

## **relationship matters podcast 7**

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Host: From Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, this is Relationship Matters!

Hello and welcome to Relationship Matters, the podcast of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. I'm your host, Dr Bjarne Holmes. Welcome to our seventh podcast. Coming up today we'll speak with Dr Jeff Hall about his latest research on 'humour in relationships; the fun stuff and the embarrassing stuff'.

But first we've got some really exciting news – this is our first podcast in a brand new format, from now on we'll only be interviewing one author per podcast, the podcast will be about 15-20 minutes long but we'll release them twice as often. We polled our thousand or so fans on Facebook about this change and had nothing but positive feedback – we hope you too will like this change. If you haven't done so already, be sure to connect with us on Facebook, just search for 'Journal of Social and Personal Relationships'. You can send us email at jsprpodcast@gmail.com, follow us on Twitter (jsprpodcast), you can also subscribe to the podcast on iTunes (search for Sage podcast).

So have you ever been out with your partner at a party and had them make a joke so aggressive or so self deprecating that you just wanted to melt away? We've all felt those awkward moments when one person is sharply elbowing their partner and whispering, 'honey, shut up!'. My guest, Dr Jeff Hall is going to talk to us today exactly about that moment; when an attempt at humour becomes a social embarrassment for our partner. Dr Jeff Hall is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas. He also happens to be our first superstar, meaning he's our first author to appear for a second time on Relationship Matters.

Back on Relationship Matters 01 we interviewed Dr Hall on the work he'd done showing that dishonesty in internet dating really is no different than dishonesty in other forms of dating. In other words, people don't lie more on the internet than they normally do. If you haven't heard that interview, go check it out! - first interview on our very first podcast Relationship Matters 1 - but the new article we'll talk about today, it's title, 'Is it something I said; sense of humour and partner embarrassment' and it's free to download from the website of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, courtesy of Sage Publications. You'll find it in the May 2011 issue, that's volume 28, issue 3.

So Dr Hall, welcome to Relationship Matters!

Respondent: Thank you, glad to be here.

- Host: So we're going to talk about humour today – what have you done?
- Respondent: Well, I'm actually asking a pretty basic research question with this project and it's simply, 'does the way that you make jokes make your partner feel embarrassed?' and that's basically the main concept, is there are certain styles of humour related to partner embarrassment.
- Host: Tell us little bit about why and how you did it.
- Respondent: Okay. Well we did two different studies in this project; one was a study of adults and these were people who had been married – about 56% were married – their average age was 36, and we had 106 couples – and what happened was, we had these couples fill out a survey about their *own* humour style and then we actually asked them, 'what do you perceive about your partner's humour style?', like 'what kind of sense of humour do they have?' and we were focusing really on two different types of humour specifically; one type of humour was called 'aggressive humour' and 'aggressive humour' is something that would be similar to like beating up on other people, being really mean spirited, saying offensive jokes, basically any type of humour where it's really negatively oriented towards others.
- Host: I've got Matt here in the studio, smiling, what's up Matt, do you recognise yourself!?
- Matt: What if *all* your humour is aggressive humour!?
- [Laughter]
- Respondent: Then I would actually say that two studies that I've done, as long as that your partner is actually very similar to you then you actually may be okay.
- Host: Can you define 'aggressive humour' just a little bit more?
- Respondent: Yeah, so 'aggressive humour' is kind of mean spirited humour, this is the type of humour where people pick on other people, make fun of different groups, makes offensive comments, it's kind of a mean spirited sense of humour and it's directed at other people – and this is compared to 'self defeating humour', which is the other type of humour we really investigated in this study – self defeating humour happens when people basically beat up themselves, right, these are people who are self deprecating, who are always pointing out their own incapacities and inabilities and saying, 'oh, I'm just terrible at this' and trying to make a joke of the fact that there's something bad about themselves. So both of these types of humour are considered negative types of humour in the sense that they're not humour as we might think of in terms of building a bridge between two people and sharing a good laugh or being playful or silly, it's more along kind of negative dimension of things.

So in our first study we looked at men and women who are in heterosexual couples, 106 of them, who mainly had been married and 20% were living together – so the vast majority of the sample, about 80%, were people who were either married or living together and they had been together for, on average, about 13 years. And when they evaluated their own humour style and their partner's humour style, the third thing we really wanted to look at is how embarrassed were they by their partner's humour in public – so we're really not concerned about whether you were maybe a little offended or bothered in private about your partner's sense of humour but really in public is what we really wanted to focus on.

Host: So 'in public' you mean say, for instance, at a party?

