

Humor and Hostility

Humor may be the perfect illustration of the severe problems in reconciling explanations of human activities via evolutionary selection with the actual functions of the activities in real life. Thus, evolutionary analysis drains the enjoyment from humor as appallingly as it erases the excuses for self-admiration as a result of charitable investments in social reciprocity. Certainly, anyone who successfully or unsuccessfully argues that the function of humor is ultimately to cause the humorist to win in social competition, especially by defeating someone else or lowering someone else's status, cannot expect to amuse his audience unless his audience sees the chosen victim in his humor as their own enemy too. Laughter is a communicated proximate mechanism of conviviality, and conviviality is viewed as the opposite of competition. The humorist is supposed to be doing favors for his audience, not for himself. Humorists who attempt to direct their humor against themselves may have sensed the conundrum. To announce that humor is a form of competition, to describe the function of humor as status shifting – meaning social manipulation by the humorist, putting down someone else or some other group – may not only destroy the tendency or desire to laugh but create an opposite mood, a dislike directed at the analyst. Nor does it help to tout humor as social-intellectual play, if play is interpreted as designed by natural selection to improve one's own later performances at the expense of others. The best chance to secure sympathy or agreement from an audience in this situation is when the exclusion of others (individuals or groups) is done indirectly, meaning solely by the one-sided increase in conviviality among those enjoying the humor. It is no malapropism that letting the cat out of the bag kills the goose that lays the golden egg (i.e., that knowing the function of humor takes away its enjoyment). And this is precisely why “sociobiology,” and evolution in general, continue to arouse so much hostility when the efforts at analysis are applied to humans.

Hypothesis: Humor is a form of either physical or social-intellectual play characterized by surprise and incongruity, and resulting in changes in

the relative status of the humorist, the audience, and the victim of the humor. One cannot generate a reasonable theory of the function of humor without recognizing that there are two levels of function in its explanation, even when one of those levels is not directly represented in the interaction. The function of humor is to foster social unity between humorist and audience, and thereby either tacitly or overtly (depending on the nature of the humor) to adjust power differentials with other individuals or groups.

But the question is: How does incongruity serve the function of ---- what? Unity? Distinction between individuals or groups? Shifting of status? (if incongruity is indeed the penultimate (least) proximate mechanism). The most general question may be: Why is incongruity involved in a highly social system of generating unity and cooperativeness and an amity-enmity axis? Is there something special about incongruity that makes it a great vehicle for this kind of thing? Maybe it is a way of bringing out failures in the psyche or in cleverness, or some such things, in others – the victims of humor. Play is sort of incongruous from the start, especially when it is related to quite serious full-cost topics. Tickling the most vulnerable parts of someone's body – which are the parts that are ticklish – might be the most incongruous way to engage in mock battle with someone – as practice. So-called “practical” jokes – usually physical in nature – thrive on incongruity. As I wrote in the earlier effort I sent you guys, is it possible that we try to locate and use to our advantage other peoples' inadequacies in realizing where congruity and incongruity meet – where the limits of congruity are in things physical and social? Is all of that related to real competition or combat, especially at the group level? For example, I can imagine that people could try to identify the weaknesses in the knowledge or understanding of the “enemy” and concentrate on them. And finding such weaknesses and parading them could be done humorously – or by humor – perhaps very efficiently – especially using surprise. Maybe even seeing how one's friends react when surprised with some incongruity is a good way to identify a reasonable strategy of competition or combat.

I am obviously not “home” yet on this project – trying to work up the humor chapter. I welcome any comments you guys have. Don't worry if you don't have any. I'll just keep working on it. I think realizing that

some opposites occur in the within- and between-group brands (practices?) of humor is pretty important. And I also think it's important to emphasize the "indirect" or incidental dumping on others or other groups, as opposed to really caustic humor directed right at the enemy, and even doing so in the process of getting people on your side – making them come up with hearty, good-fellowship within-group amity. My feeling at this point is that I need to worry the concept of social-intellectual play a lot more.

If either of you fellows knows how to get rid of the big black lines that appear with Microsoft Word when you put a row of asterisks or a short line across the middle of the page to set off the next passage, let me know. I hate the things. There's one right below here.
