A NEW FORMULATION OF HUMOR

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ABSTRACT

Having a sense of humor is an important part of being a person. Correspondingly, understanding humor is an important part of understanding persons. To understand the problem of individual differences or senses of humor requires that we distinguish the matter of what is categorically a case of Humor from what is appreciated by an individual as an instance of humor. Therefore, this paper offers a conceptual and theoretical treatment of Humor, and a report of an empirical study that tests hypotheses derived from the theoretical formulation. Thus, this essay includes (a) a theory of Humor; (b) an explication of the concept of Humor; (c) an examination of the relation of humor to emotional behavior; (d) a parametric analysis of successful versus unsuccessful humor; and (e) a status-dynamic analysis of the appreciation and enjoyment of humor. The empirical study contains (a) a description of the hypotheses derived from the status-dynamic analysis; (b) a description of the procedures and data analyses used in the investigation; (c) a report of the results; and (d) a discussion of the results of this study.

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As everyone knows, some things are funny and some are not. But which are which? What characterizes some things as humorous and others not, and how come people disagree over which things they identify as instances of Humor?

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

Some persons have attempted to resolve this dilemma by proposing that "Humor is whatever anyone laughs at or finds funny". I take this proposal to be fundamentally inadequate in illuminating either Humor or the matter of our individual differences in regard to what each of us finds humorous. The new formulation presented here purports to clarify the concept of Humor which we share, which enables us to have individual differences with regard to what we each take to be humorous on particular occasions. If we did not have the fundamental concept of Humor in common, there would be no question of individual differences, since there would be no subject, namely humor, for us to disagree with respect *to*. In short, we shall find that the matter of "what is Humor" is not simply "all relative".

Furthermore, a comprehensive understanding of humor would include not only an adequate conceptualization of Humor and the place that humor has in the behavior of persons; we should also want a theory of humor that will provide a systematic way of picking out what we actually distinguish as categories of humor, and as categories which are related to humor. Thus, a *theory* of humor would deal with *which* things, categorically, are funny. The problem of individual differences requires that we distinguish the matter of what is *categorically* a case of Humor from what is appreciated by an individual as an *instance* of humor (i.e., what he appraises as funny). This distinction will further enable us to clarify the problem of what is involved in there being successful and unsuccessful humor, since no instance of humor is guaranteed to be appreciated on any historically particular occasion.

Finally, beyond the conceptual and theoretical treatment of the problem of *which* things are funny, there is also the question, "What is *actually* found to be funny by whom?" Thus, the latter section of this essay reports the design and results of an empirical study in which hypotheses based on the formulation proposed in the first section of this paper were investigated.

Two other matters might best be addressed at the outset. First, a full understanding of Humor involves more than competence in appreciating humor. Although we are able to enjoy humor and often even produce humor without reference to any theory, still it remains for the behavioral scientist to give a more illuminating account of the nature of humor, to account for individual differences with respect to the appreciation of humor, to illuminate what contributes to successful versus unsuccessful humor, and to clarify the place of humor in human behavior. Interestingly, even successful professional writers and performers of humor and comedy often admit to being puzzled about these matters.

Indeed, we are all readily aware that the enterprise of analyzing humor (including elucidating the concept of humor and formulating a theory of humor) contrasts markedly with simply enjoying humor. Thus, a monograph about humor does not necessarily read like a joke, although I have read some which bear a marked resemblance to shaggy dog stories.

Secondly, it is important to clarify at the outset that my subject in this monograph is humor, not laughter. Some efforts to understand humor have taken as their subject matter the phenomenon of laughter. I believe that such an approach to humor is off target, and most often symptomatic of an attempt to find a suitable starting point for an investigation of humor. While the study of laughter has merit in its own right, it is misguided as an approach to understanding humor because it is both too broad and inclusive on one hand, and too narrow and exclusive on the other. The study of laughter as an approach to understanding humor is too broad in that not all cases of laughter are indications of something humorous or funny. We sometimes laugh to be "sociable" even when we don't see the humor of the matter; we sometimes laugh when we are nervous or afraid or embarrassed; we may laugh to ridicule someone, or to give a signal, and so on. The point is that we recognize that we laugh on some nonhumorous occasions, and it would be unsound to conclude that because someone laughs, there was something funny. In short, not all occurrences of laughter have humor in common. Incidentally, this position contrasts with that assumed by many researchers throughout the ages, who have sought to collect samples of laughter-occasions as if there were some essence of Humor to be distilled which they supposed might be common to all instances. The problem inherent in the above method of investigating humor is considered to a greater extent elsewhere (Littmann, 1979).

But not only is the topic of laughter as an approach to understanding humor too broad and inclusive, it is also too narrow and exclusive. Laughter does not accompany much that *is* funny (humorous). Laughter is, of course, only one manner of expressing our amusement. Sometimes we smile, sometimes we chuckle, sometimes we groan, and sometimes we remain stonefaced, among other manners of responding. Were we to delimit the study of humor to occasions that elicit or generate laughter, we would overlook much humor; laughter is not the only behavioral response to humor in our repertoires, and neither is volume of laughter necessarily proportionate to degree of amusement.

Thus, even without a theory of Humor, it is possible for the reader to recognize that the study of laughter is a misguided approach to the study of humor, and that laughter as an index of humor is, while not unrelated, conceptually off the mark. Some laughter is nonhumorous; some humor is not laughed at. A comprehensive formulation of humor ought at least to be consistent with this state of affairs.

Nonetheless, it is sensible for any serious investigator of humor to seek a starting point which clearly identifies the subject matter. Many theorists offer

definitions at this point as a method of anchoring their subject matter. However, identifying (or delineating) a subject matter and giving a definition of it do not come to the same thing. Moreover, one's *method* of identifying one's subject matter greatly influences the substance of one's findings. Among the problems encountered in the use of definitions are:

1. *Inclusion-exclusion.* Although definitions allow approximations, we can almost never be sure of including all cases (of humor) that we mean to include, and excluding everything we mean to exclude.

2. *The infinite regress.* With definitions, there is the infinite regress; that is, since the definition makes reference to something else, there is the problem of defining that something else, and so on. The definition does not provide a stopping point, but its structure reminds us that ultimately we must reach a set of terms we know enough about to use without a definition.

3. *Reductionism.* Definitions invite reductionism, since in the course of giving a definition, there is a referential leap to a new domain; for example, ''What I mean when I refer to humor is really 'anything which stimulates the occurrence of laughter' '', which is usually followed promptly by a claim that this is the same as humor. This smacks of changing the subject rather than of giving an informative account of what was set out initially for definition. The trap of reductionism often snares investigators entangled in the infinite regress.

