



Relational Humor and Marital Satisfaction in Married Individuals

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether married individuals' relational humor styles were significant predictors of their marital satisfaction levels. The study was conducted with a total of 228 married participants (139 women and 89 men). The duration of marriage of the participants ranged from 1 to 46 years ($M = 9.34$, $SD = 10.37$). The data were obtained by using the Marital Life Scale and Relational Humor Inventory. The data were tested with multiple regression analysis supported by bootstrapping process. According to the regression results, self-positive and self-negative relational humor styles significantly predicted their own marital satisfaction. On the other hand, self-instrumental humor did not predict marital satisfaction significantly. Otherwise, marital satisfaction was significantly predicted by partner-positive, partner-negative, and partner-instrumental humor styles. The findings obtained in the study were discussed in accordance with the related literature and suggestions were made for the following studies

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1. Introduction

Marriages appears to be a transition stage toward creating their own family in an individual's experience and is emphasized to be an important social ritual with the aim of meeting the emotional needs of individuals (Dildar, Sitwat, & Yasin, 2013). For some one of the most important interpersonal relationships of marriage is a source of happiness and satisfaction, while for others marriage is characterized as a worrying situation (Curun, 2006). This is because individuals raised with unique habits and spiritual values in different family environments have different expectations when they combine within a common structure (Velidedeoglu-Kavuncu, 2011). As a result, if these differing expectations are not met by the other partner, problems may occur in the relationship. However, considering everyone comes from different families and still marry, what is the difference for couples with balanced expectations who obtain high levels of satisfaction from the experience of marriage? The answer to this question has been a topic of curiosity for many researchers.

Research into factors affecting marriage satisfaction are more interesting for several reasons. Firstly, marital satisfaction appears to be important in terms of forming the basis of individual well-being and family well-being (Stack & Eshleman, 1998). Additionally, it is known that reducing problems in marriage and divorce is very important for obtaining satisfaction from marriage (Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998). Building the foundations for a strong marriage and protecting this structure has many benefits for society, like preventing possible crimes (Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998). As a result, research about marital satisfaction has great importance in the sense of both individuals and society. Research into factors increasing marital satisfaction of couples is necessary in terms of developing the required intervention methods (Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998).

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Longitudinal research about marital satisfaction has stated that satisfaction falls after the first years of marriage and reaches the level of the first years again in later years, forming a curved path (Rollins & Feldman, 1970). However, currently this statement is invalid and it was revealed that the satisfaction individuals obtain from marital experiences does not reduce or increase according to monotonous periodic cycles; contrarily, satisfaction is a dynamic variable affected by many factors (Lee, Zarit, Rovine, Birditt, & Fingerma, 2011). For example, it appears the marital satisfaction of women undergoes a pronounced fall through the years compared to men (Kurdek, 2005). The results of the same research supported the view that the fall in marital satisfaction is affected by mental problems experienced by men and women in the first four years of marriage and perceptions related to their marriage. This research also revealed that the marital satisfaction of individuals differs in line with the interaction between partners. However, when marriage is discussed, there is a significant correlation between expressing affect and marital satisfaction (Waldinger et al., 2004).

Expression of emotions occurs through a variety of pathways. For example, a person annoyed with their partner may express this by crying, shouting, sulking, or not speaking or a person happy with a gesture from their partner may show this by laughing, hugging or talking. Though different paths may be used to express negative and positive feelings, there is a common path to express these feelings and that is the use of humor (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). In marriage, humor may be used in a positive way to provide affection (Ammerman, 2002) or with the aim of regulating the relationship to resolve conflicts (de Koning & Weiss, 2002) or in a negative way to offend the other or express negative feelings (Saroglou, Lacour, & Demeure, 2010). For example, though men use humor in relationships more compared to women (Honeycutt & Brown, 1998), the content of this humor is negative in the form of hurting or demeaning the other (Saroglou et al., 2010).

