PERCEPTIONS OF HUMOROUS REPAIRS

by

Selena Lei Lei Pang

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Selena Lei Lei Pang

Approved:

Scott Caplan, Ph.D.
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved:

Elizabeth Perse, Ph.D.
Chair of the Department of Communication

Approved:

George H. Watson, Ph.D.
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

Approved:

Ann L. Ardis, Ph.D.
Senior Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current project was to understand perceptions of humorous repairs in romantic conflict. The study analyzed the relationships among humor attitudes and perceived repair effectiveness. Additionally, the study examined the relationships among humor attitudes and effectiveness mediated by attribution of intent.

Undergraduate participants (N=165) read three hypothetical scenarios about themselves in a conflict with a romantic partner involving a mundane face threat. Afterward, they completed questionnaires measuring the realism of the scenarios, the perceived intentions of their partner, perceived severity of the conflict and perceived repair effectiveness. Additionally, participants completed questionnaires on their humor attitudes. Results indicated participants with high humor appreciation were more likely to accept a repair only through attribution. On the other hand, participants were less likely to accept a repair when they perceived the face threat to be more severe.

The current study contributes to conflict theory by examining the role of humor, face threats and attribution in conflict repairs. The study illustrated the complexity of humorous repair effectiveness. The project found face theory to be valuable groundwork in understanding perceptions of repairs, adding to conflict theory’s understanding that context of a conflict impacts the success or failure of repairs. Lastly, attribution theory seemed to have played a minor role in predicting repair effectiveness.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown a strong correlation among conflict behaviors, marital satisfaction (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch, & McIlvane, 2010; Henry, Berg, Smith, & Florsheim, 2007; Segrin, Hanzal & Domschke, 2009) and personal well-being (Gottman & Levingson, 1992; Robles, Shaffer, Malarkey, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2006). While there are numerous conflict behaviors, researchers hardly pay attention to conflict repairs. Moreover, marriage research indicates that conflict repairs maintain a balance ratio of positivity to negativity (5:1) and thus are the most important behaviors among successful couples (Gottman, Driver, & Tabares, 2015). Although some studies have examined repairs (Dunleavy & Dougherty, 2013; Dunleavy, Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Sidelinger, & Banfield, 2009; Gottman, et al., 2015) the proposed study seeks to extend the conflict literature by offering a detailed theoretical account of how individuals may receive humorous repairs to mundane face threats.

Repairs are relational maintenance behaviors intended to remedy negativity and create intimacy (Gottman, et al., 2015). The most important function of repairs is to maintain the 5:1 balance of positivity to negativity (Gottman, 1998). Gottman’s research noted that happy couples (those that maintained 5:1 ratio) were able to use a wider range of repair behaviors, which may help with positivity during conflict, than dissatisfied couples (those that do not maintain the 5:1 ratio). Hence, when repairs are successful, they increase positivity in the relationship and reduce negativity.

Repairs typically occur during the middle of a conflict episode, where negative affect is high (Gottman, 1979). In later studies, Gottman (1998) identified a few ways to repair conflict – humor, affection, interest, and bids. Bids are a partner’s attempt for
emotional closeness. Driver and Gottman (2004) noted that couples that accepted each other’s bids (positively responded to a partner’s attempt for emotional connection) had higher rates of positive affect and lower rates of negative affect. They also shared more humor and affection during conflict than couples that did not accept a partner’s bid. Humorous repairs can be thought of as bids. For instance, how a recipient accepts or denies a humorous bid could influence the mood of the conflict. Moreover, the previous findings suggest that when the conflict climate has more positivity than negativity, it would be more likely that the receiver would accept a humorous repair. On the flip side, couples that reciprocated high negativity, such as hostility, were more likely to have failed repairs (i.e. when repair processes do not work) and to divorce than couples with positive affect and successful repairs (Gottman, 1979).

However, despite a partner’s intention, repairs may only work when the recipient recognizes that intent. Effective repairs occur when the recipient accepts the intention to be helpful during conflict. On the other hand, ineffective repairs occur when the recipient ignores or misidentifies the mending intention and focuses on the negative affect (i.e. negative emotion) of the speaker’s delivery. For example, repair messages are often expressed with negativity such as irritation (i.e. “Stop interrupting me!”). In happy couples, the recipient is more likely to respond to the repair intention and edit their response, whereas unhappy couples are more likely to react to the negative tone of the message and reciprocate the negativity (Gottman, 1998).

Humor is a common and potentially powerful conflict repair strategy. A study examining humor frequency in romantic conflict found that one or both partners attempted using humor every 49 seconds (Bippus, Young, & Dunbar, 2011).
Moreover, humor serves a valuable function in disagreements (Driver & Gottman, 2004). Humor can help reduce tension (De Koning & Weiss, 2002), alleviate frustration (Pryor, Singleton, Taneja, & Humphreys, 2010), regulate individual emotions (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012), aid in face-management (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and create bonding (Hall, 2013). Although humor has well-known benefits, it may also cause or escalate conflict. For instance, Norrick (1993) learned that when a partner used humor too much, it was less effective for de-escalating conflict. Furthermore, humor could back fire and lead to emotional or interactional harm during the wrong time or setting (Francis, Monahan, & Berger, 1999). Yet, Driver and Gottman (2004) stated that a couple’s ability to use humor during conflict results in better repair processes, a lower likelihood of falling into negativity, and in turn greater martial stability and satisfaction. Thus, humor is frequently used in disagreements and recipients determine how helpful or damaging it is to conflict.

Various definitions of humor make it difficult to understand what the term means for a humorous repair. The term “humor” in this context is not defined by eliciting laughter or a smile, but rather that the receiver’s feelings and thoughts of tension from the conflict are reduced or lightened. Research has focused on the success or failure of humor in conflict (Bippus, 2003, Hall, in press, Martin et al., 2003), however much less attention has been directed toward the circumstances in which humorous repairs will be effective. The proposed study seeks to combine perceptions of humor with face and attribution theory to clarify how receivers will appraise a humorous repair to a relational face threat during a romantic conflict.
The proposed study offers a new theoretical model to better understand how people perceive humorous conflict repairs. The proposed model seeks to explain how individual characteristics and contextual cues are associated with perceptions of humorous repairs in conflict. Moreover, this study attempts to explain associations among those perceptions and overall perceived repair effectiveness. The following sections illustrate how face work and attribution theory contribute to understanding humorous repairs, and detail components of the new theoretical model. The section after will offer a summary of the methods this study will employ. Lastly, results will be presented and then interpreted in a final discussion.

**A Face Theory Approach to Understanding Humorous Repairs**

Goffman’s theory of face management helps explain why humor might perform well as a repair. Face refers to the self-image a person chooses to present of themselves in social situations (Goffman, 1967). The theory’s main assumption postulates that one’s face can be honored and/or threatened in social interactions. According to Goffman (1967), individuals are generally motivated to support face. More recent research supports that face is a positive social value for an individual during social interactions (Cupach & Metts, 2008; Dainton, 2010; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto, & Takai, 2000).

Research suggests several ways humor may serve as an effective tactic for saving face. For instance, humor can be an indirect forgiveness seeking technique (Kelley, 1998). The wrongdoer attempts to make amends through humor and the forgiver offers them a chance to restore a sense of balance and fairness. The offended party determines how to facilitate the repair making the wrongdoer’s face vulnerable while the forgiver’s face is saved. Moreover, Waldron and Kelley (2005) noted that
when an individual is asking for forgiveness, they are aware they are indebted to the offended. Therefore, the wrongdoer may consciously use humor as a face saving strategy for the forgiver to be forgiven.

Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young and Heerey (2001) found partners used humor to approach sensitive topics that may be threatening to both parties or to soften the blows of mild criticism by teasing one another. In romantic relationships, couples fashion idiosyncratic humor (Hopper, Knapp, & Scott, 1981) which may re-establish common positivity from the relationship. Also, humor functions to increase intimacy (Bippus, 2003; Hall, 2013), creating a conflict environment more favorable for partners to perceive humorous messages meant as face savers.

