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LAUGHING MATTERS: WHEN HUMOR IS MEANINGFUL

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Abstract

While humor can perpetuate and preserve stereotypes, it also can redress a wide variety of prejudices and preconceptions. This paper offers several examples of positive humor. Humor can serve as a teaching tool to reduce stress and make people receptive to serious subjects that range from statistical analysis to social justice. It can also tie people together, give psychological strength to victims, and enable them to rise above despair and hopelessness. It can even enhance teamwork in the workplace. Of course, the wrong kind of humor can be a negative, causing irreparable harm to people. In a nutshell, humor is not a laughing matter and should be taken seriously.

Keywords: Humor, Biblical humor, social justice, disparagement humor, humor and stress, African-American slaves.

Introduction

Humor has become and continues to be very important to all aspects of our society today – in the workplace, professional groups, entertainment, politics, and more. In many respects, humor has become the way we communicate with each other, whether in person or by way of various types of media, including social media. The profusion of Internet memes, each a tiny tidbit of humor has, since the first (The Hampster Dance) in 1997, been nothing less than spectacular. Along with technology, humor occupies a position of primacy in our day-to-day lives. There are entire books and websites dedicated to collections of humor, and the public speaking group, Toastmasters International, holds a contest annually for the best humorous speech.

Workplace humor has come under scrutiny, for both positive and negative reasons. Several professions have been known for their humor for a long time, including mathematicians, musicians, computer scientists; and some for being the target of humor, for example, lawyers.

Full-length feature movies have highlighted humor since the technology's inception. Episodic shows (Broadcast and streaming TV) are not only rich in humor – comedies and dramas alike – but also use humor to approach topics in a way that would never have been done in earlier decades; for example, *Barry* as a not-wannabe hitman and mental illness in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. Shows like *Seinfeld*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *All in the Family*, and *I*

Love Lucy effected cultural change and sometimes (e.g., *Seinfeld*) added words and phrases to our very language. Where would we be without the proliferation of standup comedy, sketch shows, and roasts? We have come to expect the MC of an award show to be funny; we expect a talk show to begin with a monologue.

Along with this apparent growth in humor is a concomitant increase in humor scholarship as evidenced by, for example, numerous journal articles, conference presentations, scholarly books (most recently Nilsen & Nilsen, 2019) and, even, several entire journals dedicated to humor research.

The annual White House Correspondents' Association Dinner was, until the current administration, attended by the President of the United States, who not only enjoyed when jokes were directed at him but also typically gave as good as he got. Compare this to the Nazi regime of Adolph Hitler in which humor directed against the government was criminalized. Even democratic countries need comedians to mock the hypocrisy of its political leaders.

Humor can sometimes influence voting behavior. There is evidence that President Jimmy Carter was helped in his quest for the presidency by Chevy Chase skits on the *Saturday Night Live* television show that regularly portrayed incumbent President Ford as a bumbling fool. No one wants a fool for president. Similarly, the 2008 election, which John McCain and Sarah Palin lost, was also influenced by *Saturday Night Live* (Goldman, 2013).

Evan Mecham, elected to a four-year term as Governor of Arizona in 1986, was extremely unpopular, especially after he canceled what was then a state holiday to honor the birthday of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. (the holiday has since become a US federal holiday). According to Nilsen and Nilsen (2019, pp. 282-288), anti-Mecham jokes had a huge impact on his reputation and contributed to his impeachment. For example:

Did you hear that Mecham ordered the U. of A. School of Agriculture to develop chickens with only right wings and all-white meat?

Why did Mecham cancel Easter? He heard the eggs were going to be colored.

What do Mecham and an untrained puppy have in common? They both cringe at the sight of a newspaper.

A popular bumper sticker: "I'll take a urine test if Mecham will take an IQ test (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2019, pp. 285-288).

Saturday Night Live has been incessantly mocking President Donald Trump (played by Alec Baldwin). Jones (2019) points out that Trump is aware that the "amassing of a dangerous competing narrative to the one he prefers" hurts him politically. Here is Trump's reaction to the parodies:

It's truly incredible that shows like Saturday Night Live, not funny/no talent, can spend all of their time knocking the same person (me), over & over, without so much of a mention of 'the other side.' Like an advertisement without consequences. Same with Late Night Shows ..., Should Federal Election Commission and/or FCC look into this? There must be Collusion with the Democrats and, of course, Russia! Such one-sided media coverage, most of it Fake News (Jones, 2019, para. 2).

Why has humor become so important in our society? In later sections, we will investigate some possible outcomes of the use of humor. Firstly, a very brief overview of humor theory.

Why We Laugh

While many theories hypothesize why people laugh, three major theories of humor predominate: incongruity, relief/release, and superiority. Many of the others can be shown to be variants of these.

