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A SHORT COMPILATION ON THEORIES OF HUMOR AND LAUGHTER

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ABSTRACT

Humor and laughter are ecumenical phenomena. Jokes, wit, funny narratives, irony, satire, sarcasm, the ludicrous, puns, double entendres, slips of the tongue, and comical have universal appeal across all ages and different cultures. Even as the subjects covered by humor vary, all of them have a few typical characteristics and unique functions. Several immense benefits of a few laughs every day are recorded. There are no overarching theories to explain humor across all age groups. Broadly, there are classified by their content and source of origin. This review attempts to outline as many of them before summing the need for more empirical data-backed evidence-based research in the future in this less opted area of study.

INTRODUCTION

Humor is enjoyed by people of all ages. Laughter is a daily occurrence and universal experience. Some characteristics attributed to humor are exaggeration, overstatement, ambiguity, incongruity or irony, hostility, sudden insight, superiority, surprise or shock, tension and relief, a twist or trick, wordplay, sudden imagery, or sudden insight. Humor serves several functions such as to amuse, teach, relax, heal, establish superiority, gain status or control, argue, persuade, bond or make connections, promote social change, or save face. The subjects covered by humor may involve sex, scat, politics, occupations, ethnic groups, minorities, religions, and belief systems. There are benefits of a few laughs for improving one's longevity and quality of life (Giapraki et al. 2020). Take the example of the elderly. Humor buffers their sense of well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction against their loss of mobility, independence, social groups, personal possessions, privacy, physical space, and control-which are inevitable with old age. Laughter releases brain endorphins that reduce stress and pain (Yim, 2016; Agarwal, 2014). Laughter helps lower blood pressure, fights depression, boosts the immune system, and promotes fitness. If only the benefits of humor can be packed in pill form and sold in pharmacies, public demand might become tremendous.

THEORIES

There is no overarching theory to explain humor across all age groups. Broadly, there are classical, psychological, and spiritual theories on humor. Biological, instinct and evolution-based theories find "good-for-the-body" adaptive predisposition in the tickling-humor-laughter Darwin-Hecker hypothesis (Harris, 1999; Harris & Christenfeld, 1997) also find a place in this list.

The classical theories include superiority, relief, and incongruity ingredients as the core of humor. When one laughs at the weak, unfortunate, stupid, gullible, powerless, inferior, ugly, or ignorant, one's sense of superiority is asserted through humor. Superiority theories of Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes have long held that humor is to mock, ridicule, laugh, humiliate and belittle the weak to derive a fleeting sense of advantage. The elderly can be both at the giving or receiving end of a hilarious transaction (Lintott, 2016).

Arousal-relief theories of thinkers like Dewey and Spencer view humor as relief from stress, strain, or constraint thus affording relaxation (Shurcliff, 1968). Relief of tension as nervous energy caused by one fears, guilt, and unfulfilled wishes albeit temporarily through joking explain a part of the humor in elders.

Incongruity or absurdity theories are proposed by Kant and Schopenhauer to explain humor as ludicrous in the instances of teasing for disjointed, ill-suited, or incompatible pairings, events, or situations (Fedakar, 2020; Morreall, 2014). We laugh when someone slips not because of a sense of superiority. Rather, the comic is because of the incongruity between ones expectations and the sudden insight. Similarly, we laugh at animals-not because of superiority but only when their actions resemble humans. While nonsense and silly are characteristic of humor in children (Loizou, 2006; 2005), learning to laugh at oneself is at the other end of the continuum, and is viewed as the highest form of humor that typically peaks through healthy maturity by old age (Gordon, 2010). An extension of incongruity theory, the configuration theories of Hegel and Gestalt psychology view the resolution of incongruities falling into place or sudden insight as a basis for amusement.

The surprise theories of Rene Descartes (Nilsen, 1990) link shock, unexpected, alarm, or suddenness as necessary or sufficient conditions to humor experience. Ambivalence theories hold that "conflict-mixture" and "oscillation" between opposing feelings, emotions, or ideas struggling for release result in humor (Keith-Spiegel, 1972).

