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Humor, Loneliness and Interpersonal Communication: A Quantitative Study of Romanian Older Adults

Abstract

This quantitative study examines the correlations between humor, loneliness, gender and aging by presenting the results from a sample of eighty-three older Romanian adults, aged sixty and above. The first section of the paper is a comprehensive review of the social-psychological literature on aging, gender and humor. The second section assesses the findings generated from a study that uses the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (Thorson & Powell, 1993) and the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults – short version, (diTomaso, Brannen & Best, 2004). Building on Robert Weiss's (1973) reflections on the differences between feelings of loneliness because of social isolation or emotional isolation, the research findings nuance –and in some cases challenge several assumptions on gender, age, and emotional and social loneliness. The findings also point to the correlation between feelings of social loneliness and the use of humor in interpersonal communications. The data collected suggests that while Romanian men may value the use of humor more than women when self-reporting, that older Romanian women tend to use humor in interpersonal situations and that there is a significant correlation between the use of this type of humor and a reduced sense of social loneliness.

Keywords: age; humor; Romania; emotional loneliness; social loneliness; gender; interpersonal communication.

Introduction

There is a robust literature concerned with documenting and addressing the adverse effects of loneliness and social isolation on older adults in the social psychology of communication and interpersonal communications. One way to understand these issues is to investigate the ways in which older adults communicate, form and maintain social bonds, in a society where we are all aging. This paper contributes to the growing research and interest in both loneliness and the uses of humor by older adults, men and women. In the first part of the paper, the existing literature on aging, humor, gender and loneliness is examined to present a comprehensive overview and assessment of the results to date. In the second part of the paper, the findings of a questionnaire that sampled responses from eighty-three older Romanian adults are presented. Using the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (Thorson & Powell, 1993) and the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults – short version

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(diTomaso, Brannen & Best, 2004), the findings are assessed to show where positive and negative correlations exist and to answer the question: *Do older adults who report valuing a sense of humor feel less lonely?*

1. A Survey of the Literature: Loneliness in the field of Communications Studies

Within the broader field of communication studies, researchers in interpersonal communication have taken up the question of loneliness and its role within relationships (DeVito, 2015). Indeed, as Rokach suggests, one of the primary benefits of relationships seems to be the fact that they lessen loneliness (Rokach, 1998). Within the existing literature, Robert Weiss's (1973) classic study on loneliness makes a key distinction between the loneliness brought about by feeling of either social or emotional isolation. In *Loneliness: The Experience of Social and Emotional Isolation*, Weiss discusses the differences between "the loneliness of social isolation" and "the loneliness of emotional isolation", suggesting that, accordingly, they are responsive to different "remedies" (1973, pp.18-19). Both types of loneliness can be understood as a mismatch between the individual's desired relationships and the relationships available to them (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). As Weiss points out, these two conditions or forms of loneliness differ in terms of the nature of the desired relationship. While emotional loneliness is defined by the *absence of a close attachment*, and can only be remedied by forging another such close relationship, social loneliness is the *absence of an engaging network* and can only be remedied by access to a group of individuals who may provide support and companionship. In line with this proposition, Walton, Schulz, Beck, and Walls (1991) examine the occurrence of loneliness in older adults and note that age-related losses may lead to increasing occurrences of discrepancies between desired available relationships and actual experiences.

Studies on loneliness indicate that although loneliness is experienced amongst individuals of all ages, older adults are particularly vulnerable to social loneliness (Donaldson & Watson, 1996). There are several contributing factors highlighted in the literature. Reduced social activity (Aartsen & Jylhä, 2011), an absence of friends and family (Savikko, 2008; Drennan et al., 2008), and demographic factors such as living alone, bereavement and widowhood (Tilvis et al. 2011, Aartsen & Jylhä, 2011) have been correlated with increased incidences of high levels of loneliness. In a 2011 study conducted in Finland, Tilvis and colleagues found that loneliness in older adult participants was, among other factors, significantly associated with lower levels of education, a perspective that hints at the possible emotional effects of economic and educational inequality in society. Finally, Proyer and colleagues (2010), who researched aging in Germany, hypothesized that the impact of reduced social contacts for humorous people could be difficult for individuals who value having a sense of humor, as they are more likely to want to share it with others. As such, a number of sub-themes will be taken into account, including the relation between possessing a sense of humor, loneliness, and the frequency of interaction with friends and family.

