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Humor Works: Communication Style and Humor Functions in Manager/Subordinate Relationships

Diane M. Martin
Aalto University, diane.martin@aalto.fi

Craig Rich
Loyola Marymount University, craig.rich@lmu.edu

Barbara Mae Gayle

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Diane M. Martin [a], Craig O. Rich [b] & Barbara Mae Gayle [c]

[a] Department of Communication Studies , University of
Portland , 5000 N Willamette Blvd., Portland, OR, 97203 E-mail:

[b] Department of Communication Studies , University of Utah

[c] Department of Communication Studies , University of Portland
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HUMOR WORKS:
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Diane M. Martin, Craig O. Rich,
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This study explored humor production and communicator style within the dyadic communicative relationship between organizational managers and subordinates. Research questions considered positive, expressive, and negative humor functions and manager-subordinate relational style, communication style, sex, and dyad characteristics. Results indicated that both organizational managers and subordinates report using conversational humor, mostly positive and expressive humor. Results also indicate communicator image, dominant or affiliative communication style, and sex are related to the type of conversational humor initiated by organizational managers and subordinates. It appears that organizational power/dominance and sex are better predictors of humor usage than other characteristics. Overall, results suggest that relational factors, such as one's humor, may be important to the enactment of organizational citizenship behaviors among subordinates.

Τ he tensions, strains, and paradoxes of organizational life are often reflected in dyadic relationships between organizational managers and subordinates. These relationships illustrate aspects of organizational effectiveness, efficiency, and citizenship. Using humor in superior/subordinate relationships is one way individuals may cope with day-to-day interactions. But as Malone (1980) cautioned, humor can be both productive and destructive in managerial relationships. Martin and Gayle (1999) found that managers use humor production as part of their overall communication style, but little or no research has explored humor in manager-subordinate dyadic communication. Not all individuals have the same conversational propensity to initiate conversational humor (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991). This study investigates the relationships among positive, expressive, and negative humor use and manager-subordinate relations, communication style, same-sex and different-sex manager-subordinate dyads along with other dyadic characteristics, and explores the possible ramifications for enhancing organizational citizenship behaviors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Managers and subordinates use a variety of communication strategies and resources to manage daily interactions as they work together. Researchers have viewed manager/subordinate communication through a variety of lenses. Some research focused on individual communication characteristics of the manager and the subordinate, and other research investigated communicative interactions from a dyadic perspective. Other research has examined interactions that result in the enactment of discretionary, extra-role behaviors that promote organizational effectiveness and efficiency: the hallmarks of positive organizational citizenship behaviors. At issue is whether the scope of the managers' or subordinates' communicator styles are affected by each other's communication in an organizational setting. Complicating this line of research is the absence of any consideration of the roles individual's sex and humor play in communicator behaviors of managers or subordinates in a given organization, or whether the exchange between organizational supervisors and subordinates affects the enactment of organizational citizenship behaviors. In this section a brief review of organizational citizenship, manager-subordinate communication behaviors, individual communicator styles, sex and humor, and humor initiation in organizational settings is presented.

Organizational Citizenship Behaviors

Organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) are actions beyond the scope of workers' job descriptions and formal organizational reward systems (Barksdale & Werner, 2001; Lowery, Beadles, & Krilowicz, 2002; Miles, Borman, Spector, & Fox, 2002; Williams, Pitre, & Zainuba, 2002) that have an impact on superior/subordinate relationships (Cropanzano & Byrne, 2000; Wech, 2002). Fair treatment and relational trust increase an employee's willingness to engage in OCB (Cropanzano & Byrne, 2000; Wech, 2002; Williams et al., 2002), and citizenship behaviors are related to supervisor and subordinate relational satisfaction (Lowery et al., 2002). It appears that a supervisor's willingness to create an atmosphere in which a social exchange supersedes an economic exchange within the formal organizational reward system promotes OCB among subordinates (Cropanzano & Byrne, 2000). Therefore, the communication style of a supervisor or a subordinate may function to encourage the enactment of organizational citizenship behaviors.

Communicator Style

Researchers investigating communicator styles in organizations focus on identifying the wide variety of communicator styles that managers and subordinates enact. Fairhurst (1993) investigated leader and member communicator styles in speech communities. She found that speakers employ a variety of verbal strategies or resources to convey meaning or feeling, or to reinforce power differentials with the conversational partner. She identified twelve communication patterns in leader-member interactions, which grouped into three communication categories—aligning, accommodating, and polarizing behaviors. Aligning behaviors refer to communication patterns of leaders and members coming together through behaviors of value congruence, nonroutine problem solving, support, and/or fostering a higher quality relationship with individuals lower in power (Fairhurst, 1993). Accommodating behaviors refer to leaders and members acting in response to one another through role negotiation, choice framing, or polite disagreement and adjusting their communicative strategies as the interaction progresses (Fairhurst, 1993). Finally, polarizing behaviors characterize lower quality relationships between leaders and members where distancing behaviors and authority rejection occur through performance monitoring, power games, competitive conflict, or face threatening acts (Fairhurst, 1993).