Incongruity theory posits that humor results from a contrast between what is logically expected and what actually takes place or what is said (Keith-Spiegel, 1972). Gerard (1759) and Beattie (1776) first proposed this theory (some claim that it was presented first by Blaise Pascal in the 17th century), but it is usually associated with Kant (1790) and Schopenhauer (1819). A related theory focuses on surprise and/or suddenness; i.e., being presented with the unexpected. Another, ambivalence or conflict mixture theory, asserts that laughter results from one simultaneously experiencing opposite or incompatible emotions. This is similar to incongruity theory, but it stresses incompatibility among emotions/feelings rather than ideas (Keith-Spiegel 1972). Another possible variant, benign violation theory (BVT) integrates seemingly disparate theories of humor to predict that humor occurs when three conditions are satisfied: 1) something threatens one's sense of how the world "ought to be"; 2) the threatening situation seems benign; and 3) a person sees both interpretations at the same time (Wikipedia, "Theories of humor," n.d.). This may explain why we (most of us) laugh when tickled instead of interpreting this physical touch as an attack.

The relief/release theory of humor focuses on laughter's role as a socially acceptable way to release pent-up tension and nervous energy, and therefore relieve stress. This theory, first developed by Spencer (1860), was made famous by Freud (1960/1905). Many people may fear or find it difficult or uncomfortable to discuss certain subjects, for example, rape, impotence, homosexuality, violence, racism, and incest. Humor gives these people a socially acceptable way to relieve their tension about these sensitive areas. Laughter can be used as a substitute for violent behavior and thus help people avoid conflict. Relief/release theory might explain why people often need to tell jokes at funerals or why teenagers enjoy sexual humor. Relief/release theory may best explain the importance of humor in healing (e.g., medical clowns).

Superiority theory suggests that the purpose of humor is to demonstrate one's superiority, dominance, or power over others. Mocking humor that belittles the stupidity, infirmities, or weaknesses of other groups is a clear way to demonstrate one's "superiority" – or the supposed superiority of one's reference group – and thus boost one's ego. Racist and sexist humor clearly falls in this category, often used to perpetuate stereotypes about women and minorities and keep them "in their place." Superiority theory is associated with Hobbes (1651) and was also discussed by many others including Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero. Not all proponents of superiority theory see it as belittling and denigrating. Some consider this type of humor sympathetic, empathetic, and congenial (Keith-Spiegel, 1972). A variation of superiority theory is that of Gruner (2000), who believes that humor should be seen as a type of game in which there is a winner and a loser. The winners are the parties doing the laughing, and the losers are the ones being laughed about.

The kind of humor which mocks outsiders goes back as far as ancient Europe according to Cynthia Merriwether-de Vries, a sociology professor. She notes that there were court minstrels "mocking the stench of the Visigoths." There are also memos from Medieval Europe "warning that a certain jester's jokes about the Hapsburgs were going too far and beginning to affect political relations" (Cohen & Richards, 2006).

These various theories of humor are not necessarily incompatible with each other. Some jokes may be explained by two or more different theories. And the same joke may operate under different theories, depending on the identity of the teller and the audience.

While there are many theories as to what makes us laugh, this paper will focus on the outcome of this laughter, i.e., why we might choose to make others laugh.

Positive vs. Negative Humor

Like any powerful superweapon, humor may be employed for both good and evil purposes. Whereas negative humor demeans, humiliates, and belittles, positive humor is

warm, compassionate, and “giggles at the human frailties we all share” (McGee-Cooper, Trammell, & Looper, 2018).

It is unfortunate that humor can be used as a tool to facilitate prejudice. It can be a subtle way to put down and delegitimize, and provide “psychological cover to avoid the appearance of bias” (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016, p. 63). Ford and Ferguson (2004, p. 79) define disparagement humor as “humor that denigrates, belittles, or maligns an individual or social group.” They observe that it “can function as a potential tool of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination” (Ford & Ferguson, 2004, p. 305). Take these examples: (1) One Republican emailed a picture of President Obama’s face on the body of a baby chimpanzee and dismissed this as a joke. (2) Another “joke” was told by comedian Jimmy Carr: What is the difference between football and rape? Women do not like football (McCartney, 2012). (3) A Nigerian comedian joked that African women were not like Caucasian women, and were less willing to engage in sexual intercourse, thus, of course, it was necessary to resort to a bit of rape by the ninth date (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016).

These jokes are far from harmless. There is evidence that exposure to sexist jokes has a behavioral impact on those who are already relatively high in sexism; such “humor” will cause these people to donate less to women’s organizations and become more tolerant of sexist behaviors (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). The good news is that humor can also be used to fight back against bigoted humor (Friedman & Friedman, 2019) and, in fact, can be a powerful weapon for good.