Humor processes is divided into four components: a social context, a cognitive-perceptual process, emotional response, and the vocal-behavioral expression of laughter. Psychoanalytic theories highlight the unconscious processes involved in the development of jokes and explain how the release of forbidden psychic energy occurs through humor (Freud, 1960). If an elderly is fascinated by a scatological joke, it means that the person is fixated at an earlier age of development. Conflict theories see humor as an expression of struggle or antagonism between insiders and outsiders in a social context. They promote in-group solidarity, reinforce bonding, and create a shared identity, and trust among group members (Stephenson, 1951).

The phenomenological theories conceptualize humor as one's outlook or worldview of perceiving and constructing the social world (Gordon, 2014). Drive reduction theories view humor as meeting or fulfilling needs. Despite the surge of "sex over the 60s" jokes, there is no empirical evidence that humor addresses sex as a drive-in old age. The frustration-aggression hypothesis derived from this theory explains how humor serves as a disguised outlet for pent-up emotions. The more powerless the victim, the funnier they would seem (Shuster 2012).

Neuropsychology-based theories assume the right hemisphere is crucial for humor appreciation (Shammi & Stuss, 2003; 1999). The amygdala and hippocampus, as part of the limbic system, are implicated in the human brain in the production of laughter (Blake, 2003; LaPointe, 1991). Disease or damage to these areas is recorded as testimonies of the

resulting pathological crying and laughter (Tu et al. 2021; Parvizi et al. 2001), failure to distinguish lies from jokes (Winner et al. 1998), loss of sensitivity to verbal humor (Brownell et al. 1983), as shown in cases of traumatic brain injury (Keegan, Suger & Togher, 2021). A combination of the Theory of Mind and Game Theory perspectives are combined as the inner eye theory of laughter (Jung, 2003). Allied observations of humor in the elderly, both typical and affected, have shed light on how processing may be slow. A decline in cognitive abilities, especially frontal lobe deficits, is generally attributed to the elders. The TOM is invoked to explain this decline (Herth, 1993). However, there are well-recognized and recommended imagery-based strategies to enhance humor production in the elderly with beneficial effects (Prerost, 1993).

Cognitive theories on humor exclusive to the elders differ markedly from those of children and youth. Humor appreciation is more a right-brain mediated than left-hemispheric activity (Hochstein, 2021; Foot, 2017). By Erickson's theory, older people are amused by humor that reaffirms the integrity of self despite many incongruities and imperfections or helps them confront the inevitability of their death. However, such explanations are not backed by controlled research. A dynamic and dual-process theory of humor gives a unified framework for humor by combining emotions with cognition for their comprehension through four stages including surprise, reflection, dismissal, and compensation (Li, 2015). Developmental theories recognize laughter the first social vocalization (after crying) shown by human infants. Around four months of age, gelastic or laughter-producing epilepsy in some infants is akin to babies turning blue after breath-holding cry spells. They indicate that brain mechanisms for humor are present at birth. Innate laughter is seen even in children who are born blind and deaf without having ever watched or heard others laugh (Larkin-Galinanes, 2017).

Social-environmental, ecological, or culture-based theories partly explain agism and negative social stereotypes about the elderly. Fear of senility that with increasing age along with negative self-expectations that they have become more forgetful sometimes acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Culture plays a critical role in the shaping and appreciation of humor. Culture, context, and content are important ingredients in the appreciation of humor, especially for the aged. Do gender, education, and themes of interest mediate their appreciation or sense of humor? Humor has been even implicated to have a strategic function in influencing romantic chemistry and mate selection (Li et al. 2009).

Sometimes recognized as ethnic humor, the joke, comic, or hilarity is targeted at a skin color, racial, linguistic, religious, minority, or cultural group. Such humor may be distasteful, rudely offensive, or based on stereotypes (Lowe, 1986; Boskin & Dorinson, 1985). The victims of stereotyping tend to use humor as means of revenge against their more powerful detractors. There are many intercultural styles and preferences for humor. In a multi-cultural society, ethnic humor is more prevalent to strengthen or sustain in-group social cohesion. In contemporary culture, ethnic humor is turning digital or online to fill mailboxes (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2015).

