

You Had to Be There

What makes something funny?

I was struck by this in reading an article awhile ago in which a would-be comic bemoaned his lack of professional success. “Everyone always says I was funny and I could get people laughing at parties all the time. But as stand-up comedian, I don’t get the laughs.”

Now this type of essay can trip on its own feet. You may hiss, boo, and throw food at me if I lose my sense of humor and refer to a joke as one author has, as quote “a transferable humorous package” unquote.¹

So, here goes.

“A rubber band pistol was confiscated from algebra class because it was ... a weapon of math disruption.”

Pretty funny!
Here’s another.

“How do the Laihians save energy? They omit the heating up stage.”²

Not so funny? But in Helsinki Finland this has people rolling in the aisles!

Laughing at a joke is not just whether you have a sense of humor. It involves three functions: getting the joke (which is cognitive), laughing at the joke (which is a motor function), and the happy emotional feeling you get from humor. You may think this sounds squishy – and you would be right: the name for the physiological study of laughter is called gelotology. There is always room for gelotology. So here goes.

Getting a joke involves the frontal lobe; so if someone doesn’t get your joke; smack him on the forehead. Smiling or laughing involves the supplementary motor area; some believe it is the left superior frontal gyrus. And the emotional pleasure response occurs in the nucleus accumbens.³ Scientists have found that people with damage to the frontal lobe have trouble getting punch lines. In particular, people with right anterior frontal damage had the most disrupted ability to appreciate written and verbal jokes; and they show a preference for slapstick humor, like the Three Stooges.⁴ But other researchers think the limbic system, located below the cerebral cortex, is involved in laughter.

¹ Mulkay p. 4

² Davies, p. 167

³ Brain Briefings (Society for Neuroscience) December 2001

⁴ Center for Neuro Skills, “People With rain Injury to Frontal Lobe Don’t Get Certain Types of Humor”
http://www.neuroskills.com/tbi/pr_humor.shtml

Apparently the limbic system is called the reptilian part of the brain, controlling basic urges like hunger, danger responses, motivation, and emotion. They also suspect involvement of the amygdala, a small almond-shaped structure deep inside the brain, and the hippocampus, a tiny, seahorse-shaped structure.⁵

And here is the best news: laughter tends to expand the lining of the blood vessels, thereby increasing blood flow and contributing to healthier functions of those blood vessels. Know what else does that? Exercise! So for gain without pain, have a laugh!⁶

Tonight I would like to focus more extensively on the cognitive aspect of humor: the “getting it” and the way in which people create and use humor. I suggest that a nation’s jokes may be the clearest window on its soul. And the soul one sees may not always be so appealing.

Let’s start with some more anatomy (this time, the anatomy of a joke).

On the first evening after moving house, Bob went down to the local pub and started talking to the bar man. After a while, their talk was interrupted by the arrival of a dapper little man, evidently a regular, who greeted the barman, ordered a glass of sherry, drank it, said good night, walked up the wall, across the ceiling, down the opposite wall, and out through the door. There was a short silence before Bob said, quaveringly,
“Wow, that was strange.”
“Yes,” mused the barman. “That was strange.”
“He usually drinks whiskey.”⁷

This joke has the structure of a classic punch line. The joke leads us in with a seemingly normal visit to a bar. Each of us mentally pictures the scene and waits for something unexpected – after all, we are expecting a joke.

Then the dapper man does the unexpected, defying the laws of gravity. Our minds churn to figure out where this is going – is Bob imagining this? Is this going to be a “drunk” joke? No, the normalcy returns – Bob acknowledges the strangeness of the dapper man’s exit and the barman seems to agree – it was strange. So here we are – we all think walking on walls is strange.

But the joke is funny because our guess is wrong! The barman thinks walking on walls is normal – it is drinking sherry that he thinks is strange.

⁵ “Brain function and humour” http://www.rte.id/tv/scope/SCOPE4_show02_brainfunction.html

⁶ http://sensehumor.com/Brain_function.html

⁷ Mulkay p. 18

We laugh – I hope everyone did laugh – because we all believe the opposite of the barman: drinking sherry is okay but walking on walls is not. The last thing we expected was for the barman – usually the one person who has seen everything and is rarely surprised – to view sherry as the odd occurrence.

The joke required the punch line to be from the barman; it required the setting of normalcy that was disrupted. It led us together to a common expectation – and then surprised us.

Laughing can come without jokes, such as from tickling. But have you ever noticed that you don't laugh or giggle when you tickle yourself? One would think that the sensation going to the brain from tickling is the same whether you do it or someone else does it.