Gender, Age and Loneliness

Another body of literature connects gender to social loneliness in older adults (Savikko, 2008). Tilvis et al. (2011) found that loneliness was more common in women than men. In a survey conducted on older adults in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Victor (2005) found expressions of loneliness to be most probable in particular sub-groups of older adults, including older women and the very old. These findings deserve further investigation as they could lead to a better understanding of the complex mechanisms that lead to feelings of loneliness. Relationship status is also found to be relevant in the research literature on loneliness, as widowhood seems to correlate with higher levels of loneliness (Tilvis et al., 2011), a finding that is relevant to our Romania sample, too, since 10% of the total population of Romania self-reports to be widowed (Romanian National Census, 2011).

Despite research indicating that loneliness carries social stigma (Donaldson & Watson, 1996), which might make people self-conscious about reporting it, previous research has found high self-reported levels of loneliness for Eastern Europe, compared to other regions of Europe. A 2011 study that looked at loneliness levels in 25 European countries using the European Social Survey showed that the reported level of loneliness is consistently higher in Eastern Europe than for Western European and Northern European countries, across all age groups. Ukraine, Russia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Latvia (all former communist states) are countries where researchers find the highest reported levels of loneliness (Yang & Victor, 2011). To explain the findings, Yang and Victor discuss the existence of nationally specific conditions that cause loneliness. In the case of Eastern European countries, the authors point out that the political and economic transformations that have occurred since 1989 (the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, marking the end of communism in several Eastern European Countries) have forced people, especially the young and middle-aged, to move away from their social relations in pursuit of a better material life elsewhere (Yang & Victor, 2011, p.1383). Romania (with a total population of 20.121.641) has over 725.000 adults living abroad (i.e. 3.6% of the total population) primarily younger adults of working age (46,2% aged 20-34 and 24,8% aged 35-44), according to the full census report issued by the Romanian National Statistical Institute in 2011. This means that many older adults may have limited direct contact with their immediate family members.

Although loneliness can affect all individuals, irrespective of gender and age, the research literature indicates that there are specific differences related to gender. Research by Holmen (1994) and Jylhä (2004) shows that in Scandinavia older women report higher levels of loneliness than older men. Victor et al (2005) also report loneliness to be most likely to manifest in older women. Tijhuis and colleagues (1999) propose that in Finland it is culturally more acceptable for women to express their emotional states than it is for men. The authors also suggest that this might be connected to the fact that women live longer and they are thus more likely to experience widowhood and other losses. However, other studies find the opposite to be the case. Mullins, Elkins and Gutkowski (1996) report that in the United States older men experience loneliness more often than women. These researchers provide several potential explanations for this, surmising that men may be less outgoing or may find it more difficult to create close social ties compared to women. The authors also propose that men may be more wary of expressing their emotions and that they run a higher chance of not having children or friends than women (Mullins et al., 1996). Despite these different conclusions, it is clear that, when investigating loneliness in different cultural contexts, attention to different gender roles is relevant. For these reasons, the current research project *pays attention to*

the possible ways that gender differences play a role in the experience of loneliness by older adults in Romania and to the role that humor might play in alleviating these feelings of loneliness.

Humor, Interpersonal Communication and Older Adults

Humor is fundamentally a communicative activity. The field of interpersonal communication looks at how humor works within a social context, analyzing the role it plays in our daily communication strategies and the ways it can contribute to success in group or social communication (Lynch, 2002). It is, therefore, worth looking at the literature that investigates the potential role of humor as a mechanism for coping with the changes that growing old brings. Research in interpersonal communication suggests that an appreciation of humor can play a relevant role in maintaining a feeling of well-being during the aging process (Dami-anakis & Marziali, 2011) and a number of studies indicate that older adults use humor to cope with the psychological effects of the aging process (Berk 2001; Capps 2006; Dziegielewski et al. 2004). Davis (2008) suggested that having a sense of humor implies having a more profound, wiser, and light-hearted view of life in general, which can assist people in coping with circumstances as varied as moments of joy, or of suffering, or tragedy. Cohen and Wills (1985) remark that humorous persons can more easily form and keep friendships and develop a social support network, while Peterson and Seligman (2004) argue that humor can “sustain good cheer in the face of despair, build social bonds and lubricate social interactions” (2004, p. 530). Ruch, Proyer and Weber (2010b) propose that these findings on the use of humor for older adults could enable practitioners and professionals working with this age group to enrich daily communication).

Humor should be investigated not only from a psychological point of view, but also in terms of its cultural specificity. Any study of humor should take into account the specific cultural context that may influence the way humor is used and perceived. Despite the paucity of studies documenting the social and cultural specificity of humor in Romania, there is a distinctly cultural sensibility associated with humor that arguably plays a relevant role in the interpersonal communication of Romanian individuals. For example, there is a culturally coined name for a particular Romanian type of humor, called *a face haz de necaz* (Ghi?ă, 1997; Boia, 2012; Tompea, 2014), which literally translates as *making fun/light of one's troubles*. This saying signifies an individual's ability to reassure oneself or others by displaying good cheer and playfulness in the face of hardship and adversity. This approach is consistent with the use of humor as a coping mechanism (Thorson & Powell, 2009).

