

CHAPTER 6

HUMOR AS AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

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It is easy to recall those moments when hearing a funny joke or listening to an entertaining anecdote had us doubled over in hysterical laughter, a red face and wide smile presenting clear evidence of our amusement. Equally as memorable, however, are instances when a joke or comment has made us uncomfortable or even offended us. Amusement is replaced by embarrassment, and we are left feeling stung by a humorous remark. The paradoxical nature of humor is evident in our everyday interactions. Humor serves as a social tool that fosters positive feelings and encourages a sense of kinship, yet, it can also act as a demonstration of aggression. Just as the benefits of positive humor for individuals and their relationships are numerous, so, too, are the negative effects of aggressive humor. This chapter considers humor as a form of aggressive expression. The distinction between positive and negative forms of humor are reviewed, and three models that conceptualize humor are presented. Finally, the Model of Aggressive Communication is examined and a communication perspective for understanding aggressive humor is discussed.

The notion of aggressive humor is not new. Psychology scholars, most notably Freud, recognized and introduced the possible hostile nature of humor. Distinguishing between innocent and tendentious jokes, Freud (1960) characterized hostile humor as “disguised aggressiveness” (p. 129). He asserted that by using hostile jokes, one is able to evade the demonstration of overt aggression against another person. Freud (1960) argued that expressing hostile humor serves to release psychological tension and stifled aggressive impulses. Early attempts to conceptualize aggressive humor included the examination of individuals’ recognition and evaluation of hostile cartoons (Byrne, 1956), sexual cartoon exposure and the reduction of aggression (Baron, 1978a), the cathartic effect of hostile jokes (Leak, 1974), the cathartic release of witnessing aggressive humor (Berkowitz, 1970), and exposure to hostile humor and the increase in overt aggression (Baron, 1978b). Such foundational studies solidified the early domain of aggressive humor, and set the stage for its continued examination. These studies laid the groundwork for new directions in the study of humor as aggressive communication.

MODELS OF HUMOR

Contemporary approaches to modeling humor recognize humor communication as a multidimensional concept. Selected approaches presented in this chapter include models of humor functions and humor styles. A third approach composed of research explicates the effects or outcomes related to humor, although offers less at a theoretical level and more at a taxonomical level. For this review, the humor models chosen represent the specific perspective, rather than comprising an exhaustive catalog.

Two functional humor models are representative of the functions category. First, Graham, Papa, and Brooks (1992) took a functional approach toward conceptualizing humor to better understand how and why people use humor. From an extensive review of humor theory and research, they identified 24 purposes for demonstrating humor. Positive purposes included such functions as: “8. To play with others (Baxter, 1990; Betcher, 1981, 1988; Cheatwood, 1983; Civikly, 1983, 1989); 10. To minimize anxiety (Bricker, 1980; Civikly, 1983, 1989; Smith & Powell, 1988); 13. To help others relax and feel comfortable (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Landy & Mettee, 1969; Smith & Powell, 1988); and 17. To increase liking by others (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Derks & Berkowitz, 1989; Goodchilds, 1959)” (p. 168). Negative functions included: “1. To transmit verbally aggressive messages (Berkowitz, 1970; Civikly, 1989; Landy & Mettee, 1969); 2. To demean

others (Civikly, 1989; Zillman & Cantor, 1976); 19. To control others (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Goodchilds, 1959); and 22. To put others in their place (Byrne, 1956; Civikly, 1989)” (p. 168). Graham et al. (1992) created the Uses of Humor Index (UHI) to reflect the 24 functions they identified in the humor literature. Developing and validating the UHI, Graham et al. (1992) extracted three overarching functions of humor: positive affect, expressiveness, and negative affect. Positive affect defines the expression of affection and the use of humor to identify and connect with others. Expressiveness recognizes humor as a means of self-disclosure. Graham et al. (1992) concluded that “much disclosure takes the form of humorous comments because it is either difficult or socially unacceptable to disclose personal information in any other way” (p.175). The negative affect function encompasses the use of humor to demean and belittle others as a form of entertainment. Graham et al.’s functional taxonomy reflects the use of humor for both prosocial and antisocial purposes.

