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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH HUMOR

by

LORA SWARTZ

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis Adviser: Dr. Donald Wolfe

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May, 1995
CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

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date April 11, 1995

*We also certify that written approval has been obtained for any proprietary material contained therein.
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH HUMOR

Abstract

by

LORA SWARTZ

This dissertation explores humor as an essential process for building intimate and genuine interpersonal relationships. Humor is a unique type of social interaction that involves discovering, expressing, or appreciating something that is amusing. A relationship is a sequence of interactions between persons whose behaviors take each other into consideration. The study contributes to the literature on humor by focusing on the relationship as the unit of analysis.

The questions examined in this study pertain to the ways in which humor shapes the context for forming the relationship, contributes to the deepening of the relationship and the development of the partners and, is influenced by gender differences. Drawing on the interpretive research paradigm, a grounded theory building approach was employed, involving exploratory and inductive methods, including thematic analysis. Indepth interviews using multiple open-ended questions were conducted. The sample consists of 28 participants who are members or alumni of a
department in a Midwestern university. Participants were interviewed about both male and female partners, thereby allowing gender differences at the relationship level to be explored. Data was generally collected from both participants in a relationship.

The results indicate that humor is important for building relationships characterized by mutuality. Early on, humor provides opportunities to connect, facilitates communication, minimizes differences, and engages partners in the possibility of a deeper relationship. Throughout ongoing relationships, humor creates an environment that eases tensions, deals with the serious, and facilitates being fully present. In facilitating intimate relationships, humor helps partners to more fully know, understand, trust, and affirm each other, share commonalities, care for and support each other, deal with difficult issues, and be fully themselves. Humor also helps build and manage same-sex and cross-sex relationships.

The results suggest humor’s importance in four types of relational interactions varying in intimacy: casual ongoing interactions, interactions reflecting investment in a deepened relationship, interactions maintaining and renewing mutuality, and growth promoting interactions. The themes obtained in this study are integrated within these types, as are four functions of humor (communication, coping, creativity, and cohesiveness). Implications of the results are developed for personal growth and learning.
and for four aspects of organizations and work: organizational structure, teams, mentoring, and diversity.
This thesis is dedicated to:

Evelyn Spiegel Swartz
Mano James Swartz II
Lora Swartz
and
My friends who are family
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I  INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II CONCEPTUAL ORIENTATION</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV FUN, ENJOYMENT AND PLAYFULNESS: MAKING CONTACT ON A PERSONAL LEVEL</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V  DEEPENING AND DEVELOPING THE RELATIONSHIP</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI MANAGING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIPS</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Forms of Humor</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Interpretivist Paradigm Approach</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Summary of Themes - Fun, Enjoyment &amp; Playfulness: Making Contact on a Personal Level</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Summary of Themes - Deepening &amp; Developing the Relationship</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Summary of Gender Differences in Humor Use</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Relationships Between Themes</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Overly of the Functions of Humor and Types of Relational Interactions</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intimacy and Depth in Relational Interactions
Chapter 1

Introduction

A recent *Newsweek* article entitled "Counting Your Blessings: Psychologists Take up the Pursuit of Happiness" is a reminder to us of the importance of supportive, intimate relationships in our feelings of happiness or "subjective wellbeing" (Gelman & Pedersen, 1993):

What comes up consistently at the top of the charts is not, as many might expect, success, youth, good looks or any of those enviable assets. The clear winner is relationships. Close ones. Followed by happy marriage... "Supportive, intimate connections with other people seem tremendously important," says [a] psychologist (Gelman & Pedersen, 1993:57).

In this study, I am interested in exploring the role of humor in building such relationships. My questions in this inquiry pertain to humor's role in developing genuine, intimate and supportive dyadic relationships. Specifically, I am concerned with articulating the myriad ways by which humor is used to support efforts at enhancing the relationship between two people.

This exploration has been particularly important to me because both humor and relationships are part of my core personal values. I believe that our relationships are the central reason we exist as human beings. And I believe, like David Graves, that "we need humor as much as we need any other kind of sustenance in our daily lives" (cited in Higginbotham, 1988).
Humor has truly been the icing on my cake during good times, and has helped me stay in the kitchen during rough times. I have learned that I am best off when I maintain my (or any) sense of humor.

This dissertation represents the culmination of several years work in understanding and reflecting not only on important concepts in the literature but also my own practices of and responses to humor. The people I have involved in the process of conducting and writing this research (my committee members, the participants in the study, and the friends and family who have supported me throughout) are those whom I care deeply about and with whom I have wanted to spend my time and energy with in this process.

Humor has always facilitated my own personal interactions with others, from the most superficial to the most intimate. While both humor and relationships have been independently important to me in my life, in more recent years I have come to the awareness that humor is central to my deepest and most intimate relationships. I began to be conscious of how much humor enriched these relationships. I became increasing fascinated with the interweaving of humor and relationship, spurring me to explore this issue in this thesis. Throughout the process of this dissertation, I have drawn on my own personal experiences of humor in my relationships to gain deepened insights and appreciation.
Although much previous writing has been done on the topic of humor, as for example in workplace settings, only a few empirical studies have examined humor's role in enhancing interpersonal relationships, and many of these were published several decades ago (e.g., Coser, 1960; Goffman, 1955, 1959; Modigliani, 1967). Additionally, while there have been empirical studies that have examined humor as a means of social facilitation for relationships among children, research on adults has not advanced as much (Chapman, 1983:148; McGhee, 1979; McGhee & Chapman, 1980). This study addresses these gaps.

Moreover,

although scholars from anthropology, sociology, and psychology have examined the multiple functions that humor may serve, most of this research has focused at the level of the culture (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940) or the group (Coser, 1956; Fine, 1980, 1981; Martineau, 1972; Stephenson, 1951). The functioning of humor within close relationships,...has received less attention (Alberts, 1990: 110).

To date the social psychological contributions to the humor literature have been more concerned with group process issues than with relational interactions among dyads, and most research has focused on singular respondents (Chapman, 1983:148-150). This study focuses explicitly on interactions among partners in a relationship. Additionally, many studies use the interpretations of observers or survey responses rather than perceptions of group members (Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990). Since
humor is best understood in its context (Rossel, 1981), this study focuses on
the perceptions of partners in relationships regarding the use of humor and
its consequences for their relationships.

This thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 is the conceptual
orientation to the research, collating information known about humor’s
impact on relationships. This chapter lays out the key concepts that guided
my inquiry. Chapter 3 describes the methodology employed in this inquiry.
The next three chapters are the results of the data analysis. Chapter 4
describes the context for relationships provided by humor. Chapter 5
describes how relationships deepen and develop through humor use.
Chapter 6 pertains to the differences among women’s and men’s use of
humor in their relationships. In the last chapter, I draw conclusions and
implications regarding the effects of humor on relationships.
Chapter 2
CONCEPTUAL ORIENTATION

Throughout our lives we tend to be involved in deep personal relationships with other people. As Ruthellen Josselson, evoking vibrant images, observes:

People create their lives within a web of connection to others. The cast of characters in a life and the nuances of interconnection provide the richness, the intricacy, the abrasion, and much of the interest in living. Life unfolds as a kaleidoscope of relationships, with varying pieces in shifting arrangements (1992: 1).

Such relationships include attraction and friendships of various kinds, including professional work relationships. For many of us these relationships are a necessary and satisfying human experience whose functions we rarely question (Duck, 1973). Relationships give meaning to our lives. For others of us, the experience of difficulty in personal relationships brings to the forefront the importance of securing deep and authentic affiliations. People often speak of the search for mutuality in relationships as an important goal in their lives (Jordan, 1986).

In this inquiry I am concerned with exploring the consequences of humor for forming and developing such relationships. To do this, I start in this chapter by first describing the nature of relationship. Second, I describe what humor is. In the rest of this chapter, I explore literature pertinent to the
impact of humor in fostering intimate and genuine interpersonal relationships.

**Relationship**

The term relationship is conventionally used to apply to the sequence of interactions (Hinde, 1979) between persons who have impact on each other’s behavior (Miller, 1993; Stiver, 1985) and on the movement or flow of the interaction (Surrey, 1987) with some degree of continuity (Hinde, 1979; Kelley et al, 1983). It represents a stable affiliation or partnership among individuals that connotes what is typically understood to be deeper and more intimate than a simple liaison or federation of interests.

Relationship implies a degree of mutuality in that the behavior of each partner takes into account the behavior of the other. While relationships are composed of individuals, they are more than the sum of their individual parts, leading to curiosity not only about “what it is that individuals think, know, and do in relationships but also what they share and how they come to share it” (Dixon & Duck, 1993: 176).

In the social psychology literature, relationships have been constructed in various ways. For example, relationships have been conceptualized as processes within structures, as they occur in a social and relational setting (e.g., culture) that is influential (Hendrick, 1988).
Relationships have also been viewed as processes and structures, with interaction being the relational process for creating, reproducing and transforming the relational structures (Dixson & Duck, 1993; Duck, Rutt, Hurst & Strejc, 1991). Relationships have also been construed as constraints or rules that partners place on each other's behaviors, either positive and liberating constraints (e.g., rules encouraging self-disclosure) or restrictive and negative constraints (e.g., rules enforcing obedience) (Miller, 1993).

"Close" relationships are characterized by positive affect ties (Berscheid, Snyder & Omoto, 1989). Words such as "love, trust, commitment, caring, stability, attachment, one-ness, meaningful, and significant" are associated with the phrase "close relationship" (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983: 12). In one study (Berscheid, Sander & Omoto, 1989), 47% of the participants nominated a romantic relationship as their closest (deepest, most intimate) relationship. 36% of the participants nominated friendships as their closest relationships. The third major category of relationship nomination was family relationships (14%), and only a small number of participants (3%) nominated some other type of relationship (usually at work) as their closest relationship.

Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues (Judith V. Jordan and Janet L. Surrey) at the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies of
Wellesley College have proposed a feminist construction of growth-fostering relationships. Relationships are seen as opportunities for action and growth (Surrey, 1987). Relationships are characterized by each person feeling a greater sense of zest (vitality and energy), each person feeling more able to act and does act, each person having a more accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s), each person feeling a greater sense of worth, and each person feeling more connected to the other person(s) and a greater motivation for connections with other people outside the relationship (Miller, 1986: 3).

In relationships founded on mutuality, individuals relate to one another based on an interest in each other as whole, complex people (Jordan, 1986). Three underlying processes govern such relationships: mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment (Surrey, 1984). Each person in the relationship is aware of and responds to the subjectivity (meaning systems) of the other through empathy, and engages in self-disclosure of inner states, needs, thoughts and feelings (Jordan, 1986). The increasing ability to build and enlarge mutually enhancing relationships is an important developmental goal (Surrey, 1987; Miller, 1988). In relationships of mutuality, there is "an investment in the exchange that is for both the self and the other. The process of relating is seen as having intrinsic value" (Jordan, 1986: 3).
This notion of mutuality and interconnectedness has been brought up by other writers. For example, Pearce and Newton (1963) discuss interactions which promote human growth and fulfillment. Similarly, Keegan talks about the importance of a culture of embeddedness (similar to Josselson's (1992) notion of a holding environment and Surrey's (1987) notion of a relational culture), describing it as "that most intimate of contexts out of which we repeatedly are recreated" (1982: 121) and an environment in which "to hold without constraining may be the first requirement of care" (1982: 162). The "interperson" constitution of the self is the transformation of the self to one who is embedded in mutuality and interpersonal concordance (Keegan, 1982).

As Surrey (1987: 7) summarizes, a relationship, or relational context, is one in which:

there is increasing awareness and knowledge of self and other through sustained affective connection, and a kind of unencumbered movement of interaction. This is truly a creative process, as each person is changed through the interaction. The movement of relationship creates an energy, momentum, or power that is experienced as beyond the individual, yet available to the individual. Both participants gain new energy and new awareness as each has risked change and growth through the encounter. Neither person is in control; instead, each is enlarged and feels empowered, energized, and more real. Empowerment is based on the capacity to turn toward and trust in the relationship to provide the ongoing context for such interaction.
Josselson (1992) identifies relationship as the only means of transcending the psychological and physical space between people. She identifies eight dimensions of relatedness: holding (experiencing ourselves as being contained by another), attachment (keeping close to another), passionate experience (seeking pleasure in different ways and at different levels of intensity), eye-to-eye validation (finding ourselves in the eyes of another), idealization and identification (linking to a powerful other and striving to become like him or her), mutuality (moving in harmony), embeddedness (belonging), and tending and care (offering the self to another's needs).

In this study, I draw on cognitive, behavioral, and affective (relational) constructions to conceptualize "relationship". On a cognitive level, relationships are ongoing systems of creating and sharing meaning to understand experience. On a behavioral level, relationships are structures and processes that provide a collage of interpersonal guidelines for interaction. Relationships are characterized by experience-based expectations for interpersonal interaction and for the intentions and feelings that accompany interaction (Miller, 1993).

On an affective level, relationships are the means of making and enhancing relatedness in our lives and of promoting our psychological growth in terms of the connection (Miller, 1986). Authentic, intimate, and
growth-promoting relationships are characterized by mutual empathy (Surrey, 1984), caring (Miller, 1986), and mutual intersubjectivity (Jordan, 1986). Mutual empathy is the experience of interactive engaging and moving along, where "'being with' means 'being seen' and 'feeling seen' by the other and 'seeing the other' and sensing the other 'feeling seen'" (cited in Miller, 1986:2). Caring is the "extraordinarily wonderful feeling" of concern for the well-being of another person who is valued in our eyes and for remaining connected with this person (Miller, 1986: 11). Mutual intersubjectivity refers to "the motivation to understand another's meaning system from his or her frame of reference and ongoing and sustained interest in the inner world of the other" (Jordan, 1986: 2).

Humor

Humor is "discovering, expressing, or appreciating something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing (Dewane, 1978: 508). Humor is a unique type of social interaction. It is different from other types of communication in that it "establishes incongruous relationships (meaning) and presents them to us with a suddenness (timing) that leads us to laugh" (Berger, 1976: 113). Humor presents several types of incongruities: a paradox, a puzzle, a discrepancy between words and actions, a startling event, a slight twist of perspective, a sudden truth or insight, or a violation of
conversational conventions (Morreall, 1983; Napier & Gershenfeld, 1989; Winick, 1976). Humor is often ambiguous, allowing multiple interpretations (Pepicello & Weisberg, 1983). Although incongruity alone may not be sufficient for humor, "most agree that there needs to be some element of surprise for a remark to be considered humorous" (Fine, 1983: 160).

Gregory Bateson (1952: 164) notes that "paradoxes are the prototypic paradigm for humor, and that laughter occurs at the moment when a circuit [of contradictory notions] is completed". He illustrates the complex workings of humor as belonging to "the paradox of the class of classes which are not members of themselves", explained as follows:

Paradoxes arise when a message about the message is contained in the message. The man who says 'I am lying,' is also implicitly saying, 'The statement which I now make is untrue.' These two statements, the message and the message about the message crisscross each other to complete an oscillating system of notions: if he is lying, then he is telling the truth; but if he is telling the truth, then he is not lying; and so on (1952: 163).

Deborah Tannen (1986) describes this same phenomenon as joking carrying a "metamessage". Describing a particular joke made by a person named Moe, she concludes, "there is a metamessage of good will in Moe's good humor. That he goes through the same joking routine regularly, so it becomes a sort of family joke, in itself creates a sense that their relationship is ongoing and intimate" (Tannen, 1986: 61).
Humor draws on many sources; "shared success or failure, the absurd or outrageous, something very familiar and personal, or a strong memory may evoke humor" (Napier & Gershenfeld, 1989: 394). It may also arise from situations of shared tension or great fear (Duncan, 1982; Napier & Gershenfeld, 1989; Rubenstein, 1980). Incongruity, surprise, tension and relief are four salient features associated with humor (Nilsen, 1990).

Humor may be manifested in different ways. A summary of the many types mentioned in the literature is presented in Table 1. Of these types, an enduring distinction that is frequently used in the literature differentiates between two kinds of humor: affiliative humor (nonsense or harmless wit) which is focussed on creating or maintaining cohesiveness and divisive humor (tendentious wit) which is focussed on separating or differentiating people (see Alexander, 1986; Freud, 1905/1960, 1928; Kincaid, 1971; Leacock 1938; O'Connell, 1060; Salameh, 1983).

Although humor frequently generates laughter, a number of other behaviors and feelings may also be evoked by humor, either together with or instead of laughter (see Berlyne, 1972; Keith-Spiegel, 1972). For example, humor may be associated with behaviors such as a smile, a wince, a laugh-wince (which Klages (1992: 16) describes as "a moment of simultaneous resistance and reification"), a twinkle in the eye, an inner smile or acknowledgement, a sigh, and a shared glance. Humor may also be
associated with a variety of emotions such as love, joy, appreciation, sadness, embarrassment, fear, guilt, envy (Chapman, 1983).

The literature highlights different theories of humor use. Keith-Spiegel (1972) and Lynch & Achor (1991) highlight several "classical" theories that address the issues of why we use humor and what makes something funny. Biological theories hold the belief that laughter and humor are instinctual nervous system mechanisms of human adaptation that are good for the body because they restore homeostasis, stabilize blood pressure, oxygenate the blood, massage the vital organs, stimulate circulation, facilitate digestion, relax the system, and produce a feeling of well-being (Keith-Spiegel, 1972: 5).

Incongruity theories (emphasizing disjointedness), surprise theories (emphasizing shock, suddenness, or unexpectedness) and configurational theories (emphasizing sudden insight or a "falling in place") suggest that humor yields pleasure from the unexpected cognitive resolution of paradoxes (see Keith-Spiegel, 1972). Ambivalence theories suggest that people experience laughter when they simultaneously experience incompatible emotions or feelings (Keith-Spiegel, 1972). Superiority theories (drawing on the work of Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes) holds that the basis of humor is elevating oneself, oftentimes at the expense of another (see Lynch & Anchor, 1991; Morreall, 1983). Relief theories (drawing on Freud’s 1905/1960 work) suggests that humor is "a natural phenomenon
Table 1

Forms of Humor

Wit: remarks, usually spontaneous, showing verbal adroitness; quick, smooth and pointed responses; swift perception, especially of the incongruous or an event is the opposite of what is expected.

Irony: words and peripheral clues (e.g., tone of voice, gestures) used to express the opposite of what is explicitly stated.

Pun: a word or phrase suggesting multiple meanings.

Joke: something said, usually prepared, to provoke laughter with a climatic humorous twist.

Sarcasm: a sharp, caustic utterance.

Common truth: remarks acknowledging some universal truth or generally held understanding or belief.

Funny story: brief narrative intended to provoke laughter.

Putdown: words that belittle, disparage, detract, or humiliate another, expressive of a low opinion, including mockery and making fun of another.

Content-based/substantive humor: humor drawn from the substance, topic, or matter of something, which throws light on its meaning.

Contextual/situational humor: humor drawn from the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs, which throws light on its meaning.

Playful humor: humor that is light, innocent, sportive, jocular, or frolicsome.

Empowering humor: humor that enables or supports another.

Tendentious/hostile humor: forceful or aggressive humor marked by overt antagonism intended to dominate or master another.

Sexual humor: humor pertaining to sex.
that develops out of the human condition in such a way that psychic energy that naturally builds up within an individual seeks a release from the person" (Lynch & Anchor, 1991: 156; see also Chapman & Foot, 1976).

More recent writings on humor have been classified into four parallel streams (Nilsen, 1993): the physiological functions of humor (e.g., Cousins, 1979, 1989; Peter & Dana, 1982; Robinson, 1983), the psychological functions of humor (e.g., Chapman & Foot, 1976; Freud, 1928; Fry & Salameh, 1987; Goldstein & McGhee, 1972; Levine, 1969; Ziv, 1984), the educational or developmental functions of humor (e.g., McGhee, 1983; Mindess et al, 1985; Zillman & Bryant, (1983), and the social functions of humor (Coser, 1959; Fine, 1977; 1983; Martineau, 1972). Martinez, (1989) adds an additional benefit of humor: self-insight, self-acceptance and coping (see also Dixon, 1980; Robinson, 1983; Roy, 1960; Wolfenstein, 1954 for discussions of humor's role in coping and reducing stress). Other writers in the humor literature (e.g., Kahn, 1989; Kushner, 1990) refer to humor's facilitation of communication (e.g., Coser, 1960; Ullian, 1976; Winick, 1976) and creativity (e.g., Koestler, 1964; Ziv, 1983).

Various authors have pointed to the issue of individual differences in humor (e.g., Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990; McGhee, 1979). For instance, humor may vary by gender and ethnicity (see Barreca, 1991; Chapman & Foot, 1976; Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap 1990; Journal of
Communication, 1976; Nilsen, 1993; Walker, 1988), as well as by other
individual differences in temperament and personality, such as cognitive
style, introversion-extroversion, and maturity (McGhee, 1986). Additionally,
humor has been examined in a variety of contexts, such as work settings
(e.g., Coser, 1959; 1960; Duncan, 1982; Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990;
Kahn, 1989), therapeutic settings (e.g., Dewane, 1978; Fry & Salameh,
1987; Lynch & Anchor, 1991; Mindess, 1976), educational settings (e.g.,
Abramis, 1991; Bryant, Comisky, Crane and Zillmann 1980; Bryant &
Tamborini & Zillman, 1981), and mass communication and advertising
settings (e.g., Gruner, 1965, 1976).

The brief review above gives an indication of the magnitude and
diversity of the literature pertaining to humor. In this study, however, I am
most concerned with exploring humor's use for building intimate and
authentic interpersonal relationships. Hence, in the remaining part of this
chapter, I specifically review the literature for insights into the humor-
relationship link. Toward the end of this review, I explore the literature
pertinent to the individual difference factor of gender, since this was an
important variable in the data analysis.
Humor and Relationships

More than three decades ago, Cofer (1960) noted that humor is a distinctive form of social action having consequences for relationships. Humor is affiliative (Emerson, 1969), helping to build and shape human relationships (Levine, 1969), and to develop friendships (McGhee, 1988). It is essential to any smoothly functioning system of interaction (Goodman, 1983). It is also a way by which individuals make statements about themselves and their relationships (Kahn, 1989).

Recent research has confirmed these insights. In one study, the use of humor was found to be positively associated with the ability to establish deep affective relationships (Mutthaya, 1987). Another study showed that humor is an important strategy used to maintain various relationships (Canary, Stafford, Hause & Wallace, 1993).

The rest of this chapter is organized to bring out what is known through prior research about humor’s role in helping us build deep and intimate relationships. Three aspects of humor’s role in building relationships are explored. First I look at humor’s role in creating the interpersonal environment necessary for personal contact. In this section, I explore the literature on how humor facilitates the forming of a relationship, particularly in terms of allowing us to connect and bond with partners in its early stages. Second, I examine how humor facilitates the maintenance and
development of genuine interpersonal relationships. In this section, I examine the literature around humor’s role in developing solidarity, building intimacy, and dealing with difficult issues. I also explore how humor encourages the growth of the relationship by providing us means for looking at ourselves and our situations from different perspectives. In the third section, I examine the literature regarding differences in men’s and women’s humor use to build relationships.

HUMOR’S ROLE IN BUILDING THE CONTEXT FOR THE RELATIONSHIP

The literature primarily addresses humor’s ability to create a rich and contactful context for relationships through increasing liking and attractiveness of individuals, facilitating social interaction, and conveying feelings and emotions.

Creating Liking and Attractiveness

A long history of research in social psychology indicates that individuals are attracted by similarity of some type between themselves and others (see Duck, 1973: 44-49). Particularly in the early stages of a relationship between two people, more frequent interaction leads to liking, and liking leads to more frequent interaction (Argyle, 1972). Humor is an important ingredient for increasing interpersonal attractiveness and likability
(Kane, Suls & Tedeschi, 1977; Murtstein & Brust, 1985). We tend to like to be with people we laugh with (Ziv, 1984). For example, the humorist, Art Buckwald, in speaking about time he spent as a child in an orphanage, "I learned quickly that when I made others laugh, they liked me. This lesson I will never forget" (Buckwald, 1967:15). As Lily Tomlin, the comedienne, has said,

> Instead of working for the survival of the fittest, we should be working on the survival of the Wittiest, then we can all die laughing (cited in Napier & Gershenfeld, 1989: 387).

Humor is a source of pleasure, a means of checking mutual suitability and attraction, and a means of conveying goodwill and benevolence (Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977; Ziv, 1984). Jovial people are often seen as socially sensitive and personable (Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977:16). This finding is borne out by a survey in Forbes magazine which found that 98% of chief executives would hire a candidate with a good sense of humor (Machan, 1987).

**Facilitating Social Interaction**

Humor smooths our social interactions (Chapman, 1983; Kane, Suls & Tedeschi, 1977; Kubie, 1971; Martinez, 1989; McGhee, 1979, 1988; Morreall, 1983), often by having a humanizing effect (Kubie, 1971). This is particularly conducive to building relationships (Coser, 1960; Duncan, 1984).
As long as people can see the possibility of engaging with the other person in thoughts and feelings, as long as they can envision the possibility of caring and connecting, they can grapple with the difficult issues in the relationship (Miller, 1986). Humor facilitates seeing the possibility of connecting and remaining connected.

Humor facilitates conversation. As Coser (1959:172) put it, "laughter and humor are indeed like an invitation, be it an invitation to dinner or an invitation to start a conversation: aim[ing] at decreasing social distance". It helps us cope with new and unfamiliar relational settings, particularly by opening up interpersonal relations to include newcomers (Ziv, 1984). This adaptive and flexible potential of humor facilitates an individual's assimilation into ongoing relationships (Ziv, 1984).

Humor facilitates relationship building by reducing the distance between people - exploring their commonalities and building common ground on which to further explore and support differences. Duncan (1984), conducting a research study, found that humor minimizes the social distance between group members when utilized in ways appropriate to group norms. In this connection, Victor Borge commented that "laughter is the shortest distance between two people".
Creating Shared Meaning through Symbols

Drawing on Erikson's (1963) notion of intimacy, an intimate relationship refers to a state of emotional closeness among the partners in a relationship, wherein each individual feels comfortable sharing personal thoughts and feelings. Partners in intimate relationships experience a commonality of meaning and symbolism between themselves on a variety of affective issues and concerns; they use symbols "to seek, create, and develop meaning, and to analyze experience" (Dixson & Duck, 1993: 176).

Humor is an important symbolic means of creating and sharing meaning. In his famous study entitled "Banana Time", Roy (1960: 13) suggested that humor often becomes the "daily language" in which the emotional aspects of interpersonal relationships are conveyed. "Relationship work" (i.e., working at the relationship in order for it to endure) is often accomplished through humor (Seckman & Couch, 1989: 332). Members of mature social relationships work at the relationship through "evocative transactions" frequently consisting of nonverbal communication; "much relationship work, especially the incorporation of new members in to an extant social order, the affirmation of extant relationships, and the control of minor deviations, is accomplished via expressive symbols, not discursive symbols" (Seckman & Couch, 1989: 341). Since humor often works by affectively acknowledging the existence of issues without directly dealing
with them (Kahn, 1989), it may serve as a shared code or shortform language for conveying emotions in the relationship.

In this way humor gets speedily to the heart of the matter, serving as a communication heuristic for others to remember the message or the person. For example, Ronald Reagan, "the Great Communicator", always included something humorous (an incongruity or an anecdote) that could be tied with the main point of his message (Kushner, 1990). To deflect the contentious issue of his advanced age for the Presidency, he made it a point to humorously bring up this issue in his speeches, as captured in the following quotations:

And it's with a happy heart that I share with you the honor of this special occasion, the 105th annual meeting of the great American Bar Association. It isn't true that I attended the first meeting (cited in Kushner, 1990: 82).

Well, Andrew Jackson left the White House at the age of seventy-five and he was still quite vigorous. I know because he told me (cited in Perret, 1989: 32).

Somebody did quite a research job ... to find a picture of me in the Dixon YMCA band. This should lay to rest the rumor that photography had yet to be invented when I was that age (cited in Kushner, 1990: 82).

Since humor often simultaneously addresses both the explicit and implicit levels, the cognitive and the affective, the direct and the subtle levels, deeper and broader information regarding the relationship is
conveyed through humorous interchanges.

HUMOR'S ROLE IN DEEPENING AND DEVELOPING THE
RELATIONSHIP

With regard to humor's role in deepening and developing the relationship, the literature primarily refers to creating intimacy and solidarity, dealing with difficult issues, managing relational boundaries, providing perspective and safety, and promoting growth.

Creating Intimacy and Solidarity

Although much of the literature on intimacy and cohesiveness has been concerned with groups, this same thinking can be extended to the interpersonal relationship between two individuals. In his model of the social functions of humor, Martineau (1972) emphasizes humor's ability to raise morale of group members, strengthening ties between them, build consensus, and narrow the social distance between people (see also Pitchford, 1960). This occurs because "just as tension and conflict are causes of division and separation, so humor and shared laughter are factors that join and unite." (Ziv, 1984:32). In empirical and clinical work by the Laughter Project (1984) the members of the laughter group as compared to
the control group "self-disclosed more often and at a higher level of personal
risk...[and] expressed more feelings of closeness to other group members
than members of other control groups" (Martinez, 1989:36).

Despite increasing feelings of cohesiveness and closeness, humor
prevents conformity:

the enemy of humor is fear. Fear requires
conformism. It draws people together into a herd,
whereas laughter separates them as individuals.
When people are fearful, they want everyone to be
the same, to accept the same values, say the same
things, nourish the same hopes, to wear the same
clothes, look at the same television, and ride in the
same motorcars. In a conformist society there is no
place for the jester. He strikes a discordant note, and
therefore must be put down (Muggeridge, 1958: 59-
61).

Jokes are "tiny revolutions" (Orwell, 1968) that are subtle rebellions against
perceived control (Zucker, 1969). Humor thus has the potential to question
the status quo, and to undermine rather than underline the existing system
(Kahn, 1989). Conversely, in analyzing humor consultants, Gibson (1994)
concluded that they rarely question the corporate status quo. Rather,
consultants pose humor as:

not a facility for rebellion, but a method of coping with
stressful work situations. In this sense, though some
consultants couch their program as 'Managing
Change',...in fact, their program is nothing of the sort.
Humor is a way to put up with, rather than question or
alter, the underlying system (Gibson, 1994: 423).

Supportive humor is similar to play, having a rhythmic and flow-like
quality (Nachmanovitch, 1990). It is a way of bringing people closer together to build relationships and promote rapport (Norrick, 1993).

