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Definition: **humour** from *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*

amusement, laughter, and the like created by the paradoxical, ironic outcomes of social situations, language, and the portrayal of these in literature, art and the theatre. Although humour is a universal feature of human societies and a diverse literature exists (not least the work of Freud), the treatment of humour, has been only fragmentary within sociology, despite its importance in social life. See M. Mulkey, *On Humour* (1988).



Image from: [Dressier, Marie \(1868 Cobourg, Ontario-1934 Santa Barbara, CA\) in Encyclopedic Dictionary of Women in Early American Films: 1895-1930, An](#)

Summary Article: **Humor**

From *The Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology*

Humor refers to a rather broad set of phenomena associated with the creation, perception, and enjoyment of amusing, comical, or playfully incongruous ideas, situations, or events. The word *humor* is variously used to refer to an amusing *stimulus* (e.g., a joke, witty comment, or comedy film), the *cognitive process* involved in the creation or perception of funniness, the mirthful *emotion* that is associated with it, and a *personality characteristic* having to do with the tendency to enjoy humorous incongruity or the ability to amuse others and make them laugh. The term was used more narrowly in the nineteenth century to refer only to benevolent and sympathetic forms of amusement (“laughing with”), and was sharply distinguished from *wit*, which was viewed as more aggressive and less socially desirable (“laughing at”). Today, however, humor is a broad umbrella term referring to comedic amusement involving all sorts of verbal and nonverbal, intentionally and unintentionally funny events, regardless of the level of aggressiveness.

Components of Humor

Humor is essentially a form of play, a type of activity in which people take an unserious attitude toward the things they say and do, engaging in these actions for their own sake, rather than having a more important goal in mind. It is also typically a social activity: people engage in humor and laughter much more frequently when they are with others than when they are alone. Thus, humor may be viewed as a form of social play. Not all play, however, is humorous or “funny.” Humor is distinguished from other forms of play by the presence of elements that are perceived to be incongruous, odd, unusual, surprising, or out of the ordinary. Thus, as many theorists have noted, for humor to occur there needs to be a particular type of cognitive appraisal involving the perception of nonserious incongruity.

Koestler coined the term *bisociation* to refer to this cognitive process, in which a situation or idea is simultaneously perceived from the perspective of two self-consistent but normally unrelated and even contradictory schemas or frames of reference. A simple example is a pun, in which two different meanings of a word or phrase are activated simultaneously. Many theorists have argued that this type of nonserious incongruity forms the basis of all forms of humor, including jokes and amusing anecdotes, conversational witticisms, teasing, ridicule, unintentional types of humor such as amusing slips of the tongue or the proverbial person slipping on a banana peel, and the laughter-eliciting peek-a-boo games of young children.

The perception of humorous incongruity in a playful context typically also elicits a specific positive

emotion that, although closely related to joy, is uniquely associated with humor. Martin proposed the term *mirth* as a technical name for this emotion. The emotional nature of humor is demonstrated by recent brain imaging studies showing that exposure to humorous cartoons activates the well-known dopaminergic reward network in the limbic system of the brain. Depending on how amusing a stimulus is perceived to be, the emotion of mirth can range from mild feelings of amusement to very high levels of hilarity. Like other emotions, mirth is associated with a range of biochemical changes in the brain, autonomic nervous system, and endocrine system, producing effects on many parts of the body, including the cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, and immune systems.

Also like other emotions, mirth has an expressive component, namely smiling and laughter. At low levels of intensity, it is expressed by a faint smile, which turns into a broader grin and then audible chuckling and hearty laughter as the emotional intensity increases. Thus, laughter is a nonverbal vocal-behavioral expression communicating to others that one is experiencing the emotion of mirth, just as scowling, shouting, and clenching one's fists communicate the emotion of anger. Recent research suggests that an additional function of laughter is to induce mirthful emotion in others as well. The peculiar sounds of laughter appear to activate particular areas of the brain that are closely linked to humor and laughter, inducing mirth in listeners and causing them to laugh also. This explains why laughter is so contagious; it is difficult to remain serious when hearing others laugh. In summary, humor may be viewed as a positive, play-related emotion that is elicited by the cognitive appraisal of nonserious incongruity, usually occurs in an interpersonal context, and is expressed by smiling and laughter.

Evolutionary Origins

Humor and laughter are a universal aspect of human experience, occurring in all cultures and virtually all individuals throughout the world. Although different cultures have their own norms concerning the suitable subject matter of humor and the types of situations in which laughter is considered appropriate, the sounds of laughter are indistinguishable from one culture to another. Human infants begin to laugh in response to the actions of other people by about four months of age. The innateness of laughter is further demonstrated by the fact that children born deaf and blind have been reported to laugh appropriately without ever having perceived the laughter of others.

