Sarcasm Used by Couples in the U.K. and U.S.: A Cultural Comparison
Anaïs F. d’Oelsnitz, Advisor: Donald H. Baucom

Introduction
- Effective communication is key to relationship well-being. Communication quality can vary depending on several factors, including:
  - Individual differences in communication style (e.g., direct or indirect) and gender.
  - Cultural differences (e.g., between vs. within countries).
- However, little is known about the way in which these factors affect a more ambiguous style of communication: sarcasm. Although sarcasm (like humor) might also bring a sense of novelty and spontaneity to relationships, research needs to first explore how the above factors affect sarcasm use in relationships.

Current Study:
- To examine the association between culture (e.g., UK vs US) and gender (men vs women) on use of sarcasm in couples
- To examine whether this association is mediated by openness to emotional expression (e.g., comfort with being direct about one’s emotions in relationships)

Hypotheses:
- H1: Partners who are less open to emotional expression will use more sarcasm in their relationship.
- H3: Men will report using more sarcasm than women in both cultures.
- H4: UK men will report using more sarcasm due to greatest discomfort with direct emotional expression.

Methods
- Individuals in romantic relationships completed an online survey via Amazon M-Turk with several self-report measures:
  1. Sarcasm use (Sarcasm Self-Report Scale)
  2. Humor use (Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale)
  3. Openness to express emotion (Ambivalence Over Emotional Expression Questionnaire)
- All items asked participants to reflect on these behaviors in their current relationship.
- Participants: 88 individuals in relationships, with majority self-identifying as straight, White, middle-aged, and in a relationship for at least 10 years.

Results

Data Analytic Strategy: Moderated mediation was used to test whether (a) culture and gender interact to affect sarcasm use and (b) whether this association is mediated by openness to emotional expression.

- H1: The less comfortable participants were with expressing their emotions openly, the more likely they were to use sarcasm.
- H2: In isolation culture did not have direct effects on sarcasm use.
- H3: In isolation gender did not have direct effects on sarcasm use.
- H4: Culture was indirectly & negatively associated with sarcasm use in MEN only.
  - U.S. men reported using significantly more sarcasm in their relationships compared to U.K. men.
  - This association was explained by U.S. men’s tendency to report being less comfortable with open emotional expression.

Discussion
Why do our findings say that Americans are more sarcastic than the British?
Could be true... OR could be:
- Using only self-report methods provides us with only part of the story
- How people rate themselves on self-report is NOT the same as how other people rate them through behavioral observation
- Self-report = individual’s subjective experiences
- Behavioral observation = actual communication behavior

Gender norms & Cultural norms have powerful yet inherent influences on how we think and perceive our behavior.

Future research should:
- Incorporate both self-report & behavioral observation of the couple
- Explore other motivations for why sarcasm may differ by gender
- Use larger and more diverse sample

Conclusion
1. Sarcasm = can be used to avoid the vulnerability that accompanies direct emotional expression. This provides us with initial insight into a potential role of sarcasm in romantic relationships.
2. Beginning to understand the association between culture, gender, openness to express emotion and sarcasm use: gender & culture interact alongside openness to express emotion to impact sarcasm use.

Acknowledgements:
This project was supported by a David Bray Peele Memorial Research Award from the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

I would like to thank Donald H. Baucom, Alexandra K. Wojda-Burlij & Emily A. Carrino, Eric A. Youngstrom and Paschal Sheeran for their contribution to this project.

For more information, contact Anaïs d’Oelsnitz at af.doelsnitz@gmail.com