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APPRECIATION OF HUMOR

Humor appreciation is a psychological response that occurs when a situation or a stimulus is perceived to be humorous. The situations or stimuli can be quite varied, ranging from the physical (tickling, slapstick) to the intellectual (jokes, witticisms) to the absurd (black comedies, Internet memes). Appreciating something as humorous produces at least one of three responses: behavioral (laughing), cognitive (judging something as “funny”), or emotional (experiencing the positive emotion of amusement). Although any one response indicates humor appreciation, two or more suggests greater appreciation. For example, a person who finds a pun funny, feels amused, and laughs would be experiencing more humor than a person who only judges the pun as funny.

For thousands of years, scholars, entertainers, and everyday people have tried to explain what leads to humor appreciation. The resulting theories take on many names (incongruity, superiority, release, etc.) and highlight varying eliciting conditions. A broad examination of the literature reveals four commonly proposed conditions: (1) surprise, (2) simultaneity, (3) a violation, and (4) a benign appraisal.

Surprise

Most people believe that humor appreciation occurs when something is unexpected—an idea often labeled incongruity theory. Blaise Pascal wrote, “Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees.” (Note: The term *incongruity* is loosely defined and also describes other conditions below.) A major limitation of humor theories based on surprise is that many surprises—for instance, getting mugged in broad daylight—do not produce humor. Another limitation is evidence that some jokes, gags, stories, and films remain funny even after they cease to be novel. Finally, empirical studies reveal that jokes are more humorous when their punch lines are *less* surprising.

Simultaneity

A common proposal suggests that humor appreciation requires holding contrasting interpretations at the same time. The condition goes by many names, including incongruity, synergy, bisociation, juxtaposition, and script opposition. James Beattie advocated for simultaneity when he wrote, “Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage.” Consider this joke: *Did you hear about the guy whose left side was cut off? He’s all right now.* Simultaneity is present in the sense that the punch line can be interpreted both to mean that the victim has recovered or that only the right side of his body remains.

Simultaneity sometimes produces art or innovation instead of humor. For example, consumers considered the first smartphones, which combined previously disparate cell phones and Internet browsers, cool and useful rather than funny. Other times, instances of simultaneity seem tragic rather than humorous. For example, a surgeon who is a serial killer both saves lives and takes lives but would likely inspire fear rather than humor. Consequently, many theorists argue that not all instances of simultaneity produce humor. For example, Victor Raskin suggests that humor occurs in verbal stimuli that feature specific oppositions, such as good and bad, living and dead, wealth and poverty, and acting slutty and prudish.

Violations

Many humor theories make the counterintuitive suggestion that humor requires something potentially negative like a well-timed insult or slipping on a banana peel. Mark Twain articulated the idea when he wrote in *Following the Equator*, “the secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow.” Humor theories discuss a variety of negative antecedents of humor, including something bad or demeaning happening to someone else (superiority theory); the release of repressed sexual, aggressive, and other antisocial drives (Sigmund Freud’s theory); reinterpreting an initial impression as less valued than it at first seemed (reversal theory); and perceiving a threat (false-alarm theory). Each of these negative antecedents is an example of a violation, or something that threatens one’s sense of how things should be.

Violations include both physical threats like violence and disease as well as identity threats like

negative stereotypes and humiliating behaviors. Violations also include social and cultural taboos (e.g., bad manners) as well as breaches of logic (e.g., things that do not make sense), communication (e.g., irony), and linguistic (e.g., an unusual accent) norms. A violation is not the same as saying something is abnormal or that it differs from expectations. To qualify as a violation, it must part from expectations or the norm in a negative way. As with the previous conditions, violations do not always produce humor appreciation. Contracting syphilis is a violation, but it would probably not be humorous.

A Benign Appraisal

Most humor theories acknowledge that the aforementioned conditions are not enough to produce humor and require one or more of the following: a playful motivational state, resolution, misattribution, safety, distance, or low commitment. Although often described separately, each concept is similar in that it makes it easier to perceive a situation or stimulus as sensible, acceptable, OK, or, in other words, benign.

Playful Motivational State

Theorists who take an evolutionary approach often describe humor as a response to play. Laughter observed in apes, for example, typically occurs during nonserious activities like play fighting and tickling. Play refers to a state in which people are disinterested in things that otherwise seem serious, something psychologist Michael Apter (1982) calls a paratelic state, where people are concerned with immediate pleasure rather than long-term goals. A playful motivational state generally facilitates humor appreciation. For example, playful cues, such as happy music or animated frogs, increase the humor perceived in surprising ads.

