DOCTORAL THESIS

- SUMMARY -

HUMOR IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION
THE FUNCTIONS AND BENEFITS OF HUMOR FOR OLDER ADULTS

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Summary: Reasoning of the Thesis, Theoretical Framework and Results of the Research Projects

Introduction: Objectives and Theoretical Reasoning of the Thesis
The principal objective of the current paper was to investigate the functions of humor in interpersonal communication, to explore the social and psychological benefits of the use of humor, and to analyze the specific characteristics of communicational practices that make use of humor. To be able to investigate and obtain relevant results for the field of humor studies, the research projects included in the current thesis (employing mixed methods) focus upon a group largely unstudied: older adults, aged 60 and above, native and residing in Romania. Indeed, this is an age group that is investigated too little in terms of their use of humor, most studies focusing on the general population or on developmental humor. Moreover, the category of older adults is described in the research literature as being confronted with a very specific set of difficulties, naturally occurring with the process of ageing. The present work is interested in identifying the extent to which humor, used in the communication process as a coping mechanism, can influence and help manage these difficulties.

The primary objective of the thesis was to explore the functions of humor in the interpersonal communication of those aged 60 and above, with the secondary purpose of exploring the potential for humor to function as an adaptive mechanism, helping individuals cope with the natural difficulties brought on by the ageing process. Why was this perspective chosen? Because, firstly, the research literature on humor abounds in proof regarding its social and psychological benefits; and, secondly, because, from a communicational perspective, we adhered to the observations of Davis (2008), who suggested that it is necessary for studies in the field to go past the limitative approach of analyzing episodes of humor production in communication, but should instead concentrate on the effects humor has. This corresponds to Lasswell’s model of communication, that proposes an analysis of: Who? Says what? To whom? In which channel? With what effect? (Lasswell, 1948).

To be able to integrate all the research objectives, the present work primarily makes use of the way of defining humor proposed by Thorson și Powell (1991; 1993), who actually propose a
multidimensional concept of sense of humor, containing a number of dimensions, which include the production and social use of humor (the use of humor in interpersonal communication), adaptive humor, the use of humor for negotiations and the general attitude towards humor.

**Why Should we Take Humor Seriously in the Field of Interpersonal Communication?**

This work is an investigation of humor used in interpersonal communication, in order to identify and explore the mechanisms of humor and their role in our interactions with others. The theme represents a relatively new area of research, due to the fact that humor was for a long time not considered serious enough to be the object of study (Morreall, 2009). For this reason, authors, philosophers and scientists of all time, from the ancient Greeks, to the social science researchers of the modern era have broached the subject of humor only marginally. Only in the 1970s and 1980s were the first thorough investigations and research projects conducted in order to scientifically explore the different uses and functions of humor. Today, the main disciplines that study humor are psychology, social sciences (which include communication science) and philosophy. Therefore, although humor is one of the most complex human behaviors, research in this field is relatively recent, and research projects in the field of communication sciences are still scarce compared to other areas (Bethea, 2001). Furthermore, research projects that investigate humor in the Romanian cultural space are quite scarce.

Humor is one of the most interesting (but difficult to theorize and operationalize) behaviors in interpersonal communication. We can draw a comparison between humor used in interpersonal communication and interpersonal skills, based on observations in the literature that indicate that (exactly as in the case of communication skills in general) humor is positively correlated with good psychological health and increased resistance to stress; moreover, studies undertaken by Bell, McGhee and Duffey indicated that people with a more developed sense of humor are seen by others as being more socially competent in their interactions (1986), while Peterson and Seligman see the importance of humor in social interactions, acting as a social "lubricant", while, at the same time, protecting from depression (2004, p.530). Humor plays an important role in our daily communication strategies and can significantly contribute to success in interpersonal or group communication (Lynch, 2002). A number of early studies focused on humor regarded it as a fundamental element of communication (Bethea et al., 2000). The results of these research projects suggest that the use of humor in communication can have a major impact on the
quality of interactions. Humor can bring relief (Bippus, 2000) and can build and strengthen social bonds (Metts & Bowers, 1994). Mindess (2011) calls the humor a mindset, a way of looking at life that is, the author notes, highly therapeutic. We can therefore see that humor has been described in the literature as having benefits and characteristics normally attributed to interpersonal communication skills. Therefore, the study of social production and use of humor in interpersonal communication is a relevant approach.

