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Humor Me

Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "A sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done." One's self is composed of a set of characteristics distinctive to each person (3). Humor is said to be one of the most important characteristics in a person's personality in that it helps develop quick relationships to others through a common communication skill that most everyone possesses. As the relationship progresses past the acquaintance stage, humor is used less as deeper connections form (5). Humor cuts through the barriers of labels, status needs, and similar roadblocks experienced by the human condition and is constant in most peoples self actions (3). Humor has been a part of my personality and interactions with my environment since I was in grade school. I've used humor to make friends, lighten heavy moods, and communicate with people whom I have fewer traits in common with. There are various explanations as to why humor is used, but three specific theories will be discussed in this paper: Superiority, Incongruent, and Psychoanalytical theories of laughter.

Laughter, as a science, dates back to the first documented philosophical writings by such minds as Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, although they sometimes shared similar and opposing views. Plato described his view of laughter as a powerful means of disrupting the state from its duties, instead of an enjoyable past time shared between people (2). In Plato's *Republic*, he suggests the abolishment

of all literature that describes God's involved with or overtaken by laughter, as he believes that it's a bad influence on the young minds in the country (2). In *Philebus*, Plato mentions that what makes a person laugh is devious, and only done so to spite or poke fun at another as a means of making yourself feel more powerful (2). He believes that laughter is associated with both pleasure and pain. There is such pleasure in the feeling of laughing over ones course of bad events, but there is such pain in the satisfaction of putting another's misfortunes up for jest (2).

Aristotle took a similar, yet opposing view of laughter. Aristotle believe that laughter is an ugly practice involved with the distorting of views of others, but was understood not to cause pain (2). His view differed from that of Plato in that he believed laughter in small doses was an acceptable thing, but to be careful of overdoing it, because "those who go into excess in making fun appear to be buffoons and vulgar" (2).

Thomas Hobbes agrees with Aristotle and Plato that laughter is a thing that is used in the putting down of others for ones lifting up. Hobbes takes up a position in most of his writings that there is a constant struggle for power among humans, so it is not surprising to hear him award laughter to the winner (2). In *Human Nature*, Hobbes perceives laughter as a "sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (4).

The three philosophers previously described, all similar in their stances on the value of laughter in society and interpersonally, fall under the superiority

theory. The Superiority Theory suggests that laughter is a means of making oneself feel superior by playing on the past misfortunes, mistakes, or foolishness made by others or by one's own (4). In my life, I do not use laughter as a means of making myself feel superior. As a child, many kids use ridicule and "making fun of" as a way of getting attention and bullying other children. For some children who don't get enough attention at home, or security in themselves from their peers, they must rely on this outlet to produce a feeling of well-being and superiority among the other children. Most children, including the ones whom used this form of humor growing up, mature out of this stage as childhood progresses in to adolescents, realizing this is immoral and not the way society views laughter. The closest I would come to using laughter in a negative way would be my use of sarcasm in many situations. Most friends close enough, and even new acquaintances are able to distinguish my sarcastic remarks from my serious ones.

Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes paid more attention to the outcome of the laughter and the consequences it held, rather than to the mechanism by which it worked (1). Schopenhauer developed the Incongruity Theory that states that laughter occurs out of the mismatching of a physical perception and an abstract representation of some thing, person, or action (2). It is when this disparity among perceptions is discovered, laughter then results (2). Kant had similar findings and contributions to the Incongruity Theory started by Schopenhauer. Kant described laughter as "an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation in to nothing" (4). When a situation is viewed as particularly stressful

and serious, and then is suddenly viewed from an outside perspective, usually something extreme and unbelievable, the original stressful situation disappears and the expected stress emanates in the form of a humorous moment (4). This theory of humor is one I often use in stressful situations to try to find the “silver lining” in order to create a lighthearted mood both for others and myself. When faced with a stressful or serious circumstance, I often try to take a step back out of the picture and view the situation as one of little or no importance. This allows me to create a humor about the stress that I have been dealing with and rationalize as how to handle the situation. After this is accomplished, I am usually able to laugh or at least smile at the over exaggeration used in this particular circumstance. This technique is not only useful on myself, but also on my peers and my family. It is very helpful to crack lighthearted jokes on a situation that someone finds very stressful to try to ease the mood. However, there is always a time and a place to find humor in a situation, and some situations just don't have any at all.

The Psychoanalytical Theory developed by Freud classifies amusement in to three categories: jokes, the comic, and humor (4). Freud thought that excess of psychic energy that was no longer needed for some other function was then expelled in the form of laughter. Jokes, in Freud's eyes, made use of a number of cognitive techniques such as displacement, condensation, and unification. The use of these three mechanisms briefly allows the person to express unconscious aggressive and sexual impulses, that otherwise become repressed, but are allowed to escape in the socially acceptable form of laughter (4). The last term Freud uses to explore mirth is humor. Humor is seen in a situation in which a person would

normally experience fear, sadness, or anger. In this case, the negative emotion is then perceived as an amusing situation, providing an altered view and consequently avoiding a negative emotion (4). Some of the humor that I use in my daily life and dealings with peers, acquaintances, family, etc. comes from emotions and anger that has been repressed and even displaced from events that happened in my childhood. Being teased a lot as a child by having people poke fun at me has caused me to repress this anger and negative emotions and express them in a way that will draw people to me. These negative emotions that once ruined moments in my childhood and caused me difficulty in making friends and finding a social setting have actually been a big help in my adolescent years in forming close relationships, as well as, fast friendships. My sense of humor causes people to want to be in my company due to my witty nature and my happy moods.

In conclusion, humor has been studied by some of the most famous philosophers of our time who have since developed famous theories, which are still taught and idolized today. Most of today's psychologist's views on humor stem from one of the three theories discussed above. Humor has been proven to be one of the most common building blocks among humans, communication tools, and means of channeling free energy and anger. Humor has been a very big part of my childhood, adolescents, and my upcoming adult life. I use it everyday to form relationships, acquaintances, strengthen bonds, and relieve stress and pent up anger. Not only does my humor benefit myself, but works to create a happy mood to all those in my surroundings.

References

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