Although Fairhurst (1993) emphasized dyadic communication strategies employed by leaders and members in organizations, Norton (1983) focused on individual communication styles, arguing that within an organizational context, one's communication affects how one will be perceived. Norton and Pettigrew (1977) maintained that an organizational manager or subordinate's style of communication consists of "the way one verbally and paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood" (p. 260). According to Norton (1978), ten different styles—impression leaving, contentious, precise, dominant, dramatic, attentive, animated, relaxed, open, and friendly—are integral and independent parts of a competent communicator's repertoire. Thus, for example, a manager would exhibit attentiveness by encouraging others and listening, reveal openness by expressing her or his feelings, show friendliness though goodwill toward others, and use precise and clear verbiage. Or a subordinate might be nonverbally active (animated), appear at ease (relaxed), employ picturesque speech (dramatic), and create a good impression of her or his abilities as a competent communicator. Norton (1978) also suggested that a competent organizational manager would take charge of a situation or conversation (dominant) and be more at ease during a dispute (contentious). These variables are descriptive of one's communication style. Norton (1978) included a dependent variable, communicator image, to investigate the evaluative consequences of the independent variables. Communicator image taps a manager's or subordinate's overall image of her/his communicative ability to interact with a variety of people and evaluates whether someone is a "good communicator" (Norton, 1978, p. 134). Hackman, Ellis, Johnson, and Staley (1999) noted that, taken together, these communication styles are an enduring set of communicative behaviors managers and subordinates enact when interacting with one another. Regardless of individual style, status, or sex, similarity of communication behaviors among managers and subordinates is associated with effective communication (Montgomery & Norton, 1981).

Buller and Buller (1987) used Norton's (1983) research to establish two general communicative styles or behaviors in organizations—affiliation and control/dominance. Affiliation refers to behaviors that establish and maintain a positive relationship between the manager and subordinate, including communicating interest, friendliness, empathy, warmth, and humor (Buller & Buller, 1987). Control or dominance refers to behaviors that establish and maintain the manager's control in the interaction. Buller and Buller (1987) found that managers who are more affiliating produced more satisfaction among their subordinates, and managers with a more dominant communication style produced less satisfaction among subordinates.

Communicator style research suggests that the style or pattern enacted by managers or subordinates in an organizational setting has an impact on both the sender and the receiver. Conspicuously missing from the categorization scheme of communicator styles is the role that humor use plays.

Humor in Organizations: Functions and Types

Although Fairhurst (1993), Norton (1983), and Buller and Buller (1987) do not specifically address humor as a category of communicator style, many managers and subordinates employ humor in organizations on a regular basis (Rizzo, Wanzer, & Booth-Butterfield, 1999). No comprehensive theory of humor has gained widespread acceptance (Chapman & Foot, 1976), but scholars seem to agree that humor plays an important role in organizations. Jokes, stories, and anecdotes allow organizational subordinates to build group cohesiveness, reduce tension, and alleviate boredom (Block, Browning, & McGrath, 1983; Smeltzer & Leap, 1988; Ullian, 1976). Humor is used to help organizational subordinates construct identities, communicate ambiguity to save face (Kahn, 1989), and socialize new employees (Vinton, 1989). Humor is also used to

exert control over subordinates or to disparage oneself (Duncan, 1985; Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990; Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992; La Fave & Mannell, 1976; Lundberg, 1969; McGuffee-Smith & Powell, 1988; Zillman & Stocking, 1976).

Three primary theories of humor, relief (the release of tension and stress through humor), incongruity (deliberate violation of rational language or behavior patterns), and superiority (a sense of triumph over another), partially illuminate the way humor functions in communication (e.g., see Chapman & Foot, 1976; Meyer, 1997, 2000; Morreall, 1983; Raskin, 1985). Meyer (2000) argued that the three primary theories of humor relate to social functions and how one understands the social functions of a humorous event "depends on one's 'theoretical sunglasses'" (p. 315) because humorous events are ambiguous and the same humor event can serve a variety of rhetorical goals. Graham et al. (1992) also examined humor theory and delineated both prosocial and antisocial functions. They developed the Uses of Humor Index (UHI) to understand how humor functions in interpersonal relationships. Their three social functions of humor, positive, expressive, and negative, can be related to the three major humor theories: positive (relief), expressive (incongruity), and negative (superiority). Other researchers have explored humor, highlighting the differences between the three theoretical approaches: relief, incongruity and superiority.

Relief. Relief theory is based on the idea that humor is used primarily as a stress release. Morreall (1991) maintained that two strategic uses of humor are linked to relief theory: reducing stress and acting as a social lubricant. Thus, organizational members use jokes, stories, and anecdotes to build group cohesion and alleviate boredom (Block et al., 1983; Smeltzer & Leap, 1988; Ullian, 1976), develop inclusive relationships, increase a sense of belonging (Duncan et al., 1990), reduce tension (Martineau, 1972), and enhance group enjoyment (Wasserman & Klein, 1974). In other words, relief humor functions to reduce strain. McGuffee-Smith and Powell (1988) found that self-disparaging humor by an organizational manager acts as a tension reliever and encourages subordinate participation and shared decision-making. Although self-disparaging humor can be effective for a manager, caution may be warranted for organizational subordinates attempting self-deprecation. Audience members, including managers, may mistake one's attempt at self-deprecation as serious incompetence.

Incongruity. The tenets of incongruity humor maintain that people laugh at what surprises them or is otherwise unexpected (La Fave, Haddad, & Maesen, 1976; McGhee, 1979; Rossel, 1981). A play on words or surprising phrase creates a paradox of word meanings. In other words, the speaker violates audience expectations with a humorous twist; the joke is funny only in contrast to the serious meaning of the preceding discourse (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 1991). Humor arises from ambiguity inherent in incongruous meanings. This incongruity may serve a speaker's rhetorical goals. For example, humorous self-disclosure allows the speaker to impart personal information that may be otherwise socially unacceptable or difficult to communicate. Graham et al. (1992) argued, "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. 174). Through humor, unpleasant information, a tale about oneself, or expression of feelings is conveyed with less social risk in an organizational setting (Graham et al., 1992).

