

Taking humour and laughter seriously: The multi-disciplinary field of humour studies

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Abstract

From the time of Aristotle and Plato, philosophers have speculated about humour and laughter, proposing that *ridere est humanum*. But research has shown that chimpanzees and rats also laugh. Sociologist Norbert Elias believed that laughter evolved as an antidote to aggression; but humour can also be damaging. While studies in neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, literature, performance, history, sociology, religion, health and the emotions all now contribute to our understanding of the functions and consequences of humour, the question of whether humour unites or divides the human race is still open to debate. While humour can assist social cohesion in many ways, depending on cultural context (as some examples of peculiarly Australian uses of humour illustrate), and while its creators and practitioners command attention in daily life, it remains resistant to easy definition.

Introducing humour studies

How does someone come to be studying humour and laughter? Is it really a research field? Or is the idea that humour deserves serious attention merely a joke? These questions confront anyone embarking on this field, as they did the present author when, in 1965, I embarked on my doctoral thesis at University of NSW. My supervisor C. R. B. Quentin, the founder of the National Institute of Dramatic Art who also held the Chair of Drama, told me, “Oh Jessica, don’t study tragedy [my intended subject], study comedy; you’ll never be bored.” He was very right and I am still fascinated by it. Back then, I chose to focus on the commonly despised variety of low comedy or farce — the kind that depends on physical and visual humour rather than on witty dialogue as found in high comedy

and the comedy of manners. There were very few academic historians of the theatre who thought this was important and the typical reaction was that it must be very easy to comprehend such a basic form of drama. However, from a practical and theatrical point of view, it is anything but simple. Quentin himself, a former director with the Old Vic Theatre Company, preferred directing comedy and considered it far more demanding than tragedy: it was difficult to make it succeed, challenging for the actors and even more resistant to analysis on the cold page.

Beginning with a study of the history and theory of European farce across nine different cultures (working mostly in translation), I progressed to teaching comedy at Stanford University as a visiting scholar in the ’70s. Here I was lucky enough to work with famous names in English and Theatre

Studies¹ but also with researchers in psychiatry and human biology.² I joined a research group looking at aggression in animals and humans, because I was perplexed how it is that farce manages to combine being the funniest “laugh-out-loud” type of comedy with being the most physically violent (for example, the films of Buster Keaton or “Roadrunner” cartoons). Despite this, it is universally regarded as harmless — the history of the theatre across many cultures demonstrates that it is not farce but satire that falls foul of the censor. How, I wondered, does farce escape this fate? I have some ideas now, but still not all the answers.

With some of these colleagues and others from the Bay Area, we formed a research group to explore aspects of humour (BAHA, or the Bay Area Humor Association, led by Prof. Bill Fry, Stanford University). In 1976, we learned that the British Psychological Society was holding a conference — a world first — on humour and laughter in Cardiff, Wales (see Figure 1). Two of us (Fry and myself) submitted papers and set off to attend.

Among the riches of this event,³ there was indeed a paper on whether the Welsh have a sense of humour. It was authored by the scholar who has dominated the study of world collections of joke-lore, J. C. H. (Christie) Davies (1941–2017) from Reading University; and concluded that, sadly, they do not, but that they do have a great sense of fun.⁴ What it actually means to have a (good or otherwise) sense of humour has now been

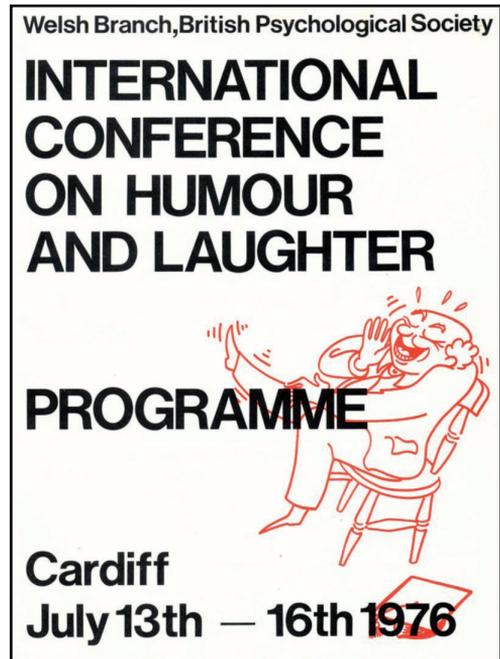


Figure 1: Poster for 1976 conference on humour and laughter convened by the British Psychological Association (Welsh Branch). From the author’s personal collection.

clarified by the work of psychologists such as Willibald Ruch (University of Zürich) and Rod A. Martin (Western Ontario), who have developed a carefully defined set of personality traits associated with different senses and habits of using humour. With no disrespect to Christie Davies, the terminology we were all using in 1976 was very speculative — suggestive of Lewis Carroll and Humpty Dumpty’s famous advice to pay words tuppence extra to mean what you like.

The conference certainly attracted media attention: *Time Magazine* covered it, so did

1 Martin Esslin (1918–2002) on farce, Ron Rebholz (1957–2020), David Riggs and John Bender on Elizabethan and Jacobean comedy, and John C. Loftis Jnr (1919–2012) on Restoration comedy.

