



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Clinical Psychology

HUMOR IN DISABILITIES AND IMPAIRMENTS

KEY WORDS: Deaf Humor- Gelatology-Rights Based-Coping Humor

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ABSTRACT

The theme of comedy, humor, laughter, and disability has a long, complex, and uneasy relationship. There are many jokes, narratives, images, and limericks that denigrate the disabled. Sometimes, the affected people have themselves taken to humor for showcasing their experiences, constructing or deconstructing the several stereotypes that are held by unaffected people. Many disability conditions ranging from sensory, physical, and developmental are misunderstood or doubted whether these persons are capable of understanding or producing humor at all. This thematic review covers a bibliography of nearly 75 peer-reviewed published research papers on humor in disability. The coverage extends from the 1980s when deaf humor vis-a-vis sign language was the focus, change in the 1990s to doubts about whether disability conditions like autism are capable of humor production or appreciation at all. The narration concludes that disability humor needs to be further explored as a therapeutic device to debunk stereotypes or stigma and ameliorate the well-being and quality of life of the affected people, their carers as well as professionals working with them.

INTRODUCTION

Society restrains people from laughing at persons with disabilities (PWDs). The disabled have been sources of amusement and humor (Goggin, 2010; Albrecht, 1999). There is little that is intrinsically humorous about having a disability. Such humor is sometimes called "disabling humor." The fear of disabled or of becoming one like them manifests as disguised jokes conveying hostility and hatred. The use of "disablist" terms like idiots, midgets, morons, imbeciles, fools, insane, or crazy is prevalent in the guise of jokes. It is not only the affected person, but also their carers and professionals who treat them have always been the butt of several jokes (Baker, Wessely, & Openshaw, 2016; Trent, 1991).

Throughout history in the west, PWDs have experienced oppression of various kinds by the majority of able-bodied healthy persons. Physical abuse, isolation, segregation, maltreatment, euthanasia of malformed infants and sexual abuse of women with disabilities are common instances of oppression leading to the evolution of disability humor. Since disability is associated with tragedy, it is doubted whether PWDs are capable of humor production and appreciation. Disability humor is recently being argued as a social creation by a dominant group to convey to the oppressed group that they are not experiencing oppression. A way the PWDs react to oppression is with humor (Lockyer, 2015). Nowadays, there is a growing presence or prominence of stand-up comedians with disabilities appearing in films, on stage, or on social media. Journalistic attention is being given to this phenomenon. Academic research on this genre is sparse (Coogan & Mallett, 2013; Mallett, 2010; Reid, Stoughton, & Smith, 2006). While there is a tradition of disabled humorists in the West, in the Indian scenario, many gods or kings with disabilities are depicted and accepted as natural creations. Natural fools are believed to be born with a physical or mental disability, and put in asylums (like animals in modern zoos), solely for humorous entertainment for the rich in society. Court jesters, often small-sized persons, were given the prerogative of mocking the king or saying things to their superiors through humor that others feared uttering. As professional fools, some trained clowns were used for entertainment (Lipscomb, 2011; Von Bernuth, 2006). Many tribes like the Todas of Andaman Islands considered it a sin to harm PWDs by neglect, ridicule, or jokes about them.

Among the various theories (Venkatesan, 2022a), superiority, incongruity, and relief theories are invoked to explain disability humor. A PWD can be both at the giving or receiving end of a hilarious transaction (Lintott, 2016). Wherein cultures disability is believed to be the result of sins committed in previous births by themselves or their parents,

comical portrayal of the disabled is justified as settlement of scores by supernatural forces. Using **incongruity theory**, a small person may joke about how tall he is and the incompatibility between his actual height and how tall he claims to be might be funny. Freud's **psychoanalytically oriented relief theory** views disability humor as catharsis for repressed emotions and anxieties. They explain that the disabled laugh to keep from crying about their predicament.

Recent reviews on the scientific study of humor recognized as gelatology have targeted children and the elderly (Venkatesan, 2022b; 2022c). Studies on humor vis-a-vis disabilities are of recent origin. In a comprehensive bibliographic listing of over 800 humor studies, a descriptive narrative on the psycho-dynamics of humor as seen in institutionalized inmates with intellectual disabilities emerged as one of the first research papers on the theme (Pustel, Sternlicht, & Siegel, 1972). This was followed by studies on the use of sign language in the production and appreciation of humor (Sanders, 1986). Dark disability humor can be an integral part of the disability culture. PWDs regularly make jokes about themselves. Disability humor can many times get blended with sexist, caste, religious, or language-based stereotypes. Thus, the target of the humor can be an ugly-looking woman of lower intellect belonging to an inferior caste. Fear and horror for the disfigured bodies, of the sociopath, insane, inhuman, and monstrous sometimes turn into humor. Sexuality or the absence of it in PWDs is a frequent theme for humor. Most stereotypes believe that these individuals are asexual, under or over-sexed creatures. Times have changed with the emergence of rights-based models and the recognition of disability as a form of diversity. Many audience members refuse to laugh at disability comics and argue that it is an infringement on their rights (Coogan & Mallett, 2013). Humor is being used to promote positive attitudes towards PWDs (Anesi, 2018; Shain, 2013).

