

## **Humor Reconsidered with Prospects for Interethnic Relations\***

L. Brooks Hill

Brandon Fitzgerald\*\*

*Trinity University*

*Trinity University*

### **ABSTRACT**

As conventional wisdom suggests, "There may be little humor in medicine, but there's a lot of medicine in humor." Whether humor and laughter can actually heal, many people believe that both are therapeutic with powerful psychosomatic implications. Just as these amusing aspects of life help us personally cope with our world, they can also assist us in varied ways to manage other complexities of social life. On occasion humor can be a valuable means of interpersonal bonding for group development, can be a valuable release for hostilities between people in conflict, and can serve to soften the effect of constructive criticism. On the other hand, humor can also be a powerful means of antagonism, inciting ridicule, thwarting cooperation, and manipulating hostility. With the remarkable potential of humor as an approach to intercultural difficulties, this paper first examines the widely varied literature about humor, establishing the need and creating a meta-critical foundation for a broader perspective. From this review, selected definitions and four general propositions are offered as suggestive points of departure for a re-conceptualization. Finally, the paper turns to the practical work of comedians for confirmation, enrichment, and possible projections.

### **Introduction**

Acknowledging some of the motivations underlying this paper may assist reader appreciation and understanding of its potential. The senior author has a scholarly emphasis in the area of intercultural communication and a powerful concern for the application of our scholarship to interethnic problems. His perspective derives from a background in rhetorical studies and linguistics,

tempered by a social science orientation and couched within a Western perspective. Central to his position is a belief that ethnic discord is a major threat to intercultural and international harmony and that scholars of language and communication can provide substantial assistance with the resolution of this discord (Hill, 1997). The second author is an undergraduate student who worked in a course about intercultural communication on the topic of ethnic humor. Although currently undecided, he will probably pursue his studies of world literature and sustain his emerging intercultural perspective. Both authors believe they have a sense of humor and agreed on the potential of this subject as a fruitful approach to intercultural problems. Both are also confounded by how difficult it is to discuss ethnic and other intercultural issues in class, as well as in broader American society. In contrast, they wondered how stand-up comedians can so readily confront these controversial issues when so much of the society remains tongue-tied. This investigation of ethnic humor began, therefore, on two tracks: examination of the scholarly literature and delightful consideration of stand-up comedy routines. This paper reflects their discovery process and will, they hope, serve to promote alternative approaches to humor and interethnic relations.

Examination of the scholarly literature about humor identified several prominent trends: First, we were surprised by the breadth and amount of comedic literature, especially commencing in the last half of the twentieth century. It would appear that humor and prosperity are somewhat correlated as this expanded concern developed in Western scholarship with the emergent peace following World War II and the widening popularity in the West of social science research. Second, we were equally struck by the one-sided treatment of humor. Studies within a behavioral and social science orientation heavily dominated the literature. Far less frequent were humanistic, literary, and linguistic emphases; however, such commentaries about humor are often buried in more expansive studies or serve as introductions for anthologies of literary humor. Third, we found even less emphasis on ethnic humor. Frequently, studies would draw upon ethnic or other intercultural examples, but few studies focused in this area. Overall, however, this literature did provide a strong, but slightly skewed and certainly not well synthesized, foundation for the extrapolation of what we know about humor in a Western context to the much broader consideration of ethnic humor within a multi-cultural perspective. This paper will characterize that foundation, and then use it to suggest an expanded position regarding humor and to project an agenda for future research and applications illuminated by the work of prominent practitioners.

### **Toward a Meta-Critical Foundation**

The imbalance and non-integration of the literature about humor is manifest in several ways. To underscore the predominance of a Western social scientific

orientation one author provided an interesting slant on the literature. Goldstein (1976) offered a chronological overview of research about humor in which he identified three general stages: pre-theoretic, psychoanalytic, and cognitive. Granted that he is by profession a psychologist, he specified no disciplinary constraints on his overview. From his psychological perspective regarding theory development everything before the work of Sigmund Freud was pre-theoretic, regardless of how comprehensive, explanatory, or predictive earlier considerations might have been. Simply, they did not fit his mold of "theory." Freud's analysis of human behavior provided the foundation for psychoanalytic theory and thus strongly influenced the approach to humor not only within psychoanalytic theory, but also in its application in psychotherapy as well. With the declining favor of psychoanalysis in the years after WW II, humor surfaced as a major concern in cognitive theorizing about human behavior. Except for occasional references to the interest in humor by ancient Greeks and Romans and by a few other, later Western philosophers, especially Hobbes, any work before Freud is treated lightly if at all. In a roughly parallel fashion, studies within a more humanistic and literary tradition tended to neglect the social scientific literature and generally buried their concerns for humor in broader analyses. Despite the insights and value of this collective literature, these trends suggest the need for better integration of what we variously know about humor.