**Sense of Humor and the Use of Humor in Interpersonal Communication**

Lynch (2002) noted that humor is fundamentally a communicative activity, which is why interpersonal communication examines how humor works in a social context and analyzes its social communication functions. Moreover, in his analysis, Davis (2008) discusses the definition of humor and questions its role in communication; he also raises an interesting point about the manner in which research in the field of communication should analyze humor. The author recommends that humor research from a communicational perspective should move beyond the limited approach of analyzing instances of communication marked by humor. Davis discusses the difference between "humor" and "sense of humor" and recommends that research in the field focus more on the second concept, analyzing its effect on effective communication. The author argues the need to distinguish between the most superficial aspects of humor (with indicators such as laughter) and "a more profound, wise and optimistic approach to life in general" associated with a sense of humor (p. 545). From this point of view, humor is any episode of spontaneous joy or elation associated with a discovery or a new association of ideas that the individual classifies as amusing. A sense of humor is, however, the ability to remain constantly "light hearted" in a range of circumstances, in moments of happiness and joy, but also in serious situations marked by suffering or tragedy.

Thorson and Powell (1991) also propose a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the sense of humor, which, in their opinion, should cover the following elements: the production of humor, the creative ability to be funny, to produce humor and words of wit, to find the humorous aspects of certain instances, the ability to create and send a message to amuse others; a playful mood, the ability to have fun, to be good natured; the ability to use humor in order to accomplish social goals, to use humor as a social lubricant, as a skill to ease tension in a tense communication scenario, to strengthen the solidarity of the social group, and to "prick" fun of
those pompous and "full of themselves"; the ability to recognize personal humor, to recognize the absurd situations of life and to recognize oneself as humorous; humor appreciation, appreciation of humorous people, humorous situations; and using humor as a coping mechanism, the ability to laugh in the face of problems or to master difficult situations by using humor. This theoretical perspective is of interest to the research approach of the present work because the concept of sense of humor encompasses the production and social use of humor in interpersonal communication, as well as other facets such as humor as a mechanism to adapt to the difficulties of life, to stressful situations, or its ability to ease communication in a tense situation.

Humor, the Comic, Laughter and a Rather Large Family of Related Terms

The first previously discussed distinction between the terms humor and sense of humor, paves the way for a clarification of terminology and concepts. This analysis is necessary because one of the main difficulties in talking about humor is, as Ruch, Proyer and Weber highlight in an article about the use of humor by older adults, that humor has been conceptualized as a number of things: a personality trait, a worldview, a coping mechanism, a temperament trait based on emotion, an aesthetic preference, a skill and competence, a virtue, and the list could continue (Ruch, Proyer, & Weber, 2010).

Victor Raskin, a contemporary researcher in the field of humor, reviews the difficulties of studying humor, in a very systematic manner (1984). First, humor has received a number of complementary definitions, but which form an incomplete picture. Another difficulty that Raskin emphasizes is that the study of humor generated an array of related terms: humor, humor, funny, ironic, funny, joke, laugh, be witty, funny, etc. (1984)

Thus, the first chapters of the thesis drew distinctions between different theories, concepts and terms in the study of humor, highlighting distinctions and terminological overlaps which often hamper research in this field. Humor has been discussed since antiquity, when the main question revolved around its morality: are the mechanisms of humor good or bad, moral or immoral, useful or simply trivial? Some of the most famous thinkers and philosophers, from Aristotle, Plato, Kant or Bergson, not to forget the notorious Freud, have proposed views on these topics. But this is precisely where the difficulty lies: each of the humor theorists (and the list does not stop at the previously listed) seems to have approached the concepts and terminology in a unique manner. In fact, it seems that each of the classical researchers discussed a different side, or
a different mechanism of humor, and seemed to have approached the topic of humor from different perspectives (philosophical, psychological, sociological). Before embarking on the research projects that the thesis proposes, a theoretical investigation was conducted, in order to explore the classical theories of humor, which discuss its origin and mechanisms (ex. the superiority theory, with representatives such as Ancient Greek philosophers; the theory of relief, represented by the notorious Sigmund Freud; the incongruity theory; benign violation theory). This theoretical approach is relevant in order to clarify the complex terminology in the field of humor studies, and will contribute to narrowing down the conceptual framework of the current thesis. Analyzing the principal theories about the origins of humor highlights the different roles assigned to it throughout the centuries by the various philosophers, psychologists, social scientists and thinkers. From a behavior that was seen as unworthy, negative and antisocial in Ancient Greek or the Old Testament, to a complex mechanism that offers us a valve to relieve our psychological tension, to a cognitive mechanism: despite these very different perspectives, a look at the classical (or more recent) theories of humor all highlight its social role and its effect upon the psyche and cognition.