DISABILITY ART, CINEMA, MEDIA, & LITERATURE

Humor is a common ingredient across disability arts, cinema, media, and literature. Contrasting traditional art, disability art refers to artwork created by or intended primarily for an audience with disabilities. Their theme is typically based on social models and focuses on disability. Among the performing arts, in the contemporary cinematic narratives on disability, there are several instances of the characters being portrayed as comical. A mute character with a speech impairment is exploited for creating situations of laughter. Sometimes the threesome of a deaf, blind, and dumb lead characterless are created to lend several events of laughter even as the protagonist portrayed as a villain in the movie mocks or refers to them by their disability rather than their

names (Pandey & Singh, 2022; Rabindranath & Prasad, 2018; Venkatesan, Gupta, & Yashodharakumar, 2015).

Comic strips television shows, soap operas, art and dance presentations have severally used humor. The ableist patriarchal culture of the majority combined with class, caste, and gender becomes the worst concoction for disability humor (Chaturvedi, 2019). It can be anybody's guess what effects such portrayals convey about disabilities to an average unaffected viewer (Wilde, 2018; Berger, 2016; Ljuslinder, 2014; Noonan, 2014; Smedema, Ebener, & Grist-Gordon, 2012). When it comes to appreciation of humor in art, no differences are reported between matched samples of hearing and hard of hearing or deaf students in their understanding of comical cartoons (Luckner & Yarger, 1997). Available notes on humor in the literature about children with disabilities insist that they can not only appreciate but also themselves able to produce various types of humor (McGrail & Rieger, 2014).

AUTISM, INTELLECTUAL, & DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

Humor related to disability in children's literature shows how mentally disabled people are used as "representative fools," to be targeted as objects of fun through humorous characterization. Additionally, mainstream media, including television, comics, cartoons, films, and graphic books portray them as villainous, comical, or unholy characters (Chadwick & Platt, 2018; Zillmann & Bryant, 1988). A comparison of the sense of humor and attitudes between 10-11-year-old children with mild intellectual disabilities and unaffected healthy controls has shown that they feel uncomfortable in humorous situations, laugh more, and find jokes irritating (Hyeri, Mina, & Kyungsoon, 2021; Degabriele & Walsh, 2010; Reddy, Williams, & Vaughan, 2001; Rieger, 2005). There were no significant differences between phonological and lexical humor in children with articulation disorders although they had more difficulties with understanding riddles (Abrahamsen, 2004).

Children with autism are noted to outwardly show characteristically different types of laughter or humor appreciation (Silva et al. 2017; Weiss et al. 2013; Hudenko et al. 2009), which is shared to an extent by their tending-toward alexithymia parents as well (Aydin, Campus, & Kadıköy, 2014). They have deficits in comprehension of double-meaning jokes but can be successfully taught using systematic teaching procedures to improve humor appreciation and comprehension (Jackson et al. 2021). Can these children distinguish lies or deception from joking? There is evidence that these children use second-order reasoning in making such distinctions (Leekam & Prior, 1994). Pexman et al (2011; 2005) found children with high functioning autism were as accurate as typically developing children in judging speaker intent for ironic criticisms, but differed in judgment latency, eye gaze, and humor evaluation as well as processing strategy for irony comprehension-one that resulted in a less accurate appreciation of the social functions of irony. When children with autism were provided contextual cues or support for verbal humor processing, greater subjective appreciation of the riddle tasks were observed (Purser et al. 2021). Humor training as a whole is shown to increase comprehension and appreciation of humor among adolescents with autism (Wu et al. 2016).

The ability to know another mind, a sense of interpersonal timing, and abstract thinking are key elements in one the capacity to tell a joke. Joke-work, like dream-work, was attempted to be explained using reflections from work with Asperger's children (Brown, 2016). The predictable course of humor development in healthy children, viewed as a left hemispheric function, is affected in children on the autism spectrum, ADD/ADHD, epilepsy, and those with nonverbal learning disabilities (Suits et al., 2012; Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010; 2008). If the speed of humor development is slow

in children with intellectual disabilities, by contrast, the rates appear to be doubly quick in gifted children of 7-9 years operating at advanced humor levels of age 12 (Bergen, 2009).

Alexithymia is a sub-clinical phenomenon involving a lack of emotional awareness and difficulty in naming, identifying, or describing one's feelings. Alexithymia is not autism as it is sometimes confused. It is not even counted as mental health disorder or recognized as one such condition under DSM-5. They can feel all the emotions but are only unable to articulate them. Despite being a debatable entity, the persons measured high on alexithymia are reported to show affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor styles (Dehghani et al. 2018; Atkinson et al. 2015; Páez, Mendiburo-Seguel, & Martínez-Sánchez, 2013).

