Antecedents and consequences of adult play in romantic relationships

KRYSTYNA S. AUNE\textsuperscript{a} AND NORMAN C. H. WONG\textsuperscript{b}
\textsuperscript{a}University of Hawai‘i at Manoa; and \textsuperscript{b}University of Georgia

Abstract
This study introduces and reports an initial test of a theoretical model of play in romantic relationships. It was hypothesized that self-esteem and humor orientation would be positively associated with playfulness in romantic relationships. Playfulness in romantic relationships was predicted to be positively associated with the experience of positive emotion. Positive emotion, in turn, was predicted to be associated with relationship satisfaction. A self-report instrument was administered to students and community members via snowball sampling. Path analysis revealed that the data were consistent with the proposed model.

Play is a fascinating, ubiquitous activity that involves exploring and expanding one’s psychological space, spontaneously enacting new roles, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Handler, 1999). A key characteristic of play behavior is that it is lighthearted. It is not any particular behavior per se that leads to the attribution of play or playfulness. Rather, it is the attitude of the play-enacting individual(s) that largely determines whether a particular behavior is framed as play. Behaviors that are perceived as enjoyable, humorous, or entertaining could be considered playful (Carpenter & Aune, 1997).

Not only is play a pervasive and positive activity, but it has been demonstrated to be a significant process, cognitively, developmentally, and relationally. Numerous animal and human studies reveal that play fosters creativity and problem-solving skills, and, ultimately, is critical to the development of psychological health (Handler, 1999). Much of the research attention on play has been devoted to the play of children (e.g., Piaget, 1951) and animals (e.g., Fagen, 1981).

However, Baxter’s (1992) seminal article delineated a taxonomy of the forms and functions of adult play. In terms of functions, play provides an index of intimacy, can be a moderator of conflict, a strategy for testing potentially embarrassing actions, a creative outlet, a way to communicate, and a way to promote relational intimacy. Play takes various forms, including idioms, role-playing, teasing, prosocial and antisocial physical play, games,
gossiping, and public performance. A significant positive association was found between play and relationship closeness in same-sex friendships and in romantic relationships.

It is apparent that play is an activity that promotes favorable relational outcomes, such as perceived closeness and positive affect. Much more remains to be investigated in this arena, however. This study investigates the antecedents and consequences of dyadic play. Specifically, we propose and test a model that examines people’s tendencies to engage in dyadic play as well as important relational outcomes that occur as the result of play in romantic relationships. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on two dispositions: (a) self-esteem, and (b) humor orientation. We extend previous research by exploring how these dispositional variables affect play in romantic relationships, and how play may elicit positive emotions and relationship satisfaction. Our review of extant research leads to the delineation of our theoretical model and culminates with a test of the model.

**Self-esteem and play**

Self-esteem is the evaluation of one’s self-concept, or how one feels about oneself (Bringle & Bagby, 1992). People with high self-esteem typically appear confident, competent, and optimistic, whereas people with low self-esteem may be more anxious, pessimistic, and incompetent (Rosenberg, 1979; Tesser & Campbell, 1983). Self-esteem has been positively associated with extraversion and openness to experience (Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997). Self-esteem should therefore be associated with playfulness in romantic relationships.

Those with low levels of self-esteem may be rather apprehensive of engaging in playful behaviors. Play, like any communicative behavior, is evaluated. The person being played to (one-way play) or played with (dyadic play) evaluates the playful interaction and responds with either positive or negative feedback. Campbell (1990) found that low self-esteem individuals are very susceptible to feedback, so much so that they are likely to change their self-evaluation in the direction of the feedback received. Because of its potential for negative consequences, individuals with low self-esteem should be less likely to engage in play.

On the other hand, high self-esteem individuals have generally been found to be unaffected by the feedback from others (e.g., Brockner, Derr, & Laing, 1987). These individuals are very confident and optimistic, and are not constantly distressed about making a good impression on others. Moreover, Campbell (1990) found that high self-esteem individuals are not likely to change their self-evaluations, regardless of the feedback received. Hence, these individuals should have little fear of engaging in playful behaviors.

Several studies show a positive association between a person’s level of self-esteem and her or his use of humor. Kuiper and Martin (1993) found that greater humor was significantly related to higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of perceived stress. Consistent with this finding, Martin, Kuiper, Olinger, and Dance (1993) found that higher scores on humor measures were significantly related to higher levels of self-esteem. Given the integral connection between play and humor, we can extend this connection between self-esteem and play and state our first hypothesis.

