



# Laughter with someone else leads to future social rewards: Temporal change using experience sampling methodology



Todd B. Kashdan<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jessica Yarbrow<sup>a</sup>, Patrick E. McKnight<sup>a</sup>, John B. Nezlek<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> George Mason University, United States

<sup>b</sup> College of William and Mary, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Prior research suggests that laughter is correlated with resilience and well-being. To date, there is little research on the subsequent social benefits following laughter with another person. We hypothesized that laughing with another person would be associated with greater social rewards in subsequent social interactions. Using a two-week daily diary study with 162 people (68% women), we collected data on 5510 face-to-face social interactions in everyday life. We found that laughing with another person during an interaction predicted greater intimacy, positive emotions, and enjoyment in the subsequent social interaction. There was no evidence for the reverse direction, as intimacy, positive emotions, and enjoyment failed to predict laughter in subsequent social interactions. As for specificity, laughter was associated with subsequent intimacy and positive emotions even after accounting for the variance attributable to enjoyment felt when socializing. As for robustness, laughter with another person had the same effect on subsequent interactions regardless of whether interacting with the same person or a new person.

In summary, besides being immediately pleasurable, laughing with social interaction partners influences the likelihood of future social rewards. This study adds to theory and research suggesting that laughing is an important social bonding mechanism.

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## 1. Introduction

He who laughs last laughs best – at least according to popular lore. Perhaps the best laughs are those that occur with somebody else, for they may lead to enjoyable conversations and stronger social relationships or greater social rewards. A number of experimental studies have exposed people to humorous videos to examine the effects of laughter on blood pressure, pain tolerance, recovery from the cardiovascular effects of stress, and other components of physical and psychological health (Martin, 2001, 2002). Surprisingly, there is less research available on human laughter as a social bonding mechanism. In this paper, we explore the potential role of laughter with another person as a mechanism that influences individual well-being as well as the formation of healthy social relationships.

There is good reason to believe that interpersonal signals such as laughter are produced in part by evolved mechanisms that increase survival and sexual fitness. From an evolutionary perspective, social relationships offer the opportunity for cooperation, shared knowledge and material goods (such as food), physical

self-protection, and sexual opportunities. Because of the complexity of trying to cooperate in dyads or groups, mechanisms are needed to facilitate communication and strengthen social ties (Forgas, Haselton, & von Hippel, 2011). In this study, we argue that laughter is one such social bonding mechanism. Although described as foundational for positive social interactions (Hayworth, 1928), laughter has received less attention than other positive social behaviors such as kindness, gratitude, social support, and self-disclosure. There are several reasons why laughter might benefit the person laughing and promote the development of social relationships. First, in most social interactions, people lack evidence of whether they are connecting with another person. Laughter with someone else has been proposed to enhance perceptions that one is valued, cared for, and understood. That is, laughter with another person offers a path toward beliefs that the social world is safe and potentially rewarding as opposed to threatening (Panksepp, 2007) – thus benefiting the individual. Second, laughter, when affiliative, is a behavioral manifestation of enjoyment with another person. Prior work has shown that positive emotions and their expression are a precursor to interpersonal attraction, liking, and cooperative behavior (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

Besides being immediately beneficial, laughter appears to elicit positive reactions from other people. Using videotaped interviews embedded in a longitudinal study, researchers found that people who express greater (Duchenne) laughter when interviewed about

\* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, George Mason University, MailStop 3F5, Fairfax, VA 22030, United States. Tel.: +1 703 672 1331; fax: +1 703 993 1359.

E-mail address: [tkashdan@gmu.edu](mailto:tkashdan@gmu.edu) (T.B. Kashdan).

their relationship with a recently deceased spouse endorse greater social support in the subsequent 6–12 months of bereavement (Bonanno, Moskowitz, Papa, & Folkman, 2005; Keltner & Bonanno, 1997). Although there is only a small amount of research on the interpersonal benefits of laughter in actual social interactions, researchers found that strangers are more likely to laugh at a humorous video when watching with another person compared to when they are alone (Devereux & Ginsburg, 2001). When interacting with a new person, laughter increases the speed and intensity of familiarity and intimacy (Thonus, 2008; Ujlaky, 2003). As an example of this effect, same-sex strangers felt closer to each other following a social interaction manipulated to be humorous (Fraley & Aron, 2004) and adults who laughed with someone during a social interaction expressed greater interest in spending time with them and getting to know them better (Grammer & Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1990; Provine, 2004).

