

Effect of Humor on Interpersonal Attraction and Mate Selection

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ABSTRACT. The authors examined whether different levels of sense of humor would influence respondents' ratings about a potentially desirable partner. The authors used vignettes to predict that the targets who possessed a good sense of humor would receive significantly higher ratings in measures of attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner than would those who possessed an average or no sense of humor. In an experimental design—with gender and humor as independent variables and level of attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner as dependent variables—the authors analyzed the data using a multivariate analysis of variance. Results show that the targets with a good sense of humor received significantly higher ratings of attractiveness and suitability than did those with an average or no sense of humor. Furthermore, male participants rated female targets as significantly more attractive than female participants rated male targets. The authors found no significant interaction between gender and humor.

Keywords: attraction, humor, long-term partner, mate selection

PREFERENCE IN HUMAN MATE SELECTION has been a topic of extensive and systematic study by evolutionary psychologists (e.g., D. M. Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Feingold, 1992). Research has shown that men value physical attractiveness and youth in a partner more than do women; attractiveness and youth are cues that suggest a woman's reproductive value (e.g., D. M. Buss, 1989; Feingold, 1990). Because reproductive value and fertility are related more closely to age and health (Hudson & Henze, 1969; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992) and physical appearance provides many cues to a woman's health (L. W. Buss, 1987), men should consider these attributes as the most important criteria. In contrast, research has demonstrated that women value in men characteristics such as dependability, good earning capacity, ambition, a career-oriented mentality, and

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high socioeconomic status (D. M. Buss, 1994; Jencks, 1979; Stewart, Stinnett, & Rosenfeld, 2000; Sadalla, Kenrick, & Vershure, 1987). Stewart et al. considered these attributes to be cues of successful resource acquisition. Thus, as Doosje, Rojahn, and Fischer (1999) highlighted, "Humans do not differ from other animals in that their mate choices are guided by cues to reproductive investment aimed at survival advantages of the offspring" (p. 46). Strengthening these findings, researchers have found the same gender differences cross-culturally (D. M. Buss, 1994; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1995), across several different age samples (Sadalla & Fausal, 1980; Singh, 1995), and using various methodologies such as experimental (Sadalla et al., 1987), questionnaire (D. M. Buss, 1989), observational (D. M. Buss, 1988), analysis of public documents, homicide statistics or divorce statistics (Betzig, 1989), and psychophysiological techniques (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992).

A large body of research on mating strategies supports the differential parental investment perspective and thus evolutionary theory's predictions about mate selection. However, researchers have largely overlooked the role of humor and its effects on interpersonal attraction and mate selection. They have conducted much research to examine humor as a personal characteristic that has many personal and social benefits. For example, researchers have shown that humor helps individuals to avoid stress and depression and to facilitate recovery (e.g., Dixon, 1980; Goldstein, 1987). However, much of the existing research on mate selection has failed to fully acknowledge the importance of the interpersonal benefits of possessing a sense of humor and, in particular, the influence humor may have in selecting a mate. Humor is a highly valued trait in many cultures (D. M. Buss, 1988). Also, studies on social desirability have found sense of humor to be among the most favorably evaluated personality traits (e.g., Anderson, 1968; Craik, Lampert, & Nelson, 1996). A good sense of humor is considered socially desirable; individuals have claimed that they possess this quality in numbers that exceed the possible truth. In two different self-assessment samples, more than 90% of the respondents considered themselves to have an average to above-average sense of humor (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986).

Also, a sense of humor in others appears to be a highly desirable quality. Murstein and Brust (1985) found that couples in a relationship who possessed similar senses of humor had higher levels of loving, liking, and a predisposition to marry. On the basis of a survey of attitudes on dating and marriage, Hewitt (1958) reported that among male and female college students, 90% and 81%, respectively, considered having a sense of humor to be critical in a potential mate. Moreover, Hansen (1977) found that possessing a sense of humor was ranked third out of 33 potential qualities for a relationship, and ranked ninth for a mate. Children whom their peers recognize as humorless were liked the least and were less likely to be chosen to attend social activities (Sherman, 1985). Furthermore, Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost (1990) found that students preferred a potential marriage partner to have an above-average sense of humor. In addition, as the level of commitment of the relationship increased, humor became more important to both partners.

Thus, it seems evident that individuals highly value having a sense of humor in themselves and others. However, when a specific trait has such significance in judging others, it is often assumed that it covaries with other positive traits. Having a good sense of humor may be valued so highly “because it implies the presence of other positive traits” (Cann & Calhoun, 2001, p. 118). These researchers have found that individuals described as being *well above average* in sense of humor were perceived as lower in neuroticism and higher in agreeableness than *typical* or *below average* sense of humor others. Also, researchers have found that higher humor orientation was associated with lower levels of loneliness, and people perceived as more humorous were also seen as socially attractive (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1996).

