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## Communicating death with humor: Humor types and functions in death over dinner conversations

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### ABSTRACT

Using Death over Dinner conversations, we examined 83 family and/or friend groups comprising 424 participants to understand how humor is used when talking about death and dying. Thematic analysis revealed that family and friends used six types of humor in their conversations about death: entertainment humor, gallows humor, tension-relieving humor, confused/awkward laughter, group humor/narrative chaining, and self-deprecating humor. We discuss the benefits and drawbacks of the use of humor when discussing uncomfortable topics, practical applications related to humor and death, as well as possibilities for future research.

### Introduction

In many cultures, death is a difficult or frightening topic to discuss with others (Keeley & Yingling, 2007). When communicating about difficult issues like death and dying, people may use several coping strategies to manage their discomfort. In particular, they may use humor, which provides a means for relieving emotions and fostering positive interactions with others (Booth-Butterfield, Wanzer, Weil, & Krezmien, 2014). However, talking about death is important for several reasons, including the opportunity for sharing end-of-life care preferences with friends and family members and the alleviation of uncertainty and fear of death (Lambert South & Elton, 2017). These conversations are essential to prepare for naturally occurring deaths and, more importantly, untimely deaths. According to Bonanno (2004), “most people are exposed to at least one violent or life-threatening situation during the course of their lives” (pp. 20). In an effort to encourage more Americans to engage in early conversations about death, a number of resources have been created that seek to help people engage with others in these conversations. One of these resources is “Let’s Get Together and Talk about Death” (also known as Death over Dinner), a free, public website created by Michael Hebb to facilitate discussions of death and dying with family and friends (McClurg, 2015). Death over Dinner strives to create a space where people can

consider and share their thoughts about death and their preferences for end-of-life care and transform the frightening (communicating about death) into the mundane (a conversation with family or friends over dinner) by creating a familiar and comfortable space to discuss preferences for end-of-life care and final arrangements before it is too late (Death over Dinner, 2020).

Because it provides an informal space for discussing what many people consider an uncomfortable topic, this study uses the Death over Dinner conversation as a framework for exploring humor use during conversations about death and dying. In essence, we use Death over Dinner conversations as the basis of our study. Many studies have examined humor use related to death during bereavement; however, the current study assesses humor use during conversations about death before a death has occurred. This distinction is important because it may be the case that individuals are willing to use humor types not found in the bereavement literature. Determining the types of humor used while discussing death may eventually be used to help conversation facilitators understand and plan for successful and satisfying conversations about death.

### Review of literature

Humor is defined as “intentional verbal and nonverbal messages which elicit laughter, chuckling, and other

forms of spontaneous behavior taken to mean pleasure, delight, and or surprise in the targeted receiver” (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991, pp. 205). Humor can be an individual communicative act (e.g., laughing at oneself after doing something funny); however, humor is most often relational and involves at least two people to be successful (Fine, 1983). Humor’s uses and outcomes have been studied with mixed results. The research tends to highlight the positive aspects of humor including coping and life satisfaction (Hall, 2017; Wanzer, Sparks, & Frymier, 2009), its use in healthcare settings (Sala, Krupat, & Roter, 2002; Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 2005), relational cohesion and relational satisfaction (Maki, Booth-Butterfield, & McMullen, 2012), job satisfaction (Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield, & Wanzer, 2007), emotion regulation (Samson & Gross, 2012), nonverbal and conversational sensitivity (Merolla, 2006), and positive responses to death and grief (Booth-Butterfield et al., 2014). On the other hand, some studies have found that negative or ineffective humor can lead to relational dissatisfaction (Anderson & DiTunnariello, 2016) and perceptions of victimization and bullying (Fox, Hunter, & Jones, 2015).

