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Cecily Cooper

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ABSTRACT

A number of studies have demonstrated that humor can impact both horizontal and vertical relationships in organizations, but little is known about the interpersonal processes underlying this link. By integrating theory and research from the fields of philosophy, social psychology, communications, and leadership, it is possible to illuminate a combination of processes which, considered collectively, explain humor's ability to create, maintain, impede, or destroy relationships at work. I first review the classical theories of humor, which explain what motivates individuals to express humor and what determines humor enjoyment. However, since these frameworks focus on humor at the individual-level of analysis, they cannot speak to the *social* processes involved in a humor exchange. Research in the fields of social psychology, communications, and leadership provides insight regarding the remaining social mechanisms. In sum, it appears that interpersonal humor operates through four related but distinct processes: affect-reinforcement, similarity-attraction, self-disclosure, and hierarchical salience. These social processes are proposed to function in addition to (not in lieu of) the individual-level mechanisms the classical humor theories describe. The discussion, thus, culminates in a relational process model of humor, contributing a more fine-grained understanding of interpersonal humor to the organizational literature.

KEYWORDS

affect-reinforcement ■ communications ■ humor ■ self-disclosure ■ similarity-attraction ■ workplace relations

The sharing of humor at work is a prevalent and pervasive phenomenon. As a social activity, humor has implications for interpersonal dynamics and relationships in organizations. Although humor research in the management literature has not been prolific, studies have demonstrated that humor can affect horizontal (e.g. Bradney, 1957) and vertical (e.g. Cooper, 2004) relationships. In an ethnography of sales associates in a department store, Bradney (1957) found that humor was a very salient aspect of the store's climate and that participating in the joking had a considerable effect on the ability of an associate to create bonds with co-workers. Bradney observed, 'Those who joke readily are obviously very much more popular than those who do not' (1957: 186). Humor is also an important aspect of manager-subordinate relations. Managers who use humor well are perceived by their employees as being more relationship-oriented (Decker & Rotondo, 2001). Leaders' humor expression is also significantly related to the affect and professional respect dimensions of leader-member exchange (LMX) quality and indirectly related to the loyalty dimension (i.e. this relationship was moderated by the tone of the humor) (Cooper, 2004).

These findings in the academic literature are complemented by a plethora of articles in the popular press which extol the virtues of humor for building relationships (e.g. Bowling, 2000; Caudron, 1992; Farrell, 1998) and are also corroborated by many examples of unconventional but effective leaders who have harnessed the power of humor to build relationships with their employees, including Scott McNealy at Sun Microsystems (Hof et al., 1996) and Herb Kelleher at Southwest Airlines (O'Reilly & Pfeffer, 1995). Taken together, the academic and popular press literatures indicate consistent support for the premise that humor plays a significant role in workplace relations. Humor dynamics can facilitate or detract from the formation of new relationships, as well as strengthen or destroy existing relationships.

In summary, management scholars have found a link between humor and relationship quality, but theory and research have fallen short in clearly explaining why this link occurs. The dearth of knowledge in this area is problematic, because workplace relationships have distinct implications for both individuals and firms. For individuals, relationships can be instrumental to achieving rewards, such as upward mobility (Podolny & Baron, 1997), or can even be considered ends in themselves, because colleagues affect a person's day-to-day enjoyment at work (Gersick et al., 2000). For firms, internal relationships can affect organizational advantage since these relationships are key to creating intellectual capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Research on humor and interpersonal relations in the management literature has addressed issues related to power, leadership, and groups but,

as the upcoming review of this literature highlights, has not investigated underlying social processes.¹ When two individuals share humor at work how does this experience bring them closer together, create barriers between them, or push them apart? To answer this question, I follow the review of the management literature with a summary of the classical theories of humor (e.g. Superiority theory) and note each humor theory's specific contribution. In this section, I also delve into how these theories inform research on humor *in organizations*, a specific context with unique features. One similarity across the humor theories, however, is that they focus on humor at the individual-level of analysis (i.e. explaining what motivates individuals to experience or express humor and what determines humor enjoyment) rather than as a *social* phenomenon. To uncover the remaining social mechanisms, research in the fields of social psychology and communications is, then, presented. In sum, I create an integrated relational process framework to explain how humor operates to affect relationships in the workplace by incorporating extant theories of social interaction with individual-level theories of humor. I begin this discussion by clarifying the meaning of the term 'humor'.

Definition of humor

The construct of humor, does not readily lend itself to a single, generalized definition. The expansiveness of this construct requires that researchers place bounds on the specific aspect of humor that is their object of interest. Three research perspectives exist in the humor literature in which theorists have attempted to offer definitions of humor. I will review each of these conceptualizations briefly before stating the definition of humor chosen for this discussion.

First, incongruity theory tries to describe the humor object, itself, and what attributes make something humorous and what motivates individuals to experience this humor. Simply put, this theory maintains that for an object to be humorous some kind of incongruity must exist (a more thorough review of this theory is offered in the next section). Second, other researchers who study 'sense of humor' describe humor as an individual trait, 'a way of looking at the world; it is a style, a means of self-protection and getting along' (Thorson & Powell, 1993: 13). The trait perspective considers humor to be an individual difference in the propensity to create and appreciate humorous stimuli (Martin & Lefcourt, 1984; Mindess, 1971) and some research goes so far as to relate 'sense of humor' to established personality constructs such as sociability and masculinity (i.e. also known as agency) (Hehl & Ruch, 1985; Kuiper & Borowicz-Sibenik, 2005).

Third, many researchers study humor as a social phenomenon, a communication shared between individuals. Most of the humor literature from the management field fits within this category. Empirical research on the social aspects of humor usually defines humor using one of two methods. Some researchers, trying to code or quantify observable humorous events, put forth conditions that must be met in order to classify an event as a humorous episode (Coser, 1960; Duncan, 1985; Scogin & Pollio, 1980). For example, Scogin and Pollio limited their raters to only classify an event as a humorous incident if the 'comment or action by a group member . . . drew audible laughter from two or more group members' (1980: 835). Other empirical researchers, particularly those using ethnographic type methods, do not offer a pre-established definition of humor but define the construct as various events present themselves during the observation (Collinson, 1988; Vinton, 1989).