Superiority. Superiority theory asserts that all humor springs from a longing to feel superior over others. Superiority humor is often conceptualized as demeaning and belittling others, saying negative things, or putting others in their place, and is frequently used to exert control over subordinates (Duncan, 1985; Duncan et al., 1990; Graham et al., 1992; La Fave & Mannell, 1976; Lundberg, 1969; McGuffee-Smith & Powell, 1988; Zillman & Stocking, 1976) and maintain boundaries without suffering negative social effects that often occur when using forceful or critical language (Graham, 1994; Martineau, 1972).

Enactment of superiority humor may be related to an individual's organizational status and positional power. Duncan (1985) found that status differential and superiority in humor creation included authoritative power components: "First, high-status subordinates of a group joke more than low-status subordinates. Second, high-status initiators most often direct jokes toward low status foci. Third, when other (high-status) subordinates are present, high-status subordinates refrain from self-disparaging humor" (p. 559). Powell (1988) noted that "humour is a control resource operating both in formal and informal contexts to the advantage of powerful groups and role-players" (p. 100) and that "for the powerless, humour like everything else constitutes generally hostile terrain" (p. 103). Although symmetrical joking patterns occur (e.g., Vinton, 1989), asymmetrical humor is more the norm, often exemplified by superiors targeting subordinates as the foci of the joke (Bradney, 1957; Coser, 1960; Lundberg, 1969).

Sex and Humor

Investigating conversational humor among managers and subordinates without considering the role of sex leads to a common pitfall in organizational research. Varma and Stroh (2001) claimed that managers report higher interpersonal affect toward subordinates of the same sex and that being the same sex influences the relationship quality. Clearly, one's sex remains an important aspect of manager-subordinate communication relationships and humor initiation and appreciation.

Sex and humor research indicates that more men than women tell jokes (Goodchilds, 1972), that cartoons with female victims are considered funnier than cartoons with male victims (Chapman & Gadfield, 1976), and that both sexes found that jokes are *less* humorous when males blundered in female roles than in "appropriate" male roles but *more* humorous when women blundered in male roles than in "appropriate" female roles (Borges, Barrett, & Fox, 1980). Taken together, this research suggests that men initiate more humor, designate women as the brunt of jokes, and are often spared from being joke victims themselves.

Zillman's (1983) predisposition theory suggests that enjoyment of aggressive humor depends upon identifying with the aggressor and not the joke victim. Thus, one's status as a subordinate is more likely to be the determinant of humor appreciation than whether women are the victims of the joke. However, the nature of the humor may be a more likely determinant of appreciation than one's group affiliation. Herzog (1999) found that females liked sexual humor with male victims but disliked sexist humor with either a male or a female victim. Moore, Griffiths, and Payne (1987) pointed out that women's increased enjoyment of sexual humor is related to the women's movement. Herzog's results, together with Love and Deckers' (1989) sexual cartoon research, suggest that the type of humor, sexual or nonaggressive versus sexist or aggressive, is the greater determinant of humorousness, not audience identification with either the humor initiator or the joke target. The uncertainties emerging in the humor literature suggest a need to examine sex, organizational status, communication style, and manager-subordinate communication behaviors together.

An examination of the three major humor theories and their related social functions illuminates the communicative dimensions of organizational citizenship behavior. As Duncan et al. (1990) noted, "joking remains a pervasive and important topic and has the potential of providing significant insights into management and organizational behavior" (p. 255). Likewise, Meyer's (1997) finding that humor is a tactic for negotiating conflicting values between organizational subordinates alludes to a face-saving role of humor in discourse. In short, analysis of humor as a communication tactic between managers and subordinates offers intriguing possibilities for understanding the experience of organizational life.

RATIONALE

The review of the literature suggests a link between humor as a communication tactic and manager-subordinate communication behaviors. Given that humor use may have multiple effects (Meyer, 2000), it likely plays a key role in organizational relationships. Moreover, extant humor research suggests that high-status members refrain from self-disparaging humor when others of equal status are present (Duncan, 1985) and that women in general tend to use more self-deprecation than men (e.g., Andersen, 1999; Bunkers, 1997; Zillman & Cantor, 1972). Applying incongruity, relief, and superiority humor theories to an examination of dyadic manager-subordinate relationships allows for integration and theoretical connections. Specifically, the different social functions offered by each humor theory provide a variety of communication tactics. Because organizational citizenship behaviors are related to supervisor and subordinate relational satisfaction (Lowery et al., 2002) and humor functions as a social lubricant (Morreall, 1991), to build group cohesion (Block et al., 1983), and to increase a sense of belonging (Duncan et al., 1990), it is reasonable to assume that humor is common in relationship maintenance. Finally, including individuals' personal characteristics and organizational status focuses organizational humor research on the roles of sex and status in the micro practices of organizational citizenship behavior. Thus, the first research question was:

RQ1: Do managers and subordinates use humor as part of their overall relational styles?

Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) found that the level of predisposition toward humor initiation is related to one's perceived appropriateness of humor use, such that one who uses humor often will use humor in a wide variety of instances. Rizzo et al. (1999) discovered that managers and subordinates regularly employ humor in organizations in a wide array of situations. It appears that organizational members strive to create good impressions of their abilities as competent communicators (Norton, 1978), and that humor may function to enhance the perceptions of one's communicator style. Therefore, it was reasonable to ask:

RQ2: Is organizational communication style related to the use of positive, expressive, and negative humor?

Although sex and humor research indicated that men are more likely to initiate humor (Goodchilds, 1972) and target women with superiority humor (Chapman & Gadfield, 1976), controversy around sex and humor usage remains. The effects of humor initiation on organizational relationships may be more closely related to the type of humor used than same sex affiliation with one's manager or subordinate. Consequently, the third research question addressed this issue:

RQ3: Is the sex of participants related to their use of positive, expressive, and negative humor and communicator style?