2 Burr S. Eichelman in human biology and William (Bill) F. Fry Jnr (1948–2019) in psychiatry.

3 Conference papers published as Chapman and Foot 1976.

4 For the amusing background to this paper and Davies’ connection to Australian academia, see Milner Davis 2017.

The International Herald Tribune. Both treated it with a combination of levity and fascination. Nevertheless, the event effectively founded the field of humour and laughter studies. This was strongly influenced at first by psychology and subsequently by linguistics, when in 1989, at a conference in Hawai'i, the International Society for Humor Studies⁵ was formed. The year before, linguists had launched an academic journal dedicated to humour with Mouton de Gruyter in Berlin. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*⁶ from the beginning had a broad, cross-disciplinary Editorial Board (of which I have long been a member) and editors have included as well as linguists, a sociologist, a psychologist and a computational linguist. The journal strives for transdisciplinarity, or at least multi-disciplinarity, in its scope.

Humour studies in Australia

In 1997, after hosting the 1996 ISHS Conference here in Sydney, I founded the Australasian Humour Studies Network⁷ in order to foster inter-disciplinary dialogue on the topic in the Antipodes. The original seminar was hosted by the University of NSW and comprised seven scholars, from theatre studies, medicine, management, political science, psychology and social work. In February 2022, the Network holds its 28th annual conference with over forty presenters from roughly a dozen different academic disciplines, plus some real-life practitioners of the comic arts, writers, performers

and importantly, the Tasmanian cartoonist, Jon Kudelka. In 2006, Kudelka penned the

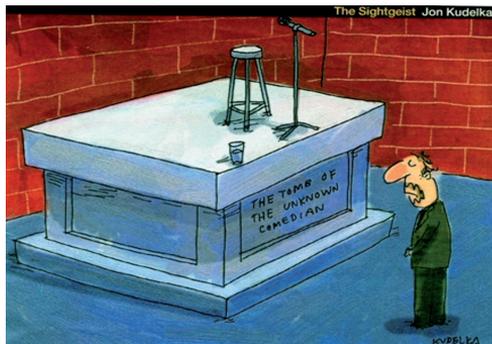


Figure 2: “*Derideo ergo sum*: I take the piss, therefore I am”, by Jon Kudelka. Originally published in *The Australian*, 17–18 June 2006, reproduced with kind permission.

clever tribute to the importance of humour and taking the piss⁸ that appears in Figure 2, playing on René Descartes famous dictum, “*cogito ergo sum*” (1637: Pt IV).

Origins of laughing and smiling

Piss-taking is a significant consideration in relation to Australian culture and national identity (Milner Davis 2009), but Kudelka’s clever parody acknowledges a much broader connection between human nature and experiencing and responding to humour. From the time of Aristotle and Plato, philosophers have speculated about humour and laughter, with many seeing laughter and its associated playfulness as an essential part of human nature; thus, not merely *erare est humanum*, but *ridere est humanum*. Aristotle claimed (in *On the Parts of Animals*, Bk 3: 10)⁹

5 ISHS: <http://humorstudies.org/>

6 <https://www.degruyter.com/journal/key/humr/html>

7 AHSN: <https://ahsnhumourstudies.org/>

8 Until recently in Australia, more euphemistically termed “taking the mickey”, see Milner Davis 2007.

9 For a general account of philosophical tradition and humour, see Morreall 2009.

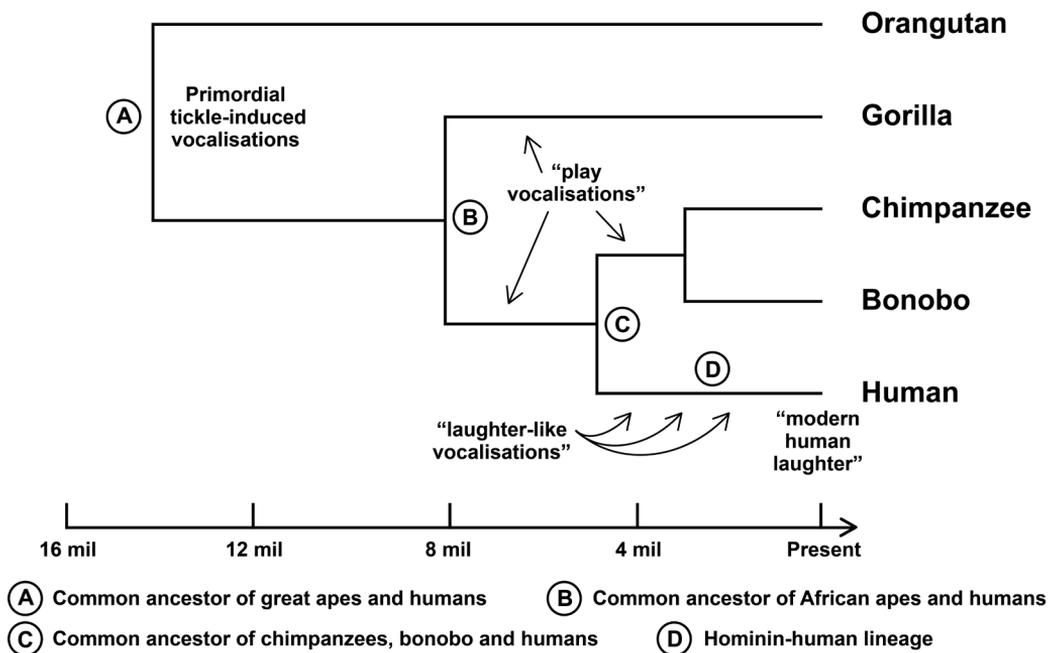


Figure 3: Phylogenetic model of laughter evolution based on acoustic analysis of tickling-induced vocalisations by the Hominidae (after Davila Ross et al. 2009; modified text; from Goddard and Lambert, 2021, in press, reproduced with kind permission).