One notable exception to these restrictive perspectives comes from the work of Arthur Koestler (1964), an eclectic artist, writer, and thinker who situated humor as a central component of his theory of creativity. His approach was variously influenced by scientists, philosophers, and literary artists, and represented a substantially different conception of theory construction than that of most psychologists. A very challenging feature of Koestler's work is his effort to conceptualize humor as one of three legs supporting a comprehensive position about creativity and the leg most deeply set in the physical and psychological nature of the person. Although his consideration of the psychological aspects seems filtered through psychoanalytic theory, he goes beyond that limitation to locate physical, artistic, and other psychological dimensions. The major influence of his position about humor is its integration into a much broader position about human behavior and artistry. His position seems much more holistic when compared with the limiting perspectives of social scientists and other literary scholars.

Deriving momentum from the impetus of Koestler's more encompassing position, this paper will attempt to integrate the psychological position with the linguistic and communication perspectives by drawing upon the artistry reflected in the work of the contemporary comedians. To bring these sources together requires brief summaries of their primary components. From the more psychological orientation, we have three major contributions: (1) theories about the nature and origin of humor; (2) treatments of humor as a personality variable,

and (3) uses of humor in therapeutic situations. Overlapping with the psychological orientation, communication literature examines humor primarily as a message or personality variable operating during the interaction process between and among individuals. A very prominent, recent trend in this literature addresses the rhetorical functions of humor in diverse contexts. Somewhat parallel to these other trends, literary and linguistic studies have examined the types of humor in terms of language and other symbolic usage. Examples here might be the study of wit, irony, and sarcasm as manifestations of the incongruity theory of humor. Last and probably the least academic interest would be the more anecdotal commentaries by professional practitioners of humor, the contemporary comedians, especially the stand-up comedians, who seem to represent the medieval jester on the current scene.

Time and space do not permit a careful review of these widely diverse contributions, but a sort of meta-review can certainly lay the groundwork for a more intercultural agenda. Consider first the work of psychologists. In their routine overviews of the literature within their field, they typically identify three theories of humor, and of late a fourth one from communication seems promising. Each of these positions comes from a distinctively Western philosophical orientation, but each has potential for helping us to understand ethnic humor. Deriving from Hobbes and filtered through Freud, a primary theory is labeled superiority or disparagement wherein humor of whatever sort is explained as someone's effort to suppress or manipulate someone else. This position would certainly explain some of what is happening when ethnic groups use humor to disparage or suppress each other, to create bonds among ethnic group members, or simply to keep one or another group within its place in society. Deriving from balance theories of human behavior, as well as centuries of observations about wit, irony, and sarcasm, incongruity theory suggests that the origins of humor reside in an element of surprise, as words and situations violate expectancies. This ubiquitous feature of symbol usage would apply to any culture and its intercultural relations, but the specific implications would require intense understanding of what constitutes the "expected" or "expectable" within a society. Based on potentially generic aspects of expectancy violations one could create a partial explanation of humor in any culture.

Another psychological theory is essentially therapeutic. Relief or release theory suggests that humor serves to reduce the stress and frustrations of coping with our world. In this fashion humor serves to help us maintain our sanity, to sustain an even keel through turbulent waters, and to avoid the confrontational extremes with other people that over-seriousness can generate. Here again, we might suspect that some generic patterns of relief and release are operating across cultures, but to determine them will require far more extensive cross-cultural or comparative study, and to locate the operational versions within a culture will require intensive cultural analysis of how one can relieve stress and

avoid personal or group confrontations therein. This partial explanation of ethnic humor is further complemented by a fourth theoretical possibility called sympathy theory (O'Donnell, 2001) that suggests a more humane motivation for many uses of humor as we altruistically attempt to ameliorate the negative potential of many interaction situations.

Within the discipline of communication a recent emphasis on rhetorical functions ties several of the psychological theories together well. Meyer (2000) has identified four primary functions that humor serves in various communication situations. Identification and clarification are two rhetorical functions that serve to unite people; in contrast, enforcement and differentiation serve to separate people. Whereas other rhetorical techniques might equally accomplish these functions, humor is a prominent message variable and vehicle for such interpersonal adaptation. From this pragmatic orientation we are also invited to observe how humor represents a set of tactics, rather than a singular tactic, for diverse use in human communication. Meyer's efforts to specify these generic functions may help us develop a framework for applicability of humor within multiple cultures. His thinking about this subject strongly influences the position taken in a subsequent proposition of this paper as his work indirectly suggests how humor is at once similar to many other rhetorical techniques, but at the same time can be a much larger entity.

