

## To be or not to be humorous: Does it make a difference?

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### *Abstract*

*Humor is thought to be a social instrument or a social skill that affects the outcomes of social interactions. The purposes of the present study were (1) to address the question whether within a peer group, humor and social distances are related to a particular social status such as popularity, neglect, and rejection and (2) to replicate Sherman's (1988) cross-sectional study. For these purposes, 225 children and adolescents divided over three age groups (9-, 12-, and 15-year olds) with three complete classrooms within each age group participated in this study. All subjects were presented with measures assessing humor, funniness, social distance, play and work preferences, and social status. The results show that: (a) from the age of 12, children evaluate their peers' humorousness on the basis of increasingly more detailed and specified social and personality characteristics; (b) already at the age of 9, females perceive humorousness differently and perhaps more "realistically" than males; (c) being humorous or fun is apparently not a sufficient characteristic to explain smaller social distances; (d) only "controversial" children obtained a meaningful relation between perceived humorousness and social distance; and (e) despite differences in strength, the patterns of interrelationships among perceived humorousness and social distance in the present study and those reported by Sherman (1988) showed a remarkable similarity.*

Already in early philosophical views, humor is perceived as an ingredient of human existence and a positive attribute that makes "man good company" (Aristotle, qtd. in Thomson 1966: 134). According to McGhee (1979), humor exists only in the minds of people and not in the real world. Despite these views of humor and its evolutionary and social

functions (Darwin 1955), little is known about the development of humor and its role in interpersonal relationships (cf. Bell, McGhee, and Duffey 1986; Sherman 1988).

Studying humor as a social skill presents us with a fascinating paradox. According to Martineau (1972), Goodman (1983) and Foot (1991) humor is important in the formation and facilitation of social relationships as well as in ending them. Consequently, humor will reduce as well as increase social distances among people (Sherman 1988). As an "interpersonal communication behavior, (humor) facilitates social interaction" (Sherman 1988: 390), promotes friendships, relationships, and intimacy by gaining the approval of others and by sustaining the friendships we value and wish to maintain. The reduced social distances between the "humorous" individual and others (Kane, Suls, and Tedeschi 1977; Masten 1986; Sherman 1988) also affect, for instance, peer relations and peer status in groups of children (Masten 1986). Humor, as an "interpersonal communication behavior," however, is also perceived as a socially acceptable way to dissociate from people (to increase distances); by means of humor, one can safely express negative feelings towards others.

Efforts to define humor have not been very successful. Because humor is a multi-dimensional concept (Foot 1991), it has not yet been possible to develop a theory of humor that adequately includes all its features. The ability to use humor to achieve particular, sometimes contradictory, social goals is only one of its features. Other features involve (a) humor production or the ability to be humorous; (b) a sense of playfulness or the ability to have a good time, which may be related to the personality trait of being good-natured; (c) the ability to recognize humor, life's absurdities, and the self as humorous; (d) the appreciation of humor, humorous people, and humorous situations; and (e) the ability to use humor as an adaptive mechanism, that is, being able to laugh at problems or to master difficult situations through the use of humor (Thorson and Powell 1991). However, despite the absence of a clear definition for humor, an intuitive understanding of what humor is about is present (Ziv 1984): Adults as well as children have no problems in telling which of their friends have a good sense of humor and which do not.

The findings from different studies by Sherman (1985a, 1985b; Sherman and Wolf 1984) and Masten (1986) suggest that humor is not derived from social status (Chapman 1973), but that humor "in the form of interpersonal humor perceptions is predictive of social status and friendship preferences" (Sherman 1988: 390). That is, children perceived as

humorous will evidence smaller social distances from their peers than children who are perceived as not humorous. As early as six years old, gender differences in humor have been reported (McGhee 1979; Ziv 1984): males more often create humor, females more often enjoy it. Explanations for this finding involve the relation between humor and gender-role expectations. Because humor is frequently aggressive, the initiation of humor is often considered to be more appropriate for males than for females in Western society. Findings about perceived humor partly support this view: Generally, sociometric humor ratings of peers resulted in a higher humor score for males (Ziv 1984). However, gender appears to be an important factor in perceived humor. Children of the same gender are seen as more humorous than children of the opposite gender (Sherman 1988).

In a study involving three 4th-grade classrooms (71 children with a mean age of 9.6 years), Sherman (1988) studied the role of gender in the relationship between humor and social distance. The data from this study indicate that, consistently among both genders, children who were rated as more humorous were also perceived as socially less distant. Children of the same gender rated each other as socially less distant as well as more humorous than children of the opposite gender. These data suggest that humor is a social instrument or a social skill that affects the outcomes of social interactions (cf. Krasnor and Rubin 1981). The purpose of the present study is to address the question whether *within* a peer group, social distances are related to a particular social status, such as popularity, neglection, and rejection (cf. Oppenheimer 1989; Warnars-Kleverlaan and Oppenheimer 1989).

According to Babad (1974), the method of sociometric humor ratings is most appropriate to assess the humorousness of children as perceived by their peers. By this method children were asked to rate all other children in their class on their humorousness, by means of a five-point Likert scale (Sherman 1988). In everyday life, humor is indicated in terms of jokes, cartoons, and the behavior of others, that is, having fun or being funny is used as a justification for humorous action, especially when the social meanings of humor are analyzed (Podilchak 1992). For example, children often play with meanings just for fun. According to McGhee (1979), the word "funny" more than any other related term, is used to mean humorous. For this reason, in the present study, humor will be compared to funniness.