4. *Peace at any price.* Definitions often represent an investigator's attempt to legislate a particular version of a concept over which there are legitimate individual differences; thus, an adequate conceptualization is often sacrificed for lack of an alternate method of coping with individual differences. Such an approach—namely, the arbitrary declaration of a particular meaning of a term as, by fiat, the correct one, or even merely, ''Well, this is what *I* mean by the term, 'humor' ''—defaults with respect to establishing the legitimacy of any claim.

Fortunately, several alternatives exist for identifying our subject matter and systematically delineating what is to be investigated further. The alternative to definitions which I shall be concerned with here is the Paradigm Case Formulation (Ossorio, 1981). It provides an alternate way of including the cases (instances of humor) which we wish to include and excluding those we wish to exclude; in addition, it enables us to be explicit about the differences in our conceptualizations of humor and what instances we would each consider as cases of humor. A Paradigm Case Formulation is accomplished in two major steps:

I. Introduce a Paradigm Case (of Humor). In the theory of humor which I shall present, the Joke is introduced and elucidated as the Paradigm Case of Humor. *Jokes* are paradigmatically *funny,* although we may disagree about

which jokes each of us finds funny. This matter will be dealt with in a later section of this paper; for now, it is sufficient to notice that if we do not find "X" funny, we are ready to withdraw our appraisal of it as a "joke". Thus, the Joke is a suitable candidate for the Paradigm Case of Humor.

II. Introduce one or more transformations of the Paradigm Case. These consist of saying, "Change the Paradigm Case in this specified way, and you'll still have a case of the subject matter of the formulation." Transformations are written in the form, "A → . . . " which is read as, "Replace A with . . . [whatever follows the arrow]."

Thus, the Paradigm Case will directly identify some portion of the cases of Humor which are to be chosen. Each transformation consists of specifying a particular change in the Paradigm Case (structure of a Joke) which will pick out additional cases; this is why they are called transformations. Among the advantages of Paradigm Case Formulations over definitions is that they enable us to clarify our conceptual differences with one another, since these disagreements usually occur in reference to one of the transformations. For example, someone may reject my second transformation (the "Practical Joke") with the comment, "Well, *you* may call those 'jokes', but I don't." Thus, at least the Paradigm Case Formulation illuminates the subject matter and enables us to understand, communicate, and clarify our differences with others. Moreover, the Paradigm Case Formulation approach avoids the assumption (shared by many critical thinkers of many eras) that there is an essence of humor, a necessary and sufficient element that all instances of humor have in common. Instead, it will become apparent that diverse forms of humor are interrelated along the model of the transformations to the paradigm case. One comic element need not be common to all instances of Humor in order for there to be a family resemblance among various forms of humor.

The theory of humor presented below actually has the form of three Paradigm Case Formulations (PCFs). (All three Paradigm Case Formulations, including the transformations, are required to descriptively encompass the range of actual cases of humor.) In the first PCF the Joke is presented as a Paradigm Case of humor.

The Joke is formulated as follows:

Paradigm Case Formulation–1 for Humor

I. Paradigm Case: Joke

A. Present some subject as to be taken seriously ($View_{serious}$)
B. Present that subject as to be taken nonseriously ($View_{nonserious}$)

A joke further involves presenting the nonserious view (V_{ns}) in such a way that it has a special relation to the serious view (V_s). The nonserious

view is not mutually exclusive with respect to the serious view; both views are maintained, but the nonserious view has controlling importance.

This special relationship between the two viewpoints, serious and nonserious, will be further elaborated following the schematic layout of the PCFs. Also, it should be noted that the presentation of the subject as serious (and nonserious) can be accomplished in several ways, for example: (1) by mention, and (2) by evocation (i.e., by implication, by suggestion, or by presupposition).

Two transformations of the first Paradigm Case modify it so as to encompass T-1: Humor in the Situation, and T-2: the so-called ''Practical Joke''.

II. Transformations (T)[1]

T-1: Humor in the Situation

A→ Notice or take some subject (S) as serious. (The Observer creates V_s of some situation.)

B→ Notice or take S as nonserious. (The Observer creates V_{ns} and correspondingly, $V_{Humorous}$.)

T-2: Practical Joke

A→ Present to someone (victim) some subject (S), especially a situation, as to be taken seriously.

B→ Present to observer(s) of the victim who takes S seriously, S as not-to-be-taken-seriously. (The victim may also assume the role of observer once he appreciates the nonserious perspective. In such a case, he has the double status of observer and victim.)

It was noted that this theory of humor actually has the form of three Paradigm Case Formulations. What follows are called ''second-order'' transformations because they take the PCF-1 (Joke) and introduce transformations of it. Basically, PCF-2 specifies that the serious and nonserious viewpoints could be presented in any order or simultaneously, and, provided that the special relationship is still created, the result would still qualify as a Joke (or variety of Humor). PCF-3 specifies that the terms ''serious'' and ''nonserious'' could be replaced by any functionally equivalent (Ossorio, 1966; Note 1) terms.

Paradigm Case Formulation–2 for Humor

I. Paradigm Case: PCF-1

II. Transformations

T-1: Present A and B simultaneously (e.g., as in Puns)

T-2: Reverse the order of presentation: First B, then A (B, the nonserious view, still predominates.)

Paradigm Case Formulation–3 for Humor

I. Paradigm Case: PCF-1 and PCF-2

II. Transformations

Serious → Any functional equivalent of serious, for example

T-1: serious (seriously) → At face value
(nonserious is replaced, accordingly, by the negation of "at face value"). Thus,

A → Present some subject as to be taken at face value

B → Present some subject as not to be taken at face value

(Each transformation of "serious" applies to both A and B clauses.)

T-2: serious → Real (realistic)

T-3: serious → Expected

T-4: serious → Unequivocal

T-5: serious → Conventional

T-6: serious → Problematic

T-7: serious → In Earnest

T-8: serious → Normative

(etc.)

As noted above, all three Paradigm Case Formulations (including the transformations) are required to descriptively encompass the range of actual cases of humor. However, most of the following discussion will center on the first, in order to illuminate the special relationship between the serious and nonserious viewpoints in a Joke.

PCF-1 may be summarized in an approximate way by noting that when we say that a person "sees the joke", "appreciates the humor of Y", "gets the joke", or "finds it funny", we are talking about a situation in which a person realizes (attains) a second, nonserious view of some (serious) subject matter while nevertheless retaining the first (serious) view of that subject matter, not as a competing view, but as a background "given".