**Classical Literature About Humor: Origins and Mechanisms of Humor**

**The Superiority Theory and the Dark Side of Humor**

The first to have investigated humor in interpersonal communication were the Ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. In this era, humor was mostly regarded as a behavior that should be reprimanded, and the key question was whether humor is moral or immoral, thinkers rather leaning towards the latter view. In "The Republic," Plato urges them defenders of the city to not be too inclined to laugh, because this can bring forth a strong negative reaction of agitation (as cited in Morreall, 2013). For Plato, the origin of humor lies simply in our bad natures, it comes from meanness, from the idea that we are happy to see others making fools of themselves. In his view, what causes us to laugh is vice, especially one’s ignorant view of oneself. In "The Republic", Socrates points out that ignorance is considered ridiculous - therefore we laugh at those who are ignorant, who have unrealistic opinions about themselves, who see themselves as wealthier or wiser than they actually are (Billig, 2005). Both Plato and Aristotle made observations about humor (Plato in his writings *Republic* and *Philebus*, Aristotle in the *Nicomachaean Ethics* and *Rhetoric*, according to Morreall, 2013), but it is important to point out that these theories are
addressed only marginally within larger debates about ethics, education, rhetoric, without humor being addressed independently. But the views held by the Ancient Greek philosophers influenced humor theories to come, up until modern times, and resulted in the first main theory about humor: the theory of superiority. Outlined in Ancient Greece, this theory dictated the way humor was regarded for centuries.

**Relief Theory**

Freud analyzed humor from a psychoanalytic perspective. Freud believed that humor functions as a way of releasing affects and tension, and produces a cathartic effect, a method which Freud recommended to treat neurosis (2004). Freud primarily investigated the concept of the joke in his book "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" (2004) and distinguished between two types of jokes: jokes that are an end in themselves and jokes that have a purpose. He called those in the first category, "non-tendentious jokes" and on the second, "tendentious jokes" - here we can see a point of intersection with the theory of superiority. This is one of the most interesting and controversial theories of humor – the psychoanalyst theory proposes that humor is actually a manifestation of hidden aggression (often of sexual nature), and allows us a pressure valve to ease psychological pressure. These jokes satisfy our instincts, despite being unable to act on them – dirty jokes are a good example, sexual humor often hiding aggressiveness. For Freud, the strongest instincts are the primary ones: sexuality and aggression, but both are censored by society. However, through humor, individuals can escape from the constraints of society. Freud sees humor as a socially acceptable translation of our instincts. Therefore, in his view, tendentious jokes always fall into one of two categories: hostile jokes or obscene jokes. The thesis also explains the distinction Freud makes between the terms humor, comic, and the joke, and offers a critical perspective on the theory by quoting the work of John Morreall (2009).

**Incongruity Theory**

One generally accepted theory of humor is the incongruity theory, which stipulates that any kind of humor involves a difference, a contrast between what is expected, anticipated, and what is experienced in the end. Theorists who support this interpretation of humor believe incongruity is central to any joke, including to jokes that could classify under the superiority theory. It is unclear who the first theoretician of incongruity humor was. Some claim it was James
Beattie in 1776, while other researchers believe that incongruity theory was first formulated by Blaise Pascal in the 1600s (as cited by Billig, 2005). Beattie suggests that laughter is produced by “two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them” (p.320, as cited in Morreall, 2009).” In turn, Blaise Pascal noted that nothing produces laughter like a surprising disparity between our expectations and what we actually experience (in Holm, 2013). Soren Kierkegaard also noted that the main element of humor is "contradiction" (Holm, 2013). This theory focuses on the internal process that triggers humor (laughter), a violated expectation which prompts us to release tension through a physical response: laughter. Because our expectations were refuted, we need to channel elsewhere the energy which was accumulated in waiting. While it is obvious that incongruity is an important part of humor, this humor theory does not explain the use of humor in interpersonal communication and does not seem to take into account the social dimension.

Victor Raskin, in "Semantic Mechanisms of Humor" (1984) provides an overview of the main theories about humor and jokes, and gives the following example for the incongruity theory “Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. “No,” the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. “Come right in”. Obviously, the patient wants to see the doctor. The invitation to come in, although the doctor is not at home is incongruous - but it is suitable/congruent with another idea, namely adultery. The patient whispers due to his health; we can understand why the doctor's wife whispers in return if we interpret the script as infidelity. The two scripts overlap to the extent that the answer would have been the same, even if the doctor was at home.