Well, scientists have learned that the cognitive function matters here too: "...for tickling to work, the brain needs tension and surprise. When you tickle yourself, you know exactly what will happen...there is no tension or surprise."⁸

So, to get the laughs and the warm fuzzies, we need the frontal lobe to set us up for tension and surprise. [Hit forehead] Now I get it!

It is not necessary that everything in the joke be plausible. Quite the contrary, we place no requirement on believability or likelihood when we are expecting a joke.

When a speaker moves from the "serious mode" to the "humorous mode" the speaker is granted by the listener much greater freedom in what he can say. "Within the realm of humor, almost anything is allowed and implausibilities do not have to be camouflaged... It is a paradoxical feature of humor that, ... although its standards ... are much less restrictive ... [it must have structure and context that] continually generate incongruity and contradiction."⁹

Incongruity and contradiction. The key to humor, it seems, is that the teller and listener must have a common point of reference. Without that, the joke is a dud – as in the common post-dud apology, "I guess you had to be there."

Jokes therefore use familiar points of reference. Here in America commonly understood points of reference form the basis for lawyer jokes, blonde jokes, southern jokes, drunkard jokes, and of course ethnic jokes, to name just a few. To be funny, these jokes depend on the teller and listener having a common point of reference but they do not necessarily have to agree on the truth or plausibility of that reference.

⁸ <http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/laugh.html>

⁹ Mulkay p. 21

Take a “blonde” joke. The common point of reference of these types of jokes is that blondes have more beauty than brains. One does not have to agree in order to “get” the joke. And the usual reference is to a blonde female – a blond male joke just might be a dud.

Take this blonde joke:

A beautiful young blond woman boards a plane to LA with a ticket for the coach section. She looks at the seats in coach and then looks ahead to the first class seats. Seeing that the first class seats appear to be much larger and more comfortable, she moves forward to the last empty one. The flight attendant checks her ticket and tells the woman that her seat is in coach.

The blond replies, "I'm young, blond and beautiful, and I'm going to sit here all the way to LA."

Flustered, the flight attendant goes to the cockpit and informs the captain of the blond problem. The pilot says that he has a blond girlfriend, and that he can take care of the problem. He then goes back and briefly whispers something into the blonde's ear.

She immediately gets up, says, "Thank you so much," hugs the pilot, and rushes back to her seat in the coach section. The flight attendant, who was watching with rapt attention, asks the pilot what he had said to the woman.

He replies, "I just told her that the first class section isn't going to LA."

Male-female relations are also rich territory based on common points of reference that may or may not be true. Here is a joke that relies on the common point of reference being that all men care about is sex:

A woman sat on a plane heading for New York, when the pilot announces that because of difficulties with the plane's engines, he must make an emergency landing.

The woman, fearing that this may be the end of her life looks over to a man sitting next to her and rips her shirt and bra off, and throws herself on him. "Make me feel like a woman again!" she screamed.

So the man rips his shirt off and hands it to her. "Iron this."

Obviously, this is a joke because we expect sex and instead get sexism.

Ethnic jokes (more on this later) provide great examples of the need for a common point of reference for a joke's incongruity to be apparent.

Take this Indian ethnic joke:

A person is traveling to the town of Ahmedabad, Gujarat for the first time by train. He is anxious about missing his stop so he descends from his train at each station to ask if he has arrived at Ahmedabad. Finally, in answer to his question a man replies, "If you give me five paise I'll tell you." The traveler answers, "I must be here."¹⁰

If you were Indian, you would be howling.

If anyone is French, you might howl at this one:

"How do you recognize a Belgian in a submarine? He's the one with a parachute on his back."¹¹

Not so funny to most of us. We aren't French or familiar with French points of reference, nor with Indian regional points of reference. So how does one "get it"?

There are two broad categories in which humor occurs. The first is in a formal, structured environment, such as an awards presentation or a meeting at work. The second is in an informal, unstructured setting such as a gathering of friends.

In the formal setting, humor tends to reinforce the hierarchy or to confirm the formal structure. In a awards banquet, for example, humor may tend to deprecate the awardees as a way to affirm the appropriateness of receiving the award. Take for example this segment from a Nobel laureate's acceptance speech for receiving the prize for physiology and medicine.

"There is an irony in the award, since neither of us is a physician. In fact it is not much of an exaggeration to say that what [we] know about medicine and physiology could be written on a small prescription form! I think [Alfred Nobel] would have been pleased to know that an engineer and a physicist, each in his own way, have contributed just a little to the advancement of medicine."¹²

Clearly here, self-deprecating humor is really being used by the speaker to affirm that he indeed merits the prize.