Along the lines of Meyer's work, other communication scholars have attempted to correlate principles drawn from the psychological research about humor with communicative practices in diverse situations. Among these are applications of humor in the workplace, such as improving the communication climate of the work environment; in marital and other interpersonal relations, such as student-teacher interactions; in therapy situations at clinics and hospitals, and in selected intercultural contexts. Nearly all of these studies are typically within Western cultures. The attraction of these communication studies and their psychological counterparts is the potential breadth of humor as a set of techniques or tactics that require, as Koestler might argue, a much more holistic approach to capture.

Throughout all of this social scientific research is a thematic recognition of "sense of humor" as a personality variable that is more or less present in each person and is variously used in relations with others. The literature provides measures to ascertain the presence or absence of this variable, and many studies have classified the research subjects accordingly and then projected the interaction implications of humor in use. The bulk of this work is strongly situated within a Western cultural orientation with its own imprint on the nature of the research and thus the findings. Whether we can actually determine what humor as a personality variable may be typifies the problem with satisfactory definitions throughout personality theory. Even without this conceptual problem,

such a diverse entity as humor accentuates how much of personality research is culturally constrained.

Not only from psychology and communication, but from humanistic and scientific perspectives as well, comes research and speculation about the physiological roots of humor. Cousins' (1989) work on the healing processes provides a stimulating overview of this literature, but does not go nearly as far as Koestler and more recent neural-physiologists in linking laughter to physiological dispositions. In fact, neurologists have identified the connections in the brain with the expression of various emotions, especially laughter that is so closely identified operationally as an emotional and physical counterpart of humor (Provine, 1996). On a parallel track popular writers such as Cousins in his earlier work (1979) have argued from personal experience the profound influence of laughter on the improvement of their physical ailments. With these lines of thought we seem to have come full circle for throughout the centuries of Western civilization the argument surfaces and resurfaces about the value of laughter to our physical and psychological well being. The major differences nowadays are the enhanced techniques for confirmation.

Of the several orientations to humor, literary and linguistic scholarship seems the oldest because across the centuries people of many different cultural backgrounds have recognized that verbal manipulation and its paralinguistic enhancements were among the most common, yet most sophisticated, sources of humor. Perhaps we are now at a time to realize the validity of these perspectives and integrate them more effectively with the current trends in the newer social sciences. To assist this effort the present paper posits a provocative, suggestive set of propositions that draws upon this meta-review of the diverse literature. After a brief introduction of these propositions, the paper will examine the work of the stand-up comedian as a cultural mediator with all the implications of that holistic perspective for integration and understanding of ethnic humor and the future of intercultural interaction.

### **Derived Propositions for an Alternative Perspective**

A set of working definitions may assist the understanding and use of the following propositions. Conceptually, we would focus attention on two prominent uses of the word humor and on a new term that captures some neglected aspects. As a human act, humor may be defined as a symbolic inducement to amuse oneself or others. In this regard, humor is primarily a symbolic action that functions to encourage our self and others to treat anything more lightly than its essence might otherwise suggest. More specifically, ethnic humor simply becomes a type of humor addressed to anyone's ethnicity or any aspect of being ethnically distinctive. Humor often results in the behavioral manifestation of a smile or laughter, but, we would argue, humor can be internalized without behavioral manifestation. As a quality of the person, humor

may be defined as a faculty or personal tendency of someone to make symbolic inducements to amuse. In the phrase “sense of humor” we recognize the relative presence of this tendency to amuse as a pattern of behavior for an individual. Beyond these somewhat predictable aspects of humor, we further argue the need for a new word: “humorizing” will reference the process of inventing, adapting, and transmitting humor in any of its wildly varied types and forms (cf. Hill & Kennan, 1979). This special word may ultimately provide a convenient vehicle for addressing the tactics and strategies so crucial to humorous interaction games. For the rhetorical purposes of this speculative essay, these definitions identify three essential dimensions of humor: as a human act, as a quality of one’s personality, and as a creative process. All three of these dimensions are important to a broadened re-conceptualization of humor and its complex relations with intercultural communication.