The positive use of humor appears to be as important as the presence of feelings like love, trust and affection and creating healthy communication to successfully maintain a marriage (Johari, 2004). In fact, humor is one of the traits most sought after by individuals in relationships and has a very important place in romantic relationships (Bressler & Balshine, 2006). Considering relational humor, it can be divided into three as positive, negative and instrumental humor. Humor is attractive and is emphasized to increase intimacy in relationships so positive relational humor may strengthen a romantic relationship (de Koning & Weiss, 2002). Negative relational humor may increase manipulation by using humor aggressively in the relationship and as a result may weaken romantic relationships. On the other hand, instrumental relational humor may be used to avoid problematic situations and lighten tension. These three relational humor types may be presented by both the individual and their partner in the relationship. As a result, humor may simultaneously provide clues about the quality of the relationship (de Koning & Weiss, 2002; Eckstein, Junkins & McBrien, 2003).

The use of humor has a determinative role in sustaining affection in marriage and securing the connection between partners (Butzar & Kuiper, 2008). Transformation of discussions into a game in daily interactions, in addition to during conflicts, ending discussion enthusiastically and using humor appears to be necessary in terms of the continuity of the relationship (Driver & Gottman, 2004). Research investigating the correlation between marital satisfaction and the use of humor have shown that individuals using humor positively have higher marital satisfaction compared to those using humor negatively (Ammerman, 2002). Additionally, it was concluded that married individuals use humor more positively than divorced individuals (Saroglou et al., 2010). Individuals experiencing difficulty in adapting to marriage appear to have low sense of humor and use a more negative humor style (Kazarian & Martin, 2006). On the other hand, the use of negative humor appears to be very effective on the breakup of marriages (Eckstein et al., 2003). Similarly, high levels of negative communication are proposed to enhance marital stress (Gordon, Baucom, Epstein, Burnett, & Rankin, 1999).

Based on all this information and findings, this study aims to research the role of humor, which appears to be very important, in maintaining marriages and obtaining satisfaction from relationships. In line with this, the predictive role of relational humor styles of married individuals for marital satisfaction was investigated. The results of this research are important in terms of revealing the factors necessary to sustain positive communication in married life and to obtain satisfaction from marriage and will guide future research. Similarly, it is expected to contribute in terms of providing awareness for experts working in the field of marriage counseling about the humor styles used by partners when expressing feelings in the counseling process.

2. Method

2.1. Study Group

The study group in this research comprised married individuals living in Turkey. Care was taken that data obtained online were provided by married individuals with living partners. Of participants, 139 were female (61%) and 89 were male (39%). The ages of participants varied from 21-65 years ($M = 34.68$, $SD = 9.34$), while their partners' ages were 21-69 years ($M = 36.04$, $SD = 10.08$). When marriage durations are considered, they varied from 1-46 years ($M = 9.34$, $SD = 10.37$). Demographic information related to participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Study group detailed information ($N = 228$)

Variable		<i>n</i>	(%)
Education level	Primary school	13	5.7
	Middle School	8	3.5
	High school	16	7.0
	Associate degree	16	7.0
	Bachelor degree	139	61.0
	Graduate	36	15.8
Perceived social economic status	Low	20	8.7
	Middle	108	47.8
	High	100	43.8
Occupational status	Working	160	70.2
	Not working	68	29.8
Kinship with his/her wife	Kindred	17	7.5
	Non-kin	211	92.5
Number of marriages	One	223	97.8
	More than one	5	2.2
Number of children	No children	85	37.3
	Single child	69	30.3
	Two children	52	22.8
	Three or more children	22	9.6
Whether he/she has received psychological support before	Psychological support received	49	21.5
	Psychological support was not received	179	78.5

2.2. Data Collection Tools

2.2.1. Marital Life Scale (MLS): The MLS, developed by Tezer (1996), comprises 10 items (e.g., 'most of my expectations from marriage were realized') in a single dimension. The MLS has 5-point Likert type scoring from 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree). With possible points from 10 to 50, increasing points on the MLS represent increasing general satisfaction in marital relationships. Tezer (1996) reported the test-repeat test reliability for the MLS at a three-month interval was .85 with Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .91.

2.2.2. Relational Humor Inventory (RHI): The RHI, developed by de Koing and Weiss (2002), comprises 34 items. The inventory measures three sub-dimensions of positive, negative and instrumental relational humor of both the self and partner. The Turkish adaptation of the scale was completed by Bacanlı, İlhan and Cihan-Güngör (2012). The Turkish form of the RHI comprises 32 items and three sub-dimensions like the original form. The researchers reported the validity and reliability of the scale.