A second functional approach is Meyer’s (2000) model of humorous communication, discussed in detail in chapter 2. Meyer delineated the functions of humor in terms of positive and negative outcomes, and organized the functions on a continuum ranging from the most unifying to the most dividing forms of humor. Two functions reside on the unifying end of the spectrum: identification and clarification. Identification defines humor that enhances mutual understanding and recognizes shared meaning between communicators. Clarification humor reveals a speaker’s view on or belief about a norm or rule without criticizing or condemning the violator of the social norm. Both forms of humor underscore the connection between speaker and receiver, creating cohesion and strengthening interpersonal bonds. At the other end of the continuum are enforcement and differentiation, the divisive functions of humor. Enforcement humor classifies teasing as a means of disparaging the receiver for violating a social norm. Meyer (2000) defines differentiation as the most relationally dividing function of humor. The aim of this type of humor is clearly to distinguish the speaker from the receiver through the use of ridicule and mocking. Meyer’s conceptualization sets humor functions on a single polarized array with prosocial humor positioned at one end and antisocial humor at the other.

A third modeling approach tackles styles of using humor. In developing and validating the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ), Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) recognized the multifaceted nature of humor. The scholars identified “four dimensions relating to different uses or functions of humor in everyday life” (p. 51). These four dimensions characterize two broad forms of humor: adaptive humor and maladaptive humor. Adaptive humor refers to the positive expression of humor that can enhance relationships and increase feelings of well-being. Maladaptive humor is negative and “less benign and potentially even deleterious to well-being” (p. 51).

Martin et al. (2003) introduced a 2 X 2 psychological model, conceptualizing humor by integrating two central functions with two styles of humor. The model identified humor to “enhance the self” and humor to “enhance one’s relationship with others” as the main functions that distinguish a person’s intention for delivering humor. Self-enhancing humor acts as a form of protection against stress, adversity, insecurity, and tension. On the other hand, relationship-enhancing humor is delivered to strengthen interpersonal bonds, increase attractiveness, and minimize conflict (Martin et al., 2003). The model also characterizes humor as either benevolent and considerate to the self and others, or as “potentially detrimental or injurious either to the self or one’s

relationship with others” (p. 52). In combination, Martin et al.’s grid of functions and styles of humor plots four types of humor use: affiliative, self-enhancing, self-defeating, and aggressive.

Affiliative humor is demonstrated in unscripted joke telling and clever repartee that affirms the self and other and encourages an interpersonal connection. Second, self-enhancing humor attends to our intrapersonal needs by evoking a cheerful demeanor and “tendency to maintain a humorous outlook on life” (p. 71). Third, self-defeating humor positions the self as the locus of attack or target of disparaging humor. By serving as the “butt” of the joke or anecdote, one hopes to gain approval and acceptance from others. The fourth style is aggressive humor. Aggressive humor incorporates teasing, sarcasm, and ridicule to demean and degrade. The objective in using aggressive humor is to “say funny things that are likely to hurt and alienate others” (p. 54). Functional models deliver the conceptual tools to determine how uses of humor may connect to other constructs such as outcomes or effects. These models work well to address multiple dimensions of humorous communication. Although each is unique, these approaches and representative models cohere in recognizing that humor has both positive and negative dimensions.

Numerous researchers have examined the effects and outcomes of humor. Positive humor has been linked to beneficial outcomes that include bolstered psychological well-being (Martin, 2001); increased relationship satisfaction (Butzer & Kuiper, 2008; Ziv & Gadish, 1989); enhanced relational closeness (Alberts, Yoshimura, Rabby, & Loschiavo, 2005; Ziv, 1988); and reduced conflict in romantic relationships (Bippus, 2003; Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008). These outcomes endorse positive humor as a social lubricant that promotes both individual and relational health. In contrast, scholars who examine negative humor have identified such consequences as marital dissatisfaction (DeKoning & Weiss, 2002), conflict escalation (Bippus, 2003), strengthened ethnocentrism (Miczo & Welter, 2006), and lower job satisfaction (Avtgis & Taber, 2006). These latter outcomes reflect the divisive use of humor that disparages others and creates social isolation. The significant body of research examining the influences of humor accentuates the idea that humor can be employed for “positive purposes (i.e., to reduce tension and provide support) and for negative purposes (i.e., to create tension and attack and demean)” (Cann, Zapata, & Davis, 2009, p. 455).

The humor outcomes and effects research may employ functional or stylistic models that provide insight into the relational and contextual use of humor. Collectively, these research perspectives provide a global conceptualization of humor communication. That is, scholars must acknowledge generally the bright and the dark side of humor. Because the thrust of this chapter is the careful consideration of the divisive use of humor, the following sections articulate the Aggressive Communication Model (ACM) as it explains humor as aggressive communication. Before describing and explaining the ACM, a review of the concept of aggression is imperative.