Affiliative humor facilitates coalition formation, cohesiveness, and relationship maintenance (Alexander, 1986). Mutual laughter communicates unity (Seckman & Couch, 1989). Several theorists point to humor as a bonding device with a cohesive effect on people (Morreall, 1983; Robinson, 1977; Weinstein, 1983). For example, one researcher concluded that:

Laughing together unites people...To laugh with another person for whatever reason, even if only at a piece of absurdity, is to get closer to that person. Indeed, humor can even be directed at the laughers themselves, and still have this unifying effect. Getting stuck in an elevator between floors with people, or running into people at the bank door on a bank holiday, often makes us laugh at our common predicament, and this laughter brings us together (Morreall, 1983:115).

Similarly, Levine (1969) remarked that nothing else is so completely shared as laughter, and Orban (1985:44) suggested "if you can laugh together, you can work together." Mark Twain best encapsulated this idea of solidarity when he quipped, "The human race has only one really effective weapon and that is laughter" (cited in Napier & Gershenfeld, 1989:386). Thus, by inducing cohesiveness, humor can influence relationships among people.

Humor is also a promoter of social intimacy (Chapman & Foot, 1976). In one study, groups showing a high degree of intimacy were associated with a high level of humor (Hampes, 1992, 1994). Tying intimacy and deep
connecting to expressions of the soul, Thomas Moore (1992: xix-xx) echoed these thoughts in _Care of the Soul_: "If Mercury is present with his wit and humor, there is a good chance that the soul - as elusive, the ancient poets said, as a butterfly - will make an appearance".

"Meaningful relationships" are based on sharing:

Partners may share ideas, feelings and needs; they may share experiences; they may share trust and respect; ...they share the feeling that each understands the other (Cahn, 1990: 242).

When people laugh together, "social barriers, such as those of status, temporarily are lowered" (Coser, 1960:81). Shared humor builds connections between people which allow them to strengthen their ties with each other. Giving advice to team leaders in workplace settings, one author recommended that "sharing a laugh produces a special feeling of connectedness with others. Thus, creating opportunities for shared laughter helps build staff camaraderie" (Feigelson, 1989). Quoting the old Chinese proverb "tell me and I'll forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I'll understand", John Cleese notes in _The Wall Street Journal_ that the point of humor is that it strengthens workplace relationships by involving others:

If I can get you to laugh with me, you like me better, which makes you more open to my ideas. An if I can persuade you to laugh at the particular point I make, by laughing at it, you acknowledge its truth (1988: 16).
Humor helps to minimize pretenses and affectations in relationships (Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977:16). Seckman & Couch (1989) give the example of a humor incident that is the watershed point in the acceptance of a person as a full member of a workgroup. They note that humor transformed "a pretense awareness context (Glaser & Strauss, 1964) and a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963) into an open awareness context and an acceptable identity" (1989: 335).

Humor creates greater intimacy and cohesiveness in relationships through increased honesty (Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977) and trust (Napier & Gershenfeld, 1989). Trust is an important concept in the study of relationships (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Argyle (1972: 116-7) described cyclical "positive feedback sequences" which reciprocally deepen and develop relationships into intimacy. For example, knowing that the partner is friendly, liking the other, and having similar attitudes and interests increases the frequency and quality of interaction, establishing a mutually satisfying system of increasing interaction (Argyle, 1972). We like those who we think like us (Myers 1995: 429). In one study, persons immediately reciprocated positive affect when told that certain others liked them or evaluated them

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1 This notion is similar to Argyris' (1990) conception of feedback loops, Senge's (1990) conception of balancing loops, and Morgan's (1986) notion of autopoiesis.
highly (Berscheid & Walster, 1978). Humor and trust work together in this way. They "are reciprocal, each less possible without the other and each building on the other" (Napier & Gershenfeld, 1989: 389).

**Dealing with Difficult Issues**

Humor is a unique form of communication which conveys risky information while allowing participants in an interaction to save face (Winick, 1976), reduce offensiveness (Morreall, 1983:116), and to convey emotional aspects of interpersonal relationships (Roy, 1960). Because of its frequently indirect nature, and the opportunities it presents for multiple interpretations, humor allows the sender to deflect full responsibility for the content of the message (Tannen, 1986). Ullian (1976:129) pointed out that with humor the initiator can convey ideas with more impact and "is protected from being charged with the responsibility for the serious content or the implication of the joke." This ambiguity presented by humor also facilitates the possibility of receivers being less defensive in response to difficult messages because "humor lets people receive difficult messages while appearing not to do so - they can react to the humor itself in the immediate situation, and to the seriousness of the message in a more psychologically safe time and place" (Kahn, 1989:51). The selection between truth and non-truth proffered by humor is what makes it possible to "save face" (Goffman, 1959).
Additionally, because of its ability to alleviate immediate embarrassment (Fink & Walker, 1977) while delivering important messages, humor helps to communicate difficult or personal messages. For example, Dr. Ruth, renowned for her use of humor in educating about otherwise taboo sexual topics, is now approaching HIV/AIDS education through the use of humor, thereby hoping to increase the effectiveness of her message (Phil Donahue Show 12/17/92).

This face-saving quality of humor lets potentially threatening interpersonal issues (e.g., sexual attraction, competition) be dealt with in relatively soft, tactful and unhurtful ways that allow communication without overt aggression or defensiveness. In this way, humor "allows statements to be delivered and heard" (Salameh, 1983:32).

Humor provides a socially acceptable means of expressing difficult emotions such as hostility (McGhee, 1988). It also provides the occasion for voicing feelings or attitudes for which there are no socially acceptable or easily accessible outlets (Winick, 1976). Additionally, humor provides a means of control in managing delicate situations (Robinson, 1977).

In summary, humor gets the point across quickly and effectively (Kushner, 1990), particularly when addressing sensitive issues. Because it addresses multiple levels, and communicates the symbolic meaning behind a message, humor facilitates the message being sent and received.
Managing Relational Boundaries

An important aspect of relationships is the creation and maintenance of relational boundaries. A relationship, which can be thought of as a culture of embeddedness, is a context in which the individual experiences both the pulls for differentiation and inclusion:

"each time a particular culture of embeddedness 'holds securely' it insures the integrity of the wider community of which the individual is a part; each time it assists in 'letting go' it attests to the community's greater loyalty to the person-who-develops than to the self-the-person-has-composed. Both functions, well performed, assure the person that he or she can survive in the community and assure the community of the person's continued participation (Keegan, 1982: 260-261)."

Humor may be used to solve the paradox of the dual needs of separation and relationality, allowing partners to negotiate their membership in the relationship (Smith & Berg, 1987).

Partners in a relationship, as in other groups and systems, navigate between opposing fears and fantasies of being completely engulfed by, or completely abandoned by, those systems, resulting in a constant level of anxiety. (Diamond & Allcorn, 1984, 1985). Humor helps us to manage these anxieties: it "can simultaneously engage people within and disengage them from situations, establishing connections at the same time it maintains distance" (Kahn, 1989:55).
Providing Perspective and Safety

Social relationships are in a constant state of becoming, transforming and evolving (Hall, 1987:15). Humor enables us to reframe and re-explore our familiar, taken-for-granted worlds (Kahn, 1989) in ways that promote the growth of the relationship. Research studies confirm that humor facilitates openness to new ideas and frameworks. Creativity was correlated with use of humor (Treadwell, 1970). Similarly, individuals scoring high on generativity (creatively promoting the welfare of others) were found to use more humor (Hampes, 1993). By breaking down previously established frames of reference, by highlighting incongruencies, and by linking contexts that are apparently dissimilar, humor encourages increased creativity and openness to new ideas.

Humor facilitates deepening and strengthening of the relationship by providing perspective and safety through the management of psychological distance. Although humor often helps us become closer to our partners, occasionally we may need to move away; we may need a little distance or perspective. Sometimes we may need to be able to retreat from threat or have a safety valve, in order to re-establish connection at a later point in time.

When conflicts arise, humor provides a release from tensions, bringing appropriate perspective to the conflict and frequently reducing the
time needed for conflict resolution (Alberts, 1990; Ziv, 1984), thereby
creating conditions conducive to cohesiveness (Duncan, 1984; Ziv, 1984).
Janet Surrey, a psychologist, has observed that when we maintain
connectedness despite conflict (e.g., by staying with difficult feelings such as
anger, or not going away physically or psychologically), the relationship
stays open and moving (see discussion summary in Miller, 1986: 19).
Humor helps us to stay connected even when there is disagreement and
misunderstanding. One researcher notes:

Humor's particular effectiveness stems from its
manipulation of psychological distance... Humor
increases distance at some times and decreases it at
others...The distance associated with humor may be
intrapsychical, or interpersonal, or between people
and social systems. Humor offers a sliding scale by
which each type of psychological distance may be
increased or decreased" (Kahn, 1989: 54)

Humor thus permits us to remain connected with others through temporarily
increasing or decreasing our distance from them because it allows us to
regulate and control our feelings (Freud, 1905/1960:179).

Humor lends a concreteness and grounding to problems that may at
first seem overwhelming. By "bringing significant problems down to a
manageable size" (Winick, 1976: 128), it is easier for people to cope with
complex problems. It allows us to introduce distance between ourselves
and the problem, allowing us to look at the problem with perspective.
Humor orchestrates a shifting of figure and ground.
In this connection, "William Gould, a headhunter with his own New York City firm and the executive vice president of the Association of Executive Search Consultants, explains why he would never offer a client a humorless job candidate. 'What companies are seeking is someone who can see issues clearly. If a person can laugh, particularly at himself, he can probably step back and get the right perspective on things'" (Kiechel, 1983:205). Humor thus frequently creates a more imaginative and flexible outlook (Morreall, 1983:116).

Promoting Growth

Relationships promote the psychological development of partners (Miller, 1986; Surrey, 1984). Growth is the process of "expansion of the capacity for intimacy, relatedness, and communication with other human beings" (Pearce & Newton, 1963: 27). As Miller (1984: 4) notes, "all growth occurs within emotional connections, not separate from them". Josselson (1992: 17) suggests in the context of doing research, "It makes no sense, then, to ask about the self who is in the relationship. Rather, we must inquire about the self-in-relationship and about the relationship as it exists in the self".

"Humor defines us as human. Humor is who we are" (Abramis, 1993:144). Humor provides a means of deeply and affectively connecting
with the other. It allows the expression of true warmth and affection (Kubie, 1971). A recent study found that both men and women associate caring with a sense of humor (Crawford & Gressley, 1991). By creating an atmosphere which is psychologically safe, humor serves to break down barriers between different types of individuals in a relationship, facilitating the reduction of interpersonal tensions, shyness, and conflict (Kubie, 1971; Lorenz, 1963; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940; Robinson, 1977). As Napier and Gershenfeld put it, humor has the ability:

- to erase, cleanse, or change what, until the transformation, was embarrassing, oppressive, sorrowful, or painful. Humor, like a feather in the wind, will sail gently earthward. Just when we think its life is exhausted, it will float lightly up and away, propelled by an unexpected breath of air, changing everything. Unpredicted humor can ease our embarrassment, calm our anger, and relax our tensions. Most of all, it can free us from pedantic, ritualized, thoroughly predictable behaviors or events (1989: 387).

Relationships are recursive in that partners in a relationship influence and modify each other (Josselson, 1992). Several authors have referred to the processes by which we feel increasingly fully present and seen in a relationship. For example, Pearce and Newton's (1963) notion of consensual validation (overt acknowledgement of a new experience as a part of the others experience), as well as the processes of mutual empathy (Surrey, 1984), caring (Miller, 1986), tenderness (Pearce & Newton, 1963),
mutual intersubjectivity (Jordan, 1986), and eye-to-eye validation (Josselson, 1992) affirm each partner's presence in the relationship and acknowledge each person's value to the other. Humor facilitates the processes of being present and feeling seen because it grounds the partners in a shared pleasurable experience, allows rich communication at multiple levels, acknowledges both the commonalities and the specialness of the relationship, and creates feelings of intimacy. Humor also promotes personal growth by helping us develop positive attitude and self-image, provoking thought and self-insight, and liberating our creative capacities (Cornett, 1986).

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN HUMOR USED TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Two decades ago, Chodorow (1974: 44) contended that "the feminine personality seems to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does". Gilligan's (1982) work highlighted differences in the concerns of males and females in responding to personal moral (relational) dilemmas: males are more concerned with the right thing to do (justice concerns) and females are more concerned with the responsible thing to do (care concerns). Females are generally more concerned than males with their embeddedness in social contexts, and the
feelings of others (Gilligan, 1982).

More recently, Gilligan (1988) has distinguished between two modes of description of the self: the connected self and the separate self. The connected self description (for which females show a greater propensity in defining themselves) views relationships in terms of the interdependence of people while the separate self description (for which males show a greater propensity in defining themselves) views relationships as reciprocal roles of obligation and commitment between people (see Attanucci; 1988). Similarly, Kegan (1982) also distinguishes men as being embedded in personal autonomy and self-system identity (the institutional self) and women as being embedded in mutuality and interpersonal concordance (the interpersonal self).

Attanucci (1988) summarizes previous research by Lyons (1981) on these modes as,

connected self is responsive to others in their own terms, a definition synonymous with the feminine role of selflessness. Separate self is related to others through the duties and obligations of reciprocal roles, a self distanced and autonomous in the contractual manner of traditional male roles (1981: 204).

There are also other differences in the relational orientations of men and women. Previous research suggests that women's values differ from 

\[ \text{For an extensive review of differences in the prosocial (positive} \]
men's values in that they are more sociocentric, with women valuing helping others and wanting to share resources more than do men (McClelland, 1985). Chusmir and Parker (1984:766) reported that women as managers have been found to exhibit more "other-oriented" behavior than their male peers (Gilligan, 1982; O'Leary, 1974; Schein, 1973). Rosener (1990) noted that female leaders are "interactive leaders", encouraging participation, sharing power and information, and concerned with the energizing of others and enhancement of their self-worth.

Comparing same-sex friendships, researchers have found reliable differences between male pairs and female pairs. Sherrod (1989) summarized these differences in a review of the literature spanning several decades, as follows. While women and men seek the same abstract qualities in close personal friends (intimacy, acceptance, trust, and help), women tend to look for intimate confidantes who share the same feelings, while men seek out partners for activities who share the same interests. Women disclose significantly more intimate information about themselves to same-sex friends than do men. Women's same-sex friendships tend to be expressive (verbal and non-verbal) while men's same-sex friendships tend to relational behaviors of women and men (examined in terms of affiliation, empathy, nurturance, altruism and morality) and their power-related behaviors (examined in terms of aggression, assertion, dominance, competition, achievement, and non-conformity versus compliance) see Basow (1993: Chapter 3).
to be instrumental. Women's friendships are more emotionally intimate than men's. Women are more attuned to subtle nuances in each other's behavior than are men.

These distinctions in the relational foci of women and men are mirrored in their use of humor. Men and women use humor differently (Barreca, 1991; Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990). For example, Childs (1975) and Coser (1960) found that males produced more humorous remarks whereas females produced more laughter (Scogin & Pollio, 1980:833). The research also shows that men use more prepared forms of humor (Case, 1988, 1990), and more tendentious humor involving sexual or aggressive elements than do women (O'Connell, 1960), including jokes that ridicule some person or group (Lamberth, 1978).

Further, previous research has found differences among men and women in their responses to humor (Duncan, 1982; Hokanson, Willers & Koropsak, 1968; Zillman & Bryant, 1974) including higher ratings of funniness from men than from women (Chapman & Gadfield, 1976; Lammers, Leibowitz, Seymour & Hennessey, 1983; McGhee, 1971). Landis & Ross (1933) found that males appreciated hostile wit more than did females.

Duncan, Smeltzer, and Leap (1990) concluded that previous research indicates that men have a preference for sexual humor (Crawford, 1992;
Groch, 1974; Malpass & Fitzpatrick, 1959; Spiegel, Brodkin, & Keith-Spiegel, 1969) with women more frequently the victims of males' aggressive humor and the objects of their sexual humor (Brodzinsky, Barnet, & Aulio, 1981; Cantor & Zillman, 1973; Sheppard, 1976). In contrast to men's preference for the use of tendentious (hostile) humor, women have liked absurd (light and harmless) humor far more than men (Groch, 1974; Hassett & Houlihan, 1979; O'Connell, 1960).

**Summary of Research Questions**

The literature reviewed above yields important observations and insights about humor and relationships. However, to a large extent these conclusions are not grounded in rigorous and systematic empirical research. In this study, my intent is to empirically examine humor's role in building relationships. Specifically, the questions addressed by this study are:

1. In what ways does humor shape the context for forming the relationship?

2. In what ways does humor contribute to the deepening of the relationship and the development of the persons in the relationship?

3. To what extent do gender differences and similarities influence the use of humor in building relationships?
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

The methods used in this study draw on the interpretive paradigm that holds that people socially and symbolically construct and sustain their realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The goal of theory building in this framework is to "generate descriptions, insights, and explanations of events so that the system of interpretations and meaning, and the structuring and organizing processes, are revealed" (Gioia & Pitre, 1990:588). Following the interpretive lens, theory building tends to be more inductive with the basic approach of the researcher becoming part of the evolving events studied. I followed this methodology, attempting to see from the perspective of the participants experiencing the processes, and engaging in discovery through code analysis. I was guided by Gioia & Pitre's summary of the interpretive analysis approach which:

begins during data collection and typically uses coding procedures to discern patterns in the (usually) qualitative data so that descriptive codes, categories, taxonomies, or interpretive schemes that are adequate at the level of meaning of the informants can be established. Thereafter, analysis, theory generation, and further data collection go hand in hand. Thus, the theory generation process is typically iterative, cyclical, and nonlinear. Through this process, tentative speculations about organizational structuring processes are confirmed or disconfirmed by further consultation with informants (Gioia & Pitre, 1990:588).
Table 2 describes the typical sequence followed by research studies in the interpretivist paradigm. Following the general ordering of my activities during this project, the first chapter of this thesis introduced the topic and the broad area guiding the inquiry into the role of humor in building relationships. This chapter specifies the design of the research, the selection of participants, the data collection methods (including the interview protocol used), and the data analysis procedures used (including the sequence of coding, theming, and verification of propositions by participants). The results of the data analysis are reported in the chapters that follow.

The purpose of my research was to gain insight into the potential of humor to form and develop deep and genuine relationships of mutuality. The study is a grounded theory building approach involving exploratory and inductive methods, including the thematic analysis methodology articulated by Boyatzis (1991; 1995). Action research and co-inquiry are the underpinnings of this study.

There were several aspects of this study from which the methodology followed. I intended to conduct the research in a manner that is congruent with the emergent nature of the phenomenon, and honors the discovery nature of the research. I wanted to decrease the psychological distance between the researcher and participants in order to understand how the
Table 2
Interpretivist Paradigm Approach

Opening Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(A) SELECTING A TOPIC:</th>
<th>(B) DESIGNING RESEARCH:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the issues?</td>
<td>What are the data?</td>
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<td>What are the research questions?</td>
<td>Where to find data?</td>
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<td>How to record data?</td>
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Data Collection

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<tr>
<th>(A) IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC CASES</th>
<th>(B) QUESTIONING INFORMANTS:</th>
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<td>according to what is</td>
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<td>relevant to them in context</td>
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Analysis

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<th>(A) CODING:</th>
<th>(B) FORMULATING CONJECTURES:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Provide a description at the first and sometimes second level of abstraction</td>
<td>Identify the relations between concepts at first level or across levels of abstraction</td>
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<tr>
<th>(C) EVALUATING CONJECTURES:</th>
<th>(D) FORMULATING THEORY:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Validate with informants through new data collection</td>
<td>Identify the emerging concepts and relationships</td>
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| (E) REVIEWING LITERATURE: | |
|----------------------------| Identify what was already known |

Theory Building

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<th>(A) WRITING UP A SUBSTANTIVE THEORY:</th>
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<td>Show how it all fits together</td>
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Source: Gioia & Pitre, 1990:593
participants make sense of and understand the role of humor in their relationships. My purpose was to pursue discovery by getting close to and immersing myself in the data and involving participants in understanding their interactions and the consequences of humor for their relationships. To achieve this, participants were included not only in data collection but also in a workshop intended to facilitate the sense making phase of the inquiry. These aspects called for certain requirements in the methodologies of the study. First, those in the sample were called upon to be insightful and reflective. I was asking participants to think beyond their espoused theories in developing insights about their relationships and social interactions. Second, they were called upon to be unusually open to sharing their thoughts and feelings about their relationships and their experience of humor in their relationships. I wanted the participants to be sufficiently comfortable with me to develop and disclose personal information and insights about their relationships. Therefore, the selection of the sample was less of an effort to find a typical or representative sample, and more focused on selecting a sample likely to fulfill these requirements.

Since the focus of the study was the role of humor in building interpersonal relationships, I wanted to get a fuller picture of the phenomenon and thought that exploring each side of a relationship would aid with this objective. Therefore, whenever possible, data were collected...
from both participants in a relationship.

Sample

The sample consisted of 28 participants (13 women and 15 men) who are members or alumni of a department of organizational behavior in a school of management. Of these participants, two persons (one male and one female) chose not to participate in the interviews, resulting in a total of 28 participants (13 women and 15 men). Of these, six were faculty members, three were alumni, one was a staff member, and seventeen were students in the department. One participant, who is the daughter of one of the participants, was otherwise unconnected with the department. The average age of participants was 40.57 years, with a range of 24 to 63 years. 89.29% of the participants were Caucasian, 7.14% were African Americans, 3.57% were Asian Pacific Islander. 32.14% of the participants held a Ph.D. degree, 46.43% held a Master's degree, 17.86% held a Bachelor's, degree and 3.57% had completed high school.

Participants consist of those who were interviewed for this study. Each participant was interviewed about their relationships with specific others. Five female participants and one male participant explored three relationships each, four participants (two female and two male) explored one relationship each, while the rest of the participants explored two
relationships each. When referring to one of the two participants in a relationship pair, I call them a partner. Therefore, the term partner is used only in reference to a particular relationship. The relationships of 30 pairs were explored resulting in a total of 58 partners (two per relationship). Of the 30 relationships, 8 were female/female pairs, 8 were male/male pairs, and 14 were mixed gender pairs.

Since I was interested in assessing the similarities and differences within and across sex groups in relationships, I used a complex selection scheme to identify participants as follows: I selected five persons to begin the process of identifying the relationships to be studied. Of these five individuals, four were students (from three different entering years in the department) and one was a faculty member. There were three women and two men in this group. Each of these participants identified and was interviewed about two partners (one male and one female). Each selected partner was then interviewed about his or her relationship with the original person and, in turn, identified and was interviewed about another partner (of the opposite sex of the person who originally identified them). In this way, each participant was interviewed about two relationships (with one partner of each sex). Two female participants were further invited to explore an additional relationship so as to maintain parity in the number of same-sex relationships. On four occasions, the same partner was selected by two
participants, thereby requiring them to also respond to questions pertaining to an additional relationship.

**Data Collection, Sense Making, and Analysis**

Three sources of data collection fed the analysis. First, my own observation of participants in many settings, and our shared history in natural settings which included humor gave me a fuller context to understand humor use and relationships among participants. Second, participants were interviewed about their deep reflections on the role and use of humor in their relationships. Third, all interview participants were invited to a data collection and sense making workshop.

Participants of the study were interviewed with follow-up sessions when necessary. Interviews were in-depth explorations which focused on the role of humor and its consequences for certain relationships.

These interviews called for extraordinary self-reflection and openness on the parts of the participants of the study. In general, participants engaged in the process and content of the study with enthusiasm, self-insight, and readiness to disclose. At the end of their interviews, many participants shared that they had learned a great deal about their relationships and their own humor use from the inquiry process. Subsequently, many participants shared with me that they were more
attentive to the process and consequences of their humor interactions with others. I also became aware that participants talked with each other about their interviews and insights.

The methodology included a modified form of critical incident interviewing (Boyatzis, 1991; Boyatzis, 1982; Flanagan, 1954). Participants were asked to identify and describe incidents pertinent to the consequences of their own and their partners' humor, such as when humor brought them closer together and when humor helped build their relationships. Multiple open-ended questions were asked of participants in the following order: (1) questions regarding the first relationship to be explored, (2) questions regarding the second relationship to be explored, (3) questions regarding the 3rd relationship, if necessary, (4) questions comparing relationships, and (5) questions regarding the participant's general use of humor. The Interview Protocol is attached as Appendix A.

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Each participant was assigned a code letter and each question was assigned a code number. The data from interviews is reported in the next three chapters as transcribed, with the question number and participant identification letter noted in parentheses. For example (12M-YY) refers to participant M's response to question 12 regarding his or her relationship with participant YY. In the analysis of gender differences reported in Chapter 6, the results are
reported for comparisons among partners. Hence (22F-SG) refers to participant F’s response to question 22 comparing his or her partners S and G.

Subsequently, a 2-day workshop was conducted which addressed the provisional themes generated from my observations and from participant interviews. The purposes of the workshop were to explore the use of humor to build common ground and to engage in mutual sense making. The workshop was the second iteration of sense making, another level of recursive interpretation. In Gestalt terms, this was an attempt to “fatten up the figure”. The workshop was an opportunity to deeply reflect on and further explore (individually and in a group) the role of humor in building common ground and developing bonds in relationships. In this way, the workshop can be considered a research event (Gergen, 1988). The workshop participants consisted of 13 interviewees and myself, including three facilitators. Other interviewees could not attend the workshop because of personal scheduling conflicts.

The workshop was a form of checking with the participants to verify the “interpretations of the data made by researchers” (Rudestam & Newton, 1992:76). Potential misinterpretations were avoided by inviting participants to reflect on, elaborate, and refine themes. Equally important, there was time for the interview participants to share their impressions from the data
collection phase. The workshop also provided the occasion to bring together a group of people interested in helping in the task of further exploring the topic by reacting, tightening, and expanding the conceptual analysis.

The workshop participants (co-inquirers) engaged in here-and-now observation and discussion of humor incidents and reflected upon their previous humor experiences. The "real time" observations let the naturally occurring humor run its course, with time for personal reflection and large group discussion. The workshop was designed in a way that encouraged fun and play, providing a context where relationships could naturally evolve and intensify. Experiential exercises were used to explore what humor emerged and its consequences for relationships. This was a highly experiential, participative workshop.

In summary the purpose of the data collection, sense making, and analysis was to collect and sort data into relevant themes and "meaning" categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). An iterative theming process was used as follows. First, I scanned the interview data to increase my familiarity with the data and cull provisional propositions. Second, these were presented and discussed in a two day workshop. Third, using a randomly selected subsample of two men and two women, specific themes were identified. Fourth, utilizing the data from the entire sample, I verified and supported
with examples the initial themes identified. Following thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1991; 1995) guidelines, final themes were obtained after searching for confirmations and negations of themes. For each theme, the number of partner responses were tabulated and reported. Data pertaining to gender related issues in humor's consequences for relationship were separately explored.

This chapter has discussed sample selection, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 focuses on the interpersonal context for making contact on a personal level, facilitated by fun, enjoyment and playfulness. Chapter 5 addresses deepening and developing the relationship. Chapter 6 examines similarities and differences in the use of humor in same sex and cross sex relationships.
Chapter 4
FUN, ENJOYMENT AND PLAYFULNESS:
MAKING CONTACT ON A PERSONAL LEVEL

This chapter is about the role of humor in developing interpersonal relationships by creating environments that are fun and pleasurable and by creating opportunities for greater personal contact in relationships. Below I describe the myriad ways by which humor helps create fun, enjoyable, and playful contexts that enable us to form and sustain genuine interpersonal relationships. I also describe below the multiple ways by which humor creates the possibilities and opportunities for developing relationships that are rich in personal contact.

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF FUN AND PLEASURE

People are drawn to others when they enjoy being together. Humor helps create environments that are enjoyable. Fun experiences lead to enjoyment in life. It is fun to have fun and to share that fun. Genuine relationships bloom and flower in fun, playful and freeing settings. Humor's role in creating such environments is described in greater detail below.
Being Fun, Spontaneous and Playful (78%)³

Fun was an important theme in the data. When participants described humor, they frequently talked about fun and play. As one participant put it, humor "...serves the function of having fun [and] makes the relationship a lot more enjoyable for both of us. And I think it really pulls us together...We really enjoy each other's company" (12A-B). Thirty six partners spoke of fun and enjoyment often helping to bring them closer or build their relationships.

The connections between humor, fun, enjoyment and pleasure were explored by nine participants. Humor was described humor as "a source of fun in the relationship" (13U-H), and as "it keeps the fun in the relationship...It keeps the pleasure in the relationship, and keeps the surprise" (13I-V). One participant defined "fun as playful with laughter" (6R-P). Another participant said:

[humor]...is fun. I like it. It just makes life more pleasant...And it really made the work a lot more enjoyable for me to just try to step back and laugh at it. Because some of that stuff was really hard....It makes me feel closer...I enjoy laughing. It...[has] a kind of flow or ease to it. It is a way of being in it, without heaviness, which is really pleasant (12D-G).

One participant said humor "is really a terminal value, it is enjoyment"

³ Numbers in parentheses represent the percentage of total partners who referred to this theme.
(11U-H). He continued,

...humor does not have to have any excuse but itself. It is its own reason for being. And we both appreciate that with each other, and so we do it...And in that sense, it is not instrumental to something else. It is its own raison d’etre” (12YY-XX).

Three partners noted that humor changed the quality of their relationships by increasing their enjoyment and pleasure (18D-G; 18F-G) and by helping them realize that the other person was fun (18D-O). One of these participants suggested:

I enjoy it more. It is just more pleasant. It is more engaging. I want to spend more time because of that and all of that stuff...it is like a magnet, it pulls me more into a relationship” (18D-G).

Fourteen partners specifically mentioned that they became closer to their partners because of fun, pleasure, enjoyment, or hilarity in their relationships, or because their partners were funny and humorous. Nine participants said that humor helped build their relationships through fun, pleasure, joy, and being funny.

An example of how humor creates a pleasurable context even in a stressful situation was given by one participant who described a time when her slip fell down as she was lecturing. She and her partner (her teaching assistant) "just cracked up about that” (5B-A). She noted:

[The incident] could have been responded to... differently. We could have just panicked...but we chose...to laugh the whole time through it. And it
made me feel okay about it, even if the slip had fallen down... She was able to join with me around an experience that could have been easily an embarrassing moment for me. One of the most embarrassing moments in my life. And it is not, it is one of the...more fun experiences that I have had. So there is something about changing the outcome of experience... (6B-A).