Affiliative humor can be described as benign self-deprecation or gentle aggressiveness. Affiliative humor is defined as a benign form of humor used to enhance relations (Martin et al, 2003). Research notes that couples frequently employ affiliative humor to decrease negative moods (Howland & Simpson, 2014) and increase positivity during conflict (Bippus, 2003). Norrick and Spitz (2008) found that self-deprecating humor influence humor effectiveness for mitigating conflict. Therefore, this study’s methodology employs self-deprecating humor as a repair response because the speaker attacks their own face to maintain the face of the other partner. The next section discusses how attribution theory contributes to understanding a receiver’s perceived intent of a humorous repair.

**Face and a Receiver’s Attribution about Humorous Repairs**

Attribution theory postulates that people construct explanations for other’s behavior by either someone’s dispositional behavior (internal attribution) or their situation (external attribution) (Heider, 1958). The success or failure of humor
depends on the receiver (Alberts, 1992; Bippus, 2003), and attribution theory provides a conceptual account for how people process their partner’s humorous repair attempts.

Tease is an example of gentle aggressive humor. Even in its benign form, teasing can be a face-threat (Alberts, 1992). Alberts’ (1992) research revealed that when a recipient perceived that the goal of a tease was to benignly joke, then the recipient thought the message was funny and responded in kind. In other words, when the recipient felt their face was not attacked, they responded with a non-face threatening message. However, if an individual attributed the goal of the tease to be serious, then the participant perceived a degree of face threat and responded seriously. If an individual was uncertain about the teasing intent, the recipient would have mixed attributions.

Alberts’ (1992) findings provided a basis for understanding recipients’ responses to both mundane face threats and humorous repairs. In a study on romantic conflict (Bippus, 2003), when receivers believed when a speaker used humor to convey sensitivity, the recipients felt the conflict was resolvable. However, individuals who interpreted humorous messages as hostile were more likely to act defensively, resulting in conflict escalation. These negative outcomes were associated with internal attributions. However, the most effective strategy to earn forgiveness is when a forgiver makes external attributions to the offender’s behavior (Kelley, 1998).

Although there is some research on humor effectiveness, much work remains to be done determining the conditions a receiver will find a humorous repair as effective. Studies have identified a few individual characteristics that may influence a receiver’s perception of humor (Alberts, 1992; Bippus, Young, & Dunbar, 2011; Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008; Hall, in press) but research has not focused on the
relationship between those individual characteristics and conflict repairs. The fact that some people find some things funny while others do not illustrate the complexity of humor (Neuendorf, Skalski, & Powers, 2004). Exploring the characteristics that influence how receivers respond to humor should provide insight into how individual differences might impact the way humorous repairs are perceived.

**Individual Factors that Influence Attributions of Humorous Messages**

Several factors influence how people perceive, or process humorous messages. As previously discussed, one such important factor is an individual’s attribution of their partner’s use of humor during conflict (Bippus, 2003). Another factor is one’s humor orientation, defined as one’s frequency of telling jokes or funny stories, and how funny one perceives others to be. It may also represent an underlying disposition of a person to seek out and readily use humor (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991). Individuals who score high on the humor orientation scale tend to be more optimistic and therefore may view face-threat messages as less face-threatening by attributing the speaker’s intent to be non-intentionally hurtful. They may also have better coping skills to manage face-threats.

Another important individual characteristic that could influence a person’s perception of humor is their humor appreciation, defined as one’s affective disposition to laugh easily, enjoy jokes, and be a good receptive audience to other’s jokes (Thorson & Powell, 1993; Ziv & Gadish, 1989). Research illustrated that individuals with a higher positive regard for humor also had higher intimacy levels with their partner (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2010). Similar to individuals who have high scores in humor orientation, people who score high in humor appreciation may also be pre-dispositioned to view the intent of a humorous message as less face–threatening.
However, one study noted that humor recipients did not give speakers acknowledgement for using humor unless the message was indeed funny (Bippus, 2003). Individuals who create and appreciate humor are more likely to find relationships to be more satisfying and pleasant (Hall, in press). It may be because recipients who do not perceive or take face-threats to heart can cope better and maintain positivity in their relationships.

In addition to individual humor characteristics, contextual factors about the conflict, such as severity of the conflict (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006), or in this case the face threatening message and the receiver’s attribution of a message intent (Young & Bippus, 2001) influence the perception of humor. Yet, our current understandings of a receiver’s reception of a humorous repair during conflict remains limited.

**Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses seek to understand perceived effectiveness of humorous repairs by addressing the relationships between individual characteristics and contextual variables.

These hypotheses are based on a theoretical model exemplifying how individuals process and respond to humorous repairs. From previous research on effective humor (Bachman and Guerrero, 2006; Bippus, 2003; Vallade, Booth-Butterfield, & Vela, 2013), individual characteristics about humor and contextual variables may directly and indirectly influence how a receiver perceives a humorous repair. Specifically, humor orientation, humor appreciation, and perceived severity of a conflict may have a direct relationship with perceived repair effectiveness. These variables could also have an indirect relationship with perceived repair effectiveness.
that is mediated by the attribution of message intent. Below are the developed hypotheses and theoretical model presented in Figure A.

Theoretical Model

![Theoretical Model Diagram](image)

Figure 1  Theoretical Model Presents

The current study examined three mediated models that predicted reception of repairs. The first model predicted humor orientation to effectiveness. The second predicted humor appreciation to effectiveness. Lastly, the third predicted perceived severity of conflict to effectiveness. Before expanding on each model, understanding message reception needs to begin with Attribution theory.

Research has established that people rely on their attributions of other’s behavior, thus influencing how they respond (Stamp & Knapp, 1990), making attribution a possible mediator in understanding perceptions of humorous repairs. A
study on relational transgressions ascertained that a target’s perceived intent of a transgressor’s behavior was the strongest predictor of blame and unwillingness to forgive (Boon & Sulsky, 1997). If a receiver attributes a speaker’s behavior as hostile to the point where the receiver is unwilling to forgive, then it is possible that any repair attempts from the transgressor will not be effective. Furthermore, Bachman and Guerrero (2006) found that partners who attributed hurtful messages as intentional were more likely to respond with distributive communication (face-threatening behaviors that include making accusations, blaming, yelling) and revenge. The findings support previous research that if a receiver is confronted with a perceived intended face–threat, they are more likely to respond with defensive behaviors (Cupach & Carson, 2002) and possibly less likely to accept a repair. Young and Bippus (2001) observed that hurtful comments about a partner’s talents, intellectual abilities, hopes, or plans were seen with cruel intentions. They suggested recipients also felt these topics were more hurtful if they believed the speaker had strong feelings about the issue, because those feelings could influence how the speaker viewed the receiver as a relational partner. In lines with face theory, receivers may feel their positive face threatened and attribute the speaker’s comment with hurtful intent.

However, Young and Bippus (2001) also discerned that recipients made more benign attributions about the strength of the sentiment from the speaker who used humor rather than not. The researchers suggested that the reason for the resulting attribution is because humorous messages could be ambiguous and both, the speaker and the receiver can leave the intention up to interpretation. This ambiguous attribution may help with repair effectiveness. If recipients form benign attributions from hurtful messages, they may be less likely to take a face threat as intentional and
be more accepting of the humorous repair. Moreover, if a receiver identifies the speaker’s attempts at humor, it could lead to accepting repairs. Thus, recipients of a humorous repair may believe that the speaker is using humor to establish common ground (Meyer, 2000), improve the receiver’s mood (Francis, Monahan, & Berger, 1999), or change the subject (Bippus, 2000). Therefore, how a receiver will attribute the speaker’s intention of the repair should directly influence how a receiver will perceive the repair effectiveness.

Given that attribution affects perception of message reception, it is likely attributions based on humor are influenced by humor attitudes such as humor orientation, humor appreciation and contextual cues such as perceived severity of an issue. The following hypotheses present the three mediated models explaining the link between each predicting variable and perceptions of repair. Additionally, attribution is affected by each predicting variable.