The focus of the current discussion is most closely related to the third perspective mentioned above, regarding the creation and sharing of humor between individuals at work, which is also comparable to the focus in Cooper's (2005) discussion of ingratiation humor. Thus, Cooper's (2005) definition will be employed, defining 'humor' as 'any event shared by an agent (e.g. an employee) with another individual (i.e. a target) that is intended to be amusing to the target and that the target perceives as an intentional act' (p. 767). This definition is appropriate because it 1) focuses on the intentional use of humor, 2) accounts for humor that may not have been originally produced by an individual but is shared by the individual (e.g. cartoons), 3) encompasses all types and forms of humor (e.g. sarcasm, puns, visual images), and 4) specifies a judgment by the audience as to the intention of the stimuli but not the effect (i.e. the source may find a joke humorous but the target is offended).

Humor and interpersonal relationships at work

In the management literature, a body of research exists investigating humor and interpersonal relationships in conjunction with the topics of power, leadership, and groups. This research enhances knowledge of humor's relational impact in the workplace, but there are still many questions which remain unanswered. As mentioned, this literature has yet to address underlying relational processes (an exception which will be reviewed is Terrion and Ashforth, 2002, but this research is restricted to the group-level of analysis). Although establishing a link between humor and relevant outcome variables (e.g. leader performance or manager-subordinate relationship quality) is

necessary in order to assess humor's relevance as a construct of interest, future research must continue to clarify *why* the effects found in prior studies occur.

Humor and power

Humor affects and is affected by power relations. Joking relationships can be used as an index reflecting the existence of power and changes in power (Dwyer, 1991; Kahn, 1989). Humor can be focused vertically to members of a lower or higher status or horizontally to members of the same status and can vary in form (e.g. teasing, bantering, and self-ridicule) (Vinton, 1989). One of the first studies of organizational humor, specifically addressing power, was Lundberg's (1969) ethnography of employees in a motor repair shop. He found: 1) if the initiator of humor is of lower status than the present target, then the joke is not considered funny, 2) peers similarly ranked in status have more fun together, and 3) if the focus of a joke is of lower status than the initiator, the lower status individual is unlikely to joke back to the initiator.

Subsequent studies have validated certain findings by Lundberg (1969), whereas some have questioned his contentions. In her study of humor in a small, family-owned business, Vinton (1989) found that, similar to Lundberg (1969), teasing was always directed from high status to lower status employees with the purpose of 'getting things done'. However, contrary to Lundberg (1969), Vinton (1989) also found that bantering about non-task specific or non-work issues was used by all levels of employees to employees at all other levels. The bantering helped to alleviate status differences and, in turn, facilitated cooperative working between employees from different levels, which was a norm in the organization. Duncan (1985) found a similar 'teasing' effect in his survey of a number of business and health care industry workers in which less motivated employees were more likely to be the focus of jokes. However, Duncan's results do not specify whether the teasing was task-related as found by Vinton (1989). In addition, Duncan's finding that managers in the business organizations were perceived to be the least likely to initiate jokes contradicts Vinton's (1989) finding that managers were usually the source of teasing. Yet, this contradiction could be explained by the fact that Duncan did not differentiate between types of humor as did Vinton (1989).

These studies examine humor and power dynamics as part of a larger social system. By focusing on power, however, these researchers observe humor as an artifact of the social system but do not consider the feelings of the parties involved, ignoring the issue of relationships. Thus, this research cannot help identify *why* humor affects relationship quality.

Humor and leadership

In the last ten years more scholars have begun studying humor and leadership in conjunction. Most of this research focuses on humor as a leadership behavior but assesses outcomes such as performance, rather than manager-subordinate relationship quality. For example, an empirical study by Avolio et al. (1999) looked at humor, other leadership behaviors (e.g. transformational and transactional behaviors), and various outcomes within a large Canadian financial institution and found that the use of humor moderated the effect of leadership style on individual and unit-level performance.

A study by Decker and Rotondo (2001) also studied leader humor but, instead, took a dyadic approach and surveyed employees regarding their bosses' behaviors and their perceptions of these behaviors. These findings demonstrated that positive humor was related to higher ratings of leader task- and relationship-behaviors and overall effectiveness, whereas negative humor was negatively related to these behaviors (but not overall effectiveness). Thus, these results indicate that subordinates perceive leaders who use humor well as more relationship-oriented but still did not directly address relationship quality. The only study to directly measure relationship quality was by Cooper (2004) who found a correlation between a leader's use of humor and certain dimensions of leader-member exchange quality (i.e. relationship quality) but even this research failed to identify the processes underlying this empirical relationship. Humor's effect in the aforementioned leader-member relationships may have resulted partly from ingratiation processes (Cooper, 2005) but this argument is also limited in that ingratiation processes cannot explain all humor interactions shared between leaders and their employees. Moreover, Cooper (2005) does not argue that ingratiation is the sole mechanism underlying humor – only that humor can successfully ingratiate one person to another.

Humor and groups

Finally, a number of studies at the group-level of analysis have focused on humor and group cohesiveness. This research acknowledges that humor within groups can be a cause, symbol, or facilitator of group cohesiveness (Duncan, 1982; Duncan et al., 1990). Much work in this area is based on a model by Martineau (1972) which outlines the conditions in which group humor can be beneficial or detrimental to group cohesiveness. The model takes into account the structural situation (i.e. whether humor is initiated by the ingroup or the outgroup), the target of the humor (i.e. the ingroup or the outgroup), and the type of humor used (i.e. whether it esteems or disparages the target group). According to Martineau (1972), the classification of group

humor as esteeming or disparaging (i.e. a positive/negative connotation) does not automatically imply that one type of humor is 'good' and the other 'bad'. Rather, the function of the humorous event is dependent upon how people within the group perceive the event. For example, if disparaging humor is initiated by the ingroup and focused on the ingroup, it can affect that group positively by solidifying the group or negatively by causing social disintegration of the group.

Scogin and Pollio (1980) published one of the more thorough empirical studies investigating the relationship between group humor and group cohesiveness. Following Martineau's (1972) recommendation, Scogin and Pollio (1980) attempted to take into account groups' perceptions of humorous events in their observational study of humorous episodes within six different group settings, including both short-term and ongoing groups. Their findings illustrate that both positively and negatively toned humor can have positive effects on group cohesion. Yet, negatively toned humor could also have a negative effect depending on the relationship of the group members; ongoing groups used both types of humor, while short-term groups avoided negatively toned humor. Although the authors do not specifically discuss the effects of using negative humor in short-term groups, they noted that the short duration groups were less likely to produce negative humor, overall, a phenomenon also noted by Goodchilds (1972). Negatively toned humor may be more risky if there is no shared history among participants. In fact, after interpreting their data, Scogin and Pollio (1980) found that the percentage of negatively toned humorous remarks the group made could serve as a proxy for group cohesiveness.