**Summing up the First Main Research Project: The Connection Between Humor, Age and Loneliness. Three Quantitative Studies**

The first studies within the thesis investigated the connection between sense of humor (containing, in the theory employed here, the production and social use of humor, according to Thorson & Powell, 1994) and sense of loneliness. This approach was selected because studies indicate that loneliness is one of the primary difficulties that older adults experience. Moreover, from a communicational perspective, Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield și Booth-Butterfield (1996)
found that people who use humor successfully in their interpersonal communication may be more efficient communicators and more likely to be included in social groups, thus able to reduce their potential for loneliness. The theoretical reasoning, common to the three quantitative studies, will now be presented.

**Humor, Interpersonal Communication and Older Adults**

Let us now turn to the literature on humor. All 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 contributions of humor as a mechanism for coping with the changes that growing old brings. Research in interpersonal communications suggests that an appreciation of humor can play a relevant role in maintaining a feeling of well-being during the ageing process (Damianakis & Marziali, 2011) and a number of studies indicate that older adults use humor to cope with the psychological effects of the ageing process (Berk 2001; Capps 2006; Dziegielewski et al. 2004). Davis suggested (2008) that having a sense of humor implies having a more profound, wiser, and light-hearted view of life in general, which can assist in coping with circumstances as varied as moments of joy or in times of suffering and tragedy. Cohen and Wills maintain that humorous persons can more easily form and keep friendships and develop a social support network (1985), while Peterson and Seligman argue that humor can “sustain good cheer in the face of despair, build social bonds and lubricate social interactions” (2004, p. 530). Ruch and colleagues 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 (Ruch, Proyer, & Weber, 2010b).

Humor is not only psychological; it is culturally specific. 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* (Ghiță,
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 or 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 provide older adults with the ability to adapt to the physical changes that come with age and the social and cultural challenges of growing old in contexts where aging is not valued. An early American study by Overholser finds that lonely individuals are less likely to use humor as a method of coping (1992). If one of these specific difficulties is, according to the researchers, a growing sense of loneliness 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, then our primary theoretical assumption is that we will find a negative correlation between a heightened sense of humor and a lower sense of loneliness within the sample of Romanian older adults who participated in this study.

**Humour and Loneliness**

In reviewing the separate literatures on both humor and loneliness, it is noticeable that they 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, according to a 2009 study, 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. Three separate groups of researchers indicate that 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 to be low in sociability and social skills, and high in social anxiety (Ernst &
Cacioppo, Hawkley, Ernst, Burleson, Berntson, Nouriani, & Spiegel, 2006).

One other set of literature compares the relationship of humor to life satisfaction. A 2010 study finds that for older adults, high scores on the humor scale in the study (Values in Action Inventory of Strengths, VIA-IS, Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) correlate positively with high life satisfaction (Ruch, Proyer, & Weber, 2010a). Indeed, studies on the topic of loneliness indicate that it is negatively correlated with life satisfaction, across all age groups (Riggio, Watring & Throckmorton, 1993; Goodwin, Cook, & Yung, 2001; Salimi, 2011). This body of literature, draws from a variety of cultural and national contexts, and suggests that using humor has social and psychological advantage making it worth investigating its relation to the sense of loneliness for Romanian older adults.

### Aging and Humor Styles

Studies that investigate age-specific differences in the use and appreciation of humor by older adults often state that age is a significant factor in styles and types of humor. Thorson and Powell, for example find 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 (1996). Ruch and colleagues, writing in the context of Germany, say that older adults laugh more rarely and less easily than younger adults (2010a), appreciate verbal humor less and show less appreciation for everyday humor (Proyer, Ruch & Müller, 2010). In a very different study, Ruch and his collaborators argue that relationship status (being married, single, divorced, separated etc) is not a predictor of sense of humor scores for those aged 61 and above (2010a). The authors surmise that humor is often a means for attracting a romantic partner, which perhaps loses its priority for older adults. Clearly, this connection between humor styles, age and gender deserves further investigation and attention.

### Gender, Age and Humor
A cluster of studies explore gender differences in the use and appreciation of humor. Ruch, Proyer and Weber, for example, find that in Germany women generally score lower than men on humor scales, in all the age groups, except in the oldest (2010a). Grengross argues that women use humor as a coping mechanism, but men do less so (2013). Yet is also worth asking if humor 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 MSHS.