Interestingly, though, humans are not the only animal that laughs. Chimpanzees and other apes also display a form of laughter, which is described as a staccato, throaty, panting vocalization. Ape laughter is typically associated with the relaxed open-mouth display, or "play face," and is emitted during playful rough-and-tumble social activities such as wrestling, tickling, and chasing games. In addition to laughter, there is evidence that apes may even have the capacity for a rudimentary sense of humor.

Chimpanzees and gorillas that have been taught to communicate by means of sign language have been observed to use language in playful ways that are very reminiscent of humor, such as punning, humorous insults, and incongruous word use.

These lines of evidence suggest that humor and laughter in humans are products of natural selection. Laughter appears to have originated in social play and to be derived from primate play signals. With the evolution of greater intellectual and linguistic abilities, humans have adapted the laughter-generating play activities of their primate ancestors to the mental play with words, ideas, and concepts that we now call humor.

Psychosocial Functions

Although it may seem to be unserious and frivolous, humor appears to have several important

psychosocial functions.

Cognitive and Social Benefits of the Positive Emotion of Mirth

One of the apparent functions of humor has to do with the positive emotion that it elicits. Fredrickson has proposed a “broaden-and-build” model of the psychological functions of positive emotions in general, including humor-related mirth. Unlike negative emotions such as anger or fear, which tend to narrow one’s focus of attention and motivate one to engage in specific actions, positive emotions, according to this theory, serve to *broaden* the scope of the individual’s focus of attention, allowing for more creative problem-solving and an increased range of behavioral response options, and they also *build* physical, intellectual, and social resources that are available to the individual for dealing with life’s challenges.

Support for this model has been provided by a considerable amount of experimental evidence showing that the induction of positive emotions (including comedy-induced mirth) produces improvements in a variety of cognitive abilities and social behaviors. These include greater cognitive flexibility, allowing for more creative problem-solving; more efficient organization and integration of memory; more effective thinking, planning, and judgment; and higher levels of social responsibility and prosocial behaviors such as helpfulness and generosity. One way that humor likely provides important psychological benefits, then, is by inducing a positive emotional state that is typically shared among two or more individuals, and has important cognitive and social benefits.

Interpersonal Communication and Influence

Another function of humor relates to its important role in interpersonal communication and the formation, maintenance, and regulation of social relationships. The pleasurable, contagious emotion associated with sharing humorous experiences and laughing together can increase feelings of attraction between people and enhance interpersonal bonding and group cohesion. In addition, because of its inherently ambiguous nature due to the multiple concurrent meanings that it conveys, humor is often used for communicating messages that might be difficult to convey using a more serious mode of communication. Importantly, a message expressed in a humorous manner can be retracted if it is not well received, allowing both the speaker and the listener to save face. For example, humorous joking and teasing can be a way for partners in a close relationship to express differences of opinion, disapproval, criticism, or requests for favors in a relatively nonconfrontational and face-saving manner.

Although humor may be used in friendly ways to enhance relationships and ease tensions between people, it can also be used for more aggressive and even coercive purposes, taking the form of disparagement, mockery, sarcasm, aggressive teasing, or ridicule. For example, by laughing at particular characteristics or behaviors of outsiders, members of an ingroup can enhance their feelings of group identity and cohesiveness while excluding and emphasizing their differences from members of the outgroup. Many jokes are based on stereotypes making fun of members of a particular gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, or nationality. Cases of schoolyard bullying and sexual or racial harassment in the workplace also commonly involve aggressive uses of humor, teasing, and practical jokes. Since being the target of others’ laughter is painful and something that most people seek to avoid, aggressive forms of humor can also be used as a method of coercing people into conforming to desired behavior patterns. Thus, humor can be used for a variety of contradictory purposes, bringing people closer together or excluding them, resolving conflicts or avoiding dealing with problems, reducing status and power differences or dominating over others.

Aggressive aspects of humor and laughter have long been recognized by philosophers and writers. Biblical references to laughter are nearly all associated with derision and scorn, and the oldest theories of comedy, dating to Plato and Aristotle, view it as essentially a form of aggression. Indeed, it is only in the past century that the more positive and prosocial aspects of humor have been emphasized.