AGGRESSION DEFINED

Among the variety of definitions of aggression used, early studies focused on physical aggression. Bandura (1978) referred to aggression as “behavior that results in personal injury and physical destruction” (p. 12). This suggests that aggressive behavior is determined by the outcome of the act. Bandura (1978) also speculated that attributed intention and responsibility influence perceptions of aggression. Similarly, Zillmann (1979) suggested aggressive behavior is defined as any attempt

made to inflict physical pain on another. Felson (1978) presented yet another definition that identified aggression as an act in which a person attempts or threatens to harm another person regardless of the ultimate goal.

Other definitions create a broader perspective of aggression that transcends the physical component. Stronger, more useful conceptualizations of aggression define it as a multidimensional construct. Steinmetz (1977) defined aggression as “the intentional use of physical or verbal force to obtain one’s own goal” (p. 19). Steinmetz (1977) argued that aggression is based on the intentionality of the act, the success or failure of the act, the instrumental or expressive use of the act, and the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the act. Steinmetz’s conceptualization of aggression suggests that these factors of motivation, outcome, need, and perception all contribute to an outcome perceived as aggressive. These selected definitions of aggression relate to the uses and perceived functions of humor in that aggressive humor is engaged to elevate oneself and/or damage another by destructively employed social knowledge.

In conceiving his aggressive communication model, Infante (1987a) defined aggression as embedded within the context of interpersonal communication. He suggested that interpersonal communication demonstrates aggression “if it applies force physically and/or symbolically in order, minimally, to dominate and perhaps damage or, maximally, to defeat and perhaps destroy the locus of attack” that can include the other person’s “body, material possessions, self-concept, positions on topics of communication, or behavior” (p. 158).

Infante’s (1987a) definition is a most compelling explanation of aggression for several reasons. First, this definition focuses on communication as the observable behavior. Second, in this definition, aggression comprises both verbal and physical behavior. Third, this definition embraces positive and negative expressions of aggression via a wide range of behaviors.

AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION MODEL

How humor communicates aggression can be explained best through the lens of the Aggressive Communication Model (ACM). The ACM provides a framework to fully flesh out the nuances of humor used aggressively. The intrinsic rationale is that numerous messages constitute verbal aggression, and humor is one of those message types. A brief overview of the ACM will be explicated next in order then to extrapolate its utility in capturing humor as aggressive communication.

Infante (1987a) conceptualized the ACM within a personality framework. Central to Infante’s (1987a) model is the trait model of personality. Infante (1987a) designed the model around four central aggressive personality traits: (a) verbal aggression; (b) argumentativeness; (c) hostility; and (d) assertiveness. The latter two traits, hostility and assertiveness, are located as general communication traits. On the other hand, verbal aggression and argumentativeness represent more specific communication predispositions. The model, as designed, conceptualizes argumentativeness as a subset of assertiveness, and verbal aggression as a subset of hostility.

The foundation of the ACM is rooted in a personality trait approach. In this way, traits are organized according to constructive (argumentativeness) or destructive (verbal aggressiveness) communication. Furthermore, as it has been used, the personality trait approach is conducive to an interactionist perspective (Infante, 1987b). The interactionist perspective of the personality trait

approach suggests that the behavior or outcome represents the interaction between the individual and situation specific variables (Infante, 1987b). The interactionist perspective explains behavior by examining the influence of the environment on the expression of traits (Magnusson, 1990; Magnusson & Endler, 1977). Hall and Sereno (2010) posit that “negative humor use depends largely on context. ... Negative put-down jokes are particularly audience and context sensitive” (pp. 355–356). To more fully grasp the nuances and outcomes of negative humor, they speculated that it is necessary to consider the perspectives or co-orientation of both interactants.

Infante (1987a) distinguished between the four traits of the model by identifying them as either constructive or destructive forms of communication. Aggressive behavior is classified as constructive if it encourages interpersonal communication satisfaction and increases the value of the dyadic relationship (Infante, 1987a). Aggressive behavior constitutes destructive communication when it leads to relationship dissatisfaction and at least one partner having negative opinions about him or herself and the relationship as a whole (Infante, 1987a). Finally, in addition to postulating the four personality trait components of the aggressive communication model, Infante (1987a) proposed two aggressive communication outcomes: (a) communication satisfaction and (b) relationship satisfaction. These outcomes serve as the criteria for assessing the constructive or destructive nature of the aggression traits. Aggressive communication outcomes are elucidated in a later section.