The importance of humor in creating a pleasurable context for the relationship was highlighted by one participant who referred to getting over a fight she had had with her partner:

it was probably the humor and the missing of our humor with each other, that led us...to get over [the fight]... Missing the playfulness or the joy or the happiness with each other...it was just simply that I was missing that. And omigosh, the relationship is more important than that. And somehow we just got beyond that...not letting that stand between us (6V-I).

Several metaphors (many focusing around fairs or carnivals) relating to the theme of an environment of fun and enjoyment were used. For one participant a carnival and then a ferris wheel and merry-go-round came to mind (19K-ZZ). She described an environment:

where you just have a lot of fun with each other. And things do go in circles. Things do go up and down. And there is...trying to win the kewpie doll. The good natured, playfulness coming in. There...[are] a few clowns running around. Might even be a naked lady. A bearded lady. The bearded lady for me, and the tattooed man for [my partner]... The sensation I have [is] much more hearing the sounds, hearing the laughter. When I think about a carnival, I don't think about the smells. I think about the hearing, the laughter, hearing the music on the ferris wheel.
Hearing the popguns that the people are trying to win, the bb guns. Hearing the chattering, you know, those kinds of things...The lights flickering. It is night time, but because there are so many lights on, it looks like it is about ten o'clock in the morning...Oh, when I say a carnival, implicit in that, in that metaphor, is it is ten o'clock (19K-ZZ).

Continuing with this pattern, another participant referred to merry-go-aroinds, roller coasters, and a playground when describing the humor in her relationship. She said:

[My partner]...is very energetic and she is very playful. And I like...to have fun. And I am playful too. So it is almost like we are going from one game to another. It is a merry-go-around and then...the roller coaster, and going to [an]other game...And just playing, you know. We like playing, I guess. Because she mentioned several times in the beginning [that] this is the time that she is getting in touch with her playful child. And to a certain extent, the same thing for me too. I have always been playful about my life. I never grew out of it...But I think that is why we connect to each other so well. Life is a playground (19L-J).

Along the same lines, another participant described a fun-filled environment:

...it is like a first hill on a roller coaster. Usually when we start joking around, it escalates. And then at some point, I think [she is saying my name]...over and over and over again. It is so fun. And then it will kind of drop off. And the high point...of the building of our relationship has been based around humor. From the standpoint of the minute you get off of a roller coaster, you want to get back on. And that it is fun (19A-B).

One participant, using a different metaphor of fun and enjoyment, described her partner as:
...something like a gopher in the ground. And it pops up and plows and says hi, hi, hi and goes back into the earth. And...I don't mean gopher in a negative way, because it could be any kind of an animal from the ground that pops up, I don't know if chipmunks do that. But it is like, something that is gone and then all of a sudden pops up and says hi, hi, hi, how are you. And laughs and talks and then back to the ground again...That is my relationship with her...[She] is just a fun happy person. Brightens your day (19I-H).

In her other relationship, this same participant tells of two incidents that signify how fun and funny experiences brought her and her partner closer:

...I was flying to Florida to see my mother. I hate flying so much...[and someone] gave me some PMS pills, about five of them, [saying] here, just take one. So I took one on the way down, and I took one on my way home, and it did help. They helped a lot, because they just took the edge off. So [my partner] came in, about a week later. And...[he] had to give a speech, he is dying you know. Scared to death, and he had not done many speeches. So I said well here, take one of these. It is just...very light. So he came back and he tells me, oh gee that worked really great. And [when] I told him it was a PMS pill, he was so ticked. Not angry ticked, but like I will get boobs. I am going to [become] ...female. And we laughed and laughed. And then just last Fall, he had allergies. And he said, do you have any antihistamines. And I said, yes here, take two. And I was going to say take one now, and save one for later. But someone came in and interrupted me. And so he comes in later and says well, I took both the antihistamines. I said ....you were only supposed to take one. And then we just cracked up. Well, you told me to take two [he said]. I said, well I did not mean for you to take two immediately. So he started calling me his nurse...But, it was just... incredible, I mean, that he would take two and not know to only take one. And it was just fun, and it was very funny. ...Well, it was the fact that he
was so worried about becoming a woman, becoming female. But again, it was just a funny, fun kind of thing and I am sure those things bring people closer together (19I-V).

As another participant commented "we enjoy laughing together. And that is part of why we keep getting together" (8Z-Y).

Only one partner noted of a potential disadvantage of a fun filled environment: she noted that work does not get done efficiently when she and her partner are having fun (13A-B).

An important aspect of pleasurable environments is playfulness. Humor is a way to play and be playful. Eighteen partners talked about playfulness. One participant noted that humor helps create a playful environment:

Part of it goes back to the...functions of humor...There is a playfulness...that helps you [engage] and participate and contribute the humor...And may even at times, in certain settings, kind of give...permission. And in doing that, it makes those settings just more playful (4R-N).

In two relationships, both sets of partners discussed playfulness at several points in their interviews (J-L & L-J; XX-YY; & YY-XX). The following quotes from the partners of one of these relationships gives some understanding and insights into this theme of creating a playful environment for the relationship. One partner began by talking about a time when humor brought her closer to her partner.
She, being this playful woman that she is... We had coffee last Friday... And we were walking home, and...[she] was just full of play. And we ended up stopping along the way, on a patch of grass and playing. Rolling in the grass. And tickling feet. And just [being] playful, and laughing. [I was feeling] hope, hopeful. She is a real inspiration... I felt very inspired at that time... We played games from our childhood (5J-L).

She continued, noting that their playfulness has helped build this relationship:

[Humor] is always around...[it is] a tag on. Sort of the end of a conversation. So it is... tying [the conversation] up. Giving it closure, or lightening it up. Lightening up the conversation, you know. Because of her playfulness... we can go deep and talk deep, and there is always this lightening at that point. That is the pattern (6J-L).

This partner said she uses humor intentionally "to connect with her." To connect with the playfulness... sometimes when I first see her" (10J-L). She suggested that the advantage of humor "is getting into this playful space, which [her partner] has this unique capability of doing" (13J-L). She described the humor environment of this relationship as:

I just keep thinking of this childhood game... because of the lightness and the spontaneity... and the sense of play... Patty-cake!... Because it is physical. It is verbal. There is slapping, there is sound, movement... takes two to play... A lot of contact. And the two is very important, because my humor, my relationship is very much one-on-one with her... [Even in a group] my humor is always experienced with her, just her usually
The above participant’s partner talked of playfulness in her interviews about two other relationships (L-M; L-X). She said, "I like to play and I like to use humor a lot. And I think that can help to bridge and to build a relationship. And I think...that it would be a fast way" (4L-M). She also used the metaphor of a playful child to describe this relationship (19L-M). Exploring another relationship, this same participant talked of playfulness as endearing her partner to her, bringing them closer and helping to build their relationship. She mentioned that during playful times they "exchange emotions and feelings" (4L-M) and are "exchanging a lot of intimate things without really speaking about it" (6L-M).

Some interesting metaphors pertaining to playful environments were used by participants. Five participants used metaphors related to children, kids, and teenagers (19D-O; 19K-ZZ; 5J-L, 19J-L; 6L-X; 19YY-M). For example, one participant first says:

[Our relationship]...is just a dirty joke... This does not quite fit as a total metaphor. Because with a dirty joke, it is the raunchiness that just pains me. Whereas [our relationship] is more sort of risqué, or more sort of playful. I mean, I don't think either one of us...[would] do anything to be malicious or harmful to each other...The other thing that is good about the teenage quality about it is [that]...we are not doing it to be raunchy...[We] are doing it as the young teenagers who don't know any better. We are just doing it and being very playful with it...Very innocent. (19K-ZZ).
She goes on describing the same youthful feeling:

It is a Friday night. It is a hot, summer's night. So everybody is out... mothers and fathers and kids. And lovers, and the teenage kids. There...[are] all different kinds of things coming, it is just that whole intensity of the imaginative... Sure, a lot of the joking that we do is sexual... There is [a] sort of a teenage component here. Young lovers kind of thing... Singing: Hello young lovers wherever you are. Of that nature. So there is sort of a teenage flavor to it. Sort of being naughty, which is what teenagers do (19K-ZZ).

In a similar vein, another participant described his humor in terms of being a teenage kid:

It is playful... In some regards, I think I test out being more like a kid. More teasing... A metaphor for some rare moment would be me as a teenage kid. A little awkward with a grownup teacher. And seeing whether the teacher is going to accept it. One of the things that is interesting about our relationship is that there are times and ways in which I am parental towards her. And times when she is parental towards me. And mostly neither of those dominates for a long enough time to get in the way (19YY-M).

Metaphors pertaining to water, flowing, and fluidity were brought up to describe the playful nature of humor. A couple of participants talked about buoyancy in their environments (6J-L; 12YY-M) and one mentioned humor helping to see a more flowing versus "formal and tight" side of someone (18D-O). One participant, speaking to the issue of fluidity, suggested that he intentionally used humor:

...to make the relationship dance. The conversation dance. To dance up around... where [it is] at some
point more fun, more interesting. Keeping it fresh...more fluid (10XX-YY).

Using a metaphor of water and flowing one participants said:

...I would use...the metaphor of a brook or a stream. And the reason why I think this is a good metaphor in this case is because a stream is a playful thing....Especially the sound that comes out of a stream. There is this bubbling and gurgling...But it is a flowing thing at the same time. You know, there are these playful little sounds and you know the water [is] flowing over the rocks and making its way downstream...There is still this constant flow in a relationship but at the same time, there are all of these little bubbles and gurgles and spits and splashes and whatnot that add life, that give life to the relationship...Refreshing...It is a warm day in this place, and a bright sky, and the water is just refreshing to kind of take off your shoes and wade in the stream. It is not like it is a mountain stream with melted snow and so ice-cold. But it really gives life. You can just take off your shoes and...very near the edges of the stream it is warm, because that is where the water does not pull as strong as when you first step into the stream...And then the further you go into the stream, the deeper the water gets and the cooler it gets...I think we take our defenses down in some way when we take off our shoes (19Y-Z).

Another participant similarly said:

I was thinking of the word playful, and I was thinking [it]...reminds me of...when I was a child, being in a...shallow pool. Actually the image that I had was being in an outdoor [pool], and splashing each other, in a real warm day, when the water felt really fresh, refreshing (19D-Q).

Humor also helps create lightness and spontaneity in the atmosphere surrounding a relationship. Being light and lighthearted was mentioned by
seven partners. Humor "ease[s] some of the weight" (13D-G, 17D-G; see also 6D-O), helps lighten serious conversations (6J-L; 6YY-XX) and "makes life lighter and makes me feel lighter" (4D-O). One participant described it this way:

After we would...lay out the emotional stuff, ...we would joke about it. It was sort of a way of...pulling us out of the depths of the emotional stuff...It did feel very much...like being in an abyss and the humor pulling us back out. Sort of back onto more level and solid ground, where we both knew [that] each other was okay. Where we had sort of gotten into the deep stuff and okay, now we are back to an okay level (5/6O-D).

Another commented on how his humor adds lightness to the environment:

Well there are times when we are just having fun. Humor begets humor. There are times when I am aware of trying to be funny. [They] tend to be those in which the setting is tense and we need to lighten up...[W]here we are having a good time, humor just builds on itself (10U-H).

Another participant echoed this sentiment:

I like spending time with someone who jokes around and kids around. Life is heavy enough without having to make it worse. If I am going to spend time with someone, I like them to joke around. And I like witty repartee and I enjoy that aspect of it...That is one of the qualities that, if I am working with someone and they are a dead head, and there is just nothing, there is no humor, there is no affect to them, the person does not...catch on to jokes, [then] I don't enjoy being with those types of individuals (5W-U).

Twenty seven partners talked about the use of humor to lift their
**partner's spirits.** For example, one participant said that when he sees his partner feeling down he "will consciously just be much more lighthearted and friendly" (10ZZ-K). Other participants believed that their partners did the same for them. Still others referred to a mutual lifting or lightening of spirits.

Two dimensions of this theme emerged from the data. First, humor appears to be used to manage mood and tone. Fifteen participants talked of lightening the mood in a situation or discussion through humor. One participant said that one of the most important aspects of the relationship with his partner "is that we can see the humorous side of serious situations" (6I-V). Another participant talked about how humor gives her and her partner relief from some of the very heavy things that we talk about. It almost enables us to deal with some really heavy stuff, which would get to be too weighty" (17D-G). "And it really does just ease some of that weight. You know... the world does not feel quite as heavy on my shoulders (13D-G).

Another participant described the impact of humor on her relationship as: "What [humor] does in different settings [is] to bring some lightness and some wit, and some brilliance, and some sun" (17M-YY). She went on to describe her partner's use of humor as bringing balance (19M-YY). Her partner noted that humor can "modul[ate]...mood and tone" (10YY-M) "when things are getting too grave, and I just need to lighten up" (10YY-M). He added that when working in groups, humor is helpful in "keeping spirits up
and present" (5YY-M).

Participants differentiated humor that lightens the situation from making light of it (e.g., 5C-Q). One participant explained how his partner could "turn my catastrophe into a funny thing...without making fun of it" (6I-V). Another participant expressed the hope that his partner hears him in the way that he wants to be heard and not "that...[he is] making light of something that is very personal" (6Z-Y). Another participant described the flip side of this situation in noting that her partner "sees what [my anxious humor] is for. Sees what it is about... and addresses what it is about rather than [the] humor" (10M-YY).

Six participants talked specifically about the role of humor in adding spontaneity to their environments. One participant said "if it is not spontaneous, it is not funny to me...I like things that happen in the moment, and are unexpected. And those are the things that have given me some of the funniest moments in my life" (17W-U). Another participant described the time when humor brought him and his partner closer as "there was an urging or a wanting to be on more spontaneous, fun and playful humor terms... I see all of those things pulled together" (5V-I).

The theme of lightness and spontaneity was reflected in descriptions referring to the childlike nature of humor. One participant spoke of seeing his partner as "spontaneous, and... child-like, and expressive about the
emotion", in part because of his humor" (5V-I). Another participant spoke to this same issue as follows:

    in one moment...there is depth, there is spontaneity there, there is a natural thing there. And there is not much effort and time or struggle. It [is] natural...I really feel connected to him, his youth and inner child. His spontaneity and feelings" (6L-X).

    Seven participants explicitly mentioned the sense of freedom they felt in their relationships because of the humor they shared. Humor "clearly helps us be freer with each other, [with] not as many constraints or barriers" (13Q-D). It helps us "break out of ruts and constraints...so that we can be more imaginative together" (12YY-XX).

    The sense of freedom to fully engage in a relationship partly derives from having permission to participate through humor (10M-YY; 4R-N, 5R-N, 13R-N; 11U-H). One participant spoke about encouraging humor in her partner "in other settings where people don't know him as well. So that [his humor] might be revealed. And that [it] could be appreciated...I know that I am a real supporter of it" (10M-YY). Still another participant talked about his partner waiting for him to give her the cue for her to engage in humor (11U-H).

**Facilitating Ease and Comfort (55%)**

    Nine partners referred to the theme of facilitating ease and comfort,
noting that humor allows them to feel "relaxed and comfortable" (5E-D; 9H-U; 6V-I; 18V-I). Humor helps create environments in which we feel more comfortable, freer, and at ease to be fullest selves. Fourteen partners specifically mentioned the role of humor in making their relationships more comfortable or easy. Humor's role in increasing comfort was mentioned by participants in varied contexts, such as being used to bridge across different races (e.g., 17B-A), different sexes (e.g., 6K-ZZ), and to affirm common realities (6U-H). Other participants talked of humor providing "very warm feeling[s]" with partners (19E-D), and allowing them to feel safe (9H-U).

Others referred to the critical role of humor in creating ease in relationships by talking about the nature of relationships lacking humor. One participant suggested that: "the moment that I lose ...[the humor] I think the relationship will become very dry" (13L-X). Another participant noted:

If I feel I have to be cautious about humor. I start feeling like I have to be cautious about everything. And so everything gets staler, and drier, and a lot more distant...And [the purpose of] a lot of playful humor is to free me up. To make me feel like this is a place where I can be playful and do whatever, and don't have to check myself. And don't have to be just so for people (17YY-M).

Several participants used metaphors implying comfort when describing the relationships. For example, one participant said:
The metaphor that comes to my mind is of a very, very soft stuffed animal... It is very comfortable and loving, engaging, attracting. Safe, it pulls me in. Makes me want to touch her. Literally have this sensation of wanting to touch that, like I would with a soft teddy bear (19D-G).

Another participant said:

Actually, the humor we share endears him to me a lot. There is a playfulness that I just enjoy that makes life more fun, makes life lighter, makes me feel lighter. And I think it has a lot to do with [being]... comfortable... There is a kind of just easy comfort, a flow, it is very much related to the humor (4D-O).

One participant used the metaphor of a blanket in describing his relationship, noting "it feels like a blanket in that it can give us warmth, and encouragement, and comfort, and just as a blanket, you can use it to... cover two people and they draw closer together" (19O-D). This participant went on to extend the metaphor to that of a wet blanket, "the flip side of that [is] the wet blanket aspect of a blanket, being that we can use it to sort of create distance... So [humor can be used] as a way... [of] managing the relationship" (19O-D).

When partners in a relationship share common values and interests and use humor to express these, their relationships feel very comfortable. Two partners, referring to the same participant, mentioned sharing common values and implicit understandings. One of these said:

What I am feeling is, how pleasant this is. How comfortable, easy... It is because I feel like we share
at a very deep level some values. I never feel like I am on guard. And never feel like I am worried about being misunderstood. I seldom feel like I need to check out what does she mean. Am I sure that she knows what I mean. So there is a very real sense of comfort. Which comes from knowing that we share some of the [same] values for each other (6D-G).

This participant continued, noting that:

I probably almost never use humor intentionally...like trying to be funny. It is more like something that I have let happen. And I let that happen a lot with...[my partner] and me. And I think part of that comes out of the fact that, there is a real strong [sense] of value base that she and I share. So it feels very comfortable. It feels very safe (6D-G).

This same participant's partner from another relationship noted:

I would say that there is a direct correlation between humor and closeness....And enjoyment, of being together....I think it has to do with comfort with each other, trust. A lot of times we know what the other one is thinking, even when we are not saying it. And sometimes humor is what voices that in a word or a gesture better than in an explanation...It is just...a more authentic relationship, and...greater authenticity occurs when there is more openness to humor (18F-G).

In addition to shared values, commonality of interests was brought up by one participant who, in describing his relationship with another man, noted that their common usage of "male humor" made their relationship feel more comfortable (5/60-Q).

One participant marked the progression of comfort in a relationship through humorous interactions with her partner:
The first joke was more of just sort of...sparkling with each other. To see who we all are. Sort of finding our boundaries with each other. And the second one was much more of a sort of a joint dialogue. Sort of a collaborative effort. And the third one, the...one that we just had. I mean, I was sharing with him some of my excitement. I was sharing with him some intimate knowledge about myself. And so when he did it, you know, it opened me up more. So it is ...the three instances that I have shared with you very much show the increase in the intimacy and the comfort with each other in the relationships (6K-ZZ).

Twenty partners suggested that humor enables or *facilitates* their relationships. Participants described several metaphors giving insight into this theme. For example, in talking about how humor makes things go smoothly, one participant suggested that humor is like a can of WD-40 and said "in that anytime something is squeaking, we sort of joke around it and sort of heal it and make it better" (21O-D). Another participant echoed this sentiment, suggesting that the humor in his relationship is a lubricant, "enabling....a nice smooth relationship" (17YY-M), and adding that the relationship is "built on other things that are really important to both of us. And the humor helps us address those things and share them... I see humor as nicely available, facilitating, giving ease to it" (18YY-M). Another participant also spoke of humor "as a lubricant....it helps grease some of the transition either into engagement, within an engagement, or even towards the end of an engagement" (19Z-Y).

Along the same lines, one participant suggested that the primary
function of humor is to work as a salve, "it helps to soften or heal... Simply that it...is...the lifeblood, the spring in the...the relationship...It helps the hellos, and through some rough parts" (12S-F). This same participant described humor as a "bobsled run...or a water slide. If you try to go down a slide without the water, sometimes you stick. And it can actually be quite painful. But with the water, it really makes it fun and it makes you want to go up the ladder again" (12S-F).

Some participants gave concrete examples of how humor facilitates interaction. One participant noted that when he is busy and does not have time to chit-chat, he uses humor to hide his impatience with his partner so that she does not think that he is angry with her (10I-H). This same participant thought that his partner uses humor when he is cool to her, but when he sees her using humor he tries to recognize and respond to it (11I-H). Another participant who said he and his partner are very busy, noted that humor "expedites lots of things" (13O-A). Another participant said that when they are working together, his partner will "chat me up for a while before we get down to the serious stuff" (11P-R). In another relationship, one participant suggested that if his partner said something that seemed to him to be "really absurd...[he] will try and make a joke out of it in some way, or...will just laugh at it" (10Y-Z).

Some participants referred specifically to humor increasing comfort in
a relationship by minimizing status differences, equalizing power differences in roles, and facilitating a shifting of unequal roles to those of peers. For those in roles of different status levels, humor is used to "put us both on equal footing....saying, you are one of us already" (A-B). Several participants talked about mentor-protege relationships; one participant thought humor was an advantage in helping to deal with these (13A-B).

One participant talked at length about how humor was used in relationships characterized by power differences between partners. He explained:

"Early in the relationship outside of...class...it was a way to kind of start to expand the relationship. To be able to talk about outside stuff, but also to have it be here and now. And because [my partner] was asking for my perspectives on some of that stuff, in terms of expertise, it was also a way to status equalize us (9R-N)...It increas[ed] the scope [of the relationship] (12R-N)...I think the relationship would have progressed regardless [but] I think the humor enabled the relationship to mature a lot faster...I think the humor has helped our relationship, because it has become one way in which early on...[my partner] could feel that...[we] were equal....And that equalization, I think, also contributed to the maturing and the speed of the relationship (18R-N).

Another participant suggested that humor lets his partner know he is "treat[ing] her as an equal as [to] what is going on, as opposed [to] being threatening to her....that makes us...both [be] in the same boat. It is not her problem. It is not my problem. It is our problem (6U-H).

Humor was helpful where participants were changing roles of different
status to building a relationship of peers (6D-E, 12D-E, 17D-E) or attempting
to "transform eventually to real colleagues" (6R-P). One participant, in
describing her experience of humor bringing her closer to her partner, said:

    I wanted very much to be even with her... I did not
    want to be one-up. And so what I was trying to do
    was to take responsibility for my inappropriate
    behavior, but to do that in a way that was light.
    Without making a big deal about it, so we can just
    kind of laugh about it...[Humor helped] build a
    relationship of peers or friends (6D-E).

    Another participant talked extensively of the development of his
relationship with his partner from graduate student-mentor/faculty advisor to
colleagues, and how humor helped facilitate this transition. The status
difference was clear to this participant, who said, "it is like breaching a wall
that I had never [done before]. I mean I had never known a professor....I
think [I had] a sense of awe at the beginning of the relationship" (6R-P).
Interestingly, he thought that because he and his partner's wife

    shared a similar sense of humor...[that] facilitated the
    relationship...and led to...[the] relationship getting to
    be on more of a personal basis...If it had stayed [as a]
    heavy, serious or intellectual conversation...[we]
    would have stayed in the more limited role
    relationship (6R-P).

    By facilitating the equalizing of status differences and changing roles
in relationships, humor enables people to be together in more mutual ways.
One of the above participants suggested that humor allowed the existence
of mutuality (6R-P) while another noted that sharing humor is "a sign of
being in a mutual way" (11P-B). Other participants suggested that humor's function is "mutual help" (12U-H) and to facilitate mutual learning (4V-WW).

The notion of humor serving to unfreeze the partners in a relationship was also brought up. One participant, in noting the importance of creating a creative climate, said:

There was one point, when we were sort of struggling around some aspect of his dissertation. And he was having a hard time figuring out what he wants to do with this thing...As we were talking about it, I can't remember quite what started it, but he said, all we need to do is to open up my skull, pull it back and look down in there and say, what is going on down in there. It was a beautiful, beautiful, sort of ridiculous way of thinking about what is the challenge. And that freed up a lot of things so we could go on (4YY-XX)...I suppose before he said that, I and he were both feeling stuck. We could not get off the dime of whatever it was we were trying to work out. And so that sort of freed us to first of all laugh, and not be troubled by being stuck. But it also let us be more imaginative about what we were trying to do (5YY-XX).

This participant continued to talk about the "unfreezing" capacity of humor:

And at times, it is to break out of ruts and constraints, and so that we can be more imaginative together...The night we spent at my house talking about how it works, ...he was very quick to say, well let's try it out...And he and I came up with [examples], and so it started happening. His doing that, and doing that with what I call good humor, not necessarily big laughs, was part of the creative act (12YY-XX).
**Creating Space for Relationships** (36%)

Humor *creates and enlarges the space for relationships.* As one participant explained:

I think humor enlarges all the spaces in a relationship. Whatever space is carved out, in whatever area in the friendship, humor has a way of eking out more elbow room on all sides so that the relationship expands. And as the relationship expands, humor continues to edge out the boundaries (18G-F).

She gave a concrete example of how this works in her relationship:

I think both of us are very sentimental. I think neither one of us likes to appear too sentimental. So I think humor sometimes help to fill out some of those spaces....It is a way to enlarge that space (8G-F).

Her partner in this relationship echoed this sentiment, saying that he saw humor as being "a transition....[a] breathing space in between...intense experiences (13Y-G, also see 19Y-G).

Another participant suggested her partner's humor use has "offered some real significant space, I think, for me to reveal myself to him in a personal [manner]" (13M-YY). She has learned through his humor "to give a lot more space to the relational part. And so I see him giving space for humor" (9M-YY). Another participant, feeling some stress in his relationship, talked about humor being the essence of buying time. It is giving me room, it is giving me flexibility. This is also making me realize that I might have made [more of] what he was doing, I may have blown it out of proportion in my own mind.
Other participants mentioned that the impact of humor was to "expand....and deepen" (18S-T) their relationships or to "open up the relationship a lot more" (18X-L). As one participant put it:

humor...brings us, brings the relationship higher. It brings the relationship deeper. And it fills it out. Which is even more joyful (19Q-O).

Another participant suggested intentionality in the use of humor to enlarge the space in relationships:

clearly...[there are] times that each of us has intentionally used humor. I see it as openness to trying to extend the relationship, to deepen the relationship, to support each other, to affirm each other (11K-J).

This participant's partner similarly noted:

The advantages are...it helps me keep, or stay in a relationship with her. So it is like a coping mechanism for me...I need that element, I think in relationships... I need to feel that there is latitude in my relationships... So I think I push for that. The disadvantage is that, you know, I still run into those boundaries. And so...there is still some caution (13J-K).

One aspect of creating the space to be fully ourselves was brought up by participants who mentioned that their relationships are characterized by *generosity of spirit, tolerance, and good humor*. One participant spoke of how humor endeared his partner to him and helped build their relationship:

I think in the first instance, we count on each other to take... [the other with a] sense of humor. I mean,
sometimes...[we are] talking about very serious things. She [brings]...the spirit to be with one another that has good humor. And we are extraordinarily generous with one another, which means that we can also confront difficult issues. And know that it does not threaten the relationship. The relationship is consolidated by [the humor] (4YY-M).

This same participant noted the disadvantage of sometimes "violat[ing] [his partner's] fine sensibilities" (13YY-M) and added "But she is also quick to laugh and smile and take things in a generous way. So I don't think it destroys anything" (13YY-M). Clearly his partner was in sync with him. She said:

In my...relationship with [my partner], ...[he] has a certain kind of tolerance. It is like a lot of things that might be an irritant to somebody else. It might upset another person. It is like it...runs right off his back or something (8M-YY).

Referring to another relationship, this partner commented that: "the humor is part of a larger thing which I think of ...[as] great generosity towards one another, and great freedom to allow each other to grow and think" (13YY-XX).

Along with generosity and good humor, five partners talked of humor helping to create an environment characterized by the presence of slack, where they did not feel they were being constantly judged and criticized by others. One participant said she uses humor intentionally so that her partner "knows that I am really not being critical" (11D-E). Another
participant spoke of an incident in which humor "helped me save face, because I was the one who made the initial error that started the fight, the disagreement. It was a relief. A sign of relief. Good, we're laughing, this is over" (5ZZ-X).

One participant talked several times in the interview about her partner's humor "never [being] critical" (13D-O also see 4D-O) or "judgmental" (4D-O). She said "there is often...the feeling of that is the way we are" (4D-O). She added, "I don't think anybody gets hurt. So...[our humor] is very safe" (13D-O). Two other participants talked specifically about how their partners' non-judgmental humor helped create a less threatening environment for them (5M-L; 18M-YY). One of these commented:

And also, it is a wonderful balance for me, in a space where I could become ever more serious...But you combine that curiosity with the critical thinking, the judgmental thinking that academia presents, and it is a whole other ballpark. And so his humor has helped me to deal with...the intensification of the judgment. Because I love my serious thinking. And I love my serious friends and all of that. But it has to be in a non-threatening environment... Yes...[humor] does make it non-threatening (18M-YY).

The other participant said that: "I felt like somehow her humor, somehow just kind of cut away at what sometimes feels to me like more of a threatening environment...Her humor creates a less threatening environment" (5M-L).
One participant, speaking about his partner's presence *giving permission to others to be fully present*, summarized this theme as:

It is clear to me that...[she] initiate[s]... humor. And in doing so, it feels to me like permission, so that I can respond in kind...But I think the permission thing did not only work with me, as I recall. I think that in that sense...[she] really...[was] social lubrication, if you will, facilitate[ing]...humor from people who otherwise might not [use humor]...[She] could start it, and then others could easily join in. I don't recall as many people being willing to start it as [her]...[It allows me to show more parts of myself] and [allows] more of myself be present (5R-N).

Four partners talked about humor as *energizing relationships*. Humor was referred to as "life giving" (17J-L) or the "lifeblood" of the relationship (12S-F). One participant described how humor facilitated the energy in his relationship:

...[he] and I have seemed to always had to work at our friendship. And clearly when the humor is facilitated and we are getting along well, it certainly gives one energy to continue to work on the relationship... I think the humor tends to act as either a weight, because it tends to be caustic or we are just speaking a different language that has more words to the relationship, when we are not sort of in sync with each other. Or it gives us energy, gives me energy I should say, energy to continue to work on the relationship. It is going well (18O-Q).