Much of the extant literature related to humor initially took a psychological approach. Specifically, one of the most commonly used measures is the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). The assessment measures four dimensions of individual humor use. In general, using the psychological approach, it is assumed that one’s humor style remains constant throughout a person’s life. The dimensions include self-enhancing humor, affiliative humor, aggressive humor, and self-defeating humor. Self-enhancing humor may be used to enhance the self in a way that does not harm others. Affiliative humor is used to enrich one’s relationship with others. Contrarily, aggressive humor is used at the expense and detriment of the other and the relationship. And finally, self-defeating humor is used at the expense and detriment of oneself. Communication scholars have expanded from a dispositional approach to humor to a relational approach to humor. Utilizing past humor measures, including the HSQ, Hall (2013) identified five communicative functions of humor. These functions include enjoyment (i.e. sharing positivity and happiness), affection (e.g. using pet names), let go of conflict (i.e. humor used to manage stress and conflict), coping (i.e. communicating during stressful situations), and apologize (i.e. conveying an admission of wrongdoing).

Taking a sociological perspective to humor research, leading scholars viewed humor as a way to provide relief for the anxieties about death, help with death coping, and ease the stress surrounding grief (Klein, 1986) and tended to situate humor within a group perspective (Fine, 1977):

The idioculture of a group can be defined as a system of knowledge, beliefs, and customs which are particular to a group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction. In most small groups this includes elements as norms, rules, nicknames, repeated insults, local slang, and humour. (pp. 315)

Much of communication research about humor examines the appropriate and effective use of humor. One way of assessing the appropriateness and effectiveness of humor use is to consider an individual’s orientation to humor (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991). According to Bonanno (2004), death-oriented humor or humor related to grieving the loss of a loved one can be positive, negative, or both. Most literature examining humor and conversations about death relate to communication after the death of loved one has occurred (or seems imminent). These studies examine how humor can impact and facilitate the grieving process (Bonanno, 2004). The most relevant literature related to conversations about death is gallows humor. Gallows humor is “both intentional (not circumstantial) and has a coping motive. It is humor that is generated for a reason” and that purpose is usually coping, in that we are likely to “make fun of that which threatens us” (Thorson, 1993, pp. 18). In a recent study, the authors reported that perceptions of stressful situations “did not impede the quantity of humor creation, it even seemed to increase its quality. Participants who rated the situations as more anxiety-eliciting produced ideas that were funnier” (Papousek et al., 2019, pp. 12).

### ***Humor from a communication perspective***

Humor theories and literature can be split into two general categories: (a) why individuals use humor (motivational/psychological explanations), and (b) the function humor has within a social setting (sociological explanations). Lynch (2002) claims that three major humor theories utilize an individualistic and cognitive view of humor: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. The problem with psychological perspectives of humor is that the focus is on cognitive processes and individual differences related to the choice to use humorous messages,

without consideration for the interactional dynamics of the decision to use humor. Conversely, sociological theories used to describe humor tend to emphasize identification and differentiation as well as control and resistance. Based on Lynch's critique of sociological humor research, most of the research utilizes case studies that tend to frame humor as a continuum, but ultimately conclude that all humor is about control or identification. Lynch (2002) makes the case that humor from a communication perspective can bridge the gaps and limitations of the psychological and sociological perspectives:

Humor is a message sent by an individual or group with psychological motivations, but this humor message is also dependent on the interpretations by another individual or group, which takes into account the social context and functional role of humor within that context. (pp. 430)

Understanding how individuals make sense out of and communicate about death before it has occurred is an understudied phenomenon. While most studies focus on death cognitions and coping when a death has occurred, it is also important to understand coping when just thinking about death. Analyzing individuals' responses to talking about and anticipating death and dying, and subsequent humor use can provide insight into how individuals across the lifespan conceptualize and cope with the thought of their death and the death of loved ones. In light of the lack of humor research examining interactive conversations surrounding death (before a death has occurred), and in line with Lynch's (2002) contentions regarding understanding humor from a communication perspective, we asked: How is humor used and communicated during Death over Dinner conversations?

## Method

### *Sampling and participants*

Participants were recruited through network (or snowball) sampling. The researchers and research assistants asked friends and or family members if they were willing to participate in a Death over Dinner. Dinners were scheduled in the evening either at one of the participants' homes, a campus location, or at a restaurant. Data were collected well after saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was achieved. Saturation occurred when no new themes emerged during data analysis; however, data were collected beyond this point to ensure a robust data set for analysis and reporting.