Humor, as it has been documented in previous studies, can act as a coping mechanism with the hardships of life and can provide older adults with the ability to adapt to the physical changes that come with age, and to the social and cultural challenges of growing old in contexts where aging is not valued. One of the specific difficulties of ageing is a growing sense of loneliness (Yang & Victor, 2011), due to age-specific events such as the decrease of a social network through widowhood, the loss of friends or the physical/emotional unavailability of family. Overholser (1992) finds that lonely individuals are less likely to use humor as a method of coping. Thus, the primary theoretical assumption of this study is that we will find a *negative* correlation between a heightened sense of humor and a lower sense of loneliness within the sample of the Romanian older adults who participated in this study.

Humor and Loneliness

When reviewing the literature on these two concepts, one may notice that humor and loneliness correlate in a contrasting manner with particular interpersonal communication skills and psychological states. For example, humor was found to be positively correlated with psychological health and resistance to stress, because it enhances perceived social support (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Conversely, lonely individuals (irrespective of age) perceive everyday stress in a more severe manner than individuals who were not lonely (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009).

A similar difference can be highlighted in terms of social competence and social skills. Apparently, individuals with a greater sense of humor seem to be more socially competent (Bell, McGhee, & Duffey, 1986; Kuiper, 2004; Yip & Martin, 2006). Likewise, researchers argue that lonely individuals score low in sociability and social skills, and high in social anxiety (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; Cacioppo et al., 2006).

A more recent study investigated the relationship of humor to life satisfaction and found out that, for older adults, high scores on the humor scale used in the study (the scale used in the study was the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths*, VIA-IS, Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) correlated positively with high life satisfaction (Ruch, Proyer, & Weber, 2010a). Indeed, other studies showed that loneliness is negatively correlated with life satisfaction across all age groups (Riggio, Watring & Throckmorton, 1993; Goodwin, Cook, & Yung, 2001; Salimi, 2011). The literature drawing from a variety of cultural and national contexts suggests that using humor has social and psychological advantages. Thus, a study whose purpose is to investigate the relationship between humor and the sense of loneliness for Romanian older adults could contribute valuable insights to the research in the field. .

Aging and Humor Styles

Studies that investigate age-specific differences in the use and the appreciation of humor by older adults often state that age is a significant factor in styles and types of humor. Thorson and Powell (1996), for example, found that older subjects generally score lower than younger individuals on affiliative humor, a style of communication that fosters social bonds through the exchange of humorous content and laughter taken as indicators that an individual does not take himself too seriously. Ruch et al. (2010a) observed that German older adults laugh more rarely and less easily than younger German adults, appreciate verbal humor less and show less appreciation for everyday humor (Proyer, Ruch & Müller, 2010). Ruch et al. (2010a) argued that relationship status (being married, single, divorced, separated, etc) is not a predictor of sense of humor scores for those aged 61 and above. The authors remarked that humor is often a means for attracting a romantic partner, an activity that is perhaps not a priority anymore to older adults. Clearly, the connection between humor styles, age and gender deserves further investigation and attention.

Gender, Age and Humor

A cluster of studies explored gender differences in the use and appreciation of humor. Ruch, Proyer and Weber (2010a) found that in Germany women generally score lower than men on humor scales, across all age groups, except the oldest. Grengross (2013) argued that women use humor as a coping mechanism, but men do less so. Yet is also worth asking if hu-

mor has become a concept that is gendered. Is there a popular belief/stereotype that men are funnier than women, which is echoed in scientific studies? For example, one of the explanations given in a 2007 study is that humor depends on testosterone levels, which are naturally higher in men (Shuster, 2007). Given that Romania is a country with relatively traditional gender roles (Arsene, 2012) and high levels of gender inequality (Gender Equality Special Eurobarometer 428, 2015), it is possible that the stereotypical assumption that men are funnier than women might lead to noticeable differences in our study, of the way men and women self-evaluate their sense of humor using the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (Thorson & Powell, 1993).

Another set of studies suggested that the principal gender differences in terms of humor are not about quantity, where men simply use or appreciate humor *more* than women do; instead, the differences could be in the *functions* that humor serves. It is suggested that women use humor to create solidarity and intimacy, while men use humor in the pursuit of status (Maltz & Borker, 1983) or as an outlet for aggression (Shuster, 2007). Crawford and Gressley (1991) found that women appreciate humorous conduct that involves hearing and telling stories about everyday events to build a sense of community and solidarity (Coates, 1996; Hay, 2001). These findings dovetail with Martin's (2003) research on humor styles that divides humor into four types: two that are positive and adaptive (affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor), and two that are maladaptive and potentially psychologically harmful (self-defeating and aggressive humor). While exploring the humor styles of older adults could further this line of investigation, this case study only takes into account the four dimensions of the sense of humor contained in the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale, although we later turn to Martin's research on humor styles at the end of this paper.