Resolution

Theorists who contend that humor comes from something that is unexpected often argue that humor appreciation requires that the surprise be explained, or resolved. By making sense of something that initially seems illogical, misleading, or incorrect, resolution can elicit humor appreciation from stimuli that might otherwise seem confusing or frightening. Consider this joke: “Why do gorillas have big nostrils? Because they have big fingers!” The otherwise illogical relationship between finger and nostril size can be resolved by recognizing that gorillas are notorious nose pickers. Resolution is

most frequently described in the context of canned jokes (setup then punch line), but it can be defined as any alternative explanation capable of justifying, explaining, or making something that seems illogical, surprising, or wrong seem appropriate.

Misattribution

Theorists who suggest that humor comes from demeaning, aggressive, sexual, or otherwise taboo behaviors often argue that these violations are more humorous if the source of humor is misattributed to something socially acceptable. Freud, for example, argued that jokes contain linguistic or logical tricks (i.e., joke work) that disguise the provocative elements of a joke and allow the antisocial aspects of the joke to seem humorous. Consider this joke: “Two cannibals are eating a clown. One says to the other, ‘Does this taste funny to you?’” Rather than attribute the humor to the taboo act (cannibalism), the audience can instead attribute it to the double meaning of the phrase “does this taste funny.”

Safety

Theorists who advocate arousal-safety or false-alarm explanations of humor suggest that cues that a situation is safe can help transform otherwise threatening or alarming stimuli into humorous ones. For example, whereas the prospect of being assaulted with a large knife would likely seem terrifying, the prospect of being assaulted with a safe, harmless object like a feather or a wet noodle might seem humorous. Building on this idea, several theorists have argued that one function of laughter is to signal to others that a situation is safe.

Distance

Theorists from several different perspectives have suggested that a real or perceived sense of feeling removed from something unexpected, demeaning, disgusting, or otherwise aversive can facilitate humor appreciation. Things that seem far away due to physical distance, social distance, the passage of time, or an absence of reality feel less threatening; therefore, distance may facilitate humor appreciation by increasing felt safety. Recently, empirical studies have supported this assertion by showing that people experience more humor in highly aversive incidents—for instance, losing a lot of money or getting hit by a car—when the incidents occurred in the distant past and victimized strangers were hypothetical or appeared farther away.

Commitment

Theorists who argue that humor comes from disparagement or other types of violations highlight how not being committed to a norm that is being violated or to a person being demeaned can increase humor appreciation. For example, insulting ethnic jokes are funnier to people who care little for the well-being of the disparaged race, just as taboo religious behaviors are funnier to people who are less religious. As with other benign appraisals, an absence of commitment makes it easier to accept behaviors that break a norm or disparage a person.

Integrating Conditions: The Benign Violation Hypothesis

Most humor theories recognize that humor appreciation requires more than one of the preceding conditions. However, they disagree on which mix is best. For example, superiority theories argue that humor requires a violation, surprise, and either social or temporal distance, whereas surprise (i.e., incongruity) theories typically suggest that the surprise must be accompanied by a playful state, resolution, safety, or distance. A promising recipe for humor appreciation comes from Thomas Veatch (1998). According to his account, which is also referred to as the benign violation hypothesis, humor appreciation occurs when and only when a person appraises something as a violation, appraises the violation as benign, and both of the appraisals occur simultaneously.

Because a violation appraisal, a benign appraisal, and the ability to experience both simultaneously vary substantially across individuals, cultures, and contexts, the same stimulus or situation may seem funny to some people at one time, but not to other people or even to the same people at a different time. The benign violation hypothesis identifies three possible reasons humor may fail. One possibility is that the person may not perceive a violation. In this case, everything seems normal or good rather than funny. The second possibility is that a person may perceive a violation but not see it as benign (i.e., a malign violation). Malign violations typically seem unambiguously wrong, bad, disturbing, or confusing rather than humorous. Finally, humor may fail even when a person both sees a violation and appraises it as benign because the appraisals do not occur at the same time (i.e., there is no simultaneity). In this case, a person can logically see the two interpretations but does not intuitively experience both. For example, consider

explaining a joke to someone who doesn't get it at first. The explanation may help the audience see both the violation and benign elements in the joke but fail to produce laughter and amusement. Surprise likely facilitates humor in many situations by making it easier to simultaneously perceive something as both a violation and benign.

