfaction. The results also reveal that the humor of contemporary Taiwanese couples may still be influenced by the sense of "no gravity, no veneration" and "rhetorical nice words," highlighting the role of traditional culture and traditional gender roles in the humor patterns of marital couples.

Finally, motivation and the dyadic humor patterns had significant interaction effects on marital satisfaction. Regardless of whether the motivation was altruism or to help the relationship, wives' humor had a more negative impact on marital relationships than husbands' humor. Studies have indicated that humor may have a short-term elevating effect, but potentially damaging effects on long-term relationships. This study showed that positive motivations had immediate and improving effects on marital relationships and that marital quality was correlated with dyadic humor patterns. Furthermore, Taiwanese marital relationships were characterized by the interaction of humorous motivations and patterns.

In the future, the actor-partner interdependence model could be applied to separately analyze the influence of husbands and wives' motivations for and types of humor and their interaction. Marital attitudes and sources of power could also be added to the model to

confirm the possible function of traditional gender roles and marital power. It would also be interesting to explore the characteristics, course, and function of humor within the whole family system.