Laughter and attraction...which comes first?

Are funny people more attractive?

Or does being attractive make you appear funnier?

What is the purpose of humour?

Some answers in this new research study may have you smiling.

*Devika Misra* explains.

Yup.... we've long tried to figure out who's attracted to whom and why.

We thought that funny people are more attractive.

Turns out....maybe we have the order wrong.

"What's new is that we looked at the reverse of this, that being attractive to someone can make you appear funnier to them, that means that if you find me attractive even before I've said anything then when I do say something you'll probably react positively and think that I'm funny. On the other hand if you're clearly not attracted to me then if I initiated humour you probably wouldn't laugh or think that I was funny."

Professor Norman Li's is at SMU's School of Social Sciences.

He conducted his research on a sample of about five hundred people in the United States and found that humour serves an important purpose.

"The overall research question that we're trying to address is what is humour ultimately for you know, 'cos we kind of know that it makes us feel good and all that but what is it ultimately for? Is
there a bigger picture purpose? So just as you might ask what is love, sex, jealousy or anger ultimately for so why does our species have this capability?"

Professor Li says our species has this capability apparently to allow people to at least indicate the direction of their interest and engage the other person's interest.

When you first meet somebody, you're probably not sure if they should be your life long partner, friend, or business associate.

So be mindful of your interaction as it develops.

If you're laughing, you are likely to want to pursue the relationship.

But it's not only in the initial stages that humour is a leading indicator.

It's there for the long haul, so watch out for it if you want to know whether the other person's still interested.

Does your spouse of ten years still laugh at your jokes?

"Humour may be a nice way to lighten things up and to relieve stress but again I'm proposing the reverse. That somebody whose interested in maintaining an existing relationship will be more likely to initiate the humour and to respond favourably to the other persons humour. As an example, a large majority of women who are satisfied with their marriages think that their husbands have a good sense of humour. Does that mean that it takes a skilled comedian to satisfy a partner? Probably not, you know most of these men are just regular guys and its because their marriages are good for other reasons that their wives are more likely to think that their husbands are funny."

Ok...so now we understand why its often an "inside" joke; the two of them are just cracking up and the rest of the us... really don't get it.

"Something like ninety percent of all laughter occurs between people that is not discernibly funny to outsiders. This suggests that something doesn't really have to be a recognised type of humour to be interpreted as funny and this is consistent with humour's underlying purpose of simply communicating some kind of interest."

Professor Li observes that often for men, a good sense of humour means that women laugh at what they say.

"Man have always tended to be the ones to initiate the romantic relationships and take the initiative so they've also tended to be the ones who've initiated the humour. When you're interacting in large group humour initiators tend to be the dominant one and people who are laughing tend to be people
indicating their acceptance of the initiators viewpoint or dominance.. So of a women initiates humour it implies that shes the one initiating interest in a relationship or shes the one in charge of the group which tends to go against what people naturally feel comfortable with especially in an Asian culture."

Due to this close connection between humour and dominance, Professor Li says that it will prevail only in situations and relationships that are flexible.

"If you think of a situation where theres an arranged marriage or theres a fixed parent child relationship in which the child is always subordinate to the parents then the relationship is not really negotiable, its already there and its fixed so those kind of people should use less humour in those types of relationships but whereas in a situation where relationships can come and go and they change and one person gets power and then the other person does and all that then you would expect more humour."

Professor Li’s research was published in the July issue of the American academic journal, Personality and Social Psychology bulletin.