A predicting factor that may influence how a receiver will perceive a humorous repair is their predisposition to communicate humor, or humor orientation (HO). Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, and Booth-Butterfield (1996) noted individuals high in HO were more likely to think about how to use and incorporate humor in interactions. They also held higher appreciation for humor and found humor to be appropriate in a variety of circumstances. It may be that when someone high on HO is presented with a humorous repair, they see it as fitting to the conflict and may be more accepting of it. Furthermore, humor orientation was linked with optimism and well-being. If someone has higher optimism about a conflict, they may be more prone to look for the repair component in a message. Participants high on HO also reported having heightened cognitive schemas (a way of organizing information about people
based on previous experiences) and a higher appreciation for joke production. It could be that people with heightened cognitive schemas can process and reframe messages to identify that the partner’s response is a repair attempt at positivity. Because HO is linked with optimism, well-being, and appreciation for humor production, it is possible that they are also more likely to keep tensions minimal and accept a humorous repair as effective.

H1: There is a direct positive association between humor orientation and perceived effectiveness of humorous repairs.

An individual’s evaluation of a message’s intent may override their characteristics influencing the direct relationship between humor orientation and perceived repair effectiveness. One important part of humor orientation is how a receiver perceives other’s to be funny. People high on HO tend to have high appreciation for humor and are more likely to seek and find humor in extensive situations (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991). Because they are more sensitive to humor potential in various contexts, they may be keener to notice their partner’s use of self-deprecating humor. They may also perceive the conflict issue as less face-threatening considering the partner’s response is targeting themselves. According to Norrick and Spritz (2008), self-critical messages correlated better with humor effectiveness. Also, high HO individuals may be more perceptible of a partner’s effort in using humor and acknowledge the speaker’s intent to repair damage. As high HO is correlated with more optimism, recipients may attribute a partner’s humorous repair as benign to give the partner the benefit of the doubt. Thus, high HO individuals may believe the speaker’s intent to be benevolent.
H1a: Attribution of intent mediates the relationship between humor orientation and perceived effectiveness of humorous repairs.

Research found that many study participants liked to laugh and repeat jokes but would not create humor by themselves (Ziv, 1988). This result meant those participants had high humor appreciation (HA). Individuals who have high humor appreciation are characterized by laughing more frequently, being merry, and finding more things to be funny (Lefcourt, 2001). Bazzini, Stack, Martincin and Davis (2007) stated that the ability to laugh about neutral or negative events benefited relational satisfaction. An earlier study pointed out that high HA individuals had higher love and liking toward their partners (Rubin, 1970). According to Fraley and Aron (2004), individuals with strong HA also felt closer to their partners when there was shared humor than individuals who had lower HA. The feelings of closeness more likely will aid in conflict repair because without the feeling of closeness, it may be more difficult to fix hurt emotions and increase positivity. Herzog and Anderson (2000) realized that individuals with higher levels of HA focused more on the emotional part of a message rather than the content of a joke. As the emotional tone of a partner’s response reflects feelings of repair or positivity, high HA participants may be more in tuned to that emotion and accept the repair as effective. Also, Weisfeld (1993) coined the term reciprocal altruism, defined as laughing and making a partner laugh to signal gratitude to the humorist. Hence, when a joke is reciprocated with laughter, both partners felt gratitude. Because HA individuals tend to be dispositioned to laugh and be merry, instead of reciprocal altruism in terms of laughing, participants high on appreciation may also reciprocate the feelings of mirth and positivity from a humorous repair.
Therefore, it could be possible that higher scores in humor appreciation will positively lead to perceived repair effectiveness.

H2: There is a direct positive association between humor appreciation and perceived effectiveness of humorous repairs.

Evidence suggests that the relationship between humor appreciation and perceived repair effectiveness is mediated by attribution of intent. It could be that people higher on appreciation will attribute friendly intent to the repair message. Hall (in press) claimed that people who believed that their partners have a good sense of humor make positive attributions to that partner as being a good spouse, a good person, and as having a good relationship. Indirectly, humor appreciation is strongly associated with having positive affect and the trait cheerfulness (Kolher & Ruch, 1996), openness and mindfulness (Moran, Rain, Page-Gould, & Mar, 2014). These characteristics may influence someone’s attributions of another’s behavior. For instance, given that HA links with openness and consciousness it could be that high HA individuals are more open to different interpretations and reasons for another’s behavior, thus giving them the benefit of the doubt. In addition, Herzog and Anderson (2000) noted that those with a well-developed sense of humor engage in a reframing interpretation of crude jokes. By reframing the cruelty cues (cues that suggest negative emotions), the chance that they respond with negativity is counteracted. Norrick and Spritz (2008) further supported the success of humor effectiveness depended when a participant reframed a humorous interaction and laughed. By being exposed to a repair response from a potential partner, high HA individuals may be more likely to reframe the repair message with a positive attribution than a negative one.
H2a: Attribution of intent mediates the relationship between humor appreciation and perceived effectiveness of humorous repairs.

Finally, humor is context-dependent (Holmes & Marra, 2006) and how one perceives the severity of a conflict may influence one’s perception of humorous repair effectiveness. Norrick and Spitz (2008) determined that the seriousness of a conflict could influence the effectiveness of humor. For instance, they suggested that humor could be successful in ending a conflictual tone in an interaction when an argument is not too heated or there is not much at stake in terms of relational power. They also found that when the argument was too heated, even humor attempts at mediation from a third party were ineffective. Bachman and Guerrero (2006) noted that the severity of an issue may impede forgiveness, even if the misbehaving partner attempted to make amends. Severity of a conflict could also be reframed as the severity of a face threat, and research showed that the more severe a face threat, the more negative attributions and emotional outcomes (Cupach & Carson, 2002). Vallade, Booth-Butterfield, and Vela’s (2013)’s study of superiority and humor use in relational transgressions ascertained that the severity of a transgression correlated with more negative usages of humor to show superiority toward the partner who committed the transgression. Even within an online context, perceived face-threat severity was associated with relational deterioration (Wohn & Spottswodd, 2016). Therefore, if recipients of a humorous repair believe the conflict issue to be a severe face threat, receivers may be less likely to accept that repair.
H3: There is a direct negative association between perceived severity of conflict and perceived effectiveness of humorous repairs.

As previously mentioned in Cupach and Carson (2002)’s study, participants who perceived face threats to be intentional had more negative attributions and emotional outcomes that contributed to relational consequences. If receivers place negative attributions and emotions from a face threat, that may also contribute to their perception of repair effectiveness. Moreover, when participants were asked to reflect on a complaint they had received from a friend or romantic partner, results indicated that if the complaint seemed to be more severe, then the recipient believed the intention to be hurtful. In an online context, participants felt the face threat to be more severe when they believed the other person intentionally embarrassed them by tagging them in an embarrassing photo (Litt, Spottswood, Birnholtz, Hancock, Smith, & Reynolds, 2014).

When a partner’s post on Facebook made the recipient feel embarrassed or awkward, results indicated the recipients felt the offender had hurtful intentions, leading to diminished feelings of closeness with the partner (Wohn & Spottswood, 2016). Considering this finding, if a receiver attributes negative intentions and feels distant from the partner, it may be harder for the offender’s repair attempt to be effective. Research further found individuals who attributed their partners’ negative behavior as a dispositional quality were more likely to react with exit behaviors that threaten or end a relationship than loyalty (Kammrath & Dweck, 2006). If recipients of a mundane face threat attribute the intention of a partner’s response as benign, they may react with more positive behaviors than negative behaviors, aiding in perceived repair effectiveness. Thereby using attribution theory as a foundation of perceived
intent, an individual’s attribution of the speaker’s intent may depend on the severity of the conflict.

H3a: Attribution of intent mediates the relationship between perceived conflict severity and perceived effectiveness of humorous repairs.

Summary

The above hypotheses were examined in the following research study. The current project sought to understand how individuals perceive humorous repairs using conflict, face and attribution theory as groundwork. Moreover, the study observed individual humor attitudes and contextual cues to assess the direct and indirect pathways to perceived repair effectiveness. The next chapter discusses the methods and measures used for the current study.
Chapter 2

METHODS

The current section presents the procedures and methods used to test the hypotheses presented in Chapter 1. In this study, participants responded to hypothetical vignettes about humorous repairs and evaluated them. Participants were exposed to three hypothetical conflict scenarios between them and a romantic partner. Each scenario contained a situation involving a mundane face threat that could provoke conflict and a dialogue of attempted repair. Afterward, participants responded to questions regarding the situations’ realism, partner intention, and overall repair effectiveness. The first part of this chapter reports the results from the pilot study meant to validate the conflict scenarios and test the reliabilities of the newly created scales. The second part of this chapter describes the methods used to test the hypotheses.

