

Pssst! Here's The Secret To Why We Laugh!

By Peter J. Fogel

I think we can all agree that humor is subjective. (And if you don't agree your decision is still subjective, correct?)

What is funny to one person might be boring and insulting to the next. It all has to do with our background and experience.

What a twenty-two year old male college student might find amusing will undoubtedly be different than what a retired seventy five year old gynecologist from Dearborn, Michigan who lives in Florida will laugh at.

A retired gynecologist should guffaw at: medical procedures, cholesterol, coupons at early-bird dinners, prostate problems. (Although prostates can be a "touchy" subject—and I mean that literally and figuratively.)

A college student will relate to: trying to get sex, getting drunk, getting more drunk, passing out from alcohol... and then try getting more sex, again.

Although mention Viagra and the two will both probably laugh.

Naturally, you think, "But the doc was a twenty-five college student once, right? Yes, but that was during the Truman administration and when gas was a nickel a gallon. People and their sensibilities change over time. I know mine has.

That is why humorists and comedians get the big bucks. Somehow we have to find the common ground that the majority of our audience can appreciate, enjoy—and hopefully learn from. Humor when used effectively is indeed the great "equalizer." It represents the human condition. (Notice that the first three letters of human and humor are h-u-m. I know, pointless trivia—my sentiments exactly.)

BUT According to Psychologist Keith-Spiegel, there are eight major theories of what we will laugh at. But before we examine this, let's look at the lunacy of this. I never heard of Keith-Spiegel, I am quoting this source from another source... and the person before me did the same thing.

Society is impressed with credentials. We assume that a psychologist's theory, just because he has a "diploma" that hangs in the den or his office, is of great importance to us.

This man might show off this degree to his family, friends or people with problems and theorize: “Please notice that I put in some time at a University and have been awarded a master’s degree.”

But in reality what it really represents is:

“Look, pal! I’ve been validated! This piece of parchment, which is in a cheap frame from Target and partially written in Latin, a language dead for centuries, says I can assist you with getting your head together. Who cares that I’m still paying off student loans from fifteen years ago, drive a Volvo that leaks oil and live on SWANSON TV dinners. Oops your time is up!”

But I digress; let’s assume for argument’s sake that good old Dr. Keith has done his homework, shall we? Here’s the list:

- 1) Surprise
- 2) Superiority
- 3) Biological
- 4) Ambivalence
- 5) Release
- 6) Incongruity

And some of these ideas or themes can be combined as you’ll see shortly. Let’s look at...

1 Surprise!

Surprise is the cornerstone of a good joke and is a “universally” accepted type of humor. (Although in the Middle East most jokes will always end with, “And so the camel drops his drink and says to the infidel...)

Why do we put ourselves through the gauntlet of listening to a joke or story? Because we have the expectation of a surprise payoff. We’ve been conditioned that way since we were toddlers and heard our first “knock knock” joke!

And we’ve invested out time in the moment. And like a good mutual fund...(if there is one) the longer we invest in listening to a setup, the bigger the payoff you hope for.

Now, if it’s a co-worker telling you a lame joke with a weak punch-line you’ll stare at him and immediately know why this cat is working in accounting. (and where he should stay)

But if it's a performer or speaker you'll moan and escape to the nearest exit with the hope of getting to the car valet before the rest of the attendees do. So again, everything is subjective.

What do you enjoy more, a surprise party in your honor or coming home and seeing your twenty-two year old (the same twenty-two year old from the early example) drunk and passed out on your couch mumbling about sex? (and by the way—that was a call back I just did.) If it's your kid, you're miffed. If it's a stranger... you'll call the police.

When using word play (i.e jokes) we'll laugh and smile at wit. A joke or a long story must end in a punch-line that should use misdirection. Give the audience as much information as they need... take them on a mini journey and then deliver them something out of left field. (also called incongruity) Here's one of mine

"I love the seasons in New York... especially in the fall. There's nothing like standing in Central Park and watching the homeless change colors."

Now that joke is not for everyone. Liberal minded people laugh at the word picture I set up with a misdirection punch-line. Conservative folks take a tad offense of making fun of the homeless.

I saw this great cartoon in today's newspaper which was satirizing the Iraq War. Four solemn looking Iraqi politicians are sitting around a table.

One announces: *"We're kidding ourselves, it's doomed to failure! There's too much instability!"* Another responds:

"Yeah and how long had J. Lo date this guy anyway?!?"

2 Superiority

This theme proves why we still laugh at Marx Bros. movies to this day. We all want to feel superiority, to be #1. That's why we cackle at a comedian who uses self-deprecating humor like Rodney Dangerfield or Joan Rivers.