Tension Relief and Coping with Adversity

Another function of humor that has often been noted is its role in coping with stress and adversity. The ability to find humor in even the most difficult life circumstances is often seen as an important coping mechanism. Because it inherently involves incongruity and multiple interpretations, humor provides a way for the individual to shift perspective on a stressful situation, reappraising it from a new and less threatening point of view. As a consequence of this humorous reappraisal, the situation becomes less stressful and more manageable. In addition, the positive emotion of mirth accompanying the humor replaces the feelings of anxiety, depression, or anger that would otherwise occur. A considerable amount of correlational and experimental research has provided evidence for the stress-buffering effects of humor.

Sense of Humor

Sense of humor refers to trait-like individual differences in the perception, expression, or enjoyment of humor. In popular usage, a sense of humor is a very socially desirable personal characteristic that is commonly assumed to be associated with a variety of positive qualities such as sociability, cheerfulness, emotional stability, and intelligence. However, it is also a very vague concept, and there is little agreement about what exactly it means to say that someone has a sense of humor. For example, it may refer to individual differences in the types of jokes, cartoons, and other humorous stimuli that people find most amusing; the frequency with which they laugh and seek out humor; the ability to perceive or create humor; the tendency to tell jokes and amuse other people; the degree to which individuals understand jokes and other humorous stimuli; the tendency to use humor as a coping mechanism; the tendency not to take oneself too seriously and to laugh at one's own foibles and weaknesses; and so on. These varied popular conceptions of sense of humor (which are not necessarily highly intercorrelated) are also reflected in the many different ways it has been operationally defined in the research literature.

Much of the early research on sense of humor focused on individual differences in appreciation of jokes and cartoons containing particular themes, such as aggressive, sexual, political, scatological, or "sick" humor. More systematic factor analytic investigations, however, revealed that certain structural aspects of humor stimuli are more important determinants of appreciation than are their content themes. In particular, stable individual differences are consistently found in the degree to which people prefer humor in which the incongruity is largely resolved and makes sense in some way (incongruity-resolution humor), as opposed to more zany or bizarre humor in which the incongruity is largely unresolved (nonsense humor). Among other findings, preference for incongruity-resolution humor has been found to be correlated with conservative and authoritarian social attitudes, whereas preference for nonsense humor is related to openness and sensation-seeking.

As an alternative approach to studying individual differences, researchers during the past two decades have developed a number of self-report questionnaires assessing such aspects of sense of humor as tendencies to laugh and smile frequently, to perceive humorous aspects of the environment, to value humor, to maintain a cheerful mood and nonserious outlook on life, and to use humor as a means of

coping with stress. These types of measures tend to be positively correlated with extraversion and modestly negatively related to neuroticism. Researchers have also approached sense of humor as an ability to create humor, which they have measured by means of humor creation tests. Scores on these tests tend to be correlated with measures of general creativity.

Humor, Health, and Well-Being

There has been a great deal of interest in recent decades in potential health benefits of humor and laughter. It has been suggested that the physiological changes produced by the positive emotion of mirth may have a variety of beneficial effects, such as enhancing immune system functioning, counteracting pain, reducing blood pressure, and so on. Although the popular media frequently report claims of scientific evidence for these sorts of health-enhancing benefits of humor and laughter, more careful reviews of the research literature indicate that the evidence to date is quite inconsistent, with numerous methodological weaknesses making it difficult to draw firm conclusions. The most consistent evidence has been found for increased pain tolerance following exposure to comedy, suggesting an analgesic effect of humor-related mirth. Although studies have not been conducted to determine whether these effects are mediated by humor-induced increases in endorphins, this continues to be a viable hypothesis in need of further investigation.

In addition to hypothesized effects on physical health, a good deal of research has examined potential benefits of humor for emotional health and psychological well-being. As noted earlier, there is reason to view humor as a means of enhancing positive emotions, coping with stress, and maintaining relationships, all of which are important for psychosocial health. Until quite recently, most investigators have focused only on positive dimensions of humor, assuming that a sense of humor is always beneficial to mental health and positive relationships. More recently, however, researchers have begun to examine potentially detrimental as well as beneficial aspects. For example, research using the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) indicates that, whereas some styles of humor (affiliative and self-enhancing) are associated with positive moods, self-esteem, psychological well-being, intimacy, agreeableness, and relationship satisfaction, other styles (aggressive and self-defeating) are associated with poor psychological functioning, neuroticism, hostility, low self-esteem, and lack of social support. Thus, healthy psychological and interpersonal functioning appears to be related as much to the *absence* of certain deleterious forms of humor as to the *presence* of beneficial humor styles.

SEE ALSO: ► Amusement ► Laughter ► Smiles ► Well-being

Rod A. Martin
University of Western Ontario

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

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