Since the Joke serves as our Paradigm Case of Humor, let us examine a very simple joke:

A. One automobile company has finally invented the perfectly safe car.

B. All the doors lock automatically so that the driver can't get in.

Line A, the build-up, presents a view that is to be taken seriously (V_s) the invention of the perfectly safe car. Line B, the punch line, presents a second viewpoint, this one nonserious (V_{ns})—it is an undrivable car. However, the punchline also preserves the serious viewpoint, thus concomitantly generating a new view, the serious-seen-as-nonserious (V_H)—what makes it a perfectly safe car is that its special new features make the car undrivable. The serious view provides the background-given (the context) for the nonserious view, and thereby sets the stage for the humorous perspective.

This joke brings out certain of the characteristic features of Jokes in general. Since a shift from one viewpoint to another is involved, and since the shift from one viewpoint (and view, V_s) to another (V_{ns} and V_H) is discontinuous (there are no halfway or intermediate stages), the new view (V_{ns} and concomitantly, V_H) will be sudden, unexpected (surprising) and incongruous in relation to the first. Notice that incongruity is not a "component" of Jokes. Whereas many theorists, including Kant and Schopenhauer, have offered accounts of laughter which hinge on incongruity as the explanatory element, it can be seen in the present formulation that although incongruity may be universally present in Jokes and humor, incongruity does not *account for* the *humor* of Jokes. Incongruity is a categorization of the kind of relationship which exists between two viewpoints, V_s and V_{ns}, both of which are adopted by an audience who "gets the joke" (V_H). Both the serious view and nonserious view are *aspects* of the humorous view, which encompasses both V_s and V_{ns}. Thus, while incongruity, surprise, and "the unexpected" may be in common to all jokes, these characteristics are in a sense "incidental" (or subsidiary) features, and do not intrinsically make things humorous. Incongruity may be funny-peculiar, but it is not necessarily funny-humorous.

Although the special relationship between the two points of view V_s and V_{ns} is examined in greater depth elsewhere (Littmann, 1979), in order to help clarify the nature of Jokes it is informative to be explicit on several points:

1. Obviously, a Joke is not merely serious (V_s). If someone treats the information in both Line A and Line B entirely seriously, he will not "get the joke". At best, he would respond like Porkypine: "Ha ha ha ha . . . evidently".[2]

2. Perhaps less obviously, a Joke is not the same as treating something nonseriously (V_{ns}). We treat many matters as nonserious without treating them as Jokes. Moreover, seeing something as a joke (V_H) *contrasts* with seeing it as merely nonserious (V_{ns}). We appraise *jokes* as "funny", "amusing", and "humorous", whereas we appraise *nonserious matters* as either trivial, inconsequential, insignificant, of minimal concern, no big deal, minor, or as silly—that is, as

not important or significant enough to be taken seriously. Humor does not reduce to "nonserious".

3. In the case of Humor, *both* the serious and the nonserious viewpoints are preserved; the serious is seen *as* nonserious. Although a Joke involves a transition from the serious to the nonserious viewpoint, the initial (serious) viewpoint is not discarded; both are preserved in the special and peculiar relationship mentioned above. (If a joke were merely a transition from serious to nonserious, an individual's appraisal would probably be "Oh, I was wrong—it's really not that serious", rather than an appraisal of the situation as funny. Notice that one might feel relieved over the diminished seriousness, but not necessarily amused.)

4. Neither is a Joke a matter of ambiguity or equivocation, that is, a subject which *merely* permits more than one viewpoint (V_s and V_{ns}). In such cases, one's response is likely to be some attempt to clarify which of the viewpoints or meanings was intended, rather than to be amused.

By way of summary, in a Joke, both a serious viewpoint (V_s) and a nonserious viewpoint (V_{ns}) about some matter are preserved in a special relationship: The serious view is the background-given which provides the context and coherence for adopting the nonserious view. These otherwise incompatible viewpoints are both maintained in the special relationship: "seeing-the-serious-as-nonserious". What is systematized by PCF-2 is that this humorous view can be created regardless of the order in which the viewpoints (V_s and V_{ns}) are presented, provided that the relationship between them is as described above, wherein both are maintained, the nonserious as figure, and the serious as ground.

The peculiar relationship between two "incompatible" viewpoints maintained in a coherent framework provides the funny-peculiar feature of Jokes. The case of *humor* (funny ha-ha) is distinguished by the fact that the appraisal which is the "background-given" is *serious* (but see PCF-3) and the reappraisal which contrasts with the serious is *nonserious*. Since some cleverness may be required to create (or appreciate) contexts which sustain contrasting dual perspectives, humor overlaps with wit.

What is systematized by the PCF-3 is the range of contexts which may serve as the background viewpoint and provide coherence for the contrasting reappraisal, that is, foreground viewpoint. The list of terms given in PCF-3 could, standing alone, provide some indication of the range of potentially funny-peculiar or incongruous ideas, but it is by virtue of the PCF structure, and especially their connection to the serious-nonserious perspective, that these terms are enlightening in respect to *humor*.

As a practical matter, it is often the case that the listener is uncertain how to appraise the initial information presented to him until he also receives the remaining portion. And to complicate the matter further, it is also possible to create a series of presentations such that one foreground viewpoint (e.g., a punch line)

becomes the background for a subsequent viewpoint, so that it may be difficult to uniquely identify a given viewpoint. For example, consider the following story of the man and his talking-dog act:

> The circus was recruiting for new, unusual acts, and a man and his dog went in to audition. The Ringmaster called them forward: "OK, let's see what you've got."
>
> The man says to his dog, "What's the top of a building called?" The dog goes, "Roof! Roof!"
>
> The Ringmaster says, "OK, pretty good. Let's see some more."
>
> The man says to the dog, "What do you call a man's beard when he wakes up in the morning, before he's shaved?" The dog says, "Rough! Rough!"
>
> The Ringmaster says, "That's fine. But let's see some more."
>
> The man says to the dog, "Who was the greatest baseball player of all time?" The dog says "Ruth! Ruth!"
>
> The Ringmaster says, "That's all! Get out of here with that act. You're finished. Get out!"
>
> Moments later the man and dog are outside walking down the street. The dog turns and looks up at the man and says, "Gosh, I don't know, was it Gehrig?"

The above joke also serves to illustrate that the nature of the background appraisal may be concealed until the final punch line (second viewpoint) is presented.