In his study on humor and social distance, Sherman (1988) suggested that humor in the form of interpersonal humor perceptions is predictive of social status and friendship preferences. The present study involves a replication of Sherman's cross-sectional study in which, instead of one age group (9-year olds), three age groups are used (9-, 12-, and 15-year-olds). In addition to the instruments that assess the humorousness and social distance of the children by their peers, also a measure for funniness, play and work preferences, and social status are introduced. The purpose of this study is to examine whether the relationship between humorousness ratings and social distance remains similar for different ages, whether social distance relates to friendship preferences and social status, and whether gender differences reported by Sherman are replicated with a Dutch population. The results of the youngest age group (the 9-year olds) will be compared with the results reported in the study by Sherman (1988).

While the present study uses a correlational design to verify the relationship between perceived humorousness and perceived social distance, the assumption that humor will reduce social distances among people (Sherman 1988) allows a directional interpretation of the correlation coefficients. That is, perceived humorousness can then be examined as an explanatory variable for the observed variance in perceived social distance.

## **Method**

### *Subjects*

The subjects in this study were 225 children and adolescents from middle-class neighborhoods. They were divided among three age groups with three complete (intact) classrooms within each age group. The age groups represented 4th-graders ( $n=86$ ; age-range from 8.6 to 10.7 years; mean age 9.3; 46 females and 40 males) and 6th-graders from elementary schools ( $n=76$ ; age-range from 11.7 to 12.5 years; mean age 12.3; 41 females and 35 males), and 3rd-year students from secondary schools ( $n=63$ ; age-range from 14.8 to 17.1 years; mean age 15.8; 28 females and 35 males). The three intact classrooms within each age group consisted of 25, 32, and 29 4th-graders, 20, 27, and 29 6th-graders, and 20, 19, and 23 3rd-year students.

### *Materials and procedure*

*Funniness.* The funniness measure consisted of two open-ended questions. The children were asked (a) to indicate which classmate(s) were most funny and (b) why they thought those children were funny. Besides peer-group ratings for funniness, the data were used to obtain the concurrent validity between the funniness and the humor scales.

*Humor.* In contrast to the funniness scale, a description of a humorous individual was presented on top of the humor scale (identical to Sherman's 1988 procedure): "We want to find out how humorous people are. By humorous we *do not mean* somebody who is looking strange or somebody who is behaving silly. By a humorous individual we mean somebody who has a good sense of humor, tells good jokes, makes other people laugh, and can laugh at other's jokes." This definition with small modifications was identical to the one used by Sherman (1988: 394).

With the above description of a humorous individual in mind, the children were asked to rate all other children in their class on their humorousness by means of a five-point Likert scale (Sherman 1988). With the exception of the child's own name, a list of printed names of all the children in the class was presented. Following each child's name a five-point continuum for humor judgements was presented, ranging from (1) "not at all" to (5) "very much." The children could then rate their peers by putting a mark in the column that best described the other child.

Three humor scores based on these ratings were calculated. These were the mean (a) total-humor score (HU<sub>t</sub>) of a child given by all other children in the classroom irrespective of gender; (b) same-gender humor score (HU<sub>s</sub>; the humor ratings given by females to females and by males to males), and (c) cross-gender humor score (HU<sub>c</sub>; the humor ratings given by females to males or by males to females).

*Social distance.* For social distance a similar procedure was used. Again a list of printed names of all the children, with the exception of the child's own name, was presented. Five social distance judgments were presented ranging from "I would like to have him/her as one of my best friends" (rating 1) to "I wish he/she weren't in our group" (rating 5). Again each

child could rate all the other children by indicating which statement best described each child. The mean social distance scores were calculated in exactly the same way as the humor scores. That is, the mean (a) total social distance score (SDt) of a child given by all children in the classroom irrespective of gender; (b) same-gender social distance score (SDs; the social-distance ratings given by females to females and by males to males); and (c) cross-gender social distance score (SDc; the social-distance ratings given by females to males or by males to females).

*Social Status.* Two lists of classmates were used to assess social status. For the positive-nomination the children were required to circle the names of three children they liked the most. For the negative-nomination they were required to circle the names of three children they liked the least. Nomination scores were based on the responses from all the peers irrespective of gender. To assess the social status of a child a method similar to the one described by Asher and Dodge (1986) was used. This method involves the computation of the frequencies for positive and negative nominations for each child and the transformation of these frequencies into standardized z-scores for liking (L) and disliking (D) within each classroom. Following this transformation, the social preference (SP) and social impact (SI) scores were computed. The social preference (SP) score is determined by subtracting the standardized disliking score from the standardized liking score; the social impact (SI) score by adding the standardized liking and disliking scores for each child. The classification procedure consists of fitting each child into one of five groups that are characterized by different values for SP, SI, L, and D. *Popular* children ( $SP > 1.0$ ,  $L > 0$ , and  $D < 0$ ) are interpreted as being cooperative and show leadership behavior and seldom disrupt the group, fight, and ask for help. *Rejected* children ( $SP < -1.0$ ,  $L < 0$ , and  $D > 0$ ) are children who cooperate little and show no leadership qualities; they often disrupt the group, fight, and seek help. *Neglected* children ( $SI < -1.0$ ,  $L < 0$ , and  $D < 0$ ) distinguish themselves from the rejected children in that they are not actually disliked by their peers; they are only not mentioned as children others would want to be friends with. *Controversial* children ( $SI > 1.0$ ,  $L > 0$ , and  $D > 0$ ) combine characteristics of the rejected and popular children. These children are perceived as disruptive, start fights, and frequently seek help. On the other hand, they are also perceived as leaders. Though not cooperative, they are also not perceived as lacking

this behavior. *Average* children ( $-0.5 < SP < 0.5$  and  $-0.5 < SI < 0.5$ ), normally the largest group of children within a peer group, are evaluated to be average on cooperation, leadership, attraction, etc. (see Asher and Dodge 1986; Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli 1982).