that laughter was the property of mankind alone, an idea that was still firmly taught in Shakespeare’s time (Screech 2015: 1). But play accompanied by laughter — or at least something acoustically similar — is actually found in animals such as chimpanzees and even rats. Rats have a squeak-laugh when playing (Panksepp and Burgdorff 2003) while chimpanzees pant-laugh. Davila Ross and colleagues (2009; 2010) studied the acoustics of tickle-induced vocalisations in human infants and in juvenile great apes (orangutans, gorillas, chimps and bonobos) in order to reconstruct the likely sequence of human laughter’s phylogenetic emergence. They found that primordial laughter-like vocalisation dates back 10-16 MYA to the last common ancestor of humans and great apes (including orangutans and gorillas); but that true laughter with its extraordinary

range of vocalisations including whoops and cries, and associated behaviours such as tears, hiccups and flopping around from weakness, developed only after the separation of the hominid line from the chimpanzees. This is because true laughter requires the adaptation of the human larynx leading to the development of speech and probably also requires the self-awareness now termed theory of mind.

Nevertheless, evolutionary scientists seem agreed that these early forms of proto-laughter constituted a shared kind of pleasurable “wordless chorusing” that served to reduce stress and promote bonding (Dunbar 2012: 1843). Darwin himself in *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* (2013 [1872]) noted that laughter gives pleasure and that in both humans and apes it is related to social relationships. But he did



Figure 4: Duchenne smile (1) and laughter (2), contrasted with neutral facial expression (3) and Non-Duchenne smile (4). Source: Willibald Ruch and research team, University of Zürich, reproduced with kind permission.

not remark on the contagiousness of laughter, although children (even adults in a silly mood) indulge in spontaneous outbreaks of glee sparked by each other. Hearing laughter stimulates others to laugh (Provine 2000; 2012) and this aspect underlines its “Duchenne” smile and laughter and “non-Duchenne” smiling and laughter. The first is a true smile that engages both the zygomaticus major muscle that lifts the corners of one’s mouth and the orbicularis oculi muscles that lift the cheeks and crinkle the corners of the eyes. The difference between a smile that engages these muscles and one that does not is shown in Figure 4, where Duchenne smiling and laughing are contrasted both with a neutral facial expression and with the non-Duchenne smile.

Named after the 19th century French neurologist Guillaume Duchenne, the true smile is associated with actually experiencing the “feel-good” factor of humour and amusement (Ekman et al. 1990; Platt et al. 2013). It can be a response to either spontaneous play or a stimulus that elicits laughter such as tickling, or decoding a humorous remark. Evolutionary biologists Gervais and Wilson (2005) theorised that the non-Duchenne smile — which can appear quite threatening and cold — is a later development, adapting true smiling to a contrary social purpose

such as politeness, pretence, or even menace, as in the case of the scary eponymous hero of the 2019 film, *The Joker* (directed by Todd Phillips). A non-Duchenne smile is immediately recognizable and disturbingly ambiguous, because it signals a lack of the positive emotions we associate with humour.

Laughter and humour: linguistic and cognitive studies

The nexus between laughter and humour is thus far from simple. If humour is the stimulus, then smiling and laughter of any kind are only part of a wide range of possible responses and they may be deliberately withheld — or even substituted for with a groan or a protest of “Oh, not *that* one again”. In the evolution of humour studies from the 1970s, deeper insight into what it means to experience humour had to await the development of cognitive science with its investigative tools for how the brain’s neural nets respond. This kind of research has definitively put aside one long-standing but simplistic approach to humour: that the experience is purely cognitive and one either “gets” the joke or one doesn’t. This view was strongly held by many linguists, who argued that the vital ingredient in humour is not its playfulness (as advocated by anthropologists and folklorists) but its logical mechanisms

for playing with and subverting conventions such as Grice's Maxims (Grice 1973) which describe how conversation relies on a speaker meaning what is said. From the 1980s to the turn of the century, the Semantic Script-based Theory of Humour (SSTH, see Raskin 1985 and Attardo and Raskin 1991; later termed the General Theory of Verbal Humour or GTVH, see Attardo 1994; 2001) ruled both humour studies and its Journal, of which Raskin was the founding editor, followed by Attardo. The GTVH posits that humour is created when an incongruous combination of two or more opposed scripts or meanings is resolved by a punchline revealing a hidden meaning. An apt illustration of a joke amenable to this structure is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Binary joke (collected by the author from unknown source)

**There are only 10 different
types of people in the world:**

**Those that read binary
AND
Those that don't**

Examining this joke, it is evident that the first line leads one to expect that the final colon will be followed by a list of ten psychological or other types of people. But the second and subsequent lines provide only two: those that can read binary (code) and those that cannot. This numerical mismatch is certainly incongruous and violates several if not all of the Gricean maxims about how rational communication should be structured — meaning what one says, providing sufficient information for decoding and so forth. But the incongruity is unresolved only

until the mind travels backwards to re-visit the key figure of 10 written as one followed by zero and to re-interpret it as two numbers set out in binary code. This solution justifies the seemingly illogical claim being made by the joke and the GTVH principles of script opposition (one way of interpreting numbers opposed to a second way) and identifying a logical mechanism for decoding it do work well for dissecting this joke. Despite this, there is some remaining ambiguity about why it should be amusing. The GTVH also stipulates that there should be a target for any joke: but what is the target here? Is it those (like the present author) who failed to get the joke the first-time round? Or is it those numerate persons who intolerantly despise the innumerate? Perhaps it is both. Despite our enjoyment of the joke and despite structural analysis, the hidden animus beneath this verbal construct remains somewhat mysterious.