Humorous tales and longer, more complex comic works involve a variety of different elements in the portrayal of various contrasting viewpoints, only some parts of which would be regarded as humorous. Not every line or moment of a comedy, for instance, is humorous. Yet the PCF structure indicates the way in which comedy connects to humor. Similarly, categories such as irony, absurdity, riddles, puns, the ridiculous, satire, farce, nonsense, shaggy dog stories, kidding, parody, caricature, burlesque, and limericks each display some unifying characteristics which form the basis for distinguishing each as a "category". However, these categories were never intended to provide a taxonomy of humor, that is, to organize humor into a set of mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive categories, nor is the classification of a genus-species sort. Not every riddle, for example, is a case of humor. Space in this paper does not permit an explanation of the relationships among these terms. However, the PCF structure provides the basis for understanding the family resemblance among these concepts and the way(s) in which diverse instances of humor are related (cf., Littmann, 1979, pp. 51–64). In contrast to definitions, the PCF structure is better suited for doing justice to representing both the similarities and differences among humor phenomena, and for distinguishing cases of humor, borderline cases, and cases which are not humor.

Individual Differences and Humor

Notice that the use of the Paradigm Case Formulation permits the clarification of the nature of Jokes, and more broadly, the nature of humor, but it is noncommittal with respect to identifying individual persons' appraisals of particular instances of Jokes or Humor. In other words, the Paradigm Case Formulation is aimed at identifying what a Joke is, and leaves as a separate matter which specific jokes appeal to which individuals. This separation is precisely what is needed to deal effectively with the observation mentioned earlier, that "some laughter is nonhumorous; *some humor is not laughed at*". Moreover, it is useful to refine the problem of individuals' different responses to humor still further. In the first place, I will give an account of those occasions when humor is not accompanied by amused behavior, and subsequently I will discuss the matter of individual humor preferences or senses of humor.

There are a number of possible reasons why a person may not laugh at a joke. However, to understand specific instances of a person's failing to express amusement when humor is presented, it is useful to consider the general case of a person's behavior not expressing a given relationship. This discussion will also facilitate our understanding of how humor resembles an emotion, since humor, like an emotion, implies a relationship.

The Relationship Between Humor and Emotional Behavior

We may formulate our knowledge of relationships as follows:

> *If person X has a given relationship to person Y, the behavior of person X* vis-à-vis *person Y will be an expression of that relationship* unless:
>
> a. *X is acting on another relationship (either with Y or with someone else) which takes precedence;* or
> b. *X takes the relationship to be a different one instead;* or
> c. *X is unable at that time to act in accordance with the relationship;* or
> d. *X mistakenly believes that what he did* was *an expression of that relationship* (Ossorio, 1970/1981).

The above is a logical, preempirical formulation of the concept of "relationship" as it pertains to the behavior of persons, and thus is called the "Relationship Formula". The "Unless Clauses" are an exhaustive classification of the kinds of exceptions there are to the principle that *X's behavior will express his relationship with Y.*[3]

We can summarize our knowledge of emotional behavior as follows: Specifying a particular emotion identifies a particular relationship. To characterize a particular instance of behavior as "emotional" is to say that (a) an individual has made some particular discrimination, which (b) tautologically carries with it motivational significance (a and b amount to saying that an appraisal is made and

appraisals are grounds for corresponding action); (c) the person possesses a learning history (competence) relevant to acting on that particular discrimination/appraisal; and (d) the person has a learned tendency to act on that discrimination/appraisal *without deliberation*. For example, specifying the emotion *fear* identifies the relationship: Danger $\xrightarrow{\text{(elicits)}}$ Avoidance/Escape Behavior. The appraisal of something as dangerous tautologically involves having reasons/motivation for escape or avoidance behavior.

The concept of Humor is given by a tautological formula which parallels the emotional behavior formulas (see Table 1) and, like them, is a special case of the Relationship Formula:

$$\text{Humor} \xrightarrow{\text{(elicits)}} \begin{cases} \text{Amused Behavior (Amusement)} \\ \text{Mirth} \end{cases}$$

Unless:

a. *Person X is acting on another relationship which takes precedence* (for example, although person X appreciates an incident as humorous/funny, he doesn't laugh because he is at a funeral, or in class listening to a lecture, or, he is doing therapy, and he is giving priority to one of these other relationships); *or*

b. *Person X takes the relationship to be a different one than humor* (for example, he doesn't get the joke and treats the information completely seriously); *or*

c. *Person X is unable at that time to act in accordance with the relationship* (for example, he was eating at the time and winds up choking rather than laughing; or is cataplexic and collapses instead of laughing); *or*

d. *Person X mistakenly believes that what he did* was *Amused Behavior, that is, an expression of amusement* (for example, his laughter was an expression of his hostility, not of his amusement).

From the above, it should be apparent that there is no mysterious ingredient which must be added to humor to make it funny; the connection, as in the case of emotions, is tautological: It is our appraisal of a given instance as funny, humorous, or amusing which tautologically carries motivation for engaging in Amused Behavior. Humor is the reality basis (like danger in the case of fear) which tautologically carries with it motivation for the appraiser to engage in some form of Amused Behavior (Mirth). Amused Behavior is engaged in when (a) a person discriminates humor; which (b) tautologically carries motivational significance

Table 1
Emotion Formulas Chart

Emotion	*Discrimination*	*Relationship*	*Behavior*	*Attitude*	*Perception*	*Belief*	*Feeling*	*State*
fear	danger	is a danger to	escape	fear	danger	danger	fear	fear
anger	provocation	provokes	hostile	anger	provocation	provocation	anger	anger
$guilt_1$	wrongdoing before the fact	temptation	avoidance	$guilt_1$	wrongdoing before the fact	wrongdoing before the fact	$guilt_1$	$guilt_1$
$guilt_2$	wrongdoing after the fact	wrongdoing	penance restitution	$guilt_2$	wrongdoing after the fact	wrongdoing after the fact	$guilt_2$	$guilt_2$
shame	transgression of social norm	transgression	face-saving	shame	transgression of social norm	transgression of social norm	shame	shame
despair	hopelessness	hopeless	none	despair	hopelessness	hopelessness	despair	despair
envy	inequity	unequal	equalization	envy	inequity	inequity	envy	envy
jealousy	possession	jealous	equity	jealousy	possession	possession	jealousy	jealousy
sadness	bad fortune	loss	lament	sadness	bad fortune	bad fortune	sadness	sadness
joy	good fortune	gain	celebration	joy	good fortune	good fortune	joy	joy
amusement[a]	humor	is funny to amuses is humorous to	express amusement, e.g., laugh, smile, chuckle, etc.	amused	humor	humorous funny	amused	amused

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[a]I have added this line to the original text in consultation with the author.