Pilot Study

Purpose

One of the main purposes of the pilot study was to validate the realism of each hypothetical conflict scenario. Three proposed scenarios were developed to assess each participant’s perception of a conflict issue and a face threat between themselves and a romantic partner. The scenarios were designed to be mundane relational conflicts and relatable enough to undergraduates. The current study used the vignette technique, similarly used by Bippus, Dunbar and Liu (2012) who examined humorous responses in interpersonal conflict. Vignettes provided a way for participants with or without a significant other to imagine themselves in each scenario. Moreover, the
study used vignettes so participants would report how they would most likely to respond to each humorous repair. The pilot test included three situations, all of which included a face-threat to the romantic partner and an apologetic response with an affiliative message. Winterheld, Simpson and Orina (2013) ascertained that when a partner used more affiliative humor, individuals laughed more, appeared less angry, and were more satisfied with conflict resolution. The set-up of the designs were inspired by previous methodologies. Earlier studies found that the topics on physical attractiveness (Zhang & Stafford, 2008; Young & Bippus, 2001), hopes/plans (Young & Bippus, 2001), and behavioral messages such as commenting on one’s money spending habits (Zhang & Stafford, 2008) were common face threats in romantic couples. The proposed study used these topics as foundational conflict issues. For the partner’s repair message, the proposed study emulated Bippus, Dunbar, and Liu’s (2012) format in humorous responses in a romantic conflict, specifically the response of an affiliative message. As participants were more likely to forgive partners that offered a sincere apology during conflict (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Kelley, 1998), the study combines the affiliative message with an apology.

The second goal of the pilot was to test measurement reliabilities. The pilot study tested reliabilities for developed scales such as Humor Orientation and Humor Appreciation. Additionally, the pilot tested newly developed scales such as Perceived Severity of Conflict, Attribution of Intent, and Perceived Repair Effectiveness. For full procedure, refer to Appendix A.
Participants

Participants were 49 undergraduates who received extra credit for their participation. The sample had 47 females and 3 males and ranged in age from 19-22 years old ($M = 20.20$, $SD = .61$).

Procedures

First, participants read descriptions of three conflict scenarios involving a face threat followed by a humorous repair. Scenario 1 presented an issue with the partner’s outfit, Scenario 2 was a conflict about the way a partner spends his/her free time, and Scenario 3 was a face threat toward a partner’s future goals/plans. After reading each scenario, participants rated situation realism, severity intent and repair effectiveness. A sample scenario is presented below:

Scenario 1: Face-threat to one’s outfit

Imagine your partner made fun of your outfit you wore the other day.

You tell him/her, “Can we talk for a minute? It hurt my feelings when you made fun of my outfit yesterday. I’d like it if you didn’t laugh at the new clothes I just bought.

Response: “I’m sorry. Who am I to judge, just the other day I wore clothes that were so big, it could have been mistaken for an oversized bag!”

Measures
Measurement Reliabilities

The second goal of the pilot was to test the reliabilities of established and new scales. The next section explains the variables of the model starting with the independent variables. Moreover, each variable description provides the reliability for
each measure. For the full scales of each variable, refer to the Appendix located at the end of the study.

Independent Variables

*Humor Orientation*. The current study used Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield’s (1991) Humor Orientation Scale to examine the how frequent an individual tells jokes or funny stories in an interaction with others, and how one perceives others to be funny in conversations. The scale was comprised of 17-items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items included, “People usually laugh when I tell a joke or story,” “I use humor to communicate in a variety of situations,” and “Being funny is a natural communication style with me.” Results from the pilot indicated the scale was reliable ($\alpha=.89$). In other words, the scale reliably measured one’s frequent use of humor. To make all the scales consistent for the full study, reverse-coded items in the HO scale were rephrased so they are no longer reverse-coded. The full scale is presented in Appendix B.

*Severity of Conflict*. This measure asked participants to rate/evaluate the severity of the conflict by perceptions of ‘face’ attack. Participants rated each item on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items included, “My partner making fun of my outfit would cause problems in the relationship,” “My partner telling his/her friends how I waste time would offend me,” “My partner teasing me about my future plans would make me mad.” Results from the pilot indicated scale reliability for each scenario (Scenario 1, $\alpha = .70$; Scenario 2, $\alpha = .79$; Scenario 3, $\alpha = .79$). The results also indicated that the participants found a
degree of face threat in each scenario. Because of the scale’s reliability, no further changes were made to the final study. The full scale is presented in Appendix D.

Dependent Variables

*Attribution of Intent.* Perception of intent was defined as an assessment of the speaker’s true thoughts and feelings (Young & Bippus, 2001). A newly created 5-item scale was used to assess the respondent’s thoughts about the sender’s intent. Participants rated each item on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample statements included, “My partner’s response was meant to lighten the situation,” “My partner’s response was meant to calm me down,” “My partner’s response was meant to de-escalate the tension.” The pilot showed the scale was reliable for each scenario (Scenario 1, $\alpha = .70$; Scenario 2, $\alpha = .80$; Scenario 3, $\alpha = .82$). Results indicated that participants found the speaker’s response to have a repair intention. No further changes were made to this measure. The full scale is presented in Appendix E.

*Perceived Effectiveness of Humorous Repair.* A new scale was developed to measure repair guided by Gottman et al’s (2015) definition of repair effectiveness as the reduction of negativity and the increase of positivity. Participants rated their perceptions of repair effectiveness on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale in the pre-test was reliable for each scenario (Scenario 1, $\alpha = .84$; Scenario 2, $\alpha = .88$; Scenario 3, $\alpha = .86$). The results show that participants perceived the humorous repair in each scenario to be effective. In other words, most participants believed the humorous repair increased positivity from the initial face-threat. No
further changes were made to this measure for the main study. For full scale, refer to Appendix F.

Table 1 shows that participants viewed each scenario as moderately realistic (ranging from 3.1-3.6). Furthermore, the 5-item scale created to evaluate perceived realism was reliable (Scenario 1, $\alpha = .63$; Scenario 2, $\alpha = .81$; Scenario 3, $\alpha = .70$). As planned, participants viewed each conflict with some degree of face threat (ranging from 3.4-4.0) and moderately realistic. The reliability results for rest of the scales are presented below.

Table 1  Means and SD for the Variables of Total Realism/Intent/Severity/Repair Effectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Scenario 1</th>
<th>Scenario 2</th>
<th>Scenario 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Realism</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Severity</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribution of Intent</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Repair Effectiveness</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

As presented above, the purpose of the pilot test was to validate the hypothetical conflict scenarios and check measurement reliabilities. From pilot data, the conflict scenarios were validated as moderately realistic with a degree of face threat. Furthermore, alpha levels from the pilot showed reliability for established and newly developed scales.
Summary of Pilot Test Results

Overall, the pilot served two purposes: validate the realism of the scenarios and test the reliabilities for the newly created scales. Results from the pilot study showed the participants found the scenarios moderately real as well as perceiving each scenario to have some degree of face-threat. Face threats were relatively similar to each other for participants to rate how severe the threat was for them and how it affected repair. All the new and original scales showed reliability and was used in the final study. The next section presents the procedures and measures of the main study.

Main Study

The purpose of this study was to test the theoretical model and hypotheses presented in Chapter 1. The current study examined how individual characteristics and contextual cues are associated with perceptions of humorous repairs. In addition, this study attempted to explain associations among those perceptions to overall perceived effectiveness. The main study presented participants with three hypothetical conflict scenarios and they answered questions about their attitudes after each one.

Participants

Participants were 165 undergraduates who received extra credit for their participation. The sample had 95 females and 70 males and ranged in age from 18-27 years old ($M=20.04, SD=1.3$). Participants from the pilot study were not eligible for the main study.
**Procedure**

As with the pilot study, after participants read each conflict scenario, they responded to items assessing realism, intent, severity and perceived effectiveness of the repair. Each conflict situation presented a face-threat with a dialogue of attempted repair. For instance,

**Scenario 2: Face-threat to using free time**

“Imagine your partner told you that he/she has been talking about you to their friends and how you spend your free time. You tell him/her, “Can we talk for a minute? I was embarrassed when you told your friends I often waste time. I was exhausted after a long week and I needed to relax.