2. Humor, Loneliness, Gender and Aging: The Study and Research Questions

A survey of the current state of research on humor, loneliness and aging makes it clear that there are many research questions left that require careful investigation. This case study begins with one main question: *Do older adults who report valuing a sense of humor feel less lonely?* To answer this question, the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS) by Thorson and Powell (1993) is used. The scale proposes a multifaceted understanding of humor with four sub-dimensions that will be detailed later. As a corollary, a number of secondary questions arise: *Do any of the humor dimensions included in the MSHS have a strong positive or negative correlation with social or emotional loneliness? Do we find that humor has a moderating influence on loneliness? Can humor act as a mechanism for coping with loneliness in the case of older adults who only have limited social interactions?*

3. Methodology: Participants and Procedure

Self-administrated questionnaires were used on a sample of people aged 60 and above ($N = 83$). A sample of 25 men (mean age 67.60, $SD = 6.13$) and 58 women (mean age 68.02, $SD = 6.78$) from Bucharest and Braşov filled in the survey, which contained the *Multidimen-*

sional Sense of Humor Scale (Thorson & Powell, 1993) and the *Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults* (diTomaso, Brannen & Best, 2004). Participants also reported the frequency of interactions with family and friends and filled in socio-demographic data such as age, gender, education, household income, occupational and marital/relationship status (single, married, divorced, widowed). Participants were primarily recruited from Senior Clubs in Bucharest and Braşov and all gave their written consent to take part in the survey, after fully understanding the research goals.

Measuring and Analyzing Humor, Loneliness and Social Interactions

Three quantitative research instruments are used to measure or gauge: the use of humor in interpersonal relationships; the participants' sense of loneliness; and the frequency of the social interactions.

Use of humor in interpersonal relationships. In this study the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale, MSHS, (Thorson & Powell, 1993) is used to assess participants' self-evaluation of the use of humor in interpersonal relationships. The instrument consists of 24 items and comprises four subsets, or categories: 1) *Production and Social Use of Humor* (11 items, sample item: "Other people tell me that I say funny things"); 2) *Adaptive Humor* (7 items, sample item: "Humor helps me cope"); 3) *Attitudes towards Humorous People* (4 item, sample items: "People who tell jokes are a pain in the neck"; 4) *Attitude towards Humor* (2 item, sample items: "I like a good joke"). In the initial development and validation of the MSHS, the instrument was first tested with 29 items, and then 27, and has been subsequently refined by the authors to a 24-item instrument (Thorson and Powell, 1993). The use of MSHS in different cultural contexts indicated that the items could also load on five factors (José et al., 2007). In this paper, we use the initial version of the scale. The instrument was validated for older adults in Romania by pre-testing a back-translated Romanian version of the MSHS scale on a smaller sample of older individuals (aged 60 and above). Participants indicated on a 5-point Likert scale how well each of the statements described them; from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). We have validated the scale for the Romanian sample by doing a principal components factor analysis, thus obtaining four dimensions, which we labelled *Production and Social Use of Humor*, *Adaptive Humor*, *Using Humor in Negotiation*, and *Attitude towards Humor*. High reliability has been obtained for the MSHC total scale (Cronbach's Alpha = .90). If looked at separately, we see that the *Production and Social Use of Humor* and *Adaptive Humor* subscales also have good reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = .91, respectively Cronbach's Alpha = .89). As for the dimension labelled *Using Humor in Negotiation*, Cronbach's Alpha was .75, after discarding one item: "Getting people to lighten up by joking around is useless". The *Attitude towards Humor* subscale is less reliable (Cronbach's Alpha = .63) indicating the possibility of using a five factor model with items loading separately on a *positive attitude towards humor* subscale and *negative attitudes towards humor subscale* in future studies.

Participants' sense of loneliness. The Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults, SELSA-S, – the short version - (diTomaso, Brannen & Best, 2004) is used to analyze and assess participants' sense of loneliness using the *Social loneliness* subscale (5 items, sample item: "I feel part of a group of friends") and *Emotional Loneliness* subscale (5 items, sample item: "I feel alone when I am with my family"). SELSA-S also contains an *Emotional Loneliness Romantic* subscale (5 items) expressing the sense of loneliness in romantic relation-

ships, which has not been used here, as it is out of the scope of our research. A Romanian back-translated version of SELSA-S was used, after pretesting it on a group of 30 participants aged 60+. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and participants were asked to rate their present situation. The reliability values were quite modest (Cronbach's Alpha = .65) for the *Social loneliness* subscale and relatively high for the *Emotional Loneliness* one (Cronbach's Alpha = .81).