*Play and work preferences scale.* Play and work preferences were obtained by asking the children to indicate the children they prefer to work with and prefer to play with in their classroom. The rating categories ranged from (1) "I don't like to play/work at all with..." to (5) "I am very eager to play/work with...". As with humor and social distance, separate average same- and cross-gender ratings were determined.

The various assessment instruments were presented in a fixed order in four sessions with two-week intervals between each session. The questionnaires and scales for funniness, social distance and play and work preferences, humor, and social status were presented in this respective order. After two months, a second humor assessment was done with one class of 9-year olds ( $n=32$ ) and one class of 12-year olds ( $n=27$ ), permitting the calculation of test-retest reliabilities for the humor measure.

## Results

### *Materials and procedure*

*Funniness.* To the question "name the most funny child(ren) in their class," 88% of the children responded with at least one child. Of the children who were not able to mention a funny child, three children gave a very negative view of their peers: "nobody was funny, all were dumb, etc."

Almost eighty percent (79%) of the responses to the why-question could be classified into five categories involving responses referring to joking, acting funny, laughing (either together or alone), making subtle and witty remarks, and being funny. The major difference between the explanations "acting" and "being" funny concerned the use of behavioral versus psychological or personality characteristics. To permit Chi-square analysis for independent samples, only the first explanation for the funniness of a child was scored. In Table 1, the resulting frequencies, percentages, and total number of responses for each response category are present. Chi-square analyses showed the response categories not to be

independent of age ( $\chi^2(10) = 52.18; p < .001$ ). No relation between gender and the response categories could be demonstrated. Separate, one-sample Chi-square analyses demonstrated that the 9-year olds perceived funniness mostly in terms of "acting funny" and joking ( $\chi^2(5) = 58.97; p < .001$ ) and the 15-year olds primarily in terms of making subtle and witty remarks, "being funny," and "other" characteristics ( $\chi^2(5) = 28.12; p < .001$ ). Although for the 12-year olds the frequencies for the different response categories differed ( $\chi^2(5) = 42.9; p < .001$ ), this age group could be perceived as transitional when compared to the changes between the 9- and 15-year olds. The responses classified as "other" may tentatively illustrate the multidimensional nature of the construct of humor. Creativity, appearances, tendentious jokes, social distance, and the use of unique and unexpected remarks are recurrent themes in these responses and together with the five major response categories closely coincide with the features of the humor concept. These additional themes in the responses of the children became more evident from the age of 12.

To relate the data obtained for funniness to the humor ratings, the frequency of the funniness nominations for each child were transformed into standardized *z* funniness scores (*F*) for each child within each classroom.

*Humor.* To obtain the concurrent validity between the funniness measure and the humor scale the mean total humor score (*HU*<sub>t</sub>) was correlated with the standardized funniness score (*F*) for each age group. The correlations ranged from .71 to .93 with mean correlations of .76, .80, and .84 for the 9-, 12-, and 15-year olds, respectively. These results show a high concurrent validity and confirm the assumption that "funny" is used to mean humorous (McGhee 1979).

The analysis of the total humor scores (*HU*<sub>t</sub>) by means of a two-way ANOVA, resulted in a main effect for age ( $F(2, 219) = 4.79, p < .01$ ) as well as for gender ( $F(1, 219) = 14.77, p < .001$ ). The 9-year old children received significantly higher humor scores (2.59) than the 12- (2.33) and 15-year olds (2.31). The males in this study received a significantly higher (2.59) mean total humor score than the females (2.27). No effect for the interaction between age and gender was evident. A  $3 \times 2 \times 2$  (age  $\times$  gender  $\times$  humor) ANOVA, with the last variable consisting of the same- and cross-gender humor scores (*HU*<sub>s</sub> and *HU*<sub>c</sub>) and treated as a repeated measurement, revealed significant main effects for age ( $F(2, 219) = 4.73, p < .01$ ) and gender ( $F(2, 219) = 16.70, p < .001$ ) but not

Table 1. *The frequencies for the first explanation to the question why a child was considered funny (percentages between brackets)*

Categories	Age		12 years		15 years		Total	
	9 years (n=86)		(n=76)		(n=63)		(n=225)	
joking	32 (37.2)	34	17 (22.4)	21	2 (3.2)	3	51	58
"acting" funny	25 (29.1)	27	15 (19.7)	19	6 (9.5)	9	46	55
laughing	12 (13.9)	13	15 (19.7)	16	9 (14.3)	10	36	39
witty remarks	6 (6.9)	7	10 (13.2)	24	14 (22.2)	19	30	50
"being" funny	6 (6.9)	6	9 (11.8)	9	16 (25.4)	18	31	33
other	5 (5.8)	12	10 (13.2)	24	16 (25.4)	19	31	55
Total	86	99	75	113	63	78	225	290
Other								
creativity	2	5	2	5	1	1	5	11
stupid remarks	1	1	2	7	1	1	4	9
social distance	2	5	2	4	0	0	4	9
general remarks	0	1	1	2	3	3	5	6
tendentious	0	0	2	2	3	4	5	6
appearance	0	0	1	1	2	3	3	4
unique/unexpected	0	0	0	3	1	1	1	4
humor	0	0	0	0	3	3	3	3
having guts	0	0	0	0	2	3	2	3

The response category "other" is specified separately. The italicized frequencies represent the total number of responses (involving all explanations offered by a child).