Jokes such as this have been called the fruit-flies of humour research (e.g., Morreall 2004: 394) and there is no doubt that GTVH analysis works well for many of them. To sociologists and literary and cultural historians, however, that theory fails to take account of the more emotive aspects of humour. Humour always transgresses some rule or another, whether a rule of logic or of propriety. To do this, it must exploit what Wallace Chafe (one of the original members of the 1970s BAHA) has termed “the importance of NOT being earnest” (Chafe 2007), which in literary studies is termed “a playframe”. Humour is innately bound up with play and pretence and clearly must involve more than just cognition and logic. In 2001, a breakthrough came from an fMRI study reported by Vinod Goel and colleague which demonstrated that in the reactions of

subjects exposed to humorous stimuli, both affective and cognitive neural nets play a part (Goel and Dolan 2001). These findings have been extensively replicated and, not surprisingly, a host of complex brain processing activities have been uncovered during responses to humour. The mesolimbic reward pathway is strongly implicated; there are marked differences in responding to verbal and to visual humour; also, to different types of humour such as benign or aggressive; and in response-type between genders.

Another key fMRI study was reported by Moran and colleagues in 2004. This showed that there are distinct stages to the processing of humour. The first stage is its detection, that is, an understanding that the stimulus presented is to be classed or treated as humorous. This stage of processing is indeed predominantly cognitive. The second and longer stage, following the first after a millisecond or so, engages more affective pathways: this is the successful and simultaneous comprehension (decoding) and appreciation (or not) of the humour.

Humour and sense of humour

Following these insights, studies of the creation and the reception of humour now distinguish between a number of stages: humour production or creation; humour detection; humour comprehension; humour appreciation; and finally, a range of humour responses, both positive and negative and including humor support for others using humour (sometimes also referred to as humor competence, see Carrell 2009). As a research term, humour has come to have a very broad umbrella meaning that is now adopted across many cultures (and languages in which “humour” is effectively a

neologism, such as *youmo* in Putonghua and *yumoa* in Japanese, see Milner Davis in press). It embraces all the phenomena relating to the field, including laughter, smiling, amusement, jokes and joke-telling, comic stimuli such as cartoons, stage- and film-comedies and novels, varieties of humour such as satire, farce and caricature, and humour as therapy or as an educational tool.

The word humour can also refer in a narrower sense to a particular world-view in which one smiles with amusement at the adversities and imperfections of life. In French culture, this is seen as something quintessentially English, *l'humour Anglaise*, as opposed to the witty and more cerebral *esprit Français*. Traditionally, Anglo-Saxon cultures have indeed valued the civilizing ability to laugh at oneself and this is usually described as having a good sense of humour. From the beginnings of personality testing at Harvard University in the 1930s, Gordon Allport included “sense of humor” as a correlate of personal maturity and good mental health (Wickberg 1998). Sense of humour continues to feature highly in such things as informally stipulated criteria for dating and marriage, and a recent national survey of the Australian judiciary found that, even for these very serious respondents, more than half considered having a sense of humour as essential or very important in their work (Roach Anleu and Milner Davis 2018: 4).

Humour and the sense of humour both embrace gentler and benevolent aspects as well as negative and aggressive comic forms and styles, such as irony, sarcasm and biting wit. All of these can be enjoyable (especially for the humorist using them), but there is no doubt that humour has the power to damage. It can demean its targets and divide us as well as gently correct them and bind us

together. Negative, disparagement humour has classically been frowned on in both the East and the West, by Confucian as well as Christian thinkers. Aristotle's *eutrapelia* — the benign and well-balanced use of humour — was considered the mark of an admirable person long before the famous 18th century dicta of Lord Chesterfield decrying the uncouth behaviour of persons indulging in uncontrolled and boisterous laughter. In his *Letters to his Son, on Education*, Chesterfield wrote (from Bath on 7 March 1748): "I must particularly warn you against it [laughing loudly]: and I could heartily wish that you may often be seen to smile but never heard to laugh while you live ... how low and unbecoming a thing is laughter. Not to mention the disagreeable noise that it makes and the shocking distortion of the face that it occasions" (Stanhope 1847, 1: 120). And again, from London on 5 February 1750: "Vivacity and wit make a man shine in company; but trite jokes and loud laughter reduce him to a buffoon". (op. cit.: 414).

The downside of humour and laughter

Negative reactions to humour today are readily observable today in politicians and others who sue comedians for defamation damages and dictators who seek to jail cartoonists.¹⁰ Such negativism is not confined to political animosity, however. Understandably, it often comes from those who are themselves, or those who seek to defend others who are the targets of racist and sexist jokes — of which there are plenty in Australian joke-lore (Davies 2002: 89–107). Such protests run alongside less defensible

efforts at censorship from governments and corporations and are increasingly impacting cultural and personal taste in humour, especially when that is aimed at the underprivileged or minority groups or religious targets. Many comedians testify to the challenge of responding to such changes in audience attitude to humour (see e.g., Marchese 2021).

