

# Why Are Things Funny And Why Do We Laugh?



PSYCH 1101: DAY 35

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# The World's Funniest Joke

Dr. Richard Wiseman from the University of Herfordshire, got people to submit jokes on the web.

40,000 jokes and 1 million ratings later, he determined what the funniest joke in the world was:

(Prepare To Laugh)

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Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy takes out his phone and calls the emergency services.

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# The Psychology Of Real People

- The things we study most are not necessarily the most prevalent/important/frequent things
- e.g., Social psychologists spend a lot of time and journal space covering things like prejudice/stereotyping, cognitive dissonance, and helping behavior
- But what are the things that we do every day? Across culture, time, location?

# Forgotten Topics?

- Sex
- Religion
- Superstition
- Sports
- *Laughter and Humor*



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MPAA 1726A-073

# We Love Us Some Funny

- *Borat* grossed \$68 million in the first 10 days
- We watch very very stupid shows and pay to see bad stand-up comedians, all in a hope to make us laugh

# Tv Guide's Best Series Of All Time (2013)

1. The Sopranos
2. Seinfeld
3. I Love Lucy
4. All in the Family
5. The Twilight Zone
6. The Wire
7. The Mary Tyler Moore Show
8. M\*A\*S\*H
9. Breaking Bad
10. The Simpsons
11. Cheers
12. Star Trek
13. The Honeymooners
14. Law & Order
15. The Andy Griffith Show
16. Masterpiece Theatre
17. The Carol Burnett Show
18. Saturday Night Live
19. The Oprah Winfrey Show
20. The Dick Van Dyke Show
21. Mad Men
22. The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson
23. Hill Street Blues
24. 60 Minutes
25. 26. The Cosby Show
27. Gunsmoke
28. Friends
29. ER
30. Sesame Street
31. The Ed Sullivan Show
32. Roseanne
33. Columbo
34. The Waltons
35. Taxi
36. Lost
37. Your Show of Shows
38. Buffy the Vampire Slayer
39. Survivor
40. Sex and the City
41. Late Night/Late Show With David Letterman
42. The West Wing
43. Modern Family
44. NYPD Blue
45. Jeopardy!
46. Barney Miller
47. Dallas
48. American Idol
49. The Bob Newhart Show
50. The Shield
51. St. Elsewhere
52. The Big Bang Theory
53. The Daily Show With Jon Stewart
54. The Golden Girls
55. Homicide:
56. The Larry Sanders Show
57. Battlestar Galactica
58. Monty Python's Flying Circus
59. The Good Wife
60. Everybody Loves Raymond

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# So Then Why...

- Hardly any mention of humor in your textbook?
- Perhaps it's so prevalent that it is easily ignored? (like fish don't notice water)
- Likely because human laughter/humor also poses a real mystery...

“Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”

-E. B. White,

*Some Remarks on Humor*

# I. What Is Funny?

- One strategy: find out what makes us laugh.

# The Ubiquity Of Laughter

- Good estimate: We laugh about 17 times a day
- It's pleasurable--we have industries explicitly built around making us laugh.
- Laughing makes us feel *good*



# What Is Laughter?

- A human universal
  - Starts at about 3.5/4 mos of age.
- “rhythmic, vocalized, expiratory and involuntary actions”
- Automatic physiological reaction to amusing stimuli (or tickling, or nitrous oxide)
- A series of staccato segments about 1/15 of a second each, separated by about 1/5 of a second.
- Vowel-like utterances (e.g., ha-ha or ho-ho)



# What Is Laughter?: Physiology

- Fifteen facial muscles contract and stimulation of the zygomatic major muscle (the main lifting mechanism of your upper lip) occurs
- In the respiratory system: The epiglottis half-closes the larynx, so that air intake occurs irregularly, making you gasp
- In extreme circumstances, the tear ducts are activated.
- While the mouth is opening and closing and the struggle for oxygen intake continues, the face becomes moist and often red (or purple)

# Laughing At A Joke: EEG Analysis

## (Peter Derks)

- The left side of the cortex analyzed the words and structure of the joke.
- The frontal lobe then becomes very active.
- The right hemisphere of the cortex showed activity, presumably the intellectual analysis required to "get" the joke.
- Brainwave activity then spread to the sensory processing area of the occipital lobe (the area on the back of the head that contains the cells that process visual signals).
- Stimulation of the motor sections evoked physical responses to the joke.

# The Brain's "Funny Bone"

(Fried, Wilson, Macdonald & Behnke, 1998)

- Electrical stimulation was applied to 85 sites on the brain of a 16 year-old girl who had serious seizures
- A small area measuring about 2 cm x 2 cm was identified on the *left superior frontal gyrus* where stimulation consistently produced laughter
- Laughter was accompanied by a sensation of merriment or mirth
- Patient confabulated--gave reasons why she was laughing.

# Laughter Is Rewarding...

- Laughter also appears to be regulated by the same reward-circuit that makes us feel good when we perform activities.
- Endorphins are released during laughter, just like after sex and eating.

# The Best Medicine?

- Laughter has many physiological features that make it healthy for us.
- Reduces the presence of stress hormones
- Decreases muscle tension
- Increases presence of positive immune markers
- In diabetics, less increase in blood sugar after a meal.
- Laughter is incongruent with many chronic negative emotional states (anger and depression) that are bad for health.

# Why Do We Laugh?

- Laughter is **social** and **communicative**
- We rarely laugh alone
- People are 30 times more likely to laugh in social setting (even with nitrous oxide. But TV is “parasocial”)
- May help social bonding
- Contagious
  - (e.g, laugh tracks, children)
  - Provine suggests that humans have a "detector" that responds to laughter by triggering other neural circuits in the brain, which, in turn, generates more laughter.



So What Makes Us Laugh?

# 1. Incongruity Theories

- “We laugh when there is incongruity between what we expect and what actually happens, unless the outcome is frightening”
- Punchline forces you to reconsider/reframe something
- “Police were called to a daycare, where a three-year-old was resisting a rest.”

# Incongruity?

- BUT:
  - doesn't *explain* why incongruity causes laughter
  - most incongruity doesn't cause laughter
    - Got an F when you thought you'd get an A? Ha!
  - A lot of laughter isn't caused by incongruity at all

## 2. Superiority

- Our mirth is explained by the sudden realization that we are better than the butt of the joke.
- Often used in ridicule
  - If the Queen of England passes gas, it's a lot funnier than if the homeless guy down the street does the same thing

# 3. Benign Violation Theory

- Thomas Veatch/Peter McGraw
  - A violation (often moral)
  - But one that is not threatening

# Peter McGraw On Benign Violation Theory



[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=-GNY4C1RX5I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GNY4C1RX5I)

# 4. Tension-Release

- Philosopher John Morreall:
  - human laughter may have its biological origins as a kind of shared expression of relief at the passing of danger
- We laugh when something builds up tension then relieves it