(a and b amount to saying that an appraisal is made, namely, the appraisal that Y is humorous, funny, amusing, and that appraisals are grounds for some corresponding action); (c) the person possesses a learning history (competence) relevant to acting on that discrimination/appraisal; and (d) the person has the learned tendency to act on that discrimination/appraisal without deliberation. Thus, we are able to specify the way in which Amused Behavior can be characterized as emotional behavior. (Again see Table 1.) And as described earlier, we are also able to give a logically comprehensive, systematic account of the kinds of exceptions there are to the principle that Humor elicits Amused Behavior/Mirth.

It may be useful to clarify that the terms "Amused Behavior" and "Mirth" are used above to signify the sort of amusement expressed in response to Humor specifically, and not to entertaining situations in general. Also, as discussed earlier in this paper, there are many reasons why someone might engage in Amused-type Behavior (for example, the *Performance* of laughing, smiling, etc.) even though he does not appraise Y as funny. However, since the focus of this paper is humor, the occurrence of amused-type behaviors in the absence of humor shall not concern us here.[4] But it would be handy to have a term in English which signifies precisely the kind of behavior that we are tautologically motivated to engage in on various occasions when we appraise Y as humorous, funny, amusing. "Mirth" appears to be a good candidate, and it is noteworthy that mirth does not signify a particular universal behavioral manifestation on each and every occasion of humor. The difficulty with the term mirth, however, is that, like Amused Behavior, it tends to suggest a response to a broader range of occasions than merely humorous ones. And although it can be seen that some of the broader meanings of these terms are interrelated, especially in the sense that something which is "entertaining" or "amusing" may put one in a "good humor" in general, nonetheless, for the present purpose, the more specific use of the terms are intended.

Having now given a preempirical account of the general conditions under which humor is not accompanied by amused behavior, we can return to the matter of individual differences in humor preferences on particular occasions. It should be obvious that various conditions specified as exceptions to the principle that "Humor elicits Amused Behavior" will obtain for different individuals, under different circumstances. Just who is most likely to enjoy humor about what on a given occasion is an empirical matter. Although the Paradigm Case Formulation primarily addresses the matter of what is involved in there being cases of Humor (categorically), we shall find that the PCF is also helpful in illuminating the nature of individual differences in humor preferences. However, there is a matter which merits prior attention, especially since it has a bearing on any empirical investigation of individual differences in humor appreciation. It can be noticed that there is no guarantee that something which is presented as humor will be appraised as humorous (funny). And there is no guarantee that any historically particular joke (i.e., any joke presented at some given point in time)

or instance of humor will succeed at being appreciated or appraised as funny. It is possible to identify, in principle, three aspects (parameters) of the successful or unsuccessful occurrence of humor: the subject matter (material), its presentation, and the personal characteristics of the audience. All things being equal, good material obviously has a better chance of succeeding (in being appreciated) than rotten material. The professional presentation of humor, including delivery and staging, is designed to overcome or preclude problems either on the audience side (e.g., poor attention) or on the subject matter side (e.g., weak, dull, or otherwise poor material), that might contribute to the failure of some given material to be appreciated as humorous. Thus, if a subject is only of minimal interest, the presentation may build it up, persuade the audience of its seriousness, help people to notice it or to understand it, and so forth, and thereby help the audience to appreciate the humor of the material. The presentation is also designed to overcome other individual differences among audience members, so that hardly anyone is too tired, or not involved enough, or in too bad a mood to appreciate the material. In brief, wherever there is a relevant audience factor, there is a relevant presentation factor, and a relevant subject matter factor; each can help make up for the deficiencies (or overcome the assets) of the others in order to produce a successful (or unsuccessful) instance of humor.

Of course, individuals differ widely in their appreciation of various matters, and humorous matters are no exception. A person's interests, attitudes, moods, states, involvement, values, sensitivity, and ideas about humor, among other factors, may all influence his disposition to find any occurrence funny or not. In the following "status-dynamic analysis", the particular contribution of the formulation of humor given in this paper to our understanding of the behavioral effects of humor should become apparent.

Behavioral Effects of Humor: A Status-Dynamic Analysis

The often-cited effects of humor include feelings of surprise, superiority, relief, and joy. We have touched on the subject of surprise earlier, when it was noted that humor involves a shift from one viewpoint to another (serious to nonserious; see also PCF-3 transformations of "serious"). Furthermore, it was noted that since the shift from one viewpoint to another is discontinuous (there are no intermediate or halfway stages), the new view (V_{ns} and concomitantly, V_H) will be sudden, unexpected, incongruous, and thereby surprising in relation to the prior view. The present formulation offers a further account of the surprise inherent in successful humor, but space does not permit further elaboration here. A portion of that discussion appears elsewhere (see Littmann, 1979, pp. 64–65).

To say that someone appraises something as serious is to specify the sort of relation which that person has toward that something and the place that it has in his world. Matters which are taken seriously are tautologically given priority in our behavior over matters which are taken less seriously or nonseriously; this is

equivalent to saying that matters we appraise as *serious* tautologically carry motivational priority. According to this formulation of humor, to appraise X as *funny* is to reappraise X, which was formerly appraised as serious, as nonserious, without invalidating the serious view. On the one hand, we could say that X's status has undergone a degradation (from serious to nonserious); a viewer who treats X as not serious can be said to be taking a superior stance. However, humor does not reduce to superiority or degradation. To see X as nonserious also introduces for the viewer alternative possibilities for involvement in his world since X no longer assumes the same priority it did when it was appraised as serious. But recall that the viewer does not *lose* the serious perspective. To see X as nonserious is to not be stuck with the same "givens"; but in the case of humor, since the serious view is retained and the corresponding behavioral possibilities are also retained (nothing is lost), the introduction of the nonserious perspective introduces alternative behavioral opportunities. The viewer who makes the reappraisal of X as humorous has two grounds for "celebration": he is "liberated" from his previous, serious involvement with X (hence, relieved of some of that involvement), and he acquires new or alternative behavioral possibilities and potential, that is, he acquires status.

In summary, to achieve a second, nonserious perspective about a serious subject, without discarding the first viewpoint, is to acquire a new relationship to the subject matter. Thus, when one appreciates the humor of X, the new perspective is both liberating and status enhancing, and the liberation and enhanced behavior potential (status) are our good fortune which accompanies our appraisal of humor. "Joy" is the name we give to the feelings of appreciating our gain and good fortune. Thus, it is no mystery that we both are amused by and *enjoy* humor.

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

Implications of the Status-Dynamic Formulation

In the opening of this paper, the question was raised not merely of which things are funny, but "How come people disagree over which things they identify as instances of Humor?" We can now also raise and attempt to answer the empirical question, "What is actually found to be funny by whom?"