Each dinner involved four to eight participants, resulting in 424 participants. Participants ranged from 18- to 76-years of age (Mean age = 29.43) and included 193 men (Mean age = 27.85), 208 women (Mean age = 31.00), and 23 people who indicated that they were transgender or selected "other" on the demographic questionnaire. Participants were recruited from Midwestern and Southern metropolitan areas in the United States, particularly Kentucky and Ohio. All Death over Dinner conversations were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by the primary researchers. The transcription resulted in 1254 single-spaced pages.

### *Procedure*

Following institutional review board (IRB) approval from Northern Kentucky University, a total of 83 Death over Dinner conversations were conducted. Each dinner conversation lasted between 32 and 184 minutes and was facilitated by the researchers or trained and IRB-certified research assistants. Each conversation began with a review of the consent form, which all participants signed, and a short welcome note to begin the conversation. Although conversations were allowed to develop organically, facilitators had unstructured question prompts they could use if the conversation waned at any time.

In each dinner conversation, facilitators used the Death over Dinner framework and began with scripted prompts that were semi-structured in nature. All conversations began with the prompt: "To start the evening, let's bring a sense of gratitude to the table and acknowledge our ancestors. Let's do a quick around the table introduction, to be completed with a raise of the glass to someone who is no longer with us, someone you admire deeply and is no more than 20 words, share why you admire them." Later prompts related to the participants' experiences with death, perceptions of death and dying, thoughts and feelings about medical staff and providers, how death is discussed in family and friend groups, and advance directives. The last prompt encouraged participants to discuss how they wanted their life to end and whether or not they were afraid of death.

### *Analysis*

This study used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis. Two research assistants coded the data to identify prominent emergent themes related to the use of humor in the conversations. Coders began

by familiarizing themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and writing down initial ideas/codes. Coders generated inductive codes independently and then discussed initial codes. Utterances were coded as humor if they were followed by or included immediate laughter (both genuine or uncomfortable) or when participants explicitly stated that they were “just kidding,” “joking,” or “just playing,” even when such declarations were followed by laughter. However, statements that appeared to be intended as humorous in context were also coded as humorous. For example, statements that were intended to transition the conversation to more light-hearted topics were identified as humor.

Originally, the two coders treated confused and awkward laughter as distinct categories. Confused laughter was defined as laughter resulting from a participant expressing laughter when it seemed as though the focal person was not sure how to respond to another participant, or the focal person seemed uncomfortable with silence. Awkward laughter was coded as a verbal expression of laughter that was not related to a previous humorous statement or event, but instead, the participant seemed to laugh because they were feeling awkward or were attempting to move the conversation forward (based on the context of the previous statements).

After the initial codes were discussed, the authors searched for themes independently and reviewed the themes together. For instance, it was clear that the confused/awkward laughter events were a predominant theme in the group conversations, but the difference between confused and awkward types was often indistinguishable. Thus, the categories of confused and anxious laughter were combined. Working together, the authors completed the fifth stage of the analysis, defining and naming themes, which entailed “identifying the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about, and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 92). The last step of the outlined thematic analysis technique includes writing the report.

## Results

The analysis resulted in six extracted themes related to the use of humor in Death over Dinner conversations. In order of the most frequent to least frequent, these humor types were: entertainment, gallows humor, tension-relieving humor, confused/awkward laughter, group humor/narrative chaining, and self-deprecating humor. Although some thematic

categories were not mutually exclusive, frequency counts reflect primary codes of the utterance/humor event regardless of secondary codes.

### **Entertainment**

Participants wanted to make the group laugh to entertain in order to ingratiate themselves to the group or to be seen as the group comedian. This category only applied when it did not seem like the participant was providing tension relief after a serious conversation. The entertainment theme was by far the most commonly coded category of all humor types ( $N = 1014$ ). The two most common subthemes under entertainment were: relational humor and making fun of the situation.

### **Relational humor**

Relational humor meant to entertain often happened between relational partners for the entertainment or enjoyment of others. The pair would make fun of themselves, quip about the demise of the other partner, or joke about life insurance policies to (primarily) get a laugh from the other participants. For example, a woman asked her partner, “You gonna leave me a big fat life insurance?” to which her male partner responded, “[I] Should get some life insurance. We only have a couple of years [physically knocks on wood].”