DEAF

Deaf humor is a culturally based phenomenon wherein the deaf person is the protagonist and sometimes the jokes are at the expense of hearing people. It is a means by which a culturally oppressed group finds amusement by retaliating against a dominant hearing group. Deaf people deal with oppression through humor. Knowledge of sign language and knowledge of what it is to be deaf is crucial to appreciate this humor. It is sometimes asked whether deaf people laugh. Studies show that they laugh even more than the hearing audience with the young than older and females outdoing the males (Napoli & Sutton-Spence, 2019; Provine & Emmorey, 2006; Provine, 2001; Erting et al. 1994; Rutherford, 1983).

Comparative studies on laughter produced by congenitally deaf and normally hearing college students have found striking similarities in aspects like degree of voicing, mouth position, air-flow direction, temporal features, relative amplitude, fundamental frequency, and formant frequencies. This confirms the presumption that laughter is importantly grounded in human biology, and that auditory experience with this vocalization is not necessary (Makagon, Funayama & Owren, 2008). At another level, the deaf-blind were noticed to be at risk during conversations of misconstruing humorous utterances as serious, or being unsure whether their conversation partner has got their joke (Willoughby et al. 2019).

There is humor unique to sign language and the deaf community. The cultures of hearing and deaf people differ and are wide apart. Deaf humor differs with age. While deaf adolescents crack jokes based on mockery, the adults take jabs at hearing individuals. The visual logic behind their humorous signages and non-verbal expressions carrying fewer images may defy the comprehension of the unaffected but their sign language knowing peers enjoy them (Vincent-Durroux, 2020; Klimkova, 2016; Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012; Erting et al. 1994; Bouchaveau, 1994).

BLIND

Jokes or humor targeting the blind is quite common. The comprehension of verbal humor by visually impaired children between 7-15 is shown to be as good as their sighted peers (Tait, 1986; Tait & Ward, 1982). Cross-sectional studies on elders living in community dwellings have shown that the frequency of laughter and the number of opportunities to laugh is directly proportional to their visual status with poor vision having a negative impact and good vision having a positive effect (Inoue et al. 2022). Further, it is shown how humor can be developed using specific strategies in children with visual impairments by giving opportunities to promote their inclusion and mainstreaming (Pagliano, Zambone, & Kelley, 2007). Prekindergarten-level children with language impairments have benefited from the use of humor in classroom settings (Fitzgerald & Craig-Unkefer, 2008).

COPING HUMOR

There is a need for constructive humor vis-a-vis the disabled

wherein they promote self-esteem and mutual support, shift people's perceptions of what it is to be human, create meaningful connections between people, give accurate insights into disability experience, dissuade destructive humor in the name of disability-in short, empower disability comedy. A.k.a. "coping humor" their use is reported across all types of PWDs as well as their families. Humor is used to fend off putdowns, increase self-esteem, or become a way of relieving stress. It is sometimes used to re-ignite their normalcy or sense of autonomy. For others, humor is a means of challenging and resisting when they are ignored, invalidated, brutalized, or abused by a so-called majority able-bodied social system. Persons with partial sight or whole blindness are noted to use comedy as a conscious reflective coping strategy to handle stress, improve resilience, gain social support, overcome negative thoughts, negotiate their relations with the sighted, relieve nervousness, and subvert stereotypes (Bittner, Edwards, & George, 2010).

Studies on families of children with disabilities show that humor serves the same functions as with unaffected healthy controls. Humor is means of releasing negative emotions under stress, developing optimistic thinking, learning and connecting, a form of problem-solving, communication, an expression of freedom, and discovering oneself (Rieger & McGrail, 2015; 2013; Rieger, 2004). Adaptive humor styles (self-enhancing and affiliative) are associated with enhanced mental health outcomes among parents of children with disabilities (Fritz, 2020). Therapeutic clowns have been especially useful for the amelioration of children with disabilities (Kingsnorth, Blain, & McKeever, 2011).

SUMMARY

In sum, this thematic review covers a bibliography of nearly 75 peer-reviewed published research papers on humor in disability. The coverage extends from the earliest research in 1980s when deaf humor and sign language were in focus. This changed in the 1990s to doubts about PWDs like autism are capable of humor production or appreciation at all. About half of these publications have appeared in the last decade thereby testifying the increasing interest of researchers on this subject. Still, empirical research on humor in disabilities and impairments is an unexplored needed area of work. Available publications in this area are usually a small subset of the larger explorations on humor in the general populations. They are mostly qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory in nature. There are several misconceptions on whether humor can be part of the plate for servings in PWDs who are viewed as pitiable sufferings.

CONCLUSION

In sum, a comprehensive progressive rights-based approach and meta-analytic reviews are needed for future large-scale studies to synthesize the fragmented or piece-meal evidence that is currently available in this area. Further, the theme of humor vis-a-vis mental illness and nervous disorders-also roped in as another category of disabilities is intentionally excluded in this review for a separate examination in this series of papers.

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