CONSTRUCTIVE DIMENSIONS: ASSERTIVENESS AND ARGUMENTATIVENESS

Assertiveness

Assertiveness characterizes a constructive form of aggressive communication (Infante, 1987a). Infante (1987a) defined assertiveness as a “person’s general tendency to be interpersonally dominant, ascendant, and forceful” (p. 165). Other researchers have defined assertiveness as the ability to express emotions appropriately (Wolpe, 1973), to defend personal rights (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976), and act in one’s own best interests without anxiety (Alberti & Emmons, 1986). These definitions are consistent with identifying assertiveness as a positive form of communication.

Aggression can be seen both in assertiveness and in hostility. Although assertiveness differs distinctly from hostility, both may be conveyed by the use of aggressive symbols (Infante, 1987a). It is social context that allows one to interpret an aggressive message as humorous rather than hostile (Gutman & Priest, 1969). “Ritual insults between old friends are not taken as insults” (p. 60). To clarify assertiveness as aggressive, yet constructive, consider the following example: An individual responds by “flipping the bird” to a friend who remarks sarcastically, “Nice hairdo” just after the individual arose from a nap with their hair protruding everywhere. Such a gesture generally is considered to be a hostile attack. However, if the interactants have an established relationship or long history that allows for a rude attack to be interpreted as assertive positive joking, then the gesture more likely will be considered as constructive teasing humor. The difference between the two centers on the intent behind the behavior. The main tenet of verbally aggressive behavior is that it is used to attack and damage the receiver’s self-concept. Assertive behavior, however, uses

symbols aggressively to improve the communication for both the individuals involved (Patterson, Littman, & Bricker, 1967).

Argumentativeness

Argumentative communication represents a second constructive form of aggression (Infante, 1987a; Infante & Rancer, 1996). In the aggressive communication model, argumentativeness is conceived as a subset of assertive communication. Argumentativeness is conceptualized as the predisposition to defend and refute controversial issues apart from the other person's self-concept (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Atkinson's (1964) theory of achievement motivation serves as a foundation for examining argumentativeness (Infante & Rancer, 1982).

The basic premise of Atkinson's (1964) theory revolves around a tendency to achieve success and avoid failure. The tendency to achieve success relies on two factors: (a) the incentives to achieve the task and (b) the perceived probability of success. The combination of these factors motivates a person to pursue the task and strive for success. People also have a propensity to avoid failure. This motivation is propelled by the fear of evaluation. When a person believes there will be some form of evaluation and a judgment will be made regarding their behavior, then their desire for success increases.

Building on this motivation perspective, Infante and Rancer (1982) conceptualized argumentativeness as "two competing tendencies: motivation to approach argumentative situations and motivation to avoid such situations" (p. 171). Similar to Atkinson's perspective, the probability of success or failure and the importance of success or failure influence the likelihood of engaging in argumentative communication (Infante & Rancer, 1982).

In defining argumentativeness as a constructive communication behavior, it is important to differentiate it from verbal aggression. The distinction between the two concepts centers on the locus of attack. As defined earlier, verbal aggression involves the attack of a person's self-concept. Argumentativeness, on the other hand, involves the attack of a person's opinions on controversial issues rather than his or her image (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Some research on ironic messages can illustrate and differentiate humor as verbal aggression vis-à-vis assertiveness.

Averbeck and Hample (2008) present findings from a study intended to illuminate nuanced conceptualization of the production of irony. They wished to go beyond the surface definition of irony as the "relatively transparent expression of a sentiment that is often the opposite of what one actually intends to communicate" (p. 396). To do so, they posit that one must account for not only understanding a message, but its intent as well. Furthermore, the sender and receiver must share key information "known to be factually incorrect" (p. 397). The ironic message produced typically approaches awkward conversation goals, while "simultaneously adhering to the necessities of social decorum" (p. 397).