A recent study by Terrion and Ashforth (2002) builds on these findings by examining the process through which humor helps foster group identity and cohesion. Through their observation and interviews of Canadian police officers in a six-week executive development course, the researchers studied how putdown humor helped this temporary group become a cohesive unit, finding that the increasing use of such humor signaled growing trust and solidarity as the group progressed through various stages. Although this research only examined one type of humor (i.e. putdown humor) in one type of context (i.e. a Canadian police officer training course), it adds to existing knowledge of humor and group dynamics, because it makes the conceptual leap from looking at *whether* humor and group cohesion are related, which had already been determined, to *why* this relationship occurs (i.e. by signaling trust and solidarity). In doing so, Terrion and Ashforth (2002) offer insight into humor processes at the group-level, which is a noteworthy contribution, but still do not speak to processes at the dyadic-level which are likely to be quite different.

As a basis for this investigation, it makes sense to begin by re-visiting the classical theories of humor. The four frameworks reviewed in the next section constitute the seminal research on humor, forming the conceptual basis for humor scholarship in different fields (e.g. psychology, philosophy), and are often cited by organizational scholars doing research on humor (e.g. Lundberg, 1969, refers to superiority theory; Coser, 1959, to relief theory; Duncan et al., 1990, reviews both incongruity theory and superiority theory; Clouse and Spurgeon, 1995, mention incongruity theory, relief theory, and superiority theory). Any efforts to clarify and advance knowledge of humor's interpersonal functioning must begin with consideration of these theories.

Theories of humor

Theories about the purpose of humor have been put forth since the time of Plato and Aristotle (circa 400 BC). Although more current philosophers have tried to create an all-encompassing theory of humor (Morreall, 1987), none have yet succeeded in producing such a theory. That said, existing humor theories can explain what causes individuals to experience or express humor (i.e. what motivates humor) as well as the processes by which people evaluate humor (i.e. how they judge whether or not a humor instance is enjoyable). Each theory is reviewed, in turn, with a depiction of how they interrelate presented in Figure 1.

The motivation of humor

Historically, there have been three primary theories of humor in the literature: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory (see Levine, 1969; Morreall, 1987, for reviews). These theories offer different explanations for why people experience or express humor, in other words, what motivates humor in individuals. Some reviews identify additional frameworks (e.g. psychoanalytic and configurational theories) related to this issue, however most of these can be considered subclasses of the aforementioned theories. Others have received so little attention in subsequent literature (i.e. ambivalence, surprise, and instinct theories) that they are not reviewed here (see Keith-Spiegel, 1972, for a review).

Relief theory

The most highly developed relief theory of humor is attributed to Sigmund Freud (1950, 1960). Freud believed that the pleasure derived from humor

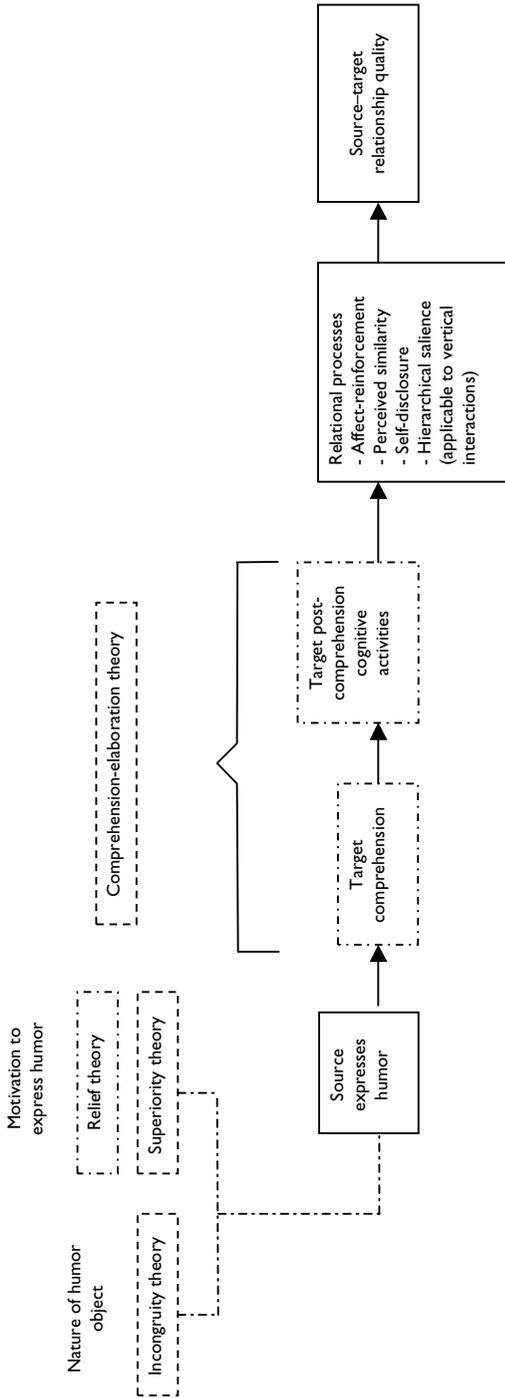


Figure 1 The processes through which a humor event affects a relationship^a

^a The existing humor theories are indicated by boxes with dashed lines. These have been included in order to visually illustrate the portion of this process where these theories apply and how they are positioned in relation to the mediating relational processes proposed herein.

proceeded from a saving in expenditure of affect. He explains the process more specifically in the following way: 'the essence of humour is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and overrides with a jest the possibility of such an emotional display' (1950: 216). Taking a humorous attitude, he reasoned, was a defense mechanism by the ego and super-ego to reject reality and protect itself from suffering, for example, a criminal making a joke before being led to the gallows. Freud also believed that humor was a means by which people could disguise and release their sexual or aggressive impulses without guilt, giving them relief from these urges.

Superiority theory

Superiority theory views humor as arising from a feeling of superiority over others (e.g. ethnic jokes) or over one's own former position (e.g. laughing after making some sort of mistake) (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952). A subset of this perspective is disparagement theory which posits that humor comprises 'humorous material in which one protagonist disparages or aggresses against another one' (Wicker et al., 1980). Superiority theory is distinct from disparagement theory in that, according to superiority theory, humor does not have to be 'aggressive' towards the other party per se (i.e. it can merely reflect feelings of condescension) and it can be focused towards one's self. However, the theories are also very similar; while experiencing humor one person feels superior over another person, including the former self, or people.