for the interaction between age and gender. Also the humor measures differed significantly ( $F(1,219)=135.56$ ,  $p<.001$ ), as well as the humor by age interaction ( $F(2,219)=18.16$ ,  $p<.001$ ). A  $3 \times 2$  (age  $\times$  gender) ANOVA on the same-gender humor ratings (HUs) revealed significant effects for age ( $F(2,219)=13.22$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and gender ( $F(1,219)=11.68$ ,  $p<.001$ ). A similar analysis on the cross-gender humor ratings (HUc) resulted in a main effect for gender only for HUc ( $F(1,219)=17.25$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

In Table 2, the same- and cross-gender humor ratings for each gender and age group are presented. Post-hoc analyses (Fisher's protected LSD) indicated that the differences in same-gender ratings between the 9-year olds and the 12- and 15-year olds are significant ( $p<.001$ ). These findings indicate that the humor scores given to same-gender peers become significantly lower and apparently more "realistic" from the age of 12. For the cross-gender ratings no significant differences between the age groups

Table 2. The same- and cross-gender humor and social-distance ratings by gender for the three age groups

Humor ratings												
	9-year olds				12-year olds				15-year olds			
	Gender of rater		Gender of rater		Gender of rater		Gender of rater		Gender of rater		Gender of rater	
	same	df	cross	df	same	df	cross	df	same	df	cross	df
Female	2.87	.62	2.13	.50	2.22	.63	1.93	.53	2.34	.63	1.99	.61
Male	3.07	.65	2.38	.68	2.83	.76	2.49	.73	2.50	.93	2.38	1.12
Social distance												
	same	df	cross	df	same	df	cross	df	same	df	cross	df
Female	1.29	.65	2.42	.56	1.37	.71	1.93	.62	1.19	.66	1.91	.63
Male	1.31	.73	2.72	.54	1.45	.53	1.87	.50	1.88	.61	1.75	.77

Note that in this table a low social-distance rating implies a small social distance.

were evident. With respect to gender, post-hoc analyses indicated significant differences between males and females for the same- and cross-gender humor ratings ( $p < .001$ ) showing that consistently over-age males received significantly higher humor ratings than females from their male as well as their female peers.

*Social Distance.* The total social-distance scores (SDt) were analyzed by means of a two-way ANOVA and resulted in a main effect for age ( $F(2,219) = 5.61, p < .01$ ) and gender ( $F(1,219) = 4.89, p < .05$ ). Perceived social distance was significantly greater in the youngest age group (1.94) as compared to the two older age groups (1.66 and 1.74 for the 12- and 15-year olds, respectively). Females perceived their peers to have significantly less social distance (1.71) than males (1.88). A  $3 \times 2 \times 2$  (age  $\times$  gender  $\times$  humor) ANOVA, with the last variable consisting of the same- and cross-gender social-distance scores (SDs and SDc) and treated as a repeated measurement, revealed significant main effects for age ( $F(2,219) = 5.87, p < .01$ ) and gender ( $F(2,219) = 3.67, p = .05$ ) but not for the interaction between age and gender. Also the social distance measures differed significantly ( $F(1,219) = 336.13, p < .001$ ), as well as all other higher order interactions. A  $3 \times 2$  (age  $\times$  gender) ANOVA on the same-gender social-distance ratings revealed significant effects for gender

( $F(1,219)=9.07, p<.01$ ) and the interaction between age and gender ( $F(2,219)=5.35, p<.01$ ). For the cross-gender social-distance ratings, significant effects for age ( $F(2,219)=35.85, p<.001$ ) and the interaction between age and gender could be demonstrated ( $F(2,219)=3.12, p<.05$ ). In Table 2 the same- and cross-gender social-distance ratings by gender for the three age groups are presented. Post hoc analyses (Fisher's protected LSD) revealed that the 9-year olds rated their peers of the same gender to have a significantly greater social distance than did the 12- and 15-year olds ( $p<.05$ ). With respect to the cross-gender ratings (SDc), it was again the 9-year olds only who perceived their peers of the other gender to have a significantly greater social distance than their peers of the same gender ( $p<.001$ ). With respect to gender, only the same-gender social-distance ratings were significant. Females rated their female peers lower in social distance than the males rated their male peers ( $p<.01$ ).

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated between the total humor (HUt) and social distance ratings (SDt) irrespective of the gender of the rater and ratee. These coefficients attained  $-.48, -.56,$  and  $-.57$  for the 9-, 12- and 15-year olds, respectively. The hypothesis that humor will reduce social distances (Sherman 1988) allows for the assumption of a (causal) direction for these correlation coefficients showing that 23 to 32 percent of the variance in social-distance ratings can be explained by the humor ratings. In Table 3, the intercorrelations are shown between the same- and cross-gender ratings for humor and social distance for each age group and all age groups combined. As can be observed from this table, the relationships between the different ratings, though varying in magnitude, are relatively consistent over the three age groups.

*Reliability.* Test-retest reliability scores for the humor measurement obtained with 9- and 12- year olds were calculated by means of Spearman rank-order coefficients. The reliability coefficients were .79 and .93 ( $p<.001$ ) for the 9- and 12-year olds, respectively. With the females, the same-gender means correlated .71 ( $p<.01$ ) and .94 ( $p<.001$ ), while the cross-gender means correlated .69 ( $p<.01$ ) and .97 ( $p<.001$ ). For the males, the same-gender means correlated .89 ( $p<.001$ ) and .76 ( $p<.01$ ) and the cross-gender means .88 ( $p<.001$ ) and .76 ( $p<.01$ ). Overall, these coefficients indicated a satisfactory test-retest reliability for the humor measurement.