### **Making fun of the situation**

Other participants attempted to entertain by making fun of the situation (i.e., talking about death). For example, while sharing personal stories about loss and expressing their appreciation for having a space to share their stories, participants in one conversation became rather emotional. Taking note of the situation, one woman said, “You better go to the bathroom and get some tissues,” after which the other participants laughed before continuing to share their stories. Also, one young man compared talking about death with family members to talking about sex with family members:

Yeah, I think that having that conversation with your family is like trying to have the sex talk with your parents [laughter by all]. It kind of like dances around and you don't really want to talk about it.

### **Gallows humor**

Participants used unsavory humor that could be characterized by others as morbid or insensitive. Gallows



humor was the second most coded humor type ( $N=313$ ). Common types of gallows humor included speaking ill of the dead, making light of the state of the deceased (self and other), and fantasizing a violent or unconventional death.

### *Speaking ill of the dead*

This sub-theme described humor that makes fun or insults the deceased. An example of this is illustrated by a woman in her 20s who, when asked to share something about a family member who passed, stated, “I’ll raise my water to my step-grandpa who died. I really don’t have that many people in my life that have died, which, I mean, is fortunate for me, and he was kind of a shitty guy.”

### *Making light of the state of the deceased*

This subtheme described using humor to downplay the uncomfortableness of death or the deceased. For example, one participant used humor to gloss over how she felt when her grandmother’s cremated remains were sent to her family via the mail: “[she’s] in a shipping box. I was like, ‘My grandma is in a shipping box.’ I was like, ‘What is this?’ and my mom was like I think that’s Grandma?” Additionally, a young man, reflecting on his own body, said “Dude, just dump me in my childhood creek and let some kids poke me with a stick.” Another participant stated, “Harvest me, I don’t give a shit.”

### *Fantasizing a violent or unconventional death*

This subtheme included comments where the participant anticipated a particularly morbid end of life. For example, one young woman explained why she felt like the end of her life will be dramatic:

I really want it to be something dramatic ... [laughing] Like I am so serious though. I’m talking like a mass shooting, if I am a victim in it ... [yelling and laughing] I feel like it’s not going to be a natural death, I feel like it’s just going to be something crazy. Like I’m so serious though. Like I have always had pictures of my death as being something traumatic like crazy. So I just feel like that’s how I’m supposed to go out. Like I really can’t imagine myself growing old or getting an illness and dying. Like I just can’t imagine that for myself. [laughing] I know that sounds really morbid but just that’s me.

### *Tension-relieving humor*

Humor was coded as tension relief when a participant told a joke or made a (perceived) humorous statement

after a serious or emotional conversational statement or exchange. There were 191 coded instances of humorous tension relief. The four main tension-relief devices included: conversational pivot, reiteration, reframing the finality of death, and communication through pets.

### *Conversational pivots*

This type of humor was used to change the subject after a stressful disclosure or interaction. Some pivots included utterances such as “Sooooo ...,” and others relied on pivots such as “How ‘bout them Cowboys?”. Another young woman tried to change the topic by responding to her mother by stating, “You are watching too much Lifetime, Mom.”

### *Reiteration*

These statements showed support for or emphasized the point made by a participant. For example, two women used reiteration in the following exchange:

Woman 1: Relax for the rest of eternity. [laughs]  
 Woman 2: Right. [laughs]  
 Woman 1: You did your part in life, just come relax over here, it’s fine.  
 Woman 2: Chill out, it’s fine. Yeah. [laughs]

### *Reframing*

The third type of tension relief was reframing death, often to make it sound more appealing or pleasant. This included statements that were used primarily to assuage the finality of death. As one young man stated:

... recently, ‘cause my grandpa died, my dad has been talking about how he wants to go and that’s awful but he wants to become a tree, have you heard about this? [laughter] they make them ashes, and then they become a vessel then he’s planted as a tree and he wants his grandkids to go hang out under himself. [laughter]

### *Communicating through pets*

Last, in some cases, when there were pets present at the dinner, participants would try to relieve tension by paraphrasing or soothing others by communicating through pets. They did this by personifying their pets’ behavior or by focusing attention onto a pets’ behavior or presence. For example, a young man tried to soothe his dog when the dog started whining during the dinner conversation: “[Dog whining] Thunder says, ‘I don’t like thinking about that shit!’” [laughter]. Participants often relieved tension by laughing after a dog barked during silence.