Response: I’m sorry. Who am I to talk, when I relax, I don’t even notice if it’s day or night!”

See Appendix A for the exact format of each scenario. Participants then completed the humor orientation measure and the Humor Appreciation Scale (see Appendix D).

Participants completed each of the measures three times (one per scenario). Thus, each participant produced three values for each variable. To test the hypotheses, the three scores on each variable were averaged to create an overall score which was then used in the final analyses below. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of these measures as well as humor orientation and humor appreciation that was assessed only once.
Measures

Perceived Repair Effectiveness. A new scale was developed to measure repair. Repair effectiveness was guided by Gottman et al’s (2015) definition of repair as the reduction of negativity and the increase of positivity. Participants rated each item on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) asking about the effectiveness of the repair. Sample statements included, “I would think we could solve the issue,” “I would feel more comfortable to talk about my feelings to my partner,” “I would be less upset.” For full scale, refer to Appendix G. The scale was reliable across the three scenarios, ranging from $\alpha = .87 - .94$.

Perceived Realism. Realism was measured on a 5-item scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This measure assessed how realistic each scenario was to the participants. Participants responded to four items: “It is easy to image myself and a partner in this situation,” “I can imagine myself responding to conflict this way,” “Conflicts like this are common among college students,” “The response to this conflict is common among college students.” The scaled was reliable ($\alpha = .74 - .78$) across the three scenarios.

Attribution of Intent. A newly created 5-item scale assessed the respondent’s thoughts about the sender’s intent. Participants rated each item on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Example statements included, “My partner’s response was meant to fix the situation,” “My partner’s response was meant to calm me down.” The full scale is presented in Appendix F. The scale was reliable across all scenarios, ranging from $\alpha = .79 - .88$. 

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Humor Orientation. Participants rated items from Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield’s (1991) 17-item scale that measures how frequently an individual uses humor and the individual’s perception of other people’s humor. They responded to the items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items included, “I regularly tell jokes and funny stories when I am with a group,” “My friends would say that I am a funny person.” “I use humor to communicate in a variety of situations” (see Appendix C). The analysis indicated the scale was reliable, $\alpha = .93$.

Humor Appreciation. Participants completed a combination of the Humor Generation and Appreciation scale Ziv (1988) and the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (Thorson & Powell, 1993). They rated six statements about their humor appreciation from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items included, “I find many situations funny,” “I laugh easily,” and “I like a good joke” (see Appendix D). The scale was reliable, $\alpha = .81$.

Perceived Severity of Conflict. A new measure was created to access participant’s belief about the severity of a conflict by perceptions of ‘face’ attack from each scenario. Participants rated each item on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items included, “My partner making fun of my outfit would cause problems in the relationship,” “My partner telling his/her friends how I waste time would offend me,” “My partner teasing me about my future plans would make me mad.” The full scale is presented in Appendix E. The scale was reliable across all scenarios, $\alpha = .88$. 
Table 2  Means and Standard Deviations of Independent and Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Realism</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Severity</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribution of Intent</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Repair Effectiveness</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor Orientation</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor Appreciation</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chapter presented the results of the pilot study and the methodology used in the main study. The pilot study aimed to validate the hypothetical scenarios and check measurement reliabilities. The results indicated that the scenarios were realistic and the scales were reliable. The main study used the same procedures and measures as the pilot. The next section presents the results of the main study.
Chapter 3

RESULTS

The current study sought to analyze the relationships among humor attitudes and perceived repair effectiveness. Additionally, the study examined the relationships among humor attitudes and effectiveness mediated by attribution of intent. This chapter reports the results of the tested hypotheses presented in Chapter One. All hypotheses were tested with regression procedures. More specifically, the study used a mediation analysis (PROCESS in SPSS; Hayes, 2013) to test the direct and indirect paths between variables. The PROCESS analysis provided estimates of the total, direct, and indirect effects of the variables in the hypothesized model. Furthermore, the analysis showed whether there were full or partial mediated effects. The main results are depicted in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

Hypothesis 1 and 1a

H1 predicted a direct relationship between humor orientation and perceived repair effectiveness. H1a predicted an indirect relationship with attribution of intent mediating the relationship between humor orientation and perceived repair effectiveness. H1 and H1a were analyzed using PROCESS in SPSS to test for mediation (Hayes, 2013). Repair effectiveness was entered as the outcome, humor orientation was entered as the predictor, and attribution of intent as the mediator. Additionally, humor appreciation and perceived severity of the conflict were entered as covariates to control for their influences. Figure 1 summarizes the results.
** $p < .001$, *Indirect Effect*: BootLLCI ($-0.1112$) BootULCI ($0.0791$).

The overall model was significant, $F(4.160)=19.11$, $p<.001$, $R^2=.05$. Taken together, the variables in the model only accounted for 5% of variance in perceived effectiveness scores. For H1a, the analysis indicated covariations for severity ($\beta = -0.21$, $SE=0.06$, $p=-.10$) and humor appreciation ($\beta = -0.03$, $SE=0.10$, $p=.78$). To test the mediation hypothesis, the analysis examined humor orientation to perceived repair effectiveness mediated by attribution of intent. While intent was statistically significant to repair, humor orientation to intent was not ($\beta = -0.02$, $SE=0.10$, $p=78$). There was no mediation, and thus H1a was not supported. Lastly, the direct relationship between humor orientation and repair was also not significant ($\beta = 0.14$, $SE=0.08$, $p=.06$), therefore, H1 was not supported.

**Hypothesis 2 and 2a**

H2 predicted a direct relationship between humor appreciation and perceived repair effectiveness. H2a predicted an indirect relationship between HA and repair
mediated by intent. With the mediated model, the analysis used repair effectiveness as the outcome, humor appreciation as the predictor, and attribution of intent as the mediator. Humor orientation and perceived severity of the conflict were entered as covariates to control for their influences. Figure 2 summarizes the results.

Figure 3 Effects of Humor Appreciation to Perceived Repair Effectiveness

** $p < .001$, Indirect Effect: BootLLCI (-.1112) BootULCI (.0791).

The overall model was significant, $F(4,160)=19.11, p<.001, R^2=.32$. Taken together, the variables in the model accounted for $32\%$ of variance in perceived effectiveness scores, indicating a moderately strong correlation. For H2a, severity ($\beta=-.21, SE=.06, p<.001$) and humor orientation ($\beta=.14, SE=.08, p=.06$) were entered as covariates. The results indicated that attribution of intent mediated the effect of HA on repair effectiveness. H2a was supported by the data ($\beta=.29, SE=.10, 95\% CI [.09, .50])$. In other words, there was a mediated effect. Lastly, the direct relationship between humor appreciation and repair was not significant ($\beta=-.03, SE=.10, p=.78$), therefore, H2 was not supported.
To further examine mediation, the direct effect of HA to repair was compared to the mediated effect between HA and repair. The overall relationship between HA and effectiveness showed significance, $F(3,161)=6.05, p<.001$. However, with the addition of the mediator, the direct relationship became insignificant ($\beta=.13, SE=.11, p=.25$) and the mediated effect was significant ($\beta=-.21, SE=.06, p<.001$). Therefore, results indicated a fully mediated relationship.

**Hypothesis 3 and 3a**

H3 predicted a direct relationship between perceived severity of the conflict and perceived repair effectiveness. H3a predicted an indirect relationship between severity and repair mediated by intent. For the mediated model, repair effectiveness was entered as the outcome, perceived severity as the predictor, attribution of intent as the mediator. Humor orientation and humor appreciation was inputted as covariates to control for their influences. Figure 3 summarizes the results.
Effects of Perceived Severity to Perceived Repair Effectiveness


The overall model was significant, $F(4.160)=19.11, p<.001, R^2=.32)$. Taken together, the variables indicated a moderate correlation of the variance in effectiveness scores. For H3a, the analysis indicated covariations for HO ($\beta=.14, SE=.08, p=.06$) and HA ($\beta=-.03, SE=.10, p=.78$). To test H3a, the analysis examined severity to repair effectiveness mediated by attribution of intent. H3a was not supported by the data ($\beta=-.03, SE=.06, p=.67, 95$ percent CI [-.15, .10]), thus there was no mediated effect. Lastly, the direct relationship between severity and repair was significant ($\beta=-.21, SE=.06, p<.001$), therefore, H3 was supported.