2.3. Data Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was performed with the aim of identifying whether relational humor of married individuals predicted marital satisfaction. Before beginning hierarchic regression analysis, correlation analysis was performed to determine the relationships between variables and mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis were examined. Additionally, the 10,000 bootstrapping procedure was used for regression analysis and confidence intervals were calculated.

3. Results

Firstly, the research investigated the correlations between marital satisfaction and relational humor. In line with this, Table 2 gives the correlations between variables and the descriptive statistics for the variables.

Table 2. Correlations among the variables and descriptive statistics

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Marital satisfaction	-						
2. Self-positive	.54**	-					
3. Self-negative	-.22	.32**	-				
4. Self-instrumental	.16*	.49**	.52**	-			
5. Partner-positive	.50**	.69**	.10	.38**	-		
6. Partner-negative	-.31**	.02	.39**	.48**	-.09	-	
7. Partner-instrumental	.31**	.57**	.26**	.56**	.55**	.37**	-
Mean	39.67	24.21	9.74	29.63	23.42	19.32	16.51
SD	8.42	6.86	3.61	9.95	6.83	7.58	5.99
Skewness	-.79	-.38	.35	.06	-.27	.72	-.05
Kurtosis	.34	-.47	.13	-.32	-.62	.75	-.63

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

As seen in Table 2, marital satisfaction of married individuals has a significant correlation with relational humor. Marital satisfaction displays a positive significant correlation with self-positive humor ($r = .54, p < .001$) and self-instrumental humor ($r = .16, p < .05$). However, marital satisfaction was determined to have a negative and significant correlation with self-negative humor ($r = -.22, p < .001$). Marital satisfaction can be said to have positive significant correlations for partner-positive humor ($r = .50, p < .001$) and partner-instrumental humor ($r = .31, p < .001$) and a negative significant correlation for partner-negative humor ($r = -.31, p < .001$).

After investigating correlations and determining there was no singularity between variables, regression analysis was used to check other variables. In this context, the Durbin-Watson value was investigated to confirm no collinearity between terms. The values were between 1.96 and 2.00 which abided by Field's (2016) recommendation. Additionally, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was investigated to confirm there was no multicollinearity. Values varied from 1.33 to 1.94 which abided by the conditions given by Field (2016). As a result, it was decided the data were suitable for regression analysis. The results for the multiple regression analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis results for predicting marriage satisfaction

Variable	Unstandardized		Bootstrapping BCa 95% CI		Standardized		R ²	F (2-224)
	B	SE _B	Lower limit	Upper limit	β	t		
(Constant)	26.58	1.87	22.90	30.28	-	14.20		
Self-positive	.77	.08	.63	.93	.63**	10.09	.34	38.43**
Self-negative	-.45	.15	-.75	-.16	-.20**	-3.05		
Self-instrumental	-.04	.06	-.16	.07	-.05	-.72		
(Constant)	32.33	2.07	28.26	36.40	-	15.66		
Partner-positive	.39	.09	.22	.56	.32**	4.55	.36	42.56**
Partner-negative	-.45	.07	-.56	-.29	-.38**	-6.17		
Partner-instrumental	.39	.11	.19	.60	.30**	3.75		

Note. ** $p < .001$

As seen in Table 3, the model where marital satisfaction was predicted by relational humor use by the self ($F_{(2-224)} = 38.43, p < .001$) and relational humor use by their partner ($F_{(2-224)} = 42.56, p < .001$) was significant. When dealt with in detail, self-positive humor ($\beta = .63, p < .001$) and self-negative humor ($\beta = -.20, p < .001$) significantly predicted marital satisfaction, while self-instrumental humor ($\beta = -.05, p > .05$) did not significantly predict

marital satisfaction. These two variables with significant predictive value explained 34% of the total marital satisfaction ($R^2 = .34$).

The marital satisfaction of married individuals was significantly predicted by partner-positive humor ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$), partner-negative humor ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$) and partner-instrumental humor ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$). Relational humor use by their partner was understood to explain 36% of the total variance ($R^2 = .36$) in marital satisfaction.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the predictive role of relational humor for marital satisfaction. In line with this, the six sub-dimensions of relational humor for self and partner (positive-instrumental-negative humor) were tested for whether they predict marital satisfaction or not. The results of the analysis observed that positive humor use by self and negative humor use by self significantly predicted marital satisfaction, while instrumental humor use by self did not significantly predict marital satisfaction. On the other hand, positive, negative and instrumental humor use by partners were identified to significantly predict marital satisfaction. These findings are discussed below in light of the literature.