Incongruity theory

Whereas, the previous two theories describe conditions which may motivate humor within people, the third theory of humor elicitation, incongruity theory, describes the humor object (i.e. the stimulus that is humorous, such as a joke, cartoon, etc.) (Morreall, 1987). Incongruity theory, described by Kant, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Koestler, and others, maintains that for an object to be humorous some kind of incongruity must exist. The incongruity can exist between what an individual expects and what actually occurs (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995), when an individual perceives a situation simultaneously with two incompatible frames of reference, or when meanings of the same word or phrase can coexist (Frecknall, 1994).

The evaluation of humor

Recently, a fourth theory of humor, comprehension-elaboration theory, has appeared in the psychology literature. Rather than explaining what

motivates humor within individuals, however, this theory focuses on how people evaluate humor. Stated differently, comprehension-elaboration theory explains why individuals might find some humor amusing but other humor not amusing or even offensive (i.e. it explains why humor can be a double-edged sword). This framework is more comprehensive than the prior three in that it takes context into account and it can be applied to both social as well as nonsocial situations. Accordingly, when this theory is considered in conjunction with extant research on workplace humor, it can delineate the factors which influence the enjoyment of humor in an organizational setting. I first review the theory and, then, incorporate research in the management literature to demonstrate the application of this theory specifically to a work context. Doing so offers an explanation to a question which has puzzled both academics and practitioners alike: why does some workplace humor elicit positive reactions and other humor elicit negative reactions?

Comprehension-elaboration theory

This most recent theory of humor specifies the conditions under which individuals will find a particular humor event amusing (Wyer, 2004; Wyer & Collins, 1992). Comprehension-elaboration theory states that the degree to which someone will enjoy a humor attempt is first determined by how difficult the humor is to comprehend and, second, by the cognitive elaboration the target performs after comprehending the humor. A particular humorous event may initially begin to elicit amusement, but the individual will then enact 'post-comprehension cognitive activities' (Wyer, 2004: 209). At this time, the person may think more about the humor, itself, or may think outside of the humor. People will be motivated to think outside of the humor if they have concerns about issues such as: 1) the motives of the person who conveyed the story, 2) whether the humor is socially (in)appropriate in a situation (e.g. the workplace), and/or 3) whether the humor is offensive to themselves or other groups. During the elaboration process, amusement may increase if the humor is particularly relevant and appropriate to the situation. Alternatively, the immediate enjoyment of the humor may decrease if, upon elaborating, the individual finds the humor to be hurtful or concludes the person expressing the humor had an undesirable motive.

Evaluating humor at work

Much research on humor in organizations has acknowledged that humor can be a 'double-edged sword' (e.g. Collinson, 2002; Malone, 1980), but this duality of humor is not limited to the work context. As discussed previously, comprehension-elaboration theory is a general theory of humor evaluation

which can be applied in any context and which explains why humor can be offensive across various contexts. That said, the comprehension-elaboration framework can be applied to a work context by integrating extant research on organizational humor with the three premises of the framework mentioned above (i.e. regarding motives, appropriateness, and offensiveness).

The first factor to be considered during the elaboration stage of cognitive activity involves a simple attribution of motives to the source. These attributional processes are basic cognitive functions of perceivers and should not vary according to context. Regardless of whether the perceivers are at work, their motive judgment will be influenced by factors such as the nature of their prior relationship with that person and how long they have known that individual. For example, if a manager and subordinate have a high quality relationship, that manager is more likely to attribute positive motives to the subordinate when interpreting his or her actions (in this case expressing humor) (Green & Mitchell, 1979). The converse is true if they have a poor relationship. This basic attributional process explains why humor can operate differently for strangers than for intimates.

For the latter two factors context is more relevant and certain unique attributes of the work context should influence what issues perceivers consider (i.e. appropriateness to the situation and offensiveness to the audience). Comprehension-elaboration theory claims that perceivers will be motivated to think outside of the humor if they have concerns regarding whether the humor is appropriate in a particular situation which, in this case, is work. Two attributes of the work context which are relevant to this dimension are group norms and organizational culture. Although groups within an organization will generally share the organization's values and norms, sometimes they do not. If subcultures arise within a firm, norms of certain groups may differ from or even contradict the organization's culture (Martin, 1992). Hence, these influences may sometimes be distinct. Additionally, in organizations the usefulness of the humor for the situation is typically a salient concern. Humor can be used to decrease conflict, release tension, increase morale, or communicate a message (e.g. pressure others to get to work) (Collinson, 1988; Lundberg, 1969; Roy, 1960). These functions of humor facilitate rather than detract from the work process and to the extent that the humor fulfills such a function it will be considered acceptable.

Finally, perceivers will be motivated to think outside of the humor if they have concerns about the humor being offensive to themselves or other groups. Obviously, perceivers will be aware of their own values and able to compare the humor to their value set. If they interact regularly with other people who are audience to the humor (which is likely in a work context), then they may also have knowledge of others' values. Additionally, perceivers

may make assumptions regarding others' values. For example, a perceiver may assume that a 'blond joke' will be offensive to a woman or that a racial remark will be offensive to a minority since they are members of the disparaged group. As an aside, this tendency is likely to occur even though research has not proven a clear link between demographic attributes and humor preferences (Cantor, 1976; Henkin & Fish, 1986).

To summarize, the focus of each theory is detailed in Table 1. Each contributes in part to our understanding of humor, but none can speak to which processes may be involved in building, maintaining, or destroying relationships. They do not connect the appreciation (or not) of a humor episode back to the other party involved in the exchange. For insight into relational processes, I turned to research in social psychology, communications, and leadership, looking particularly for theories of dyadic interaction that may appropriately complete the framework. A consideration of the leadership literature was necessary, since there might be humor processes in an organizational context applicable specifically to managers and subordinates (i.e. when humor is shared vertically) which are unique from those operating amongst co-workers (i.e. when humor is shared laterally). A thorough analysis of these literatures indicated four processes through which humor likely operates. These are described in the next section.