Finally, the relative power differentials between managers and subordinates need to be considered. As Duncan (1985) found, superiors tend to use humor more often than subordinates and tend to target lower status subordinates. Duncan's (1985) results pointed to general tendencies of humor among managers and superiors, but failed to consider types and functions of humor use among subordinates or the communicator style and sexual make-up of manager/subordinate dyads. Accordingly, the fourth research question was:

RQ4: Do the characteristics of the manager/subordinate dyad affect the use of positive, expressive, and negative humor and communicator style?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited in a two-stage process. First, graduate and undergraduate students in communication and business classes from a large Western university were invited to voluntarily participate in the study. Participants were given a packet containing two informed consent cover letters and two sets of instruments with return mail envelopes. One self-addressed envelope was provided for each participant. Participants were instructed to individually mail completed questionnaires directly to the first author. Those who worked part-time or full-time were instructed to determine their status level in their organization (i.e., manager or subordinate) and fill out the appropriate instrument (green for managers, yellow for subordinates). Second, students were asked to forward the other survey to their organizational (manager or subordinate) counterpart. Unemployed students were invited to give the surveys to employed family members or friends. These methods resulted in 222 valid surveys, but yielded only 106 valid manager/subordinate dyads.

An analysis of respondents' self-reported organizational status revealed that supervisors were generally older (over 25) than the subordinates (under 25) and reported longer tenure in the organization. Forty-four percent of supervisors had been with their organizations for more than five years whereas 89% of subordinates had been in the organization for less than five years.

Participants ranged in age from under 18 to 64, with the highest percentage (69%) in the 25-34 age range. For managers, participants ranged in age from 26 to 64, with the highest percentage (42%) in the 25-34 age range. Subordinates reported ages from under 18 to 64, with the highest percentage (60%) in the 18-24 age range. Overall, 37% were female, and 58% were male. Female managers (n = 36) represented 34% of the manager sample, and male managers (n = 70) represented 66%. Among subordinates, women represented 45% of the sample, and men 55%. Overall, nine participants (5%) declined to report age and sex.

Most participants had some college education (50%), and 31% reported having an undergraduate degree. Most managers had a college education (42%), some college (35%), or a graduate degree (10%). Subordinates were most likely to report some college (68%) and undergraduate degrees (23%). The participants were overwhelmingly White (87%), though 4% were Asian American and 2% were Hispanic.

Instrument Design and Measurements

Instruments for this study included Buller and Buller's (1987) version of Norton's Communicator Style Measure (CSM) that measured communicator image (the dependent variable of the original Communicator Style Measure [Norton, 1983]), Martin and Gayle's (1999) adaptation of Graham et al.'s (1992) Uses of Humor Index (UHI), and demographic questions.

Participants rated their perceived communicator style on the two CSM constructs (affiliation, i.e., establishing and maintaining a positive relationship between the manager and subordinate, including communicating interest, friendliness, empathy, warmth, and humor and control/dominance, i.e., establishing and maintaining the manager's control in the interaction), their communicator image, and their humor usage using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Buller and Buller (1987) used this version of the CSM as a reliable and valid instrument. Reliabilities for Buller and Buller's (1987) 15 items measuring Affiliativeness (alpha = .79) and six items measuring Dominance/Activity (alpha = .68) were adequate.

Martin and Gayle's (1999) adapted UHI scale measures three types of conversational humor, positive, negative, and expressive. Graham et al.'s (1992) 11-item UHI scale was designed to determine positive ("I use humor to make light of a situation"), expressive ("I use humor to allow others to know me"), and negative ("I use humor to say negative things to others") purposes of humor. To achieve acceptable reliability, one item from the original UHI was deleted ("I use humor to avoid telling others about me"). Martin and Gayle's (1999) modified UHI included two items that addressed self-deprecating humor in the expressive scale (e.g., "I make jokes about myself at work"), two items in the positive scale that captured using humor to enhance workgroup enjoyment (e.g., "I laugh easily"), and two items in the negative humor scale to address the use of demeaning or controlling humor (e.g., "I enjoy making ironic or sarcastic jokes"). Reliabilities for the revised UHI were .73 for the positive affect scale, .75 for the expressive affect scale, and .81 for the negative affect scale.

RESULTS

Research question 1—Do managers and subordinates use humor as part of their overall relational styles?—was answered positively. Managers and subordinates consciously used humor as part of their communication style. All participants reported using positive (M = 19.77 out of a possible score of 25, SD = 2.76) and expressive humor (M = 19.37 out of 30, SD = 3.76) more than negative humor (M = 13.01 out of 25, SD = 2.33).

Overall, t-tests revealed only one significant relationship between organizational status and humor type. There was a significant relationship between status and use of positive humor (t (206) = -2.561, p = .011). Subordinates (M = 20.25, SD = 2.56) reported a higher use of positive humor than managers (M = 19.28, SD = 2.89).

Research question 2—Is organizational communication style related to the use of positive, expressive, and negative humor?—showed significant relationships between communicator image, affiliativeness, and dominance aspects of the communicator style measure and types of conversational humor. T-tests of communicator image and humor functions and t-tests of dominance and humor functions revealed several significant relationships. Overall, participants with more positive communicator image reported significantly higher use of positive humor (t (199) = -2.164, p = .032, M = 20.20, SD = 2.70) than participants with more negative communicator image (M = 19.36, SD = 2.79). Participants with more positive communicator image reported significantly higher use of expressive (t (195) = -2.60, p = .01, M = 23.52, SD = 3.79) humor than participants with more negative communicator image (M = 22.14, SD = 3.63). Participants scoring high in dominance reported significantly higher use of negative humor (t (196) = -4.86, p = .000, M = 14.29, SD = 4.64) than low dominance participants (M = 11.71, SD = 3.32). Additionally, high dominance participants used more positive humor (t (201) = -2.361, p = .019, M = 20.2, SD = 2.80) than low dominance participants (M = 19.30, SD = 2.65). High dominance was also significantly related to high expressive (t (203) = -2.485, p = .014, M = 20.06, SD = 4.17) humor (low dominance M = 18.71, SD = 3.52). There was no relationship between levels of affiliativeness and humor functions.