Positive humor appears to be a humor style ensuring partners become closer and feel appreciated in relationships (de Koning & Weiss, 2002). At this same time it has aspects that strengthen connections between partners (Ziv, 1988), and ensure a healthy communication style increasing warmth between partners to strengthen connections (Bippus, 2000). The appropriate use of humor in potential conflict situations, especially, is known to be a feature of couples obtaining high levels of relationship satisfaction (Driver & Gottman, 2004). Humor is a part of sustaining relationships in couples with high relationship satisfaction and they are known to frequently use it to develop affection (Haas & Stafford, 2005). Additionally, previous research has indicated similar results (e.g., de Koning & Weiss, 2002; Ünal & Akgün, 2019). Research has stated that positive humor has the potential to reduce conflict (Bippus, 2003) and contribute constructively to relationships (Haas & Stafford, 2005). Additionally, Saroglou et al. (2010) revealed that individuals using positive humor themselves gain high satisfaction in terms of marital satisfaction for both themselves and their partners. In this context, the determination that positive humor use by themselves and partners positively predicts marital satisfaction in the research may be said to be consistent with the relevant literature and logical.

Negative humor is encountered as a humor style used to represent aggressiveness or to manipulate the opposite side (de Koning & Weiss, 2002). Humor may be used in negative form to provoke conflict during discussions between married couples and to not make hostility clear (Alberts, 1990). From this aspect, humor may cause distance in relationships (Jacobs, 1985). Especially when humor is used to demean the opposite side, the two partners cannot perceive this situation as constructive (Driver & Gottman, 2004). The use of humor in this way causes weakening of relationships. Similarly, a person's perception of the use of negative humor by their partner appears to be associated with low marital satisfaction (de Koning & Weiss, 2002; Jacobs, 1985). As a result, it is plausible that negative humor use by the individual and their partner negatively predicts marital satisfaction as revealed in this research. Additionally, similar results are observed in the relevant literature. Research has revealed that negative humor in romantic relationships is a factor which may reduce marital satisfaction (e.g., Johari, 2004). Additionally, according to the results of a meta-analysis by Hall (2017) negative relational humor negatively predicted marital satisfaction, as in the findings of this research.

Instrumental humor represents the extent to which humor is used to prevent tension in a person's relationships and in attempts to repair negative feelings (de Koning & Weiss, 2002). Instrumental relational humor is the use of humorous messages or behavior to reach a communication target specific to romantic relationships, like reducing stress or solving problems (Hall, 2013). Humor used only in this fashion, in other words narrowing the use of humor as a tool, is stated not to positively affect relationships in the literature (Hall, 2017). The use of humor instrumentally may be an indicator of directing conflict, expressing hidden thoughts and the need to apologize in relationships (Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008; de Koning & Weiss, 2002) and this are more common in relationships with less satisfaction. Additionally, this style of humor may be characterized as avoiding humor (de Koning & Weiss, 2002). Generally, it appears that a feature of this type of humor is to change the focus of conversation during conflict (Butzer & Kuiper, 2008) and to completely avoid talking (Alberts, 1990). In line with this, it was revealed not to affect relationship satisfaction in the scope of a meta-analysis (Hall, 2017). Within the scope of this research, consistent with the literature, instrumental

humor used by the self negatively predicted marital satisfaction. However, also within the research, the use of instrumental research by the partner appeared to positively predict marital satisfaction. This situation is thought to be due to instrumental humor having the trait of creating a positive moment (de Koning & Weiss, 2002) by distracting negative feelings and reducing tension during conflict discussions.

It is necessary to consider limitations when assessing the findings obtained in this study. Firstly, there is a limitation due to the cross-sectional design of the study. At this point caution is recommended when dealing with causative relationships between the study variables. Additionally, there are limitations due to the nature of the scale tools used. Concepts should only be assessed within the scope of these self-report scale tools and future studies should include scale tools based on different techniques.

With all these limitations, it appears significant findings were obtained about how married individuals may experience more quality in their marital lives. It may be stated that married individuals should use positive relational humor to strengthen their marital satisfaction and reduce the use of negative relational humor. Additionally, instrumental humor use by partners was determined to be an element that may increase marital satisfaction.

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