It is not easy to deal with disparagement humor. It is a tool used by bigots and workplace bullies and can create a hostile work environment (Murphy, 2018). The ‘quenelle,’ an inverted Nazi salute invented by Dieudonné M’bala M’bala, is seen by many as a “running gag masking anti-Semitic communication.” (Boudana, 2018). It is not easy to deal with disparagement humor.

The final problem of humour in the public sphere is that being laughed at leaves people with few elegant ways to respond. When laughed at, one can laugh along and probably feel bad about it, try to ignore it, or object and get angry and be accused of not having a sense of humour – a deadly reproach in Western societies. It is hard to deny the shift to a humorous frame without turning it into an embarrassing situation (Billig, 2005). Moreover, being an object of laughter often causes an acute sense of exclusion and humiliation, almost akin to social paralysis (Bergson, 1999). This hampers people’s ability to respond appropriately – let alone elegantly – to jokes at their expense (Kuipers, 2011, 72-73).

The best and most dignified way to deal with disparagement humor seems to be joking back (Kuipers, 2011). Semoun a comic and Dieudonné’s former partner, uses humor to mock Dieudonné and others that use humor as a cover for bigotry.

Humor is not meant for this. It’s like those who tell you, right after they insulted you: ‘No, but I’m joking!’ ‘Arabs are all terrorists. No, but I’m joking!’; ‘Gas chambers never existed. No, but I’m joking!’; ‘I’m going to vote for Marine Le Pen. No, but I’m joking!’ (Boudana, 2018, p. 8).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the broad spectrum of meaningful humor or, perhaps, humor that has been used in meaningful ways, i.e., positive humor that has a higher purpose and is beneficial to humankind.

Humor Matters

Examination of the above-mentioned theories of humor, might lead one to assert that

humor has almost no redeeming value. It is used to indicate one's superiority or to mock those that are different from us. This may be one reason that there was for a long time a paucity of humor research in the discipline of psychology (Gibson, 2016). Nowadays, however, the sub-discipline of positive psychology – which focuses on what people do well – has changed the way humor is perceived. Gibson (2016) underscores that:

[H]umor can be used to make others feel good, to gain intimacy, or to help buffer stress. Along with gratitude, hope, and spirituality, a sense of humor belongs to the set of strengths positive psychologists call transcendence; together they help us forge connections to the world and provide meaning to life (Gibson, 2016).

This paper will examine several areas in which humor is used in a positive manner.

Humor in Education

Humor is an ideal teaching tool. The Talmud relates that before Rabbah (4th century CE) began lecturing his students, he would first say something funny, and the students would laugh. After that, he began the lecture (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 30b). Humor has been used to teach subjects that students are afraid of, such as statistics (Friedman, Friedman, & Amoo, 2002). Humor is an important de-stressing device; this function of humor makes it an ideal teaching tool, with the ability to bring the teacher closer to his or her students (Berk 1998; Burkhart 1998).

There is evidence of the “importance of humor helping create a learning-conducive environment and improve retention of material” (Halula, 2013, p. 115). What humor accomplishes is that the classroom atmosphere becomes more relaxed and less stressful; and students then lose their fear of asking questions (Halula, 2013). Research indicates that appropriate, correctly-used humor can improve retention of material (Halula, 2013; Henderson, 2015):

...studies indicate that the use of appropriate, content-specific humor to reinforce concepts can be a positive tool to improve retention. Educators can utilize humor's systematic activation of the dopamine reward system to reinforce the brain's pathways to new knowledge (Henderson, 2015, para. 12).

This function of humor – to pave the way for learning — is critically important, as we shall see later, when humor is employed in the service of social justice. In fact, we have seen that humor was used as a teaching tool in the Bible, for example, to mock sinners (Friedman, 2000).

Biblical Humor: When Sarcasm and Satire Serve a Higher Purpose

One important function of humor, according to Hyers (1969, p. 220), is to minimize the distance between the sacred and the profane. Humor makes God seem closer to humankind, and can be a powerful weapon in the battle against evil. Consider, for example, that satirizing racists, sexists, bullies, and other wicked people can sometimes be more effective than taking legal action. The Hebrew Bible,¹ Judaism's oldest literary document, does the same. The Hebrew Bible uses humor to mock the idolater and the wicked. Names used for idols throughout the Hebrew Bible include *gilulim*, a word related to *galal* which means excrement; *toevah* (abomination); and *atzabim* (*etzeb* means sorrow and grief). Irony is employed in the Bible when punishment is meted out measure for measure. Thus, for example, the Egyptians drowned the Israelite babies, and they were themselves drowned in the Sea of Reeds.