Summary of Analyses and Hypotheses Tests

To summarize, H1 and H1a predicted direct and indirect relationships between HO and effectiveness. Both were unsupported. Humor orientation did not directly
predict nor indirectly predict repair effectiveness. The first model had a weak relationship between HO and effectiveness, accounting for only 5% of variance in perceived effectiveness scores. H2 predicted a direct relationship between HA and effectiveness. The result was insignificant. H2a predicted a mediated relationship between HA and effectiveness with attribution of intent. H2a was supported. HA predicted repair effectiveness only through attribution of intent. The overall model had a moderate relationship, $R^2=.32$. Lastly, H3 predicted a direct correlation between severity and effectiveness. The results were significant, thus H3 was supported. H3a predicted a mediated effect between severity and effectiveness and it was not supported. The next chapter presents how the current findings fit within the larger body of research. Moreover, the next section discusses and interprets the relationships of the variables within theory. The author also identifies limitations and directions for future research.
Chapter 4
DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was test the theoretical model presented in Chapter One on perceptions of humorous repairs. Research determined that humor works at reducing frustration (Pryor et al., 2010) however little is known how and when a humorous remark will be positively perceived. The current study examined individual humor attitudes and contextual cues associated with repair effectiveness. First, this chapter discusses how the results from the current study fit into existing conflict and humor literature. Next, the chapter interprets how the current results contributes to conflict, attribution and face theory. Lastly, the author identifies limitations and provides directions for future research.

Result Summary & Interpretation

Humor Orientation’s Direct & Indirect Effect on Repair Effectiveness

The present study examined two humor attitudes and their relation to humorous repairs. The first model proposed that humor orientation would be both directly and indirectly associated with perceptions of repair messages. The model also hypothesized that attributions of intent would mediate the relationship between HO and effectiveness (H1 and H1a). In the current study, neither hypothesis was supported. HO did not predict how likely a receiver would accept a repair or how they would attribute the speaker’s intent. This finding was inconsistent with previous research that found people higher in HO were more likely to seek and find humor in extensive situations (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991). The current study’s result could be consistent with Bippus’s (2003) research that noted humor
recipients did not acknowledge a speaker for using humor unless the message was truly funny.

The current findings did not support the model with humor orientation. A reason may be because humor orientation focuses more on the production of humor rather than the acceptance of humor. Research noted that individuals with increased levels of HO held higher appreciation for humor (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, and Booth-Butterfield, 1996), however the HO scale focused on the individual’s perception of themselves as being funny rather than other’s to be funny. Although past research associated high HO with humor seeking, the current study found that seeking humor does not lead to repair effectiveness.

Overall, the humor orientation model was not supported by the data. HO was not significant in predicting either the direct or indirect pathway to repair effectiveness. The next section examines humor appreciation’s relationship to repair effectiveness.

**Humor Appreciation’s Direct & Indirect Effect on Repair Effectiveness**

The second mediated model examined humor appreciation (HA) to repair effectiveness. Individuals who score high on HA are characterized as people who laugh easily, find more things to be funny, and are overall merry (Lefcourt, 2001). The model proposed that humor appreciation would be both directly and indirectly associated with perceptions of repair messages. The model also hypothesized that attributions of intent would mediate the relationship between HA and effectiveness (H2 and H2a). In the current study, H2 was not supported and H2a was supported. Interestingly, HA did not have a direct effect to repair effectiveness, however it did have an indirect effect through attribution of intent. This result contradicted Bazzini,
Stack, Martincin and Davis (2007)’s claim that the ability to laugh about neutral or negative events benefited relational satisfaction. The current study assumed that high HA individuals would be likely to perceive a repair as effective because they would appreciate the humor use. However, the results suggest that someone who is appreciative of humor does not mean they will accept a humorous repair.

H2a revealed that HA did influence repair effectiveness but only through attribution of intent. In accordance with previous research (Moran et al., 2014), HA may have predicted attribution of intent because HA has been associated with openness and mindfulness. Participants high in HA may have given their hypothetical partner the benefit of the doubt by being more open to different interpretations of their partner’s behavior, thus leading to a better repair effectiveness score. Similar to Herzog and Anderson’s (2000) research, participants in the current study could have reframed the face threat and humorous repair, thereby also leading to a higher effectiveness score. Herzog and Anderson (2000) further realized that high HA individuals were more likely to focus on emotional parts of a humorous remark rather than the content. Potentially, even without face-to-face, participants high in HA were more sensitive to the non-hostile emotion of the repair and responded positively to their hypothetical partner. Hall (in press) reported that people who believed their partners to have a good sense of humor and made positive attributions about their partner reported being in a good relationship. Therefore, future research may want to examine couples and how each partner perceives the other in general before presenting them with a conflict and a humorous repair.

An important reason for the difference between the findings of HO and HA is because HO focused on humor production whereas HA focused on reception. The
distinction between the two variables is important to further understand humor. The current study’s findings suggest that someone perceived as humorous by others and themselves (HO) does not mean they will be receptive of humor. On the other hand, HA provided fruitful results that suggest reception is an important measure in understanding perception of humorous repairs.

Overall, the current study’s findings on HA partially coincided with existing research. Participants high on HA were more likely to accept a humorous repair after evaluating the speaker’s intent. Thus, HA is an important variable to understand attributions. Although HA determined effectiveness through intent, HA did not predict effectiveness directly. Future research may want to manipulate the degree of the face threats to determine at what point will appreciation be ineffective to effectiveness through attribution.

**Perceived Severity of Conflict’s Direct & Indirect Effect on Repair Effectiveness**

Finally, the third mediated model examined the relationship between perceived severity of conflict and repair effectiveness. Norrick and Spitz (2008) revealed humor could be successful in ending conflict when an argument is not too heated and relational power is not at stake. The model proposed that perceived severity of conflict would be both directly and indirectly associated with perceptions of repair messages. The model also hypothesized that attributions of intent would mediate the relationship between severity and effectiveness (H3 and H3a). In the current study, H3 was supported and H3a was not supported. Participants that rated the severity to be harsher were less likely to accept attempted amends from their partner. This result was consistent with previous research, in which Bachman and Guerrero (2006) established that the severity of an issue impeded forgiveness even if the misbehaving partner tried
to make amends. The results from H3 supported that one’s perceived severity of a conflict directly influenced how likely they were to accept a repair.

In the current study, participants rated Scenario Three (goals/plans) as a higher face threat, thereby a more severe conflict, and repair effectiveness decreased. A possible reason for why Scenario Three showed higher severity of conflict could be that goals/plans are associated with one’s identity. Participants may have thought that by teasing about their goals/plans, their partner was evoking superiority over them by attacking the receiver’s identity and positive face. Furthermore, it may be possible that receivers evaluate severity first before evaluating partner’s intent. Severity directly predicts effectiveness because the face threat directly affects the receiver. Once a receiver feels that their face is being threatened, they may not want to cognitively process if the speaker meant the humorous response to be helpful or hurtful. Judging from the current study, teasing about one’s goals/plans are significant face threats to lower the chance of repair effectiveness.

The prediction that severity would also affect repair through attribution of intent (H3a) was not supported. A reason may be that attribution of intent is a secondary cognitive process from the receiver’s initial evaluation of a face threat. The study’s findings showed perceived severity did not have a significant relationship to attribution of intent, contradicting previous research (Young & Bippus, 2001). Interestingly, Cupach and Carson’s (2002) finding that individuals who perceived face threats to be intentional and had more negative attributions was not supported in the current findings.

Overall, the current study’s findings on severity partially supported existing research. Severity directly predicted repair effectiveness but not intent. Future research
may want to manipulate the degrees of severity or face threats to determine at what point humorous repairs are possible or not.