After listening to them we feel better ourselves...because we're not them. Humor is a reaction to tragedy (and feel free to fill in any bad Ben Affleck movie you've seen recently.)

Or why a politician will make fun of himself... or why we high-five each other when satirist Mark Russell lampoons a politician. Now when you hear your boss give a speech with self-deprecating humor—(which his way of making sure the rank and file know that he is just one of the “guys.” you’ll know the reasoning.)

In his own way he’s telling his staff that: “Yes! I’m flawed. I’m still one of “the little people” despite the fact that my BMW is worth more than the GNP of Kenya.”

And even if it’s a poor joke... I’d probably do the same thing you’d do in your position: And that’s laugh politely... because I’m spineless weenie and wouldn’t want to lose my job.

(Notice how I called myself a spineless weenie and not you. Another example of self deprecation.)

According to Freud *“a good bit of humor is oriented to maintain the status quo by ridiculing deviant social behavior and reassuring the majority that their way of life is proper. It is used as a weapon of the ‘in’ against the ‘outs.’”*

Again, a useful theory coming from a dead, German, psychiatrist who I’m sure had lots of diplomas hanging in his den.

But now you can identify why roasts are so popular. Everyone enjoys taking someone down a peg or two... or three or four. Good natured ribbing never goes out of style. The guest of honor knows that the “roasting” is done with love. And you know he has a good sense of humor about himself, because if he didn’t, he would’ve stayed home and had his wife insult him there.

Here’s one of my examples that shows self deprecation: *“I remember when my girlfriend broke up with me. She says, ‘Believe me... it’s not you, it’s me! It’s not you... it’s me.’ I go, ‘It’s really you... and not me?’ She says, ‘Yes. I-don’t-like-you!’”*

Or one that shows superiority and self-depreciation at the same time:

LA people suffer from a combination of low esteem and big egos: “I may not be much... but I am I think about!”

Also, note when a comedian uses self deprecation in his act... he is using this as a way of drawing the audience in to him and putting them at ease. BUT in reality we are using this strategy to control the audience... (passive/ aggressiveness?) which is also a form of superiority... See? Now you're learning our secrets!

3 Biological

We were born to laugh. Our early ancestors did it first. In fact, primates because of their inability to communicate with other chimps, will show warmth and friendship to their brethren with a closed mouth and then turn 360 degrees and shove their butt cheeks in their face.

This is there way of saying:

"Hey, it's great see you and now you can kiss my you-know-what?" You can actually view this ritual everyday with brokers at Wall Street watering holes during Happy Hour.

Now hostility with a chimp is shown by bearing its open mouth and displaying all his sharp, gnarled teeth. Where is this anger coming from, you may ask? Probably fear, shortage of food and not finding a good orthodontist in the bush. (I just used the rule of three—and misdirection)

Like our tribal ancestors, most professional athletes and "suits" will immediately bump their chests, stomp their feet and let out a howl of glee after scoring a touchdown... or being involved in some corporate takeover.

Laughter really is a creative substitute for a physical assault. That's why comics always "put down" a heckler. Or they "slayed" or "killed" an audience. They "died laughing" is another worn-out euphemism we makers of mirth use. Again, this is a way of showing our superiority...

#4 Incongruity

The dictionary definition of incongruity is: *the quality of disagreeing; being unsuitable and inappropriate.*

So here is a quick recipe for incongruity: Somehow take a rigid person and put him in a ridiculous scenario—and let the hijinks begin. A 62 year old bank president walks out of his branch and sees some black kids dancing in front of the entrance.

A crowd has gathered and is getting into their moves. The bank president is miffed. These youngsters are blocking the path to the bank and disrupting his business. What does he do? He decides to break them up so he can get back to his “world.” (Change is bad!) He immediately goes over to disrupt and disband them when instead the lads bring him into their routine. The stoic man gets caught of with “the beat” and starts to gyrate to the music and the crowd APPLAUDS.

He can't beat 'em—so he joins them

That is incongruity. It works best in movies when it is used as a plot. It's called a fish out of water scenario. Eddie Murphy in Beverly Hills... or Martin Lawrence back in medieval times. It also works in buddy movies. In sitcoms it's basically every-episode-of- “Three's Company” where Jack hides in a closet so as not to be caught by yes, once again, the girl's dad that's he's dating.

Now the humor comes out when the audience (at home watching) knows what is going on but the character (the girls' father) in the episode is clueless. This is allowing the audience to feel superior again. (like a child announcing to everyone in ear shot) “Nah, Nah, Nah... I know something you don't know, poopie-head,” which is what Bush said to Congress just last week. (misdirection and a dose of superiority.)

