Too Close for Comfort, or too Far to Care?

Finding Humor in Distant Tragedies and Close Mishaps

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Abstract

Humor is ubiquitous and often beneficial, but its antecedents have been debated for millennia. We examine two factors that jointly influence perceptions of humor: the degree to which a stimulus is a violation (tragedy vs. mishap) and one’s perceived distance from the stimulus (far vs. close). Five studies then show that tragedies (which feature severe violations) are more humorous when temporally, socially, hypothetically, or spatially distant, but that mishaps (which feature mild violations) are more humorous when psychologically close. Although prevailing theories of humor have difficulty explaining the interaction revealed in the studies, the result is consistent with an account that proposes that humor occurs when a violation simultaneously seems benign. A benign violation account suggests that distance facilitates humor for tragedies by reducing threat, but closeness facilitates humor for mishaps by maintaining some sense of threat. We discuss implications for theories of humor and psychological distance.

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“Humor is tragedy plus time.” – Mark Twain

“Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die.” – Mel Brooks

Humor is the psychological state characterized by the appraisal that something is funny, the positive emotion of amusement, and the tendency to laugh (Gervais & Wilson, 2005; Martin, 2007; Veatch, 1998). Humor is important. It benefits well-being, facilitates coping, smooths social relationships, attracts attention, and influences consumption and relationship choices (Keltner & Bonanno, 1997; Martin, 2007). The conditions that elicit humor, however, are debated. We inform the debate by examining a factor that comedians, writers, directors, and some humor theorists speculate plays a crucial role in the creation of humor: psychological distance. Contrary to previous evidence, we propose that the effect of distance on humor depends on the extent to which a stimulus is aversive. In accordance with a recent account that suggests humor is created by the perception of a benign violation, we show that although distance increases humor in response to tragedies, it decreases humor in response to milder mishaps. Our research serves as a test between competing accounts of humor and provides evidence that psychological distance reduces threat independent of changes in cognitive construal.

Psychological Distance and Humor

Psychological distance is the subjective set of experiences associated with being close or far away from something (Ross & Wilson, 2002; Van Boven, Kane, McGraw, & Dale, 2010).
There are four commonly accepted forms of distance (Liberman & Trope, 2008): 1) spatial (e.g., a mile is more distant than a foot), 2) social (e.g., a stranger is more distant than a friend), 3) temporal (e.g., a year is more distant than a day), and 4) hypothetical (e.g., an imagined event is more distant than a real event). Psychological distance has multiple properties. Construal level theory illustrates how distance causes people to construe events more abstractly (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2010; Liberman & Trope, 2008). Other evidence suggests another important property of psychological distance: it reduces the extent to which a stimulus is threatening (Mobbs et al., 2007; Williams & Bargh, 2008). For example, people who were spatially distant from a tragic event, such as the 9/11 World Trade Center attack, perceived less threat and experienced less anxiety and post-traumatic stress than people who were spatially close (Blanchard et al. 2004; Huddy et al. 2005). Further, merely priming distance by asking people to plot points far apart rather than close together made reading a violent story less distressing (Williams and Bargh 2008).

Prior research on psychological distance and humor is consistent with the intuitively appealing suggestions of Mark Twain and Mel Brooks: distance helps transform tragedy into comedy. For example, immoral acts, like bestiality, are more amusing to readers primed to feel spatially distant (McGraw & Warren, 2010), disparaging sexist jokes are more amusing to people who are not personally affected (Wolff, Smith, & Murray, 1934), and highly disgusting behavior is more amusing to viewers who take a socially distant perspective (Hemenover & Schimmack, 2007). Although research has yet to explore the effects of hypotheticality or temporal distance, anecdotal evidence suggests similar effects. The popularity of cartoons, like South Park and Looney Tunes, indicates that hypotheticality can make scathing satire and brutal violence humorous. Similarly, the Oscar winning movie Life is Beautiful indicates that even a Nazi
genocide can be a source of humor if enough time has passed. (People also often quip “too soon” when a joke is told shortly after a tragedy.)