Among managers, t-tests of communicator image, dominance scores, and humor functions revealed some significant relationships. A t-test between levels of communicator image and use of expressive humor approached significance (t (96) = -1.932, p = .056). Managers with higher images of themselves as "good" communicators reported higher use of expressive humor (M = 19.78, SD = 3.11) than managers with lower communicator image (M = 18.23, SD = 2.52). Managers scoring high in dominance reported significantly higher use of negative humor (t (93) = -3.903, p = .000, M = 14.24, SD = 4.64) than low dominance managers (M = 11.26, SD = 2.64). There was also a relationship that approached significance between dominance and positive humor (t (96)

= -1.932, p = .056). Managers reporting higher dominance reported more use of positive humor (M = 19.79, SD = 3.11) than managers reporting lower dominance (M = 18.69, SD = 2.52). However, among managers there was no relationship between levels of affiliativeness and humor functions.

Among subordinates, t-tests of dominance scores and humor functions revealed one significant relationship. Subordinates scoring high in dominance reported significantly higher use of negative humor (t (101) = -2.537, p =.013, M = 14.32, SD = 4.68) than low dominance subordinates (M = 12.18, SD = 3.88). There were no relationships between either affiliativeness or communicator image and humor functions.

Results for research question 3—Is the sex of participants related to their use of positive, expressive, and negative humor and communicator style?—produced several significant results relating to communication styles and humor usage. Overall, men were more likely to report using negative humor (t (199) = -4.601, p = .000, M = 14.03, SD = 4.21) than women (M = 11.43, SD = 3.71). Likewise, men were more likely to report using expressive humor (t (203) = -3.194, p = .002, M = 20.05, SD = 3.47) than women (M = 18.32, SD = 4.27).

Among managers, men have a significantly higher communicator image (t (98) = -2.019, p =.049, M = 18.68, SD = 3.04) than women (M=17.06, SD = 4.11). Male managers reported using more negative humor (t (195) = -2.865, p = .005, M = 13.50, SD = 4.27) than female managers (M = 11.15, SD = 2.76).

Among subordinates, men reported using more negative (t (102) = -3.599, p = .001, M = 14.62, SD = 4.11), positive (t(104) = -2.714, p = .005, M = 20.86, SD = 1.98) and expressive (t (100) = -3.262, p = .002, M = 20.78, SD = 2.83) humor than women. Means for women's negative (M = 11.63, SD = 4.29), positive (M = 19.48, SD = 2.99), and expressive (M = 18.39, SD = 4.52) humor were lower than men's for each aspect of humor use.

Participant's sex was also an important element in the similarity of communication styles and humor usage in these relationships. ANOVA results suggested significant relationships between types of manager/subordinate dyads and types of humor (F(3.96) = 2.747, p = .047). One t-test indicated that dyads of male managers and female subordinates used significantly more negative humor (t (40) = -2.334, p = .025, M = 13.72, SD = 3.49) than dyads of female managers and female subordinates (M = 11.30, SD = 3.25). Another t-test revealed that dyads of male managers and female subordinates used significantly more negative humor (t(33) = 3.078, p = .004, M = 13.72, SD = 3.49) than dyads of female managers and male subordinates (M = 10.92, SD = 1.89). In other words, manager/subordinate dyads that included male managers and female subordinates used more negative humor than dyads of female managers with either male or female subordinates.

Research question 4—Do the characteristics of the manager/subordinate dyad affect the use of positive, expressive, and negative humor and communicator style?—yielded few significant results. Analysis of humor types and communicator styles in manager/subordinate dyads revealed a significant relationship between affiliativeness and use of positive humor (X^2 = 13.764, p = .008). In dyads where subordinates reported higher affiliativeness than their managers, subordinates engaged in more positive humor. In dyads where managers and subordinates reported equal levels of affiliativeness, managers and subordinates engaged in equal levels of positive humor. However, in dyads where managers reported higher affiliativeness than subordinates, there was no reported difference in the use of positive humor.

Multiple regressions suggested status difference and sex related to humor use (see Table 1). Predictors in the model included communicator image, affiliativeness, dominance, status, and sex. Dominance (beta = .368) and sex (beta = .326) emerged as the best predictors of negative humor use and accounted for approximately 23% of the variance (r^2 = .22; F (2, 195) = 28.86; $p < .000$). Dominance (beta = .199) and sex (beta =

Table 1
Multiple Regression Analysis of How Organizational Status Difference and Sex Relate to Humor Use
Full Sample, Managers and Subordinates

Humor Type	Best Predictor	Beta	t	Significance
	Dominance	.189	2.59	.010
Positive	Sex	.144	1.97	.050
$r^2 = .05$; $F = 5.02$; $p < .0080$				
	Dominance	.199	2.78	.006
Expressive	Sex	.272	3.82	.000
$r^2 = .11$; $F = 10.56$; $p < .000$				
	Dominance	.368	5.84	.000
Negative	Sex	.326	5.18	.000
$r^2 = .22$; $F = 28.86$; $p < .000$				

.272) also emerged as the best predictors for expressive humor use, accounting for 11% of the variance ($r^2 = .11$; $F (2, 176) = 10.56$; $p < .000$). For negative humor, the effect of dominance controlling for sex was larger than the effect of sex controlling for dominance, whereas the results for expressive humor suggested that sex, controlling for dominance, had a larger effect than dominance controlling for sex. For positive humor, no predictor accounted for at least 10% of the variance.