Frequency of social interactions. This was assessed by asking participants to rate their frequency of interactions separately for family and friends, with questions such as "How often do you see your family members?", using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*every day*) to 5 (*once every few months or more rarely than this*). In addition, participants rated the quality of the time spent with family and then friends. For instance, one question asked, "How often do you have positive meaningful interactions with your family – for example, enjoyable conversations, common activities, sharing feelings?" using a similar Likert-type answer scale.

4. Results

Let us first examine the raw data on education, gender, age and marital status. The group of men in our sample ($N=25$) are significantly more educated ($t=3.71$, $df.=79$, $p<.001$) than the group of women ($N=58$) a variable that will be considered in the subsequent analysis. In terms of level of education attained (high school, university etc.) the subgroup of men are more homogeneous compared to the subgroup of women ($F=5.23$, $df.=79$, $p=.02<.05$). These differences in educational level are not only found in this particular sample, but are consistent with the educational situation of this age cohort in Romania, in general.

There are no significant age differences between the group of men and the group of women in our sample. Most of the participants are married (46 out of 83), although the number of widows is significantly higher in the case of women (23) compared to men (1). Overall, there is a relation between gender and marital status in this sample (chi square = 17.50, $df. 3$, $p=.001<.01$): more women are found in the "widow" or "divorced" categories compared to men (21 out of 24 men from our sample declared they are "married").

Table 1 presents the sample structure from a socio-demographic perspective based on data collected from the participants and looks at differences for the two subgroups: men and women.

Table 1. Socio-demographic structure of sample.

Variable	Total sample	Women subgroup	Men Subgroup	Gender Differences	Sig.
Age	M (67.89) SD (6.56) Range (60-82)	M (68) SD (6.78) Range (60-81)	M (67) SD (6.13) Range (60-82)	$t = .24$ ($df. = 81$)	$p = .79$ $> .05$
Marital status	Married (44) Not married (2) Divorced (12) Widowed (24)	Married (23) Not married (1) Divorced (11) Widowed (23)	Married (21) Not married (1) Divorced (1) Widowed (1)	*chi square = 17.50 ($df. = 3$)	$p = .001$ $< .01$
Education ^c	Low (12) Medium (30) High (39)	Low (12) Medium (22) High (22)	Low (0) Medium (8) High (17)	** $t = 3.71$ ($df. = 79$)	$p < .001$
Income ^b	Low (3) Low to medium (24) Medium (20) Medium to high (9) High (11)	Low (3) Low to medium (21) Medium (14) Medium to high (7) High (3)	Low (0) Low to medium (3) Medium (6) Medium to high (2) High (8)	* $t = 3.41$ ($df. = 65$)	$p = .002$ $< .01$
Occupational status ^a	Self-employed (10) Stay-at-home (3) Full-time employed (10) Part-time employed (4) Pensioner (66)	Self-employed (3) Stay-at-home (2) Full-time employed (3) Part-time employed (2) Pensioner (51)	Self-employed (7) Stay-at-home (1) Full-time employed (7) Part-time employed (2) Pensioner (15)	*chi square = 8.36 ($df. = 1$)	$p = .004$ $< .01$
Total	83	58	25		

* Significant gender differences for $p < .01$; ** significant gender differences for $p < .001$

^a categories are non-exclusive

^b low (less than 700 lei); low to medium (701-1500 lei); medium (1501- 2500 lei), medium to high (2501-3500 lei), high (3501 lei and above)

^c lower level of education (0-8 classes); medium level of education (high school graduates); higher education (college graduates)

The largest differences between the women and men subgroups in our sample lie in the levels of education, which correlates with differences in income and occupational status. Women in our sample have received less formal education, are more likely to have lower incomes and also more likely to be widowed or divorced, compared to the men.

Gender Differences, the Use of Humor and Social Loneliness

Gender differences were revealed in three out of the four subscales of the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS): In the *Production and social use of humor* it seems that men use and produce more humor in their relationships than women ($t = 2.72$, $df. = 81$, $p = .008 < .01$). In terms of the use of *Adaptive Humor*, men report using slightly more humor for adapting to different situations (humor for coping). The difference in this sense between the two groups (men and women) is small and rather non-significant ($t = 1.98$, $df. = 81$, $p = .051$); 3) In the category *Using humor in negotiation*, men report using more humor for negotiation and assertive purposes, in comparison to women ($t = 2.00$, $df. = 81$, $p = .04 < .05$). Both groups have a positive attitude towards the use of humor in interpersonal relations and there are no gender differences in this respect ($t = .69$, $df. = 81$, $p = .49 > .05$).