Another participant reflected on how humor facilitates the energy in difficult group situations with his partner:

[I feel] We are going to make it through this after all. Some of the time, [there] has to be a bit of [humor]
before we can reinvest in what should we do about [the situation]. Whereas if we just had to stay in the gravity of it, I think our energy lets down. I think it gives us courage to...[have] bigger aspirations (6YY-M).

This same participant talked about the impact of humor on his relationship as:

it keeps us buoyant and energized...It keeps us interested in one another, and things we are trying to do or accomplish or whatnot. And it keeps the energy up. And keeps the flow going (12YY-M).

Co-mingling Play and Seriousness (10%)

Our human environments are characterized by a serious reality. Humor allows us to deal with this reality in a way that allows us to handle the seriousness of our human condition. This notion was brought out by many participants who talked about a mixture of humor/play and seriousness. For example, one participant referred to a clown when speaking of the humor in his relationship:

The absurd bring[s]...the lightness to the seriousness...Sometimes it is [a] very fun/loving, light clown. The other times it is a very serious clown. But it is always this kind of humor that is a juxtaposition to absurdity and realities...serious/clown-like nature (19V-WW).

Describing this aspect of humor in enhancing the richness of relationship, one participant noted that:

She uses humor in the context of the conversation, in
the topic that we will be talking about. And even in a serious conversation, I think she takes a piece of it, and just makes fun of it (11L-J). You know, humor for me...has [a] depth of reaching out for fun and playfulness and sometimes sadness. Sad in that....the shadow side of life. To acknowledge both sides, the light and the shadow. You can't have a relationship just emphasizing the light side...I think it helps us recognize our sadness and joy. And that is the way I think we reach the depths of our relationship (17L-J).

Another participant talked of how humor built his relationship and said that "every single time...[he and his partner] get together, we are playful with words, with observations about the human condition (6YY-XX). Later he continued talking about this theme in his relationship:

We discovered greater depths and things to really care about in each other and each other's lives...And also how good it is to be with each other...through both the humor and the serious talk. And some of our deepest and most serious talks have been also times when we have been playful. And it is just wonderful (19YY-XX).

He talked about his philosophy of fun and how this applied to his relationship:

'Taking fun is merely fun, and earnestness is earnest. Shows how thoroughly none of the two does discern'. You have to play with [this quotation] for a little while, but if you try to separate what is really serious and what is really fun, as if those two had nothing to do with each other, you don't understand either fun or seriousness....The weaving of the fun and serious is so rich, and so complete, ...[these] two sides enhance each other tremendously (19YY-XX).
Describing another relationship, this same participant expanded on his philosophy:

...ordinary things that go on that are laughable. There is not separation between the serious and the laughable. Those things flow into each other. That is part of what I mean by natural humor...Humor is in the atmosphere (4YY-M)... I think [humor] counterbalances the more serious thing without interrupting it or without blocking it (12YY-M).

This participant's partner explained how this participant's use of humor helps to increase the balance in their environment:

...the first thing that comes to mind is colorful balloons. Helium balloons, many of them. And...[him] in a wonderful, wonderful costume. I mean, of the greatest sort. Kind of the jester. And the jester was not making fun of others, but was really kind of making fun of himself. And of all...we think we are about....But not in a sacrilegious way. But in a way that brought balance....And part of it is that his humor oftentimes helps me and others...to know that we have many selves. And so the costumes might change. And today he is this kind of a jester. And tomorrow he is that kind of a clown. And the next day he is that. And we are a troupe. And we are troubadours. And...I have a great appreciation for that whole role, if somebody can bring that...because there are so many colors that need expression. And it seems like the humor bring[s] out the many different sides that need to be expressed in different ways. Humor is one of the ways that some of those selves get a chance for their fifteen minutes of glory...Anita Roddick had been here and she said, the most important thing to do is when you are working with indigenous people[s], is to learn to be the buffoon. And what she meant there was, try your best to break down the barriers of what they think you might be about. Because those barriers are very, very
damaging. And don’t be a fool to be on their level, because you think they are fools. Allow yourself to be the jester, because it is more expressive in some way. It is more relational in some ways. And it is like a way in (19M-YY).

Echoing some of the sentiments echoed in this theme regarding the close connection between humor and seriousness, another participant noted that "there is a natural flow...I don't like to be serious all of the time. And when I am not serious all of the time, that is when I am relaxed and natural. I am more fun" (12L-X). As one participant put it,

humor is a moment of freedom. So it is not a dodging away from the serious, but it is saying, we can be free with one another even in the seriousness...it is almost always maybe just a moment of freedom in the midst of an otherwise serious talk that we persist in (5YY-M).

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL CONTACT

Humor creates opportunities and possibilities for deep and meaningful contact in interpersonal relationships. It is a way by which people enter relationships and stay engaged and energized about them.

Facilitating Communication (38%)

Humor as facilitating communication was specifically referred to by sixteen partners. For some participants, humor is their primary means of
communication (12I-H; 5X-ZZ; 12ZZ-K), a "way that we related to each other
(11G-F) and "a way that we talk to each other....[and] get exposure to each
other (12J-Z). One participant described humor as a "second language in
that it is shared, there is so much shared meaning in the joking, that we
don't have to use the actual words to convey the message" (17O-D).

Humor facilitates communication in myriad ways. One participant
suggested that humor helps "communicat[e] more fully" (12M-YY). It
provides "an inclusive nature" to communication (13M-L). Humor aids in
communicating how we see things or people (12E-D). It helps
communicate "heavy" (6W-U) or difficult topics, and "to tread uncharted
ground" (17B-P). In one relationship, a partner noted that "we can't have a
serious conversation, so we use humor" (17B-P). Humor is also a way to
communicate "complex things that people really care about...in a way that
leads to learning" (4V-WW). This participant later noted that humor has had
the effect of adding "more sophistication in our communication" (17V-WW).
Humor also helps close a conversation, "tying it up [and] giving it closure"
(6J-L).

Humor also helps build relationships by encouraging interaction. For
example, participants in relationships spoke of how they call each other up
(6G-F; 4X-ZZ) to share something funny (4G-F) and or to give them "a
reason to get in touch with each other every day" (17X-ZZ), thereby
developing their relationships.

Despite these beneficial functions, two participants mentioned that humor prevented them from being better connected with their partners (4J-Z; 13ZZ-K). One of these participants noted that while humor does render some closeness, it also keeps him and his partner from getting closer: "neither of us...have gotten beyond [the humor]...It keeps us more at the surface... [The humor] does not connect us in any other way than communication" (13ZZ-K, also see 12ZZ-K).

Ten partners commented that humor helps us express ourselves in multiple ways. As one participant commented, humor "gives a relationship another stream. So...you have multiple ways of individual...expression in a relationship" (13G-D). Another participant, using the jester as a metaphor for humor in her relationship, highlighted the expressive nature of humor (19M-YY).

Several participants talked about using humor to express feelings and emotions (e.g., 4L-X; 5Y-G; 5V-I). One participant mentioned that humor allows her and her partner to express their personalities, hopes, dreams, and playfulness (13G-D). Interestingly, another participant talked of the difficulty she has in expressing care in terms other than intimate and noted that humor helps her overcome this (10A-O).

In one relationship, two male partners talked throughout their
interviews about their particular use of humor and expression in their relationship (W-U & U-W). One of the partners said that he and his partner used humor to express a "common sentiment, typically about another individual, who we may or may not like" (13W-U). His partner agreed that they use humor to express their "intensity of feelings" about others (4U-W). He added that his partner used humor as an "alternative way to...say I am fed up with this world" (11U-W). Referring to another relationship, this second participant noted that he uses humor to expose his vulnerabilities and as a way of "affectively relating" to his partner (4U-H).

Humor helps us express personal or difficult issues safely because it invites others to respond while giving them an out if they do not. If our partners choose not to respond, they can save face by saying "it was only a joke" or "he/she was only kidding". By offering the opportunity for multiple interpretations, communication becomes less defensive. Thus, humor is often used in situations as a way of expressing difficult, personal, and ambiguous communications.

Creating Possibilities and Connections (71%)

Twenty partners spoke of humor helping to open the possibility of relationship. Humor was perceived as being "one of the vehicles by which people get related" (5W-U). Participants said that humor precipitated (6F-
S), helped create (18A-O), built, and enabled their relationships to continue and grow (18F-S; 18YY-XX).

Humor facilitates the possibility for relationship in many ways. Humor opens the door to relationships (12X-L). One participant described his relationship as a pool, with humor helping him to "just jump in" (6T-F). For other relationships that take a less intense approach, humor can be very facilitative early on, acting as an ice breaker (12T-S) and keeping some participants "from being mute with each other" (17ZZ-K). Humor was mentioned by five partners as being important from the very start of the relationship. One participant suggested that in his relationship "at the earliest stages, the sort of formative stages, the humor was very instrumental in helping to get much closer to her" (4O-D). Another said that humor was how his "relationship was founded" and that the relationship continues to build because their humor is so similar (6ZZ-X). This participant elaborated:

The humor...is the grounding of how I feel about the relationship...I mean, that is where we started...[and it] is still. I mean...[it runs] all the way through the whole [relationship] (18ZZ-X).

Another participant said she connected very early with how her partner "relies on humor....particularly in the group" (4F-T). The absence of humor early on was seen as hindering the development of a relationship (9O-Q).

Humor was perceived as "inviting" (5XX-YY), such as by inviting
people to get to know each other better (4H-I; 4M-L; 5Z-J). Humor was also mentioned as a way to explore the kind of relationship partners wanted to have with one another (13R-N).

Humor is often employed to attract one person to another. In some cases, a person may start by being attracted to another's humor and then feel attracted to the person. Persons may also be attracted to others when they see themselves as sharing a similar sense of humor. One participant said humor gave him and his partner "something to hold on to...something in common" (4ZZ-X). Another saw the similarities in how they relied on humor in relating to a common external group, noting that they "connected with that very early" and that "humor was actually part of what brought us together and made us enjoy each other" (4F-T).

Thirty three partners referred to humor as giving them ways of connecting and bonding either to a person or their thoughts. One person described this as a "sense that [my partner] is moving toward me and I am moving toward him, and there is a mutual connection there" (6F-S).

Several participants referred to humor as connecting through bridges and bridging. Humor was seen as "bridging the distance" (17B-A; 17J-K; 5K-ZZ) or "shortening the bridge" (5L-M, 12L-M) between partners. As one participant noted:

[Humor] is a way of beginning to bridge the distance between the two of us, the air between the two of us,
to show that we are there for each other (5K-ZZ).

Humor allows us to connect at a deep level. One participant, referring to one of her relationships, said, "it helps us connect at the soul level" (12L-X). Referring to her other relationship, she commented:

It gives me a different sense of depth...You can reach the depth without having to go through the heavy kind of conversation. There is a natural flow in it...that is deep without also...having to connect with people in deep conversation (12L-X).

Later, this same participant adds that the humor helps her to feel "connected as a whole person...As a whole. I think I am reaching the depth" (17L-X). In the same vein, another participant suggested that humor serves [as] a deeper connector [and that this]...deep connection...is real important to me in terms of being able to connect and to have expression. To have real expression (12M-YY).

The theme of connection was used in many different ways. Some participants talked specifically of how humor helped them stay "more connected when...[they] were talking about some heavy-duty stuff" (e.g., 5/6 O-D). One participant referred to humor as enabling her "to establish connection non-verbally at a distance" (12F-G). Others speak about humor being used to connect around something "present" for their partner (5L-X, also see 6D-O). Humor also facilitates connecting with different parts of ourselves and others. For example one participant used humor to connect through what she described as her "playful child" (19L-J).
Metaphors relevant to the theme of connecting were mentioned (e.g., 19J-L). One participant used the metaphor of oil and water in a can to describe the humor in one of his relationships (19ZZ-K). The surface where the oil and water touch is the connecting point; the humor is what mixes up the oil and water to create the connection.

Eight partners commented about humor as a way of engaging each other and being a way partners relate to each other. One participant gave an example of how he and his partner use humor in a relationship to engage one another and maintain the relationship:

I am saying, it is nice to see you, when we are getting together again. We will have lunch every now and then, and just tell jokes...without having to do business. It is just a way of saying, hey, we maintain a relationship with each other (17U-W).

Humor is a way of greeting each other (10U-W), of saying "how are you doing" (10Z-Y, 12Z-Y) or "I am here, you don't have to be so uptight" (11A-O), and therefore is "like a ritual greeting that...rekindles the relationship" (6A-O). It is "a way to...connect...very briefly" (100-A), sometimes "within the first twenty seconds" (13YY-XX). Humor helps us expedite connecting with others (120-A; 4L-M). As one participant put it, "[humor] expedites lots of things. The two minutes is sort of connecting and feeling connected, rather than having to schedule a two-hour dinner with each other" (13O-A). Humor's ability to help us connect quickly helps
explains why one participant suggested that humor "makes the relationship work, because we don't see each other much...[humor] is what keeps the relationship going" (17I-H).

This connecting aspect of humor was mentioned by eighteen partners who talked about the importance of humor initially in getting acquainted. One participant said he associated humor with when he and his partner first started to get to know each other (5X-L). Another commented that the people she laughs with or make jokes with are the people she gets to know well (13F-G).

Two participants, however, raised the possibility that humor may not always lead to getting to know each other better (4J-Z, 13J-Z; 4T-F). One participant gave the following metaphor:

It is like having a dog and the dog loves you and you love it. But the more you pat it, you feel good. But you don't necessarily get to know the dog better. Or the people around the dog (4T-F).

In addition to initially helping getting to know the other, humor also provides the opportunity to make contact by reestablishing connection after some period of time or after some disconnection. It enables us to stay connected even if we are having a hard time with something (6YY-M). One participant explains that humor has helped her to...establish and reestablish connection... [and] that is probably one of the biggest roles humor does play. That it has an ongoing effect of reminding us of the
connection of the things we share, or have shared, the experiences we have shared, the opinions we may share (6F-S).

One participant spoke of a time when he and his partner were not connecting because of a disagreement they were having. He said, "because of the humor, I was able to reconnect. Yes, [humor] ...brought us closer" (5ZZ-X). Another participant commented that, "both of us have used humor to create distance in the relationship. And then also to sort of reestablish...[the] closeness and move it further along" (4O-D). Still another participant spoke of the reconstructive role of humor: "[it is a] way of beginning to reestablish [and] build back our friendship" (10O-Q). Clearly humor-based connections "bring us closer and closer" (5L-J).

**Being Integral to Relationships** (50%)

For many participants, humor played a key role in the formation of their relationships. Eighteen partners commented directly or indirectly about humor being integral to their relationships. Nine partners, in describing humor as integral to their relationships, noted that humor is central, necessary, and ubiquitous. Partners noted that humor "has always been there"
(12A-B), humor is an "important part of what we share" (4F-S, also see 10S-F), and humor "has been the essence" of their relationship (5S-F). Other participants commented that humor is "part of the reason that our relationship exists" (4X-ZZ), or what "may be the biggest thing that connects us" (12F-T). One suggested that "some of the key events or ...things that have happened in our relationship have focused around humor (6A-B). This notion was reiterated by one other participant who said that humor "is...key in my relationship....It may be the biggest thing that connects us...the fact that we can laugh at most everything" (12F-T). Another participant said that so much of the relationship with her partner is humorous (4I-H), that it makes "the relationship work" (17I-H). For another, when she thinks about her partner, she thinks about humor (17K-ZZ).

In addition to being integral, two participants talked of humor's importance in maintaining their relationships and keeping them viable. Three participants described humor as the \textit{glue that keeps the relationship together}. One participant described humor as "the cement between the building blocks" in his relationship (6Y-G), noting that humor "probably cushions our position" (12Y-G), helping to "provide a transition [or] breathing space...[with] the"
mortar...tak[ing] some of the imperfections...out of those building blocks" (19Y-G).

Eleven partners spoke of the *drawing power* of humor. One participant referred to humor "usually [being] an attractor as opposed to something that pushes me away" (7A-O). Another participant put it as "she is pulling me as a whole...She is pulling me towards her" (12L-J). Encompassing this theme, another noted that humor "pulls us closer, or him closer to me or me closer to him. Yes. It does. It really does" (4Z-Y).

Several colorful metaphors emphasizing the drawing power of humor were given by participants. For example, one participant said that humor "is like a magnet, it pulls me more into a relationship" (18D-G). Another likened humor to a blanket under which two people draw closer to each other (19O-D). Another participant suggested that humor is akin to

> a very, very soft stuffed animal...it is very comfortable and loving, engaging, attracting. Safe, it pulls me in. Makes me want to touch her. Literally have this sensation of wanting to touch that, like I would with a soft teddy bear (19D-G).

Others alluded to humor's psychological attractiveness for partners. One participant said he was "looking forward to [the humor] and [was] happy to be involved in [the relationship]" (5P-R). Another participant remembered
"meetings where we were laughing so hard that tears were coming out. It just makes you want to be together" (6V-I). Another participant said that he and his partner keep getting together because they enjoy laughing together (8Z-Y), adding that humor is "one of the things that I really look forward to when we get...together" (13Z-Y).

One participant talked of this theme in both of his relationships. In one relationship, he suggested that humor "keeps us interested in one another, and things we are trying to do or accomplish" (12YY-M). In his other relationship, he talked more extensively about his partner's sense of humor:

He has a very active imagination. And quickly jumps into outrageous metaphors that capture things. And so it always draws me closer to him. I laugh a lot, at him and with him. At the things that he is calling attention to. I love the quickness of his laugh, when he finds something ironic, or ridiculous or funny or whatever (4YY-XX).

Later in the interview he continued on this theme, mentioning that humor "draws us to being together, and investing in each other. And wanting each other's presence" (17YY-XX). This was confirmed by another participant who said "if we had no humor, we would interact a lot less" (13U-W).

These comments indicate that humor plays a special role in forming and maintaining relationships and creating feelings of cohesiveness. At the extreme, for several participants humor is what made it possible for them to
have any relationship at all with their partners (18I-H; 40-A). One participant could not even imagine a relationship without humor (18D-O). Another commented that if he and his partner "did not even have the humor, I don't know what else we would have" (9ZZ-K) because, as he explains, they "don't have much else of substance to our relationship... [humor] is our relationship" (9ZZ-K). One participant said "If I do not connect with somebody on their sense of humor, I tend to not be friends with them" (40-A). Some other participants also acknowledged that humor is all they and their partners have in common (6J-Z; 17T-S), which gave them ways to continue to stay engaged in the relationship (13J-K; 17T-S; 13U-W). By allowing partners to maintain some relationship, humor thus proffers the possibility that these relationships may expand and deepen in other realms and at other times.

Summary

People engage in humor for its own sake and also to create the context for building interpersonal relationships. In this chapter, I have examined the role of humor in creating environments of fun and pleasure that are most conducive to developing genuine relationships. Within this, I have explored how humor helps to create environments characterized by (a) fun and enjoyment, (b) playfulness, (c) ease and comfort (d) lightness and
spontaneity, (e) energy, (f) space, and (g) a mixture of play and seriousness.

I have also explored in this chapter how humor creates opportunities for deeper personal contact through (a) opening the possibility of relationship, (b) being integral to forming and maintaining relationships, (c) creating connections, and (d) facilitating communication. A summary of these themes and their subthemes is presented in Table 3.

In the next chapter, we turn to exploring the process of developing and deepening relationships.
Table 3
Summary of Themes
Fun, Enjoyment and Playfulness: Making Contact on a Personal Level

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF FUN AND PLEASURE

Being Fun, Spontaneous and Playful (45, 78)%
Fun and enjoyment
Playfulness
Fluidity
Sense of freedom
Light and lighthearted
Lifting spirits
Increasing spontaneity

Facilitating Ease and Comfort (32, 55%)
Increasing comfort
Increasing ease
Facilitating the relationship
Minimizing status differences
Unfreezing

Creating Space for Relationships (21, 36%)
Creating and enlarging the space for relationships
Generosity of spirit, tolerance, and good humor
Giving permission to others to be fully present
Energizing relationships

Co-mingling Play and Seriousness (6, 10%)
Mixing humor/play and seriousness

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL CONTACT

Facilitating Communication (22, 38%)
Facilitating communication
Expressing ourselves
Creating Possibilities and Connections  (41, 71%)
Opening the possibility of relationship
Connecting and bonding
Engaging each other
Greeting each other
Becoming acquainted
Reestablishing connection

Being Integral to Relationships  (29, 50%)
Being integral
The glue that keeps the relationship together
Drawing Power of Humor

*Numbers in parentheses represent the total number and percentage of partners who referred to this theme.
Chapter 5

DEEPENING AND DEVELOPING THE RELATIONSHIP

To develop a relationship, we need to learn about and understand each other, build common ground, build caring and intimacy, and promote the growth of the relationship and each other. The essence of this chapter pertains to using humor to develop a solid foundation to interact with one another and deepen the relationship.

Overall, the data suggest that humor is an important part of discovering and bonding in relationships. Humor deepens, enhances and enriches our relationships through increased knowledge, commonality, intimacy, and cohesiveness with our partners. Humor makes a relationship "more important" (19YY-XX) and "much more of a relationship" (18X-L). It endows "richness" (13ZZ-K), enabling our relationships "to continue and to grow (18F-S)",

Below I examine the specific elements necessary for developing and deepening a relationship, and the role of humor in each of these elements.
DISCOVERING AND BUILDING COMMON GROUND

Once we establish the initial connection with another and seek to pursue a deepened relationship, we focus on knowing our partners in a deeper way. We attempt to learn more about the other, and help the other to discover the things that they like about us. We use humor in order to get to know each other better and to discover our general compatibility with each other. Humor also facilitates our present-time interactions, thereby allowing us to better understand the other and calibrate ourselves.

Humor helps us to establish and build common ground. Through seeing commonalities, life experiences, a common sense of humor, similar views and values, and a common sense of the absurdities of life, humor helps us to deepen our bonds with our partners and lessen the space between us.

Learning About and Understanding Each Other (69%)

Humor facilitates interaction and the process of learning about each other. To deepen the relationship, we seek to know more about the other. We also share things about ourselves that we want to have known or that we think other people will find attractive. Humor is an important way by which we can learn about each other.
One participant pointed out that humor is how her partner shares himself with her and others (13M-YY). Others concurred that humor helped get deeper into knowing each other (5F-G; 18J-L). Two metaphors were used to describe this aspect of humor: one participant (4Y-Z) said humor was like a window into the other's life while another described the humor in his relationship as a mirror "in that it helps us see the world as the other person sees it" (19O-Q).

Many participants noted how humor helps deepens our learning about each other. Through humor "a part of our true self is revealed" (7M-YY also see 11M-L), shedding light on our attitudes and perspectives (7M-YY), values (12T-S), basic assumptions (9M-YY), and positions on issues (18M-YY). One participant explained that humor is a "medium to communicate with one another, especially when we [do] not know each other as well" (13A-O). Others added that it is a way to open up a topic of conversation which later gets discussed seriously and more honestly (10F-T) and which may lead to further conversations (5M-L). Similarly, other participants noted that humor gives an "entre into talking about more personal things" (6A-B) by letting the other venture further into one's personal life (60-Q). In one case, a participant thought that the humorous moments he had shared in his relationship "led to...a deeper, sensitive, intimate exploration around each other" (13S-T).
Humor helps us learn more about each other by *seeing and showing multiple sides of each other*. Ten partners discussed this theme. Some participants talked about using humor to reveal sides of themselves to their partners (13A-B; 5J-L), including parts that have been "repressed or just not expressed" (5J-L). Others said that the humor helped them to see other sides of their partners (6J-Z; 4Q-C, 5Q-C; 4X-L). One participant noted that humor helped reveal unseen sides of both herself and her partner (5J-Z). Another specifically noted the importance to her of seeing the different sides of a person, including the serious, the personal, and the humorous (5M-YY).

Sometimes others may see sides of us through our use of humor that may be different from our general image (19T-S). For example, one participant talked about using humor in her relationship to show that she is a human being and is willing to joke and play (5K-ZZ) and be approachable (12K-ZZ). Another participant said that although her partner is often viewed as "very serious [and] no-nonsense", humor allows her partner to show herself more fully (12B-A). In explaining how her partner’s humor allows others to reveal their multiple selves, one participant commented:

> And part of it is that his humor oftentimes helps me and others...to know that we have many selves. And so the costumes might change. And today he is this kind of a jester. And tomorrow he is that kind of a clown. And the next day he is that. And we are a troupe. And we are troubadours. And...[that is] great.
I have a great appreciation for that whole role, if somebody can bring that. So it is like a changing scene. The costumes are always changing...because the humor is always renewing. We have got many, many [costumes]...because there are so many colors that need expression, and it seems like the humor bring[s] out the many different sides that need to be expressed in different ways. Humor is one of the ways that some of those selves get a chance for their fifteen minutes of glory (19M-YY).

Understanding each other in terms of what we think and feel, and communicating this understanding to the other, are important for deepening the relationship. Getting in touch with and testing out where each person is helps accomplish this. These aspects of the process of building a relationship are facilitated through the use of humor. Humor also allows partners to see the other's reactions to their behaviors, and to respond to these reactions.

Six partners commented that humor helps us to feel and show empathy for each other. For example, one participant commented that humor helped "bring more understanding of how each other felt" (5X-ZZ). Another noted that compassion and empathy result from humor use (18L-J). Three of these participants specifically referred to empathy when discussing the use of humor to build their relationships.

Humor is also used to communicate "a deeper level of understanding of one another" (6V-I; see also 12M-L; 5V-WW) and to acknowledge the other person's experience (6E-D). For example, humor is used to say "I
hear where you are coming from" (19Z-Y) or "I hear what you are saying" (5Y-G; also see 4X-ZZ). One participant suggested that humor allowed him to express to his partner that "I can hear what you are saying and I can empathize with the problems that you are facing" (4X-ZZ).

One participant explained "that every statement both has a content but it is also a statement on the relationship...I think the humor does communicate quickly the caring and sincere understanding of each other" (5V-WW). Another advised that it is important to "listen to what the other person is saying. Whether it be through humor...silence or...activity" (5K-ZZ).

Ten partners talked about humor as a way to get in touch with and test out where each other is in order to better understand the other. Specifically, humor was used to get in touch with partners and check on where partners are at or what they are thinking or feeling.

Several participants employed humor to test the waters before plunging too deeply into the relationship or a particular subject. Some participants used humor as a "process check" (6X-ZZ) for the relationship. As one participant commented, "how else do you know where you are in the relationship?" (4U-H). Others used humor to "test out" their partner's comfort with a sensitive issue before approaching them directly (e.g., 10H-U). For this, humor was used as a way to "approach" (11F-G) or "introduce"
(6X-L) something when one partner was not sure of what the other was thinking or feeling. For example, one participant commented, that "I think sometimes...[he] uses humor when he is not sure where I am at, as a way to approach me...So rather than take a chance...he says it in kind of a humorous way" (11F-G).

Humor is also a useful way to determine if partners in a relationship are in the "same place" (4B-A) and to "test out agreement" (6U-W). This latter participant noted that "humor acts as a meeting through which we can test our agreements around things [helping us] know...that we are on the same wavelength" (6U-W). This participant explained that humor is:

the fine tuning of the intensity, of our likes or dislikes for something...If I am being sarcastic towards somebody and [my partner] does not feel quite as negatively as I do, then he won't reinforce it. So [humor] is like a measuring rod. It is a way of saying hey, you are either get[ting] nastier...than we [need to be] or...don't do that...Instead of saying that, instead of saying I disagree...you communicate it through what you join in or not [with your humor] (6U-W).

Deepened understanding is also facilitated by humor as it offers a way to see each other's reactions. One participant said that she used humor to "see [her partner's] reaction. It is...fun to watch his reaction" (10L-X) and thought that her partner probably used humor to see her reaction (11L-X). Our partners' reactions confirm our existing insights or provide new evidence, furthering our understanding of them.
For instance, several participants spoke of telling or wanting to tell their partner something humorous because they knew or speculated their partner would enjoy or appreciate it (e.g., 6G-F; 5L-M; 8YY-M). Another participant commented that she thought her partner used humor "because he wants me to have fun. He knows I will enjoy it" (11YY-XX). Participants refer to being good audiences for their partners (4XX-YY) and to their partners being good audiences for them (5F-S).

Eleven partners commented about calibrating to each other’s sense of humor. Some of these talked about understanding their partner’s use of humor or the joint use of humor in the relationship (138-A; 130-A; 4U-W). This understanding often leads to calibrating to the other’s use of humor (4B-A; 6K-J; 5K-ZZ). For example, one participant realizing that her partner was more demonstrative than she was acknowledged that "in order for me to be with her, I have to adjust to that a little bit" (6K-J). This same participant noted the importance of listening "to what the other person is saying, whether it be through humor...and to be willing to meet them...on their level" (5K-ZZ). Later in the interview she went on to explain that she "realized early on, that if I was going to be with this man, I needed to find a way to communicate with him...So that meant that I was making a conscious choice to be with that [his] kind of humor (18K-ZZ). Some other participants talked of continuously calibrating to the different aspects of their partners'
humor, including "the senses of timing, the rhythm, the production of an engagement, the different kinds of humor, and the way it is expressed" (7S-F also see 13L-M).

Calibration includes limiting the humor used in a relationship on either an ongoing or one-time basis. For example, one participant explained that he and his partner each use only a limited range of humor in their relationship because their "other senses of humor don't overlap" (13O-A). Another participant gave an example of an incident when she used humor that made her partner uncomfortable. Here calibration consisted of her "working it a little bit...[and] he was able to re-engage in the humor and...to meet me again" (6K-ZZ).

Calibration also includes checking out whether the humor used is acceptable to the other and generally facilitative of the relationship. One participant noted "I think we kind of do check out with each other that it is okay, and how far we [can] go" (5F-G). This same participant went on to say that

the humor between us is mediated by the fact that we know we are going to let each other know if we go too far. Or if we go over the line or get too close to the line, to where it does become personal or uncomfortable, or something...That is trust building (6F-G).

Trust is an important element in humor use in that there is a certain amount of trust involved in believing that the other is at the same place
where one is at and will share their feelings if at a different place. One participant said that even if his partner "crossed the line... [he] probably...would not say anything because...[he] trust[s] where it is coming from" (11Z-Y). Another participant talked of "a comfort level that allows the two of...[them] to joke in that way" (5K-ZZ).