Relational processes of humor

Humor is known to have the ability to serve several functions at once (Holmes, 2000). Because of this multi-faceted quality, no single process could be identified as the 'sole mechanism' underlying the link between humor and

Table 1 Summary of independent and dependent variables addressed by humor theories

<i>Theory</i>	<i>Independent variable</i>	<i>Mediator</i>	<i>Dependent variable(s)</i>
Relief theory	Undesirable situation	None	Humor expression
Superiority theory	Superiority over another or self	None	Feelings of mirth, laughter, and/or humor expression
Incongruity theory	Incongruity between expectations and reality	None	Feelings of mirth and/or laughter
Comprehension-elaboration theory	Expressed humor	Cognitive activities	Evaluation of the humor

relationship quality. Rather, four processes are proposed to play a role: affect-reinforcement, perceived similarity, self-disclosure, and hierarchical salience. Any of these four may be primed depending on the nature of the humor event. The first three are relevant to any relationship whereas the last, hierarchical salience, is relevant to relationships which involve a power differential (i.e. when humor is shared vertically). As illustrated in Figure 1, these processes are not proposed as a substitute for the various humor theories but, rather, should augment these individual-level theories to explain social implications. I will offer an overview of the four relational processes before describing each individually.

Discriminating between the processes

The processes are conceptually distinct but closely related in that they all link to affect in some way. Because of this commonality, a singular process may act during a humor sharing encounter, but sometimes two or more processes may operate simultaneously. The affect-reinforcement mechanism, which will be discussed first, is the process having the greatest overlap with the other three. Although discussing humor as an affective phenomenon is not novel in and of itself (e.g. Carnevale & Isen, 1986; Cooper, 2005), noting the specific mechanism as 'affect-reinforcement' provides necessary clarification (Byrne & Neuman, 1992; Clore & Byrne, 1974). Additionally, considering the four processes together offers a holistic picture of how interpersonal humor operates and further emphasizes that there are other relevant mechanisms related to but more nuanced than affect-reinforcement (e.g. self-disclosure). That said, it may be possible for the affect-reinforcement mechanism to operate without priming the other specific downstream processes, depending on the content of the message.

Existing theory and research on similarity-attraction, self-disclosure, and hierarchy (i.e. in the literature on leader distance) imply that these three mechanisms are inherently affective phenomena. The processes of similarity-attraction and affect-reinforcement are inextricably linked because people are attracted to (or like) others to whom they are more similar (see Griffitt, 1974, for a complete discussion). The literature on self-disclosure indicates that disclosure is significantly related to liking (Jourard, 1971). The link between hierarchy and affect is less explicit in the literature, but discussion by Antonakis and Atwater (2002) suggests that if subordinates perceive there is a greater 'distance' between themselves and their managers that this perception will impede them from forming close relations. Thus, the latter three processes are ultimately driven by affect, but each represents a distinct mechanism through which affect flows.

For simplicity, the processes will be described in terms of a single humorous expression shared between two people, wherein one person is noted as the 'source' of the humor and the audience is the 'target'. However, as two people interact over time, humor often becomes a shared event which is bi-directional in nature (Holmes, 2000; Locke, 1996). The 'target' may end up joking back to the 'source', thus switching their roles. As humor builds or detracts from the relationship, it encourages or discourages the other party from expressing humor. The theoretical paradigms associated with the processes (e.g. self-disclosure) account for why this cyclical pattern will emerge, and this dynamic will be elaborated in the concluding remarks.

Affect-reinforcement

The interpersonal attraction literature contends that individuals are attracted to people based upon the extent to which they elicit positive affect or are associated with another stimulus that elicits positive affect (Byrne & Neuman, 1992). Specifically, the reinforcement-affect model of attraction by Clore and Byrne (1974) describes how social communications can be either reinforcing (by eliciting positive affect) or punishing (by eliciting negative affect) with the model operating in much the same way as classical conditioning. Humor is one form of social communication which acts as a reinforcing or punishing event, since humor manipulates affect (Baron, 1984; Carnevale & Isen, 1986; Isen et al., 1987).

Evidence of this social process appears in ethnographic research on humor. In her study of a pediatric clinic, Locke (1996) observed that pediatricians often enact humorous performances (i.e. comedic acts) with patients and their families in order to manage families' emotions, and that these interactions cause the family to like the doctor more and feel more comfortable with him or her during treatment. As described by the reinforcement-affect model, the humorous performances function as reinforcing (i.e. positive) events. Additionally, these performances are so powerful and effective at eliciting positive affect that they are able to do so despite the fact that families often harbor negative emotions when arriving to a doctor's appointment.

A field study by Wanzer et al. (1996) also indicates the viability of this affective mechanism, finding that individuals who were perceived as more humorous (i.e. having a high 'humor orientation') were judged to be more socially attractive by their acquaintances. As a reinforcing event, humor facilitated a relational link between the two parties. Similarly, individuals with a clowning, rather than sarcastic, sense of humor were judged to be more popular group members (Goodchilds, 1959). Although sarcastic individuals were judged to be relatively less popular, this effect was attenuated

when rater sex was considered, since men were more likely to find people with a sarcastic wit funny. In other words, sarcasm was more likely to be a reinforcing, rather than punishing, event for men in this study as compared to women. For those who saw it as a reinforcing event, they also judged the sarcastic source to be more popular with others.

Additionally, the affect-reinforcement process is relevant for humor originating from the source (e.g. a spontaneous joke) or humor created elsewhere but shared by the source (e.g. canned joke, cartoon), since the target will associate the positive or negative affect generated by either types of event with the source.

Proposition 1: Humor can affect relationship quality by eliciting affective reactions.

Perceived similarity

Perceived similarity is the degree to which an individual believes that he or she is similar to a target individual. Years of research on similarity-attraction theory has demonstrated that people are attracted to others who share similar attitudes and beliefs (Byrne, 1971; Griffitt, 1974). This research is relevant to the current discussion, because it implies that people will also be attracted to those who find the same events or stimuli humorous (i.e. it will be reinforcing). Sharing a humorous experience allows an individual to validate that he or she is interpreting a 'humorous' stimulus correctly (i.e. as being funny), and will, in turn, make the parties involved in the experience feel closer.

In organizations, humor can signal similarity or dissimilarity between parties in many ways. Sometimes employees use humor to signal their membership in a certain group and distinction from other groups in an organization and/or as a way of expressing their attitude regarding certain topics (obviously this latter point is also closely related to self-disclosure as will be discussed below). Collinson (1988) observed this type of differentiation through humor by shop floor workers who created a joking culture in order to define their identity as distinct from management. By derogating management through humor, the workers were able to maintain a sense of dignity even though they were forced to work in very poor conditions. Granted, Collinson (1988) did not directly assess how this humor affected the relationships among the workers, however if a worker 'poked fun' at management in front of a co-worker of a similar mindset, similarity-attraction theory would predict that priming their common group membership (i.e. as shop floor workers) and discovering they hold a similar attitude (i.e. disdain for management) should bring these workers closer.