In addition to political and cultural pressures, however, psychological research has shown that in many cultures and language groups, there exists a small minority of quite normal persons who positively dislike laughter. Not as Chesterfield did, because it is unmannerly, but because it alarms them. Such people were first identified by the German psychotherapist, Michael Titze (1998) and research into the condition has been carried further by psychologist Wilibald Ruch and his team at University of Zürich (e.g., Ruch and Proyer 2008; Ruch et al. 2014). The condition is termed gelotophobia, or the fear of being laughed at (NB: the "o" in this term indicates it is not related to icecream). Gelotophobia is now recognised as part of a triad of personality differences relating to humour, termed the PhoPhiKat, a collocation of parts of three technical dispositional terms below (morphemes in italics):

- Fearing being laughed at = gelotophobia
- Enjoying being laughed at = gelotophilia
- Enjoying laughing at others = katagelasticism

These dispositions identify individuals who are habitually predisposed either to fearing being laughed at (gelotophobia), to enjoying being laughed at (gelotophilia), or to enjoy-

¹⁰ Many serious and life-threatening cases are recorded on the website, Index on Censorship, see for example, "Cartoonists being silenced during Covid, report shows", at: <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/?s=cartoon&id=114715> (accessed 27 October 2021).

ing laughing at others (katagelasticism). All three are inter-individual difference variables that have been found in normal populations across seventy-three different cultures and language groups (Proyer et al. 2009). In its extreme form, gelotophobia can be clinically relevant, seriously hampering life enjoyment (Ruch and Proyer 2008; Ruch et al. 2014). Gelotophobes fear being ridiculed and appearing ridiculous to other people. They have a paranoid sensitivity towards others' laughter and misinterpret normal humor and laughter as being weapons. Displaying negative emotional responses to laughter, such individuals react by avoiding situations where they might be laughed. Importantly, the gelotophobe's interpretation of humour and laughter is independent of any intention towards them (i.e., whether it is harmless or aggressive, directed at them or not), meaning that they mis-interpret most instances as being malevolent.

For the general population, however, a positive appreciation of humour can be regarded both as an innate personality trait and as a settled habit of using humour in various ways as a coping behaviour, as psychological studies by the two leading psychologists of humour, Ruch at Zürich and Rod A. Martin of Western Ontario University, have shown. Some of these habits or "humour styles" are more virtuous and positive in impact on others and are probably linked to better mental and physical health on the part of the user. But conclusions from experimental research on styles of using humour (including some cross-cultural comparisons e.g., between Taiwan¹¹ and Canada, see Chen and Martin

2007) remain tentative. It is better not to be simplistic about the relationship between humour and health as some types of humour and laughter are probably beneficial to certain aspects of mental or physical health; some are neutral; others may be detrimental and some have been shown to be both beneficial and detrimental. Where effects can be demonstrated, different mechanisms are probably involved for different effects (Martin 2008: 470). One surprisingly negative case has been demonstrated by Paul Thomas FRSN and colleagues at University of New South Wales (UNSW), who showed that for some asthma sufferers, an attack is triggered by laughter and that this follows distinctly different pathways than those implicated in, say, exercise induced asthma (Liangas et al. 2004).

Humour, health and cultural variation

Despite such special cases, humour used well in settings such as hospitals, nursing homes and emergency services has repeatedly been shown to assist in stress reduction (Moran and Massam 1997; Auerbach et al. 2016). This has led to the development of carefully planned interventions and specialist training programmes: in Australia, the leading example is the Clown Doctors, run by the Humour Foundation,¹² with clinical results studied by Belinda Goodenough at Wollongong University and Fay Lee Low at UNSW (Low et al. 2014). Overseas, similar programs are popular in German-speaking lands (for a review of the movement in Europe, see Dionigi et al. 2012). The positive results reported in these studies align with results from fMRI research showing that

¹¹ Taiwan indicates the geographical and political entity known as China, Taiwan, and as the Republic of China.

¹² <https://www.humourfoundation.org.au/>

enjoying funny cartoons triggers subcortical reward pathways in the brain and that the funnier such stimuli are perceived to be, the stronger the reward response (Mobbs et al. 2003). Helping to reduce stress in a natural, drug-free way is clearly of benefit for patients and carers alike.¹³

Evidently, laughter is only part of achieving this beneficial effect. Humour does not always result in laughter; and laughter does not always result from humour. Laughter is ubiquitous for example in casual conversations between friends but often arises there for no obvious reason or may accompany an entirely innocent remark such as “well, I’ll be off then”. We are dealing with a highly complex behavioural phenomenon. To this kind of complexity must be added cultural differences. Working with humour scholars in other languages and cultures, I rapidly came to realise that it is not in fact *what* we laugh at, nor even *how* we laugh, that varies, but rather when, where and with whom we indulge in laughter. Thus, it is not laughter itself but the cultural conventions that govern its use that vary from one society to another, leading to misunderstandings and possible offence. An example is how, in reporting the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, Western media observed with shock that one teenage diver from China did not smile at all on receiving her perfect results. A report showed her serious, downcast face, and captioned it thus: “Hongchan Quan, 14, looked devastated after being given a perfect score” (Rolfé 2021). In Chinese culture, however, such a reaction to triumph is quite appropriate since smiles more usu-

ally admit embarrassment and error (Chey 2011: 41). For their part, Chinese social media expressed bemusement at the whole story (Sun 2021).