Although most prevailing theories of humor do not directly account for the role of psychological distance, some accommodate the view that distance increases humor. Superiority theories, which hold that humor results from an unexpected feeling of triumph, suggest that disparagement is funny when it victimizes someone else or a past self, but not one’s current self (Gruner, 1997; Hobbes, 1651). Reversal theories, which hold that humor occurs when people reinterpret something in a less serious or favorable manner, suggest that psychological distance from real world concerns helps people respond to the reinterpretation with humor (Apter, 1982; Wyer & Collins, 1992). Incongruity theories, which hold that humor results from perceiving a mismatch between expectation and reality (Martin, 2007), typically do not explain how distance influences humor. One version of the theory, however, explicitly proposes that humor requires psychological distance in addition to incongruity (Morreall, 2009). Other versions, which propose that humor occurs when one makes sense of (i.e., “resolves”) an unexpected occurrence (e.g., Suls, 1972) or when one sees something from multiple perspectives (e.g., Koestler, 1964), can accommodate distance effects in a roundabout way using a construal level account of psychological distance. In this view, distance may increase humor because it increases abstract, high-level construals (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010), which makes it easier to hold multiple interpretations (Hong & Lee, 2010).

**Humor in Benign Violations**

We draw from a recent account of humor to make the prediction that the effect of distance depends on the degree to which a stimulus is aversive. Building on work by Veatch
McGraw and Warren (2010) proposed that humor occurs when a violation (i.e., a stimulus that is physically or psychologically threatening) simultaneously seems benign (i.e., okay). Evolutionarily, violations likely originated as physical threats from attackers or unpredictable ecological disasters (Buss, 2009; Gervais & Wilson, 2004; Ramachandran, 1998). As humans began to develop a sense of self, a complex worldview, interdependent societies, and communication skills, violations likely expanded to include identity threats and behaviors that break logical, cultural, social, conversational, and linguistic norms (McGraw and Warren, 2010; Veatch, 1998). The account posits that the potentially negative experience inherent in a violation generates humor when the apparent threat is perceived to be safe or acceptable.

The account suggests that seemingly disparate humor-inducing stimuli are alike in that they are perceived to be benign violations: play fighting and tickling are mock attacks, puns violate one linguistic or logic norm while adhering to another, and satire presents something that is wrong as if it is not (Veatch, 1998). It also suggests that because humor requires a benign violation, either too much or too little threat impedes humor. Too much threat makes it difficult to perceive a violation as benign; conversely, too little threat makes it difficult to perceive a violation. For example, the laughter typically elicited by play fighting and tickling ceases either when the attack stops (no longer a violation) or becomes too aggressive or prolonged (no longer benign).

Because of the threat-reducing properties of psychological distance, we suggest that distance should increase the humor perceived in highly aversive stimuli (i.e., tragedies) by making the severe violations seem benign (figure 1). Indeed, the evidence suggesting that distance increases humor features highly aversive stimuli (e.g., bestiality, disparaging jokes). In contrast, we propose that distance should have the opposite effect for less aversive, mild
violations because distance eliminates an already low level of threat. Mild violations pose only a small amount of threat, which, even from a close distance, should be easy to perceive as benign. However, increasing distance may make it difficult to perceive any threat in the stimulus, thus transforming it from a more humorous benign violation into a less humorous, purely benign stimulus. In sum, we hypothesize that distance should increase the humor perceived in tragedies, like getting hit by a car, but decrease the humor in mishaps, like stubbing a toe.

Overview

Whereas other humor theories predict that distance makes tragedies more humorous, only a benign violation account predicts that closeness makes mishaps more humorous. Therefore, our inquiry not only proposes a reversal of distancing effects on humor, it also provides a critical test between competing accounts of what makes things funny.

We present five studies that examine humor perceptions in response to stimuli that differ in terms of severity and temporal (study 1 and 2), social (study 3), hypothetical (study 4), and spatial (study 5) distance.

