

Humor Communicability

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ABSTRACT: A theory of humor appreciation is advanced based on William Stephenson's play theory of mass communication and his fundamental theory of communicability. Communication pain and communication pleasure as well as the idea of "shared knowledge" are examined in relationship to humor appreciation. A method for identifying humor structure that accounts for one's "sense of humor" is illustrated with a Q sample (N = 54) of Gary Larson "The Far Side" cartoons. Thirty-four subjects sorted the cartoons from "most appealing" (+5) to "most unappealing" (-5). Three factors emerged, from the subsequent correlation and factor analysis, representing humor factor structure that is fundamental to the theory. Humor communicability explains why some people share a sense of humor and can account for different senses of humor. Humor communicability offers a holistic view of humor appreciation.

Humor Communicability

The study of humor appreciation has blossomed over the past two decades. Communication scholars are becoming aware of the importance of understanding humor appreciation in areas as diverse as

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persuasion in the mass media (Gruner, 1976), education or learning (Bergen, 1992), and as a tool for social communication and interaction (Murstein & Brust, 1985).

The mass media are viewed as providing "the most effective source of humor in the popular culture" (Mintz, 1983, p. 138). Humor is ever present in the mass media whether it be in televised comedy or regularly read newspaper comics. Brown and Bryant (1983) tell us that although the power of humor in the mass media to entertain, persuade, and educate seems to lie chiefly in the ability of humor to attract audiences, "neither researcher nor mass media practitioners are able to agree completely on how and why people find certain messages funny" (p. 167). There is no agreement on how humor should be defined nor is there agreement on how humor appreciation should be studied.

Over one hundred theories of humor exist (Haig, 1988, p. 9). However, researchers are "no closer to developing a generalized theory of humor than we were in the first century A.D. . . ." (Maase, Fink, & Kaplowitz, 1984, p. 80). Several edited volumes have addressed various aspects of humor and give us a sense of the importance of understanding humor (Chapman & Foot, 1976, 1977; Goldstein & McGhee, 1972a; Levine, 1969; McGhee & Goldstein, 1983a, 1983b). Further advancement of humor research is illustrated by the recent founding of the International Society for Humor Studies (I.S.H.S.) in 1990, and the publication of *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, which is devoted exclusively to humor research. *Humor* started publishing in 1988.

Current Theories

The most popular of the current theories of humor appreciation are the incongruity theories. Incongruity theories state that a surprise or paradox is the main component in humor appreciation. In incongruity theories, humor arises from ideas that are disjointed from what one would expect based on everyday occurrences (Deckers & Buttram, 1990). Although many researchers agree that incongruity or information conflict is essential to humor appreciation (Nunnally, 1972; Berger, 1976), there is little explanation of why some people find some incongruous items funny and others not funny. Some have argued that a resolution of incongruous stimuli is necessary to appreciate humor (Suls, 1983), yet this still offers little explanation of differences in the appreciation of humor.

Another group of theories classified as disparagement theories

(Zillman, 1983) have as their basic tenets aggression and ridicule: that is, human communication in which one party disparages against another. Included under the classification of disparagement theories are "superiority theory" (LaFave, 1972) and "dispositional theory" (Zillman & Cantor, 1976). However, these theories do not answer the question of why many people appreciate non-disparagement type humor.

Arousal theories, which try to link arousal to humor, suggest that arousal may be necessary for humor appreciation (Godkewitsch, 1976). McGhee's (1983) review of studies in this area found positive correlations between physiological arousal and degree of humor. Yet as Maase and her colleagues (1984) point out, these arousal theories "do not tell us how much arousal maximizes humor or whether the increase in arousal or the subsequent reduction in it causes humor" (p. 84).

Theory of Humor Communicability

Many scholars would agree that humor is "preeminently a form of communication" (Fine, 1977, p. 329) and that a humorous attitude is "a state of mind" (Levine, 1977, p. 127). Humor communicability assumes that humor is communication and humor is a state of mind, but also that humor appreciation is not a random phenomenon. It is deeply rooted in the subjective make up of the individual. However, the individual must not have a completely unique sense of humor. If one did, humor as persuasion, or for education or social interaction etc., would be futile because it would have to be too individualized to matter.