When the variable “level of education” is considered, this reveals that the men who are more educated are more likely to use adaptive humor ($r(25) = .47, p = .01$), whereas the same relation is not significant in the case of women. Also, the younger the people in our sample are, the more likely they are to use humor as a coping mechanism (Adaptive Humor), ($r(83) = -.21, p = .05$.)

No differences are found between the two subgroups (men and women) in terms of perceived Social and Emotional Loneliness category. The level of social loneliness is higher for both men and women ($M = 2.8$ for men and $M = 2.5$ for women, $SD = 1.18$, respectively $SD = 1.05$) in comparison with reported levels of emotional loneliness ($M = 1.9$ for men and $M = 2.1$ for women, $SD = 1.5$ for both groups), however there are no gender differences detected. A positive correlation ($r(83) = .34, p = .001 < .01$) emerges between age and social loneliness. The older the participants are, the more social loneliness they report feeling. This correlation is not indicated in the case of emotional loneliness.

When examining the interaction between gender and marital status (coded as a dummy variable), we find that women without a life partner (whether divorced or widowed) report less emotional loneliness compared to men without a life partner ($t_{\text{men}} = 4.62, df = 21, p < .001$; $t_{\text{women}} = 1.13, df = 33, p = .26 > .05$). No similar differences are found in the case of social loneliness. Overall, it appears that older men without a life partner experience more emotional loneliness than older women without a life partner; however, both genders report similar levels of social loneliness.

When looking at the relationship between the sense of loneliness people reported (both social and emotional) and the frequency/quality of interactions with family and friends (using self-reported measures, see the method section for details), then two predictors prove to have significant import for the feelings of emotional loneliness: the quality of interactions with family ($r(82) = -.47, p < .001$) and the frequency of interactions with friends ($r(82) = -.44, p < .001$). The frequency of interactions with family members and the quality of interactions with friends does not seem to play a role in reducing the sense of loneliness, neither social, nor emotional, for men and women. The two variables, the reported quality of interactions with family members and the frequency of interactions with friends, seem to be more important factors for reducing the sense of emotional loneliness for men ($r(24) = -.74, p < .001, r(24) = -.76, p < .001$) than for women: ($r(58) = -.35, p = .006 < .01, r(58) = -.30, p = .02 < .05$). In other words, the evidence suggests that emotional loneliness is mitigated primarily by the quality of that time spent with family more than the amount of time. The expectation with friends is that you will spend more time with them, without the same expectation of quality. In addition, there is no apparent relation, or significant variation, between the frequency and quality of interactions with family and friends reported by participants and their sense of social loneliness.

The Use of Humor and a Reduced Sense of Loneliness

Although there did not seem to be a relationship, at the aggregate level, between the level of social or emotional loneliness and possessing a sense of humor, one significant correlation in the case of women emerges from the data collected: the more women use humor in their social interactions (*Production and Social Use of Humor subscale*), the less social loneliness they feel ($r(58) = -.26, p = .04 < .05$). This is one significant result, indicating that women who use more humor in interpersonal relationships might indeed experience a re-

duced sense of social loneliness. This becomes particularly intriguing from the point of view of gender and could be followed up with subsequent qualitative research. The findings do not indicate the same relationship between the use of humor in interpersonal relationships and the decrease of a sense of social loneliness in the men in our sample.

Table 2 presents the analysis of variance (ANOVA) demonstrating that the model has significant explanatory power for women, when they are examined as a subgroup within the larger sample.

Table 2. ANOVA for the model explaining the relationship between Production and Social Use of Humor score on the MSHS and Social Loneliness score on the SELSA-S for women.

<i>Df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	
Regression	2	9.356	4.678	4.731	.013(a)
Residual	55	54.388	.989		
Total	57	63.744			

A linear regression analysis can be conducted on the way the production and use of humor influences social loneliness, in the case of women, using social loneliness as a dependent variable, and production and social use of humor and women's age as factors.

Table 3 presents the results of this regression analysis.

Table 3. Regression analysis: explaining perceived social loneliness for women using production and social use of humor and age as factors.

Variable	Standardized coefficients		Unstandardized coefficients		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
(Constant)	.341	1.451		.235	.815
Production and Social Use of Humor	-.241	.133	-.227	-1.805	.046
Age	.043	.020	.277	2.197	.032
.341	1.451		.235	.815	

a Predictors: (Constant), age, Production and Social Use of Humor

b Dependent Variable: Social loneliness

c Sex = feminine

The model explains 11% of the variance of the dependent variable (social loneliness): $R = \text{Square} = .14$, $R \text{ square adjusted} = .11$, ($F = 4.73$, $df. = 2$, $p = .01 < .05$). When removing age from the model, the explanatory value of R decreases to 5%. This indicates that women within the group who can be described as "younger elders" (60-70 y.o.) benefit from the use of humor in social interactions and that the use of humor in this way contributes to a decreased sense of loneliness.