Respondent: Yeah, so the context would be people at a party, perhaps at a social event, maybe out to dinner with another couple, maybe at a faculty party (if you're a member of a faculty somewhere). So in this case this is something called 'team embarrassment' and the idea is that two members of the same partnership (so a couple), they *both* have a responsibility for making that relationship and the couple look good. So in one sense you could say 'well I'm worried about how I look to others' and in another sense you can say 'well I'm worried how my partner looks to others' but with 'team embarrassment' the idea is that you're protecting the face of the couple itself, right, that 'we are a good couple', that 'we're doing fine', that 'we have the right attitudes and we don't do embarrassing things'.

Host: Yes, so if your partner makes a fool of him or herself it makes a fool of you too?

Respondent: That's right, exactly! And the key part that you said there is that 'it makes a fool of you too' because we weren't looking at the idea that 'I'm embarrassed for you', right, that 'I think you made a fool of yourself', it's that the focus is on 'I feel embarrassed because of what you did', which is a slightly different idea.

So what we found with the first study is that for sure aggressive humour was related to whether or not a person was embarrassed – if this was the case there was no caveats or questions about this, this is very strongly related to you embarrassing your partner and it makes a lot of sense. If you do things that are mean spirited and offensive in public, it's probably going to be an embarrassment to your partner.

Now, there were slight effects of whether or not the people were male or female – in the case of women, the embarrassment was worse and it's partly because that men use more aggressive humour in general and women have a tendency towards being embarrassed in public a little more so than men – so that was a bad combination for women in that case; so having a male partner who was very embarrassing and their husband did things that were just in poor taste in public.

However, we found something interesting with this, which was also suggesting that self defeating humour was *also* embarrassing and self defeating humour is fascinating because you wouldn't think that by beating up on yourself you're going to make your partner look bad, right. So if I say 'oh, I just can't do anything right', it doesn't really seem like that would make my wife look like she was embarrassed but what we found was that this actually ended up being a factor; so self defeating humour was also embarrassing. One thing to keep in mind about this, which was interesting, is that men and women also tend to use equal amounts of self defeating humour and are equally embarrassed by it. So unlike aggressive humour, self defeating humour was something that didn't have a gender effect; men and women were very, very similar in this regard.

So, this led us to study two – at this point we were like 'we really want to confirm this, this is not something we started out assuming was going to happen, so let's find out more about it'. So what we did was we did a second study, which was an experiment and in this study we said 'okay, imagine you're going to introduce your new boyfriend or girlfriend to your friends, right, this is a public situation, they don't really know them but you're all going to go out together and your new boyfriend or girlfriend is going to be introduced to your friends'. And we created experimental conditions where either there was a lot of humour or a little bit of humour - right, so a person was really laying it on thick, self defeating humour specifically or a little humour, so they were making jokes, they were making light of incapacity but they weren't really going into a lot of extent, they weren't going on about this.

The other thing we did was focus on whether or not a person or not a person just said 'oh, I'm just terrible at relationships' or 'I'm just terrible at ultimate frisbee' – so we thought that when you're going to say 'I'm just terrible at relationships, I'm not good at it, it never seems to work out for me' and you're meeting your partner's friends for the first time, this is likely to be a lot more embarrassing than just saying 'I can't play frisbee, I'm not good at that' and telling them a funny story about some incapacity that you have.

So what we found from this study ... this was a study of under graduate students here at the University of Kansas ... and we found, which was supporting our hypotheses, was the idea here that self defeating humour was in fact embarrassing to your partner *and*, interestingly, it's more embarrassing when it's a very specific threat, right, that you're *bad* at the relationship. And if you think about this, this sort of makes sense in the sense that you don't want your new partner saying they're bad at relationships, saying 'we're about to have a relationship together', it makes you look like you're going to be in a relationship with someone who's so bad at relationships they have no hope of making this one work even. So that can be a particularly uncomfortable situation for meeting your new friends.

*But* we found one other interesting little effect; when people were making fun of themselves about a trivial inability, like ultimate frisbee, if you go on it at length, if you really lay it on thick, it's really embarrassing, so you come off as really neurotic and emotionally needy if you're saying how terrible you are at ultimate frisbee but if you're really laying it on thick when it comes to 'I'm no good at relationships', people can sort of, it's embarrassing for sure but whether you use a lot or a little humour is not as important.

Host: Does this have anything to do with generally our cultural view on self esteem? Is it a bad thing in our culture to admit *not* being good at something?

Respondent: Yeah, I think that there might be something there. One thing that I think is actually particular to a self defeating humour or self deprecating sense of humour is that other studies have suggested that when you use that kind of humour, you're actually kind of asking people to come to your aid and your defence – what you're doing is you're saying 'look how bad I am at this, hahaha, aren't I terrible', so people can go 'oh no, you're not bad, you're good, you're actually very good at frisbee' or 'you're making too much of this, 'or 'what are you talking about, you're great at relationships!', it's really kind of an attempt to gain support and confirmation from people around you.