Another set of studies propose that the principal gender differences in terms of humor are not about quantity, where men simply use or appreciate humor more than women do, but a difference 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) find 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 research on humor styles (2003), which 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.

**Research Questions**

In surveying the current state of research on humor, loneliness and aging it is clear that many there are many research questions that require careful investigation.
This case study begins with one primary 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 deployed, that 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 MHS 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, for older adults who only have limited social interactions? Will we be able to identify gender or cultural differences for the use of humor?*

**Common Methodology of The Three Quantitative Studies**

**Participants and Procedure**

Toți participanții la cele trei studii au completat chestionare auto-administrate conținând același instrumente de măsurare: the *Multidimensional 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. Moreover, only for the sample of English older adults, the *Humor Styles Questionnaire* was also used (Martin, 2003).

**Participants for the first study – Romanian older adults aged over 60:** 83 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. 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.

**Participants for the second study – English older adults aged over 60.** 73 individuals, mostly over the age of 60, but also four individuals aged 50-52 (of which two male and two female). The sample was composed of 19 men (mean age = 68, *SD* = 9.47) and 52 femei (mean age= 70, *SD* = 7.24) from North-East England (especially from the city of Sheffield); tow persoans did not indicate their gender.
Participants for the third study – Romanian students aged 18-30. The survey was filled in by a group of 25 men (mean age = 21, SD = 2.53) and 170 women (mean age = 21, SD = 1.87); two persons did not indicate their gender.

Measuring and Analyzing Humor, Loneliness and Social Interactions:

Three quantitative research instruments are used to measure or gage the use of humor in interpersonal relationships, the participants’ sense of loneliness and the frequency of the social interactions were then analyzed using the following procedures. Only for the sample of English older adults, the Humor Styles Questionnaire was also used (Martin, 2003).

Use of humor in interpersonal relationships. The Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS Thorson & Powell, 1993) is used to assess participants’ self-evaluation on 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 indicates that the items could also load on five factors (José et al., 2007). In the current paper, we use the initial version of the scale. The instrument was validated for a Romanian population by pre-testing a back-translated Romanian version of the MSHS scale. 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. The items loaded differently for the Romanian student population, a finding which is intuitive and suggests age-related differences in the use and appreciation of humor. For all three samples, all dimensions, as well as the overall scale, obtained good (or in some cases satisfactory reliability Cronbach’s Alpha score

Participants’ sense of loneliness. The Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults – short version (SELSA-S, 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 relationships, which has not been used in this series of studies. A Romanian back-translated version of SELSA-S was used, pretested and validated for a Romanian population. 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 satisfactory and adequate for use, for all three samples.

**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.

**The Style of Humor Used in Interpersonal Communication.** One other instrument was used to measure humor, but only for the sample of English older adults: the Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin, 2003), a 32-item self-report inventory used to identify how individuals use humor in their lives. Participants respond to the degree to which they agree with each statement (e.g., "I enjoy making people laugh") on a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). It is a self-report measure that assesses four styles of humor: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating. Sample items include: "I don’t often joke around with my friends."; "I rarely make other people laugh by telling funny stories about myself."; "When telling jokes or saying funny things, I am usually not very concerned about how other people are taking it."; "People are never offended or hurt by my sense of humor."; "I often try to make people like or accept me more by saying something funny about my own weaknesses, blunders, or faults."; "If I am having problems or feeling unhappy, I often cover it up by joking around, so that even my closest friends don’t know how I really feel.". A principal components factor analysis highlighted that items loaded on four factors, according to the original version of the scale. The sub-scales obtained good reliability: Affiliative humor obtained medium reliability with Cronbach’s Alpha= .74; Self-enhancing humor obtained high reliability, with Cronbach’s Alpha= .83, after excluding one item (no. 22, If I am
feeling sad or upset, I usually lose my sense of humor). Aggressive humor scale however had a reduced reliability, having Cronbach’s Alpha= .52, after excluding one item (no. 19, Sometimes I think of something that is so funny that I can’t stop myself from saying it, even if it is not appropriate for the situation.) Self-defeating humor had medium reliability, with Cronbach’s Alpha= .71.

The principal findings of the quantitative studies are presented in the following results section.