Table 3. *The intercorrelations between same- and cross-gender social-distance and humor ratings for each age group separately and all age groups combined (including age as variable)*

9-year olds ( <i>n</i> = 86)	SDs	SDc	HUs	HUc	
SDc	.66**				
HUs	-.54**	-.32**			
HUc	-.37**	-.31**	.67**		
Gender	-.02	-.27*	-.16	-.21*	
12-year olds ( <i>n</i> = 76)	SDs	SDc	HUs	HUc	
SDc	.56**				
HUs	-.52**	-.44**			
HUc	-.26*	-.58**	.70**		
Gender	-.07	.06	-.41**	-.41**	
15-year olds ( <i>n</i> = 63)	SDs	SDc	HUs	HUc	
SDc	.48**				
HUs	-.44**	-.43**			
HUc	-.34**	-.60**	.82**		
Gender	-.48**	.11	-.10	-.21	
All ages ( <i>n</i> = 225)	SDs	SDc	HUs	HUc	Gender
SDc	.42**				
HUs	-.51**	-.17*			
HUc	-.32**	-.43**	.71**		
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-.18**	-.01	-.20**	-.27**	
Age	.16*	-.45**	-.29**	-.02	-.07

*Note*\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01<sup>a</sup>Gender was a binary coded variable: girls = 0 and boys = 1.

*Play and work preferences.* The scores on this measure involved peer ratings with respect to play and work preferences. The intercorrelations between the play and work preferences and the total humor (HU<sub>t</sub>) and social distance (SD<sub>t</sub>) scores for each classroom peer group separately indicated that the social-distance scale and the play and work preferences scale assessed the same variable. The correlation coefficients between the SD<sub>t</sub> and work and play preferences ranged from  $-.81$  to  $-.94$  for the nine peer groups. For the same- and cross-gender play and work preferences identical results were found. Children with whom others would like to play and work are also the children who are perceived to be close to others (with small social distances). As with social distance, significant

but considerably weaker relationships were evident between humor and play and work preferences. Because the play and work indices did not add additional information to the social distance measures, the play and work indices were omitted from the following analyses.

*Social Status.* By means of the social status scales, the status of each individual child within the peer group was established (popular [ $n=59$ ], controversial [ $n=14$ ], average [ $n=70$ ], neglected [ $n=41$ ], and rejected [ $n=41$ ]). Within groups ANOVAs with the five social-status groups as the independent variable were performed on the total social-distance (SDt) and humor scores (HUt) separately for each age group. With respect to social distance, the three ANOVAs revealed significant effects ( $p < .001$ ) for the social-status groups ( $F(4,85)=26.6$ ,  $F(4,75)=32.02$ , and  $F(4,62)=13.32$ ,  $p < .001$  for the 9-, 12-, and 15-year olds, respectively). This finding indicates that social distance is related to social status. A similar relationship could be demonstrated between social-status and humor. The  $F$ -values were 5.59, 5.2, and 7.57 ( $p < .01$ ) for the 9-, 12-, and 15-year olds, respectively. In Table 4, the mean social-distance and humor scores for each social-status group and age are presented. From this table it can be observed that the popular children possess the smallest social distance and the rejected children the greatest social distance from their peers. Separate one-way ANOVAs indicated that the popular children could be distinguished from all other social-status groups — with the exception of the 15-year old controversial group — on the basis of low social distances ( $p < .05$ ). Similarly, the rejected children could be distinguished from all other social-status groups by significantly larger social distances ( $p < .05$ ). With the humor scores, a different picture emerges. The only distinctions based on the humor scores that could be made between the social-status groups were between the popular and rejected groups and the controversial and rejected groups. These distinctions demonstrated significantly lower humor scores for the rejected children as compared to the popular and controversial children ( $p < .05$ ). It is interesting to note that certainly at the older ages the neglected children do not distinguish themselves on the basis of their social distance, nor humor ratings from the average children. The neglected children appear to be reasonably well-liked and to possess a reasonable sense of humor.

When the same- and cross-gender social distance and humor ratings are considered separately, complex patterns of interrelationships between

Table 4. *The mean social distance (SDt) and humor scores (HUt) and standard deviations for each social-status group and age*

Age	Social distance (SDt)						Humor (HUt)					
	9 years		12 years		15 years		9 years		12 years		15 years	
	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd
Popular	1.48	.29	1.18	.29	1.22	.25	2.81	.25	2.73	.65	2.66	.71
Average	1.90	.40	1.67	.31	1.67	.44	2.64	.49	2.27	.54	2.06	.68
Controv.	3.02	.41	1.75	.47	1.58	.61	2.85	.52	2.64	1.11	3.55	1.05
Neglected	2.84	.37	1.68	.43	1.91	.53	2.67	.70	2.09	.42	2.18	.67
Rejected	2.79	.49	3.57	.29	2.34	.53	2.05	.47	1.84	.56	1.80	.59

Note that in this table a low social distance score implies a small real social distance.

age, gender, and social status became evident. In general, however, the results from the four separate  $3 \times 2 \times 5$  (age  $\times$  gender  $\times$  social status) ANOVAs repeat the previously reported findings for the effects of age, gender, and social status for the total social-distance and humor scores.

Correlations computed between the total social-distance and humor ratings (SDt and HUt) and between the same- and cross-gender, social distance (SDs and SDc) and humor scores (HUs and HUc) for each social-status group revealed a surprising pattern (see Table 5). For the popular and rejected groups the correlation between SDt and HUt did not attain significance. With the average and neglected groups, the correlations between these variables were significant. The magnitude of the coefficients, however, suggested that only 6 to 12 percent of the variance in social distance could be explained by humor. In contrast to these findings, the relationship between the SDt and HUt with the controversial group was .78. If it is again assumed that humor will reduce social distances (Sherman 1988), then with the controversial children approximately 60 percent of the variance in social distance could be explained by the humor ratings. (Note that the controversial group consisted of only 14 children.)