### Confused/awkward laughter

Participants used humor and or laughter when they were not sure how to respond to another participant or they seemed uncomfortable with silence among the group. There were 162 coded instances of confused laughter and 305 instances for awkward laughter for a total of 467 coded confused/awkward laughter utterances. Examples of confused/awkward laughter are difficult to truly show without multiple lines and or pages of context. For example, a coded example of awkward laughter included a response after a long discussion about how older people in a young woman's family were stubborn: "Yeah [laughing]. Yeah. I'm sure a lot of them are. [laughing] Anyone else?" (The most common example of confused laughter occurred when a participant would respond to a statement with an extended "Um" or "Well" followed by a laugh and shift in the conversation. The conversational shift, however, was not to alleviate tension but to shift from a confusing or awkward statement to something more on-topic or comfortable.

### Group humor/narrative chaining

Group humor and narrative chaining occurred when a joke was started and multiple participants "chained" 'onto the initial joke. There were 144 instances of group humor/narrative chaining. These communication events ranged from three speakers and a few lines of transcribed conversation to six speakers and multiple pages of transcription. Specifically, lines of talk were coded as narrative chaining when three or more speakers took turns to build on a theme/joke. If there were fewer than three speakers, the humorous acts were not coded as narrative chaining. In the following excerpt, two young women and four young men discussed their plans for a long life and what they want to happen to their bodies:

Woman 1: Well I mean it's like ...  
 Man 1: That old age would be like 60?  
 Woman 1: I drink a lot. [laughter]  
 Man 2: I plan on living to 150.  
 Woman 1: It's alright we're just hoping medicine saves us all.  
 Man 3: I want to be frozen. [laughter]  
 Woman 1: You're one of those people [laughter]  
 Man 3: Yeah next to Walt Disney and Ted Williams.  
 Man 1: There ya go.  
 Man 2: Nice. Is that what you think of yourself? [laughter] Are you in that ring? You're not getting in that freezer. I'll toss ya in a beer fridge or something.  
 Man 4: Yeah.  
 Man 2: Hey I'm not a picky guy.  
 Woman 2: Hey dead is dead.  
 Man 2: Yeah toss me in the dumpster.

In the next excerpt, two men and three women discussed what they would like to come back as if they were reincarnated:

Man 1: She goes from a witch to a rabbit!  
 Woman 1: Or I will [unintelligible] before, I don't know, but I have something from that.  
 Woman 2: Mhmm.  
 Woman 1: So, uh, or duck. No, I don't – I don't want to be duck, but –  
 Man 1: I don't wanna have feathers.  
 Woman 1: Shit. What?  
 Man 1: I don't wanna have feathers.  
 Woman 3: Which is a scary creature.  
 Woman 1: I'm not allergic, so it's okay [unintelligible]  
 Man 1: Ducks just run around and shit everywhere, and – [laughter]  
 Man 2: Wait! I missed where this conversation went! [laughter]  
 Woman 2: Are we talking, about like reincarnation, like?! [laughter]

### Self-deprecating humor

Statements within this theme occurred when participants made fun of themselves or underestimated their competence in order to get a laugh from others. Self-deprecation was the least coded primary humor type ( $N=10$ ). It was identified as a unique theme because self-deprecating humor was focused on an individual making fun of or putting down him/herself, whereas in chain humor or entertainment humor among relational partner interactions involved making fun of or putting down others. As noted, self-deprecating humor may have been present in other types of humor interactions, but it was distinct because the target of the humor was self-directed. Examples of primary self-deprecation humor events included comments about age (e.g. "Well I *am* 63 years old"), comments related to talking too much in the Death over Dinner (e.g. "Someone put a muzzle on me,") (and comments about organ donation (e.g. "They don't want my skin. Nobody wants my skin").