One example of Biblical humor used to mock idolatry is in the story of the matriarch Rachel and the *teraphim*. Rachel's husband Jacob took his family and fled from his father-in-

law Laban in Haran, after noticing that he was not being treated by Laban as in the past. Unbeknownst to Jacob, Rachel had stolen her father's *teraphim*, small personal statues used for idolatry and divination. When Laban caught up with Jacob, he asked (Genesis 31:30): "Why have you stolen my gods?" The reader is certain to realize that a god that can be stolen cannot be much of a god. Even worse, Rachel hid her father's deities by sitting on them. These idols did not get much respect.

The story of Balaam and the talking ass is an example of how the Bible mocks an evil person who misuses his preternatural powers and turns his prophecy into a business. Balaam claimed to "hear the sayings of God and sees the vision of the Almighty" (Numbers 24:4). God showed Balaam that even his own donkey saw more than he did (Numbers 22). The ass, seeing an angel standing on the road with drawn sword, kept trying to turn away and save her master; Balaam saw nothing and repeatedly beat her. Moreover, Balaam did not sound like an eloquent prophet when he addressed his ass, who had asked him why he struck her three times (Numbers 22:29): "Because you mocked me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would now have killed you." The ass, on the other hand, responded quite logically (Numbers 22:30): "Am I not your ass upon which you have been riding all your life until this day? Have I been wont to do so to you?" The one being mocked here is Balaam; his ass had greater vision and superior logic. Balaam was the jackass; he thought he could go on a mission despite God's wishes. Balaam sounds even more ridiculous when we realize that, while he was being hired to eradicate a people using his ability to curse others, he needed a sword to kill his own donkey (see commentary of Rashi).

The story of Jonah uses humor in a clever way to make a very serious point. Jonah was without doubt among the Bible's worst prophets. He thought he could escape his God-given mission by running away. Seemingly, he was never told that God is ubiquitous. When Jonah finally delivered his prophecy to the people of Nineveh, capital of Assyria, after miraculously being spit out by a whale, his message was ludicrously brief (Jonah 3:4): "In forty days, Nineveh shall be overturned." Jonah did not give a reason for his prophecy; he mentioned neither God's name nor repentance. What kind of prophecy is that? Compare this to the eloquence of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets. Even Balaam spoke better than Jonah; certainly, Balaam's ass was more eloquent. Yet, Jonah's success was astounding. Everyone repented, everyone fasted, and everyone donned sackcloth. Even the animals fasted and wore sackcloth. Jonah was arguably the most successful prophet in the Bible. We can imagine God saying: "I sent the worst prophet I could find to the Assyrians, and they all repented. I sent numerous eloquent prophets to the Israelites, and they still did not change their idolatrous ways." The Bible's humor here delivers a very potent message.

Victor Borge, Danish comedian and musician, is known to have said, "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people." An abundance of wit, irony, wordplay, sarcasm, and humor can be found in the Hebrew Bible. If one of the functions of humor is to narrow the distance between the teller and listener, then the humor of the Hebrew Bible brings God closer to humankind.

When Humor Creates a Bond

The primary function of what Friedman and Friedman (2003) call "bonding humor" appears to be the creation of a feeling of belongingness and togetherness. This category of humor covers a wide variety of comic endeavors, including the humor of various ethnic groups, racial groups, religions, professions, scientific disciplines and, indeed, any group of individuals who share a body of knowledge, rituals, experience, lore and, of course, a sense of humor.

Schutz (1995) feels that ethnic humor plays an important social function by helping in-groups bond and reinforce their values. While humor can be used to deride others (e.g.,

racist jokes, lawyer jokes), it can also be used to enhance the image of a group. Of course, one joke can sometimes do both jobs at the same time: mock one group while at the same time making another group appear smarter than everyone else. The jokes of victims and oppressed groups very often have this dual purpose. Lowe (1986) makes this observation about certain kinds of ethnic humor: “it produces simultaneously a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders.”

Martineau (1972) developed a model to describe the different functions of humor in social settings. Some of his theorems about an intragroup situation — i.e., where both the actor (the party initiating the humor) and the audience are from the same group — may be summarized as follows: (A) When humor lauds the in-group, it functions to strengthen the group. (B) When the humor belittles the in-group, it has one of four purposes: to control the behavior of the in-group, i.e., using humor to gently rebuke a member for not going along with group norms; to strengthen the in-group, i.e., using self-disparaging humor to laughingly talk of one’s own group’s weaknesses but in a congenial way that strengthens the rapport of the group; to introduce or encourage conflict that is already present; and to encourage the break-up of the group. (C) When humor lauds an out-group, it functions to strengthen the group. The outgroup may be seen as a reference group, and the humor demonstrates that the two groups have much in common. (D) When humor belittles an out-group, it has one of two purposes: it enhances the morale of the in-group, and it introduces or encourages a negative attitude towards the out-group.