Humor communicability stems in large part from William Stephenson's communication theories. Borrowing from Stephenson's play theory of mass communication (1967) and his fundamental theory of communicability (1980) we accept that communication can be divided into two modes: communication pain and communication pleasure. Humor communicability involves communication pleasure. And just as communication pleasure in everyday life depends on shared knowledge, humor communicability also depends on shared knowledge.

By shared knowledge we again return to Stephenson (1986):

Based on past experiences, the individual develops interests, values, beliefs and the like, not as items of knowledge or information stored up in memory, but as active systems which determine what the individual will perceive or react to or have fantasy about. The individual sees things the way he does because of the schematical function of his communicability (p. 53).

Shared knowledge is essential to humor appreciation. Shared knowledge is the foundation of humor communicability. It is the existence of shared knowledge that allows people to laugh together, share similar favorite cartoon strips, "get" the same jokes, enjoy the same comedians or comedy shows, etc. It also explains why some people have the same "sense of humor" and others have a "different sense of humor." It explains why some people will laugh hysterically at a cartoon and others will wonder why someone is laughing at something that "is not funny at all."

Humor communicability is at issue here. While humor appreciation is "a personal and subjective affair" (Leventhal & Safer, 1977, p. 335), it is not unique. While individuals must have humor structure that determines whether they think a supposedly humorous item or event is humorous to them, this humor structure must be shared by others.

If the theory of humor communicability is viable then one must be able to identify humor structure that exists within individuals and groups that account for their "sense of humor" and that different humor structures exist that account for "different senses of humor." That is, the discovery of different humor structures that are not significantly correlated with each other.

This paper is concerned with empirical and not philosophical matters. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to test for and identify humor structure that will strengthen the theory of humor communicability.

Humor structure, although an abstract, unobservable concept must be made measurable in order to strengthen this theory. To determine the existence of humor structure that accounts for humor communicability, we will need a research methodology that goes beyond the current methods¹, one that can identify and make operational humor structure.

¹For a discussion of research methods used in the study of humor appreciation, including content analysis, Likert type rating scales, oscillographic recordings to analyze laughing, coding schema for smile measurement and physiological measures, see Kinsey (1991).

Proposed Research Method

Humor structure will be made operant through factor analysis. Q-technique and its methodology (Stephenson, 1953) will be utilized for the examination of and the development of humor communicability. Q methodology provides a scientific method for identifying attitude structures that exist within individuals or groups.

Others have proposed the appropriateness of the methodology in communication research as "especially relevant for communication scientists whose research assesses the perceptual world of individuals . . . and is particularly useful as a means for subjects to express their own uniquely valid views and beliefs" (Stephen, 1985, p. 204-205).

As Brown (1986, p. 74) has shown, Q methodology provides "flexible procedures for the careful examination of all aspects of social and political life that engage human attentiveness." Clearly humor in the mass media engages human attentiveness. The veritable masses who attend to the comics in the daily newspapers will attest to that.

Basically, Q methodology involves a rank-ordering procedure in which participants rank order stimulus items (Q sample) to some condition of instruction, e.g., from "most appealing" to "most unappealing" Once the participants have sorted the items to reflect their own viewpoint, the data are correlated and factor analyzed. People who have sorted the items in a similar fashion will cluster together on a factor. Each factor represents a point of view or the shared knowledge of those associated with that factor. For a detailed description of Q methodology see Brown (1980, 1986) and McKeown and Thomas (1988).

The stimuli used is the single-panel cartoon. The cartoon has been described as "communication to the quick" by Harrison (1981), who suggests that "in an era when media are increasingly fast-paced and visual, the cartoon seems to capture the best -- and perhaps the worst -- of modern communication" (p.11).