By incorporating the four conditions most frequently discussed in other humor theories (i.e., a benign appraisal, a violation, simultaneity, and surprise), the benign violation hypothesis provides a plausible, general explanation of humor appreciation. Additionally, it suggests several unique predictions. One is that moral violations, or things people consider wrong, may produce mixed emotions of both humor and negative feelings when the violation simultaneously seems benign. Indeed, recent experiments illustrate that taboo behaviors tend to elicit both amusement and disgust when the behavior seems harmless and when the person feels distant or not strongly committed to the violated norm. An example was an experiment involving reactions to a scenario in which a man rubbed his bare genitals on his pet kitten; the scenario provoked disgust in nearly all participants; but it was more likely to also cause amusement in participants if they were told that the kitten was not harmed. Recent studies also support a second new prediction: The effect of psychological distance on humor appreciation depends on the extent to which a stimulus is threatening or aversive (i.e., a violation). Distance increases the humor perceived in tragedies, for example, falling into an open sewer by making the severe violation seem more benign, but distance reduces the humor perceived in milder mishaps, as in stumbling on a curb, by completely eliminating the perceived violation. Thus, the benign violation hypothesis explains why "you have to be there" to appreciate the humor in milder mishaps, but tragedies become more humorous over time or when afflicting someone else.

Caleb Warren and A. Peter McGraw

See also Humor Mindset; Humor Production; Mirth; Psychology

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ARABIC CULTURE, HUMOR IN

In a broad sense, Arabic culture includes all kinds of literary and artistic production in Arabic. This includes also Islamic religious literature, such as the Qur'an and statements ascribed to the prophet Muhammad.

In regard to literature, humor is mostly found in jocular tales with satirical or ridiculing features. In these tales, humor is usually connected to the deviation from the ordinary and conventional, which causes relief from the psychological and social restrictions imposed on man. Humorous anecdotes have different Arabic names indicating different qualities that are difficult to be separated from each other. Some of these names are *nādira* for a short, witty amusing anecdote, *ṭurfā* for an elegant anecdote, and *fukāha* for a funny, humorous anecdote. The term *al-adab al-hazlī* (jocular literature) is the most used name for this genre of Arabic literature. In addition, humorous formulations and ironic or funny expressions can also be found in numerous poems and prose texts in the classical and modern period. In order to avoid the critique of religious authorities against entertaining literature not clearly showing articulated moral values, classical authors of Arabic literature tend to combine the jocular element (*hazl*) with seriousness (*jidd*).

While dealing with humor in Arabic culture, one cannot disregard the cultural and historical context, and beyond that, the social and political circumstances, which widely affect the taste of humor. What was considered humorous in earlier Arab societies might well lose this quality in our time, due to

the sheer variability of cultural-historical standards of humor. So is the case, for instance, in regard to jokes that caused caliphs to fall on their backs from laughing; today, such jokes may sound rather silly, vulgar, and disgusting.

Humor in Medieval Arabic Literature

There is a wide range of medieval Arabic literature that uses different forms of humor as stylistic device. One example is *1001 Nights*, where laughter carries the existential weight of saving lives. Similar to the storyteller Shahrazad herself, some of her protagonists have to amuse a ruler by narrating their stories in an exciting and thrilling way. If they manage to make the ruler laugh, they avert their own death sentence. While humor appears as a distinctive way of survival here, it functions as a vehicle of critique addressing social groups and patterns of behavior in the early Abbasid period in the writings of al-Jāhiz (d. 868), known for his sharp observations, comic sense, and satirical arguments. In his famous *Book of Misers* (*Kitāb al-Bukhālā'*), he tells funny stories illustrating the meanness of his greedy protagonists, many of whom are Persians. In doing so, al-Jāhiz seems to indirectly emphasize the proverbial generosity of Arabs. Here and in his ironic letters or treatises about the superiority of the Black races to the White, or expressing his disdain of homosexuality, al-Jāhiz employs humor-generating techniques in order to seriously criticize deep cultural phenomena. Furthermore, the *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008) and al-Harīrī (d. 1122), a specific genre of fictive stories written in rhyme prose, extensively include humorous phrases and satirical descriptions of funny protagonists and events.

As an example for humor in medieval Arabic poems, we can point to the love poetry of the Umayyad 'Umar Ibn Abī Rabī'a (d. ca. 712). Humor and even satire can be found in his verses, including narratives, with which he expresses distance and self-mockery, especially regarding his view on the other gender. Using stylistic techniques, such as exaggeration, funny descriptions, and reversing of roles, 'Umar transcends the conventional style of passionate love poetry through creating an amusing atmosphere. However, it is Abu Nuwas (d. 814) who deserves to be considered the most prominent figure of humorous Arab poetry. In his poems, he expresses his critique of literary customs and social habits. By means of satire, mockery, and irony, he rejects the way pre-Islamic Arab poets traditionally