Therefore, it appears that possessing a good sense of humor potentially makes an individual be perceived as attractive and that humor is a factor that could influence perceptions of interpersonal attraction. However, could different levels of sense of humor influence judgments on how attractive or suitable a person may be as a long-term partner? In the present study, we aimed to address this question. If humor is a positive attribute, then the more humorous a person is, the better. However, possession of a good sense of humor may be a negative concept in interpersonal relationships. For example, a highly humorous person may not always take other critical issues, such as child care, seriously. Similarly, individuals may often use humor as a defense tactic to distance themselves from feelings or avoid intimacy. For example, Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) have suggested that individuals who display higher levels of self-defeating humor may use this defense tactic to hide underlying negative feelings or avoid dealing with a problem constructively. Therefore, in the present study, we aimed to examine the effects of various levels of humor in mate selection.

Also, our study focused on a potential long-term partner because researchers believe that humor may be a personal attribute that is more critical for the viability of a long-term romantic relationship than a short-term relationship (e.g., Kenrick et al., 1990). In addition, we address the question of whether there are gender differences in relation to the importance of humor in long-term mate selection. Although researchers have found gender differences for specific types of humor—men enjoy sexual humor more than do women (Herzog, 1999) and women prefer nonsense humor (O’Connell, 1960)—findings from various studies have suggested that there are few differences between the genders in terms of preferences for humor (e.g., Goodwin, 1990; Woll, 1987). Also, it appears that researchers have not systematically investigated this issue. Previous researchers who have examined the relation between humor and attraction have tended to loosely operationalize humor (Sherman, 1985), designated a specific humor talent (Masten, 1986), or used self-assessment techniques (O’Connell, 1969). We aimed to add to the literature by investigating the role of humor in mate selection in a more experimental fashion.

To examine these issues, we requested participants to rate targets (i.e., James, Chloe) in terms of physical attractiveness and perceived suitability as a long-term partner. We described the targets as possessing a range of attributes thought to be consistent with evolutionary theory's concept of an ideal partner for each gender, and we described them as having a good sense of humor, an average sense of humor, or no sense of humor. First, we predicted that ratings of physical attractiveness and mate suitability would be positively associated with the level of humor: Those we described as possessing a good sense of humor were rated highest in terms of suitability and attractiveness. Second, we designed the experiment to investigate whether attractiveness and suitability ratings differed between male and female targets across all levels of humor. This was an exploratory element of the investigation, because there was insufficient research evidence to predict whether humor would be important for men or women.

Method

Participants

The opportunity sample comprised 180 undergraduate students (90 men, 90 women), with ages ranging from 17 to 32 years ($M = 24$ years, $SD = 3.2$ years). To assess sexual orientation, we asked participants to check a box at the bottom of the questionnaire to determine if any of the participants perceived themselves as being nonheterosexual. We used data only from heterosexual participants. We offered no reward or inducement for participating.

Materials

We constructed vignettes to describe hypothetical potential male (i.e., James) and female (i.e., Chloe) long-term romantic partners. On the basis of evolutionary theory, each target was described as having positive attributes. We described Chloe as being young, single, physically fit, healthy, and attractive; whereas we described James as single, ambitious, and having good job prospects and a high status (see Appendixes A and B). Each vignette varied only in the description of the target's sense of humor. We manipulated this by including one of the following three phrases at the end of each vignette.

1. *Condition 1: Good sense of humor.* One person who knows James [Chloe] well said, "I have known James [Chloe] a long time and he [she] has a great sense of humor."
2. *Condition 2: Average sense of humor.* One person who knows James [Chloe] well said, "I have known James [Chloe] a long time and I wouldn't say he [she] has either a great or poor sense of humor. He's [She's] kind of average."
3. *Condition 3: No sense of humor.* One person who knows James [Chloe]

well said, “I have known James [Chloe] a long time and I can say that in relation to his [her] sense of humor—he [she] doesn’t have one.”

We asked participants to rate the target below the vignette in terms of attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner using the questions “How attractive do you find James [Chloe]?” and “How suitable would you think James [Chloe] would be as a long-term partner for you?” The participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very unattractive*) to 7 (*very attractive*) and 1 (*very unsuitable*) to 7 (*very suitable*), respectively. Also, we requested the participants’ age.

Design

We used a 3×2 independent groups experimental design. Independent variables were level of humor (i.e., no sense of humor, average sense of humor, good sense of humor) and gender of target (i.e., male, female), whereas dependent variables were ratings of physical attractiveness and ratings of suitability as a long-term partner.