**H1:** Self-esteem will be positively associated with playfulness in relationships.

**Humor orientation and playfulness**

Humor orientation has been defined as a reflection of an individual’s sense of humor (Honeycutt & Brown, 1998). Individuals high in humor orientation tend to value and express humor more in their interactions (e.g., telling jokes, laughing) than those low in humor orientation (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1995). According to Wanzer et al., people higher in humor orientation were found to tell more jokes. Additionally, Honeycutt and Brown found those with a high humor orientation spent more time practicing, rehearsing, and mentally preparing for humorous situations.

Playfulness has generally been defined as a tendency to engage in activities in a nonser-
ious manner (Glynn & Webster, 1992). Moreover, one of the eight forms of play identified by Baxter (1992) is teasing, under which joking is a subcategory. By definition alone, it can be argued that a positive association exists between humor orientation and playfulness. Given the parallel in functions served by both humor and play, it can be argued that those high in humor orientation will be likely to engage in playful interactions, which leads to our second hypothesis.

**H2:** Humor orientation will be positively associated with playfulness in relationships.

**Playfulness and positive emotion**

Carpenter and Aune (1997) examined how playful behaviors in relationships may lead to the experience of positive emotions for both partners. Their study of play was grounded in Mandler’s (1975) Interruption Theory, along with Berscheid’s (1983) application of the theory to close relationships, and Carver and Scheier’s (1990) Control Process Theory. Individuals typically engage in scripted behavioral sequences when communicating with familiar others. According to Mandler, interruption of these sequences triggers an arousal of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) and the cognitive interpretive system, whereby emotion occurs. Applying this theory to close relationships, Berscheid explained that relational partners form “meshed” sequences, where the action sequences of one individual facilitate the performance of sequences by her or his partner. The greater the extent of the meshed sequences, the more likely that an interruption will occur, resulting in the experience of emotions.

Berscheid’s (1983) control hypothesis explains how individuals can experience intense positive emotions. The control hypothesis suggests that an event may be interrupting, but control over the onset and offset allows the interruption to facilitate the completion of action sequences. A similar view of the genesis of positive emotion was provided by Carver and Scheier (1990) with their Control Process Theory.

Play is an interruptive yet controllable event, rendering it ideal for eliciting positive emotions. Since play is a spontaneous activity (Marano, 1999), it can disrupt scripted action sequences. Additionally, play is an activity that individuals have the ability to control. Control over the onset/offset of play may facilitate the completion of higher order goals. Such higher order goals may include closeness, intimacy, and satisfaction in a relationship. This would facilitate the experience of positive emotions (Carpenter & Aune, 1997), as stated in our third hypothesis.

**H3:** Playfulness in romantic relationships will be positively associated with positive emotion.

**Playfulness, positive emotion, and relationship satisfaction**

Previous research has examined the direct link between play and relationship satisfaction. According to Kopecky (1996), couples who enjoyed playing together counted the playful interaction as a relationship strength, whereas those who did not engage in play were unhappy that playfulness was not part of their lives. Bombar and Littig (1996) offered further support, finding a significant positive association between frequency of babytalk (a form of play) and relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Bruess and Pearson (1993) found a positive association between the use of idioms and marital satisfaction.

Adult play is primarily enacted to create a positive atmosphere and is typically perceived as fun (Baxter, 1992; Carpenter & Aune, 1997). The immediate positive emotions elicited by play may include happiness, joy, and positive surprise, for example. More embedded or distal positive affect stemming from play could include feelings of closeness, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction. In other words, our model proposes that playfulness will facilitate relationship satisfaction because it elicits positive emotions within the relationship.

Baxter (1992) found that for both same-sex friendships and opposite-sex romantic relationships, global playfulness was positively associated with interpersonal closeness. Aune,
Aune, Dawson, and Pena (1993) found that dyads who engaged in persona-sharing (a form of playful behavior) were perceived to be more intimate than dyads not engaged in persona-sharing. Based on these results, it can be argued that adult play leads to the experience of positive emotions such as feeling close and intimate. Given the associations between playfulness and positive emotion, and closeness and satisfaction, we can argue that positive emotion and relationship satisfaction should be positively associated.

**H4:** The experience of positive emotions in a relationship will be positively associated with relationship satisfaction.

The previous discussion of individual characteristics (self-esteem and humor orientation), play, positive emotion, and relationship satisfaction culminate in an integrated model. The interrelationships of these variables are graphically summarized in Figure 1. Specifically, we expect humor orientation and self-esteem to positively predict play in romantic relationships. Playfulness is expected to elicit positive emotion. In turn, positive emotion is expected to predict relationship satisfaction.