### Discussion

This study explored the use humor in conversations about death and showed that participants used six types of humor: entertainment humor, gallows humor, tension-relieving humor, confused/awkward laughter, group humor/narrative chaining, and self-deprecating humor. These humor types were used by participants in this study to accomplish particular communicative or relational goals. The use of humor allowed participants to help themselves or others save face (tension-relieving humor); to have a reprieve from serious conversational topics (tension-relieving humor and entertainment humor); to help participants indicate support for others (chain humor, tension-relieving humor, and entertainment humor); to increase

their own likeability or promote affinity within the group (self-deprecating humor, chain humor, and entertainment humor); to help helped participants to minimize or cope with uncomfortable situations (tension-relieving humor); and to communicate honesty, especially when the honesty was uncomfortable (gallows humor).

First, tension-relieving humor allowed participants to help themselves and others save face. According to Goffman (1967), face is people's positive self-presentation, which is performed through their messages, actions, appearance, and so on. Effectively managing one's face is an inherently relational act because it requires the cooperation of others to validate and except one's face (Metts & Cupach, 2008). Because it has the potential to evoke negative emotions (Keeley & Yingling, 2007), discussing death may threaten people's face. In this study, participants helped themselves and others save face by using humor to avoid becoming too upset or emotional during uncomfortable points in the conversation and was especially notable when analyzing tension-relieving humor. By cracking a joke or making an unrelated statement (i.e., conversational pivot), participants were able to deflect attention from themselves or another participant and re-route, even temporarily, a particularly heavy emotional line of communication.

In addition to helping others save face, humor also provided participants with a reprieve from conversational topics. In her discussion of frame analysis, Du Pré (1998) noted that humor/laughter provides people with a momentary release from a prior frame so that they can go back into it with more ease than before. Similarly, in this study, participants' use of tension-relieving humor, particularly conversational pivots, or entertainment humor, like making fun of the situation, allowed them to take a break from interactions that were getting too serious, heavy, or uncomfortable.

Participants also used humor to support others. Often it seemed as though humorous statements were meant to help others avoid getting upset (illustrated through delayed pauses, crying, or seeming to be "choked up"). Humor also allowed participants to build community or bond as a group through chain humor. Chain humor also served a tension-relieving function by enabling participants to digress or make light of a serious topic of conversation, but the participation of more than one participant made it unique due to the participation of three or more individuals in building on a joke or creating a humor story. Shared narratives also create a form of

emotional entertainment which mark solidarity and a sense of belonging (Fine & Corte, 2017).

Humor was also a tool used by participants to increase their own likability or promote affinity, which is consistent with previous research that suggests that humor increases interpersonal closeness and makes individuals more likable (Booth-Butterfield et al., 2014; Graham, 1995). This was seen in the use of self-deprecating humor and humor to entertain, the use of which was intended to elicit the group's laughter. In these cases, when the group gave that participant attention by responding with laughter, the instigator appeared to be encouraged and more likely to continue being funny or making jokes at other moments in the conversation. Additionally, in some instances, narrative chaining appeared to be some participants' attempt to "get in" on a joke in order to promote affinity and or increase their likability.

Similar to other research that examines the use of humor in coping (Bonanno, 2004; Thorson, 1985), humor helped participants in our study minimize or cope with discussing a topic that many admitted to finding uncomfortable or scary. The discomfort or fear experienced by the participants in this study is common. In many cultures, including the U.S., death is considered a cultural taboo (Ohs, Trees, & Gibson, 2015) or a topic that elicits fear and anxiety (Considine & Miller, 2010; Keeley, 2007; Keeley & Yingling, 2007). Thus, humor to relieve tension provided opportunities to turn a daunting topic into a humorous one.

Lastly, humor also allowed participants to be candid about their feelings without appearing too insensitive. Framing statements with humor allowed participants to share their honest thoughts about illness, death, and dying, or to express negative feelings about a deceased relative. In particular, gallows humor provided a way of communicating shocking statements in a more socially acceptable way. Narrative chaining once again becomes important in the present case because the narrative chains allowed participants to express their true thoughts without accountability because they could express an honest (humorous) statement.