Interpretation of Findings

The results of the current study contribute to humor and conflict research in a few ways. First, the study revealed a distinction between humor orientation and humor appreciation. Specifically, HO focused on humor production and HA focused on humor reception. The distinction between the two attitudes is important when understanding perceptions because being funny is different from accepting funny. From the results of the study, appreciating humor also has limitations to repair effectiveness. Such that, perceived severity of the face threat may surpass one’s disposition to appreciate humor.

The current study also sought to expand research in understanding conflict and the effectiveness of humorous repairs. Generally, there is a consensus in conflict literature that humor works to reduce tension. However, results from the current study suggests that humorous repairs are not always effective. For instance, among the studied variables, individual characteristics (HO and HA) did not have direct effects on effectiveness, and HO and severity had no effect on intent. To further understand Face and Attribution Theory, this study revealed that face threats were strong motivators in determining a receiver’s response to a humorous repair. In addition, attribution did not perform a significant strong role in mediating either HO or severity and repair effectiveness. Therefore, determining humorous repair effectiveness continues to be a complex area of study. The next section discusses the theoretical implications of the current project.
Theoretical Implications

The current study revealed the complexity of humor in conflict repairs. Gottman (1993) concluded that repairs were the most important maintenance behaviors in romantic conflict. When they are successful, repairs maintain the ratio of positivity to negativity in a relationship. According to Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (1998), happy couples that maintain the 5:1 ratio employ and receive humor better in conflict than unhappy couples. Happy couples are also more likely to have effective repairs. However, what is not revealed in Gottman’s studies is how and why happy couples are better at receiving repairs or humor. Moreover, humor is not clearly defined in his studies, other than that humor is an interaction that “turns toward” their partner or implies positivity than negativity (Gottman, 1998). The current study’s findings shed light into the complicated aspects of humor in repairs. For instance, the results suggest simply using humor does not guarantee repair effectiveness. These findings indicated that reception attitudes are more conducive to understanding repair effectiveness than other variables.

Another factor that could impact repair effectiveness is a couple’s relational stage. For instance, unhappy couples on the verge of divorce and/or do not maintain the 5:1 ratio may perceive any face threats (weak or strong) and conflicts as more severe than happy couples. If humor is ineffective in decreasing tension in unhappy couples, it could be that they also see conflicts as more negative and unsolvable, thus making repairs consistently unsuccessful. Future research on couples may find that severity escalates marital dissolution in unhappy couples because repairs and humor are less effective at increasing positivity. Thus, humorous apologies work better for happy couples than unhappy couples. Although this study did not examine specifically
couples, the results indicated that using humor does not always lead to repair effectiveness.

The study’s findings partially support the significance of Attribution theory when evaluating a partner’s behavior. Attribution explains how an individual perceives the reasons for another’s behavior and those perceptions influence how the individual acts, feels and thinks about the other person. Attribution theory would assume that a receiver would process reasons for their partner’s behavior when presented with a humorous repair. Attribution of intent was the mediating variable used to understand the relationship between the predicting variables and overall repair. In all three models, attribution of intent directly influenced repair effectiveness. However, with the addition of the predicting variables, attribution was not as significant. Results from the current study showed HA was most associated with the attribution route, which in turn predicted repair effectiveness. These findings suggest that attribution was not an overall significant variable in understanding repairs besides humor appreciation.

The current study also suggests that there can be reactive responses to repair messages than thoughtful ones. For instance, it is possible that HO and severity are more reactive responses than HA. In other words, participants with HO may have attributed benign intentions if they had thought the repair was truly funny, but if the message did not make them laugh, they did not perceive it as a repair. However, individuals with HA may have attributed benign intentions because they were already dispositioned with openness, mindfulness (Moran et al., 2014) and being overall merry (Lefcourt, 2001). Because HA was associated with attribution, HA could be considered a thoughtful response because individuals would think about reasons for
the other’s behavior before responding. When the face threat was more severe and personal, the participant was quicker to react to their own emotional feeling, which then directly influenced repair effectiveness. Consistently with Alberts, Kellar-Guenther, and Corman’s (1996) study, humor recipients seem to have responded more to their internal states than to the content of the humorous message.

The current study further sheds light on Face theory. Face was the foundation for the impact of perceived severity of conflict. When participants rated severity higher, they were indicating that the face threat was harsher. This result supported face theory’s general claim that people want to present a positive image of themselves and, when that image is threatened, they engage in face work to gain back their image. Kelley (1998) determined that an offended party determines how to facilitate repairs, making the wrongdoer’s face vulnerable while the forgiver’s face is saved. In the current study, one way the offended regained face may have been to not accept the repair, putting leverage in their hand when their partner attempted amends.

Interestingly, humor appreciation may also provide insight into face theory. As noted above, the characteristics of HA includes openness, mindfulness (Moran et al., 2014) and being merry (Lefcourt, 2001), which may have buffered how individuals perceived the face threat. When high HA individuals are presented with a face threat, they could be more likely to reframe it as not severe. They may also be less reactive to a face threat, allowing them to take the time to process attributions of intent that result in better repair effectiveness. Although this study used mundane face threats, future studies may want to incorporate a variety of face threat degrees to understand at what extent and under what circumstances repairs will be effective.
Methodological Limitations

Although this research adds preliminary insight to humorous repairs in romantic conflict, it is not without limitations. First, the results obtained for this study are from a small sample of college students mostly made up of females, thus not representative of the general population. This study focused on perceptions of repairs using face threats that were more likely to affect college-aged relationships. Besides the face threat to one’s goals/dreams, the other two face threats (outfits and using time) may not be as concerning to older adults. Perceptions of repairs from young adults are most likely to differ from older adults due to the nature that college students are creating and forming their own identities during their school years. Older adults may perceive teases about clothes or time as trivial, but goals/dreams could still be a sensitive subject.

Another limitation is the development of the realism scale. Upon further analysis, the items should have been separated to distinguish between conflict realism and face threat realism. Conflict realism should have assessed the participants’ belief on the conflict issue, whereas face threat realism should have assessed how the participant felt in determining if the face threat was severe enough to become a conflict. In other words, face threat realism would have assessed a personal feeling than conflict realism. Moreover, the narrow selection of scenario topics in the pilot and main study is another limitation. Although the pilot and final study participants found the scenarios to be moderately believable, other topics of conflict could have been incorporated to provide a variety of common face threats in a romantic relationship.

Furthermore, not considering the potential role of nonverbal cues presents another limitation. Participants read and imagined themselves in each conflict situation
with a potential romantic partner and self-reported their responses in all measures. However, they were not exposed to any nonverbal cues such as tone or facial expression that went along with the repair message. Repair effectiveness scores may have been more significant if participants were able to see a short clip of their potential partner delivering the repair, as done in Bippus, Dunbar and Liu’s (2012) study. Further research should consider alternative ways to present the humorous repair as realistically as possible. Overall, the results from the current study still provide valuable information about the variables that do and do not predict repair effectiveness when using a humorous apology.

**Directions for Future Research**

Although this study produced interesting findings, much work remains to be done in conflict repair research. First, future research should better define and differentiate key terms used in this study. Secondly, conflict scholars could improve methodological operations. Finally, research could implement a different project design that may yield alternate results.

To begin, researchers should differentiate the ideas of “conflict” and “face threat” as being two separate variables. Conflict should refer to the situation and face threat should refer to the feelings of distress towards one’s positive face. Research can examine how participants perceive/view the face threats and how likely those face threats would turn into relational conflicts. Future studies could also distinguish face threats based on behavior preferences or character criticisms. For instance, the current study examined face threats geared toward outfits, time usage, and hopes/dreams. Outfits and time usage are individual choices or preferences that can be easily changed. However, hopes/dreams are tied deeper to one’s character and is not easily
changeable. The distinction could be analogous to Gottman’s distinction between complaints versus criticism during conflict. Continuing research on Face theory and conflict could separate face threat scenarios into complaints and criticisms, then ask participants to rate the severity and overall repair effectiveness to a humorous apology.