5 Ambivalence

The ambivalence theory is first cousin to incongruity--- and even though it's part of the same family... it's never invited to many catered functions. (hold for laughter! Okay, movin' on)

Ambivalence allows us to laugh at recognized institutions. (mothers, fathers, in-laws, ex's--- you know any person who is related to you and pisses you off)

It's important to note that incongruity puts its emphasis on *clashing ideas* (or perceptions.)

While on the other hand, ambivalence stresses *conflicting emotions*. One instance we have is the love/hate relationships with families and with members of the opposite sex.

Ambivalence was the core of the success of the "Cosby Show" which dealt with Bill and his love/hate (mostly love) relationship he had with his children. It also mirrored our own relationships, didn't it? I mean, you all love your kids, right? But there are times when they infuriate you so much you want auction them on e-bay—and pay for the shipping and handling.

Here's one of my bits:

"Nothing pleases my father. NOTHING. His favorite program is "The Antique Road's Show." For his birthday I got him on the show And now he's angry at me. It seems an 85 year old man with arthritis is only worth a buck fifty."

Or when there is sibling rivalry:

"My younger brother hates the fact that I have hair and he doesn't. I mean, the guy is bald. When he walks into a sporting goods store tennis balls jumps off the shelves and scream: "Daddy!"

"My brother also has health problems too. Epilepsy. As a kid I remember him taking a bubble bath and then getting a seizure. There he is: his arms are flailing... his head is jerking back and forth... he's foaming at the mouth... so I did what any older brother would do... I threw in some dirty laundry."

Ambivalence helps us get our dignity back. It also covers up our deep guilt and darkest feelings that we have for each other. Yes, we love people... and yet at the same time there's a part of us that wants to drive over them in a forklift. It's human nature... or so my shrink with the leaky Volvo tells me. (another callback... keeping track?)

#6 Release

"Ahhh..." that felt good. No, not the I.R.S. refund or hearing that a co-worker who you can't stand just got canned!

No, I'm taking about the stress release you get from laughing at a stand-up comedy show or watching a Jim Carrey movie.

I equate the medicinal attributes of having a good laugh with that of just having above average sex... (And NOT by myself thank you) but with a partner.... and without the usual apologies afterwards (you just got a punch line, with a tag and dash of self deprecation thrown in.)

I remember laughing hysterically at the late great Sam Kinison who was doing a bit about Jesus being nailed to the cross and then being asked about his own reincarnation. (I knew Sam and other comics recognized him as the incarnate of Lenny Bruce.) One of his lines in the bit was...

(As Jesus) "*Sure...I'll come back as soon as I'm able to play the piano again!*"

The whole audience was convulsing with tears rolling down their cheeks. It was cathartic to say the least. You felt completely drained and relieved at the same time. He brought his reality to his audience. And once an entire audience is laughing (and trust me they were when Sam was on stage) the release is even more magnified because the whole group – synergistically is now giving its approval.

That's why laughter and the release theory is so affective. Everyone is enjoying the moment.

And why a comic insists an audience sit closer to the stage to enjoy the intimacy of the jokes with everyone else. And why it's death for comedy if there are 4 people in a room spread out in an auditorium that actually holds thirteen hundred.

To quote my favorite, dead, German shrink: Sigmund Freud says:

The most favorable condition for comic pleasures is a generally happy disposition in which is in which one is in the mood for laughter. In happy toxic states almost everything seems comic. We laugh at the expectation of laughing, at the appearance of who is presenting the comic material (sometimes even before he attempts to make us laugh) and finally, we laugh at the recollection of having laughed.

Again, who knows if this lost something in the translation. Laughter is indeed a release for us after a hard day of battles with the wife, the boss and traffic.

We enjoy seeing other folks getting their just desserts. We can't help it... although there's a weird side of us (that if Freud was alive to day he would love to investigate) that continually laughs at others misfortune.

On the show, "American's Funniest Home Video" where the hapless 4 year old kid rides his tricycle into a tree... falls side way (like a scene out of the Benny Hill show)... and starts to cry. Yes, we know it's cruel... and we also know it's going to happen... (it does every show) but we laugh anyway.

"Oh, look at what funny Grandpa is doing. He's so out of it he's putting little kitty in the blender,"

Again, it's wrong to laugh, but the sadist in us does it anyway. And one reason it is because it's NOT OUR CAT! (distance = funny)

So there you have it. See if you can come up with some of your own theories and I'll give you credit if I use it in another e-report or in my monthly e-zine. Just e-mail me at peter@fortune500comedy.com

Here's a prescription for a healthier mental and physical existence: I suggest you take two "laugh at life's absurdities," one "always question authority" and then wash it down with a ---"never stop learning" and call me in the morning.

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