And even other studies that I've looked at and done on the use of Facebook, for example, at self defeating humour, people who use self defeating humour on Facebook get a lot more comments on their post, people saying 'oh it's okay, you're making fun of yourself but it's alright' – while people who use more positive forms of humour get comments that are 'likes', they're like 'I like this joke'. So self defeating humour really seems to require a response and I think the reason that it's embarrassing is that when you're being emotionally needed publicly you're suggesting that there's something wrong with the relationship, in the sense that this person is somehow needy or neurotic or not a good partner. So I wouldn't say it's as much that our close society doesn't allow people ... it's okay in our society for you not to be effective at something but it's more embarrassing if you come off as really needing to be supported and cajoled to feel okay about yourself.

Host: Is there any evidence that partners are matched in any way, non randomly, on their styles of humour or affect each other in any way? – so if one is self defeating, that the other one tends to go in that direction as well? – or is that just a big question mark?

Respondent: Yeah, that's a great question! Part of our overall theoretical lens here is something called 'Co-Orientation Theory' and Co-orientation Theory looks at this idea of similarity in three different ways – 'perceived similarity', which means 'I think that I'm like you, 'actual similarity', which is 'I report myself being one way and my partner reports

themselves being a similar way' and then the third is 'understanding', which is 'I know how you feel about yourself'. So when you collect that data, where you say have a person both fill out their own self reported humour style and their perceived partner's humour style, you can do more dyadic analyses and these sorts of co orientation variables.

And like a lot of past studies, we found that perceiving similarity even on negative humour is a very, very good thing because if you seem like you really share a sensor of humour with your partner, even on things which are offensive or off-putting or are self defeating humour, if you're similar you actually feel less embarrassed. And what was interesting about this is that perceived similarity kind of acts as a shield because you understand why a person's making jokes about themselves, you understand those jokes and you're not as embarrassed because you're like 'hey, I get the joke, I understand why this is funny', not sharing a sense of humour means that you kind of don't see why it's funny.

Host: Not sharing a sense of humour means that you're standing there *cringing!*

[Laughter]

Respondent: Exactly right! Our study would say 'you're just going 'oh my god, please stop, don't say anything!'.

Host: Yeah, whereas if you're sharing that sense of humour, maybe publicly you're like 'well, I don't know if that was appropriate or not but I understand what you're saying, so who cares what somebody else says or thinks'.

Respondent: Exactly, exactly, 'I understand what you're saying, so who cares what other people think?'.

Host: What do we know now that we didn't know before?

Respondent: There's a couple of things that I think we can take away from this. I think that obviously being offensive and being in bad taste is not a very good idea in public, it is likely to be an embarrassment to your partner but I think that the more surprising result is that the joke may be on you when you self deprecate, you think that you're doing it to protect yourself or perhaps to kind of beat somebody to the punch but what you're actually doing is you're at risk of embarrassing your partner because it's your job to actually keep that relationship specific face in tact for both of you to look good in the public for others. For example, if a husband makes fun of his weight gain, right, he says 'oh my god, I've gained a few pounds', it embarrasses their wife because it kind of implies that they share responsibility for each other's health and appearance, right, that it's very much the case that couples feel responsible for one another's, how they look to others and how they treat themselves. So by

self deprecating you bring *attention* to something that you like to have hidden.

Host: So what kind of advice do you have for people?

Respondent: [Laughs] Well I've actually ... I'll tell you a quick story because I think that it's kind apropos to this ... I had an under graduate just recently talk in class about introducing her boyfriend to her parents for the first time, very similar to our experimental design and when she did so she really just tried to act as naturally as possible and had the same sort of sense of humour that they do privately and all that sort of thing. At the end of the evening he was furious with her and he was so upset with what she had done because he felt like she kept sort of picking on him, picking on their relationship, making jokes about both herself and him in a way that made him look terrible and he couldn't recover from. So I think what's interesting about this is that he felt that she was revealing private aspects of their relationship publicly – and we have to remember, the more personal topic is, the more face threatening it is, or potentially face threatening it is. So when you are joking about the relationship itself, that's probably the worst you could possibly do.

Host: So no jokes about your sex life, right!?

Respondent: [Laughs] That would probably be the epitome, right!? It's private, it's potentially offensive and if you're talking to your parents it's definitely something you want to keep hidden.

Host: So, Jeff, I happen to know you're married ...

Respondent: Yes!