Some humor is hermetic, that is, the listener must bring some kind of specialized knowledge to the joke-telling enterprise or the joke is meaningless, or, at least, not funny. This can occur in tightly-knit groups or groups that share similar experience or knowledge, for example, musicians, mathematicians, computer scientists or, even, families (Friedman & Friedman, 2003). Ziv and Gadish (1989) found that inside/private jokes, phrases, sayings, and expressions constitute a kind of “secret language” for couples that serve to strengthen “feelings of belongingness and intracouple cohesiveness.”

Some jokes do not even sound funny unless the listener has the necessary knowledge or experience to understand them. The following classic Jewish joke often sounds to the uninitiated as if it is, rather, a tragic bit of storytelling:

In a small village in the Ukraine, a terrifying rumor was spreading: a Christian girl had been found murdered. Realizing the dire consequences of such an event, and fearing a pogrom, the Jewish community instinctively gathered in the synagogue to plan whatever defensive actions were possible under these circumstances. Just as the emergency meeting was being called to order, in ran the president of the synagogue, out of breath and all excited. “Brothers,” he cried out, “I have wonderful news! The murdered girl is Jewish!” (Novak & Waldoks, 2006, p. 73).

Yes, it is funny. And tragic. And funny. Most Jews will laugh; non-Jews not so much.

Humor to Create a Sense of Belonging in the Workplace

Skalski et al. (2012) consider humor a social interaction tool for “the establishment of a sense of group belonging or understanding” and “a means of building and maintaining relationships.” This is why humor is quite important, maybe even essential, in the workplace. It helps create a sense of belonging and contributes to group solidarity. All humor is to some extent cultural and, perhaps to that same extent, humor can also enhance our understanding of workplace culture.

Teasing banter in the workplace may facilitate cohesiveness. (Vinton, 1989). Plester and Sayers (2007) demonstrate how people working at three different IT companies use

humorous “banter” to strengthen workplace relationships. The term banter (they also referred to it as ‘taking the piss’) is a kind of playful teasing whose purpose is to deflate another person’s ego. It is part of what employees see as a “fun” organizational culture. They also note that it strengthens the cohesion of the in-group, although it might be exclusionary to outsiders:

Observing exchanges of banter defined ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups within these organizations. Banter created group bonds and was used to exclude some individuals from the group. Groups developed ‘in-jokes’ only understood by members and these types of jokes highlighted the group’s identity. Banter highlighted many demographic differences such as ethnicity, gender or age diversity inside work groups. Rather than denigrating the differences the jocular insults used in the banter appeared to emphasize and perhaps even celebrate diverse individual characteristics of coworkers. Demographic differences such as ethnicity and gender had effects on the types of banter shared... (Plester & Sayers, 2007, p. 183).

The dark side of workplace humor is explored in Friedman and Friedman (2018).

Humor as a Tool for Healing

Norman Cousins (2005/1979) was probably the first person to write a book describing in detail how he used laughter as a tool to heal himself from a crippling and life-threatening illness. Today, many hospitals are using clown visits and various other techniques to enhance the healing process (McGhee, 1999). Klein (1989), in his popular book, describes how humor can be used to deal with such difficult matters as terminal illness and death. The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor has a website (<https://www.aath.org/>) that provides resources for those interested in learning how humor can be an effective therapeutic tool.

Christopher Reeve (1999) describes how laughter helped give him hope and changed his life. Paralyzed from the neck down after a riding accident, Reeve was in a deep depression and actively contemplating suicide. Suddenly, a strange doctor with a heavy Russian accent entered Reeve’s hospital room, announced that he was a proctologist, and declared that he was going to examine him immediately. The “doctor” was Robin Williams, and this marked the first time Christopher Reeve laughed since the accident.

Mehmet Oz states:

Humor is a wonderful tool. It helps patients cope with what they’re facing, and it helps them get better too. There’s a lot of data showing that patients who are depressed after heart surgery have a higher mortality rate, and optimistic patients have significantly fewer wound infections. Laughter can cultivate that optimism, and it truly is the best medicine in many ways (Oz, n.d., para. 1).

Several studies conducted since the late 1980s support the idea that “laughter stimulates the immune system and counteracts the effects of stress hormones, although results are mixed about exactly how” (Malchiodi, 2008). One study reviewed 42 papers dealing with humor and pain. It appears that humor helps one deal with chronic pain (Perez-Aranda et al., 2019). However, the results are not conclusive that laughter promotes longevity and good health. Martin (2008), in an examination of healing and humor, concludes:

[R]elationships between humor and laughter on the one hand, and psychosocial and physiological health on the other, are more complex than many people believe. More research is needed to disentangle these complex relationships. Only when a clearer picture has emerged from the empirical research can health care practitioners design humor-

based interventions that are likely to be effective. There is little doubt that humor and laughter can enhance positive feelings of mirth, but we have only an incomplete understanding of the ways in which different aspects or styles of humor may contribute to broader dimensions of mental health and satisfying social relationships. Similarly, while children and adults who are suffering from serious, life-threatening illnesses are likely to feel more cheerful and hopeful if they can find something to laugh about, the jury is still out on whether humor and laughter actually hasten the healing process or protect one from becoming ill in the first place (Martin, 2008, pp. 511-512).