The formulation I have presented has already provided a general answer to this question: People will find nearly anything funny, provided they can see it as both serious and nonserious. Then, why don't we all agree about how funny a given occurrence is? An obvious answer follows from the formulation: we don't all take the same matters equally seriously. Thus it is suggested that much of the variability among people about what they appreciate as funny and how funny they find it, can be accounted for by the variability among persons as to how seriously they take the humorous subject matter. Furthermore, it follows from

the formulation that for any given individual, his degree of enjoyment of a particular subject matter (how funny he finds it) will be related to how seriously he takes that matter.

The problem, however, is more complex. For on the one hand, we would expect that someone who is more seriously involved in a given subject matter (area) would be likely to be more relieved, to be more liberated, and to enjoy being released from this exclusively serious perspective more than someone who is not so involved, when he appreciates the serious-as-nonserious. Such a person would also be acquiring more alternative behavior possibilities when he acquires the new, humorous perspective than someone who had not been so involved. However, on the other hand, it is also likely that a person who is extremely involved in a given area, that is, takes it extremely seriously, may have greater difficulty relinquishing that serious perspective and acquiring the nonserious (and humorous) perspective. In other words, if one is *extremely* involved in a given area (takes it extremely seriously), his degree of involvement may *interfere* with his appreciating or enjoying the humor of that matter.

We have each experienced being so "caught up" in a problem or so preoccupied with some issue that we failed to see the humor of it. Our formulation is in keeping with this experience; one who cannot see the matter as also nonserious will not appreciate the humor of it. At the lower end of involvement, we find the person who is not sufficiently involved in the subject matter and thus does not appreciate the serious side sufficiently to appreciate the humor. We offer accounts for these cases of unappreciated humor such as—"Well, I guess you had to be there", or "Hmm, it seemed funny at the time", or "Oh, I guess he's just not into that", or "That's not so-and-so's type of humor", and similar explanations, which often hinge on the degree of the audience's involvement or willingness to take the subject matter seriously at the time the humor is presented.

Thus, we could summarize our expectation, based on the formulation, by saying that the success of humor depends both on a person's appraisal of an area as serious and on his reappraisal of the serious-as-nonserious. Outright failure to enjoy presented material or loss of impact of the funniness of the material can occur if either appraisal, of the serious or the nonserious, is deficient.

Hypotheses Based on the Status-Dynamic Formulation

More specifically, the hypotheses which were proposed in this study in conjunction with this formulation of humor were:

1. For a given individual, the greater his degree of involvement in a particular subject, that is, the more seriously he takes that issue, the greater would be his enjoyment of (amusement at) jokes concerning that subject; however, overinvolvement detracts from or interferes with one's enjoyment of the humor of some matters.

2. Similarly, for groups, those groups which are more involved in a particular subject would enjoy humor about that subject more than groups which are not as involved in that subject (do not take it as seriously), provided the ''more involved'' group is not ''overinvolved''.

Method

Subjects

The persons who participated in this study as subjects were students fulfilling a research requirement in an Introductory Psychology class. At the time that they volunteered, they did not know that the research concerned humor.

Questionnaire

Subjects were assembled in groups, where they completed as individuals a four-part questionnaire, the completion of which required less than two hours.

Section 1. Enjoyment Scale. The subjects rated 30 jokes on a nine-point Enjoyment Scale, ranging from ''Not funny at all'' (1) through ''Extremely funny'' (9). All subjects rated the same jokes, which were presented in partially counterbalanced order. Participants were instructed to rate their own enjoyment of the jokes, that is, ''How funny is it to *you*,'' as opposed to trying to rate how ''good'' the joke is.

Section 2. Involvement Scale. Subjects rated 64 subject-matter areas on a nine-point Involvement Scale according to their own seriousness about each area. The Scale ranged from ''Not serious at all'' (1) through ''Extremely serious'' (9).

The subject-matter areas were selected by a panel of four experimenters on the basis of several factors: (a) availability of jokes for each area; (b) likelihood that a given individual would use a wide range of involvement ratings across subject-matter areas; and (c) likelihood that for a given subject-matter area, there would be high variability among individuals with respect to their involvement in it.

Section 3. Relevance Scale. Subjects were asked to reconsider the same 30 jokes they had previously rated for enjoyment, but this time they were to decide what the jokes were about. The experimenters had previously identified several subject-matter areas as possibly relevant for each joke. Participants were asked to rate on a seven-point scale to what extent the joke was about the suggested subject-matter areas. The scale ranged from ''Not at all'' relevant (1) through ''Extremely'' relevant (7).

If a subject thought a particular joke was more relevant to some other subject-matter area than those listed as possibilities, he was asked to describe that subject-matter area briefly and then to rate, on the standard seven-point scale, the degree to which the joke was relevant to the new area. Data were not used unless a subject reported that the joke had at least "a lot" of relevance to the subject-matter areas suggested by the experimenters.

Section 4. Miscellaneous Information. Subjects were asked to provide information about (a) factors such as demographic characteristics, (b) general humor preferences, such as favorite comedian, and (c) feedback to the experimenters about the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

It was hypothesized that there is a curvilinear relation between enjoyment and involvement, such that enjoyment increases with involvement up to the point of overinvolvement, where there is a decline in enjoyment. (See Figure 1.)
In order to test this hypothesis of the relation between Enjoyment and Involvement (i.e., Seriousness toward the subject matter of the joke), it was necessary to devise a single rating of Enjoyment and a single rating of Involvement. The constructed scores were called "net Enjoyment" and "net Involvement", notated $\hat{E}$ and $\hat{I}$, and were derived by various transformations from the original raw scores reported by the subjects.

Net Enjoyment Scores. The difficulty with using an individual's raw enjoyment rating is of course that part of how funny he finds each joke depends, not merely on his involvement, but on how good the joke is, and as indicated earlier, not all jokes are equally funny. But neither can the funniness of each joke be

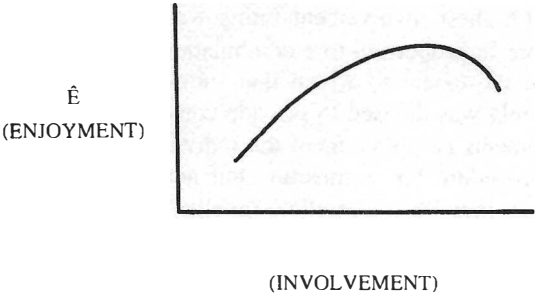

Figure 1. Predicted relation between a respondent's doubly-corrected Enjoyment scores and ratings of his Involvement in the subject matter of the jokes.

assessed by taking a simple average of all the ratings given, since those scores would be confounded by differences in individuals' involvements in the various subject matters of the jokes. Thus, to remove the confound of intrinsic funniness and the tendency of some jokes to attract different degrees of involvement, a Joke Correction Factor was calculated for each joke. This Factor was the mean of the raw Enjoyment ratings given for each joke by subjects whose Involvement ratings were low, that is, two, three, or four on the Involvement Scale.