The cartoon also appears to be a favorite independent variable of humor researchers. In their twenty year survey of methodology in empirical humor studies, Goldstein and McGhee (1972b, p. 265) found that cartoons were used as stimulus items in over half of the studies (52%) and nearly twice as often as the second most used stimuli (riddles, jokes or stories; 23%).

This is not the first time that Q methodology has been used with cartoons (Bormann, Koester, & Bennett, 1981; Kinsey & Taylor, 1982), however, these earlier studies used political cartoons as stimulus

items and were concerned with political meanings and implications.

Humor Factor Structure: An Example

A sample of Gary Larson "The Far Side" cartoons was selected from "The Far Side 1987 Off-the-Wall Calendar." A Q-sample of 54 cartoons balanced to represent a 3x3 design, replicated six times was constructed. In the simplest form, Larson has cartoons involving animals, cartoons involving people, and cartoons involving the interaction of people with animals. Furthermore his cartoons would sometimes contain descriptive captions, they would sometimes contain narrative captions (i.e., one of the characters saying something), and others would contain no captions.

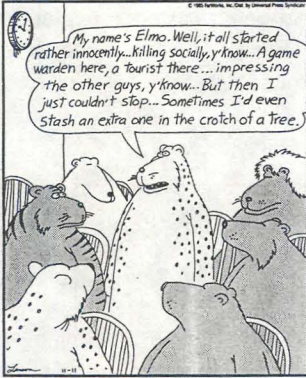
Subjects (a convenience sample of $n=34$) were asked to sort the cartoons from "most appealing" (+5) to "most unappealing" (-5) in the typical quasi-bell-shaped distribution consistent with the dictates of Q methodology. All resulting "Q sorts" were correlated and factor analyzed. Three factors emerged representing humor factor structure which is the fundamental to the theory of humor communicability.

Factor A: Animals Are People Too

Factor A comes closest to falling under the incongruity theories of humor appreciation, than do the other two factors. This factor found most appealing those cartoons that portrayed animals in human roles or situations. These cartoons characterized animals as walking, talking, and acting like humans. The animals in the cartoons that appealed to this factor were outside of their natural habitat and beyond their usual position or role in society, clearly illustrating incongruity with everyday expectations. Some of the cartoons that distinguished this factor include (scores in parentheses for factors A, B, and C, respectively):

Cartoon #37 (+5, -3, +1)

THE FAR SIDE By GARY LARSON

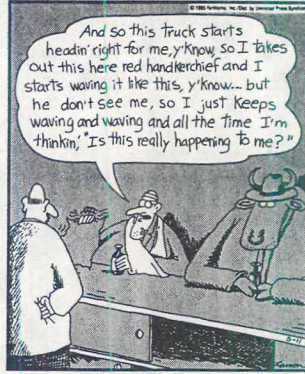


All Maneaters Anonymous

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Cartoon #33 (+4, -3, +1)

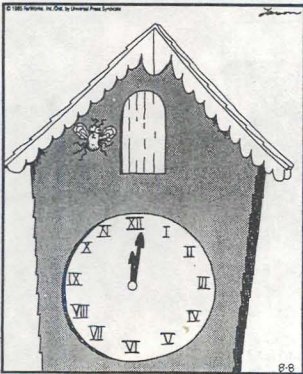
THE FAR SIDE By GARY LARSON



Additionally, this factor found most unappealing those cartoons that portrayed animals in conventional roles or in congruent situations. These animals were often in their expected habitats, walking on "all fours" and not taking on essentially human characteristics. For example:

Cartoon #24 (-5, -1, -2)

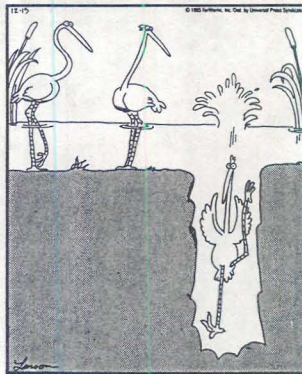
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Cartoon #3 (-4, -2, +4)