Australian culture as noted features frequent, straight-faced mockery or piss-taking. This is a kind of hazing for friends and newcomers alike that falls into the spectrum of what is termed deadpan irony by comedy theorists (Weinglass and Haugh 2020). An illustration comes from The real-life experience of an American fantasy-writer Jack Dann in 1999 provides an illustration. He recounted¹⁴ how he had then lived happily in Australia then for six years but still found himself bemused by what happened to him at an outback petrol station when he asked for directions to the toilet: “Ah”, replied the laconic serviceman, “you’ll need a compass and a cut lunch for that one”. Perhaps even an Australianised American might need to be told that “cut lunch” means sandwiches, but otherwise, what in this statement could have puzzled Jack? It clearly indicates that (i) the place is hard to find and (ii) requires effort equivalent to an all-day wilderness trek with a compass and food. Hence, it is to be deduced that the toilets are hard to find and a long way off. *But are they?* It is equally possible — indeed, to Australian ears, far more likely — that the piss was being taken from an evident foreigner and that the statement ironically indicates that the facilities are only a step or two away, obvious to everyone but Jack.

Despite having been subjected myself to this kind of teasing and deadpan legpulling after arriving from England in the 1950s as

13 It is important to note that to date, the commonly asserted belief that laughter produces endorphins in the brain has not been substantiated by valid research.

14 Interviewed by Murray Waldren in *The Weekend Australian*, 12–13 June 1999; award winning sci-fi author, see <https://jackdann.com/> (accessed 2 November 2021).

a schoolgirl, I was not really conscious of it as a typically Australian humour practice until I embarked on a collaboration with colleagues from the Japan Society for Humor and Laughter Studies.¹⁵ This resulted in our book, *Understanding Humour in Japan* (Milner Davis 2007). Being no scholar of Japanese, I had to learn from scratch about the various forms and conventions of humour and comedy as practised and enjoyed in Japan and as I did so, I began to realise how entirely different was my more familiar culture of Australia.

When sociologist Giseline Kuipers (then at the University of Amsterdam) undertook her ground-breaking study of joking taste cultures in the Netherlands, she had the same experience as I did. She reported: “It wasn’t until I did a similar project in the US [in 2003–4] that I realized there was something particularly Dutch about Dutch respondents, despite their great [individual] differences” (Kuipers 2006: 15). Precisely because one is so enmeshed in one’s own culture, one is normally unaware of its conventions: because one is too busy carrying out the rules and conventions, one simply does not see them for what they are. It was only *after* working with my colleagues in Japan that I could begin to write anything meaningful about Australian humour. Having managed to acculturate to Australia, only later did I realise how I had been acculturated. Appealing again for wry comment on this to cartoonist Jon Kudelka, like his immigrant couple in Figure 5, I too would probably have failed an Australian citizenship test if I had had to sit it.



Figure 5: “The Australian citizenship test”, by Jon Kudelka. Originally published as a pocket cartoon in *The Australian*, 2008, reproduced with kind permission.

Humour and Australian culture

Australia has in fact a most extraordinarily permissive culture about humour use. From working with Japanese colleagues (and later with others in South Korea, Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the PRC), I believe that Japan and Australia may well be at the extreme opposite ends on the scale of regulation of humour and laughter. In Japan, laughter is considered important and modern culture celebrates it, even including obligatory practices such as ritual laughter on specified annual occasions (Abe 2007; Takekuro in press). Parallels such as the Feast of Fools used to exist in medieval and renaissance Europe but for the West now, only pale shadows remain in the form of things like Mardi Gras (adopted as their own by the gay and lesbian community) and school muck-up days. Despite this elevation of laughter in Japan, containment strategies for it have long been internalised into

15 <http://www.nwggk.jp/index.html>

everyday life, characterised by hierarchical rules about personal distance and considerations of face and shame controlling the use of humour. Traditionally, it was women and warriors who should not be seen smiling in public. One saying held that, for a samurai, one dimple in one cheek each year was sufficient. Although in contemporary times things are changing, my late colleague Mr Oda Shōkichi pointed out that: “In Japan it has long been considered a virtue among upper-class men to refrain from laughing. In general, women traditionally have tried to laugh with their mouths only slightly open and to cover their mouths with one hand when laughing” (Oda 2008: 28). He even coined a term specifically to describe the still limited range of times and places where and when it is socially permissible to laugh: *warai no ba* (笑いの場 laughter containers).