Method

Study 1: Humor then and now

Inspired by the quote attributed to Mark Twain, we investigated the relationship between distance, violation severity, and humor by asking respondents to recall an event that either has become more or less funny over time. If distance increases the humor in severe violations (i.e., tragedies), but decreases the humor in mild violations (i.e., mishaps), then autobiographical events that get funnier over time should feature more severe violations than events that get less
funny over time.

Design and measures. We asked Amazon Mechanical Turk respondents ($N = 70$; 34% female; mean age = 30.2; 30% born in US) to describe an autobiographical event. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Those in the increasing humor condition described “an incident that has become more humorous as time has passed.” Conversely, respondents in the decreasing humor condition described “an incident that has become less humorous as time has passed.” After describing the incident, participants rated their impression of its severity on four seven-point scales anchored by not threatening/threatening, not aversive/aversive, not upsetting/upsetting, and not disturbing/disturbing ($\alpha = .85$). Finally, participants rated the extent to which they considered the incident humorous, both at the time (i.e., then; $\alpha = .90$) and now ($\alpha = .92$), on three seven-point scales anchored by not funny/funny, not humorous/humorous, and not amusing/amusing.

Results. The humor ratings indicated that the manipulation was effective. Respondents in the increasing humor condition, perceived the incident to be more humorous now (i.e., distant; $M = 6.13$, $SD = .92$) than at the time (i.e., close; $M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.70$), $t(39) = 9.23$, $p < .001$. Conversely, respondents in the decreasing humor condition perceived the incident to be less humorous now ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.90$) than at the time ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.59$), $t(33) = -3.50$, $p < .001$.

Importantly respondents also indicated that incidents that became more funny were more severe ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.59$) than incidents that became less funny ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.65$), $F (1, 68) = 12.55$, $p < .001$. Consistent with the idea that severe violations are difficult to see as benign at a close distance, ratings of severity were negatively related to how humorous the incident seemed at the time, $r(72) = -.63$, $p < .001$. However, consistent with the idea that distance makes
it easier to see severe violations as benign, ratings of severity were positively related to how humorous the incident seems now, $r(72) = .37, p < .01$. Figure 2 depicts a spotlight analysis that illustrates how the humorousness of the autobiographical event judged at different times depends on violation severity. Perceived humor is greater for less severe violations (-1 SD) when the event happened, but perceived humor is greater for more severe violations (+1 SD) when the event is judged now.

**Study 2: Reversal due to temporal distance and violation severity**

In our subsequent studies we move away from a retrospective approach by assessing humor perceptions in real time. In study 2 we use an empirical thought experiment to manipulate the time an event occurred and its severity (figure 3). Henceforth, we test whether distance will increase humor for tragedies, but closeness will increase humor for mishaps.

**Design and measures.** As part of a voluntary in-class exercise, we presented undergraduate students ($N = 87$) with the following stimuli (order counterbalanced) and asked “Which of the following situations would you more likely find humorous?”:

- Being hit by a car five years ago.  
- Being hit by a car yesterday.

- Stubbing your toe five years ago.  
- Stubbing your toe yesterday.

**Results.** Consistent with previous evidence, 99% of respondents indicated that a severe violation, getting hit by a car, would be more humorous five years ago than yesterday. However, consistent with our hypothesis, the effect reversed for the mild violation; only 18% indicated that stubbing a toe would be more humorous five years ago than yesterday, $\chi^2(1, N = 87) = 116.1, p < .001$ (figure 4a).
Study 3: Reversal due to social distance and violation severity

Our next three studies continue to test whether the effect of psychological distance on humor depends on whether something is a tragedy or a mishap. The studies feature the remaining forms of distance and new violations.

**Design and measures.** Undergraduate students completed a study ostensibly on social networking services in exchange for course credit. Because the experimental materials originally appeared on a popular website (failbook.com), we only invited participation from students who had not previously seen the stimuli ($N = 90$). The study used a 2 (distance: close, distant; within-subjects) x 2 (violation severity: mild, severe; between-subjects) mixed design.