For the controversial children in particular it was the cross-gender social-distance ratings (SDc) that related most strongly with the cross-gender humor ratings (HUc:  $-.74, p < .001$ ). The relationship between SDs and HUs, while lower, was still strongest within the controversial children as compared to the other social-status groups. For the other social-status groups, the relationship between SDc and HUc and between

SDs and HUs was more varied. While for the neglected and rejected groups the relationship between SDs and HUs was the only significant relationship between these variables, with the average group it was the strongest relationship. While no significant relationship was present between SDt and HUt for the popular children, the relationships between SDc and HUc and SDs and HUs were identical but weak ( $-.30$  and  $-.32, p < .05$ ). These findings suggest that the relationship between social distance and humor (either negative or positive) is dependent on social status and the gender of the child who is rated as well as the gender of the rater.

*The replication.* One of the purposes of the present study was to replicate Sherman's (1988) study and to compare the data of the 9-year olds in both studies. In Table 6 (see also Table 2), the same- and cross-gender mean social distance and humor scores by gender reported in the Sherman

Table 5. Correlations coefficients between the same- and cross-gender, social-distance (SDs and SDc) and humor ratings (HUs and HUc) for the five different social-status groups

Popular ( $r[SDt, HUt] = -.15$ )				Average ( $r[SDt, HUt] = -.25^*$ )			
[n = 59]	SDs	SDc	HUs	[n = 70]	SDs	SDc	HUs
SDc	-.05				.13		
HUs	-.30*	.20			-.42**	.10	
HUc	-.10	-.32*	.62**		-.14	-.25*	.63**
Controv. ( $r[SDt, HUt] = -.78^{**}$ )				Neglected ( $r[SDt, HUt] = -.34^*$ )			
[n = 14]	SDs	SDc	HUs	[n = 41]	SDs	SDc	HUs
SDc	-.06				.21		
HUs	-.57*	-.38			-.45**	-.06	
HUc	-.27	-.74**	.72**		-.19	-.19	.76**
Rejected ( $r[SDt, HUt] = -.25$ )							
[n = 41]	SDs	SDc	HUs				
SDc	.10						
HUs	-.36*	.08					
HUc	-.14	-.20	.70**				

Note

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 6. *Same- and cross-gender mean social-distance and humor scores by gender for Sherman's (1988: 396) and the present study (underlined)*

	Humor		Social distance	
	Gender of rater		Gender of rater	
	same	cross	same	cross
Female	2.89 <u>2.87</u>	2.12 <u>2.13</u>	1.88 <u>1.29</u>	2.91 <u>2.42</u>
Male	2.89 <u>3.07</u>	2.37 <u>2.38</u>	2.06 <u>1.31</u>	3.56 <u>2.72</u>

(1988) and the present study are presented. Similarly, in Table 7, the intercorrelations between same- and cross-gender social distance and humor are given.

From Table 6, a number of interesting differences between Sherman's (1988) findings and the results of the present study with a Dutch population can be observed. While Sherman (1988) does not report same- and cross-gender differences in the humor ratings, in the present study a significant same-gender difference is present showing that males receive a significantly higher humor rating from males than females receive from females ( $t(39) = 2.05, p < .05$ ). With the social distance ratings the same-gender ratings are considerably lower for the Dutch than for the American sample. Dutch children perceive their own gender peers to be closer (to have less social distance) than the American children. With the cross-gender ratings the findings of the present study show a similar effect as reported by Sherman. That is, cross-gender ratings "which males received from females were significantly higher (greater social distance) than the cross-gender ratings which females received from males." Despite these differences and the considerably higher relationships in the present study between same- and cross-gender social-distance ratings (.63 versus .31) and between same-gender humor ratings and cross-gender social distance ratings ( $-.32$  versus  $-.18$ ; see Table 7), the correlation patterns for the present and Sherman's study are very similar.

## Discussion

The guiding hypothesis of the present study stated that humor as a social competence or "interpersonal communication behavior" would facilitate social interaction (Sherman 1988: 390) and reduce the social distances

Table 7. *The intercorrelation matrix for same- and cross-gender social-distance and humor ratings for Sherman's (1988: 397; n = 74) and the present study (underlined; n = 86)*

	SDs		SDc		HUs		HUc	
	Sher.	Pres.	Sher.	Pres.	Sher.	Pres.	Sher.	Pres.
SDc	.31**	.66**						
HUs	-.63**	-.54**	-.18	-.32**				
HUc	-.30*	-.37**	-.40**	-.31**	.61**	.67**		
Gender	.14	.02	.40**	.27*	.00	-.16	.17	-.21*

*Note*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

between the "humorous" individual and others (Kane, Suls, and Tedeschi 1977; Masten 1986; Sherman 1988). Reduced social distances were assumed to affect peer relations and peer status in groups of children (Masten 1986).

Humor or a "good sense of humor" certainly is a characteristic that children take into account when evaluating their relationships with other children. Conforming with McGhee's (1979) assumption, the word "funny" was indeed conceived by children to mean humorous. The understanding and perception of humor changes as children are older. Our findings suggest that with the younger children, humorousness is primarily defined by observable behavior, by acting or behaving funny and by telling jokes. Often these jokes are worded in terms that are not normally used in the home and classroom setting. Humorousness, then, is perceived as behavior (acting and jokes) that is incongruous with the regular normative setting (cf. McGhee 1979). This emphasis on behavioral incongruity decreases as the children are older. Humorousness becomes more defined by the ability to produce witty remarks, that is, to offer apt retorts and is thought of more in terms of personality or a psychological characteristic than perceived as a behavioral characteristic. Corresponding with these changes in conceptions of humorousness from "dirty joke" to apt retort and from a behavioral to a personality characteristic, also explanations involving characteristics such as creativity, social distance, appearance, and "having guts" become more apparent. Speculatively, this increase in the variety of characteristics may imply that from the age of 12 children come to understand the multidimensionality of the concept of humor (Foot 1991).