5. Discussion and Limitations

The data on Romanian older adults presented above suggest several sets of correlations, as well as insights into whether or not humor can attenuate feelings of loneliness brought about by emotional or social isolation. This distinction between feelings of loneliness that are social and those that are emotional is made by Robert Weiss (1973) and acts as a theoretical underpinning of this study. As Weiss argues, while emotional loneliness is defined by the *absence of a close attachment*, and can only be remedied by forging another such close relationship, social loneliness is the *absence of an engaging network* and can only be remedied by access to a group of individuals who may provide support and companionship. Can humor act as a kind of remedy for feelings of either social or emotional loneliness?

To summarize the findings, the data collected in this study indicates that both male and females, in our Romanian sample of older adults, have a positive attitude towards the use of humor in interpersonal relations and that there are no gender differences in this respect. Older Romanian men report using humor more often than older Romanian women do, in all the dimensions included in the study (in social interactions, to cope with difficult situations, to negotiate and assert a position). A strong correlation emerges between age and social loneliness; that is, the absence of a network of relations and attachments. The older our participants are, the more social loneliness they are likely to feel. Interestingly, this correlation is not significant in the case of emotional loneliness. The data also suggest that in the Romanian context emotional loneliness is mitigated not by the amount of time spent with family, but by the quality of that time. The expectation with friends is that you will spend more time with them, with less expectations of quality of that time. Other findings from our sample indicate that older Romanian women without a life partner (whether divorced or widowed) report less emotional loneliness compared to men without a life partner.

The most significant finding with respect to the use of humor and loneliness, however, is that older Romanian women who report using more humor in their interpersonal communication also report feeling less social loneliness. The data collected indicate that this probability is most pronounced in the case of Romanian women in the “young elder” category. There is no such correlation with regard to older men. How do we account for these findings? One possible explanation, following the research conducted by Maltz and Borker (1983) in the United States, is that women’s humor in interpersonal communication differs from that of men because it tends to create social bonds and solidarity. Women generally scored lower than men on the humor scales that were used in this case study, indicating that they consider themselves to use humor less than men do. However, the *function* and *style* of humor that older women use may be different in terms of creating empathy, solidarity and potentially reducing social isolation and feelings of loneliness. Again, previous studies find that men use a more aggressive type of humor that is based on the pursuit of status (Maltz & Borker, 1983; Shuster, 2007). This could indicate that women can manage and remedy their sense of loneliness through communicational strategies that foster bonding and empathy, with humor potentially being only one of these strategies. This idea should be examined by further studies.

These findings lend some support to the import of examining humor styles, as proposed by Martin (2003). Martin’s investigations into humor suggests that humor is not all the same and that humor does not always serve the same social purposes. As he argues there are maladaptive styles of humor that may be ‘unhealthy’, such as aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. There are also adaptive styles of humor that can be considered ‘healthy’, such as

self-enhancing humor and affiliative humor (Martin, 2003). Future research on age, gender and humor in Romania could look more deeply into the styles of humor that are used by older men and women. This could help us better understand why older women who use humor in their social interactions tend to experience a reduced sense of social loneliness. Future studies on this topic could also benefit from employing qualitative research methods. Qualitative studies that interview participants, discuss humor with them, use observational analysis, or other forms of narrative and story-telling methods may render explicit these interpersonal dynamics and may bring explanatory value that could help researchers disentangle the interaction between humor and the experience of social isolation and loneliness for older women. Moreover, future research could control for gender interaction: is the use of humor in the interaction between older women and older men different than the type of humor used when interacting with members of their own gender?

Interestingly, and in line with previous studies conducted in Germany (Ruch, Proyer & Weber, 2010a), Romanian men self-report that they produce and use more humor than women did: that is, they score themselves higher than women on the *production and social use of humor*, *adaptive humor*, and *use of humor in negotiation* sub-scales. However, since this is based on self-reporting, we can speculate that these results may be a function of the widely spread gender stereotype that posits that men are funnier than women (Mickes, Walker, Parris, Mankoff, & Christenfeld, 2011), a stereotype that may be augmented by the traditional gender roles that are present in Romania.

