

A LINE ON LIFE

5/9/99

"What are you laughing at?" *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.



Most psychological studies on laughter have focused on the audience's responses to humor. In contrast, psychologist Robert R. Provine studied everyday laughter to find the rules that governed this behavior. He eavesdropped on over 1,200 conversations in shopping malls, classrooms and other public places.

Provine was surprised that most of the things people laughed at were not funny. Jokes, stories and other recognizable attempts at humor lead to less than 20% of the laughter that he noticed. Most of the time, laughter occurred after clichés like "Got to go now," "I see your point" and "It was nice meeting you."

Laughter usually occurs in playful settings. Provine indicates that most laughter is not a response to comedy. Instead, it is to establish a positive attitude and increase feelings of belonging within a group. Since it is not a conscious behavior, most people don't realize that they are laughing at something that really isn't funny.

**Laughter has positive effects –
as long as you laugh *with* others rather than *at* them.**

Of course, laughter isn't always good humored. People can laugh *with* you or laugh *at* you. Laughter can be a way of indicating dominance or submission, rejection or acceptance. For example, you can laugh to signal acceptance of a speaker's message, or you could give an indignant "ha!" to indicate rejection. As a speaker, you could use laughter to lower the impact of what you were saying, as if to say, "I'm just kidding."

Surprisingly, Provine found that the average speaker laughs 46% more than his/her audience. There are also gender differences. When addressing a male audience, a woman typically laughs 127% more than her listeners. On the other hand, when a man is addressing women, he usually laughs 7% less than they do. It indicates that men are typically humor producers and women are usually the laughers.

Another view emphasizes an evolutionary viewpoint, since apes and gorillas also engage in frolicking, tickling and vocalizations similar to laughter. Psychologist Glen E. Weisfeld (Wayne State University, Detroit) is an ethologist – one who studies animal behavior. He indicates that laughter is a way of rewarding speakers who provide valuable information. Even while we are laughing, the humor gives us important information about avoiding various social blunders.

Weisfeld indicates that jokes often focus on public embarrassment or failure. In that way, they show us what *not* to do. Professional comedians often have stooges who are the butt of their jokes. Puns and other types of word play teach us about words and language.

"The subject matter of humor often pertains to ticklish situations. Lots of humor pertains to sexual situations or aggressive, competitive situations in which someone gets hurt. It

makes sense that we would be especially interested in learning about these aspects of life."

In contrast to the effect on the group, Weisfeld indicates that evolutionary theory needs to demonstrate that a particular behavior benefits individuals. He views humor as benefiting both the humorist and the audience members. The listener uncovers valuable lessons, and the speaker is rewarded with laughter as a nonverbal indication of gratitude. Of course, the humorist can also be rewarded by invitations to parties. These invitations are also opportunities to obtain food, drink and potential mates.

Evolutionary biologist Richard D. Alexander (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) has a similar view about humor. As team sports can be seen as practice for warfare, Alexander views humor as practice for gaining social status and putting others in their place.

Alexander has challenged his students to come up with a joke that doesn't put someone down. So far, no student has found one. For example, puns and intellectual wordplay indicate the joke-teller's cleverness, but degrade the listener's ability to get the joke. He indicates that even the "*Why did the chicken cross the road?*" joke is a put-down. The listener can feel foolish for missing the obvious answer, "*To get to the other side.*"

Some people laugh at the jokes of their bosses – whether they are funny or not. Under these conditions, laughter is a signal of submission that confers status to the joke teller. Alexander indicates that the groans that often follow a punch line or a pun signal the listeners' awareness of their lower status. (However, I think it can indicate mild disapproval of the quality of the humor.)

Personally, I choose to emphasize the positive aspects of laughter. I like to laugh at many situations rather than take them seriously. As long as we laugh with others – not at them – laughter seems to reduce tensions, defuse anger and reduce the probability of aggression. In addition, it can lead to learning something new and promote social solidarity. Even if it doesn't do any of these things, at least you've had a good laugh.

* Adapted from Rebecca A. Clay's "Laughter may be no laughing matter," [*APA Monitor*](#), September 1997, page 16.