Irrespective of age, humorousness is perceived differently by girls and boys. Gender differences in humor perception were reported by McGhee (1979) and Ziv (1984). According to McGhee (1979), boys more often create humor, girls more often enjoy it. A possible explanation for this gender difference is sought by McGhee in the relation between humor and gender-role expectations. That is, because humor is frequently aggressive, the initiation of humor is often considered to be more appropriate for boys than for girls. In the present study, gender also plays an important role in perceived humor; not only are children of the same gender perceived to be more humorous than children of the opposite gender (cf. Sherman 1988), but boys are perceived to be more humorous by their male *and* female peers. Though this finding could be accepted as support for McGhee's (1979) assumption, it is not clear whether the higher level of perceived humorousness is a result of a more aggressive type of humor, or that boys initiate humor more often than girls, or because girls and boys experience humor differently.

In the present study, the younger boys were considered to be much more humorous by their male peers than their female peers. While there is ample evidence that younger children "overattribute" in their social judgments (cf. Heller and Berndt 1981), this should have occurred with both boys and girls. However, while these same-gender higher humor perceptions for boys decreased with age, with the girls, no such age-related changes in the same-gender humor perceptions were observed. The convergence of same- and cross-gender humor perceptions of boys and girls at the age of 15 suggests that already at the age of 9 girls perceive humorousness differently, perhaps more "realistically" than males. The latter finding suggests that an argument could be made that gender differences in humor perception are due to differences in the experience of humor by girls and boys, rather than the aggressivity or the frequency of initiation of humor. Clearly more research will be needed to clarify this issue. In addition, if overattributions are made with respect to peer evaluations, it is not clear whether such overattributions are also made with respect to younger and older children. To study this issue, use could be made of mixed-age classrooms (for example, within the Montessori educational system), younger and older children are still sufficiently known to the children to permit valid evaluations of a particular characteristic (humorousness).

Gender differences were also observed for social distance. While girls perceived themselves to be closer to one another than boys (cf. Gilligan

1982; Tannen 1990), the perceived social distances between girls as well as the social distances perceived by girls between themselves and boys did not change for different ages. With boys, on the other hand, the perceived social distances between themselves and their male peers increased in older boys, while the perceived social distance between themselves and girls decreased.

In the introduction to this study, it was argued that humor as a social competence will affect social distances between the humorous individual and others. An assumption that possesses an almost intuitive validity: Individuals with a good sense of humor are fun to be with! The recurrent, identical patterns of interrelationships among perceived humor and social distance for the age groups studied indicated that perceived humorousness relates to perceived social distance. Each recurrent correlation pattern can then be perceived as a replication.

That is, if perceived humorousness is taken as the explanatory variable for variance in social distances, then the absence of age-related changes in girls' perceived humorousness of girls and boys nicely explains the absence of age-related changes in girls' perceived social distances to their female and male peers. Similarly, because older boys perceived their male peers to be less humorous, the social distances between boys increased. For the boys' perceived social distances to girls, however, perceived humorousness fails to offer a satisfactory explanation. While no age-related changes in the boys' perception of girls' humorousness was observed, the boys' perceived social distances to girls decreased. In addition, the girls' low perceived humorousness of their female peers, as compared to their male peers, does not correspond to the girls' perceived smaller social distances to their female peers as compared to their male peers. While our findings amply demonstrated that children are able to judge their peers in terms of humorousness or funniness (McGhee 1979), the latter findings suggest that a "good sense of humor" or being humorous may not be sufficient to explain differences in social distance. Speculatively, it could be argued that as children become older their interest in the opposite gender increases, which could explain the observed decrease of the boys' perceived social distances to girls, but leaves unexplained why the same decrease did not occur with the girls' perceived social distances to boys. At the age of 15, there is no reason to assume a gender difference in the attraction for the opposite gender.

By relating perceived humorousness and social distance to the social status of children, additional support for this suggestion was obtained.

The division of the Dutch children over the five social status groups (26% popular, 18% neglected, 18% rejected, 6% controversial, and 31% average) shows an approximate correspondence with the division reported by Coie, et al. (1982) for American children (22% popular, 24% neglected, 24% rejected, 13% controversial, and 16% average). When dealing with social status in relation to perceived humorousness and social distance, it is important to note that the determination of the social status of a child is based on peer evaluations *irrespective of gender*. This implies that perceived humorousness and social distance *irrespective of gender* only, that is, the total humorousness and social-distance scores (HUt and SDt) can be related validly to social status.

When only the relationships between total perceived humorousness and social distance are considered, the previously discussed recurrent relationship between humor and social distance could not be observed for the social status groups. Notwithstanding the fact that popular children are perceived by their peers to be cooperative, to show leadership behavior, and seldom disrupt the group, fight, and ask for help (see Coie, et al. 1982), and contrary to the expectation, no relationship between humor and social distance could be demonstrated. That is, while these children were found to possess the smallest social distance to other children, they were not perceived to be the children with the highest humor ratings.

While the rejected children demonstrated the largest social distance to other children and obtained the lowest humor ratings, no relationship between perceived humorousness and social distance was evident. In contrast to the popular children, rejected children are perceived to show little cooperation and no leadership qualities; they often disrupt the group, fight, and seek help. For the neglected and average children, relationships, while moderate, were present between perceived humorousness and social distance. Neglected children distinguish themselves from the rejected children in that they are not actually disliked by their peers; they are just not mentioned as children others would want to be friends with and are a low visibility group. The average children constitute the largest group of children within a peer group and are evaluated to be average in cooperation, leadership, attraction, etc.