### **Limitations**

There are three main limitations to the current study. First, the authors did not distinguish between groups comprising family, friends, or a mix of family and friends. This is problematic because family and friends may interact differently when discussing death and



end-of-life wishes. Next, we used convenience and snowball sampling, in which the researchers and research assistants invited family and friends to participate in Death over Dinner conversations. Even though we attempted to recruit a mix of ages, the average age of the participants was relatively young. Although analyzing the perceptions related to death are important at any age, our findings might not be transferable to adults who are chronologically closer to death and who may have a more imminent need to make and talk about the end of life decisions. Third, for practical reasons, we chose to audio record the conversations. Thus, we could only note nonverbal cues that could be indicated via voice recordings such as tone and extended pauses. Therefore, we could not code for proximity, facial expressions, or body movements. Because humor entails much more than the words spoken or how they are spoken, we likely missed nuances related to humor events.

Future studies should continue to examine the role that gender plays when examining the use and reception of humorous statements when talking about death. In particular, past studies examining how men and women use humor during bereavement indicate that men are more likely to make humorous statements while grieving (Bippus, Dunbar, & Liu, 2012). In addition, those statements are generally well-received by the audience and are often considered an appropriate way to grieve. Humor use among women was rare, and in instances where women did use humor, the humorous messages were not well-received (Booth-Butterfield et al., 2014). This may relate to Western cultural expectations of gender and grief. In Western cultures, men are typically expected to be strong grievers, withholding their feelings, whereas women are expected to experience loss deeply and express their emotions outwardly (Martin & Doka, 2000). This may account for why men's use of humor was received more favorably than women's use of humor in this study. Thus, future studies should further differentiate gender and humor usage when discussing end-of-life preferences and death, particularly in the context of cultural expectations or socialization according to gender roles.

Second, and related to the most surprising result of the current study, participants were likely to talk through pets when discussing death (when a pet was present). Future studies should continue to examine this phenomenon when related to end-of-life conversations. Future research should expand on our findings regarding pets to include if or how people communicate (difficult) messages through a pet. For

example, it could be the case that couples or family members may communicate conflict, excitement, or disappointment through a pet (e.g. "Maxi, tell Dad he is being a jerk," or "Wiggles, ask Hannah how sad you are that she has to work and she won't take you to the park tomorrow").

Next, our study explored the types and functions of humor used in everyday conversations about death, as opposed to end-of-life conversations between either dying people and their families and/or friends, or health professionals and dying persons and their families. End-of-life conversations are important for determining the plan of care but can be experienced as challenging by the dying, their families, and health professionals (Towsley, Hirschman, & Madden, 2015). The humor used, and its functions, may be quite different depending on the context and speaker. Future studies could compare and contrast the types and functions of humor used between everyday conversations, when death is imminent, and or after a death has occurred.

### **Practical applications**

Humor, when appropriately used, can serve to alleviate some of the tension and fear that may result from discussing uncomfortable topics like death (Lambert South & Elton, 2017). Given that our culture typically eschews conversations about death, humor offers a way to overcome the general avoidance of the topic. This is especially true when the topic is planned and occurs in a lighthearted environment with family and or friends such as a Death over Dinner event. Practitioners and lay-persons alike should consider how to plan end-of-life conversations in an environment that supports humor use, narrative chaining, and tension-relief. Health care providers and those who engage in end-of-life communication could also consider establishing relational rapport, creating an appropriate environment and context, and using humor in ways that comfort reduces the stigma related to conversations about death and dying. These communication strategies may be useful when talking with patients about advance care directives and palliative or hospice care.

Additionally, Death over Dinner may be a useful tool for building compassionate communities or advancing a health-promotion approach to death. Death over Dinner creates an opportunity for people to talk about death and dying with loved ones well in advance of a death, which creates spaces for sharing end-of-life preferences, working through death

anxiety, and providing support for others. This is important to both creating compassion and being pro-active about the end-of-life, which is at the core of the compassionate community movement (Charter for Compassion, 2019) and the health promotion approach to death (Sallnow, Richardson, Murray, & Kellehear, 2016).

Overall, this study utilized a communication perspective in order to understand humor use when individuals talk about death and end-of-life wishes. Unlike previous studies, we examined context and humor as it relates to end-of-life conversations and not humor usage when death was imminent or after a death occurred. These functions included: saving face, supporting others, increasing/fostering likeability, coping, emotional reprieve, and communicating honesty. The result of this analysis and future death humor studies is a richer understanding of how people communicate humor to conceptualize death.

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