Procedure

We asked the participants to read the description of the target (see Appendixes A and B) and answer the questions relating to physical attractiveness and mate suitability. We administered each participant a vignette of James or Chloe with a no sense of humor, an average sense of humor, or good sense of humor description at the end until an equal number of participants had completed each of the conditions. Of the 90 male participants, 30 completed the no sense of humor vignette; 30 completed the average sense of humor vignette; and 30 completed the good sense of humor vignette. We followed the same procedure for the female participants.

Results

We conducted a 3 (humor level) \times 2 (gender of target) multivariate analysis of variance to determine the effect of humor and gender on ratings of physical attractiveness and mate suitability. The tests of between-subjects effects showed a significant main effect for gender on attractiveness, $F(1, 174) = 29.720, p < .05, \eta^2 = .15$, but not for suitability, $F(1, 174) = 1.374, p > .05, \eta^2 = .01$. The main effect for humor on attractiveness was statistically significant, $F(2, 174) = 10.682, p < .05$, as was the main effect for humor on suitability $F(2, 174) = 12.831, p < .05$. The effect size for humor was larger for suitability ($\eta^2 = .13$) than it was for attractiveness ($\eta^2 = .11$). The interaction of gender with humor was statistically significant neither for attractiveness, $F(2, 174) = 0.567, p > .05$, nor suitability, $F(2, 174) = 0.860, p > .05$.

Post hoc multiple comparisons using the Scheffé method showed that for ratings of attractiveness, the mean rating in the good sense of humor condition was significantly higher than it was for the average sense of humor ($p < .05$) and the

no sense of humor condition ($p < .05$). Likewise, for ratings of mate suitability, we found significant differences between the good sense of humor condition and the average ($p < .05$) and no sense of humor conditions ($p < .05$). In addition, on both scales, those with an average sense of humor did not receive significantly higher ratings than those with no sense of humor.

Discussion

We aimed to investigate whether different levels of humor and gender of the target would influence participants' ratings of a potentially desirable partner in terms of perceived physical attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner. Because of the presumed social significance attached to having a good sense of humor (e.g., Goodwin, 1990; Hansen, 1977; Hewitt, 1958), it seemed likely that the presence of a good sense of humor in a potential partner would lead to high ratings on measures of physical attractiveness and suitability. Our results provide support for this prediction. The targets (i.e., James, Chloe) described as having a good sense of humor received significantly higher ratings than did those with an average sense of humor and no sense of humor on both the attractiveness and suitability scales. In addition, there were no statistically significant differences in ratings for those targets who had an average sense of humor and no sense of humor on both scales. This finding implies that only a good sense of humor was desirable and an average sense of humor was less desirable; participants did not rate it differently from having no sense of humor. Also, we found a significant main effect for gender on attractiveness. Table 1 shows that male participants rated Chloe as more attractive than female participants rated James across all levels of humor. Furthermore, the humor by gender interaction was not statistically significant.

The main effect for humor provides more empirical support for those studies that found sense of humor to be among the most favorably evaluated personality traits (Anderson, 1968; Craik et al., 1996). The data are consistent with studies in which researchers found humor to be highly valued in interpersonal relationships (D. M. Buss, 1988; Goodwin, 1990; Hansen, 1977; Hewitt, 1958; Murstein & Brust, 1985; Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Also, the data support previous findings that there are no significant gender differences in terms of preferences for humor in a romantic partner (D. M. Buss, 1988; Feingold, 1992; Goodwin, 1990; Woll, 1987).

These results suggest the importance of humor in mate selection and interpersonal attraction. However, why is possession of a good sense of humor so important to romantic relationships? If we regard romantic relationships from Berscheid's (1983) perspective—that we desire easy achievement of our immediate and higher order goals—then there are several ways in which sense of humor could promote these goals. If happiness or amusement is an end goal in itself and a partner's sense of humor creates happiness or amusement, then sense of humor directly aids the realization of this goal. Alternatively, as previously mentioned, it may be that sense of humor is highly valued because it is indicative of partners

possessing other positive attributes such as values, intelligence, and imagination (Murstein & Brust, 1985) and may be seen as socially attractive (Wanzer et al., 1996). Consequently, a good sense of humor may also be considered evidence that partners possess other facilitative qualities. That is, it may make people feel that their relationships are potentially better or more successful because they may associate sense of humor in their partner with better mood, less conflict, and other relationship variables that affect their abilities to realize their goals.