In the formal structure of a business meeting, humor generally reinforces the hierarchy. Researchers have found that humor is most often expressed by the boss, and directed to his subordinates. It is a "gentle" reaffirmation that the boss is in charge. No surprise that the junior members of business meetings will generally not make a joke and will relegate themselves to laughing at their boss' attempts at humor.¹³

¹⁰ Davies p. 16

¹¹ Davies p. 20

¹² Mulkay p. 161

¹³ Mulkay p. 169

In an informal setting, there is less structure on which to base the contradictions inherent in humor. Instead the humor has (and I love this quote) its origins in “creative interpretive work that is [only] possible in situations where participants are relatively free from structural constraint.”¹⁴

Nonetheless, extensive studies of informal humor, including graffiti, find that it does not generally provide a more effective way to challenge the dominant structure. “Humor can be used to challenge the existing pattern... but only when it is given meaning [using] criticism and confrontation that [are] already underway...”¹⁵

For example, take the quip:

*“To be successful at anything, a woman has to be twice as good as a man....
Luckily this is not difficult.”*

The effectiveness of this humorous quip comes only from its obvious link to the serious dialogue of the women’s movement. Equally important, “getting” the joke is a tool to emphasize the bond or commonality among all those who get the humor.

Thus, we see that most humor plays on contradictions or inconsistencies as a gentle way to highlight the contradictions or inconsistencies. In general, it acts as a bond between teller and listener to acknowledge their mutual awareness of the underlying social convention or structure.

Political humor is of a different nature. It is a way for a subgroup to bond by emphasizing a real or imagined quality of another group to which the subgroup doesn’t belong. The bond generally works by reinforcing the “rightness” of the subgroup’s views or positions. Thus in its own way, it is also a tool to reinforce the current structure or hierarchy.

A significant phenomenon of the past 40 years has been the evolution of the stand up comic. In the 1950s and early 1960s comedy teams were common where one comic talked to the other. In the 1970s and 1980s the comic increasingly took on the image as “one of us” and the entire routine was structured as a conversation with the audience. The new comics emphasized they were everyday people with the same gripes and worries as any of us. And the punch lines played on the ironies or inconsistencies of shared life experiences.

As Zoglin writes:

“the old-style comics might talk about subjects we all recognized (the wife and kids, airline flights, TV commercials) but they got laughs with the artifice of gag

¹⁴ Mulkay p. 173

¹⁵ Mulkay p. 177

lines – a pun or a witticism, or a surprise reversal. This emphasized the distance between performer and audience. *‘I got no sex life,’ cracked Rodney Dangerfield ‘My wife cut me down to once a month. And I’m lucky – two guys I know she cut out completely’*

“No one is expected to actually believe ... that or mistake it for a real commentary on marriage. Certainly not the way you believed a Richard Pryor rant about a girlfriend who walked out on him – *‘I don’t mind them leaving’, but they tell you why!’*”¹⁶

So humor can be a way to share a commonality that makes us feel we belong to a larger group. But tone and intent can turn a bonding joke into a knife. Here is where we need to take a closer look at ethnic humor – an us-them form of humor.

It is fascinating that ethnic humor is universal. It is found throughout the world, only the names get changed. Ethnic humor heavily relies on two themes: the stupid and what Davies call the “canny”, representing the virtues of rationality, efficiency, diligence, ... thrift, and hard-headed calculation.”¹⁷

Davies has a table that illustrates this universal dichotomy¹⁸:

	“Stupid” groups	“Canny” groups
United States	Poles	Scots, Yankees, Iowans, Jews
Canada (East)	Newfies (Newfoundlanders)	Nova Scotians
Canada (West)	Ukrainians, Icelanders	Scots
Mexico	Yucatecoes	Regiomontanos (Monterrey)
France	Belgians	Auvergnats (the Auvergne)
Netherlands	Belgians	Jews, Scots
Finland	Karelians	Laihians
Greece	Pontians	Armenians
India	Sikhs	Gujaratis
New Zealand	Maoris	Dutch

The universality of this ethnic joke dichotomy seems to be based on the contradictory pressures of modern life. “Modern societies exhort their members to be careful and yet to be carefree, to calculate everything and yet to know the decent limits of material calculation, to compete ruthlessly as individuals and yet to remain social beings....The jokes, by mocking the excesses of the incompetent and the compulsively acquisitive,

¹⁶ Zoglin, pp. 4-5

¹⁷ Davies p. 28

¹⁸ Davies pp.11-12

seem to convey a pair of linked cultural warnings: do not take the rational world of work and money too seriously but do not take it too lightly either.”¹⁹

One, then, must ask why are ethnic jokes the common vehicle for this thematic dichotomy. The answer seems to be that any joke can be funnier by taking advantage of the convention that the butt of the joke is pre-labeled as stupid, canny, cowardly, lazy, etc. so that the listener is already alerted to the nature of the punch line and can respond and understand it quickly.