Host: ... and I also happen to know that most good research has some sort of personal link ...

Respondent: [Laughs]

Host: ... so what's the story Jeff!?

Respondent: [Laughs] Well this study was actually brought about by an earlier study I did with Dr Ken Sorino at the University of Southern California (where I got my PhD) and we looked at also co orientation and related to offensive jokes or things in poor taste and one of the things that actually inspired that study was that my wife and I both have kind of a dark and black sense of humour in private and we'll say things that are very offensive but are really hilarious to one another because we kind of get each other's sense of humour and what we found was that occasionally it was very hard when we were public not to continue that, right, to not continue to share those jokes with other people because they would look at us blankly and go 'I don't think this is really something you should be saying'. So the self defeating humour part actually was less so but

definitely the aggressive and more offensive part was something that she and I had joked about in the past and something I wanted to know a little bit more about. But we've certainly learned that in faculty parties and in other contexts, probably keeping that offensive sense of humour on the down-low is a good idea.

Host: I don't really know what my wife and I do in terms of fitting into this but we sometimes look at the level of silliness we have with each other and say 'god, if anybody was watching us right now, that would be bad!'

Respondent: [Laughs] And in private I would say, you know, my other research that I've done on humour and certainly the reading that I've done, would say that a private level of silliness no matter how funny it is objectively is important to a couple, right, even if you might look foolish to others, being able to share that kind of vulnerability, that sense of playfulness, that childlike capacity to see the world, is something that I think is so important for a relationship and in one of my future projects I'm looking at specifically is that people have argued for a while that a sense of humour is a good thing for the relationship but they've actually found it difficult to show that a sense of humour in itself creates relationship satisfaction.

And the argument that I've been working with is it's not having a sense of humour, it's what you do with it that makes you happy. And the one project that I'm currently working on (that's under review right now) looked at a lot of possible functions of humour; coping with stress, reducing conflict, being silly and being playful, as you mentioned – and what we found was really that that joyfulness, that levity, that light heartedness was actually the only one of the possible functions of humour that helped their relationship satisfaction; that if you breed an environment where things are fun and things are pleasant and things are positive and light hearted, that *that* is what makes you more happy in your relationship; the other functions, it didn't seem to matter so much.

Host: Wow, that's really groundbreaking findings! So what you're basically saying – and everybody you're hearing it here first, even though it is only under review! – what you're basically saying is that we think of humour as being really important to relationships but what you're basically saying is that it's not necessarily always just humour by itself but it's the ability to be silly and ...

Respondent: Joyful, fun, silly, playful, all of those good things.

Host: ... so you're saying that that's what's contributing mostly to the positive relationship function of having humour in a relationship, right?

Respondent: Right, that's my argument, that that's the thing that's contributing most to relationship satisfaction and being happy with your relationship – because if you think about it this way, look at my study, you know, this one we're talking about now in relationship to this new one – is in this



case you have somebody who has a self deprecating sense of humour. Now in itself that self deprecating sense of humour probably helps him cope with stress, it allows them to make light of things or to apologise, right, but all of those things may not do anything good for the relationship in themselves, it may be good for the person but not for the relationship and I've really been inspired recently to try to understand; is it the fact that humour makes us a happier person – and which I think there's good evidence for that and I think there's a long history to show that it's functions for coping, it's one's physical health and reducing stress or are present – but how does that help another person? – and I'm arguing that it's not the creativity or the intelligence that it shows or even the creative word-play, it's the fact that we feel happier, it's more pleasant and it's more joyful and *that's* what makes us happier *in* our relationship; not necessarily for us as individuals but for the relationship.

Host: Well Jeff, all humour aside, thank you very much, this has been extremely enlightening. I will not ask you to end with a joke!

Respondent: [Laughs] I'm never good at this!

Host: For all the listeners, go check out the paper!

Respondent: Thank you very much, I appreciate this time.

Host: Alright, bye-bye Jeff.

Respondent: Alright, bye-bye.

Host: You were listening to Relationship Matters, I'm your host Dr Bjarne Holmes. Before we end today, a plug for an exciting new book on the market – most books on 'relationships' are of mediocre quality (in my humble opinion), often basing advice more on cultural beliefs than on scientific evidence but my colleagues over at Science of Relationships.com have just published a new book titled precisely 'Science of Relationships' and which a number of international relationship researchers answer topical questions about relationships and give practical advice for a mass audience and do so, importantly, based on peer reviewed research. Now I should disclose that I do write for their web page from time to time and this endorsement is my *personal* opinion and does not reflect the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships for Sage Publications. But I just want to really get the message out there; this book is fabulous, in my opinion – learn more by visiting Science of Relationships.com.

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