Animal models, neurobiological, anthropological and genetic studies, humor in children and some pathological conditions, or in traditional societies, phylogeny, and cognitive archeology have proposed evolution-based theories of humor (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006). The origins of both spontaneous and volitional laughter in non-human primates are located as vocal signals for social interaction between organisms (Bryant & Aktipis, 2014). Further, tickling-induced laughter is shown to be homologous between great apes and humans with phylogeny continuity (Davila-Ross, Owren, & Zimmermann, 2009). Playful teasing as part of pre-verbal humor is typically seen in human infants as well as non-human primates including chimpanzees, apes, gorillas, bonobos, and orangutans (Eckert, Winkler, & Cartmill, 2020). The onset of bipedal locomotion, increased breath control, vocalization of short simple utterances, and inward-outward breath in chimpanzees are recognized as turning points in the human evolution of humor (Provine, 2017). Tickle-induced laughter has been experimentally recorded in rats (Panksepp, 2007; 2000; Panksepp & Burgdorf, 2003). The evolution of language generally and humor specifically have been viewed as a vocal extension of physical grooming that promotes bonding (Vaid, 1999). Tickling as a menacing threatening approach followed by a non-threatening contact is described as part of the false alarm theory in the neurology and evolution of humor (Ramachandran, 1998). The evolutionary perspectives on humor are being recently used even to explain modern advertising (Eisend, 2018). A synthetic bio-cultural approach is sometimes proposed to explain the origins and evolution of humor (Gervais & Wilson, 2005).

A relatively new Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT; Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010) explains why particular types of humor impact student learning positively or negatively. This theory combines elements of incongruity-resolution, disposition, and persuasive functions of instructor-generated humor to result in increased student learning, retention of information, and others do not. Other-disparaging and offensive humor did not correlate with pupil learning (Tsukawaki & Imura, 2020; Segrist & Jupp, 2015). Another Enlightenment Theory of Humor attempts to reconcile the tenets of Incongruity, Repression /Release/ Relief and Superiority theories since they cannot account for all the aspects of humor. This theory covers failed humor, motivation for humor, literary and music humor, the relationship between wit and humor, tickling, laughing, gas, and sadistic humor (Karlen, 2016). There is timing, nuances, tone of voice, gestures, and artistry in joke-telling. The botched joke-telling by an amateur can evoke peals of laughter when narrated by a professional. The Benign Violation Theory of Humor (Veatch, 1998) claims that we laugh when something is violated-such as morals, social codes, norms, or personal dignity, or when there is the transgression of taboos. This theory states that distance facilitates humor in the case of tragedies by decreasing threat as closeness facilitates humor in the case of mishaps by maintaining some sense of threat (McGraw et al. 2012).

A contemporary linguistic perspective called Raskin's Linguistic-Semantic Theory (1985) holds that verbal humor is compatible with two different semantic scripts which are opposite in several ways: obscenity/no obscenity, violence/ no violence, no money/money, death/life, bad/good. Each of these opposite relationships has moral and effective content. This theory is strictly limited to jokes, viewed as linguistic forms, or texts. It does not deal with humor that makes no use of linguistic means -- sight gags and slapstick, for example. Humor is not restricted to jokes (Krikmann, 2006; Raskin, 1985).

Theories on Therapeutic Humor showcase humor as a form of environmental stimulation to foster positive feelings, generate pleasure points, defuse anger or frustration, reduce anxiety, increase morale, and mitigate pain, stress, and mood disturbances. There are separate joke books composed for different target groups. Humor has been applied as a therapeutic device for several chronic conditions in the aged and elderly, such as Alzheimer's Disease, Parkinson's Disease, cancer, and stress, and for reducing worries or tension. Special mention is to be made on the adaptive function of humor with aging. Research suggests that the elderly enjoy humor more than younger people, although the amount of laughter exhibited by them is smaller and they have increasing difficulty in understanding jokes-especially those

with aggressive content (Greengross, 2013: Daniluk & Borkowska, 2017; Kruse & Prazak, 2006). Unlike the young or middle-aged, the smiles to gaffe clips of older adults are fewer (Stanley, Lohani, & Isaacowitz, 2014).

In sum, there is no single universal theory of humor. As in the proverbial blind men and the elephant, no theory, definition, or perspective on humor has universal appeal or acceptance (Fedakar, 2020; Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017). This review seeks to highlight the various theories with hope that more empirical data-backed evidence-based research in the future in this less opted area of study.

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