Over time, deeper understanding of the other changes how we interact humorously with each other. For example, one participant talked of how she may still use "cutting humor" with her partner but that now "I try to be there to make sure that the cutting edge is not standing alone" (4K-ZZ). Another participant contrasting how she would "want to pull back" when her partner used "cutting humor" earlier in their relationship, mentioned that now she just laughs it off, realizing that this is just where her partner "is at that moment [and] she will come out" (4B-A).

Knowing what we have in common is a major component of building cohesiveness and closeness in a relationship. As one participant commented,

Well I think it is almost as if two people are standing on the shore of...some kind of water, and you see the same point in the distance. And it is something that naturally would bring you together when you see or experience the same thing at the same moment. There is an affinity that develops around that particular mutuality" (5G-D).
Building Common Ground (66%)  

Thirty three partners referred to humor's role in helping us find our commonalities. Humor helps us to recognize commonalities (6K-J), common ground (6O-Q also see 5/6O-D; 6Z-J) common bonds (6X-ZZ), and "likeness of spirit" (4G-F), and to "get back that feeling of connectedness and commonality" (11O-D). It enables us to express commonly-held sentiments (12W-U) and to realize that we think alike (4G-F; 5G-D; 17S-T). One participant suggested that "there may be rules around our uses of humor that...help us stay focused on the commonality" (12O-D).

One way building common ground occurs is through sharing life experiences. Seven participants commented that humor was a way of sharing. For example, one participant summarized this theme by saying that humor is "sharing something with another person, a little bit of those warm fuzzys" (18O-A). Others noted that sharing brought them closer to their partners. One participant commented that humor "has an ongoing effect of reminding us of the connection of the things we share, or have shared, the experiences we have shared, the opinions we may share" (6F-G). Another echoed this thought, adding that "humor is a sharing of our lives, of our thoughts, of our emotions with each other" (6K-J).

Nine partners spoke about sharing a common sense of humor, referring to one another as "kindred spirit[s]" (10R-N). One participant said
that he did not realize they had so "many things in common...until humor became part of our relationship" (4X-L). Commonality in humor brings people together. As one participant suggested "it is the jokes that we share about our relationships that actually bring us together. Because it is something that we then share in common" (6Y-Z). Some participants said they liked to share funny things with each other (10YY-M; 11YY-M) while one participant acknowledged that he is glad when his partner is amused by what amuses himself (6P-R).

Fifteen partners talked about sharing a common sense of the absurdities of life. Participants described this as laughing "about the basic condition of human beings" (17W-U), being playful with "observations about the human condition" (6YY-XX), "taking a humorous perspective on a shared situation" (5P-R), laughing "about things that in fact, we care deeply about" (4D-G), and laughing "at the foibles of human beings, yours truly included" (17W-U). Others referred to sharing humor that is "based on the absurdity of the moment" (5G-D) or on "the natural absurdities of life" (6YY-XX; see also 9T-F) which leave us "feel[ing] the same confoundedness" (6YY-M). One partner talked of how he and his partner build off each other and become more and more absurd with their humor (4V-I).

Several metaphors pertinent to this theme were used. For example, one participant described the humor in her relationship as the I Love Lucy
episode where Lucy and Ethel were working on the chocolate assembly line:

You are going as fast as you can, you are trying to take it all in. You are trying to react, you are trying to respond, and you both notice at the same time, that it is futile and that you are not getting anywhere. So a lot of the laughing we do is just laughing. Just laughing at the absurdity, the sort of existential dilemma of being alive. And I see it as standing side-by-side with someone going as fast as you can, and eventually,...instead of getting angry, laughing (19F-T).

Another participant described the humor in his relationship as A Night at the Opera by the Marx brothers:

Life is comedy. It has got that quality to it... Life is a joke, or one of the ways of coping with life is to see that it is a joke (19U-W).

Sharing a common sense of absurdity gave one participant the sense that her humor was in sync with her partner's (5B-A) and that they do not have to say to the other, "Don't you get it?" (9B-A). The experience of a common sense of absurdity also led to enhanced feelings of endearment (4V-I; 4D-G), solidarity (5P-R), alliance (6XX-YY), closeness (5B-A; 5G-D; 5P-R), and building of the relationship (6XX-YY; 6YY-XX).

Nineteen partners talked about their enhanced commonality through having similar views and values. Humor helps us to compare our perspectives and beliefs with others. It helps reinforce that we are coming from the same place, particularly when others are different. As one participant said throughout her interview:
I think a lot of the humor that we share is kind of on a subtle level. And it... has to do with sharing opinions about people and the way the world is. And just sort of a... way of... reinforcing that we are coming from similar perspectives. And that we see the world in a similar way (4E-D)... It is... a way to communicate with each other about how we see things, sometimes see people. It just seems like so often what we are joking about is people who are different from us politically, or personality-wise (12E-D)... When we are joking about people who are different than us, we are affirming the way that we are (13E-D)... I think usually it is... a reality check-in... It is more about... sharing and reinforcing our similar perceptions of the world. You know, if I make a joke about something, if we see something differently... and [my partner] thinks it is funny too, then that tells me... [she] is [a] person who sees the way I do (17E-D).

This same participant commented that knowing she was among people who shared similar world views let her feel relaxed and comfortable, and not on guard (5E-D). She also used a metaphor that captured this theme:

[holding a glass ball my partner is saying:] look isn't this interesting, isn't this funny if you turn it this way. And maybe... I look and say, oh yeah, I see that. ... And [others may not see] that... [because] they are looking at things different from the way we do... It is... [only she and me] and sort of a void around us. [I have]... a very warm feeling about the image, it is sharing... I think, yes it is about us coming from a very similar place. Like... feeling that most people are not coming from that place, yet there [we] are (19E-D).

Other participants echoed these remarks, referring to humor around common views and values as endearing them to their partners (4L-J; 4P-R; 4Y-G), bringing them closer to their partners (5B-P; 5F-S; 5F-T; 5G-D; 5X-L;
5Z-Y), and building their relationships (60-A; 60-D; 6U-W; 6X-L).

Three participants used metaphors that pertained to this theme (e.g., 19E-D). One used a metaphor of a mirror to explain the humor in his relationship. He said, "it helps us see the world as the other person sees it...agreeing on this is what you are seeing [and] this is what I am seeing. Just a common definition of what is there" (19O-A). Another participant spoke of being in a "helicopter" or "hot-air balloon" and "being together in the distancing [from events in the world], and seeing [them] through a similar lens, from a similar perspective" (19F-G).

In addition to sharing similar views, several participants spoke of shared values and humor (5D-G; 5H-I; 4P-R; 5S-T; 5U-W, 6U-W) and using humor to acknowledge (5S-T) and affirm (5U-W, 6U-W, 12U-W) personal values. One partner, referring to a shared value base, commented that "it feels very comfortable.... [and] very safe" (11D-G):

What it feels like....is...because she and I, at a very deep level, share some values. That is part of what I talked about in terms of there almost being a shorthand. There are lots of things that are never said explicitly. That don't need to be said explicitly. And what I think...that lends itself to then is the ability, because there is a kind of safeness around some shared values, ...to really kid each other, and laugh about life....Because we know that we have got a sort of a common base of values, so we don't have to explain a lot of stuff....It is because I feel like we share at a very deep level some values. I never feel like I am on guard. And never feel like I am worried about being misunderstood. I seldom feel like I need to
check out what does she mean. Am I sure that she knows what I mean. So there is a very real sense of comfort. Which comes from knowing that we share some...values....I think we know we share some real important values (5D-G).

Thus, humor helps us understand, communicate and affirm each other's views and values. Seeing things in the same way or sharing certain values leads to affinity and rapport. We like people who are like us (6F-S).

BUILDING CARING AND INTIMACY

We seek relationships so that we are cared for and can care for others. Caring and intimacy differentiate between functional interactions and genuine interpersonal relationships. Humor allows us to build and show caring and intimacy in our relationships by providing support, building closeness and cohesiveness, uplifting the other's spirits, and confirming ourselves, our partners and our relationship.

Building Closeness (93%)

There is "a direct correlation between humor and closeness" (18F-G). Forty three partners talked about humor facilitating coming together, intimacy, and moving closer. Humor was seen to indicate (6F-G; 9V-WW), symbolize (4V-I), and communicate (6V-I) closeness. Humor also reminded partners of their closeness to each other (4F-G, 6F-G; 5H-U; 5YY-M).
As one participant suggested, humor is the "first indication of intimacy or a willingness to be able to go ahead, and put a little more depth into the relationship" (5W-U). Summarizing this theme, another participant explained that, "humor was very instrumental in helping to get much closer to [my partner and] in building the foundation of our friendship" (4O-D).

Humor's impact on intimacy in a relationship was described metaphorically as:

it is [like]...friendship in a elementary school. You have your favorite friend...[and] you go to school together, and you eat lunch together, and you share whatever food your mommy prepared for you. [It is]...a very natural, very relaxed... relationship (17L-X).

Participants talked concretely about the times when humor brought them closer to their partners (e.g., 13C-Q). One participant explained that humor:

allow[ed] us to come together around a topic that had a certain amount of tension related to it, but...[which] had also a deep importance to each of us, and to be able to laugh about it together (5F-G).

This same participant, referring to another relationship, continued to explain how humor helped:

We have been able to get quite close. Because when we get into intense situations or talk...about real personal stuff, there is a mix of humor in it. And I think that enables us to stay with the process.... The process stops if you do not feel engaged (6F-T)... [Humor] open[s] the conversation... which is an
example of how it brought us closer. And it has
increased honesty in the relationship (10F-T).

Some participants mentioned that humor brought them closer when they
recognized that they were together in a difficult situation (5K-J; 4M-L). For
example, one participant said:

Well my first reaction was, how can he joke at a time
like this. And second, I realized that that was...[his]
way of kind of putting his arm around me and holding
me close, so I would not be afraid. Which is more of
a heart thing to do, so he was using his humor in a
kind of loving head way...If it were the reverse, I
would have used a little humor and more physical
(literal) holding...His humor was his way of
symbolically holding me (5H-U).

"Joint recollections" of humorous incidents become part of our shared
history (5I-V). As we refer back to them and recount them to each other
(e.g., 5A-B) we remind ourselves of our common history and closeness. In
some cases, we develop humor "rituals" in which we continue to use humor
around a particular subject or have a gesture which reminds us of a whole
sequence of events (e.g., 5Y-Z). In other cases, something humorous may
happen that reminds us of similar moments we have shared in our past. As
one participant put it, humor:

recognizes...shared history, that the humor will
oftentimes be about...other times, or another incident,
and so it tends to connect us in a sort of longitudinal
way. That we see ourselves...living our lives side by
side, in a way, over time (4F-G).

Humor helps us feel closer on multiple levels. Participants gave
examples of non-verbal connections which resulted in bonding and intimate moments. Others expressed the sentiment that humor "brings us closer...physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually" (12F-S; also see 12ZZ-X; 5S-F). One participant explained:

So sometimes even in a playful moment, I feel like we are exchanging a lot of intimate things without really speaking about it. And our body language...is very playful too... I feel connected, my mind, ...my heart and my body. [The] humor makes me feel whole, integrated. Integrated because I am not fragmented. I am not just relating to him in my head mode, or just in feeling mode (6L-X).

Several examples of physical humor helping to bring partners closer were given (e.g., 5F-S; 5Y-Z). One participant commented that physical humor gives her and her male partner "a way to touch each other to be closer, in a way that is not always [otherwise] available" (13F-S). Another participant explained that "sometimes humor...voices...in a... gesture better than in an explanation" (18F-G). Another suggested that she felt closer to her partner after a humorous exchange "but it was also as a result of being embraced...I had to link the two... It could not be just the humorous interchange. There had to be some other show of endearment" (5J-Z).

Some limits or caveats were expressed by participants about this theme of moving closer. Some participants expressed ambivalence about whether humor brought them closer to their partner (12C-Q; 5W-U). Others noted that while humor may facilitate a certain amount of closeness, it also inhibits getting
closer (13A-O; 4J-Z; 5T-F). One participant thought that humor "keeps us a bit separate...Basically [with] regards to the superficial[ness] of it...It does not connect us in any other way than communication" (13ZZ-K). Another participant said that when she wants to be close and have a lot of honesty with her partner, she does not "cloud...it with humor" (5K-J).

Another theme that consistently emerged was that humor in relationships **endears the other**. Forty four partners talked of this theme. One reason for enhanced feelings of endearment is that we like people who make us laugh and who appreciate our own sense of humor (4YY-M also see 6D-G). We are endeared to others because we enjoy their humor (e.g. 4I-H; 4Q-0).

In referring to this theme, some participants specifically talked about the nature of the humor in their relationships. One participant said:

> there is a kind of loving quality to her humor...We...often laugh...about things that...we care deeply about. Some of which are not very happy things. But the spirit of it is one of good intent...It does not have a malicious quality to it. So it feels very safe (4D-G).

Another said that the humor shared in their relationship endears her partner more to her because "it is so lively...so visceral...so rambunctious, so it has got such a great quality to it" (4J-L).

One participant explained what most endears his partner to him:

> And the thing that endears me to someone now is whether or not they have warmth. Whether or not they express caring. Whether or not there is intimate
conversation. In other words, that they confide things. They acknowledge vulnerability. Those things are things that would tend to endear me more to an individual (SW-U).

Several exceptions emerged to this theme. Two partners said humor both endeared their partners to them and did not (40-D; 4T-F). One of these observed:

yes and no...Yes because it means I can relax around her... no...because to me humor is in and of itself, it is a thing that sits on the table. And to me, sometimes I feel like, say I am in a funny thing with...[her]. And we are jabbing back and forth. I guess the sense [is] that we are building the humor without necessarily building each other (4T-F).

Some other participants were just not sure if the humor in their relationships endeared their partners to them noting, however, that there was not much humor present in their relationship (4Q-C) or that they could not separate the humor from the total person (4W-U). One participant who was not clear whether humor endeared her partner to her, said that it does add depth to their relationship (41-V).

Another participant suggested that humor endears herself to her partner "but it only goes so far" (4K-J). This participant added that when she wants to really endear herself to her partner, she stops being humorous and becomes serious (4K-J). Two other partners said that early in the relationships humor endeared them to their partners, but that later it did not (4C-Q; 4O-Q). Another participant felt endeared by humor only when it was focused personally on
herself (4C-Q).

One participant was clear that his partner was less endearing to him because of his partner's humor "style and delivery...I think I know where...[he] is going before he has gotten four words out...because of delivery" (4T-S). This participant added that his partner was not funny when delivering a "packaged good" but is funny when he is spontaneous (4T-S).

In addition to bringing us closer and enhancing feelings of endearment, humor is also associated with positive feelings. Humor evokes feelings which make us feel more positive about our relationship and therefore more likely to pursue it. Twelve partners talked specifically about this theme. Humor helps bring a "very positive tone" to relationships (17P-B), particularly at early stages in the development of the relationship (18O-A). We feel "happy" (19V-I), and "pleasant" (17I-V). There is happiness in "seeing each other" (6V-I) and "being involved" with the other (5P-R). Humor helps us to "look forward to our interactions" (5P-R) and makes us "want to be together" (6V-I). One participant said humor facilitates "good feelings" for him (13M-YY; also see 17S-T) and "brings a great big sense of wellness in my life" (17M-YY). Another participant mentioned that humor reinforced his sense of competence (12T-F).

One participant explained that she and her partner smile and talk "in a humorous tone. And when she leaves, I feel good about her, because of the kind of person she is" (5I-H). This participant's other partner also talked
extensively about this theme:

And the humor comes out quicker. So I am not sure what comes first, the relationship or the humor...Part of it is just happiness in seeing each other. Kind of, with the heavy expectation that I am going to smile as a result of being in her presence and with her for a while. And I think that makes me happier, so we tend to see each other, and laugh and joke (6V-I).

Later in his interview he used the metaphor of a rainbow to describe the positive feelings aroused by the humor in his relationship.

I think it is multifaceted. I think there is a spring-like quality to it, in the sense of kind of "feel happy". Feel enriched. Feel that it is easy, the colors flow together in an easy way. There...[are] a lot of different kinds of humor...But it is like a prism. And...different facets of the light and colors...come forward. Pot of gold at the end of it...It is magical in the sense that the relationship is filled with inspiration. And that...colors bring... life (19V-I).

**Showing Support and Care** (48%)

Humor is a very effective way of *enacting and communicating support*, particularly in terms of providing "mutual help" (12U-H) and "mutual support" (13U-H), and "show[ing] that we are there for each other" (5K-ZZ). One partner said: "we were lucky to have each other to share space together and to have each other [as we were] going through [difficult] times" (5/6S-F). She added that their humor use resulted in "nurturing, validating experiences" that brought her closer to her partner (5S-F). In all, nineteen partners spoke of humor as providing support for the relationship. One participant even analogized the
support messages in her relationship as acting like "therapists" (13F-T).

Six partners described concrete situations when humor was used to give or get support or help from partners. One participant commented about using teasing to "desensitize...[and]...also provide a kind of support and guidance about how to proceed" (5H-U). Another participant described how her partner used humor "to help get the group behind her wish for me" (11V-I). One participant described how he used humor to give his partner the cue that he had a "need for some support in this situation" with the result that he felt "not quite as alone" (5X-ZZ). Another participant explained how their humor helped her partner in better "understanding [another] relationship" (5F-T) and reducing "the pain of what this [other] relationship was doing to him at the time" (5F-T).

Thirteen participants talked about humor as expressing care in their relationships. For example, participants noted that humor "turns up the caring, the compassion" (5YY-M), resulting in "a sense of...care for [the partner] in the sense...[of] his wholeness as a person" (5G-Y). One participant said that she realized that the people she laughs and jokes with are the ones she will "get to know well and care about" (13F-G).

Some participants noted that humor is a way to show we care about our partners (5G-Y; 10H-I). Several other participants realized that humor was a way for their partners to show that they care (5C-Q, 12C-Q; 4H-I; 11K-ZZ; 4V-WW). For example, one participant using the metaphor of "brotherly love" (19C-
Q), suggested that humor was her partner's "way of showing that he cared. Part of his way of listening" (5C-Q) and that the "end result was that I realized that he is concerned and caring" (12C-Q). Others echoed this sentiment, noting that humor leads to feeling cared for (6V-I; 6V-WW, 9V-WW). One participant talked of his partner's humor as maternal, a "mothering kind of humor" (12V-I).

Still others acknowledged that humor "lets both of us know that we care about one another" (12H-I; also see 12A-O; 12C-Q; 12O-Q; 12V-I). For example, one participant suggested that her partner's humor engenders both respect and caring (17M-L), while her partner saw herself as "more embraced" in their relationship, and commented "I see her more as...caring, and just being with me in [my] space" (19L-M).

Humor is sometimes useful in communicating care in awkward or difficult relationships. One participant suggested that she uses humor to say that she cares, but not in an intimate way:

I can be in a relationship with a guy, ... not an intimate relationship, but a personal relationship...I often have difficulty talking about the degree to which I care about the other person in other than intimate terms. So the way I reflect [care] then is in humor (10A-O).

In talking about another difficult relationship, the above participant's partner said:

I think [humor] also serves as a sort of safety net or life vest [that]...we are still here for each other and if there were sharks in the water, we would point each other out to the sharks. But we are still there in the water together, and holding each other's heads up. Yes...[we are] still here. We have retreated but we
have not run completely away (17O-Q).

**Affirming the Relationship** (52%)

The humor we share indicates the quality of our relationships. By the same token, we affirm each other and the relationship through our humor, by sharing a specialness, by expressing how we feel about each other and the relationship, and by reassuring each other that relationship is fine.

Eleven partners talked about humor being a sign of a healthy relationship, a sign of familiarity and friendship, and as *indicating the quality of the relationship*. For example, participants suggested humor is "a way of reflecting...where our relationship is at the moment" (19O-A), signals "the state of our relationship" (9V-WW), and "reflect[s] the change in the relationship" (18Q-C). One participant commented that the "variety of things...[we] can...poke fun at and laugh about is indicative of the depth of the friendship" (17G-F) and of the trust she and her partner have for each other (17G-F). Another stated that humor is the weathervane of his relationship, noting that, "it is a marker of the current quality of the relationship...When we are being humorous, we know that we are okay with each other" (18U-H).

One participant suggested that humor symbolizes "our knowledge of one another that maybe others don't have" (4V-I). Another participant confirmed this idea, noting that the way her partner used humor showed how much she really knew her (5L-J). Referring to humor being a gauge of the stage of development
of a relationship, one participant commented: "as we have gotten closer, we have started joking and talking about things that we did not talk about before. As the relationship has evolved, the humor has also evolved" (18Q-O).

Humor is often used to communicate that we care about the other. *Expressing to others that we have a relationship* and a certain degree of intimacy was mentioned by eleven partners. Participants expressed this theme as: "my humor...is my way of saying that I have a relationship with this person" (10H-I), and to signal feeling "real close to [my partner]" (10H-U). Humor "gives us a way to reaffirm the intimacy and to publicly acknowledge... the fact that we have a friendship" (12H-U also see 11Z-Y). Another participant commented that in her relationship "we want to present ourselves as so connected, so in tune, always in this wonderful affective state" (5B-P).

One participant explained how humor can be used to affirm the other (11K-J also see 13U-H, 18U-H) by "extend[ing] the relationship...it helps us get to...intimacy. It helps us get to an acknowledgement that we see each other" (13K-J). Other participants concurred, suggesting that humor is a way of "acknowledging each other,...or appreciation" (10M-L), and "it is a form of affirmation. It is a form of mutual support" (13U-H). One male participant suggested in his relationship with his female partner that humor is a way to express that admiration for each other without...actually coming out and saying I really admire you for this. Or I love you for this, or whatever. There is the recognition in being able to
sort of give each other an emotional hug without having us do it. (100-D).

In another mixed sex relationship, both partners talked about this theme. The female partner suggested that humor "gives...[them] a way to reaffirm the intimacy and to publicly acknowledge also the fact that [they] have a friendship" (12H-U). She added that sometimes when she is feeling close with her partner she uses humor because her partner might otherwise get embarrassed (10H-U). Her partner responded similarly, saying that he "would be humorous as opposed to giving her a hug or something like that" (9U-H).

Five partners talked about humor being used to reassure that the relationship is ok, particularly during difficult times. Humor affirms that although difficult things may happen in a relationship, it continues to be strong. For example, one participant observed that her partner used humor in a difficult interaction to "show that there was still that familiarity, that we still had a relationship" (11K-J). Another partner noted that humor "reaffirms the [relationship] if I have not seen [my partner] in a while" (18U-H).

In one relationship, after the two partners had had a misunderstanding, one used sexual humor (which was related to the misunderstanding) to "attempt....to say, it's over and done with and is not a general problem in our relationship" (10X-ZZ). Likewise, his partner realized that in making "a wise-ass comment" he was saying that this was a "one
time thing” and "a grudge was not going to be held”, allowing him to "feel more confident" in his relationship (5ZZ-X). This partner took their laughing together as an indication that the difficult situation was over, noting that they use humor "as almost a pacifier...a reuniter kind of thing. It is like, I am okay, you are okay" (5ZZ-X).

Humor is also used to reassure where the difficulties are more pervasive than temporary. One partner whose relationship was strained, said that he used humor to let his partner

in further...into my personal life...I think that is a way for us both to say, yes, we are still a part of each other's lives. It is a bit rocky, but we are still there, and will probably continue to stay there" (6O-Q).

Fourteen partners talked about humor explicitly or implicitly contributing to feelings of specialness about their relationships. As one participant expressed it, humor "reminds me of how special I am to [my partner] and how special he is to me. And it lets me convey that" (13H-U).

There are many ways by which we communicate others' specialness to us. We may share special things with our partners, such as side comments (4F-G), special phrases (4H-U), mutual glances (19XX-YY), a "shared belief in the eye" (12G-Y), or a special perspective (4P-R) or frustration (12Q-O).

One participant suggested interactions with her partner were like using a "code", indicating to each other and others a deep "knowing [of] each other" (6H-U). Another participant echoed this sentiment by suggesting that humor
brings them closer by showing "that we are paying attention to each other in a way that few people pay attention to one another...[and that] the humor works because it assumes so much prior knowledge and tacit understanding" (5V-I). Another suggested their nonverbal humor interactions have been like "this quicky little hug that he gives me, without it being a hug. And...that kind of hugging can be done and almost nobody will notice" (5Y-Z). One participant said her partner uses a nickname for her, which she interprets as "his way of saying hi...we are special with one another" (11H-U) and that this not only reminds her of how special she is to him, but also how special he is to her (13H-U).

Humor through non-verbal interactions with partners was mentioned by several participants. One partner observed that "our eyes can just meet, and we both just chuckle a second, and there is a feeling of being safe with someone...being able to establish connection non-verbally at a distance" (12F-G). Describing a nonverbal humor interaction, another partner commented that he felt he "knew...what she was thinking, and that is what made it so much fun. We were both in the same place, and it was like, oh my God" (5S-F). Another partner noted that he projected from the look in his partner's eyes and her mouth being in a certain position what she was thinking, and that that showed him that he and his partner "have this inside thing going on. Whether we do or not...it is fun to pretend we do" (10T-F).
Humor contributes to and facilitates interactional dynamics, increasing the possibility of growth-promoting relationships. Humor is an important reason we want our relationships to grow (17Z-J). It helps us and our relationships grow in multiple ways. Humor gives us a vehicle to talk about personal or difficult issues with our partners, issues which we may otherwise avoid or address in non-constructive ways. It grounds us in a present-time reality and encourages us to be our fullest, most human selves. It provides the opportunity to see ourselves and the situations we are in through our partners’ eyes. Humor enables us to grow by pushing our boundaries. It also allows us to be fully known and liked for who we are, promoting authenticity and honesty in our relationships.

Dealing with Difficult Issues and Boundaries (60%)

Thirty four partners commented on using humor to talk about personal or difficult issues. The essence of this theme is using humor to express things that otherwise may not be said (5X-L; 5Y-G; 13Z-Y) or that would be very difficult or uncomfortable to hear (12H-I; 12H-U; 6YY-XX; 5X-L; 5X-ZZ). This theme was brought out in a number of ways. One participant said humor "just ...makes it easier to talk" (17V-I). Another
commented that if there was something she would not want to say to her partner she would say it kiddingly (6D-O). One partner noted that they used humor "if it is about time for us to cross another boundary....and we can't do it" (17B-P). Another participant suggested "sometimes I think humor is a gateway into those things that we can only joke about, but are not yet ready to deal with. And if you stay with it, eventually those things come to the surface, and you can talk about them" (18J-L).

Humor helps "bring [difficult subjects] to public conversations" (13Z-Y) by providing an "entre into discussing something" (6A-B; see also 6X-L; 10F-T; 6YY-XX). It allows us explore new and uncharted territory (11B-P, 17B-P; 5Q-O, 13Q-O; 6X-ZZ), opening up a "path to a conversation" (5Z-Y) about things that cannot be talked about seriously (17B-P) or directly (A-B; 11O-A; 13Q-O; 5YY-XX) or which "we are uncomfortable saying" (6X-ZZ). It helps us give "voice" (19YY-XX), addressing and sharing subjects which are difficult (6I-V; 6O-D; 100-O-D; 13YY-XX), touchy (10E-D), sensitive (18U-H; 11X-ZZ), delicate (10X-ZZ), tough (6V-I), important (6D-O; 5F-G; 5V-I; 18YY-M) and serious personal issues (4H-U, 6H-U; 6X-L). This was summed up by one participant who said:

those things are not things that we normally talk about, they are kind of topics that are hard to approach, because they make your heart rate go up, and make you sweat and all of that kind of stuff...You can approach those kinds of issues with humor. And then, talk about them in more depth, once you have
sort of broached the topic with a little bit of humor. And, [my partner] and I do that a lot. As our relationship grows, you know, you move into new unchartered territory, and you can...take the first step with humor (13Q-O).

One partner said that he used humor "to get to something that is concerning" (10XX-YY) while his partner suggested that he used humor to talk about things that were troubling his partner (6YY-XX). One of these participants commented that humor made it "easier to talk about something that is worthy of more grave consideration" (12XX-YY). The subject matter participants talked about here included their relationship (6A-O) and their weaknesses and insecurities (4O-A).

Once a subject is broached with humor, we are more able to have a serious conversation. One participant commented that "if I talk about it jokingly...then I can talk about it more seriously" (18U-H). Another participant suggested that without the humor first, she was not sure they would have had a conversation (5K-ZZ).

Three participants mentioned humor and trust in the context of sharing about personal or difficult subjects. One participant said that humor led them to speak "openly about the relationship and the trust we had" and about the "meaning of the relationship" (6V-WW). Another participant talked of how trust was facilitated by using humor to help deal with the "tenderness of [the] moment" (6Z-Y). Another observed that comfort and trust were very
important in her relationship with her partner, noting that "a lot of times we know what the other one is thinking, even when we are not saying it" (18F-G).

One of the reasons conversations about personal and difficult issues are possible is that humor reduces the possibility of upsetting or hurting each other or the relationship (A-B; 13A-B; 5X-ZZ), or pressuring each other in some way (5F-G). As one of these participants put it, humor allows us to "let someone know what is on your mind without being really in their face about it or confrontational" (13X-ZZ). Humor makes things "more easily accepted...more easily received." (6X-L) by making the message for the receiver more gentle (4Y-Z) and "soften[ing] the moment" (11Y-G). Another participant explained how her use of humor affected her partner:

I was feeling that she was feeling tolerant, and accepting of [my humor], more so than she was when I did other things. When I might just say things like listen, I really want you to stay here in a real serious way. Which she might respond to more like a feeling of pressure. In this case, I think she responded [with] more feeling. [I felt] cared about and loved. And so I think in that way, it was really positive, a more positive way of conveying my desire to have her stay (5F-G).

Humor is often used in the feedback process. One participant described the use of humor to give feedback as a "gentler kind of feedback". Two participants talked about using humor to make a point or get through (6Q-C; 4Y-Z) to someone. One of these used the metaphor of an alarm

clock to describe the humor in his relationship (19Q-C) noting that humor is another way of saying "wake up" (6Q-C).

Humor also influences the receipt of feedback. One participant noted being hurt by feedback from her partner that is not related to humor (5Y-G). In contrast, another spoke of humor's incisive, even hurtful, truth: "even though I actually appreciate it when people make a point or give me feedback [with humor, it is]...bittersweet... there is still that little sting in the humor, that biting truth" (4Y-Z).