Even aside from controversial topics (as in the above example), a simple humor exchange can also highlight similarity or dissimilarity. To illustrate, I will recount an experience shared by an acquaintance who is a real estate agent (referred to as Katie). Katie had not been working at her agency very long when she looked out the window of the office and saw a colleague arriving in her car. Although this colleague had been out showing property, she now appeared to be alone. However, as Katie watched, her co-worker got out of the car, opened the trunk, and a man climbed out of the trunk. Sharon, who was in the office at the same time, was also privy to this odd occurrence and she and Katie had quite a laugh over it (which they shared with that colleague after her trunk-riding customer left). Interestingly, though, others in the office did not find the incident as funny as Katie and Sharon. Rather, it worried them and they expressed concern for their co-worker's safety. Katie found their reaction to be odd. Although Katie did not know all of her colleagues very well by this time, she disclosed that, after that day, she expected she and Sharon would be friends. Through this single incident Katie was able to distinguish certain people she might be more similar to in the office (i.e. Sharon as well as the colleague who let the customer ride in her trunk) than others and felt incrementally closer to these women simply because of this incident. Simply stated, humor was a means by which the co-workers could identify similarities.

Proposition 2: Humor can affect relationship quality by informing similarity perceptions.

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is a critical aspect of relationship-building and, in general, higher levels of self-disclosure lead to increased liking for the discloser (Collins & Miller, 1994). Notably, this process is also relevant for understanding humor, because expressing humor at work is a form of self-disclosure. For example, when an employee moves into a new office, he or she may incorporate humorous elements into the office's décor, such as a cartoon tacked to a bulletin board or a coffee mug with a pithy saying. By displaying such humor, this employee is sharing a special type of information. Humor is an aspect of people which they are not required to share at work, but which they may voluntarily disclose and, through doing so, help others come to know them on a deeper level.

Through this self-disclosure, humor then has the power to increase liking and link parties together or, conversely, decrease liking and push them apart. Disclosing behavior does not always lead to liking, particularly if the disclosure violates normative expectations (Derlega et al., 1993). In such

cases, disclosure may actually make people appear less attractive (i.e. have the opposite effect of what was intended). Because of the risks of disclosure, people can be wary of expressing humor at work if they are not well acquainted with their co-workers. To clarify, for the process of self-disclosure, the potential diametric effect of humor at work may be caused by factors such as content or timing. As mentioned earlier, the target will evaluate this type of information during the 'elaboration' phase of humor interpretation, as described by comprehension-elaboration theory.

For example, although employing racial or sexually motivated jokes in the workplace is generally considered risky, people still often do (Elsesser & Peplau, 2006; Leap & Smeltzer, 1984; Markels, 1997). I distinctly recall an acquaintance, who works in public accounting, mentioning that co-workers in a prior job shared sexual jokes regularly, it was a 'totally acceptable' norm within that group, and that she enjoyed that type of joking. She was then quick to clarify, however, that she would not attempt this type of sexual humor in her new job, because she was afraid of how her new co-workers would perceive her. She implicitly understood that using sexual humor in her new job would disclose her preference for this type of humor, and that this could elicit a negative reaction to her as the source. The content (i.e. sexual) would be non-normative in that context.

Yet, what would happen if a new employee expressed sexually tinged humor at the former employer mentioned, where jokes of this type are supposedly common? Notably, there could also be a negative reaction to the humor source in this instance, depending on the timing of the utterance. Research has shown that there is some social consensus regarding the types of information which are appropriate to disclose in new relationships and that more intimate information is typically shared only as more time is spent with the other person (Berger et al., 1976). If people disclose information out of sequence (or in this case types of humor), they may risk alienating others or, at the very least, being perceived as having something wrong with them. Thus, expressing sexual humor, even in a context which may generally condone such activities, may be risky for a newcomer if this humor is perceived as an instance of over-disclosure (i.e. disclosing too much too soon). Notably, the same humor event (i.e. sexual joke) may elicit a positive reaction if used at a more appropriate (i.e. later) time, because content and timing can interact. This tendency for newcomer-individuals to moderate their humor disclosures at work has also been acknowledged by Bradney (1957) in her observation of department store employees: 'Joking is usually learned by a newcomer after she has been in the store about three weeks and it takes about the same length of time for her to be accepted as a "joker" by the rest of the department' (p. 185).

However, an important nuance of this argument must also be acknowledged: in addition to being a form of self-disclosure, humor should also be able to facilitate the disclosing of other personal information since, at work, individuals often 'confess' more sensitive information in a humorous manner in order to save face with colleagues (Holmes, 2000). Yet, the tendency for people to disclose personal information in a humorous way is distinct from the argument being made here which is that by simply expressing humor, and disclosing humor preferences, a person is offering a window into his or her character.

Proposition 3: Humor can affect relationship quality by operating as a form of self-disclosure.

Hierarchical salience

The fourth process, involving perceptions of hierarchy, is relevant for humor shared vertically. Humor can enhance or detract from individuals at different levels of the hierarchy feeling 'close' and building relationships. When hierarchy is salient, this can engender 'distance' within the manager-subordinate dyad (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002), resulting in diminished relations. Napier and Ferris (1993) describe dyadic distance as occurring through disparity or discord along any of three dimensions: psychological, structural, or functional. The process proposed here, hierarchical salience, is most closely related to the psychological dimension of distance (referred to as 'perceived social distance' by Antonakis & Atwater, 2002) but is not synonymous with psychological distance as hierarchical salience is only a subset of this construct. Specifically, psychological distance as conceptualized by Napier and Ferris (1993) comprises both power distance and perceived similarity. For the purposes of this discussion, the process of 'power distance', referred to here as *hierarchical salience*, is conceptualized as being distinct from perceived similarity, because the two processes may operate separately. Humor expressed by a manager or subordinate may indicate a difference in the value systems of the two parties, as described above, while not manipulating the salience of hierarchy, such as a manager expressing a racial joke which is not appreciated by an employee.