In the present study, social psychological perspectives may also account for the significant value placed on humor. Social psychologists (e.g. Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971) have found that individuals are attracted to one another on the basis of similar attributes (i.e., personality; Caspi & Harbener, 1990) and physical appearance (Feingold, 1990). Therefore, in the present study, it is possible that participants rated the targets that had a good sense of humor more highly because they perceived themselves to possess a good sense of humor. Consistent with this assumption are those findings in which participants claimed to possess a good sense of humor, in numbers that exceeded the possible truth (e.g., Cann, 1998). Consequently, it may be consistent with an evolutionary perspective that individuals should base their choices on an estimation of their own attributes (Sloman & Sloman, 1988). If a woman courts a man who has substantially fewer assets than her own, she is not likely to maximize the number of successful offspring she could produce. If she courts a man with overall value greater than her own, she risks loss of time and subsequent abandonment.

Participants rated Chloe as significantly more attractive than James. However, male participants did not rate Chloe as significantly more suitable as a long-term partner than female participants rated James. As previously mentioned, perhaps evolutionary perspectives explicitly predict that men will be more influenced by the attractiveness of members of the opposite gender than will women, because women's physical attractiveness is correlated with their health and reproductive value (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Moreover, this gender difference in responsiveness to physical attraction may have occurred because women are thought to be more selective than are men in evaluating mates because of their differential parental investment. Women have more to lose from a rash mating decision because they invest more in their offspring than do men. Alternatively, sociocultural explanations may account for this difference. That is, the value placed on physical attractiveness may be learned. Society teaches and reinforces these gender differences. Moreover, it is likely that men perceived suitability as a long-term partner in terms of a long-term relationship, and physical attractiveness was viewed in the form of immediate desirability (i.e., the target's short-term hedonistic value). Therefore, on the basis of this assumption, findings from various studies generally indicate that intrinsic attributes (e.g., honesty, kindness, dependability) are relatively more important for a long-term relationship; whereas external attributes (e.g., physical appearance such as attractiveness) are more important for a short-term relationship (Kenrick et al., 1990; Regan & Berscheid, 1997).

TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Target Ratings

Target and level of humor	Suitability		Attractiveness	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
James				
Good	4.66	1.45	4.53	1.04
Average	3.56	1.63	3.63	1.33
None	3.13	1.62	3.30	1.18
Chloe				
Good	4.56	1.28	5.26	1.28
Average	4.16	1.21	4.63	1.03
None	3.44	1.54	4.53	1.38

Nonetheless, although these results suggest that a good sense of humor in a potentially desirable mate is preferred to no sense of humor, this does not imply that individuals will act according to these preferences. These preferences may reflect the norms and stereotypes of the culture. Actual mating behavior may be affected by many variables: some personal, some situational (Buss & Barnes, 1986). Thus, to test whether these findings reflect these cultural norms and to make these findings more robust, future researchers could investigate whether humor plays a significant role in mate selection across cultures. Furthermore, individuals may not possess the characteristics (e.g., social skills, physical attractiveness) needed to achieve their ideal or find an approximation to their ideal choice, so they settle for less.

Future researchers may also benefit from examining the role of humor in different age groups. We defend our use of college students because they are at an age at which mate choice is most relevant. However, humor may or may not be as important to older adults as it is younger adults. In addition, we focused on whether humor would be a significant factor in mate selection in a long-term partner. It would be interesting to assess this possibility across multiple relationships, such as marriage partners, dating partners, and casual sex partners.

Nonetheless, these results support the prediction that possessing a good sense of humor positively affects perceptions of a person's suitability as a long-term partner. It would be interesting to see whether other qualities can be found that strongly influence mate selection or whether sense of humor occupies a unique position in the hierarchy of desirability traits.

AUTHOR NOTES

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APPENDIX A
Full Description of Female Target (Chloe)

Chloe is a single, young woman. She is sporty and likes to exercise regularly at the gym. She is physically fit. To maintain her health, Chloe eats healthy food. Chloe's perfect skin and trim figure are a testament to her healthy lifestyle. People have always commented on how attractive she is. Her friends are envious of her natural beauty. She has not had too many romantic relationships, as she is waiting for the right man. A friend once said, "Chloe is a nice girl with great looks and a real zest for life." During work and social occasions, she meets a lot of people. [Ending for Condition 1, 2, or 3 inserted here]

APPENDIX B
Full Description of Male Target (James)

James is currently single. He has a good job at a large company and manages many people. It is expected that James will continue to be successful in the organization because of his hard work and ambition. He is considered to be professional and well respected. He is wealthy and lives comfortably in a large house. He is healthy and enjoys playing sports. James has always been described as being mature. People have commented on how dependable he is. He is generally not interested in short-term romantic relationships or one-night stands. He prefers commitment to a single partner. All his previous relationships have been long-term and he has always said that he would like to get married and raise a family. A friend once said, "James is a nice guy, with a good job and good financial prospects. He would love to settle down and have a family." [Ending for Condition 1, 2, or 3 inserted here]

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