Three participants mentioned the role of humor in pushing each other's boundaries. One participant said that humor helps in "pushing each other or reinforcing certain behaviors" (12V-I). Another participant observed that she notices her partner pushing his own boundaries but "can also see that he is coming up against the walls. But I want to help him with that. Because if I can help him with that, it helps me with it also" (5K-ZZ). Therefore, she uses humor "to challenge him...push him or...stretch him a little bit" (5K-ZZ also see 6K-ZZ, 10K-ZZ) and "to get him thinking [and]... to push his boundaries" (10K-ZZ).

In another relationship humor was used by each person to "nudge" the other. One participant thought the other "was not...getting involved in...[a group]" (12F-T) and by her using humor she "put him on the spot of having to respond to [her comment], and come into the situation" (12F-T).
By pushing our boundaries we engage in *exploring new and different parts of ourselves and each other*. As one participant put it: "some of those things [we laughed about] have provoked [my partner] to inquire beyond" (10F-T). Humor helps "each other to face things in ourselves that are hard to look at" (17G-F). It is a way of engaging our insights as we get "deeper into knowing each other" (5F-G). Therefore, humor allows both the communication that supports the other, and the self-exploration that follows.

One participant described humor as emerging from "our own desire to understand ourselves, and to support and to be with each other" (6K-J). She continued by talking about her partner’s humor use as helping them grow:

> But what she is also doing with me, she knows my sensitivity around [a difficult issue], so she is also helping me look at that. So in a larger, more expansive way, she is helping me work that issue...So that the issue has opened up more fully...So it is a mutual area of using humor as a way to help each other grow (17K-J).

This same participant used a metaphor for the humor in the relationship of "a cutting edge" with regard to learning about herself and pushing her boundaries (19K-J). Her partner also recognized this theme in their relationship in her response:

> What it has made me aware of is that [my partner] has greater sensitivity around issues than I do. Which has caused me to be more introspective about my own sensitivities, so to speak (18J-K).
Other participants' responses add to understanding how humor helps us deepen learnings about ourselves. Some suggested that humor "has caused me to be more introspective about my own sensitivities" (18J-K) and "brings wisdom" (12M-L). One participant commented that humor helped her to "see myself a little better...or be a little more objective" (4C-Q). Another described the humor in her relationship as "a first hill on a roller coaster...It makes you look at parts of yourself, or come to face to face with some of your fears that you might not have dealt with if it had not been for humor" (19A-B). Still another participant suggested that humor helped her "to remember things about my life. Kind of a spin that my mind is going in, I forget certain things. And the trail that [my partner] is following helps me to pull back things" (7M-L).

Several participants pointed out that humor allowed them to gain perspective and to see things in different ways than they usually do. Humor is a way to get us "to think about [an issue] in another way" (5C-Q). It is "almost like taking a different lens...and that sometimes breaks...this heavy focus...on the negative" (10F-G). Sometimes humor hauls "the other one out and back into reality" (10ZZ-X). One participant commented that when he gets into a funk, the other will "tell me in a humorous way that my life is not all that horrible" (10YY-XX).

Another participant suggested that through humor she and her
partner can laugh at themselves (12M-YY). She described humor as a "shift" (17M-YY):

My attention in the shift is greater. More intensified. And what I see I like. It is like another kind of looking at things...It is kind of like the humor just creates a more interesting playing field (17M-YY).

In one relationship, a partner explained how humor brought him and his partner closer:

[we were] pushing the norms of the kind of places we both came from...the pattern is more of a transplanting or a transposing, or somehow, looking at some of the stuff that we are talking about from an even more outrageous standpoint or in a different context (5Z-Y).

**Being Fully Ourselves** (50%)

Relationships develop into deeper intimacy when we are fully present in our interactions, and allow others to fully see us. Eight partners spoke of humor helping them to be fully present in their relationships. For example, one of these partners said that humor facilitates putting herself "out there" (13A-B). Her partner confirmed this notion, saying that humor helps her partner be present:

...it is like I feel that that she allows herself to be herself with me, and I feel good about that. That she can trust and know that she can be herself with me (12B-A).

One participant described this theme in a way that highlights the
essence of "being present". She described the function of humor for herself:

> I feel like my body just surrendering [to] that moment, that wave that comes and goes...of the humor. So I am part of that interaction. I am not out of that interaction. I am not just watching that interaction but a part of it (12L-X).

Another participant noted that the effect of her partner's humor is that "it lets me know that she is there...[and that humor is one of the] signs that indicate that [she] is really present" (4M-L). This participant continued to describe this sense of being present, reflecting that

> It is something about [my partner's] humor, something about her way, where she has...a steadiness. And the steadiness indicates, I am...putting myself out here, but I am not going to withdraw. I am just...going to go out there, and I am going to stay with this. And then one of the other things that I see is that she really opens herself up (5M-L). It is like...there are a million things that you ought to be doing. Why are you here? Well, I am here. It is like it is not questioned (19M-L).

In a related vein, humor allows us to be our whole selves in our relationships. Eight partners spoke of this theme, referring to humor facilitating "other parts of ourselves to be present" (12R-N) and "be[ing] myself" (12O-A; 5R-P).

There seem to be two aspects - feeling connected, and showing other sides of ourselves - that facilitate our feeling more whole. One participant explained the former when she talked of

> [I] feel connected [in] my mind, like my heart and my
body...Humor makes me feel whole, integrated. Integrated because I am not fragmented. I am not just relating to [my partner] in my head mode, or just in feeling mode (6L-X).

Humor also gives us a "fuller picture" (5Z-J) of each other. For example, one participant suggested that "humor...reveals something very real" (5M-YY) and helps us to see the other "more as a human being in....wholeness" (5M-YY). Another participant talked more specifically about humor allowing "other parts of ourselves to be present (12R-N), sides that otherwise might be "denied voice" (6R-N). Another participant suggested that humor "brings out a different side of me that then allows me to use other skills when I am doing work" (13A-B).

One side of the self that humor seemed to stimulate for some participants was the inner child. As one participant explained about his relationship:

in...transactional analysis...adult-child and the circles that represent each, my child is very large...And I suspect that...[my partner's] child is very large. And often, I think both of us find that...we don't have a home...for such a large child image. So...really in many ways we create that home for each other (6S-F).

Another participant used the metaphors of "becoming like a child" through the use of humor (19L-X):

The humor leads me to free my feelings and emotions. And...in the process of freeing my emotions, and feelings...I interact much better with
people. That is the way I connect to people. And one way of freeing my emotions and my feelings is through humor, playfulness. Expression of your inner child (6L-X).

Several partners talked about the positive impacts of humor in allowing them to bring their whole person to the relationship. One participant pointed out that humor brought him closer to others "because I was able to be myself, and the other people were themselves" (6R-P). This participant felt that often large parts of him, "his human sides, are denied voice" but that humor allows him to reveal these parts (6R-N).

Another participant noted that humor has the impact of giving her the "opportunity to experience depth" (17L-X) through "lighten[ing] the depths...[a] natural way of being" (12L-X). She explained:

If I am connected as a whole person, I feel very light. Because I am very light, because I am connected, I do not have to think about, piece by piece, where I am at. As a whole, I think I am reaching the depth (17L-X).

Bringing our whole person into our relationships with humor adds humanness to our interactions. Five partners talked about this theme. For example, one participant suggested that a function of humor is to increase humanness (12R-N), explaining that he is using the word human "in a sense that...there is a naturalness where you and I have permission to be more of ourselves with each other" (17R-N). He added that humor makes interacting "a more human experience" and is "enhancing the relationship rather than
dehumanizing it" (5R-N).

One participant observed she became closer to her partner when she intentionally used humor to "show I am human" (5K-ZZ; see also 12K-ZZ). Another participant suggested that his humor helped his partner see the humanness in him (4U-H).

One participant described a time when his partner told a story that he could relate to as a human being. As he put it:

the story said a lot about human nature and I think that is why it brought us closer...I was alternating between poor...[him] and then poor...[me]" (5T-S). [His story] showed me he was human. It showed me that he fumbled and that he could laugh at himself. That was what was so funny about it. Not just that oh, I screwed up and feel sorry for me. But, he was laughing along with the rest of us (12T-S).

The more we are able to be "human" in our relationships, the more we are able to fully accept each other. Eight partners talked about humor contributing to **accepting each other**. As one participant put it, humor's consequence was for her to become "more compassionate and more understanding" of her partner (18L-J), and to "want to be with that person...with her journey" (18L-J).

In one relationship, both partners talked about feeling accepted by the other. One partner suggested that humor's effects were "being able to say what you want to say, and not feel in any way judged by it" (171-V) and knowing that her partner would still like and care about her (4I-V). Her
partner confirmed these feelings by acknowledging that "there is a sense of just real acceptance on both of our parts. For the whole person" (6V-I).

This partner felt "very accepted" (6V-I) even when the humor was at his expense.

Being considered normal is a way of feeling accepted. One participant said that "humor is like an indirect affirmation that I am normal" (4U-H). He explained how humor helps build his relationship, suggesting that periodically when he is troubled about something he and his partner will:

just yuck it up. I mean, it is like, here is someone who lives in [my] world, and who understands me, and we will laugh about it. And I feel wonderful when I do that. And it gives her a chance to affirm me. To let me know that I can still define myself, and she will accept that. Normalize my circumstance by agreeing with me that it is a difficult...to deal with and handle...And so it is comforting in that sense...someone is affirming (6U-H).

Growth in relationships is promoted by genuineness and authenticity.

Nine partners talked about humor facilitating authenticity in their relationships. For example, one observed that "greater authenticity occurs when there is more openness to humor" (18F-G).

Although humor may sometimes be used to mask genuineness, participants suggested that genuineness is often expressed through humor. For example, one participant, who said that her partner's genuineness "comes through the humor" (4D-O), explained the feeling around their humor
as "that is the way we are, that is the way you are, [and] I am" (4D-O).

Another partner expressed how her partner's humor signified authenticity:

[His humor] really makes me feel very, very good about just really where his heart is....Again, how he is making space for people to become ever more themselves...[His humor] does not have sharp edges to it. I do not think his humor is at...[others'] expense (5M-YY).

She continued to describe how this humor helped others become more authentic:

I began to see...[the] breadth of humor that this man offers the world. And offers me. And [how he] was able to take in a large variety of humor...in different circumstances. And then I began to even really appreciate when he...[said something outrageous]. And it is like, oh that was so great. I am so glad you did that. It just brought some new air in. It brought some fresh air in...It broke down some of the ways that we have to act to be okay...And...his humor [made] that...crumble. To be re-formed in new ways that are more authentic to people (4M-YY).

Others partners talked of the quality of authentic humor in their relationships. One participant observed that it was "nice to just let down your hair...stop the censorship, and just let [the humor] rip" (6T-F). Another talked of the times when humor brought him closer to his partner in terms of when they "genuinely and spontaneously" (5Q-C) laughed, noting that sometimes he got "swept away....[in] an ecstatic state" (5Q-C).

Within the theme of authenticity, two participants linked humor with being natural. One of these noted that "there is a naturalness where...[we]
have permission to be more of ourselves with each other...humor enables us to be genuine" (17R-N). Another participant tied her partner's "authenticity" (4D-E) and the "directness" of her humor (4D-E) with a "natural humility" (4D-E).

In conjunction with authenticity, four partners talked about humor and **honesty**. The essence of this theme, as expressed by one participant, is that she believes humor "has increased the honesty" in the relationship (13F-T) by "opening up the conversation" (10F-T). Another participant talked of the high level of honesty in her relationship and suggested that an advantage of humor is that

humor is a way of getting back, being honest...in a way that does not hurt each other or hurt the relationship. And that honesty has pretty [much] been mostly around our relationship, and not in a negative way (13A-B).

Many of the elements discussed in this section, particularly the themes of affirmation and acceptance, refer to **knowing and liking each other for who we are**. Seven partners talked explicitly about this theme as contributing to growth in their relationships. For example, one noted that humorous teasing is an affirmation that he and his partner fully saw each other (5YY-M). Another participant said that he felt most intimate with his partner when he had the feeling "of being known, and being liked for who I am" (5H-I). Another participant spoke of realizing "that if I actually acted
myself, there were people...who liked it" (6R-P).

**Summary**

We engage in a number of activities to enrich our interpersonal relationships and make them more fulfilling. We deepen our knowledge of each other through learning more about each other and attempting to understand each other more fully. We increase the area of common ground between us by exploring our commonalities in life experiences, values, views, and sense of humor. We build caring and intimacy in our relationships by providing support to our partners, building and communicating care, building closeness, and affirming each other and the relationship. We grow in our relationships when we deal with difficult issues, push each other’s boundaries, and are more fully ourselves in our relationships.

A summary of this chapter’s themes, highlighting the discovering and bonding elements of interpersonal relationships, is presented in Table 4.

In the next chapter, we specifically address gender dynamics in interpersonal relationships.
Table 4
Summary of Themes
Deepening and Developing the Relationship

DISCOVERING AND BUILDING COMMON GROUND

Learning About and Understanding Each Other  (40, 69%)*
Learning about each other
Seeing and showing multiple sides of each other
Feeling and showing empathy for each other
Getting in touch with and testing out where the other is
Seeing each other's reactions
Understanding and calibrating to each other

Building Common Ground  (38, 66%)
Sharing commonalities
Sharing life experiences
Sharing a common sense of humor
Sharing a common sense of the absurdities of life
Having similar views and values

BUILDING CARE AND INTIMACY

Building Closeness  (54, 93%)
Moving closer
Becoming endeared of the other
Having positive feelings

Showing Support and Care  (28, 48%)
Enacting and communicating support
Expressing care

Affirming the Relationship  (30, 52%)
Indicating the quality of the relationship
Expressing to others that we have a relationship
Reassuring that the relationship is ok
Recognizing specialness
PROMOTING GROWTH

Dealing with Difficult Issues and Boundaries (35, 60%)
Talking about personal or difficult issues
Building trust
Reducing the possibility of upsetting or hurting each other
Giving feedback
Pushing each other's boundaries
Exploring new and different parts of ourselves and the other
Gaining perspective

Being Fully Ourselves (29, 50%)
Being fully present
Being our whole selves
Being human
Accepting each other
Being authentic
Being honest
Knowing and liking each other for who we are

*Numbers in parentheses represent the total number and percentage of partners who referred to this theme.
Chapter 6

MANAGING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIPS

Humor helps make our interactions with others more fluid. As described earlier, humor facilitates managing psychological and interpersonal distance, allowing us to bring ourselves closer to others and to move ourselves further away, as necessary. In this way, we manage our boundaries with others.

We often feel the need to manage our relationships across sexual groups. Humor facilitates this managing process in multiple ways. For example, humor gives us a way of talking about topics that are hard to talk about directly. Humor allows us to open or begin a conversation about personal or difficult issues, providing us with options to subsequently explore these topics in myriad ways. Humor offers the opportunity to reveal and explore our attraction for another in ways that allow us to save face and affirm the ongoing relationship. It lets us explore the kind of relationships we have - to check out and play with the possibilities in ways that feel safe to us. Humor also helps us cope with high levels of intensity in a relationship.

In this chapter, I report about the use of humor by male and female participants to manage cross-sex and same-sex relationships. Participants were asked to compare the differences in the humor used in their
relationships (with male and female partners). If participants were interviewed about one male and one female partner, they compared the humor used in these relationships. If participants were interviewed about three relationships (one female and two male, or two female and one male) they did two comparisons, so that all pairs of male and female partners were compared. In four cases, comparisons were not possible since these participants were interviewed about only one relationship (participants C, E, W, XX). The responses of 11 female participants were used in this analysis, including five women responding about two comparisons (a total of 16 comparisons by female participants). The responses of 13 male participants were used, including one man responding about two comparisons (a total of 14 comparisons by male participants).

The themes below are reported in the following order: (1) female participants' use of humor with their male and female partners, (2) male participants' use of humor with their male and female partners, (3) female participants' use of humor to distance from their male and female partners, and (4) male participants' use of humor to distance from their male and female partners. The responses of participants for these analyses pertained specifically to interactions with their partners; hence these were grounded in concrete relationships. My intention was to try and avoid pulling for socially acceptable answers, preconceived biases (espoused theories), and
generalities that would be triggered by directly asking, for example, "how is
the humor different in your relationships with men and women".

Women's responses about how their humor differed in their
relationships with male and female partners

An important difference four women noted in their relationships with
male and female partners was that the humor used in their relationships with
male partners was often of a sexual nature while the humor in their
relationships with female partners was not (25%). Four participants speak
very directly to this theme. For example, one participant spoke of "the
sexual innuendo" in the humor with her male partner (22J - LZ). Another
female participant specifically mentioned this theme as:

[With my male partner there is] a lot of sexual humor,
comparatively speaking...With...[him] it is also usually
more sexualized. Our jokes, the content of them,
focus more around sexual issues. And it is not sexual
jokes, per se, but it is like double entendre kinds of
things (22H - UI).

While no exceptions were noted in this theme, occasionally, in the case
where the woman partner is a lesbian, sexuality was mentioned as:

...it is more sexual with...[my male partner]. I will say it
really is a lot more sexual with...[him]. And it is only
occasionally sexual... with...[my female partner]...like
when I teased her...and...made jokes...about how she
just invited me because she needed a date (22F -
SG).

Three of these female participants (although one of them in
comparing another relationship) and several additional female participants (a total of eight partners) noted that humor is lighter, more playful and frivolous with male partners and more serious and deep with female partners (50%).

There were three exceptions to this theme.

For example, one participant said:

With [my female partner]...there is a much higher level of consciousness as I am joking with her about shared values...It is like it is almost always present. And I mean, clearly...[my male partner] and I share a lot of values, but that it is not nearly as uppermost or conscious in my mind. So that is one reason...It is less playful actually with...[her]...With...[her] it really is more tied to shared values. It may also feel more like a release, for some really heavy things that we talk about... (22D - GO).

Another female participant echoed this sentiment, as follows:

My humor with...[my female partner] is deeper, heavier, less light. My humor is more light and probably more playful with...[my male partner]. However...[she] and I do have some playfulness...[However] it is...[generally about] a more serious issue. It is almost like satirizing, or taking the things that we are actually arguing and pushing them to more of a limit. And less just frivolous. And...[with him] it is more frivolous (22F-SG).

Speaking to the issue of a teasing relationship with her male partner, one participant noted:

And...[my female partner] I kind of have to look at the sword coming out, and wait for it to transform into a tickle feather. Because sometimes I am not sure if she is jabbing me a little bit or tickling me. And with...[my male partner] I don't even...concern myself
that there is even a jab there...With...[him] it is also, though, more personal teasing. [With her]...it is less of that (22H - UI).

Another female participant said:

[My male and female partners] expand my boundaries in different ways. With...[her], she expands my boundaries by allowing me to get in touch with some of my most serious intense sides. So if I automatically go towards humor, it is a defection on my part. It is a defense mechanism on my part. Whereas...[with him] the benefit that I get...is he shows me that it is okay to be...[me]. He shows me that it can actually be fine. You can have some jokes about it. And so therefore he also shows me it is okay for me to be who I am. And so...[he] really helps me out in that way. And his humor is...the way that he does that for me. So he expands my boundaries that way. [She]...shows...me that it is okay for me to be serious, emotional...And so it fits two very different needs that I have (22K - JZ/Z).

Similarity, still another participant noted the deeper relationship she had with her female partner than with her male partner:

[With my male partner it]...is more natural and much more free, and much more myself...It does not mean that the way I relate to...[my female partner] is not myself. ...With...[each of them] there is a different kind of safety. With...[her] I feel safe because she is a woman. And with...[him] there is another piece of safety because he is a man. It is so paradoxical, but there is a piece, I think well, that I can be safe in his way of being a man, and that will relax me. And with...[her] I can explore another type of humor because there is safety around her being a woman....She just gives you space. She is very in touch with you. That is the kind of person that I think she is. And with...[him] it is just being in a boat, and just rocking, let him be light (22L - XM).
Two other female participant echoed these same thoughts. One said:

Well, first of all, the depth and the scope of humor is directly proportional to the depth and the scope of the relationship. And with either of the relationship, the wider scope and also the more multiform are the purposes of the humor. So my relationship with...[my female partner] is much, much deeper. And therefore, it has many phases to it and many moods, and many textures. And I think my relationship with...[my male partner] is quite different (22G - FY).

Another noted:

There is something that, you know, that...[both my male and female partners] find funny in me...But with...[my female partner] we tend to speak more in depth, we relate in depth. Talks. Life in general. Our relationships, or work...It is not that with...[my male partner] I don't have an in depth relationship...I guess it is just a different context I guess (22L - JX).

There were some exceptions to this general theme. One female participant, for example, noted:

I don't think...[my female partner] and I use humor to release tension. I think the humor with...[her] is more generative humor....My humor with...[my male partner] is a different....They are not polar opposites, but...[he] is more somber...[She] and I are not. our relationship does not have a somber tone about it (22B-PA).

Another participant, in describing her male partner as her "best girlfriend" said:

Oh, it is much more intimate with...[my male partner] than with...[my female partner]. It is much freer, much more trusting... It is much warmer with...[him], it is more fun. I mean, these two are like contrasting day
and night, really, because they are just not
similar... My relationship with her is... completely
different. And I see her once every two or three
months, and then it is passing through or popping in
and saying hi or goodbye, you know. It is just not an
engagement of a relationship (22I - VH).

Another participant mentioned that the humor with her female partner was
more playful as follows:

Now with...[my female partner] it is much more
[playful]. I mean...[with her it] has got the playful
element....[With my male partner it] has got the sexual
innuendo, and the humor ...[is] a defens[e]...a way to
manage the boundary. As opposed to as a way to
bridge the boundary (22J - LZ).

In a similar vein as the above theme, two female participants went on
to note that with male partners humor tends to be unintentional and
spontaneous, while with female partners humor tends to be more intentional
(13%). There was one exception to this theme.

One participant said:

With...[my male partner]...[humor] is very
unintentional. With [my female partner] I think it is... at
least in the beginning... intentional...[With my male
partner it] is more natural and much more free, and I am
much more myself... It does not mean that the
way I relate to...[my female partner] is not myself (22L
-XM).

Another female participant, following this theme, noted:

Well...[with my male partner] ...first of all I feel much
freer. There is so much more allowed in our
relationship. And with [my female partner] it feels that
the] use of humor is more confining. So that in
comparison, one is expanding, the other is...converging...contracting (22J - ZK).

One participant noted the opposite pattern in her relationships:

Well...[there is] probably more cautio[n], more intentionality [in my relationship with my male partner]. It is relationship building for both, but it is done differently....My relationship with...[him] is much more evolutionary than my relationship with...[her]. My relationship with...[her] grows by leaps and bounds (22B-PA).

The spontaneous nature of humor with male partners may account for the observation by one female participant who noted in both her comparisons that with male partners there is a higher frequency of humor and the humor is more "active" than with female partners (22D-OE; 22D-GO). As she put it: "There is probably actually less humor [with my female partner]...[and] less frequency" (22D-GO). This participant continued on:

I have never thought about this before, but it was interesting when you asked me the metaphor question. The difference that I was really aware of in the two metaphors, is that with...[my male partner] it is a more...[but] certainly not aggressive at all. But it is more active. Which is not to say that...[my female partner] and I don't laugh hard. We can laugh really hard, but it feels more gentle. With...[my male partner] it feels more active: [like]...splashing each other (22D -OE).

Three participants focused on female participants using humor to manage their relationships (i.e., managing tension and boundaries) with male partners while using humor to build their relationships with female
partners (19%). One participant expressed this theme as:

I think...[my male partner] and I both use humor as a way of managing the distant[ce] between the two of us. And I think there...[has] always been a sense that we need to keep a distance. I think that when it comes right down to it, he and I have an attraction to one another, and have never felt that we could act on that. And we use humor as a way of managing that. [I use it to get closer at some times, but then I move away when he gets too close.]...That may change now that he is in a [romantic] relationship, we will see... But certainly, it is used as a management technique, more than as a relationship builder.

...[With my female partner humor is more of a way just to continue to build the relationship.] And I think we have built on it...We build our relationship on...[humor] (22A-OB).

This same idea was also clearly conveyed by this participant's female partner:

[My female partner] and I use...humor to kind of cope with the external environment. Yes, because we are fine together, because we are up against the world. Now...[my male partner] and I, have to deal with our relationship because of...[other] factors like: what is this relationship, the sex part that never gets talked about...(22B - PA).

Following the pattern of the earlier themes, four women explicitly noted that with male partners, humor is often about observed events, whereas with female partners humor is often about commonalities, shared values, and shared experiences (25%) There was one exception to this theme.

For example, one participant said:
With...[my female partner] there is...a much higher level of consciousness as I am joking with her about shared values....It is like it is almost always present. And I mean, clearly [my male partner] and I share a lot of values, but that it is not nearly as uppermost or conscious in my mind....With...[my female partner] it really is more tied to shared values. It may also feel more like a release, for some really heavy things that we talk about... (22D - GO).

Another participant, generalizing this theme, said:

It is also different because it is cross-gender...Well, I think within gender groups, the commonality of experience is such that it allows a wider menu of topical areas to find humor and to use humor around. I don't share all of those same areas with someone from the opposite sex. And so even though I consider myself to be bi-cultural in both the female world and the male world... I am less well-versed in...[a] male gender culture. But more importantly, men are less comfortable with me in their gender realm. And there are certain things that you are not supposed to talk too much about. You...are not really allowed to poke fun at that quite as easily. Whereas in the sensitive of areas within your own gender group, if you have a closer relationship, you can poke fun at people more readily (22G - FY).

In another comparison this participant similarly noted:

Well first of all, there is a gender difference. There is an...unspoken lift into reality when...humor is shared within the same gender...There is an unspoken consensus that humor, particularly contextual humor, springs out of. That one does not have to explain...it is sort of like...water flowing from the same source. And I think with...[my male partner], being that he is an opposite gender, you have to work a little bit more to...create common ground on a certain level, rather than implicitly working with it without thinking about it in the same gender. So that would be one big
difference. [With my female partner it is like it is flowing from a common source]. And with...[my male partner] the water is flowing from different tributaries, and you have to work to braid it together, which means you have to use a little more words, because what I would say to [my female partner] she would get immediately. Whereas with...[my male partner] you need to put more words around it because he does not come from the same context. It is not a shared context....I think the humor with...[him] is a little more concrete than it is with...[her]. I really, really appreciate...[his] good sense of humor...[he] is also more thoughtful. And it may be personality, but I think it is also a gender [issue]. Sometimes he would not get something right away, or I would not get it right away. We would have to sort of work a little bit more at that. And that could be the gender difference...(22G - DY).

In support of this general theme, this participant's female partner voiced that she had a greater sense of personal connection with her female partner than with her male partner:

There is a difference, and the difference has to do with differences in my relationship. With...[my male partner], I feel like it is a crazy thing to say, but I feel sort of a sense of being a little wiser, a little more experienced. And I think he defers to that a bit. With...[my female partner] it is a completely peer relationship....It is less an age thing...[but] it may have to do with gender...There is a...difference:...[with my female partner] it feels like there is a common experience deeply within that we are sharing. Whereas with...[my male partner] it feels like there is something common that we are seeing similarly, and reacting to in a similar way...[With my male partner] we react...to it similarly, but there is less of a feeling like there is some connection that is internal. And I would have to say that there may be exceptions, of course...The humor...[my female partner] and I share
is often more personal. And that is probably the biggest difference. The humor that...[my male partner] and I share is sometimes personal, and oftentimes not. Where [as] the opposite is true with...[her] there is more often personal [connection]. And...[we are] less likely to have...a laugh about someone across the room doing something funny (22F - TG).

Interestingly, even though one female participant described a more intimate relationship with her male partner than her female partner, she referred to this male partner as her "best girlfriend":

I think the trust factor works with...[my male partner]. It is the] best girlfriend factor, the seeing him everyday....it is much more intimate with...[him] than with...[my female partner]. It is much freer, much more trusting...These two [relationships] are like contrasting day and night, really, because they are just not similar....My relationship with her is...completely different (22I - VH).

**Men's responses about how their humor differed in their relationships with male and female partners**

Five male partners supported the theme that with male partners humor tends to be about external things whereas with female partners humor tends to be about the relationship or things that have significance to the internal system (36%). One participant spoke about these differences as:

I think... men and women do joke differently with each other, and their relationships are very different. I think...me and...[my male partner] tend to joke about things out there that we can both agree on. [One of
my female partners]...and I especially, and...[my other female partner] and I on some levels, joke about stuff between us. Even though it may be outside stuff, it is still stuff that is within the domain of our friendship. And therefore is a part of us. And it is a way of us staying a part of each other (22O-AQ).

Echoing these comments, another male participant said:

I would say there is more direct affect involved...in the humor [with my female partner]. I think it is used to communicate my admiration of...[her] and vice versa, more directly than with...[my male partner]. Because I think there is actually...strong...[affect] in...[him] but being men, we don't express it that way...I think a lot more...of...[my female partner's] and my humor...is based on mutual maintenance and support, and mutual affirmation. And maybe those are the same things that are happening in my relationship with...[my male partner] but we tend to point it toward a third party. And there is a more aggressive component to that third party. There is more negative humor, on balance, than with...[her] (22U-H/W).

Another male participant noted:

And...with...[one of my female partners we talk about the] parts of our relationship. The parts that go well, the parts that don't go well. Things we will mention, things we don't want to mention (22O-DQ).

Another participant noted the differences in his relationship with a male and female partner as:

Well I think with...[my male partner] the humor is a lot more to stir things up, rile things up. Get the energy flowing. Prepare the ground for a debate. Or open the door into some insight. And I think with...[my female partner ] her humor is much more caring for each other. Almost...maternal. I feel...that way towards...[her] and...[she feels] towards me. That is a
maternal instinct...And vice versa, you know, the communication with humor is one of attending to the other person (22V - IWW).

Two male partners suggested that with female partners humor’s role is to manage tension about differences, while with male partners there is more perspective taking and creating common meaning from humor use (22O-AQ; 22P-BR). One participant said that:

Well with...[my female partner] I think it is much more on managing the tension. And with....[my male partner] it is more on this sort of perspective taking and creating common meaning to maintain a solidarity of the relationship. That is pretty precise, actually....Well just what I was saying before, [with my female partner it is]...kind of like communicating about difficult subjects, helping to do that...Try[ing] to talk about diversity, you know [about] our own differences (22P - BR).