Research on humor and power examines collective patterns of workplace humor, whereas the current discussion focuses on humor affecting *feelings of* distance between two people. Humor can be used by managers to reinforce power differentials (e.g. Coser, 1960; Lundberg, 1969). As Collinson remarks, 'Far from always being a source of social cohesion, humor can reflect and reinforce, articulate and highlight workplace divisions

... power asymmetries and inequalities' (2002: 282). For example, managers often use humor to control the behavior of employees (Holmes, 2000; Martineau, 1972), and when humor is used to wield power in this way, it signals a distinction between the parties. Bradney (1957) describes a buyer who noticed a more junior colleague in the department store not working in a motivated fashion and says to the junior colleague 'Miss [name] looks as if her heart's in her boots today! Don't you like work today, dear?' The junior colleague did not reply to this remark (p. 184). As mentioned in the prior section, Collinson (1988) also observed that shop floor employees frequently expressed humor with each other which derogated management. Although it would obviously be risky for employees to try to expressly create distance by focusing this type of communication upwards, it is still possible that employees could express humor of this type to management if they were not concerned with potential repercussions. Either way, by making the manager-subordinate distinction more salient, this type of humor reinforces the notion that employees and managers are 'different' and, in doing so, also reinforces feelings of personal distance.

That said, humor can also be effective for breaking down the interpersonal barriers associated with formal hierarchy or status (Locke, 1996; Vinton, 1989). Interestingly, although some might assume that only higher-status individuals would use humor to break down barriers, once managers establish a norm of decreasing hierarchical salience through humor this dynamic is often perpetuated by lower-status individuals who will reciprocate by joking upwards. In an unequal power relationship, humor provides an acceptable means of signaling disagreement, registering a protest, or challenging the opinions of those in positions of power (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Holmes, 2000). Kets de Vries (1990) describes that certain employees who are particularly adept at using humor may adopt the role of the 'sage-fool' and take on the responsibility of relaying dissenting opinions and feedback to senior management, since this type of feedback is generally more accepted when communicated in a humorous way. In this case, the sage-fool acts as a bridge between levels of the hierarchy.

Many organizations are also known to create temporary contexts in which humor from lower to higher status individuals is particularly encouraged. For example, Rosen (1988) describes the annual Christmas party of an advertising agency in which there was a tradition of creating and performing elaborate skits which would poke fun at management. During this party and these skits 'structural norms governing behavior are temporarily relaxed, if not relatively abandoned' (p. 472). Interestingly, however, managers will eventually set limits even in these contexts if they feel employees are too extreme in their slander. At the aforementioned Christmas party, top

management maintained control of the situation by only letting the jokes go so far, allowing them to still maintain an 'appropriate' amount of power and associated relational distance (Rosen, 1988). Stated simply, as these examples illustrate, humor also affects relationships by impacting the salience of hierarchical differences.

Proposition 4: Humor can affect relationship quality between individuals of unequal power by manipulating the salience of hierarchical differences.

Concluding remarks

This conceptual discussion elucidates the underlying relational processes of humor, proposing four distinct but interrelated processes which cause humor to affect relationship quality. Considering these additional mechanisms will allow scholars studying workplace humor to have a more complete understanding of how a humor event shared between two people affects their relationship. Established theories of humor explain why someone would be motivated to express humor (i.e. incongruity, relief, and superiority) as well as why someone else would enjoy this humor (or not) (i.e. comprehension-elaboration theory). Yet, as argued here, the link between the humor source and target is only fully elaborated by the inclusion of the four interpersonal mechanisms illustrated in Figure 1. In sum, humor can build relationships by: 1) creating positive affect in either party when they interact with the other (i.e. through affect-reinforcement), 2) allowing the parties to see that they are similar types of people (i.e. through similarity-attraction), 3) functioning as a type of disclosing behavior which helps the parties become more familiar (i.e. through self-disclosure), and/or 4) decreasing the amount of distance felt between the two which can stem from hierarchical distinctions (i.e. decreasing hierarchical salience). Humor can detract from relationships by priming these processes in the opposite direction. This insight has implications for both research and practice.

Implications for research on relationships

Researchers studying humor and relationships should consider this relational process model when conceptualizing their work. Prior research indicates that humor may act through ingratiation to affect relationships (Cooper, 2005). However, the current model puts forth a broader conceptualization of humor that looks beyond its potential as a social influence

technique, acknowledging other possible functions. Moreover, since no all-encompassing theory of humor exists in which to ground research, the notion that humor scholars can draw from established paradigms, such as affect-reinforcement (Byrne & Neuman, 1992), similarity-attraction (Griffitt, 1974), and self-disclosure (Collins & Miller, 1994), for theoretical grounding is also quite useful. Researching humor in this manner will also allow the field to move past the question of *whether* humor matters, a notion which has already received much support, to more clearly understand *how* humor operates. For example, an interview-based study by Elsesser and Peplau (2006) indicates that one of the most significant obstacles to the formation of cross-sex friendships at work stems from the hesitancy of men to initiate joking relationships with women for fear that stories or jokes might be viewed as harassment. Applying the proposed model to interpret this finding, it might be helpful to explore perceived similarity as a mediator in this situation. Specifically, humor expressed by a female to a male colleague might jumpstart the relationship by signaling to the male colleague that the two are more similar than he expects.

This framework also has implications for how researchers should define and operationalize humor. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) argue that people at work will react differently to certain types of humor, such as clowning and teasing, than others. Moreover, some research focuses on types of humor, such as sarcasm, based on the assumption that most people will have similar (in this case negative) reactions to that type of humor (e.g. Goodchilds, 1959). However, depending on the research question, this framework illustrates why a consideration of humor types or styles might be irrelevant in many cases. Regardless of the particular form of humor, it will proceed through the noted individual and social processes and through these processes affect perceptions of or feelings toward the source. Considering shared humor in this more general manner clarifies why self-deprecating, nonsense, clowning, teasing, or sarcastic humor can all be equally enjoyable or offensive. This last point is obviously contrary to conventional thought.

Implications for research on power and leadership

This framework can also be used to re-interpret certain findings in extant research on power. A number of scholars have conducted empirical work on humor and power, however, findings across some of these studies were contradictory. Lundberg (1969) observed that when people of higher status initiated a joke with a lower status individual that the latter would rarely joke back (i.e. humor was very top-down), whereas Vinton (1989) found that humor was used by all levels of employees to employees at all other levels.

One could speculate vis-à-vis the current research that higher status individuals in Lundberg's sample may have used humor which increased the salience of hierarchical differences, impeding the development of close relationships and discouraging low status individuals from joking. The same process (i.e. hierarchical salience) could have resulted in the opposite effects in Vinton's sample. Employees may have felt close to their managers and this facilitated a cycle of humor sharing between the two groups.