Participants read an online status update in which a young woman unknowingly donates nearly $2,000 (tragedy) or $50 (mishap) via text messaging (see figure 3 and online supplement for details). We manipulated social distance by having participants rate their perceptions of the posting twice, once imagining the author as “a close friend,” and once imagining her as “someone you don’t know” (order counterbalanced). Participants responded to two questions: “Do you think your friend’s [this stranger’s] posting is funny?” and “Do you think your friend’s [this stranger’s] posting is humorous?” The six-point scale differentiated, 0, _No_ from the remaining five points, which ranged from, 1, _slightly_, to 5, _very_. We combined these two measures to create a measure of perceived humor ($\alpha$’s > .9).

**Results.** A repeated-measures ANOVA with distance as a within-subjects variable and severity and order as between-subjects variables showed the predicted interaction between distance and severity, $F (1, 86) = 20.1, p < .001$ (figure 4b). Whereas a stranger accidentally donating $1,880 was judged more humorous ($M = 2.65, SD = 1.91$) than a friend accidentally donating $1,880 ($M = 2.18, SD = 1.74$), $t(50) = 2.47, p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = .35$, the effect of...
distance reversed when the mistake was less severe. The $50 mistake was judged more
humorous when it afflicted a friend ($M = 2.69, SD = 1.69$) rather than a stranger ($M = 2.00, SD =
1.81$), $t(38) = 2.97, p < .01$, Cohen’s $d = -.48$. The interaction between social distance and
violation severity was similar irrespective of whether respondents first judged a status update
posted by a friend or an update posted by a stranger (distance x severity x order interaction: $F (1,
86) = .07, p > .7$).

**Study 4: Reversal due to hypotheticality and violation severity**

Although our studies reveal a pattern that is consistent with a benign violation account,
they could be criticized on the grounds that the reader is intuiting the relationship because the
distance manipulation is too transparent. Therefore, we next employ a between-subjects design
that disguises the distance manipulation. We also conceptually replicate the pattern using
different stimuli (website photographs), a different type of violation (a physical abnormality),
and a different form of psychological distance (hypotheticality).

**Design and measures.** Undergraduate students ($N = 67$) completed the study in exchange
for course credit. The study used a 2 (distance: close, distant; between-subjects) x 2 (violation
severity: severe, mild; within-subjects) mixed design.

Participants received a booklet titled “Judging Website Content.” Participants in the close
condition read about a website, Realphotos.net, that “displays real pictures” that “have not been
altered using image design software.” Participants in the distant condition viewed similar
instructions, except the website was named “Fakephotos.net” and participants were told that the
“website displays fake pictures,” that “have been altered using image design software.” Next,
participants judged the humor of pictures portraying a severe abnormality, a man with his finger
protruding from his eye socket, or a mild abnormality, a man with a frozen beard (figure 3; order
counterbalanced). Participants rated their perceptions of humor using the scales described in
study 3.

**Results.** A repeated-measures ANOVA with severity as a within-subjects variable and
distance and order as between-subjects variables again showed the predicted interaction between
distance and severity, $F(1, 62) = 10.25; p < .01$ (figure 4c). Whereas the highly aversive image
was directionally more humorous when it was perceived to be fake than real (fake condition: $M = 1.50$, $SD = 1.35$; real condition: $M = 1.01$, $SD = 1.31$), $t(64) = 1.49$, $p = .14$, Cohen's $d = .37$, the
less aversive image was significantly more humorous when it was perceived to be real than fake
(fake condition: $M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.40$; real condition: $M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.09$), $t(64) = -2.16$, $p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = -.53$. The effect did not depend on the presentation order of the pictures
(distance x severity x order interaction: $F(1, 62) = .21$, NS).

**Study 5: Reversal due to spatial distance and violation severity**

Our final study attempts to replicate the reversal shown in our previous studies using a
subtle manipulation of spatial distance and a fully between-subjects design.

