

Sarcasm Used by Couples in the U.K. and U.S.: A Cultural Comparison

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Components of communication are key in romantic relationships and vary dependent on the dyad. A sense of humor facilitates playfulness; sarcasm use, while more ambiguous in meaning, might also serve to enhance relationship quality. For those who are less comfortable with direct communication (i.e., sharing their feelings), sarcasm might serve as a useful tool in sharing their thoughts without being too vulnerable. Such sharing might produce individual and dyadic benefits (i.e., laughter, closeness) or bolster fundamental aspects of relationship functioning (i.e., trust, comfort). Sarcasm is a particular communication strategy likely influenced by individual (i.e., gender) and situational factors (i.e., culture). The purpose of the current study was to investigate the effects of (a) culture (U.K. vs. U.S.), (b) gender (male vs. female), and the interaction between culture and gender on the use of sarcasm and humor, while considering openness to emotional expression as a potential explanation for these differences. Participants in romantic relationships completed an online survey examining their use of sarcasm, humor, and emotional expression with their partner ($N=88$). Moderated mediation analyses revealed a significant negative association between openness to express emotion and sarcasm use for individuals in romantic relationships. Existing literature on the use of sarcasm as an alternative for more direct and literal expression of emotions supports these findings. The findings also indicated that gender and culture interact in unexpected, complex ways to predict sarcasm use, noting the importance of openness to expression of emotion as part of the process. Furthermore, the current investigation demonstrated that the pattern of findings for sarcasm use did not generalize to humor more broadly in a dyadic context. Findings indicate the importance of understanding nuanced communication processes, particularly with regard to their use based on unique societal and cross-cultural factors.

Keywords: romantic relationships, sarcasm, humor, openness to express emotion