The researchers investigated the strategic production of ironic messages, such as sarcasm as "a particularly nasty form of an ironic message" (p. 397). First, Averbeck and Hample connect these ironic messages—which generally have negative connotations and are potentially more hurtful than direct attacks—to trait verbal aggressiveness. The scholars indicated that a verbally aggressive person may endorse "the continued use of verbally aggressive messages" (p. 398). They reported results that supported their claim: "Using irony to condemn a behavior is an attempt to simultaneously be verbally aggressive (condemn behavior) and indirectly aggressive (dilute condemnation

by deflecting target)” (p. 398). Averbeck and Hample extend their reasoning to a secondary motivation for “softening criticism through irony” (p. 399). Qualifying irony as indirect argument, Averbeck and Hample provided data that revealed a significant positive relationship between the endorsement of ironic messages and argumentativeness. Thus, verbally aggressive humor would be more direct. The humor employed by argumentative individuals, however, would likely be irony (such as sarcasm) in an attempt to protect the humorist and/or the relationship. In short, argumentative humor would be used to save face (cf., Ivanko, Pexman, & Olineck, 2004). It is out of some concern for outcomes for oneself and the other that individuals engage in verbally argumentative humor, as opposed to verbally aggressive humor.

DESTRUCTIVE DIMENSIONS: HOSTILITY AND VERBAL AGGRESSIVENESS

Hostility

Hostility characterizes a destructive form of aggressive communication (Infante, 1987a). Hostility is a personality quality that is demonstrated through aggressive behavior (Buss & Durkee, 1957; Steinmetz & Straus, 1974). Zillmann (1979) characterized hostility as an eagerness to interact aggressively. Costa and McCrae (1980) conceptualized hostility as one aspect of the neuroticism dimension, and defined it as a “generalized conceptualization of the affect of anger” (p. 93).

Similarly, Buss (1961, 1988) suggested that the presence of angry feelings can lead to the development of hostility. In developing the Hostility-Guilt Inventory, Buss and Durkee (1957) identified seven dimensions of hostility. Six of the dimensions of a hostile personality are related to destructive symbolic aggression (Infante, 1987a). The verbal hostility subset coincides directly with definitions of verbal aggression. Researchers (Averbeck & Hample, 2008; Yip & Martin, 2006) concur that it is likely that underlying hostile feelings drive the use of humor that is aggressive.

Verbal Aggressiveness

Verbal aggressiveness represents a second destructive form of communication (Infante, 1987a). Verbal aggression is defined as communication that attacks another’s self-concept with the objective of inflicting psychological harm (Infante, 1987a; Infante, Trebing, Shepherd, & Seeds, 1984; Infante & Wigley, 1986). Although researchers have identified different types of aggressive verbal messages, they all share the same purpose: to harm or damage the target. Infante et al. (1984) labeled 10 communication behaviors as possible messages of verbal aggression: (a) character attacks, (b) competence attacks, (c) background attacks, (d) physical appearance attacks, (e) ridicule, (f) teasing, (g) threats, (h) swearing, (i) nonverbal emblems, and (j) maledictions. Infante, Riddle, Horvath, and Tumlin (1992) investigated the differences among message types. Results showed that high verbal aggressives demonstrated greater use of competence attacks, teasing, swearing, and nonverbal emblems than other message types.

In discussing their research findings about verbally aggressive messages, Infante et al (1992) suggested that high verbal aggressives’ more frequent use of competence attacks, teasing, nonverbal emblems, and swearing may be a tactic “to express hostility in an indirect manner” (p. 123).

Further reflecting on the motivation underlying these message types, they speculated about the use of humor as verbal aggression. Both high and low verbal aggressives reported roughly similar frequencies of “verbally aggressive messages ... trying to be humorous” (p. 125). Although these percentages did not discriminate high from low aggression, Infante et al. (1992) suggested that the intention behind using humor aggressively could meaningfully distinguish between them.

For high verbal aggressives, using humor may be a tactic for being mean to a disdained other, or it may be an “evasive” device which masks the use of personal attacks and avoids provoking physical violence. Recipients of aggressive messages in this form may perceive ambiguity in the seriousness of the message sender. For low verbal aggressives, on the other hand, humor may be a “softening” device which the message source uses to lessen the chance that critical comments will hurt the receiver. (p. 125)

Yip and Martin (2006) reported that some negative humor styles (aggressive teasing, use of sarcasm) were related indirectly to the social competencies of providing emotional support to others or managing conflict.

