

*The Psychology of Humor:
An Integrative Approach*

The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach

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To Myra, who keeps me laughing

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FOREWORD

Understanding the nature of humor is a problem for psychology. Humor, comedy, and laughter are important and engaging aspects of behavior. Consequently, they have received attention from many perspectives and approaches. The amount and diversity of relevant information should have made this book impossible to write. The material for a work on humor is widely scattered, both in space and time. Even if the focus is on psychology, all the other areas touching humor need to be examined. Not only empirical research, but rational and literary thought must be included. Rod Martin has not only brought this material together but turned it into an easy read. To borrow a simile from James Agee, it must have been like “putting socks on an octopus.”

The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach can stand at the head of a line of books that have presented a picture of this universal trait. Any philosopher who wrote on human nature discussed laughter and, at least by implication, humor. Bergson and Freud at the beginning of the last century focused on laughter and wit to present testable, if not tested, hypotheses. Psychologists in the middle of the century included humor as part of their assessments of personality. Chapman and Foot, and Goldstein and McGhee (as well as McGhee and Goldstein) gave humor scholars a platform in the 1970s and 1980s. Separate chapters in these various books permitted presentation of data and ideas, but little interaction or direct communication. Even now, with a yearly conference and a quarterly journal, disagreement is more typical than exchange and cooperation. Here, then, with a single voice Martin surveys

and integrates a disparate field. After 100 years, we have some answers to the questions the theories have raised. It is possible to evaluate incongruity/surprise, aggression/superiority, tension/release, and so on. Their points of overlap and agreement as well as their conflicts can be examined and a decision advanced as to what predictions are most accurate.

As the past century has evolved, humor has broadened and increased in scope. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet supply more accessible—and to a degree less critical—outlets for humor. One might complain that increased quantity has led to decreased quality. On the other hand, quantity also leads to more variability, so the best is better yet! Humor has become a more significant reflection of society and humanity as a whole. In these pages, the current state of our knowledge is assessed. The direction of future inquiry and understanding can be seen.

Life, it has been said, would be meaningless without art. Perhaps it would be too meaningful without humor. Here, then, is a thorough description and evaluation of the good, the bad, and the playful behavior that is a common and significant part of life.

Peter Derks
Professor Emeritus
College of William and Mary

PREFACE

Humor is a ubiquitous human activity that occurs in all types of social interaction. Most of us laugh at something funny many times during the course of a typical day. Although it is a form of play, humor serves a number of “serious” social, cognitive, and emotional functions. Fascinating questions about humor and laughter touch on every area of psychology. Surprisingly, however, despite its obvious importance in human behavior, humor and related topics like laughter, irony, and mirth are hardly ever mentioned in psychology texts and other scholarly books. Although there is a sizable and continually expanding research literature on this subject, most psychologists seem to have little systematic knowledge of it.

The main purpose of this book, then, is to provide an integrative review of theory and research findings in all areas of the psychology of humor, with one chapter devoted to each branch of the discipline (cognitive, social, biologic, personality, developmental, clinical, etc.). The book is designed in part to be used as a textbook for senior undergraduate- or graduate-level courses in the psychology of humor. Although such courses are not currently part of the curriculum in most psychology departments, it is my hope that the availability of this book will encourage instructors to consider offering one. This course, like the book, would typically be organized around the different areas of psychology, with a week or two spent on each chapter. In my experience, this is always a very popular course, and it serves as an excellent vehicle for demonstrating to students how a very intriguing, enjoyable, and

personally relevant aspect of behavior can be approached from the perspective of each branch of psychology, providing a comprehensive and compelling understanding of the topic.

In addition to its purpose as a course textbook, I have also attempted to make this book useful as a research handbook for students as well as more seasoned academics who might be interested in conducting their own research in this topic area. In each chapter, therefore, I point out interesting questions that remain to be answered, novel hypotheses arising from recent developments in various areas of psychology, and promising research methods for addressing these questions. Researchers will no doubt see other ways that concepts from their own field of investigation could be applied to an understanding of humor. I also include an extensive bibliography for those who wish to examine the primary sources more closely. It is my hope that this book will trigger many interesting new ideas and stimulate readers to branch into this research area.

In addition to students and academic psychologists, I hope this book will be beneficial to scholars from other disciplines who are interested in learning about how humor has been investigated by psychologists. At various points in the book, I touch on some of the contributions of several other disciplines, such as anthropology, biology, computer science, linguistics, and sociology, which augment the research of psychologists. Finally, this book is also intended for practitioners in health care (e.g., physicians, nurses, occupational and physical therapists), counseling, social work, education, and business, who may be interested in potential applications of humor in their respective fields. I therefore do not assume that readers necessarily have a strong background in psychology. For those who may be less familiar with the discipline, I try to provide enough information to make the theories, methods, and findings reasonably accessible. Thus, I am attempting to reach a fairly broad audience with this book. I ask the reader's indulgence if I seem to be "spreading myself too thin."

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This book could not have been written without the help of many people. My interest in the academic study of humor was first kindled by my graduate research adviser at the University of Waterloo, Herb Lefcourt, whose intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm for scholarship have provided an inspiration and role model for me throughout my career. Over the years, I have honed my thinking about humor in many hours of lively discussion with several colleagues, including Nick Kuiper at the University of Western Ontario, with whom I have collaborated on a number of projects, and my good friends and fellow members of the International Society for Humor Studies, Peter Derks, Willi Ruch, and Sven Svebak. I am also grateful to a number of other research collaborators, including Eric Bressler, Jay Brinker, Lorne Campbell, Guohai Chen, Kathy Dance, David Dozois, Paul Frewen, Shahe Kazarian, Paavo Kerkkänen, Joan Olinger, Tony Vernon, and Lynne Zarbatany. I have also learned a great deal from my students, whose inquisitiveness and fresh insights have provided me with ongoing inspiration. Those who have worked with me on the topic of humor include James Dobbin, Patricia Doris, Gwen Dutrizac, Jeanette Gray, Tim Hillson, Melissa Johari, Jennie Ward, Kelly Weir, and Jeremy Yip.

I also wish to thank the following individuals who read drafts of various sections of this book and provided me with helpful feedback and suggestions: Albert Katz, Martin Kavaliers, Nick Kuiper, Paul Lewis, Jim Olson, and Willi Ruch. I am especially indebted to Peter Derks, who read and responded to every chapter, and whose

unfailing encouragement and enthusiasm for this project helped keep me going. Needless to say, however, I take full responsibility for all errors and omissions. I am also grateful for the support and encouragement of my good friends, Ed Beharry, Ray Cardey, George Vanderschaaf, and John Zinkann. I am blessed by a warm and caring family, and am buoyed by the love of my daughters Rachelle (and her husband Andrew and their children Caroline and Christina) and Julia (and her husband Ben), and my son Ben. Finally, and most importantly, I cannot fully express my gratitude to my wife, Myra, whose enduring love and cheerful sense of humor have sustained me, and to whom I dedicate this book.