Among managers, dominance (beta = .503) and sex (beta = .305) emerged as the best predictors of negative humor use and accounted for 32% of the variance ($r^2 = .32$; $F (2, 84) = 19.35$; $p < .001$) (see Table 2). No predictor accounted for at least 10% of the variance for managers' positive or expressive humor uses.

Among subordinates, dominance (beta = .214) and sex (beta = .387) emerged as the best predictors of negative humor use and accounted for 19% of the variance ($r^2 = .19$; $F (2, 91) = 10.81$; $p < .000$) (see Table 3). Yet, in contrast to the combined manager/subordinate analysis, and the manager analysis, results for negative humor suggested that sex, controlling for dominance, had a larger effect than dominance controlling for sex. Sex (beta = .337) also emerged as the best predictor of expressive humor usage among subordinates, accounting for 11% of the variance ($r^2 = .11$; $F (1, 90) = 11.39$; $p < .000$). Still, no predictor accounted for at least 10% of the variance for subordinates' positive humor usage.

DISCUSSION

Overall findings from this study enhance our understanding of the relationship between communicator style, organizational status, sex, and humor use in organizations. Results revealed that humor was employed frequently by both managers and subordinates. Not surprisingly, more participants admit to using positive and expressive humor. When viewed from an organizational perspective, these findings would appear to support the idea that humor plays an important role in maintaining a congenial organizational climate (Cade, 1982; Linstead, 1985; Rizzo et al., 1999). It appears that managers and subordinates do use jokes, stories, and anecdotes to enhance the overall work environment (Block et al., 1983; Smeltzer & Leap, 1988; Wasserman & Klein, 1974). Perhaps, managers and subordinates employ mostly positive and expressive humor because they engage in accommodating behaviors as Fairhurst's (1993) research suggested, or they recognize that certain kinds of humor are more appropriate than others. Managers may engage in humorous behavior to enhance satisfaction with organizational relationships as well as enhance the organizational climate. Such behaviors are likely to increase employee willingness to engage in those "extra" work

Table 2
Multiple Regression Analysis of How Organizational Status Difference and Sex Relate to Humor Use
Managers Only

Humor Type	Best Predictor	Beta	t	Significance
Positive $r^2 = .09; F = 8.93; p < .05$	Dominance	.307	2.99	.004
Expressive $r^2 = .08; F = 7.35; p < .05$	Image	.281	2.71	.008
	Dominance	.503	5.51	.000
Negative $r^2 = .32; F = 19.35; p < .000$	Sex	.305	3.34	.001

behaviors described in the organizational citizenship literature. As Williams et al. (2002) suggested, there is a link between relational satisfaction within the organization and the enactment of organizational citizenship behaviors.

More research is needed to discover whether the use of humor, for example, requires careful consideration of the political ramifications of making fun of any one group. Does humor use involve a communicator style that enhances organizational citizenship behaviors? Issues such as these merit further investigation.

Although both managers and subordinates engaged in positive humor, subordinates reported using significantly more positive humor than managers. As Dwyer (1991) said, "humor has no essence; it is inserted into the dynamics of social life and its contents and form reflect social relations [and] power distributions" (p. 1). Perhaps, organizational subordinates used more positive humor because they were less inclined due to power differentials to employ expressive (self-disclosure may be seen as risky for employees) or negative humor (attempts to exert control over others may be misconstrued). As Hackman et al. (1999) suggested, subordinates' thoughts about the way they may be perceived will affect their communication and choices of humor.

Exploring research question two produced several interesting results. First, those individuals who had a higher image of themselves as "good" communicators engaged in significantly more positive and expressive humor. These findings support Rossel's (1981) argument that the successful humor initiator is often "the linguistically dominant individual [and] is the one who is most versatile in the combined use of metaphor and humor to tease others about his or her identity without allowing it to be 'teased out'" (p. 129).

Second, individuals who reported using a more dominant communication style reported using significantly more humor than individuals reporting a less dominant

Table 3
Multiple Regression Analysis of How Organizational Status Difference and Sex Relate to Humor Use
Subordinates Only

Humor Type	Best Predictor	Beta	t	Significance
Positive $r^2 = .07; F = 7.24; p < .05$	Sex	.271	2.69	.008
Expressive $r^2 = .11; F = 11.37; p < .000$	Sex	.337	3.37	.001
	Dominance	.214	2.25	.027
Negative $r^2 = .19; F = 10.81; p < .000$	Sex	.387	4.07	.000

communication style. These results establish an important link between dominant communication style and likelihood to initiate humor. Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) devised the concept of humor orientation and found that high humor-oriented individuals attempt humor often and employ diverse humor strategies across a variety of situations. The link suggested here offers new insights into the relationship between communicator style and humor use.

Emergent in these findings is the role of organizational status and the communicator style/humor use linkage. Managers who reported a higher communicator image used significantly more expressive humor. These findings suggest that a competent manager can take control of the situation as Norton (1978) suggested and risk being "witty" or self-ridiculing because, as Gruner (1985) maintained, it builds her/his sense of ethos or, as Smeltzer and Leap (1988) claimed, it builds rapport. Additionally, managers who reported engaging in more dominance used more negative humor than those managers reporting a low use of dominant communicator behaviors, and subordinates who reported engaging in high dominance also used more negative humor than subordinates who reported a low usage of dominant communicator styles. Such a result supports the superiority theory (i.e., all humor springs from a longing to feel superior over others), and extends the use of negative humor to organizational subordinates and thus links the use of superiority theory to communicator style, rather than just to organizational status. In other words, negative humor usage is not linked to actual organizational status. Communicator style and the associated willingness to use the type of humor aligned with a particular style suggest the importance of similar communicator styles among managers and subordinates. Paton and Filby (1996) argued that more aggressive or less aggressive humorous discourse by management and workers is linked: Organizational members respond to managerial humor style with similar humor use. They noted that subordinates respond to managers' aggressive forms of humor (irony, mockery, and sarcasm) with similar forms of humor (ridicule, mimicry, and sarcasm). Future research should examine the congruence of communicator style and humor style among managers and subordinates to tease out such a relationship.