### Method

#### Participants

A total of 113 individuals (47 males and 66 females) involved in a romantic relationship participated in the study. The sample was comprised of students as well as nonstudents. The snowball sampling technique (Monge & Contractor, 1988) was used to solicit research participants from the community. In addition, upper-division students from a speech communication course were solicited to complete the instrument. A recruitment protocol was provided to all research assistants who collected data. The mean age of participants was 25.57 years, $SD = 9.17$ years, minimum = 17, maximum = 62.

The sample was ethnically diverse. Thirty-nine participants were of Japanese descent (34.5%), 28 were Caucasian (24.8%), 11 reported mixed ethnicity (9.7%), 11 were Hawaiian or part-Hawaiian (9.7%), 9 were Filipino (8%), 5 Chinese (4.4%), 2 Samoans (1.8%), 2 Okinawans (1.8%), 2 Koreans (1.8%), 1 Vietnamese (.9%), 1 Native American (.9%), and 2 individuals (1.8%) checked the “other” category.

In terms of relationship status, participants included casual daters ($N = 7, 6.2\%$), steady daters ($N = 70, 61.9\%$), cohabitators ($N = 12, 10.6\%$), engaged couples ($N = 6, 5.3\%$), and married couples ($N = 18, 15.9\%$). Most participants reported that their relationship was serious (85.8%) and exclusive (87.6%), and that family and friends viewed them as a couple (88.5%).

#### Measures

All interval-level items in the survey utilized a 7-point scale, anchored by $1 = \text{very strong disagreement}$ to $7 = \text{very strong agreement}$.

**Self-esteem.** To assess individual differences in self-esteem, Rosenberg’s (1965) 10-item...
self-esteem scale was used. Five items are reverse-coded. Sample items of the scale include: “I feel that I have a number of good qualities” and “I certainly feel useless at times.” Alpha reliability obtained in this sample was .86. The mean for this sample was 5.45, $SD = .94$.

**Humor orientation.** Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) developed the Humor Orientation Scale to assess individual differences in the use of humor as a communicative device. The scale consists of 17 items, 7 of which are reverse-coded. Example items include “Being funny is a natural communication style with me” and “I can be funny without having to rehearse a joke.” Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield provide evidence supporting the scale’s reliability and validity. Alpha reliability obtained in this sample was .93. The mean was 4.72, $SD = 1.02$.

**Playfulness.** A modified version of Betcher’s (1977) Play Questionnaire II was used to assess playfulness in romantic relationships. The instrument was originally used for married couples. For the purpose of this study, the three items assessing sexual spontaneity and playfulness were excluded because the sample may have included dating couples who were not sexually involved. The scale has been used as a unitary index of global playfulness (see Baxter, 1992; see also Lutz, 1982). Alpha reliability obtained in this sample was .85. The mean obtained in this sample was 5.00, $SD = .74$. Sample items include: “I have fun acting silly with my partner” and “We play together in many different ways.”

**Positive emotion.** To assess participants’ experience of positive emotions in their relationship, a 5-item scale was developed. Alpha reliability obtained in this sample was .95. The mean was 6.01, $SD = 1.10$. Sample items include: “I feel a great deal of positive emotions in my relationship” and “Overall, the emotions I typically feel in my relationship are positive.”

**Relationship satisfaction.** A modified version of Norton’s (1983) Quality Marriage Index was used to assess relationship satisfaction. The first 5 items of Norton’s scale were included and any reference to “marriage” was replaced with “relationship.” Alpha reliability obtained in this study was .95, mean = 6.00, $SD = 1.09$. Sample items include: “We have a good relationship” and “Our relationship is strong.”

**Results**

**Test of the hypotheses**

We predicted that self-esteem and humor orientation would predict playfulness in relationships and that playfulness in relationships would predict positive emotion. In turn, positive emotion was expected to predict relationship satisfaction. The predictions were tested by analyzing a path model using Hunter and Hamilton’s (1992) PATH program. In our path analysis, we entered self-esteem and humor orientation as exogenous variables, playfulness as a first-rank endogenous variable, positive emotion as a second-rank endogenous variable, and relationship satisfaction as a third-rank endogenous variable. The correlation matrix is presented in Table 1.