That is also the reason why the butt of the joke varies so much from country to country because, without knowing the comic convention associated with a particular group, the listener has no foundation for understanding the punch line. “Even if the audience were to comprehend a pseudo-ethnic joke by spotting analogies with true ... ethnic jokes they would do so far too slowly and this would ruin the joke. By contrast, jokes that begin ‘two misers’ ... provide too much information too early in the joke and undercut the surprise of the punch line.”²⁰

It is great to tell a joke, but what about being part of the group that is the butt of the joke, with the stereotype convention that is not factual?

Without doubt, the nature of an ethnic joke is that the teller feels superior to the object of the joke. But researchers find that the themes of the jokes focus on the boundaries of a joke-teller’s identity and on “ambiguous people who are not quite separate yet not quite members of the joke-teller’s group.”²¹

This similar-but-not-the-same quality may explain why Canadians and New Zealanders are not featured in British jokes but they are featured in the jokes by the more similar Americans and Australians, respectively. Once the butt of the jokes loses its ambiguity and is more similar to the joke-teller’s group, the joke seems to disappear. An example of this is the decline of English jokes about belligerent Welshmen that followed major changes in Welsh society, not changes in English attitudes. Similarly, American jokes about the Irish seem to have been largely replaced by jokes about the Poles.

Sometimes the joke-teller’s view of the object of the ethnic joke is based on open hostility and sometimes it has some basis in reality. For example, Sarah Lyall writes in her book The Anglo Files, “Many of the unkind clichés about British dental care are in fact dead accurate.” Similarly, the British are viewed by some as reserved and not very talkative. Hence the following becomes funny:

¹⁹ Davies p. 36, 38

²⁰ Davies p. 321

²¹ Davies p. 312

“Two men ... drink pint after pint together in the pub, companionably silent. A few hours pass. On his tenth pint, the first man raises his glass and says, ‘Cheers!’ The second man glares at him. ‘Look,’ he says, ‘did you come here to talk or to drink?’”²²

And this brings us to the final issue. What makes a joke bad and how is a bad joke received? Washington State University professor Nancy Bell has researched people’s reactions to a failed joke. She has found the response of the listeners to include “insults, glares, silence, or even blows.” She reported, “The predominant verbal reaction to failed humor in our study was oriented exclusively toward attacking the speaker.”²³

If humor is a social tool to emphasize the bond between teller and listener, a bad joke seems to threaten that bond. Jokes are intended to deliver humor and a failure to do this violates a social contract and is punished to discourage further bad jokes. And sometimes the listener to a bad joke may conclude that the teller is insulting him as someone who is stupid enough to find a bad joke to be funny.

There are video clips on You Tube of would-be comedians actually being attacked by listeners.

The bonding role of jokes is so strong that one can be repelled by hearing a bad joke as much as by being the butt of a joke. So it seems that telling and laughing at a joke is a universal tool to assert and confirm one’s place in society and particularly one’s belonging to a group. And the joke becomes funny by relying on common beliefs of the group in order to create incongruity and surprise, thereby reinforcing the common beliefs of the group.

²² New York Times Book Review August 28, 2008, p. 10.

²³ Associated Press, August 22, 2008, Nicholas K. Geranios, [Bad Jokes could Be Bad News for the Teller](#)

So here is the final test whether you and I both belong together in this Kit Kat room. I assert our bond by telling the joke. You confirm our bond by laughing at my joke.

Ready?

An atheist was taking a walk through the woods, admiring all that evolution had created.

"What majestic trees! What powerful rivers! What beautiful animals!", he said to himself. As he was walking along the river, he heard a rustling in the bushes behind him. When he turned to see what the cause was, he saw a 7-foot grizzly charging right towards him.

He ran as fast as he could. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the bear was closing. He ran even faster, crying in fear. He looked over his shoulder again, and the bear was even closer. His heart was pounding and he tried to run even faster. He tripped and fell on the ground. He rolled over to pick himself up, but saw the bear right on top of him, reaching for him with his left paw and raising his right paw to strike him.

At that moment, the Atheist cried out "Oh my God!...." Time stopped. The bear froze. The forest was silent. Even the river stopped moving.

As a bright light shone upon the man, a voice came out of the sky, "You deny my existence for all of these years; teach others I don't exist; and even credit creation to a cosmic accident. Do you expect me to help you out of this predicament? Am I to count you as a believer?"

The atheist looked directly into the light "It would be hypocritical of me to suddenly ask You to treat me as Christian now, but perhaps could you make the bear a Christian?" "Very well," said the voice.

The light went out. The river ran again. And the sounds of the forest resumed.

And then the bear dropped his right paw brought both paws together....bowed his head and spoke: "Lord, for this food which I am about to receive, I am truly thankful."

And I thank you.

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