By contrast, we have no need of such a term in Australia. Australians are able to joke with anyone, not just friends but even the Prime Minister, if we were to meet him. The distinguished historian Inga Clendinnen ventured the opinion that Australian jocularity today has something in common with that found in Indigenous traditions (*Dancing with Strangers*, 2003). Although few Indigenous researchers have time to devote to this issue, the Australasian Humour Studies Network has keenly supported those who can. Two in particular, Lillian Holt from Adelaide and Angelina Yoolelar Hurley from Brisbane, are adamant that, for their peoples, humour is inextricably bound up with questions of survival and overcoming odds, both now and in the past (Holt 2009; Hurley 2015). The autobiographical novel, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, by proud Bundjalung woman, the late Ruby Ginibi Langford, bears this out. Speaking

of the liberating role of humour in her own life, she recollected how she used it against unwanted official visitors at the hospital bedside of one of her adopted sons, Nobby, who was ill with hepatitis after his release from gaol (he eventually recovered):

The police were always checking [Nobby] out and wouldn't leave him alone. Not believing he was sick, they pushed past me. I didn't say anything till all four of them were in the bedroom, when I said, 'I hope you've all had your shots, he's got contagious hepatitis.' You should've seen those dicks fly out of the room, asking where the nearest doctor's surgery was. I fell about laughing and so did Nobby. (Langford 1988: 201).

This was carefully prepared, effective retaliation; it was also very good therapy for the patient.

As our history since European arrival is re-examined from other perspectives, it is becoming possible to discern a long tradition of joking played defensively by our First Nations against their dispossessioners. Examining descriptions of the first cultural exchanges found in the diaries of Lieutenant Watkins Tench (1788–1859), Clendinnen describes how Colbee and Boladeree, two Indigenous guides accompanying an exploration party, performed a dance by the campfire in which they took “special delight in miming the more spectacular British slips and stumbles of the day ‘with inimitable drollery’”, in Tench's words (Clendinnen 2003: 203). These two were very efficiently “taking the piss” out of the hapless newcomers.

This is the positive side of aggressive humour and it is one that has been cheerfully adopted over the last forty years in Australia by our so-called “ethnic stand-

ups”. Pioneered by Australian-Italian and Australian-Greek artists in TV series and stage shows like *Wogs Out of Work* (1987) and *Acropolis Now* (1989–1992),¹⁶ these brave young souls set out to “emphasize the ugliness of a lot of old migrants towards the new migrants. To show that they were dealing out the same intolerant attitude to new arrivals that they themselves experienced when they first arrived”. These are the words of Australia’s first Vietnamese-Australian stand-up comedian, the lanky, dreadlocked Le Trung Hung (stage-name, Hung Le), who escaped Saigon by boat with his family at the age of nine to survive starvation and refugee camps and eventually to gain Australian citizenship. He described audience reaction to his performances in the stage show *Wog-a-rama* (1995, with Mary Coustas and Nick Giannopoulos) as follows:

People of mostly Southern European descent — or whoever gets to be called ‘Wog’ — would come to the theatre in packs, and keenly wait to hear the piss being taken out of their nationality ... The bigger the abuse, the crazier the response. After the show people would complain if their country HADN’T received equal piss-take time ... It was craziness ... When packs of boys in Monaros roared past me in the street yelling abuse, they meant it as a sign of affection and appreciation of the show. For two years and five hundred shows, “Hey Ching Chong” meant “love ya work ... China!!” Bizzzaarre (Le 1997: 146–148).

The success of these comedians inspired others, leading to standing ovations for the August 2002 live show, *Habib on Parole*, that featured Tahir Bilgiç who calls himself “Australia’s only Turkish stand-up comedian”. At Sydney’s run-down Enmore Theatre, Tahir and colleagues drew a largely Australian-Lebanese and Australian-Serbo-Croatian audience at a time when feelings within — and against — local communities were running high. The Milošević trial was taking place in The Hague, Islamicist terrorism threatened, and members of Sydney’s Lebanese communities were experiencing racial backlash as a major gang-rape case was going through the courts. The youthful, packed house nevertheless enthused about the “piss-take” accorded each group in turn, with a reviewer noting how “[t]he audience squirmed and groaned, recognizing reality with embarrassment as well as laughter” (Comrie-Thompson 2002).

Many of these comedians have enjoyed commercial success whether they stayed with ethnic comedy or not. In 2003, Bilgiç, Hung Le and others toured Australia with their show, *Lord of the Kebabs*, and in 2005, *Show us Your Roots*. Australian ethnic comedy is available on video, DVD, TV, radio and stage. The latest successful drawcards are Sooshi Mango¹⁷ said to be Australia’s fastest-growing ethnic comedy troupe; and Crazy Rich Ethnics,¹⁸ their title playing off the internationally successful film, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018, directed by [Jon M. Chu](#), based on the eponymous [2013 novel](#) by the Singapore-born American writer, [Kevin Kwan](#)).

16 Written by Nick Giannopoulos, Simon Palomares and Maria Portesi, directed by Marc Gracie, it debuted at the 1987 Melbourne International Comedy Festival with huge success and toured for a number of years. Its success led to the TV series *Acropolis Now* and the film *The Wog Boy* (2000, directed by Giannopoulos) among others.

17 <https://www.sooshimango.com/>

18 <http://crazyrichethnics.com.au/>

Although it continues to be robust, ethnic comedy here and elsewhere has now evolved some conventions about how it takes the mickey, perhaps reflecting issues of both credibility and political correctness (Locker and Pickering 2009). In conducting a public “piss-take” of a group (on whatever social basis, ethnic or otherwise), there is a prior requirement to disparage oneself and/or one’s own group before targeting others. Similarly, Australian audiences are now much less likely to believe that comic insight into the ethnic experience can be rendered vicariously by white artists posing as what they are not. Interpretations that were popular in the 1980s (e.g., Mark Mitchell’s impersonation of the Greek greengrocer, Con the Fruiterer, in the TV series, *The Comedy Company*, 1988–1990) have been superseded by today’s authentic voices. Such caveats apply even more strongly in the case of Indigenous Australian comedians — although they too reach audiences beyond their own nations (Austin 2017). Whatever the reason, laughter today flows more easily when the comic baton is firmly held by an unchallenged voice, speaking from experience. This gives a natural advantage to new performers who arrive to deliver comic pay-back for society’s past “flexing of superiority muscles” (Le 1997: 146).