The controversial children are described as an intermediate group between the popular and rejected children. These children are perceived to combine characteristics of both social-status groups. They are similar

to the rejected children in that they are perceived as disruptive and start fights; they also frequently seek help. On the other hand, they are also perceived as leaders in the group. They are not perceived as cooperative but they are also not perceived as lacking this behavior. Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli (1982) describe these children as "visible, active, and assertive ... Sometimes this activity takes the form of leadership and sometimes it puts them in demand as leaders" (p. 565). Elsewhere, the same authors note that "one might speculate that controversial children possess more positive social skills than they are described as having" (p. 568).

With the controversial children, the relationship between perceived humorousness and social distance was substantial. If social distance is affected by humor, as was stated in the guiding hypothesis for this study, then for this group more than 60 percent of the variance in social distance is explained by humor. Hence, a good sense of humor may be one of those "more positive skills" possessed by the controversial children that make them a small but very special group of children within their peer groups (Coie, et al. 1982). Perhaps the controversial children are able to use humor more "effectively," that is, by using humor to facilitate social interaction thereby promoting friendships and relationships and by using humor as a socially acceptable way to dissociate people or express in a socially acceptable manner negative feelings towards others (cf. Martineau 1972).

The controversial children distinguished themselves from the other children on a second characteristic. In general, higher same-gender humor ratings were associated with higher same-gender likeability judgments. A girl who was judged by her female peers to be humorous was also the girl who was well-liked by her female peers and similarly, a boy who was judged by his male peers to be humorous was also the boy who was well-liked by his male peers. The controversial children demonstrated a different pattern. With these children, the higher same-gender likeability ratings related much stronger with the cross-gender humor ratings than with the same-gender humor ratings. This finding shows that a boy who is judged by his *female* peers to be humorous is the boy who is best liked by his *male* peers and vice versa a girl who is judged by her *male* peers to be humorous is the girl who is best liked by her *female* peers. These findings suggest that controversial children differ on a variety of personality and social characteristics from the other children.

While the rejected children were clearly less liked and were perceived to be the least humorous, the neglected children did not distinguish themselves from the average children in their peer group. These children were perceived to possess an average level of humorosity and to be reasonably well liked. Speculatively, it could be argued that neglected children are not so much children with whom other children do not like to be friends, but rather that they are children who "voluntarily have no need" to be friends with other children within the peer group. This assumption may be based on differences between the educational systems in the United States and the Netherlands. In the Dutch educational system, activities like sports, music, and arts are not part of the educational system but are offered by private clubs and institutions. Children who participate in these activities "outside the school" are often not the same children who form the peer group in a classroom and are often not from the same school. Children in the Netherlands regularly function in two or more completely different peer groups. Consequently, a child may have friends in one peer group and be perceived as popular (for example, the soccer team) and not feel the need for the formation of additional friendships with children in another peer group (the classroom). The study of social status formation in peer groups that function outside the educational system (the classroom) is required to verify this assumption. However, the nature of the groups, particularly with respect to how sports teams are formed on the basis of gender, may obviously constrain the examination of same- and cross-gender evaluations.

As was previously noted, the presence and absence of relationships between humor and social distance, as well as the differences in relationships among same- and cross-gender perceived humorosity and social distance within the different social status groups, may be a consequence of the way in which social status has been assessed. The reported findings should, consequently, be cautiously interpreted. The observation that the relationship between social distance and humor is dependent on social-status and the gender of the child who is doing the evaluating, as well as the gender of the child who is being evaluated, concurs with this assumption.

In other words, the recurrent relationships between humor and social distance within each age group, which could be considered as replications, are not necessarily sufficient reason to interpret statistically significant relationships as relevant scientific findings. The (theoretical) assumption

that humor will reduce social distance (the assumption of causal direction; Sherman 1988) should have resulted in *stronger* relationships between perceived humor and social distance than observed in this study. The present findings suggest that humor as an explanatory variable, irrespective of the social status of the children, explains at most 36% of the variance in social distance. Other variables (other social competencies) may play as important a role in the formation of social distance.

The previously discussed findings proceed beyond the results reported by Sherman in his 1988 study which formed the basis for the present study. When the findings of the present study for the 9-year-old children were compared to the findings reported by Sherman, similarities and differences were observed. However, despite differences in the magnitude of the relationships, the interrelationships among same- and cross-gender perceived humorousness and social distance showed remarkably identical patterns for the American and the Dutch children. While in Sherman's study, children who are perceived to be humorous by their same-gender peers are not perceived to possess smaller social distances by their peers of the opposite gender, in the Dutch sample the peers of the opposite gender also perceive these children to possess smaller social distances. In addition, the relationship between same- and cross-gender social-distance ratings with the Dutch children is considerably stronger than with the American children. This finding is probably based on the Dutch children's perception and/or experience of considerably smaller, same- and cross-gender social distances within their peer group and a lesser emphasis on gender (see, for instance, the absence of a relationship between cross-gender social-distance ratings and gender with the Dutch children). With respect to humor, the same- and cross-gender perceptions of the Dutch and American children are almost identical.

In summary, the present study detailed the results reported by Sherman (1988) and amply demonstrated that humor is a complex concept. The meaning and interpretation of humor and perceived humorousness is age- and gender-related. A "good sense of humor" plays a role in the establishment of social distances among children and in the formation of the social status of a child. To be humorous does seem to make a difference. The present study, however, could not give conclusive answers to the question "how?" As has been noted throughout the discussion more research is definitely needed.

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