The overall chi-square goodness of fit test yielded a nonsignificant chi-square value, $\chi^2 (5, N = 123) = 1.08, p > .05$, signifying the fit of the model to the data. The path coefficient from self-esteem to playfulness was significant ($r = .19, p < .05$). The coefficient from humor orientation to playfulness was also significant ($r = .38, p < .05$). As expected, there was a significant positive coefficient from playfulness to positive emotion ($r = .60, p < .05$), and a significant positive coefficient from positive emotion to relationship satisfaction ($r = .86, p < .05$). Various fit indexes yielded reasonable fit to the observed data (GFI = .98, AGFI = .95, NFI = .98). The hypotheses were confirmed and the path model was supported.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to test a process model of playfulness in relationships, focusing on individual predispositions as antecedents,
and positive emotion and satisfaction with one’s relationship as outcomes. The pattern of results that emerged is supportive of a model in which self-esteem and humor orientation influence playfulness in relationships, that playfulness in relationships influences positive emotion, and that positive emotion predicts relationship satisfaction.

Self-esteem was found to be a predictor of playfulness. To the extent that an individual is self-assured, he or she feels at ease and is more willing to engage in playful behavior without feeling threatened by another’s evaluation. High self-esteem may also relate to an individual’s resilience in the face of challenges or hardships. This resilience may further reinforce high self-esteem individuals’ perceptions of success and enhance their ability to view themselves and their situations positively.

The other dispositional characteristic explored, humor orientation, was also found to influence playfulness in relationships. As a distal factor, having a sense of humor facilitates an individual’s overall level of playfulness. Our findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating the relationship between humor orientation and telling jokes (Honeycutt & Brown, 1998), and between humor and intimacy (Hampes, 1992; 1994). However individuals who do not necessarily see themselves as having a great sense of humor may nonetheless benefit from engaging in playful behaviors in their relationships since the results demonstrate the proximal link between playfulness and positive emotion.

Consistent with our expectations, playfulness is positively associated with the experience of positive emotion in the relationship. The enactment of play within a relational interaction by one partner should trigger a positive affective response by the other person (Manusov, 1995). This positive response, in turn, may lead the partner to continue engaging in playful behaviors, leading to further positivity, forming a circular loop. Because of this continuous loop of positivity during the interaction, partners should view the interaction overall as positive, enhancing their feelings of closeness and intimacy.

Theoretically, the link between play, positive emotion, and relationship satisfaction can be considered from a dialectical perspective. Baxter’s (1988) dialectical approach described three oppositions that form the exigence for communication between partners: autonomy-connection, novelty-predictability, and openness-closedness. Play is an activity that can function to manage these dialectics in relationships. Playful behaviors can allow an individual to stand apart, or remind partners of their bond; they can bring spontaneity and novelty into a routine pattern, or they can be a comforting reminder of the relationship’s history; and, finally, play can facilitate disclosure, or can serve as a convenient shield, protecting the inner thoughts or feelings of a partner while still remaining connected.

Likewise, play may serve as an important relational maintenance tool. Baxter (1992) contended that play is a significant resource in relationships, serving a number of important relational functions (e.g., indexing and enhancing intimacy). Our findings suggest that other functions play may have in relationships are eliciting positive emotion and increasing relational satisfaction.

Table 1. Zero-order correlations among the variables

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<th>(4)</th>
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<td>Humor orientation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Playfulness</td>
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<td>.42**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td>Positive emotion</td>
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<td>.27**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.22*</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.86**</td>
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*significant at the .05 level. **significant at the .01 level.
Suggestions for future research

This study only solicited data from one relationship partner. Dyadic data would provide more insights regarding the process of play in relationships. For instance, partner response to the initiation of a play episode may be a significant moderator of the emotional reaction and ultimate effect of play. This study was also limited by its use of a self-report instrument. The perennial problem of self-report bias and response sets are a concern in such a design. Common method variance may be problematic in that global measures of playfulness, positive emotion, and satisfaction were used. Behavioral data would be useful in adding to our knowledge of play in relationships. Experimental or observational techniques could be used to investigate play episodes and their form, functions, and outcomes.

In this study, only two dispositions were considered as predictors (i.e., self-esteem and humor orientation). There are other variables that may influence a person’s level of playfulness in relationships, such as communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1982), communicative adaptability (Duran, 1983), and affinity-seeking (Bell & Daly, 1984). Future research could also explore the frequency and quality of play over the course of relationships and over the course of the life span. The perceived appropriateness and effectiveness of play may be influenced by relationship and life stage. Relatedly, health outcomes associated with playfulness and relationship satisfaction would also be a rich avenue for research. Playful behavior may be a source of stress relief that may be associated with greater resilience.

This study further demonstrates the need for continued research in the area of adult play. Playfulness was found to predict positive emotion, which is associated with more satisfying relationships. Duck (1990) and Hays (1989) urged researchers to expend greater effort and energy in investigating everyday occurrences. This study shows the importance of further examining one such occurrence, playfulness in relationships.

References