Regarding methods, there are many directions researchers can take to further understand the motivators that drive repair effectiveness. Methodologically, a follow up study could provide more detail into how the humorous apology is presented to the participants. As in Bippus, Dunbar, and Liu’s (2012) study, which showed an image of a person along with a humorous message, a future study may use an image or video clip that visually expresses a humorous repair. Another methodological addition would be to implement different degrees of transgressions in a relationship. For instance, this study examined mundane relational conflicts, however to what degree would relational transgressions surpass the effectiveness of a humorous repair? A theoretical suggestion would be to incorporate other variables that would influence repair. For instance, one’s conflict style, mindfulness, sex, attachment style or cultural background, may influence their reception of a humorous repair.

Additionally, a future study could use a different research design. The current study used a survey to measure repair effectiveness. Results may be more significant and interesting if the same concept of this study were observed through a lab. Participants could be couples in a romantic relationship. Rubin (1970) recorded that high HA individuals had higher love and liking toward one’s partner and felt closer to their partners when there was shared humor between them (Fraley & Aron, 2004). Studying romantic couples may provide more insight into perceptions of humorous repairs when they are in person. Because relationships require interdependence
between the individuals, it may be possible that being in the relationship makes a difference to repair effectiveness than hypothetically thinking about being in one.

**Conclusion**

The current study sought to expand knowledge on conflict and humor by examining recipient responses to humorous repairs. More specifically, this study examined individual characteristics and contextual cues that predicted perceived repair effectiveness. Additionally, the study examined how one’s attribution of intent mediated the relationship among those variables and repair effectiveness.

The results of the current study contribute to conflict and humor research in a few important ways. First, the study found an important distinction between assessing humor orientation and appreciation to humorous repairs. Humor orientation was not a conducive variable to understand perception. On the other hand, humor appreciation had a significant relationship to repair effectiveness, but only through attribution of intent. In other words, someone who scored high on HA was more likely perceive the speaker’s intent to be benign and thus accept the repair. Results also indicated that perceived severity of a conflict was strong variable to predict repair effectiveness without attribution of intent.

On a theoretical level, the current findings reveal the complexity of humor as repairs in conflict. Such that, simply using humor will not always be effective in reducing tension or repairing the relationship. Attribution theory was not a significant framework to understanding perceived intention. Yet, Face theory was a fruitful theory to understand contextual cues and repair effectiveness. Because humor and repairs are commonly used and important communicative tools in relational maintenance, conflict
and humor scholars could use the current study’s results to further understand humorous repairs in romantic conflict.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

CONFLICT SCENARIOS

For the survey, participants will be presented with a series of three different situations involving a conflict between the participant and an imagined dating partner. For each situation, the participant will be asked to answer a series of questions about how the participant views the partner’s behavior.

Scenario 1: Face-threat to one’s outfit

“Imagine your partner made fun of your outfit you wore the other day. You tell him/her, “Can we talk for a minute? It hurt my feelings when you made fun of my outfit yesterday. I’d like it if you didn’t laugh at the new clothes I just bought.”

Response: “I’m sorry. Who am I to judge, just the other day I wore clothes that were so big, it could have been mistaken for an oversized bag!”

Scenario 2: Face-threat to using free time

“Imagine your partner told you that he/she has been talking about you to their friends and how you spend your free time. You tell him/her, “Can we talk for a minute? I was embarrassed when you told your friends I often waste time. I was exhausted after a long week and I needed to relax.”

Response: I’m sorry. Who am I to talk, when I relax, I don’t even notice if it’s day or night!”

Scenario 3: Face-threat to one’s future plans

“Imagine you told your partner your 2-year plans for your future and your partner teases you that it’s unrealistic. You tell him/her, “Can we talk for a minute? I
was hurt when you teased me about my future plans. I spent a lot of thought thinking about how I saw my next couple of years.

Response: I’m sorry. Who am I to say, I can’t even plan what I’ll be eating for dinner tonight, let alone a two-year plan!”
Appendix B

HUMOR ORIENTATION

Humor Orientation. Humor orientation is the frequency one tells jokes or funny stories in an interaction with others, as well as how funny one perceives others to be funny in conversations (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991). The main study used Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield’s (1991) 17-item scale, that ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). It measures how frequently an individual uses humor and the individual’s perception of other’s humor. The two adjustments that will be made to this scale is to rephrase reverse-coded items (*) so they are no longer reverse-coded statements as well the scale value. Participants will be asked to rate the following statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Humor Orientation
1. I regularly tell jokes and funny stories when I am with a group.
2. People usually laugh when I tell a joke or story.
3. I have no memory for jokes or funny stories.*
4. I can be funny without having to rehearse a joke.
5. Being funny is a natural communication style with me.
6. I cannot tell a joke well.*
7. People seldom ask me to tell stories.*
8. My friends would say that I am a funny person.
9. People don't seem to pay close attention when I tell a joke.*
10. Even funny jokes seem flat when I tell them.*
11. I can easily remember jokes and stories.
12. People often ask me to tell jokes or stories.
13. My friends would not say that I am a funny person.*
14. I don't tell jokes or stories even when asked to.*
15. I tell stories and jokes very well.
16. Of all the people I know, I'm one of the funniest.
17. I use humor to communicate in a variety of situations.
HUMOR APPRECIATION

Humor Appreciation. Individuals who have high humor appreciation are characterized by laughing more frequently, being merry, and finding more things to be funny (Lefcourt, 2001). To measure humor appreciation, participants completed a combination of the Humor Generation and Appreciation scale by Ziv (1988) and the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (Thorson & Powell, 1993). The incorporation of this variable occurred after the pilot test. Participants rated statements about their humor appreciation from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Humor Appreciation
1. When others laugh, I generally join the general laughter.
2. I find many situations funny.
3. Comparing myself with my friends, I enjoy more the jokes I hear.
4. I laugh easily.
5. I like a good joke.
I appreciate those who generate humor.
Appendix D

PERCEIVED SEVERITY OF CONFLICT

Severity of Conflict. Severity of conflict asked participants to rate/evaluate the severity of the conflict by perceptions of ‘face’ attack. The pilot study used a newly created 5-item scale. Participants rated statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Because the scale was reliable, no changes were made to this scale for the main study. Participants were asked to rate how they feel about the conflict issue between them and the partner.

Perceived Conflict Severity

2. My partner [scenario] would offend me.
3. My partner [scenario] would embarrass me.
5. My partner [scenario] would make me mad.
Appendix E

ATTRIBUTION OF INTENT

Attribution of Intent. Perception of intent was defined as an assessment of the speaker’s true thoughts and feelings (Young & Bippus, 2001). A newly created 5-item scale was used to assess the respondent’s thoughts about the sender’s intent. Participants were asked to rate how well each statement describes their view of the partner’s response on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Because the scale showed reliability in the pilot test, no further changes were made to this measure.

Attribution of Message Intent

1. My partner’s response was meant to de-escalate the tension.
2. My partner’s response was meant to lighten the situation.
3. My partner’s response was meant to calm me down.
4. My partner’s response was meant to fix the situation.
5. My partner’s response was meant to repair the relational damage.
Appendix F

PERCEIVED REPAIR EFFECTIVENESS

Perceived Effectiveness of Humorous Repair. A new scale was developed to measure repair guided by Gottman et al’s (2015) definition of repair effectiveness as the reduction of negativity and the increase of positivity. Results from the pilot test showed reliability, so no further changes were made to this measure for the final study. Participants were asked to rate how well each statement describes their view of the partner’s apology from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Perceive Repair Effectiveness

1. I would think we could solve the issue.
2. I would be less upset
3. I would feel calmer
4. I would feel more comfortable to talk about my feelings to my partner
5. I would be more likely to cooperate
6. I would accept the response as a repair attempt to the relational damage
Appendix G

IRB APPROVAL LETTERS

DATE: March 6, 2017
TO: Selena Pang
FROM: University of Delaware IRB
STUDY TITLE: [979023-2] Humor and Romantic Conflict
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification
ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: March 6, 2017
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # (2)

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office. Please remember to notify us if you make any substantial changes to the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Farnese-McFarlane at (302) 831-1119 or nicolefm@udel.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

cc:
DATE: November 3, 2016

TO: Selena Pang
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [979023-1] Humor and Romantic Conflict

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: November 3, 2016

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # (2)

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office. Please remember to notify us if you make any substantial changes to the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Farnese-McFarlane at (302) 831-1119 or nicolefm@udel.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.