Survivors of all kinds of ailments often use humor as a coping tool as well as a way to reduce stress. For example, Tig Notaro says:

Before I had a double mastectomy, I was already pretty flat-chested, and I made so many jokes over the years about how small my chest was that I started to think that maybe my boobs overheard me...and were just like, 'You know what: We're sick of this. Let's kill her' (Annis, 2019).

Humor to Relieve Stress

As noted above, the relief/release theory of humor views humor as a socially acceptable way to release pent-up tension and thereby relieve stress. Laughter can be used as a substitute for violent behavior and thus help people avoid conflict. Dirty jokes, according to Freud (1960, p. 97), are a substitute for sexual aggression. Theodor Reik, a disciple of Sigmund Freud, also saw humor as a way of dealing with the misfortunes and tragedies of life. By joking about adversities, one can rise above and handle the cruelties of life (Abrami, n.d.).

Lipman (1991) and Ostrower (2014) show how victims of the Holocaust used humor to cope with the horrors of the Nazis. Fritz, Russek, and Dillon (2017) found that the use of humor was associated with reduced stress. Jewish humor has helped the Jewish people "confront the reality they are facing in their daily life and cope with adversity and unpleasantness" (Abrami, n.d.). Abrami (n.d.) concludes that Jewish humor is unique "not only because it pokes fun at our [Jewish people] shortcomings and weaknesses, but because it affirms our determination to overcome the threatening situations which may beset us." This joke illustrates this.

A Jew in czarist Russia falls into a lake, and, not knowing how to swim, he frantically screams, "Help, save me!" But his calls are totally ignored by all present, including a number of soldiers standing nearby. In desperation, the Jew yells out, "Down with the czar!" At that moment, the soldiers immediately jump in, yank the Jew out of the water, and haul him off to prison (Abrami, n.d., para. 8).

A Jew managed to hide in a psychiatric asylum during the war. He is pretending he is demented like the other patients. One day, the director of the institution informs the residents that the Führer, Adolf Hitler, is planning to visit the asylum. When he enters the main hall, they are told, they are to stand up and greet him with the words "Heil Hitler!" The day comes, and they all welcome the Führer with the words they had so carefully rehearsed, except for the Jewish man, who remains seated in the back of the hall. "You," says Hitler, "why didn't you

greet me like everybody else?” “My Führer,” says the Jew, “they are all *meshugah* [crazy], I am not!” (Abrami, n.d. para. 10).

Similarly, African-American slaves used humor as a tool to maintain their dignity. Dance (1977) underscores the point that the Black American slave:

Forced to suffer at the hands of a formidable and often brutal foe ... was able to attack him in his humor and thus secure some measure of revenge and victory ... derived much satisfaction and revenge in observing the ignorance of the so-called superior white man, and they delighted in accounts of his stupidity, his ineptness as a businessman, his fear of conjuration, and his gullibility (Dance, 1977, p. 128).

Humor is an important coping skill to reduce workplace stress for female sex workers such as prostitutes (Sanders, 2004), who often ridicule clients behind their backs and might deride the way they look or how they perform. Sanders (2004, p. 287) feels that “joking relations are important in extreme professions that require intense physical and emotional labor that potentially threatens personal well-being.” If humor is a coping strategy for prostitutes, it certainly can help others employed in various kinds of stressful professions.

Humor to Enhance Self-Esteem: Getting Even

One kind of humor that might fall into the category of relief/release humor is the put-down joke. Comeback jokes and put-down humor can be an instrument of self-respect and a way to get even with oppressors. Freud (1960, p. 103) made the following observation about hostile jokes that he believed served the purpose of aggressiveness or defense: “By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him.” Davies (1998) asserts that all ethnic groups tell “put-down” jokes, whose goal is to show scorn and belittle a member of another group. This is especially true when the other group is known to be prejudiced to the first group and/or is seen as a rival. Thus, Blacks will tell jokes about White supremacists; women will tell jokes about male chauvinists, and Jews will tell jokes about anti-Semites. It is an ideal way for those that are oppressed, abused, or taken advantage of to “get even” with their oppressors.