An individual's raw Enjoyment rating can also be seen to reflect his individual response tendency, for example, any differences in his use of the rating scale or in his overall responsiveness to humor, other than his degree of involvement in the subject matter. Thus, an Individual Correction Factor was derived for each subject by taking, for each individual, the mean of the differences between his raw Enjoyment scores and the Joke Correction Factors over all the jokes in which he had low involvement, that is, a rating of two, three, or four on the Involvement Scale.

Finally, the "net Enjoyment" score for each individual on each joke, $\hat{E}_{ij}$, was calculated by subtracting from the original raw score on the Enjoyment Scale for that joke (a) the Joke Correction Factor for the joke and (b) the Individual Correction Factor for the subject.

Net Involvement Scores. The number of subject-matter areas viewed as relevant to each joke differed for different individuals, and differed for any given individual across jokes. Thus, for some jokes, there was only one subject-matter area rated as relevant (at least 5, or, "A lot"), and correspondingly, only one rating of involvement given by that individual for that joke. For other jokes, as many as four areas were rated as relevant. In order to provide a single measure of an individual's involvement in the subject-matter area for each joke, a net Involvement score for each individual toward each joke was derived by the following procedure.

First, the highest involvement score for a relevant area was determined. Second, the second-highest involvement rating was transformed to augment the Involvement score in proportion to a combination of the individual's degree of involvement and the extent to which that subject matter was also viewed as relevant. A formula was devised to provide constraints on the degree to which multiple involvements could augment the individual's Involvement score. The details of this procedure for augmenting but not overloading the involvement rating to reflect an individual's multiple involvements have been reported elsewhere (Littmann, 1979, pp. 90–92). Finally, the individual's highest involvement score and the score reflecting multiple involvements were summed to produce the net Involvement Score, $\hat{I}$.

A net Involvement score was not calculated if the individual did not report at least one subject-matter area as having at least a rating of 5 ("A lot" of) relevance to the joke.

Hypothesis Testing

Having defined Involvement and Enjoyment Scores, net Enjoyment scores were plotted against net Involvement scores. Several predictive criteria were proposed (cf., Littmann, 1979, pp. 93–101) to establish whether or not the curve fit the predicted shape of the hypothesized relation between enjoyment and involvement, (as shown in Figure 1).

Thirty-five of the original eighty-two subjects provided the data which met the criteria for data selection, that is, data which could be transformed so as to test the predictions.[5] The deletion of subjects indicates that the set of thirty jokes selected for the Questionnaire Joke Packet did not concern a sufficiently broad range of subject-matter areas to provide the range of information regarding the humor behavior of all these individuals needed to respond to the questions raised in this study.

Nevertheless, it may be of interest that the joke with the highest mean "funniness" for this group of college students concerned teaching and the value of a college education:

> "Class! Pipe down!" ordered the Professor. "I've been lecturing for almost 45 minutes, but there's so much racket in here I can hardly hear myself!"
>
> "Don't worry," came a voice from the back of the lecture hall, "you haven't missed a thing."

This joke rated as 5.3, slightly better than "funny" (5.0) but still below "Quite Funny" (6.0 on the Enjoyment Scale).

Results

When $\hat{E}$ versus $\hat{I}$ was plotted for each of the thirty-five participants, and each of the predictive criteria was applied, on the whole, a moderate degree of confirmation of the hypotheses was observed.

For twenty-four of the thirty-five individuals in this study, the data, according to several criteria, are in accordance with two predictions: First, that for low to middle range of involvement ($\hat{I}$ = 2.0 ["only slightly serious"] through 6.5 [between "Serious" and "Quite serious"]), an individual's enjoyment of humor is a monotonic function of his involvement in the subject matter of the humor. (These twenty-four individuals had scatterplots with positive slopes based on $\hat{I}$-values of 2.0 through 6.5, and are henceforth referred to as the "Positive Slope Group".) Second, that at very high levels of involvement ($\hat{I}$ = 9.0 = "Extremely serious"), there is, in more instances than would be expected by chance, a drop in these individuals' level of enjoyment relative to the level that would be expected from a linear projection of their enjoyment based on a monotonic function. Twenty-four out of thirty-five respondents is a statistically significant proportion of the sample.

However, some of the experimental hypotheses were not confirmed. For example, there remains some question about the enjoyment levels of these twenty-four individuals when they have merely a high degree of involvement in the subject of the joke (cf., Littmann, 1979, pp. 116–117).

Among the most interesting results of this study were some findings in the opposite direction from the experimental predictions. Most surprising was the finding that eleven of the thirty-five respondents' scatterplots had negative slopes, reflecting an inverse relationship between enjoyment of a joke and involvement in the subject area of that joke (for low- to middle-range involvement values). Moreover, a further statistical test supported the finding that for members of this group, the greater their involvement, the *less* their enjoyment. In Figure 2, the group means of $\hat{E}$ versus $\hat{I}$ across the full range of $\hat{I}$ were plotted separately for the positive and negative slope groups.

Discussion

Although there are several possible accounts which might be offered to explain the results of this study (see Littmann, 1979, pp. 116–140), one of the most plausible and intriguing is that there are actually two effects present which contribute to this surprising finding: (a) a liberation effect and (b) a social inhibition effect, or more specifically, a "Propriety" effect.

The liberation effect was already briefly discussed. Based on the formulation of Humor, it was suggested that when a person can see the nonserious side of a matter which he had formerly appraised exclusively as *serious,* then he acquires a new relationship to that subject which is liberating, in that the subject no longer has the same place in his world as it had previously. The person acquires an additional perspective on that matter. The term "liberation effect" indicates that a person may experience surprise, relief, joy (enjoyment), amusement, and/or some other possibilities including having new behavior potential, that is, possibilities for behaving differently in regard to other aspects of his world. The individuals in the positive slope group behaved in accordance with this hypothesis.

However, it appears that for other people, among whom the eleven negative slope individuals would be included, there exists some inhibition such that the more seriously a subject matter is taken, the more difficulty these individuals have in relinquishing an exclusively serious perspective (and/or acquiring a nonserious perspective), and the less they enjoy jokes about it.