In essence, this body of research points to the perceived need for and problem of competing motives (and goals) for using humor to mask or soften aggression. Such a notion parallels Averbeck and Hample's (2008) work on using irony to deliver criticism in a less face-threatening manner than a literal criticism or insult. Teasing communication, the cousin of irony, can also help us to better understand humor as verbal aggression. Just as irony attempts to accommodate both hostility and politeness, teasing messages allow a source to straddle the fence between ridicule and jest.

DiCioccio (2010) defined teasing as “the purposeful selection and use of social knowledge in order to position the other as the focus of amusement or jocularly” (p. 342). This definition encompasses the complexity of teasing communication intended for both prosocial and antisocial purposes. Recognizing the dual function of teasing, DiCioccio (2010) asserted that teasing messages can be used affectionately and aggressively. Affectionate teasing expresses positive affect through playful joking while aggressive teasing inflicts psychological harm through harassment. Although these forms distinguish between message types, DiCioccio (2008) found that “both affectionate and aggressive teasing were related positively to verbal aggression” (p. 267). Her research suggests that regardless of the intentionality behind the use of teasing messages, they are perceived as inherently aggressive in nature. Reflecting on the use of teasing to demonstrate verbal aggression, Infante et al. (1992) suggest that:

Teasing may be a vehicle for appearing humorous and thus not serious in attacking another person's self-concept. Perhaps by teasing through humor, high verbal aggressives attempt to keep the receiver guessing as to whether they mean, for example, to attack the receiver's competence. Another possible explanation is that through teasing the verbally aggressive person may simply want to be mean toward disdained others.” (p. 12)

Both irony and teasing provide a clear window into aggressive humor. These insights reinforce Avtgis and Taber's (2006) claim that aggressive humor manifests trait verbal aggression. One may extrapolate from this skill deficiency or weakness that when hostility increases, the ability to manage conflict is reduced (Ivanko et al. 2004), and the potential for physical violence increases.

Infante and Wigley (1986) tested the relationship between hostility and verbal aggression to validate the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale. Infante and Wigley predicted that the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale and the Hostility-Guilt Inventory would be positively related and underscore the relationship between hostility and verbal aggression. Results showed that although the constructs are distinct, they are closely related. The relationship between hostility and verbal aggression is further supported in a study by Malamuth and Thornhill (1994). The goal of the study was to test the concept of “Hostile Masculinity” as a predictor of male dominance in same- and opposite-sex conversations. Results revealed that although hostile masculinity and dominance were not significantly related overall, when paired with female partners, there was support for the connection between hostility and verbal aggression. Ivanko et al. (2004) elaborated on the production, interpretation, and processing of verbal irony, i.e., sarcasm. Describing the results from their two studies, they observed clear gender differences in “the social impact of ironic speech” (p. 266). Replicating earlier research, Ivanko et al. found that women perceived ironic statements as less polite than did men. Furthermore, men were more likely to use sarcasm in most contexts than were women, except when women used a verbally ironic statement for self-criticism. Last, “a speaker’s tendency to use sarcasm affects the way they [sic] interpret the speech of others” (p. 269). This research thus points to a connection between males’ greater hostility and aggressiveness and more use of humor that is aggressive.

Finally, the Argumentative Skill Deficiency Model of Interspousal Violence (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989) connects verbal aggression and physical violence. A major premise of this model is that verbal aggression is most likely to escalate into physical violence among people predisposed to hostility. In addition, the model explains that people who demonstrate hostile dispositions are also identified by a lack of effective arguing skills (Infante et al., 1989). Averbeck and Hample (2008) lend credence to the model, stipulating that individuals lacking argumentative skills have limited repertoires. Aggressive individuals “tend to be less competent at ironic message production. The skill needed to focus the criticism on the behavior while accentuating the attitude (character) of the other person is on par with argumentative abilities. When this argumentative skill is lacking, there will be character attacks” (p. 408). These findings lend support to Infante’s (1987a) aggressive communication model by underscoring the relationship between hostility and verbal aggression.

In addition to the four personality traits, the aggressive communication model proposes two aggressive communication outcomes: (a) communication satisfaction and (b) relationship satisfaction. These two communication outcomes reflect the influence of the constructive and destructive personality traits.

CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION OUTCOMES

Infante (1987a) identified two major communication outcomes of the aggressive communication model: communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. Both these outcomes represent central concepts in interpersonal research, and are useful measures for understanding how aggressive communication effects interpersonal relationships.