For example, the following:

If you're black in America, you're relatively well-spoken, well-dressed, well-educated, sooner or later you can count on one of your white contemporaries -- with the very best of intentions -- turning to you and saying something along the lines of, 'You know what? You are so damn cool. Sometimes, I actually have trouble remembering that you're black. No, I mean that. Sometimes I really forget that you're black.' Yeah, well, let me marry your sister, and I'm sure it will pop right back into your mind -Torian Hughes (Comedy Central Jokes, 2018)

I went to an all-inclusive vacation in Greece. I was there and met two ladies, beautiful ladies, so I hit on them. I said, “Hi, I am from Israel.” One of them said, “No! No! I heard that all Israeli men are all rude and are not gentlemen.” I asked whether she had ever met any Israelis. She said, “she had not, but she heard.” I asked her where she came from. She said, “Germany.” I said, “I am rude! You almost killed all of us. I am rude! I do not remember that Hitler was a gentleman. He used to open the train doors [transporting Jews to the concentration camps] and said, ladies first!” -Israeli comic, Shahor Hason (Sponder, 2017, t=30s)

What is that insensitive bit at the base of the penis called? The man.

What did God say when he created Adam?
I can do better than this.

A woman came home just in time to find her husband in bed with another woman. With superhuman strength borne of fury, she dragged her husband down the stairs to the garage and put his penis in a vise. She then secured it tightly, removed the handle, and picked up a saw. The husband terrified, screamed, "Please, please, I beg you stop! You're not going to saw it off are you?" The wife, with a gleam of revenge in her eye, said, "Of course not. You are. I am just going to set the garage on fire."

Mel Brooks has said that *The Producers* was his way of getting even with Hitler (Beier, 2006). Brooks states:

Of course it is impossible to take revenge for 6 million murdered Jews. But by using the medium of comedy, we can try to rob Hitler of his posthumous power and myths.

Just as humor is often used by professionals to create a bond, it is also a device for "getting even" with a profession or establishment. For example:

Targeting lawyers:

Q: What do you call 1,000 lawyers at the bottom of the sea?

A: A good start.

A man took a trip out West after a harrowing divorce proceeding. He stopped in a bar, and after a few drinks, stated to no one in particular, "Lawyers are horses' asses." One of the locals spoke up on hearing this and said, "Mister, watch what you say. You're in horse country."

Targeting psychologists:

A man was walking in the street one day when he was brutally beaten and robbed. As he lay unconscious and bleeding, a psychologist, who happened to be passing by, rushed up to him and exclaimed, "My God! Whoever did this really needs help!"

Targeting statisticians:

Two statisticians were traveling in an airplane from Los Angeles to New York City. About an hour into the flight, the pilot announced that although they had lost an engine, there was no need for worry as the plane had three engines left. However, instead of 5 hours travel time, it would now take them 7 hours to get to New York. A short while later, the pilot announced that a second engine failed. They still had two left, but it would take 10 hours to get to New York. Somewhat later, the pilot announced that a third engine had died. Never fear, he announced, because the plane could fly on a single engine. However, it would now take 18 hours to get to New York. At this point, one statistician turned to the other and said, "Gee, I hope we don't lose that last engine, or we'll be up here forever!"

Targeting computer scientists:

Four men rode in a car: a mechanical engineer, an electrical engineer, a chemical engineer, and a computer engineer. The car stalled out. The mechanical engineer said, "It must be the pistons; let's repair

them and be on our way." The electrical engineer said, "It has to be the spark plugs; we'll replace them and be ready to roll in no time at all." The chemical engineer said, "No, it's got to be bad gas; we'll flush the system and be on our way." They turned to the computer engineer. "What do you think we should do?" they asked. The computer engineer shrugged and said, "Let's get out of the car, close the doors, then get back in and try restarting it."

Targeting economists:

A physicist, a chemist, and an economist are stranded on an island, with nothing to eat. A can of soup washes ashore. The physicist says, "Let's smash the can open with a rock." The chemist says, "Let's build a fire and heat the can first." The economist says, "Let's assume that we have a can-opener..."

This one targets the medical / nutrition establishment, especially in the US and Britain:

The Japanese eat very little fat and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans.

The French eat a lot of fat and also suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans.

The Japanese drink very little red wine and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans.

The Italians drink excessive amounts of red wine and also suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans.

The Germans drink a lot of beer and eat lots of sausages and fats and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans.

CONCLUSION: Eat and drink what you like. Speaking English is apparently what kills you.

Social Justice Humor

Social justice comedy combines humor with social activism. It attempts to make the world a better place, using humor as a tool to change society. Ziv (1984) cites Charlie Chaplin, who stated that "the function of comedy is to sharpen our sensitivity to the perversions of justice within the society in which we live." Ziv asserts that people are afraid of being laughed at:

Moreover, the fear of becoming a target for mockery should be sufficient to prevent a person from again committing the deed that has led to a punitive reaction. Thus laughter should have the power to change not merely the personal behavior of one individual, but also the behavior of institutions and even whole societies (Ziv, 1984, para. 3).