This idea is consistent with our customary notion of propriety. That is, there are certain more serious issues or subject matters which we ought not to joke about, and the more serious the matter is, then the less we ought to joke about it. The extent to which persons are bound by their attitudes and values concerning propriety would be expected to differ and would be apt to influence, or at least be related to, one's ability to acquire the nonserious view of a matter which is

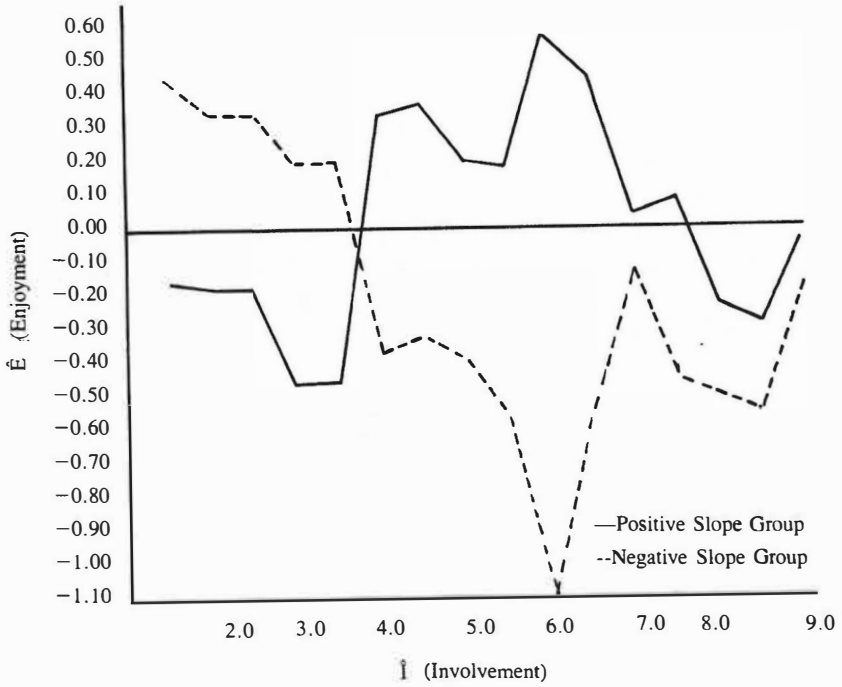

Figure 2. Group means of "net" Enjoyment versus degree of Involvement plotted separately for positive and negative slope groups.

treated as serious. And although our account of the drop-off of enjoyment for members of the positive slope group at extremely high levels of involvement has focused primarily on preoccupation and the consequent inability to achieve a nonserious perspective, such an account is not incompatible with an explanation which includes the effect of propriety at high levels of seriousness.

Support for this account was gained from a perusal of the sorts of responses participants gave on the open-ended page of the Questionnaire which asked them about their humor preferences and why they liked and disliked what they did. Positive slope individuals tended to respond in terms of *their own* preferences about what they find funny. Negative slope individuals, in contrast, tended to respond to these same questions regarding their humor preferences with objectively stated judgments concerning standards of right and wrong, moral and social appropriateness, and aesthetic merit. For example, to the question, "Which of these jokes did you like the least?" and "Why?" a characteristic answer from the positive slope group was: "(Joke #12) I really didn't understand it. Maybe if I had, I would have rated it higher." In contrast, a negative slope respondent reported, "(Joke #20) It was not funny. It was stupid. I did not

understand it.'' Differences in response styles are described more fully elsewhere (Littmann, 1979).

Summary

In summary, this empirical study supported the hypothesis that one's degree of enjoyment is a function not merely of seeing a matter as nonserious, but of the degree to which one takes a matter as serious. The more seriously one takes a matter, the more potential there is to enjoy humor about those matters, provided one is able to see the matter as nonserious. The enjoyment is based, in part, on the person's liberation from his previous involvement, that is, he is freed from an exclusively serious outlook on the matter and is eligible for other, alternative involvements. To the extent that a person's appraisal of something as ''serious'' corresponds to an appraisal of it as ''problematic'', or is problematic for him, then a person's liberation from that exclusive perspective further constitutes good fortune.

There remains some question as to the relationship between one's ability to achieve a nonserious (contrasting, humorous) view and the degree to which one takes a matter as serious. On the basis of this study, it appears that persons differ on the dimensions both of how seriously they take various matters, and of to what extent and at what point their degree of seriousness inhibits their enjoyment of jokes about those subjects. This inhibition may be described partly as a reflection of an individual's attitudes concerning propriety. Some persons in this study tended to express their humor preferences as objective judgments and appealed to public standards as the basis for their judgments of what is funny. For these individuals, the more serious the subject matter, the less their enjoyment, for low to moderately high levels of involvement. This ''propriety effect'', that is, inhibition of enjoyment, appeared at low levels of personal involvement for this group because their judgments are anchored on public norms of what is, and ought to be, taken seriously. Thus, the first hint of seriousness would be grounds for some inhibition of enjoyment. In contrast, a larger group of individuals tended to express their humor judgments as based on subjective, personal standards. For this group, inhibition of enjoyment was displayed primarily at high levels of involvement.

Thus, different attitudes concerning propriety appear to be associated with a person's enjoyment of humor, that is, the success or failure of humor which is presented. Alternatively, we may say that individual differences concerning propriety are an important feature of one's sense of humor.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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dress: Psychology Service, William S. Hall Psychiatric Institute, Post Office Box 202, Columbia, South Carolina, 29202.

NOTES

1. Recall that transformations are written in the form A → . . . , wherein A is replaced by whatever follows the arrow.

2. From Walt Kelly's comic strip, Pogo.

3. They logically exhaust the kinds of possibilities for exceptions, because they are systematically related to the parameters of behavior (cf., Ossorio, 1966 and *The Behavior of Persons,* in preparation). There is a further set of exceptions to the principle that X's behavior will express his relationship with Y. These exceptions have to do with the Performance and Achievement parameters of behavior, under the Intentional Action parametric analysis of behavior. The exceptions involving the Performance and Achievement parameters deal with cases where X miscalculates or his behavior miscarries, for example, as a result of some interfering condition. This set of exceptions can either be handled as a fifth (and perhaps sixth) Unless Clause or elaborated in a separate discussion since this last set of possibilities is not a special feature of behavior as an expression of relationships. I have adopted the latter approach, and address this matter in the discussion of successful versus unsuccessful humor.

4. Neither is it the purpose of this paper to address how it came to be that laughter, smiling, etc. are the behaviors we commonly engage in in response to humor; nor is it the subject of this paper to discuss individual differences in the form(s) of expressing one's amusement in response to humor. These might be subjects for other investigations which focus on laughter or amused behavior.

5. However, for purposes of computing the Joke Correction Factors (JCFs), the pool of all 82 respondents was used as the data base.

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