**Design and measures.** The study used a 2 (distance: close, distant) x 2 (violation
severity: severe, mild) between-subjects design. Respondents ($N = 350$; 50% female; mean age =
48.7) recruited from an online survey panel viewed one of the two images from study 4. We
manipulated perceived spatial distance by varying the size and position of the image relative to
the background. In the “close” [“distant”] condition, the image was approximately 2.5” x 3”
[1.5” x 1.7”] and appeared towards the left [right] side of the page (for illustrative purposes,
figure 3 shows the images in both positions; see online appendix for stimulus materials). We
measured humor using the scales described in study 3.

**Results.** Older respondents generally perceived less humor in the images, $b = -.017$, $t(345) = -3.65, p < .001$. Therefore, we included age as a covariate in our analysis. Replicating previous studies, an ANCOVA revealed a significant crossover interaction between distance and severity, $F(1, 345) = 7.47, p < .01$ (figure 4d). Whereas the highly aversive image was more humorous when it looked far away (distant condition: $M = .90$, $SD = 1.42$; close condition: $M = .57$, $SD = 1.02$), $t(345) = 1.90, p = .06$, Cohen’s $d = .27$, the mildly aversive image was more humorous when it looked closer (distant condition: $M = 1.33$, $SD = 1.36$; close condition: $M = 1.71$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(345) = -1.97, p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = -.28$.

**General Discussion**

We broaden our understanding of what makes things funny by showing that humor perceptions depend on both psychological distance from a potentially funny stimulus and the extent to which the stimulus seems aversive. Five studies show that psychological distance increases the humor perceived in more aversive, severe violations (i.e., tragedies), but that closeness increases the humor perceived in less aversive, mild violations (i.e., mishaps). We found this reversal across various forms of distance, types of violations, and experimental designs. The observed interaction between psychological distance and violation severity is not easily accounted for by prevailing accounts of humor or psychological distance. The interaction, however, is consistent with both a benign violation account of humor (McGraw & Warren, 2010; Veatch, 1998) and a threat reduction account of psychological distance (Mobbs et al., 2007; Veatch, 1998) and a threat reduction account of psychological distance (Mobbs et al., 2007; Veatch, 1998).
Psychological Distance is More Than Construal Level

Our research provides additional evidence that psychological distance is capable of influencing judgments independent of cognitive construals (Van Boven et al., 2010; Williams & Bargh, 2008; Williams, Stein & Galguera, 2011). Psychological distance often influences the cognitive construal of a situation: closeness facilitates concrete, low-level construal and distance facilitates abstract, high-level construal (Trope & Liberman, 2010; Liberman & Trope, 2008). A construal level account of distance can possibly explain how distance makes severe violations funnier by making it easier to see multiple interpretations (Hong & Lee 2010), but has difficulty parsimoniously explaining how closeness makes mild violations funnier. Changes in cognitive construal are important consequences of psychological distance, but they are not the only consequences. Psychological distance also reduces threat.

Conceptualizing Humor as Benign Violations

The current research improves our understanding of what makes things funny by using a benign violation account to generate novel predictions about the effect of psychological distance on humor. The benign violation hypothesis integrates broad insights from a wide range of theories into three conditions (McGraw & Warren, 2010; Veatch 1998). Several humor theories propose humor is associated with negative elements found in the violation condition, including forbidden sexual and aggressive drives (e.g., Freud, 1928), disparagement (e.g., Gruner, 1997), diminishment (e.g., Wyer & Collins, 1992), and unmet expectations (e.g., Morreall, 2009). Other accounts propose elements similar to the benign condition, including resolution (e.g., Suls,
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1972), playfulness (e.g., Gervais & Wilson, 2005), and safety (e.g., Ramachandran, 1998). Yet others propose elements similar to the simultaneity condition, including bisociation (Koestler, 1964), synergy (e.g., Apter, 1982), and script opposition (e.g., Attardo & Raskin, 1991). Previous theories, however, do not integrate all three conditions.

In addition to explaining the effects of psychological distance on humor, the benign violation hypothesis helps explain when a broad range of stimuli (puns, satire, etc.) are humorous and when they are not. Consider tickling as an example. Because humor theorists often have difficulty explaining why tickling produces laughter, many humor theories argue that laughter provoked by tickling does not qualify as humor (e.g., Wyer & Collins, 1992). A benign violation hypothesis, however, suggests that laughter provoked by tickling is like other humor in that it is caused by a benign violation. Tickling elicits laughter when it poses a harmless physical threat from a trusted aggressor (a benign violation) but not from an untrusted aggressor (not benign) or oneself (no violation).