Goebel (2018) maintains that humorous texts work better than serious literature in teaching young students about social justice. He cites Native American comic Don Kelly who observes, "Humour is a fantastic communication device. If you yell at people or browbeat them into submission, they'll tune out and walk away. But if you keep them laughing, they'll keep listening" (Kelly, 2006).

Social justice stand-up comics see their role as pushing social boundaries; the "laugh takes away the sting" (Cohen & Richards, 2006). Cohen and Richards (2006) point out that humor is important for members of minority groups because it serves as a powerful tool "to neutralize the power of stereotypes that obstruct their path to equal participation in society. Stand-up comedy can give social critique and instigate transformation in a way that leaves many audience members wanting more." Friedman and Friedman (2019), in their study of

social justice humor, state:

[V]iolence doesn't educate, and there is no lasting cultural change. With humor, on the other hand, you have a chance of actually doing some good for society (Friedman & Friedman, 2019, pp. 16-17).

When humor is employed in the service of social justice, it has the opportunity to educate, to bond together members of an oppressed group and help them cope, to target their oppressors, to heal both the oppressed and the oppressor if he/she is willing to be educated. Some examples:

Israel Zangwill, the British Jewish writer, once found himself at a fancy dinner party, seated next to a well-dressed matron. Zangwill was tired, and without thinking, he yawned — right in the face of the woman beside him. Taken aback by his rude behavior, she said to him, "Please mind your Jewish manners. I was afraid you were going to swallow me." "Have no fear, madam," Zangwill replied. "My religion prohibits my doing that" (Novak & Waldoks, 2006, p. 83).

Moses Montefiore, the great 19th Century philanthropist, once found himself seated next to an anti-Semitic nobleman at a dinner party. "I have just returned from Japan," the nobleman was saying, "and it's a most unusual country. Did you know that it has neither pigs nor Jews?" "In that case," Montefiore replied, "you and I should go there, so it will have a sample of each" (Novak & Waldoks, 2006, p. 83).

Humor has been used by countries under occupation, without the ability to militarily fight back and gain their freedom, e.g., countries that were part of the Soviet Union. This kind of humor "is an instrument of self-respect and the spirit of freedom" (Ziv, 1984). The joke below was told in Czechoslovakia when it was occupied by the Nazis.

"Did you hear that the Germans have decided to lengthen the day to 29 hours?"

"No, why?"

"Because the Fuhrer has promised them that by the spring they'll be in Moscow!" (Ziv, 1984, para. 14).

Between 1933 and 1945, as many as 5,000 people were sentenced to death for being involved in anti-Nazi humor (Morreall, 2001). One example of this kind of humor:

Several stormtroopers enter an Evangelical Church during a Sunday morning service. "My fellow Germans," begins their leader. "I am here in the interest of racial purity. We have tolerated non-Aryans long enough, and must now get rid of them. I am ordering all those here whose fathers are Jews to leave this church at once." Several worshipers get up and leave.

"And now I am ordering out all those whose mothers are Jewish."

At this, the pastor jumps up, takes hold of the crucifix, and says, "Brother, now it's time for you and me to get out." (Morreall, 2001, para. 33)

The oppressors in a dictatorship may imprison or execute those who mock them, but, while keeps alive the spirit of hope and freedom, there is no evidence that humor can topple a totalitarian regime (Davies, 2011: p. 247). The Soviet Union remained a powerful dictatorship despite all the jokes about communism. Humor provides victims with psychological empowerment and enables them to rise above despair and hopelessness.

Conclusion

Humor has the ability to perpetuate and preserve stereotypes and even mock those

who have a physical or mental disability. On the positive side, it can also redress preconceptions and biases. Humor can be a teaching tool that reduces stress and makes people receptive to learning difficult subjects like statistics and even the importance of social justice. Humor can be a bonding tool that ties people together. Humor can provide victims with psychological empowerment and enables them to rise above despair and hopelessness. It can also enhance teamwork in the workplace. Of course, the wrong kind of humor can be a negative tool and cause irreparable harm to people. The acid test to determine whether humor is healing or harmful requires that one answer the following questions: Does the humor bond people together, or does it create schisms? Does the humor increase or decrease tensions? Does the humor enhance the self-esteem of others, or does it lessen their dignity and self-confidence? (Anderson, n.d.).

In a nutshell, humor should be taken seriously. Perhaps, after all, humor is not a laughing matter.

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ⁱ The Hebrew Bible, collectively referred to as the Jewish Scriptures, is also known in Hebrew as the T'nach – a Hebrew acronym from Torah (the Pentateuch), Nevi'im (the prophets) and Ketuvim (the writings, such as, say the Book of Esther or the Book of Lamentations).