Another male participant described the use of humor in his discussion with his male partner as: "I think men, me and...[my male partner] tend to joke about things out there that we can both agree on" (22O -AQ).

Three male participants suggested that with male partners there is greater use of stereotypical humor than with female partners (21%). One participant explicitly defined the humor with his male partners as "male oriented" (22Y-ZG). Another male participant mentioned that with his male partner, "there is the element of me...[sort] of lapsing into the stereotypical male humor again. I hate using those words...[but] there is [that] element of it" (22O-AQ). Another participant, referring to male type of humor, said:
And...[my female] and I don't do acts...[My male partner] and I will do Abbot and Costello. We will do who's on first kind of stuff...I will do that with...[him] but I will never do that with...[her].. (22U - H/W).

Three male participants suggested that with male partners humor is 
more playful, spontaneous and joyful while with female partners humor is 
more intentional and deep (21%). There were three exceptions to this theme.

One participant expressed this theme as:

Well, my humor with...[my male partner] is by and large more joyful, more spontaneous. It brings...[him] and I together. It is full and it is hearty. My humor with...[my female partner] tends to be more calculated. More trying to help...[her] in some way. More forced (22Q - OC).

Another male participant noted:

With...[my male partner] nothing is off-limits, really. It is a very well-established part of our relationship. With...[my female partner] the humor is there, and it is a predominant aspect of our relationship. But...it is not the basis of our relationship as much. It becomes much more like a mean[s] [to have the relationship] (22X - ZZ/L).

Still another male participant said:

With...[my male partner] one of us will say something funny. The other will build on that funniness, and then it will reach the other. And so we keep it going for cycle after cycle...There is something mysterious in how...[he] and I do that. Which tells us, okay, that we have done that long enough now let's talk about what is really under it. Or if we have been talking seriously about something, I will give time for us to laugh about
it. It is...magic. And I don't know if I even want to understand, because I want it to work in an unselfconscious way. But it is wonderful, I am aware that there is something around that (22YY - M/XX).

This same participant continued to explain the differences in the humor in his two relationships as:

I think my humor is a tad more cautious around...[my female partner] than it is around...[my male partner]. Certainly isn't at all around...[him]. And I don't think of it very much around...[her]. That would be...[the] comparison (22YY - M/XX).

This theme of greater playfulness and spontaneity with male partners may have prompted one participant to suggest that there is a higher frequency of humor with male partners than with female partners [22Y-ZG].

As he put it:

Well there is just a greater volume of humor with [my male partner]. ...And it is, as I described it in the metaphor before, it is actually one of the building blocks. Whereas with...[my female partner]...there is less of it. But it is hard to say that you need it any less. The mortar in the building is just as important as the building blocks themselves. And so, even though it serves a different function, it does not serve a lesser function in that way (22Y - ZG).

However, in contrast with this above participant, another male participant said that the humor with his female partner was more frequent (22R - PN).

Exceptions to the general theme that humor with male partners was more playful and spontaneous than with female partners emerged as follows. Two male participants suggested that with male partners humor is
deeper and heavier, whereas with female partners humor is more light (22S-FT; 22R - PN). One of these participants highlighted the differences as:

Well you know...with...[my male partner] we really got into some very deep stuff. And so there has probably been more contrast between light and heavy" (22S - FT).

Another male participant noted that:

I think that although both are playful, ...[with my female partner it] is probably consistently more playful. Where[as] the times with him, there...[is] this regal quality to it. So I am more likely to laugh in interactions with....[my female partner] I am more likely to [just] smile [with my male partner] (22R - PN).

Another male participant held that his relationship with a female partner was more spontaneous: "there is...more...ease with....[my female partner] on that dimension, on being spontaneously humorous" (22U - H/W).

Four male partners mentioned that with female partners there is more mutuality and personal connection in the humor than with male partners (29%). There was one exception to this theme.

One participant said:

Oh with...[my female partner] there is a much easier flow to the humor...It is more work with...[with my male partner]...The pace of...[my female partner's] life and my life, we don't see each other a whole lot [but we] are able to use humor as sort of a way to make sure that we are connected across time (22O -AQ).

This same participant, contrasting another pair of relationships, said:

I think it would be the exact same way that I just
described it with...[my other female partner] only exponentially more....There seems to be more mutuality between [us] with my humor with...[my female partner]...than there is with....[my male partner] I mean, once again, we are talking about the heart of our relationship (22O - DQ).

An exception to this theme was one participant's comment that:

The humor with...[my male partner] fosters the development [of our relationship]. It is a tie that binds us emotionally and fosters our emotional development. With...[my female partner] it is just a filler...With...[her] it fills the gap that if it were not there, there would be very little else there. With...[my male partner] if it were not there, if for some reason...[he] lost his sense of humor,....we would be okay....[He] and I understand each other much more. We know each other much better. There is, besides knowledge, there is also, you know, for lack of a better word, there is a great deal of love between us I think. I do not have that with...[my female partner]. And it is because of humor, again that I think that...[he] and I have that kind of relationship that it pulls us together (22ZZ - XK).

**Women's responses about their use of humor to distance from male and female partners**

Six female participants mentioned that they did not use humor to distance from either male and female partners (38%). For example, one participant noted that:
I would just say [that I needed to distance myself]. I would not have to use humor. I would not use humor as a mediator. I would be able to approach her directly and sort of say it. And I think I would probably do the same thing with...[my male partner]. Primarily because I value him a lot, and I trust him enough. But more importantly, you know, I am learning to trust myself enough to be direct about it...I have been experimenting a lot lately with trying to be more direct. So I think partly that is a factor in this. I would be more willing, of my own volition and intention, to be direct with both (23G - FY).

Another participant denied ever using humor to distance herself even momentarily from her partner (23D-OE). Similarly, another woman said:

I probably would not use humor...I would really say, you know, I have got this stuff I have to do....With both of them (23I - VH).

Explaining in detail why she believed she never used humor to distance herself, another participant commented:

It would never be my conscious choice to use humor to distance myself from anyone. Unless I was so, no, I can't even say that...Because what I was going to say, unless I was so absolutely...[superficial] with that person, that all I could do was joke. But even at that place...[I] would stop myself. Even in that place, if I am so incredibly mad at you, that all I could think of to do was joke. If I wanted to be really true to myself, I am going to tell you that I am...[angry] with you. And have that dialogue. So I cannot imagine any time when I would choose. And I mean this. I don't know if you noticed, but I feel really strongly about that....I would never, because for me, if there is a reason why I don't want to talk to you. If there is a reason why, I need to distance myself
from you....it is important for me to tell you. Now of course, I am making the assumption in your question that the only reason why I would want to distance myself from you is because I am mad at you...[I realize] that I may need to distance myself from you because I just need some time....But even there...it would be important for me to tell you that it is not because you did not brush your teeth this morning that I don't have time for you right now. It is important for me, even then, to attend to the relationship to tell you, you know, that I need my time....In a way I feel...[strongly about] direct honest communication. Not to say humor does not include that (23K - JIZZ).

Five female participants noted that they were *more likely to use humor to distance from male partners than from female partners* (31%).

One participant generally supported this theme as follows:

I would not...[use humor to distance] with [my female partner]. First off, because I could never get away with it. And because she would immediately call me on it, which I think is really good. And also it would really hurt her, because I have never done it. So I would find another way. I don't know what that way would be, but... With [with male partner] I may use a little more of that kind of humor with him. It is possible that I do that. You know, it is boundary setting in some way for me...I would say...[this about] men (23G - YD).

However, when speaking specifically about her male partner, and not about men in general, this same participant said:

But with...[my male partner] I am not sure. [He]...and I went through so much together this last semester that it is amazing that both of us are still talking. But I don't think I would...[use humor to distance myself] with...[him] either, because I would hurt him. He is so
sensitive....[But] I might though. I think I might do it [though not] intentionally....I think if I did not think about it, I could use it as a defense mechanism at times with...[him] Although, thinking about this last semester, I was very direct (23G - YD).

Another participant noted:

It is interesting. I would not use humor with...[my female partner]. I would tell her what I needed, and then step out of it. With...[my male partner] I am not sure, I may use humor. I could see...possibly using humor to distance myself from him...It seems like that would be a way of communicating with him. Because that is...the basis of our relationship (23J - ZK).

This same participant contrasting two other partners, said:

I would not use humor with...[my female partner] because that seems to be in direct antithesis of our relationship. But with...[my male partner] I could easily do that, and that would be fine (23J - ZL).

While one participant emphasized, "I think with...[my female partner]...I will talk to her. Very gently but seriously. But with...[my male partner] I think I will mix humor in the seriousness." (23L - XM), another participant said, "It would be probably more frivolous, jovial with...[my male partner] and softer with...[my female partner]" (23D - GO).

An exception to this theme emerged when one female participant suggested that she used lighter humor when distancing from female partners and more serious humor when distancing from male partners:

I could use humor with...[my female partner]...and I can say that in a humorous fashion...For...[my male partner], I would use...[humor], but it would have a
much more serious tone....I think I need to take a break, you know. Can we take a break? And then we will laugh, but it is a different. You see there is a seriousness, it is much more somber with...[him]....I think I could use humor to take a break with...[her] and not think about it. Like what I need to do. But to use it with...[him] to take a break, I would have to think about it. I would have to have some intentionality (23B - PA).

The theme that distancing humor was more explicit or direct with male partners than with female partners (19%) was brought up by three participants. There was one exception. One participant summarized this theme as:

If I needed to distance myself, would I use humor? Probably, because I also use humor when I am uncomfortable. How would I do it? [With my male and female partners it]...would be a little different. Hard to say, I am thinking...[With my male partner]...I would use the humor, but it would be more explicit that I was distancing. And with [my female partner]...I would use the humor, and let the humor hopefully, convey the message that I am distancing... (23H-UI).

Another participant, stating this theme in terms of using more contextual humor with female partners said:

With...[my male partner it] probably would be a joke about him, something said to him personally. And with her, it probably would be more contextual, not a joke, but some kind of humor that would have to do with what we are working on (23A - OB).

One participant was an exception to this theme when she suggested that she would probably use direct humor with her female partner (23G-YD).
Another theme was expressed by three women who were concerned about being *softer and more gentle with female partners* (19%). As one participant put it:

I think I would [use humor with both of them. I would do it differently]...With...[my female partner], I will use more gentle humor. With...[my male partner] I would use humor, but I think I can be more direct (23L - XJ).

Two female partners saw *no difference in their humor use in distancing from male and female partners* (13%). For example, one participant suggested:

I might use humor with either one of them. And I might not...But I don't feel like I need to. I felt like if I need space, I have done it with both of them, just said, I just need some space....I don't feel like getting together, or I don't feel like talking or whatever. And I also might equally use it. I would not use humor because...it would make...saying it easier with these two people, with either of them. I might use it because I think humorously sometimes. Because I might just say something that is kind of funny about it....I think I have probably with both of them. It would be saying things like, back off, and then laughing (23F - TG).

She continued on this theme when comparing her other relationship:

I don't think I am that aware of doing this [using humor to distance] although I imagine I do it. And probably the way I do it would be saying things like get out of my face in a humorous way. And I guess I might actually do that with just about anybody, if I really needed to get them out of my face. But I also may say that to people...[but without] humor. So the humor would be with people who I think I might want to get...[into their] face[s] later. And without humor
[would be] the ones...[with whom] I am willing to risk the relationship...I would like to repeat that if I think I want to get in their face later, I am more likely to soften the response through humor. And so I guess that it actually is a sign of endearment...to the people that I actually do that....(23F - SG).

Men's responses about their use of humor to distance from male and female partners

Five male partners suggested that they do not use humor to distance from male or female partners (36%). Some comments included: "No. I would try not to" (23R - PN) and "I think with...neither one of them would I use humor" (23T - FS). Basically, one male participant summed up this sentiment when he said: "If I needed emotional distance from these people,...I don't think I would use humor in either case" (23Q - OC).

Three participants suggested that they use humor to distance with male partners but not with female partners (21%). There were two exceptions to this theme. For example, one participant said:

I know I have [used humor to distance] with...[my male partner]. I don't think I would with...[my female partner]. Well, I think if I needed to with...[my male partner] if I needed to step back, I probably would use humor, although I am not necessarily sure it is the best way. I think in a real time situation, it is probably the one that I would use. [I would not use humor with her] because I think there is enough other stuff in our relationship...that being more direct about it or more open about it would be clearer, and less likely to be misperceived (X - ZZ/L).

Another male participant following this theme noted that:
I would probably not with...[my female partner]. I would probably take the initial [step], just sort of creating the distance, because we are not with each other on a daily basis. If...[she] said, you know, it feels like you are pulling away, I would respond yeah, I just need some space. And I would use the humor to sort of rebuild the relationship later (23O - AQ).

One male participant suggested: "humor would be a great way for me to...[distance myself] and for...[him and I] to do that, and a little less for...[my female partner] to do that" (23YY - MXX).

An exception to this theme emerged when one participant said:

I probably would joke a little bit with...[my female partner] about needing some distance, so she just sort of knew what I was doing, and then later we would probably talk about it to make sure we were okay, and then use humor to rebuild it again...[I would not do that with my male partner.] If I just needed some slight distance, I might tone it down a little bit. Just as I tone it up to sometimes to build a better connection. If I needed any significant distance, I probably would not do that (23O - DQ).

Also an exception, another participant noted:

With...[my male partner] I would not use humor to distance myself...I would probably either distance myself quietly without saying anything or more likely, would talk to him about it. With...[my female partner] I would either joke about it somehow or not say anything (23ZZ - XK).

Another theme of men using humor with male partners to not take ownership of an issue or to diffuse a potential conflict (21%) was brought up by three partners. One participant noted:
With... [my male partner] again, I would create the distance, and see, if he wanted to say something about it, then I would immediately use the humor to sort of divert the issue, not really talk about it directly... (23O - DQ).

In his other comparison, this same participant continued on with this theme:

With...[my male partner] I would immediately lapse into some sort of humor... so I would not have to take ownership of what I was doing, on the process at that point, or deal with it (23O - AQ).

Another male participant said:

I think I do use [humor] with...[my female partner]...to avoid communicating sometimes or [being] direct....With...[my male partner] if anything, I might use humor to diffuse a potential for conflict....It is like with...[my female partner] it is I don't want to get that close, so I will use...[humor]. With...[my male partner] it is, hey, I don't want to get that far apart. So I will use it...If...[he] and I are really fighting over something...when the easiest way to reduce tension is to fall into that. ..It reaffirms the relationship (23U - H/W).

Two male participants reported no differences in their humor use to distance from male and female partners (14%). One participant commented:

Depending on the mood. So I could see myself very comfortably using humor, but not in all cases...I can also see very comfortably [using humor to distance myself] (23S - FT).

In describing how he would use humor to distance from male and female partners, one participant said the following:
Another thing I can do with...[male partner] is completely cut off the stereotypical male stuff, which would create a great deal of distance between us...I think that is something that would create an immediate distance there. Whereas if I started the stereotypical male joking with...[my female partner], right away she would think I was sort of taking strange pills (23Q - DQ).

Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the differences in men's and women's use of humor with same-sex and cross-sex partners. Overall, a number of interesting differences have emerged, pointing out that men and women use humor differently and that both men and women differentially use humor depending on the sex of their target. A summary of the themes that emerged from the data is reported in Table 5.
Table 5
Summary of Gender Differences in Humor Use

**Women** (n=16)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>with male partners</th>
<th>with female partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>of a sexual nature</td>
<td>was not of sexual nature (25%)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lighter, more playful and frivolous</td>
<td>more serious and deep (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tends to be unintentional and spontaneous</td>
<td>tends to be more intentional (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>humor to manage their relationships (i.e., managing tension and boundaries)</td>
<td>humor to build their relationships (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>often about observed events</td>
<td>often about commonalities, shared values, and shared experiences (25%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Men** (n=14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>with male partners</th>
<th>with female partners</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tends to be about external things</td>
<td>tends to be about the relationship or things that have significance to the internal system (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>greater use of stereotypical humor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more playful, spontaneous and joyful</td>
<td>is more intentional and deep (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>more mutuality and personal connection (29%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Women’s use of humor to distance (n=16)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>with male partners</th>
<th>with female partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>did not use humor to distance</td>
<td>did not use humor to distance (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more likely to use humor to distance</td>
<td>(31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distancing humor was more explicit or direct</td>
<td>softer and more gentle (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no difference</td>
<td>no difference (13%)</td>
</tr>
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Men’s use of humor to distance (n=14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>with male partners</th>
<th>with female partners</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>not use humor to distance</td>
<td>not use humor to distance (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distance</td>
<td>(21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to not take ownership of an issue or to diffuse a potential conflict</td>
<td>(21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no differences</td>
<td>no differences (14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* percentage of partner comparisons who explicitly referred to this theme.
Chapter 7
Discussion and Conclusions

In this concluding chapter, I first summarize and discuss the results obtained in this study, including the process of grouping the themes into clusters, and the surprising findings obtained. Second, I report and discuss the relationship among the major themes of this study. Third, I summarize the strengths and limitations of the inquiry. Fourth, I explore the implications of the results for personal growth and learning. Finally, I discuss the implications of the results for organizations and work, and make recommendations for organizational action.

Summary of Results

The results of this study indicate that humor is an essential process for building relationships. Humor helps create a fun and pleasurable context for interaction. It creates opportunities for personal contact. It allows partners to get to know each other on a deeper level. It builds common ground. It builds caring and intimacy. It promotes the growth of the individuals and the relationship. It helps manage same-sex and cross-sex relationships.

Humor is important for building relationships of all kinds. It facilitates
our day-to-day interactions in relationships that are just beginning. It facilitates the maintenance of ongoing relationships that are less intimate. It is essential for close and authentic relationships.

Early in a relationship, humor provides the opportunities to connect and form a partnership. It facilitates communication, draws partners together, minimizes differences, and engages them in the possibility of deeper personal contact. Under the guise of playfulness, humor allows us to test the qualities of potential partners before seriously embarking into the relationship. It also allows us to subtly test out the direction in which the relationship may progress without putting the existing relationship in jeopardy.

Throughout a relationship, humor creates an environment that encourages fun and enjoyment, eases tensions, creates lightness and energy, builds a generosity of spirit and tolerance, deals with the serious, and facilitates being fully present in interactions. Humor lets us learn more about each other and the relationship than through direct conversation alone. It provides less threatening ways of continuing to engage in the relationship.

In deepening and developing a relationship to a more intimate and authentic state, humor helps partners more fully understand, affirm, and trust each other. It helps partners to share commonalities, care for and
support each other, deal with difficult issues, and be fully themselves in their interactions. In intimate relationships, the regular use of humor facilitates deep connection and caring, and unconditionality in acceptance of each partner's humanness. It is often most effective in helping people reconnect after disconnecting and alienating experiences. In well-developed relationships, humor is often a vehicle through which partners encourage each other to look at potential learning and growth.

Humor is important for the well-being of the relationship. Shared laughter engenders commonality, intimacy and perspective. In strained relationships, partners do not laugh together because they are more occupied with asserting firm self-boundaries and maintaining the space between them. The humor shared in a relationship also communicates to others outside the relationship the specialness of the partners to each other.

The results of this study also point to differences in the use of humor to build and manage same-sex and cross-sex relationships. Certain patterns of learning emerge from the results with regard to differences in the use of humor in relationships with same-sex and cross-sex partners. First, both women's and men's humor use was more intentional with female partners than with male partners. Second, both women's and men's humor with male partners tended to be about external/observed events whereas their humor with female partners humor tended to be about the relationship
(commonalities, shared values, and shared experiences) or things that have significance to the internal system. Third, both women and men experienced a greater sense of personal connection or mutuality in their humor use with female partners than with male partners. Fourth, both women's and men's humor with male partners was more playful, spontaneous, frivolous, and joyful than with female partners.

With regard to differences in the use of humor to distance in relationships with same-sex and cross-sex partners, the results indicated the following. First, many women and men did not use humor to distance from either male or female partners. I was struck by the large number of participants who vehemently denied using humor for this purpose, suggesting possibly that (a) there are norms in the community in which these relationships are embedded that inhibits partners from using humor to distance others, (b) participants gave what they perceived to be socially acceptable responses, or (c) distancing humor is used by participants but not with the partners chosen for this study.

Second, both women and men were more likely to use humor to distance male partners than female partners. Third, women were concerned about style or relational issues with female partners (e.g., being more soft and gentle). Men were more concerned with the "whys and hows" of using humor to distance others (e.g., to not take ownership of an issue or to
diffuse potential conflict with male partners or to prevent too much closeness with female partners, and using or not using stereotypical humor).

*Clustering the Themes*

14 themes of how humor facilitates relationship building were derived in this study. These 14 themes were organized into five clusters of themes based on the conceptual likeness of the themes within a cluster and their distinction from other themes outside the cluster. The themes of (1) humor being fun, spontaneous and playful, (2) humor facilitating ease and comfort, (3) humor creating space for relationships, and (4) humor co-mingling play and seriousness were clustered together since they pertain to creating an environment of fun and pleasure conducive to building intimate and authentic relationships. When partners feel playful, spontaneous, at ease, energized, and accepting of each other, and experience a shared sense of absurdity even when dealing with extremely serious matters, the relationship is surrounded by an environment of fun and pleasure.

The themes of (5) humor facilitating communication, (6) humor creating possibilities and connections, and (7) humor being integral to relationships were clustered together because they refer to creating opportunities for personal contact. By allowing partners to express themselves, connect and become better acquainted with each other even
after a break in the relationship, and by serving as an attracting and bonding agent, humor creates opportunities and possibilities for deep and meaningful contact in interpersonal relationships. Humor permits people to enter relationships and stay engaged in them.

The themes of (8) humor helping us learn about and understand each other, and (9) humor building common ground were clustered together because through these ways humor allows partners to discover and build commonalities, thereby strengthening the relationship. Once the initial connection is established, humor helps us to know our partners in deeper ways and to discover our general compatibility. By sharing similar experiences, values, and views, and a common sense of humor, partners lessen the space between them.

The themes of (10) humor building closeness, (11) humor showing support and care, and (12) humor affirming the relationship were clustered together because they pertain to building care and intimacy in the relationship. Relationships are deepened and developed through humor allowing partners to share intimacy. Particularly since humor encourages holding positive feelings, expressing support and caring, and recognizing the specialness of the relationship, the relationship is deepened through enhanced caring and intimacy.

The themes of (13) humor letting us deal with difficult issues and
boundaries, and (14) humor allowing us to be fully ourselves were clustered together because they contribute to promoting growth in relationships. By giving us ways to deal with issues which we may otherwise avoid or address non-constructively, by providing us with the opportunity to see ourselves in insightful ways and push our own and our partners' boundaries, and by allowing ourselves to be fully known and liked for who we are, humor promotes the growth of partners as well as of the relationship.

Discussion of Themes

While many of the themes regarding humor's importance in building relationships are intuitive, several surprising themes were obtained. These themes listed below suggest that in addition to the belief that humor is either a frivolous and meaningless activity, or indicative of power-oriented behaviors, it is also an important positive means of engaging and deepening relationships, as well as a way of furthering personal development.

First, this study indicates that humor is used to show support and care in relationships, in addition to the idea that humor is often used as a means of undermining others.

Second, the results indicated that humor is useful in creating and enlarging the space for a relationship, particularly in terms of generating the spirit of tolerance and acceptance, and giving permission to others to be
fully present. These aspects of humor are generally not talked about as important in the literature.

Third, the results indicated that humor is used to learn about and understand others, particularly in terms of seeing and showing multiple sides of oneself, showing empathy, and testing where the other is. This finding provides another perspective on earlier research findings that indicate that humor is often used as a facade, covering up true beliefs and feelings.

Fourth, this study indicated that humor is important in affirming the relationship, especially through reassuring that the relationship is doing fine, expressing to others the quality of the relationship, and recognizing the specialness of the relationship. This sense of being in a situation together and making the other feel good is in addition to some of the literature's discussion of the use of humor to perpetuate power-oriented relations.

Fifth, in this study, humor was used by partners to deal with difficult issues and boundaries, particularly in terms of pushing each other and exploring new and different parts of the relationship. Humor is generally not thought about in terms of these growth promoting functions; the results of this study showed that humor is powerfully relevant in intrapersonal and interpersonal growth.

Sixth, humor was used in this study to allow partners to be fully themselves: being fully present, bringing their whole selves, being human,
being authentic and honest, and accepting each other. These aspects of humor, particularly with reference to grounding the relationship in the present moment, and providing new areas for exploration of the self in relation to others, allows us to be and grow into the best of who we are. This growth promoting aspect of humor has not been fully explored in the literature. Perhaps the most interesting aspects of the results of this study can be drawn from the fifth and sixth points above: humor helps us create environments where partners can become the best of who they are. The implications of humor’s potential for learning and growth are discussed in the last section of this chapter.

**Relationship Among Themes**

In this section, I discuss the relationship among the themes derived in this study. The specific question I address is: how do the themes regarding the use of humor to build relationships relate to one another? To do this, in Table 6, I report the interrelation of themes in terms of the number and percentages of people mentioning each theme in relation to all others.

The key presented in Table 6 gives details about the number and percentage of total partners under each theme (derived in Chapters 4 and 5) who also mentioned another theme. For example, 26 partners (45%) mentioned both the theme of being fun, spontaneous and playful and the
theme of facilitating ease and comfort. The table also reports the total number and percentage of partners mentioning a particular theme.

The table indicates that there is a high degree of overlap among the themes in terms of the numbers of people mentioning them. The theme of building closeness generally overlaps the most with all other themes. In seeking to explain this, it is likely that the reason this theme has appeared so frequently is because during interviews I specifically asked participants to comment on how humor helped bring their partners closer.

The patterns of Table 6 indicate that beyond the influence of the building closeness theme, a few other themes were generally mentioned in conjunction with others. First, the theme of being fun, spontaneous, and playful was most frequently mentioned in conjunction with eight themes (facilitating ease and comfort, creating possibilities and connections, learning about and understanding each other, building common ground, building closeness, showing support and care, dealing with difficult issues and boundaries, and being fully ourselves). This indicates that the creation of light and spontaneous environments is associated with enhanced opportunities for personal contact, enhanced discovery regarding partners, increased intimacy, and growth-promoting relationships. Second, the theme of creating possibilities and connections was most frequently mentioned in
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Table 6: Relationships Between Themes (continued)

**Key**
1 - Being spontaneous and playful  n=45  (78%)
2 - Facilitating ease and comfort  n=32  (55%)
3 - Creating space for relationships  n=21  (36%)
4 - Co-mingling play and seriousness  n=6  (10%)
5 - Facilitating communication  n=22  (38%)
6 - Creating possibilities and connections  n=41  (71%)
7 - Being integral to relationships  n=29  (50%)
8 - Learning about and understanding each other  n=40  (69%)
9 - Being common ground  n=38  (66%)
10 - Building closeness  n=54  (93%)
11 - Showing support and care  n=28  (48%)
12 - Affirming the relationship  n=30  (52%)
13 - Dealing with difficult issues and boundaries  n=35  (60%)
14 - Being fully ourselves  n=29  (50%)
conjunction with the three themes of creating space for relationships, being fun, spontaneous, and playful, and building common ground. These themes appear to relate to the beginning stages of relationship in terms of creating pleasurable environments where enhanced discovering and commonality can be established. Third, the theme of learning about and understanding each other was most often mentioned in connection with the three themes of facilitating communication, building common ground, and showing support and care. This indicates that with deeper personal contact and a deepened personal relationship, humor aids in discovery and learning. Fourth, the theme of building common ground was most frequently mentioned in connection with the theme of affirming the relationship. This indicates that the commonalities among partners deepens and strengthens their relationships.

A Framework of Building Relationships Through Humor

In this section, I present a framework of building relationships through humor that integrates four different functions of humor and four types of relational interactions.

Functions of Humor

Previous research at the individual or group level has suggested that
humor is important in human interaction because it helps in communication, coping, creativity, and cohesiveness. These four functions have largely been described as follows. In facilitating communication, humor serves as a social lubricant, enabling smooth social interaction, and conveying emotions (see *Journal of Communication*, 1976; Kahn, 1989; Roy, 1960; Ullian, 1976; Winnick, 1976). In helping to cope in difficult situations, humor enables individuals to gain perspective and manage their interpersonal distance, thereby reducing stress (see Dixon, 1980; Mindess, 1976; Robinson, 1983; Salameh, 1983; Wolfenstein, 1954; Ziv, 1984). In facilitating creativity, humor combats boredom in the workplace, providing new insights by making room for differences, changing frames of reference, and encouraging risk-taking (see Cleese, 1988; Fabrizi & Pollio, 1987; Koestler, 1964; Ziv, 1983). In facilitating cohesiveness, humor strengthens and develops groups through shared experience, reinforcing similarities, and a shared sense of investment in the group (see Duncan, 1984; Duncan and Feisal, 1989; Kahn, 1989; Napier & Gershenfeld, 1989).

Extrapolating from the individual and group level functions to the level of the relationship, the themes obtained from this study may be categorized under the four functions of humor, with some themes falling under more than one. For example, the function of communication subsumes the themes of facilitating communication, learning about and understanding each other,
creating connections, showing support and care, and dealing with difficult issues and boundaries. The function of coping subsumes the themes of facilitating ease and comfort, dealing with difficult issues and boundaries, and co-mingling play and seriousness. The function of creativity subsumes being fun, spontaneous and playful, creating the space for relationships, dealing with difficult issues and boundaries, and being fully ourselves. The function of cohesiveness subsumes the themes of building common ground, building closeness, showing support and care, affirming the relationship, and humor as integral to the relationship.

Types of Relational Interactions

Relationships vary in their degree of depth and intimacy. As participants talked about their relationships, I recognized that they were discussing many different types of relational interactions. The metaphor of concentric circles is useful in describing different types of relational interactions (see Figure 1). The outer circle encompasses our casual, ongoing, daily interactions with others. The next inner circle represents a deeper and more intimate level, reflecting those interactions in which we are investing in order that they become deeper. A third inner circle represents even deeper and more intimate interactions, characterized by mutuality. The innermost circle, representing the deepest and most intimate level,
Figure 1
Intimacy and Depth in Relational Interactions
comprises a select set of growth-promoting interactions. The metaphor of the concentric circles suggests that relational interactions form an increasing order of intimacy and depth, with relationships at inner levels reflecting many of the characteristics of relationships at outer circles. Thus, growth promoting interactions encompass many elements of relations at lower levels of intimacy and depth. Additionally, reflecting the progressively smaller size of the inner circles, the number of relational interactions at high levels of intimacy and depth is likely to be less than the number of those at lower levels. The concentric circles metaphor is useful also because it allows the circles to be embedded in larger contexts (other outer circles, as for example, the team, department, organization, and society).