### 1.1. The present study

Researchers have examined laughter as a correlate of healthy relationship functioning (such as intimacy and kindness) and well-being (such as subjective positive emotions). However, with one notable exception, all of the research on laughter has been limited to single assessment surveys and reactions to laboratory stimuli. The exception is the research by George Bonanno and his colleagues showing that bereaving spouses who laugh more frequently when reminiscing about their romantic relationship during an interview experienced less distress and greater social functioning months later (Bonanno et al., 2005; Keltner & Bonanno, 1997). To add to this small body of prospective research, we examined the benefits of laughter with another person in the context of everyday social encounters over the course of 2 weeks; laughter being defined as the “emotional-expressive component of humor” (Martin, 2007, p.208).

Our study focused on the following question: does the amount of laughter in a given social interaction predict healthy behaviors (such as intimacy, warm/agreeable behaviors, influence) and well-being (such as enjoyment and positive emotions) in the subsequent social interaction? In other words, we were interested in whether there are carry-over benefits of laughing with other people. To address the direction of this relationship, we also tested the reverse effect of whether intimacy, enjoyment, positive emotions, warm/agreeable behaviors, and/or influence predicted laughter in the subsequent social encounter.

Based upon existing research at the between-person level, we expected that during social interactions, more frequent laughter with someone else would predict more healthy social behaviors and greater well-being in the subsequent social interaction. Our expectation was based on the assumption that laughing with someone else often serves as a social bonding mechanism (Preuschoft & van Hooff, 1997). Specifically, in a face-to-face social interaction involving the dedication of time and effort, and the sharing of information in a conversation, the display of laughter signifies intentions to be cooperative (Mehu, Grammer, & Dunbar, 2007). Laughter with another person also provides evidence of shared interests (e.g., notions of absurdity), and a sense of belonging (e.g., Curry & Dunbar, 2013) – shown in prior work to be a fundamental psychological need that when satisfied, facilitates personal well-being and positive social behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

We also wanted to examine the robustness of any temporal effects of laughter on subsequent behaviors and well-being during social interactions. By collecting information on the nature of social interaction partners, we were also able to test whether the consequences of laughter in a social interaction changed depending on whether the next social interaction was with the same person or

somebody new. In the absence of prior theory and research on contextual moderators, we had no hypotheses as to whether laughing with someone else would predict different benefits when interacting on the same day at another time with the same person compared to a different social interaction partner.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

For our sample, we recruited 174 university students of whom 162 provided analyzable data (12 people did not complete the social interaction record portion of the study); 68% of the sample were women, with a mean age of 21.65 ( $SD = 2.36$ ); 59% Caucasian, 10% African-American, 10% Asian-American, 9% Hispanic, 6% Middle Eastern, and 6% in other racial groups. Excluded participants did not differ from the final sample on demographic variables. After completing self-report questionnaire packets, participants were guided through a secure, dedicated website to log on and complete reports on social interactions multiple times per day (as soon after the social interaction as possible) every day for 14 days.

Participants attended a meeting (1.5 h) during which the purpose of the study was explained and instructions were given about how to use the website to enter social interaction records. A social interaction was defined as “any situation involving you and one or more other people in which the behavior of each person is affected by the behaviors of the others”. Consistent with previous research, participants were asked to describe all face-to-face interactions that lasted 10 min or longer; see Nezlak (2012). Participants were told to log onto the dedicated website as soon as possible after each interaction to complete social interaction records. At the minimum, they were told to complete social interaction records online at the end of the day (before going to sleep) for the 2 week assessment period. They were given handouts with the survey items and the experimenter went over each item to ensure that participants understood the wording, definitions of all terms, and the response format. Experiments emphasized the importance of compliance and explained that each entry included both date and time. After 2 days, participants were contacted for trouble shooting and then received multiple reminder emails each week. Throughout the study, participants were reminded that their responses were confidential and stored in a way that could not be readily traced to individuals. Each participant was assigned a random identification number that was used to organize the data. Our final interaction sample had 5510 interactions ( $M = 34.01$ ,  $SD = 18.27$ ), and the daily diary was maintained for an average of 13.38 days ( $SD = 2.57$ ).

### 2.2. Measures of social interaction

For each interaction, participants described when it started, how long it lasted, where it occurred, its purpose, and who else was present (initials, gender and relationship for up to 3 other individuals). If any of the partners for one interaction matched any of the previous interaction partners on initials, gender, and relationship, this was coded as the “same partner”. All other combinations were coded as a “new partner”.

Participants also assessed the amount of laughter during the social interaction as well as the presence of social rewards (energized positive emotions, warm and agreeable behavior, intimacy, enjoyment, and influence). All responses were made using 9-point scales and items started with a stem referring to the interaction. For enjoyable and intimate, the stem was “The interaction was...”. For ratings of energized positive emotions (enthusiastic and happy) the stem was “During the interaction, I felt...”. For ratings of

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