**Summarizing the Second Main Research Project: A Qualitative Approach.**

The second main research project is a qualitative one, conducted through in-depth interviews, semi-structured, which investigated the communicational practices of older adults that make use of humor, exploring a series of principal dimensions: gender differences in the production and social use of humor; the perception of the study participants about the connection between humor and age (investigating, equally, the topic of humor about old age, and that of humor produced at different ages/intergenerational humor); humor as an adaptive mechanism with the difficulties of life; the Romanian concept of haz de necaz/ laughing at one’s problems; the manner people with a sense of humor and those without a sense of humor are perceived and described.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

Through the proposed research questions, the qualitative study seeks to explore the social benefits of humor and its function for social bonding. Humor can strengthen the bonds between people (Friedman & Friedman, 2003; Martineau, 1972). Martineau, in particular, discusses the role of humor in creating and maintaining social groups, suggesting that sharing humor that is beneficial for groups (e.g., shared, common themes and interests) may increase solidarity and cohesion of the group (1972). Humor can act as an indicator that a person is interested in developing or maintaining certain social ties, according to the theory of interest indicator (Li, Griskevicius, Durante, Jonason, Pasisz, & Aumer, 2009). Ziv (1984) notes that one of the main functions of humor is offering information about similarities shared by members of the group, referring to a type of humor that helps participants in communication to identify shared themes, ideas, interests, and to recall shared past experiences.
Moreover, the qualitative research project based on interviews explores the role of humor for social bonding. By reducing psychological tension, humor has been shown to give us new strength to fight our problems (Murstein & Brust, 1985). A number of studies have investigated the ability of humor to act as a coping mechanism with difficult or stressful situations (Chen & Martin, 2007). Hay (2000) also notes that one of the functions of humor is the ability to cope, to adapt to a problem, be it a contextual one (which could occur during the communication act, be it a social blunder or a pot boiling over), or non-contextual (by this term, the author understands general, more long-term problems, difficulties such as illness or death, or, in our case, the aging process).

In addition, the discussion with the participants explored gender differences on the production and appreciation of humor, in the perception of participants in the study. There are studies that highlight gender differences regarding interpersonal communication preferences, as women are more oriented towards cooperation (Kuhn & Villeval, 2015) and more likely to avoid competitive activities (Gneezy et al. 2003; Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007). Moreover, as mentioned previously, studies have found that the use of humor in interpersonal communication, women prefer to listen and share stories about life everyday (Crawford & Gressley, 1991), as this reinforces a sense of community and solidarity (Coates, 1996; Hay, 2008). Maltz and Borker (1983) note that the humor women use in interpersonal communication differs from that of men because it tends to build social bonds and solidarity. Indeed, Martin (2003) points out that more men use aggressive humor than women, while men’s humor rather has the purpose of asserting status (Maltz & Broker, 1983; Shuster, 2007). The team led by Dunbar suggests that women’s conversations are conducted in a way that builds bonds and social networks, while men focus on "self-promotion" (Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997). Furthermore, a gender difference their study identified is the extent to which women address issues related to family and children in their conversations, these topics dominating their interpersonal communication, while these issues are not addressed in the conversations of men. Therefore, exploring topics that participants use in their production of humor is relevant. The research literature also discusses topics of humor production, investigating aggressive topics related to sex and sexuality. Lundell (1993) notes that it is less likely that women appreciate humor that addresses sexual themes which they decode as being hostile or aggressive, the kind of humor created by men, for men. However, he concludes in his
research, that women appreciate humor using sexual themes as much as men, when it is not hostile to women. These results are also replicated and further explored by Bing (2007).

**Research Questions and the Interview Guide**

The interview guide included questions covering all directions of investigation related to this study: the production and social use of humor in interpersonal communication, styles of humor used, sense of humor, using humor to adapt (as a coping mechanism to deal with difficulties); moreover, because the quantitative study in the thesis found a significant difference between older people and younger people (students) in the self-reported sense of humor, participants in the interviews were asked to discuss the problem of humor and age, from several points of view: is humor different from age to age, according to participants? How does one produce and share humor with individuals in a different age group? How do participants perceive generational differences in the use of humor? Furthermore, we investigated one other dimension regarding humor and age: what does it mean when older people joke about their age and produce humor on topics related to the natural aging process? What is the self-perceived purpose of such events? Is it an example of coping humor, making light of one’s trouble, or a form of self-discrimination and a case of repeating interiorized negative stereotypes about old age? We also discussed the differences study participants perceived in how women and men use humor. Furthermore, we sought to investigate how each study participant uses humor with people of the same gender: is the communication based on humor different in mixed groups, in groups of older women, or in groups of older men? In addition, the interviews and data analysis have identified other perceptions about the use of humor, by identifying related behaviors, associated with the production of humor, or personality and psychological traits of individuals who have a sense of humor.