Results also suggest that sex plays a role in humor expression in organizational settings. Overall, men reported using more negative and expressive humor than women. Male managers reported engaging in significantly more negative humor than female managers, and male subordinates reported using significantly more positive, negative, and expressive humor than female subordinates. Although prior studies investigating sex differences in humor have examined reactions to humor more often than humor initiation in organizations (for an exception see Martin, 2001), it is possible to extrapolate from those findings to the results of this study. Parisi and Kayson (1988) and Cantor (1976) suggested that males engage in more humor than females, and general U.S. cultural socialization processes may have shaped women's views of proper behavior to not include telling certain kinds of jokes or being sarcastic. The use of and response to negative humor by males has been consistently documented (e.g., Brodzinsky, Barnet, & Aiello, 1981; Moore et al., 1987), and the findings of this study support the idea that males appreciate and engage in more negative humor—apparently whether they are in an organizational setting or not.

Investigation into research question four produced findings related to communicator style and humor orientation in terms of one's organizational relationship. First, in dyads where subordinates reported higher affiliativeness than their managers, subordinates engaged in more positive humor. It would not be surprising that subordinates, who have a tendency to establish and maintain a positive relationship with their managers (as Buller and Buller, 1987, suggested is true of high affiliatives), would use humor to construct positive organizational identities (Kahn, 1989).

The second series of findings revealed that dominant communicator style and respondents' sex were related to the functional use of humor. Dominance and sex were

the biggest predictors of expressive humor, but they accounted for only 11% of the variance. Our finding of dominance as the largest overall predictor of negative humor corresponds with Martin and Gayle's (1999) findings, but there was no prior support for the dominance/sex/expressive humor finding.

Because sex was a large predictor of expressive humor, the results may be explained by the cultural expectation hypothesis discussed above. Expressive humor requires some elements of self-disclosure and self-disparaging humor that would be more risky for women in organizations than men due to sex-role behavioral expectations (Cantor, 1976; Parisi & Kayson, 1988). The relationship between antisocial or negative humor as identified by Graham et al. (1992) and the dominator communicator style suggests a propensity to use humor to wield control over other individuals. Perhaps, rather than engage in more polarizing behaviors where distancing occurs through face-threatening acts as Fairhurst (1993) described, managers may use negative forms of humor to exert or retain control without resorting to more forceful methods (Graham, 1994; Lundberg, 1969).

The most interesting aspect of this finding is that dominance and sex were the best predictors of negative humor, with dominance having the largest impact. Manager results paralleled the overall group, but sex had the largest effect for negative and expressive humor among subordinates. These results suggest that managers have the power to exert control or maintain boundaries (Graham, 1994; Martineau, 1972). Males may have a sense of empowerment in organizations that allows them to use more negative humor regardless of their position in that organization. Use of asymmetrical humor has been found more acceptable for males (Cantor, 1976). Cleveland and Kerst (1993) argued that "in addition to formal power derived from positions within the organizational hierarchy, individuals gain power from sociocultural as well as interpersonal sources" (cited in Rospenda, Richman, & Nawyn, 1998, p. 42). In other words, male subordinates enjoy sociocultural as well as interpersonal sources of individual power. The underlying logic of contra-power suggests that male subordinates may feel few behavioral constraints when interacting with female superiors (Rospenda et al., 1998). Sociocultural dynamics may provide more freedom for subordinate males than subordinate females to enact negative humor.

Implications

Organizational communication theory has often developed around a need to better understand the foundational relationships within an organization. Consideration of organizational roles and the associated power differentials between managers and subordinates provides a familiar link to experiences of everyday work life. However, the interplay of communication style, humor, and sex that underpins manager/subordinate relationships is not easily explained by power and authority associated with formal organizational roles. Communicator style appears to be an important component for understanding manager/subordinate relationships. Refining organizational research to include humor provides fertile ground for examining informal relational dynamics. Finally, organizational communication research focused on relational dynamics always needs to consider sex. As Rothschild and Davies (1994) warned, "the assumption of gender neutrality may be one of the great blind spots, and errors, of twentieth century organizational theory" (p. 583).

The study revealed that although subordinates used positive humor, they were less inclined to employ expressive or negative humor. This finding seems to support the idea that organizational power and associated superiority discourse is confined by one's organizational role. However, attention to communicator style, humor, and sex uncovered other important nuances. Not surprisingly, a dominant communicator style was associated with negative humor. Those with formal organizational power (e.g., male

managers) and male subordinates use all forms of humor whereas their female coun-
terparts are limited to a narrower range of humor usage. The tendency for manager/
subordinate dyads that included male managers and female subordinates to use more
negative humor than dyads of female managers with either male or female subordi-
nates suggests that humor-type use among the dyads may depend on the sex of the
manager. Moreover, the results of this study indicated that in dyads where subordinates
reported higher affiliativeness (a subconstruct of communicator style) than their man-
agers, subordinates engaged in more positive humor. Overall results suggest that com-
municator style, humor type, and sex are related to the success of manager/
subordinate relational interactions.