The current study did not find that Romanian older women report being more socially or emotionally lonely than men. In fact, we found no significant difference between men and women in our sample in terms of self-reported loneliness. This finding makes a small contribution to the general debate about which gender group reports more loneliness, distinct from the findings of researchers in other contexts, who propose that women generally feel lonelier than men. Indeed our data also indicate that older women without a life partner are less emotionally lonely than older men without a life partner. Not having a life partner is associated with emotional isolation and loneliness in older men, but not in older women and is consistent with the Scandinavian study by Holmén, Ericsson and Winblad (2000), which showed that being a widowed male is a stronger predictor of emotional loneliness than being a widowed female. It is possible that this is because, in Romanian families in the age cohort included in our sample, women are the ones responsible for maintaining close contacts with all family members. This is in line with studies suggesting that men depend on their life partners for emotional support and to create and consolidate family ties and activities (Stevens & Westerhof, 2006), which could explain the rather frequent emotional (family) isolation and loneliness that is reported by widowed men.

The analysis of the data also demonstrates that the quality of interactions with family and the frequency of interactions with friends seem to be linked to reduced feelings of emotional loneliness for the Romanian older adults included in our sample. This correlation is stronger for men than for women (although the relationship is true for both genders, irrespective of marital status). This is noteworthy, although difficult to interpret, taking into account that overall men and women reported almost the same level of loneliness. One interpretation could be that, overall, men are less engaged than women in their close emotional relationships with family (as the previously quoted studies also indicate) and that, therefore, increasing the quality of these interactions is precisely what men need to reduce their emotional loneliness.

Overall, the older Romanian adults in our sample report experiencing more social loneliness, rather than emotional loneliness. Again, research by Yang and Victor (2011) indicated that this may be a condition that is particularly visible in Eastern European countries for a variety of socio-economic reasons.

The theory of loneliness, as proposed by Weiss (1973), suggests that social isolation that creates feelings of loneliness can be remedied by interaction with a social network (such as a group of friends). However, we find no relation between the reported frequency and quality of interactions with family and friends and feelings of social loneliness. More frequent and more meaningful interactions with friends did not lead to a reduced sense of social loneliness in the current study sample, a fact that is worth pursuing by future research. Instead, the most significant finding of this study is that the older Romanian women who report using more humor in their interpersonal communication also report feeling less social loneliness.

The findings of the current study indicate that age plays a significant role for our sample of older adults and that there are differences between our younger and older respondents in terms of social loneliness and use of humor. The younger the older adults are, the more they tend to use an adaptive (coping) style of humor. Moreover, younger women experience a reduced sense of social loneliness, when this is coupled with the use of humor in their interpersonal communication. Also, in general, older respondents are more likely to report social loneliness. This is perhaps self-evident for this age cohort of Romanian older adults, as the size of social networks and the range of social activities decrease with age.

Even though Finnish researchers have found that loneliness is more likely for adults with lower education levels (Tilvis et. al, 2011), we find no such connection in our sample. What the current research project did identify in terms of education is that, overall, men in our sample are more educated than women, and that the more educated the men are, the more likely it is for them to use adaptive humor. It could be that education does not play a role in the case of women in our sample because the production and social use of humor associated with reduced social loneliness (a relation found solely in the case of women) is a more intuitive and instinctive communicational strategy, which would not alter greatly with variations in levels of education.

This study has several limitations. The study is based solely on self-reporting, which presents several disadvantages, including the possibility that participants might not be honest in their answers or might feel it is necessary to answer in a certain way, due to the perceived social desirability to give a particular answer. This could well be the case, as having a sense of humor is seen as socially desirable in Romania. Self-reporting can be subject to cultural bias and stereotypes, such as the idea that men are more humorous than women. Another limitation may stem from its quantitative approach. Although the study identifies some interesting and statistically significant findings and patterns, explaining their exact mechanisms remains, at this stage, subject to theoretical speculation because of the limited explanatory value of simple statistical tests and correlations.

The main finding, the correlation between the production and interpersonal use of humor and social loneliness for older women, should not necessarily be interpreted as a causation. It could be that the findings of this study indicate that the use of humor in the interpersonal interactions of older women is because they are already experiencing social connectedness and, hence, a reduced sense of social loneliness. However, it may also be the case that, for example, older women in the study sample who have social connections may have more opportunities to use humor in these interpersonal interactions.

Despite these caveats, this study identifies several correlations that deserve further investigation, including the significant indication that older women who use more humor in their interpersonal communication report feeling less social loneliness. There is evidence here that suggests that Romanian older men and women differ in the quantity of humor they use, that Romanian older women without a life partner feel less emotional loneliness than men, but also grounds for speculation that the functions and styles of humor differ for each gender. This points to the need for further investigation of each of these findings, including qualitative research on the social and cultural modes of humor and further research on aging, humor and gender.

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