**Summing up the Main Conclusions of the Thesis**

The current summary of the work will now present the principal findings obtained, correlating the results of both principal research studies (quantitative and qualitative). In the quantitative study, the sense of humor (measured using the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale, Thorson & Powell, 1993), with its four dimensions, including the production and social use of humor, and the sense of loneliness (measured using Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale, short version – SELSA-S – diTomaso, Brannen & Best, 2004) were investigated for three different
samples: Romanian older adults, English older adults and a group of Romanian university students. The results of this study suggest that the production and social use of humor can act as a factor to reduce the sense of social loneliness for older adults, in general. The result was found for the entire sample of English older adults, but was found to only function for older Romanian women, and not for the men. This suggests that Romanian older women could enjoy the social benefit of humor more. A potential explanation offered in the paper is that this gender difference could be due to the fact that women use a different, more adaptive style of humor than the men do, or use humor with a different function. Indeed, the thesis presents and discusses studies that suggest the humor of women has an enhanced potential to create solidarity and social bonding, compared to the humor of men.

Moreover, the women in the Romanian older adult sample self-evaluated their own sense of humor differently than the men did, obtaining lower scores for three out of the four subscales of the humor measuring instrument, a gender difference that we cannot simply attribute to age, as it was not found in the English older adult sample. One potential explanation for the lower scores that women obtained could regard gender roles and gender stereotypes. It is possible that in Romania, a society with rather traditional social and communicational gender roles (Arsene, 2012; White, Vanc, & Coman, 2011), and one in which gender inequality is high (Gender Equality Special Eurobarometer 428, 2015), the use of humor in communication is primarily regarded as an attribute of masculinity. Indeed, there is a widespread idea that men are funnier than women, a stereotype that is also reflected by a number of research studies (ex: Mickes, Walker, Parris, Mankoff, & Christenfeld, 2011; Shuster, 2007). It is speculated in the current thesis that this stereotype could be amplified by traditional gender roles in Romania. Therefore, one interpretation is that the women who took part in the study had interiorized these social communication norms and reflected them in their answers on the MSHS humor scale.

These findings, obtained through a quantitative study, suggest the presence of potent and relevant gender differences in the use of humor by Romanian older adults. Thus, the necessity of a second, qualitative study, became clear, in order to further explore social and psychological benefits of humor, and also specific communication practices that include humor, in order to identify any gender differences, in the participants’ perceptions. This second study, carried out through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, has identified the social advantages of humor. Both the men and the women indicated that using humor in communication can act as an instrument of
social bonding, which can act as a motivating factor to preserve and develop an interpersonal relationship. Moreover, those with a sense of humor were described in a manner that highlights their social skills and the fact that others perceived them as pleasant and desirable social presences, being easily integrated in the social group. By contrast, those who lack a sense of humor are seen as less endowed with communication skills, less sociable and more likely to be avoided in a social group/interaction.

In a distinctive manner, the women who took part in the study revealed that they perceive relevant gender differences in the use of humor, differences that might suggest why the use of humor is more socially advantageous for Romanian older women than it is for men. In the opinion of the women study participants, men tend to have a humor repertoire based on the topics of sex and sexuality, which is perceived by the women as aggressive, and used primarily in order to boast or for status affirmation. This perception is confirmed by the men, who believe that the type of humor they prefer is not suitable for a lady’s ears, as ladies are more delicate. However, women in the sample indicated that they do not simply reject all humor which approaches themes of sex and sexuality but that, rather, it is the male-specific approach and delivery style that they find off-putting. Women indicated that they also tell and appreciate jokes on such intimate subjects, but that, in their perception, a woman who tells such jokes is never as vulgar as a man. This finding is in accordance with a study conducted by Bing (2007).