Communication Satisfaction

Hecht (1978b) suggested that communication satisfaction is the result of actual communication outcomes mirroring desired communication expectations. Hecht (1978a, 1978b) developed the concept of communication satisfaction based on the discriminant fulfillment approach. The discriminant fulfillment approach suggests that people draw connections between discriminant stimuli and response reinforcement. Hence, when the proper response to certain stimuli is reinforced, the result is communication satisfaction. Diverse literature has examined the effect of aggressive communication on communication satisfaction.

Research focusing on assertiveness and communication satisfaction has identified varying results. Zakahi (1985) investigated the relationship between assertiveness and communication satisfaction among stranger dyads. Findings revealed that other-reported assertiveness is significantly related to communication satisfaction.

Newton and Burgoon (1990) examined the effects of constructive and destructive communication on communication satisfaction of marital couples. The results showed that other-accusations such as criticizing or blaming were inversely related to the target's communication satisfaction. Onyekwere, Rubin, and Infante (1991) studied the relationship between argumentativeness and communication satisfaction. They predicted high argumentativeness would increase perceptions of credibility and satisfaction. Results indicated that when paired with high argumentatives in an argumentative situation, interactants reported higher communication satisfaction. Although communication satisfaction has not been examined outright in humor literature, scholars have attended somewhat implicitly to this construct, embedding it within the framework of relational satisfaction.

Relational Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction reflects the emotional state of the relationship. The combination of positive and negative emotions influences the experience of the relationship (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). The degree to which partners in the relationship feel their needs are being fulfilled determines perceptions of relationship satisfaction. Rusbult et al. (1994) suggested that positive interactions result in greater perceptions of relationship satisfaction.

Relationship satisfaction can be explained according to five aspects: (a) closeness, (b) communication, (c) conflict resolution, (d) cognitions, and (e) forgiveness (Worthington, 1991). Closeness is any type of behavior that is demonstrated by both partners and encourages intimacy. Communication is evaluated according to how appropriate it is. Conflict resolution defines a couple's ability to address and resolve relationship problems constructively. Cognitions reflect the perceptions and assumptions that partners hold for the other person. Finally, forgiveness concerns both partners' willingness to accept and forgive the other for faults and weaknesses.

The majority of literature examining aggression and relationship satisfaction centers on dating and marital relationships. Guerrero (1994) examined college dating and married dyads to investigate the link between relationship satisfaction and four types of aggressive communication: distributive-aggression, integrative-assertion, passive-aggression, and nonassertive-denial. Distributive-aggression is the direct expression of threatening anger. Integrative-assertion defines the assertive and empathetic expression of anger. Passive-aggression and nonassertive-denial are defined as

indirect and threatening and indirect but nonthreatening, respectively. Findings showed that the only significant predictor of relationship satisfaction was integrative-assertion.

Aggressive humor has been found to relate negatively to relational satisfaction (Cann, Zapata, & Davis, 2011). Bippus (2003), in her examination of humor used in recalled conflict episodes, concluded that when receivers perceived aggressive source intentions in using humor, they also reported more negative relational outcomes. In developing the Relational Humor Inventory (RHI), DeKoning and Weiss (2002) looked at functions of humor to better understand marital relationships. Based on self- and partner assessments of humor use, they reported significant negative correlations between partner aggressive humor and marital satisfaction for both husbands and wives. In addition, husbands' aggressive humor use correlated negatively with their own marital satisfaction. Clearly, being on the receiving end of aggressive humor diminished the quality of the relationship for both partners.

Butzer and Kuiper (2008) corroborated and extended the findings of previous research about the link between aggressive humor use and marital satisfaction. Regardless of the context of the interaction, i.e., conflict or pleasure, greater use of aggressive humor correlated indirectly with relational satisfaction. The underlying premise seems to be that aggressive humor has a powerful influence on relational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has expanded further the view that humor can be aggressive. There is no question that we experience both the affiliative and aggressive nature of humor in our routine interactions. These experiences are elucidated via exemplar contemporary models of humor, such as those of Graham et al. (1992), Meyer (2000), and Martin et al. (2003). Infante's Aggressive Communication Model is advanced as a useful mechanism to scrutinize humor as aggressive communication. The ACM provides a vital framework for conceptualizing aggressive messages as humor. This chapter delineates the ACM's four traits and its two outcomes, explicating its utility to enhance our understanding of humor as aggressive communication. Regardless of the specific model, the aggressive dimension of humor is articulated as central to our full grasp of humor.

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