Another potential advantage of the benign violation hypothesis is that it can help explain the link between many of the antecedents and consequences of humor, which are often examined in isolation. For instance, humor facilitates coping with pain and adversity, smoothes interpersonal conflict and eases criticisms (Martin, 2007), phenomena that are consistent with the notion that humor is associated with violations that are transformed into less threatening and more pleasing benign violations.

A Note about Laughter

Not all instances of laughter indicate humor. For example, laughter can serve purely social communicative functions or occur simply because others are laughing (Provine, 2000).
Although the antecedents of laughter are fairly well understood (see Provine, 2000), we contribute to the more contested question of what makes things humorous. However, because we limited our investigation to humor appraisals and not laughter per se, future work should examine whether severe and mild violations interact with distance to produce laughter. One interesting puzzle is Provine’s (2000) observation that most of the laughter in everyday situations is elicited by seemingly mundane comments that are not apparently funny to an observer (e.g., “Do you have a rubber band?”). A benign violation account suggests the following explanation: Consistent with the saying, “you had to be there,” these interactions could be humorous because they feature extremely mild violations at a very close distance. Any distance from the context, no matter how slight, removes the perception of a violation thereby eliminating the humor for others not involved or even for the same people at a later time.

**Conclusion**

In Leviathan, Hobbes (1651) writes, “Men laugh at the follies of themselves past,” suggesting that psychological distance enhances humor. We demonstrate that Hobbes is only partially correct. Although distance does increase the humor perceived in highly aversive situations, like getting hit by a car, closeness increases the humor perceived in mildly aversive situations, like stubbing a toe. Because distance reduces threat, tragedies fail to be funny when one is too close for comfort, but mishaps fail to be funny when one is too far to care.
References


Figure 1. Predictions of humor perceptions based on the interaction of psychological distance (distant vs. close) and violations severity (tragedy vs. mishap).
Figure 2. Perceived humor for events as a function of when it occurred (then or now) and participants’ reported severity of the event. Black bars depict humor judgments made for events judged to be less severe (-1 Standard deviation) and grey bars depict humor judgments made for events judged more severe (+1 Standard deviation).
**Figure 3.** Abridged stimuli used in studies 2 - 5.
Figure 4. Humor as a function of distance and violation severity in studies 2 - 5. Black bars indicate psychological closeness and grey bars indicate psychological distance. In each panel, the left two bars depict severe violations and right two bars depict mild violations.
SUPPORTING ONLINE MATERIAL

Materials

Study 3

*Severe Violation*

_Cara:_ I’ve texted to Haiti 90999 over 200 times… over $2000 donated to Haiti relief efforts. Join me!

_Noah:_ your parents might not like your cell phone bill this month.

_Cara:_ Wait a second. This doesn’t get added to the phone bill does it? I thought it was just a free thing...

_Noah:_ Cara shoot. No every text is $10!!!

_Cara:_ Oh wow. Are u sure? This isn’t good.

_Aaron:_ Yeah I saw it on the football game. They just bill it to your cell phone.

_Cara:_ Just double checked my texts… total is 188 texts. $1,880 extra on my phone bill!
Mild Violation

Cara: I’ve texted to Haiti 90999 five times… $50 donated to Haiti relief efforts. Join me!

Noah: your parents might not like your cell phone bill this month.

Cara: Wait a second. This doesn’t get added to the phone bill does it? I thought it was just a free thing...

Noah: Cara shoot. No every text is $10!!!

Cara: Oh wow. Are u sure? This isn’t good.

Aaron: Yeah I saw it on the football game. They just bill it to your cell phone.

Cara: Just double checked my texts… total is 5 texts. $50 extra on my phone bill!
Study 5

Severe Violation – Far
Severe Violation – Close
Mild Violation – Far
Mild Violation - Close