The intersections of communication style, humor, and sex in manager/subordinate
relationships have implications for the enactment of organizational citizenship behav-
iors. Supervisors' communication that fosters perceptions of fairness, trust (Cropan-
zano & Byrne, 2000; Wech, 2002; Williams et al., 2002), and relational satisfaction
(Lowery et al., 2002) may encourage a social exchange between the employee and orga-
nization, and in being more ambiguous, increase subordinates' citizenship behaviors
(Williams et al., 2002). By arguing that "organizations are not successful because peo-
ple do their jobs: they are successful because workers do a variety of other activities in
addition to their jobs," Cropanzano and Byrne (2000, p. 142) highlight the importance
of OCB. The success of manager/subordinate relationships can be linked to macrolevel
and microlevel constructs of OCB and may improve the likelihood of enacting those
"extra" workplace behaviors by both subordinates and superiors.

As a macrolevel construct, employees' conscientious citizenship behaviors have
been found to benefit the organization (Barksdale & Werner; 2001; Lowery et al., 2002;
Wech, 2002). Miles et al. (2002) discovered that organizational environmental condi-
tions explained 11% of variance in OCB behaviors. If positive humor plays a role in
maintaining a congenial organizational climate (Cade, 1982; Linstead, 1985; Rizzo et
al., 1999), then organizations where managers and subordinates use positive and
expressive humor to enhance the overall work environment (Block et al., 1983; Smelt-
zer & Leap, 1988; Wasserman & Klein, 1974) may contribute to employee enactment of
OCB. It appears from prior research that positive humor releases tension and stress
(Graham et al., 1992; Martineau, 1972), lubricates manager/subordinate social interac-
tions (Morreall, 1991), enhances group enjoyment (Wasserman & Klein, 1974), devel-
ops belonging and inclusive relationships (Duncan et al., 1990), and that expressive
humor facilitates the expression of feelings, information, and self-disclosure (Graham
et al., 1992). Employing each of these types of humor could create positive manager/
subordinate interactions, likely resulting in a positive work environment that facilitates
subordinate and superior OCB.

As a microlevel construct, an employee's altruism (behaviors that help others) and
sportsmanship (refraining from negative comments and complaining) benefit individ-
uals in the organization (Barksdale & Werner, 2001; Lowery et al., 2002; Wech, 2002).
Setton and Mossholder (2002) described these actions as person-focused or task-
focused interpersonal citizenship. Person-focused citizenship is more affiliative and
supportive, and task-focused citizenship is more instrumental and work-oriented. Low-
ery et al. (2002) noted that workers who were satisfied with managers and coworkers
were more likely to engage in sportsmanship. Our results suggest that affiliative com-
munication style (with associated humor types) and sex characteristics of manager/sub-
ordinate dyads may underlie the communicative relationship between managers and
subordinates that fosters perceptions of fairness, trust, and relational satisfaction pro-
moting the enactment of OCB. Positive (relief) and expressive (incongruous) humor
function in generally positive ways, but negative humor remains within the construct of
superiority humor: demeaning and belittling others, saying negative things, or putting
others in their place (e.g., Duncan, 1985; Duncan et al., 1990; Graham et al., 1992; La

Fave & Mannell, 1976; Lundberg, 1969; Zillman & Stocking, 1976), reflecting unsports-manlike behaviors. Male managers and subordinates use more negative humor than females, and the highest levels of negative humor use are among male manager/female subordinate dyads. In these relationships, male managers are likely to initiate most of the negative humor, which may have detrimental effects on female subordinates' willingness to enact OCB. Sociocultural organizational practices encouraging women to take on the emotional labor responsibilities suggest conflict for subordinate women who feel responsibilities for enacting OCB but do not experience perceptions of fairness, trust (Cropanzano & Byrne, 2000; Wech, 2002; Williams et al., 2002), relational satisfaction (Lowery et al., 2002), or sportsmanship (Barksdale & Werner, 2001; Lowery et al., 2002; Wech, 2002) with their male managers.

CONCLUSIONS

Limitations to this study included a lack of racial diversity, the self-report nature of the data, and the relative percentage of women in management positions. As noted above, the sample was derived first from the student population at a large Western university. Although the ratio of White individuals in the sample closely reflects the ratio of Whites in the local population, the results should be viewed with caution when applied to the nation at large. Although the identification of humor use may be best left up to the initiator, the ambiguous nature of humor as a communication tactic suggests attempts at humor may fall flat. Therefore agreement on the nature, function, and type of humor between the initiator and the audience may be a better indicator of actual humor use. Finally, the smaller percentage of women in management positions may be a reflection of the politically conservative nature of the local population.

Overall, these findings suggest that humor is integral to the collective organizational climate. Humor appears to function as an interpersonal communicative element that could create the kinds of cohesiveness and inclusiveness that underlie positive organizational citizenship behaviors. As Martineau (1972) found, humor appears to be a key part of interpersonal relationships in organizations. The use of positive humor creates an added dimension to everyday organizational life that may make work more satisfying (Duncan et al., 1990). Humor may serve as an integral part of establishing relational trust, increasing an employee's willingness to engage in OCB (Cropanzano & Byrne, 2000; Williams et al., 2002) or in similar behaviors related to supervisor and subordinate relational satisfaction (Lowery et al., 2002). The results of this study suggest important relationships between manager and subordinate communicator styles and humor use in organizations. Humor may be an important tool for any member seeking to engage in organizational citizenship behavior.

Future research should continue to examine communicative elements that facilitate subordinate OCB. More specifically, researchers should examine other microlevel communicative practices (e.g., conflict style) and variables (e.g., age) that may confound communication relationships between managers and subordinates. Further research also should consider the congruence of communicator style and humor use among manager/subordinate dyads. Finally, researchers should examine the link between organizational satisfaction, OCB, and communicative practices (e.g., humor) to more fully examine manager/subordinate communicative relationships as a predictor of OCB.

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