Conceptualizing the relationships described in this study in this way has implications for the use of humor in different types of relational settings. At the fundamental level of our daily interactions, humor is (1) a tool of social contact and facilitation. At the next type of relational interaction, those that we are interested in deepening, humor (2) helps us to invest in the further development of the relationship. At the next level of depth and intimacy, humor (3) facilitates the maintenance/renewal of mutuality. Lastly, in select interactions humor is (4) growth-promoting for the individual partners and the relationship. Since the characteristics of relational interactions at lower levels of intimacy and depth are often reflected in relationships at higher
levels, humor as a tool of social contact and facilitation applies across all kinds of social interactions, from first meetings to deep and developed relationships.

The themes obtained from this study may be categorized under these four types of relational interactions. For example, humor as a universal tool of social contact/facilitation subsumes the themes (1) being fun spontaneous and playful, (2) facilitating ease and comfort, (3) creating space for relationships, and (5) facilitating communication. These themes regarding the use of humor to build relationships are relevant for the category of casual and ongoing interactions (including beginning relationships). Two of these themes, namely (2) facilitating ease and comfort and (5) facilitating communication are often referred to in the literature. Whereas the theme of (1) being fun, spontaneous and playful has generally been described in the literature as more frivolous, my results confirm the importance for creating an environment of fun and pleasure. Likewise, the theme of (3) creating space for relationships, which has not been extensively treated in the literature, is important for the creation of environments of fun and pleasure conducive to casual and ongoing interactions.

Humor as a way to invest in developing a relationship subsumes the themes of (6) creating possibilities and connections, (8) learning about and understanding each other, and (9) building common ground. Humor to
support mutual relationships subsumes the themes (10) building closeness (11) showing support and care, and (12) affirming the relationship. Humor to promote the growth of the individual partners and relationship subsumes the themes of (13) dealing with difficult issues and boundaries and (14) being fully ourselves.

The humor literature has only indirectly discussed humor as a way to invest in developing a relationship, to facilitate the maintenance and renewal of mutuality, and to promote growth of individual partners and relationships in select circumstances. Thus the following themes and their implications have generally not been explicitly explored in the literature: the themes of (6) creating possibilities and connections, (8) learning about and understanding each other, (9) building common ground, (10) building closeness [explored at the group level], (11) showing support and care, (12) affirming the relationship, (13) dealing with difficult issues and boundaries, and (14) being fully ourselves.

Two themes have not been included in this categorization, the themes of (4) co-mingling play and seriousness and (7) being integral to relationships. The theme of co-mingling play and seriousness was the most rarely obtained theme of this study. This theme may be interpreted differently in relationships of different depth and intimacy. In new relationships, the theme generally meant that partners were sometimes
serious and sometimes playful, but both qualities were present in their relationship. Early on this co-mingling is a way to manage tension and create ease and comfort. In deeper and more intimate relationships, the theme had a different twist: humor was not only used to lighten serious topics. Rather, humor was generally present in what partners were serious about or partners looked for what was important in the humor they shared. Humor was not only for "fun" in deep and intimate relationships.

In addition, the theme of being integral to relationships has also not been included in the above categorization. Without humor there would not have been a relationship at all for some pairs, generally partners who were not deeply and intimately connected. Such relationships were based totally on the humor present in the interactions. In other more deep and intimate relationships, humor was an important component of the relationship, one that draws the partners together, but not the whole relationship.

**Overlay**

Using the themes derived from this study, Table 7 presents an overlaying of the two conceptual schemes presented above: the four functions of humor discussed in the literature (communication, coping, creativity, and cohesiveness) and the four types of relational interactions found in this study (casual and ongoing interactions, interactions reflecting
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<td>8-learning about and understanding the other</td>
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<td>3-creating space for relationships</td>
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<td>communication- who I am expressing ideas &amp; feelings</td>
<td>communication - who are you in relation to who I am</td>
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<td>coping - awkward situation</td>
<td>cohesiveness - reaching for</td>
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<td>creativity - fresh experience, new ideas</td>
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<td>14-being fully ourselves</td>
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<td>12-affirming the relationship</td>
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<td>communication - who we are to each other</td>
<td>creativity - our partner's self-actualization</td>
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<td>cohesiveness - committing to</td>
<td>coping -existential issues</td>
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<td>communication- what are our lives really about</td>
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investment in developing the relationship, interactions maintaining and renewing mutuality, and growth-promoting interactions). This overlay is described below in terms of the themes of the functions of humor within each type of relational interaction.

While there is some overlapping of each function in each kind of relational interaction because this is the nature of human interaction, some functions are more salient in certain relational interactions, and these are highlighted in Table 7. As we can see from Table 7, the humor function of communication appears in each type of relational interaction. In more casual relationships or in the beginning of relationships, much of the function of humor is to communicate about thoughts and feelings, sharing the self with others and expressing "who I am". When we begin investing in a deepened relationship, the communication function of humor begins to change the focus to "who are you in relation to who I am?" In deepened relationships of mutuality, communication through humor large attends to the issue of "who we are to each other". And in growth-promoting relationships, much of the humor is communicating about "what are our lives really about".

The coping function of humor is most salient in two types of relational interactions: casual and ongoing interactions, particularly in beginning relationships, and in growth-promoting interactions. In the former, humor is
used to cope in the conventional sense of the term: increasing ease and comfort, reducing tensions, and facilitating socially awkward situations. In growth-promoting relationships, coping refers more to using humor to deal with difficult issues and boundary concerns, focusing more on existential issues and dilemmas that are deeply personal.

A similar pattern emerges for the creativity function of humor, which is most salient in casual interactions and in growth-promoting interactions. In ongoing interactions requiring social facilitation, humor focuses on the generation of new ideas or fresh experiences, encouraging partners to see things differently, often from the other’s eyes. In growth-promoting relational interactions, the focus of creativity tends to be around the use of humor for self-actualization - allowing partners in the relationship to be the best and fullest of who they can be.

The cohesiveness function of humor is most salient in interactions reflecting investment in developing the relationship and in interactions maintaining and renewing mutuality. In the former type of relational interaction, humor is used as a means of "reaching for" cohesiveness, and in the latter type of interaction, as "committing to" cohesiveness.

Just as a relationship changes through development, the quality of humor used also changes, increasing in the degree of intimacy and depth expressed. Table 7 suggests that increasing the level of intimacy in humor
may help propel us to more intimate types of relational interactions. However, it is important that caution is used in doing this: the level of intimacy and depth in relational interactions should be matched with appropriate intimacy and depth in humor used. In other words, the humor used in an interaction should be appropriately calibrated to the level of intimacy and depth characterizing the interaction. Thus, the use of humor as a way of moving people toward growth can be counter-productive if it is not in the context of a well established relationship. In a well-developed relationship (as for example, a well-developed mentoring relationship), humor can be a productive vehicle for facing up to tough issues in a less defensive manner. However, in beginning relationships, where humor is mostly a tool of social facilitation, the use of humor to deal with difficult personal issues could be harmful to the relationship, delaying intimacy and depth. Sometimes, the same humorous remark may be taken to be growthful or intrusive, depending on whether it was made by a close friend or a relatively less trusted individual. Thus, humor that engages in boundary pushing, and challenging boundary issues is appropriate only when a sound relational base has been built.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

This study contributes to the humor literature by focusing on
interpersonal relationships. While most of the existing literature employs either an individual or a group level of analysis, this inquiry used the relationship as the unit of analysis. Both sides of a relationship were examined.

The study used methods of indepth, open-ended exploration. Since there were no limitations on the variables that could emerge, the data were rich and evocative. A number of illustrative metaphors and images emerged, adding fullness and concreteness to the themes.

A strength of the study is that the participants, being part of an academic community, were particularly reflective. Responses were thought through carefully and articulated in a deep and insightful manner. Participants were open to the questions and the process of the data gathering and sense-making. As a result of the interviews and workshop, participants felt that the process of the study had positive impact on their personal relationships, primarily by increasing awareness of the humor used.

The study has two limitations. First, the participant group was relatively homogenous in terms of race, socio-economic status, educational level, and occupation. However, there was a fair degree of diversity in age and gender. Future studies exploring the issue of building relationships through humor may be well advised to draw from a more diverse population.
Second, since the study was conducted in the specific context of an academic department, the results may be less generalizable. Particularly as the study was conducted in an academic department in which values-alignment is an important selection criteria, the range of values displayed by participants may be narrower than in other contexts.

**Implications for Personal Growth and Learning**

The context in which this study took place is an ongoing community which focuses on personal and professional learning and development. Unusual attention is paid here to recognizing the importance of and building relationships and community. Personal growth is seen as important in and of itself and as necessary for developing competence as professionals in organizations.

In this context, personal growth is considered largely synonymous to the process of self-actualization (see Bruno, 1977). It is individual change, characterized by movement in the desired direction in areas such as: general self-awareness, basic attitudes toward the self (e.g., self-acceptance, self-esteem) and others (e.g., collaboration, valuing differences), sensitivity to others' feelings and perceptions, and effectiveness in interaction (role performance, managing situations) (Lieberman, Yalom & Miles, 1973: 92-93).
In such an environment, humor is particularly vital in facilitating personal growth and learning. The results of this inquiry confirm the belief that humor is a process of growth and a sign of emotional maturity and mastery (Grotjahn, 1957). Humor is indeed an operational definition of self-actualization (Kuhlman, 1984:55; drawing on Mindess, 1971, 1976, 1981).

A commonly held notion is that a graduate school program is primarily a serious and intellectual community of scholars, experienced frequently as a serious, somber and stressful context. The results of this study did indeed confirm that humor is an important means of coping with and managing in such environments. More importantly, however, the results indicated that humor serves as a counterpoint to gravity in the learning endeavor. As Arthur Koestler has said, "the jester is brother to the sage" (cited in Cornett, 1986). Humor facilitates development and growth by providing a relational basis for learning. We learn more and better when we have access to support, caring and mutuality.

Much has been written about humor's role in enhancing and accelerating learning and insight (e.g., Allport, 1961; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Smith, Ascough, Ettinger, & Nelson, 1971; Ziv, 1976). Because humor is an (affective) arousal agent, it is often directly related to increased attention and learning (Gorham & Christophel 1990). It furthers self-exploration (McGhee & Goldstein, 1983) and can be used as a diagnostic
tool which measures progress (McGhee, 1979). It promotes learning through increased rapport (see Linfield, 1977; Welker, 1977). It reduces distance among inquirers in a learning environment, including between students and faculty members. Humor sometimes serves as a heuristic or mnemonic device to trigger important learnings through affective associations. The results of this inquiry confirm these insights from the literature.

The development of a mutually-enhancing, growth-promoting relationship, which allows us to be fully ourselves, seldom occurs without the use of humor. Humor lets us be fully present in our interactions with the other. It breeds authenticity, trust, and honesty. It lets us express different sides of ourselves, allowing others to see the multiple aspects of our being. Humor allows us to be more human as well as to accept each other for who we are. All of these encourage an environment of personal freedom in which learning best occurs. As the old German saying goes, "Humor gives freedom, and freedom gives humor" (cited in Lynch & Anchor, 1991: 158).

Humor facilitates increased attention, retention, and learning. It fosters in our relationships the conditions necessary for psychological growth: mutual empathy, mutual caring, and mutual intersubjectivity. People experience enhanced energy, positive attitude and self-image, and increased connectivity from humor in their relationships.
Humor encourages personal development through deepened exploration and awareness of our inner selves. It provokes thought and self-insight. By allowing others to give, and by allowing us to hear the feedback necessary for positive change, humor gives us a mapping of the pathways to personal growth, and the strength to change in a relational environment characterized by support, care, and mutuality.

Because humor is very effective in simultaneously transmitting information, feelings, and ideas at multiple levels, and is efficient in getting right to the heart of a matter, it helps reframe thoughts and ideas, and facilitates openness to new ideas and insights. Humor generates learning by reducing fears, encouraging risk taking, and liberating our creative capacities. Humor is indeed "a tool of 'flexibility' (Sands, 1984) allowing persons to 'enlarge their reality' (Klein, 1976), thus 'creating a perspective' (Hickman, 1977) ... for finding new solutions to their problems" (Lynch & Anchor, 1991: 158).

Humor gets people to feel more fully involved in the learning process. By helping to create environments conducive to personal growth (e.g., those characterized by mutuality, support, lightness, challenge) which engender both psychological safety and the desire to be more deeply involved, humor makes learning more personally interesting and relevant, and makes the learning process more relationally affirming.
Implications for Organizations and Work

Increasingly, organizations are facing change at all levels. With the projected changes in workforce composition in the 21st century, and increasing globalization of all facets of the organization, ambiguity, tension, and instability are the order of the day. While these changes demand increased workforce diversity, decreased organizational levels, and tightened resource allocation on the one hand, they simultaneously call on organizations to increase relationality and teamwork within and across organizational boundaries.

Given these new organizational realities, humor has a vital role to play in creating constructive relationships. Below I describe four aspects of organization that lend themselves well to strengthening relational ties through humor: organization structure, teams, mentoring, and diversity.

Organization Structure

The implications of this study are particularly helpful regarding two aspects of organization structure. First, humor is likely to be important in the reorganization of the way work is done (including flattening of the hierarchy, creation of networks, and reshuffling of the flows of work, authority, responsibility, and information). Since position power is considerably altered and reduced through reorganization, the culture is much more interactive,
placing greater emphasis on skills of communication, interpersonal
influence, networking, and flexibility. In flattened cultures, decision making
is moved closer to the end user (internal or external customer), requiring
greater liaising with and relational attention to persons outside the
immediate work system. Humor's role here may largely be to facilitate the
relational conduct of work. Particularly in terms of the functions of creativity
(new ways of doing things) and communication (working in peer
relationships rather than in hierarchical relationships), humor is likely to
strengthen the bonds of trust and mutuality necessary for work in contexts
where boundaries are fluid and permeable.

Second, humor may provide natural outlets for expression that are
important in downsizing efforts. It is likely to help employees cope with the
trauma of severed relationships, providing a forum for expressing feelings of
personal insecurity, anger, and loss of meaningful relationships. Humor
helps express deeply felt emotions, and serves to raise difficult issues and
concerns in ways that are acceptable within the organization's norms.
Additionally, humor can provide a sense of personal stability (in certain
relationships) in the midst of situational instability.

Teams

Teams are being increasingly used in the workplace. The
implications of this study are particularly strong for organizations employing
greater teamwork such as self-directed work teams. Teamwork calls for
relationships beyond the merely casual, where people performing jobs are
closely linked with one another and must rely on each other to get work
done effectively. Humor helps build and strengthen these workplace
relationships. Modelling and supporting humor use begins to create the
norm of social facilitation of group activity. Humor builds cohesiveness and
solidarity. It facilitates creative solutions to group problem solving and
decision making. It helps in running team meetings more effectively.
However, humor may result in an increased feeling of ingroup, sometimes at
the expense of other outside groups.

Humor can foster group and intergroup development. As Fine (1977: 19) notes, "when members of a group do share humor, they construct the
boundaries necessary for establishing and maintaining shared norms and
identities - the group's unifying perspective and `culture'". Humor helps
maintain shared identity and culture through shared language, rituals and

At the beginning stages of the group's life or of intergroup relations,
more casual humor (that facilitates social interaction) is most appropriate.
As relations progress in depth and intimacy, humor reflecting investment in
the relationship, humor that maintains and renews mutuality, and growth-
promoting humor are progressively appropriate. It is important to note here that there needs to be a match between the type of relational interaction and the use of humor, as this impacts the feelings of inclusion and safety of group members. For example, if the level of intimacy and authenticity in the group is low but very deep and intimate humor is used between some group members, others may feel disconnected and even isolated, discomfited, and excluded.

Organizational-level attention needs to be paid to the team's use of humor. The team's utilization of humor risks being seen as frivolous by the rest of the organization in a culture that does not support relational intimacy and authenticity. Such cultures may also limit flexibility and risk-taking. Additionally, when teams are competitive, they may use humor to devalue other teams' contributions - this has nonproductive outcomes at the organizational level that need to be guarded against.

*Mentoring*

Applications of the results of this study to mentoring relationships in the workplace are clear. Humor is likely to facilitate and build mentoring relationships. It may be most effective in reducing status differences between the mentor and mentee. Humor establishes rapport, and builds common ground. It helps build trust between the partners, enabling giving
and receiving feedback in ways that are acceptable to both parties. Humor helps the partners in the relationship learn about one another and become committed to each other's vision. It enables the mentor and the mentee to move into growthful interaction, moving the relationship from superior-subordinate to one that is increasingly more mutual and supporting, and growth promoting. In cross-sex mentoring relationships, humor is likely to be helpful in managing sexual differences and sexuality - reducing tension and using energy most productively.

The results point to the importance of using humor to build a mentoring relationship one step at a time - for example, not attempting to use growth promoting humor in the early stages of forming a relationship. In therapeutic relationships, effective therapists use humor that is relevant to the different stages of therapy, enabling the client to more productively deal with difficult issues: laughing with rather than laughing at a person. Likewise, in teaching relationships, effective teachers tailor their humor to the developmental stage and concerns of the student, thereby enabling themselves to be most conducive to student learning. Similar to therapeutic and teaching relationships, advice and counseling issues may also arise in mentoring relationships, which can be facilitated by the appropriate use of humor.
Diversity

This study has two sets of implications for diversity in workplaces: valuing diversity and diversity efforts. First, in pluralistic contexts, relationality becomes even more important. It is the relationships between individuals that allow differences to be truly appreciated and valued, and that allow us to move beyond the stereotyping of groups to which individuals may belong. Humor is helpful in beginning the learning process among diverse individuals, and in creating the space where the possibility of deepened relationship may exist. Humor can help put people at ease in unfamiliar situations (e.g., contexts characterized by diverse individuals), particularly when the humor used is gentle, builds on common realities, and perhaps even is self-deprecating. When used appropriately, humor can be a joining point rather than a judgement point. It can promote increased sensitivity to and knowledge of different peoples and cultures, enhancing generosity of spirit, tolerance, and permission to be fully present. It can diffuse and reduce conflict and tensions. Recent research supports these ideas: diverse groups that emphasized having fun and feeling relaxed felt more effective at accomplishing their tasks (Griest, 1995).

Of course, the importance of appropriateness and timing of humor must be emphasized at all times. Humor that is improperly channeled may be offensive, having the potential to be legally construed as harassing
behavior in a hostile work environment, and humor in the form of horseplay may cause bodily injury or property damage (Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990).

Second, humor has implications for organizational diversity efforts. Understandably, diversity programs are generally implemented in a serious and somber manner, mostly because in such situations there is a high potential for humor to be misused (e.g., to put a particular group in a one-down position) or misunderstood and misinterpreted. In many cases, people participating in diversity efforts, particular those in privileged groups, are fearful about the use of humor, largely because they are afraid that they may hurt or offend others, or because they are afraid of being labelled in particular ways. These processes of fear create environments lacking spontaneity and flexibility, where learning is stultified. But humor, when appropriately used, can emphasize the humanness of each one of us, and our common ties, facilitating moving on to individual commonalities and differences rather than staying at the level of the generalized categories to which individuals may belong.

Recommendations for Organizational Action

In this section I address the implications of this study for what organizations should and should not do to become more effective places.
(1) Leaders and members of organizations need to make space for humor, and to model a relaxed, natural and constructive humor style. Humor should be seen as an inside-out phenomenon. Organizational members need to be made aware that humor is not indicative of a lack of seriousness, and that humor does not devalue task accomplishment. Making the space for play and fun promotes better relationships, and multiplies humor. Criticizing or trivializing the use of humor is counterproductive. Honoring humor by giving appropriate time to it can foster an environment conducive to the effective conduct of work. An environment that facilitates these experiences of humor needs to be created.

If the use of humor is not natural and comfortable for any individual, supporting humor use by others is a step in creating more positive workplaces. Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines, and Ben and Jerry’s Joy Committee provide examples of tremendously successful organizations that have built their businesses around the concept of humor.

In this regard, I caution against the implementation of ad hoc, one-shot humor programs intended to patch up human resources problems. When humor gets used as a “flavor-of-the-month” program intervention, it gets applied in artificial or phoney ways, with little or no lasting system effects.

Instead, humor is most productively employed when it is integrated
into the norms of the organization: when it is genuine, appropriate to the
type and stage of relational interaction, and acceptable in the culture within
which it is embedded.

(2) Organizations should intentionally employ humor to improve
effectiveness. In modern life, work and play are often treated as two
separate spheres. In workplaces, the implicit ethic seems to be "keep your
nose to the grindstone." Employees are encouraged to work hard and hard
work does not include play. As John Cleese (1988) notes, the problem is
that we confuse being serious with being solemn. Workplaces foster the
notion that if we work hard we will receive the financial resources we
deserve to then play somewhere else. This separation between work and
play is particularly evident in bureaucracies and large public institutions,
representing the common belief that if you are having fun you are not
working hard.

The perceived dichotomy between work and play, two essential
spheres of life, is unnecessary and damaging. Play is a relational act that
can increase productivity and satisfaction at work. It can create positive
affect in workplaces, including feelings of belonging, identity, loyalty, and
fun. It can help employees cope with change. Additionally, employees' lives
have the potential for greater integration.
There are several dimensions of play that are not usually evident in the workplace (for example, relaxation and fun). Some dimensions of play are somewhat more acceptable in certain positions or organizations, (for example, highly creative jobs in advertising agencies) or for certain individuals, usually high enough in the organizational hierarchy to be attending to personal growth and self-actualization needs. Humor, however is one dimension of play that is acceptable regardless of organizational level or job type.

For example, humor may be used to target team effectiveness. By using anecdotal humor, stories and metaphors, the team can begin to see opportunities and possibilities where none may have been evident before, and can learn from its mistakes and failures. Fun and play techniques may be used by the team to encourage members to break their conventional frames of reference, and to inspire creative solutions to dilemmas. These are also useful in hastening the process of getting to know team members in relaxed and informal settings in the case of newly formed teams. Skits, parodies, experiential exercises, simulations, role plays are examples of such methods.

Recent work in the literature confirms the importance of humor in the workplace. Giving advice to supervisors, Feigelson (1989) has suggested that humor is one of the most powerful tools for motivating staffs, stimulating
creativity, and improving job performance. Other studies have found that employees having fun on the job are more productive and efficient (Krohe, 1987; Machan, 1987). In a study of 341 adults aged 18 to 63 in a variety of white-collar occupations, employees who had fun at work (defined as enjoyment, pleasure and amusement derived from working) were less likely to be late or absent, and their motivation and productivity were higher (Abramis, 1991).

Given these insights, it is not surprising that a whole industry has sprung up around the issue of humor in workplaces. Humor books, workbooks, magazines, video programs, workshops, courses, conferences, and organizations are now available to guide individuals, teams and organizations in this new direction. For example, recent books include The Light Touch: How to Use Humor for Business Success (Kushner, 1990), They Used to Call Me Snow White But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor (Barreca, 1991), Lighten Up: Survival Skills for People Under Pressure (Metcalf & Felible, 1992), and This Job Should Be Fun! The New Profit Strategy for Managing People in Tough Times (Basso & Klosek, 1991). Recent workbooks such as Playfair: Everybody's Guide to Noncompetitive Play (Weinstein & Goodman, 1980), The Art of Mixing Work and Play (Wilson, 1992), and Making Humor Work: Take Your Job Seriously and Yourself Lightly (Paulson, 1989) give exercises, tips, and ideas for
introducing humor into the workplace culture.

_Jocularity_ (specifically for the nursing profession), _Laughter Works_, and _Laughing Matters_ are examples of popular workplace magazines. A compilation of such magazines is available in _The Directory of Humor Magazines and Humor Organizations in America (and Canada), 2nd Edition_ (Ellenbogen, 1989). Recently, video training programs on workplace humor have become popular, including Bob Mitchell's _The Role of Humor in Coping and Success_, and John Cleese's series in management, including _Humor is Not a Luxury_ and _Creativity in Management_ (produced by Video Arts).

Numerous humor consultants and organizations offer speeches, workshops, conferences, and consulting services (see Gibson, 1994); the most well-known of these are Joel Goodman at The Humor Project, Malcolm Kushner, C. W. Metcalf, and Nurses for Laughter. There is even an International Association of Professional Bureaucrats, and an Association for the Promotion of Humor in International Affairs! A comprehensive compilation of humor resources is provided in _Humor Scholarship: A Research Bibliography_, including listings of humor research, scholars, organizations, publishers, journals, magazines, newsletters, newspapers, college magazines, courses, and programs (Nilsen, 1993).

Most of these consulting activities and workshops pertain to humor use at the first level of relational interactions: ongoing interactions. They
focus on facilitating communication, easing tensions, and sometimes using humor for creative solutions. When the consulting relationship is of a longer duration, consultants may use humor to help in diagnosing organizational issues. While it is important to continue focusing on humor that is socially facilitative of relationships in workplaces, the results of this study also suggest that humor consultants and programs need to pay attention to humor at the other three levels of relational interactions, stressing the context of the interactions. These other levels of relational interactions are important to address in humor programs in order to broaden the use and benefits of humor in organizations: validating the varied experiences of individuals, increasing awareness of different kinds and appropriate use of humor, and enhancing humor use to facilitate relational interaction at deeper and more intimate levels.

(3) Leaders and members of organizations, and consultants brought in to facilitate work processes in organizations, should employ humor as a diagnostic guide for understanding the culture and state of the organization. Humor tells about a number of different facets: the power and control dynamics, the risk-taking atmosphere, the pluralism and openness in the system, the norms of participation, the importance of hierarchy, the cohesiveness of the team, the trust and intimacy in relationships. It
indicates what are the pressing issues needing action, reflects the practical application of espoused goals and ideals, and it signals the importance given to the history of the entity. Humor, thus, is a gauge of the system's past, present, and future. It can be used to diagnose processes and to intervene in them.

Final Thoughts

Humor is a complex and consequential human activity. This thesis has focussed largely on its positive aspects for building relationships. It is important to acknowledge here that humor can also be power-driven and alienating; this humor, however, rarely facilitates the development of intimate, authentic, and growthful relationships.

In attempting to achieve humor consequences that are prosocial, we need to take personal and interpersonal risks in order to create the best of our selves and our relationships. These risks in humor use may sometimes have unintended outcomes, such as increasing one's own vulnerabilities and affronting others' sensibilities. Just as we sometimes cannot create or change without questioning historical assumptions and breaking existing frames, likewise, we cannot use humor without risking revealing our inner selves, and offending others. To achieve the highest potential of humor for enhancing human development (where we are affirming, intimate and
growthful in our relationships) we must be willing to take appropriate risks with our humor, not stifling the spontaneous expression of our innermost selves but being conscious of our relational contexts.
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APPENDIX A

REVISED RELATIONAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL - 2/11/94

SPECIFIC RELATIONSHIPS AND USE OF HUMOR

[complete the following for two relationships, one same sex & one opposite sex]

(1) Describe your relationship with X?

(2) How did you get to know each other?

(3) How has your relationship evolved over time?

(4) Does the humor you share endear X more or less to you?
   Any thoughts about why that is?

(5) Can you think of a time in your relationship when the humor brought you closer? Tell me about that, by giving me examples or illustrations. What were you thinking or feeling? How did it bring you closer?

(6) Has humor been used to build your relationship? How? Tell me about that, by giving me examples or illustrations. What were you thinking or feeling?

(7) Can you think of a time in your relationship when his/her humor distanced you? Tell me about that, by giving me examples or illustrations. What were you thinking or feeling?

(8) Can you think of a time in your relationship when your humor distanced him/her? Tell me about that, by giving me examples or illustrations.

(9) Can you think of a time in your relationship when the humor hindered the building of your relationship? Tell me about that, by giving me examples or illustrations.

(10) Are there times that you intentionally used humor in this relationship? How? (In managing or managing the distance)

(11) Are there times when you thought that X intentionally used humor in the relationship? How?
(12) What functions does humor serve in your relationship with X?

(13) What advantages/disadvantages do you see from the use of humor in your relationship?

(14) What kinds of humor do you share in your relationship? (Go down this list and talk about how much of any of these kinds of humor are used by you or the other and talk about it)

(Under Sarcasm ask)
   Do you ever use sarcasm with each other?
   Who the sarcasm directed to (each other or others)

(15) What don't you joke or laugh about together?

(16) Have you ever talked about the humor in your relationship? What was said?

(17) What are the effects/impact of the humor on your relationship with X?

(18) Has the humor in your relationship changed how you feel about the relationship?

(19) What metaphor would capture the humor in your relationship with X?

(20) Do you use humor differently with this person than with others? How? Why?

(21) Anything else you would like to add about your relationship or the humor in your relationship?

[after both relationships are discussed ask the following]

(22) How does your use humor differ with X [the first person discussed above] than with Y [the second person discussed above]?

(23) If you needed to distance yourself temporarily from your relationship, would you use humor to do that with x and/or with why? how would you use humor differently with X than Y in that situation?
USE OF HUMOR IN GENERAL

[I'm going to ask some things that might sound like the questions I asked already because in this part of the interview we are going to try to generalize to other relationships]

(24) How do you see humor helping you build relationships with others? Any other ways?

(25) Are there times that you intentionally use humor in your relationships? (managing)
Do you find yourself using humor as a way of getting closer to somebody?
Describe. Examples.
Have you ever used humor to keep someone at a greater distance?
Describe. Examples.

(26) Are there times when you think others might have intentionally used humor in their relationships with you? (managing or managing the distance)

(27) What functions does humor serve in your relationships?

(28) What Are the advantages you see in your use of humor in relationships?

(29) Are there ways that your use of humor sometimes creates disadvantages?

(30) Is there any way you'd like to change the way you use humor in relationships?

(31) [ask women] Do you use humor differently with women than with men? How?
[ask men] Do you use humor differently with men than with women? How?

(32) Do you think men use humor differently with you than women do? How?

(33)Anything else you want to add?

(34) Will how you interact in your relationship change as a result of this interview? How?

(35) What is your Myers Briggs Type?