Significantly, respected Indigenous actors were among the original pioneers, especially proud Yamatji man, Ernie Dingo,¹⁹ and proud [Walmadjari](#) woman, Ningali Lawson (1967–2019), who collaborated with Hung Le in the 2000 comedy show, *Black and Tran*.

Since 2007, the Deadly Funny Awards, the national comedy competition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent, have been held at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival (Austin 2017); in 2018, the winner was Leon Filewood, graduate in law from Queensland University of Technology and keynote speaker at the 26th AHSN Conference held at Griffith University in February 2019.²⁰

For voices that are marginalised in society, using humour gives some freedom of expression and the opportunity to assert identity. Therefore, across the world, it is much prized in times of struggle, although humourists and cartoonists often suffer for their art. Here in Australia, despite our deep-seated historical separations, humour can perhaps now serve to unite rather than divide. Concluding her study of the vexed cultural exchange between Australia’s original inhabitants and invasive European settlers, Clendinnen suggested that this might be the case: “Through processes I do not yet understand, we are now more like each other than we are like any other people. We even share something of the same style of humour, which is a subtle but far-reaching affinity. Here, in this place, I think we are all Australians now” (2003: 288). I hope this is true and continues to be the case.

Conclusion

Studying humour and laughter is a limitless project: as my former Stanford colleague, William F. Fry put it, “[t]he entire universe — everything we think we know,

¹⁹ Ernie Dingo (<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0227669/>) was one of four Australian comic artists to receive an award from the ISHS Conference held at University of New South Wales in July 1996. The others were Campbell McComas, Ruth Cracknell and Barry Humphries.

²⁰ <https://www.comedyfestival.com.au/profileleonfilewood>

everywhere within the human experience — has some relevant connection to humor” (Fry 2015: I, xxvii). Recent recognition achieved by the field has produced several well-ranked specialist journals and book series in addition to the founding journal, *HUMOR*, and the publication of a number of methodological studies, including, significantly, introductions to humour studies from both Oxford and Cambridge University Presses.²¹ Key topics now under exploration include a wide range of cross-cultural studies of humour use as well as investigations of what might be called “humours of the past” — cases where the comic elements in classical and religious texts have been ignored or overlooked. Examples are texts from Chinese Daoist and Confucian scholars (Chan 2011; in press; Xu 2011), the Icelandic sagas (Burrows 2020) and even the bloodthirsty and heroic 11th century *Chanson de Roland* (DuVal 2020).

Current research has a particular focus on the impacts of using humour, both personally on the user and also on audiences, with investigations into the benefits and drawbacks of the widespread adoption of humour in advertising (Gulas and Weinberger 2006) and in business culture more generally, usually on popular rather than research grounds (Wood et al. 2007; 2011; Scheel and Gockel 2017). Humour’s widespread use in political commentary and mock-news reports is also under intense scrutiny in the present time of increasing political polarisation in Western democracies, with the jury still out on the issue of whether (and if so, how) satire actually changes things such as voter intention and beliefs about candidates (for a current meta-analysis, see Burgers and Brugman

2021). In related areas, Sharon Roach Anleu from the Judicial Studies Project at Flinders University and I, together with colleagues from Scandinavia, UK, USA and Brazil, have explored the different roles played by humour in courtrooms and judicial work (Roach Anleu and Milner Davis 2018).

Another growing body of studies deals with humour’s significance in many different religions, revealing for example the complex but enlightened attitudes to humour found in the Mormon Church (McIntyre 2019) and confirming that the more fundamentalist a person is in religious belief, the lower they will likely score on a psychological test of sense of humour (Saroglou 2002). Meanwhile in philosophy, both East and West, the connections between humour and ethics, the good life and transcendental experience are all receiving renewed attention (Gardner 2020). Even if the word itself and the experience it connotes remain difficult to define, one can safely agree with Mikhail Bakhtin, the scholar of the Renaissance world of carnival, that humour has “a deep philosophical meaning [it is] one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole ... the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint” (Bakhtin 1984: 66).

Acknowledgements

My special thanks go to Tracey Platt of Sunderland University, UK, for her expert advice on Duchenne and Non-Duchenne smiling, also to Jennifer Hofmann and Sonja Heintz, all former members of Willibald Ruch’s psychology of humour research team at University of Zürich. I thank Jon Kudelka

²¹ For a review of these and other related volumes, see Condren 2021. OUP’s volume is more successful than CUP’s effort.

for kind permission to use his artworks and David Lambert and Cliff Goddard of Griffith University for re-use of their diagram. I am indebted to my anonymous reviewer for comments helping to transform this article from a Royal Society lecture to its present format; and also to Jason Antony at UNSW Canberra for his photographic expertise. Finally, I thank Robert Marks, Editor of *JPRNSW*, for encouragement and advice.

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