The analysis of the interviews revealed another relevant gender difference, in the participants’ perception. This finding can serve as a potential explanation for the fact that Romanian older women’s humor seems to have stronger social benefits than that of Romanian Older Men. The women who participated in the study indicated, without doubt, that, in their use of humor in interpersonal communication, they elect to share personal stories and humorous based on their own experience. Women do not tell jokes (canned humor) very often, it was revealed, but rather stories about situations they were confronted with, or stories about people they know; gossip also has its role in the humorous communication of women, in the opinion of the study participants. Sharing personal stories allows women to identify themes, ideas that they share, common interests, as well as to recall experiences they had together. In the women’s discourse, the idea of a domestic humor was also strongly present, approaching topics of family, the home, pets etc. This finding is in accordance with other research studies, which state that the sharing of humorous personal anecdotes contributes to building solidarity and social bonding, and can consolidate interpersonal
relationships. Even gossip, which the participants mentioned, can play a social role in maintaining group cohesion and relationships (Dunbar, 2004). Thus, this gender specific way of using humor for women can offer a potential explanation for the fact that the using humor in interpersonal communication functions as a factor to reduce social loneliness for the women in the sample, but did not serve the same function for the men.

The studies carried out through quantitative methods have revealed that, in accordance to other previous studies (e.g.: Thorson et al., 1997; Ruch et. al, 2010a), that Romanian older adults have obtained lower scores on all the dimensions of the humor scale used, compared to the group of Romanian students aged 18-30. This could suggest that humor is appreciated and used differently at different ages, also indicating not only differences along the life cycle, but also a potential cohort effect. Indeed, the qualitative study of the thesis, through the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with Romanian older adults revealed the fact that they perceive age-specific differences in the way humor is used. It became clear that, in the perception of study participants, younger adults use a type of “libertine” humor (sic), rather indelicate in temrs of topics, and that younger adults do not understand the limits of humor, and do not know when to stop their humor production without violating social and behavioral norms. The conclusion of this line of investigation is that, in the opinion of the older adult participants, the ideal partners for the social production and use of humor are those within the same age bracket due to a shared and similar life experience. Intergenerational humor is not positively assessed and is not described as a comfortable communicational practice. Older adults either described having to convince younger adults to talk, suggesting perhaps a lack of young adults to participate in intergenerational humor; or conveyed the idea that they are only witnesses to the humor production of younger adults, without taking on an active role in the humorous communication.

Another line of investigation that the thesis concluded on was that regarding the use of humor on the topic of age. The analysis of the qualitative data revealed that older adults perceive the use of humor on the subject of age as a mechanism to adapt to the natural drawbacks of older age (e.g. pains and medical issues, faults in memory, the modification of own physical aspect), when these subjects are taken up in a humorous registry in interpersonal communication. The conclusion is that sharing humor on these topics helps participants to reduce the stress and negative emotions caused by the experience of ageing; by becoming aware that these difficulties are shared and experienced by other friends and acquaintances in the same age group, they become easier to
accept. Therefore, in the current thesis we suggest that the use of humor on the topics of age and ageing process functions as an adaptive/coping mechanism, and not as a maladaptive communicational behaviour through which older adults repeat a series of negative stereotypes about old age. On the contrary, the problems of old age that participants addressed in humor production were concrete and realistic (a pain in the leg that was not there before; prostate problems) and producing humor on these topics allows participants to cope by laughing at their problems (haz de necaz). This idea of laughing at one’s difficulties, using humor as a coping mechanism was prevalent in the interviews, and supports the idea that humor has psychological benefits, in the perception of study participants.

One other study finding to be detailed in the summary regards the participants’ preference for what we have labelled horizontal humor or humor amongst equals. By analyzing all the research question of the qualitative approach, it emerges that Romanian older adults prefer to engage in the production and social use of humor with those that are their equals in a number of respects: power status (there was a negative perception of humor produced by a superior and aimed at status inferior, e.g. employer to employee); age group (as highlighted, participants believed they can best engage in humor production with those in their own age group, intergenerational humor was not regarded as a successful approach); level of education/intelligence (participants indicated that you cannot socially risk humor production with a person with an intellect superior to yours, nor with an intellectual inferior). We can interpret that this perspective highlights larger social realities in Romanian society, casting light on strong social divisions, especially in the studied age cohort. Divisions based on socio-economic class (those educated and intelligent, compared to the non-educated), on gender (women being perceived as more domestic and delicate, and having lower income and access to education) and even according to age (the young and libertine (sic), born and socialized after 1989, exposed to changing social order and realities; and older adults, who, as a generation, had the experience of life under a totalitarian regime and its strongly imposed social norms).

The production of humor in interpersonal communication is a universal practice, but one that varies according to the specific socio-cultural dimensions and the life experiences of the analyzed group. We consider that the present study managed to identify several relevant aspects about the way humor is used and appreciated by Romanian older adults.


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