This relational process model is also relevant to current research on humor and leadership. Specifically, the proposed processes likely explain the link between a leader's use of humor and leader-member exchange quality (Cooper, 2004), and research should examine whether mediation actually occurs in this situation. The notion that humor may be very effective at manipulating perceptions of hierarchical distinction should also be of interest to those researching 'leader distance' (e.g. Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

Limitations and future directions

Future research will need to test the stated propositions to confirm whether the processes operate in the manner indicated and explore whether there are any additional processes which have not been identified. This conceptual discussion should also inspire many interesting questions in addition to those directly stemming from the propositions. For example, is there something about humor that causes it to build or destroy relationships differently than any other type of communication? Many articles in the popular press imply that there is something special about humor's effects on workplace relations (e.g. Bowling, 2000; Farrell, 1998; Graf & Hemmasi, 1995). By conceptualizing humor processes in the manner this research proposes, it will be easier to compare humor to other communications, such as casual conversation. For example, if two co-workers find out that they are both avid cat lovers and talk about their cats (or email each other about their cats), these conversations could facilitate their relationship development through the processes of similarity-attraction or self-disclosure. Alternatively, they could use humor as a way of building their relationship. Which of these strategies (i.e. simple conversation or humor) would more readily build their relationship? Or are there situations in which one strategy would be preferable to the other (i.e. a contingency perspective)?

That said, this discussion has focused on only a narrowly defined type of humor exchange. The propositions depict a unilateral relationship between constructs in which humor functions as an independent variable to affect relationship quality. This conceptualization is valid when referring to isolated humor events in which one party is expressing humor (i.e. the

source) while the other is audience to that humor (i.e. the target). However, in ongoing relationships humor dynamics will operate in a cyclical fashion in which humor often begets more humor: in studying discourse patterns in organizations, Holmes (2000) observed that when humor was expressed in a positive manner 'addressees often added to a humorous remark, indicating not only appreciation, but a willingness to extend the humor' (p. 164). Similarly, Locke (1996) observed that if a physician is comedic while delivering care, family members often joke back. Importantly, this reciprocal dynamic is consistent with the notion that humor is a form of self-disclosure, since research in this area has determined that disclosure also occurs as a reciprocal sharing process (Jourard, 1971). In sum, over time, humor expression and relationship quality will reciprocally influence each other. Future research, therefore, which studies dyads longitudinally will need to assess perceptions of each party as *both* a source and target of humor in the relationship.

Humor may also operate differently in relationships at various stages. In particular, prior research implies that humor may have an incrementally larger impact earlier in a relationship. For example, disclosing information about oneself is less effective in the early stages of the relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994). However, as Cooper (2005) speculates, humor may have the strongest incremental effects at these stages, because there is greater latitude for ingratiation. Humor may be one of the first acceptable ways of disclosing something about oneself before moving on to topics of a more personal nature. Thus, although casual conversation may be able to fulfill some of the same purposes in relationship-building as humor, there may be certain limitations to conversation in making these connections, limits which humor can overcome by sake of its informality. These notions, however, need to be tested.

Finally, this analysis of interpersonal humor has focused solely on relationship quality as the outcome of interest, but shared humor can also result in cognitive outcomes, such as identity maintenance and sensemaking (Tracy et al., 2006). A useful next step for humor research would be to create a more advanced construal of interpersonal humor which includes both relational and cognitive outcomes. In certain circumstances achieving positive outcomes in both areas may be difficult or even mutually exclusive. For example, Tracy and colleagues (2006) find that correctional officers and firefighters often use 'dark' humor to cope with grotesque or tragic aspects of their jobs. This humor might be effective in fulfilling cognitive functions (e.g. sensemaking), while simultaneously alienating a new colleague who may find the humor (and, accordingly, the people) to be crass or even cruel. Alternatively, if a humor instance achieves its cognitive function (e.g. identity

maintenance), this might attenuate a negative relational reaction. In particular circumstances, such as the extreme contexts of firefighters and correctional officers (Tracy et al., 2006), attempts to censor humor (so as not to offend and impede relations) may obstruct important socialization and sensemaking functions. Future research could examine both types of outcomes simultaneously and even try to determine whether there are certain situations or contexts in which one type of outcome (i.e. relational versus cognitive) is more salient to organizational members or instrumental to achieving group or organizational goals.

Practical implications

Management scholars must continue work in this area so that academic research can maintain pace with practitioner interest on this topic, as illustrated by the multitude of popular press articles on workplace humor (e.g. Bowling, 2000; Farrell, 1998; Graf & Hemmasi, 1995). Organizations need to not only understand that humor can have both benefits and risks for relationships, a premise which has been well established, but also *why* humor can engender such contrasting results. Facilitating positive workplace interactions is important, since relationships are the building blocks of organizations. When employees build positive relationships with co-workers and managers this can lead to outcomes such as increased job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviors, and decreased turnover (Deluga, 1994; Gerstner & Day, 1997). Granted, recommending that organizations or managers adopt some sort of large-scale humor initiative is surely short-sighted and perhaps even risky, since as Collinson (2002) observes it is doubtful 'whether humor can ever be effectively suppressed or manufactured by management' (p. 283). However, if humor affects how relationships form and develop, and these relationships are valuable for organizations, then organizational members would benefit by understanding how this occurs. Such knowledge could guide managers and employees, alike, to be more mindful in how they use humor.

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Note

- 1 Although research has examined *cognitive* outcomes of interpersonal humor (e.g. identity maintenance and sensemaking) (Tracy et al., 2006), the current discussion focuses on *relational* outcomes, specifically relationship quality. That said, future research integrating cognitive and relational outcomes of interpersonal humor may further enhance knowledge in this area, and this notion is presented in the concluding remarks.

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Cecily Cooper is an Assistant Professor of Management, specializing in organizational behavior, at the University of Miami. Her research interests focus on interpersonal relationships in the workplace, trust (particularly trust repair), and leadership. Her research appears in a number of scholarly journals, including the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior* and *Leadership Quarterly*. She has received an outstanding doctoral student paper award from the Southern Management Association, an outstanding reviewer award from the Western Academy of Management, an award for the best published paper of 2004 from the International Association of Conflict Management, and a best paper award from the Conflict Management Division of the Academy of Management.

[E-mail: cecily@miami.edu]