THE FAR SIDE By GARY LARSON



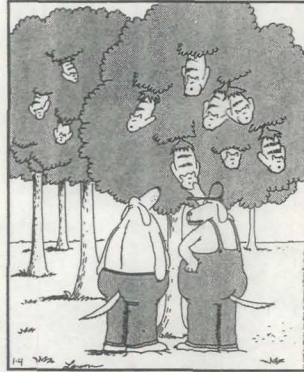
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Factor B: Anti-Violence

Factor B is characterized by a strong rejection of cartoons depicting violence. This includes violence against animals or people (scores in parentheses for factors A, B, and C, respectively):

Cartoon #17 (-2, -5, +1)**THE FAR SIDE** By GARY LARSON

"Bigger, Wayne, bigger! It's gonna be a record!"

Cartoon #40 (+2, -5, -3)**THE FAR SIDE** By GARY LARSON

"Yup. This year they're comin' along reeeeeeal good. ... Course, you can always lose a few to an early frost or young pups."

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Cartoon #34 (+2, -4, +1)**THE FAR SIDE** By GARY LARSON

"Bedtime, Leroy. Here comes your animal blanket."

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Factor C: Victorious Underdog/ Empathy for the Embarrassed

Factor C comes closest to falling under the disparagement theories of humor appreciation. However, the "fit" is not exact. Factor C may best be described as the victorious underdog because they find appealing those cartoons in which an individual, or animal, overcomes the odds and succeeds. For example (scores in parentheses for factors A, B, and C, respectively):

Cartoon #10 (+2, +3, +5)

THE FAR SIDE By GARY LARSON



"Go ahead, Vera ... treat me like dirt."

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Cartoon #7 (+1, +3, -4)

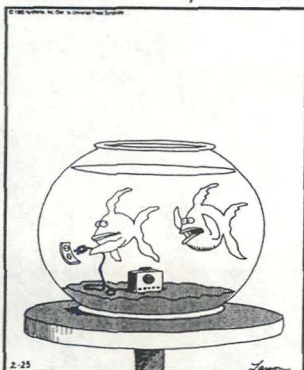
THE FAR SIDE By GARY LARSON



The restless life of the nomad.

Cartoon #23 (+2, +2, +5)

THE FAR SIDE By GARY LARSON



"Bob! You fool! Don't plug that thing in!"

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Cartoon #11 (+1, -2, +4)

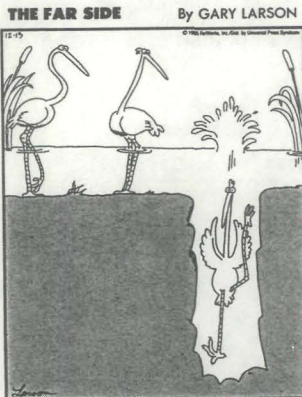
THE FAR SIDE By GARY LARSON



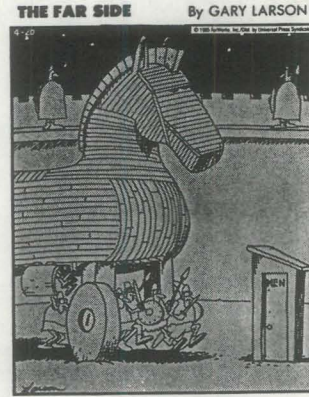
Okay, mon, I see you, I see you.

Additionally, factor C seems to have a real capacity for empathy. This is evident in their positive response to cartoons in which someone is in an embarrassing situation. This empathy dimension is one that the disparagement theories do not seem to capture.

Cartoon #3 (-4, -2, +4)



Cartoon #45 (-2, -2, +3)



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Conclusion

Humor factor structure does exist and can be measured. Q methodology provides an access to the individual's subjectivity and allows one to examine humor communicability. Humor communicability explains why some people share a sense of humor and can account for different senses of humor. Humor communicability offers a holistic view of humor appreciation.

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