Proposition 1. Like many other rhetorical techniques, humor can serve as a singular rhetorical tactic, but unlike many other rhetorical techniques, humor can serve as a rhetorical strategy. Practically expressed, one might use humor as specifically and simply as a brief justification for a slip-up that occurs in the course of doing something else more important, or more broadly and strategically one might systematically employ stereotyped slogans to suppress categorically a group of people. To appreciate this range of possibility one needs to understand the difference between tactics and strategy, and the amazing flexibility and types of humor. Strategy and tactics are terms heavily dependent on their military origins and uses. Strategy refers to the broader purpose(s) and the general plan for its implementation. Tactics are the varied techniques that comprise the means for achieving the strategy that usually involves a combination of several tactics. What complicates the study of humor is the difficulty of specifying its nature and function. What is humorous at one point in time with one audience may not be humorous on another occasion, and how it works on one occasion may vary on another. What can produce a humorous reaction may be unlimited, and the tactical selection from this repertory is a major source of creative adaptation. Thus, the range of what can be humorous and how those actions can function is amazingly variable even within one cultural context. Our generic theories about the origins and rhetorical functions of humor are a major step, but understanding the strategic and tactical deployment will compel us to enhance our conceptualization of humor and humorizing (compare Gruner, 1997, for example, regarding the game of humor).

Proposition 2: One reason that humor has commanded so much popular and scholarly attention is its crucial function in the management of self and interpersonal relations. Drawing from the ageless principle regarding pleasure and pain, humor illustrates how people tend to avoid pain and seek pleasure. Simply stated, we learn the association of humor and pleasure. One extension of this association is that we learn how to use humor to avoid painful

confrontations with others. From these central features are other less promising, and perhaps perverted, social extensions where self-aggrandizement becomes more important than social harmony, and any humorous palliative can become a negative instrument of abuse. As with many tactics, humor may involve neutral choices that can serve positive or negative functions. Within our total repertory of interaction techniques, few are as varied, as numerous, and as adaptable as humor. The effective use of this humorous repertory, i.e., effective humorizing, demands remarkable sensitivity to cultural norms, rules, and standards of behavior. Whereas our generic theories of the nature and function of humor may frame our study of this range and potential, its variable use in human interaction exceeds any neat compartmentalization, but provides an attractive perspective for understanding the creative adaptability of human behavior.

Proposition 3. Paralleling Gruner's (1965) quest for a capturing analogy, we would argue that humor may be to rhetoric what idiom is to language. Those of us who study language structure and its use recognize the major dimensions of grammar as the parts of speech (components), syntax (logic for relating the components), and idioms (idiosyncratic manipulation). The first two dimensions are essentially compositional, more logical and predictable, but the latter primarily represents an individual's creative manipulation and deviation from the logical usage of the language. Idiom and idiomatic use of the language builds on intense and thorough awareness of the operative rules and how they can be manipulated to capture some unique aspect or angle of insight. Analogically speaking, rhetoric, like language study, is rule bound and builds upon a more psycho-logic of interaction. As with idiom, humor represents the creative manipulation and deviation from the norms. Koestler was remarkably perceptive to place humor as a central component of creativity because it represents one of the most adaptable and unrestrictive aspects of our symbolic behavior. Just as an idiom can become commonplace and work its way into the basic structure of the language, so it can be with humor as certain types of humor become commonplace and used in a rather pedestrian fashion. Creative humor, and sometimes the most ethnically ravaging, may be highly idiomatic creations built on deviations from the rules of good decorum and personal relations.

Proposition 4. By this stage of the paper, the fourth proposition should be obvious: Substantial re-conceptualization of humor is necessary and should build upon the diverse orientations available. This does not mean that we should abort any existing lines of research. What it does accentuate is the need for more scholars, perhaps like Koestler, to step back from the specifics of individual studies and to embrace the patterns and deviations of humor in a broader philosophical orientation about human behavior and interaction. One of the distinct advantages of intercultural study is the necessity of holding in abeyance our cultural bias and thus to enrich our perspectives with those from other

cultures. The development in the last decade of *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* offers some prospect for such a venture, but its heavily Western bias and more limited perspective restrict its potential. What we need most is for scholars in diverse cultures to ask the simplest questions and build on their collected answers: In my culture, they should inquire, what constitutes humor, how do members of my culture use humor, and how does ethnic humor operate positively and negatively within my culture? If we generate these profiles, then we can begin to address the ways humor can serve as a unique window for cultural insight and intercultural learning. Most importantly, we might find how we can check the negative aspects of ethnic humor that constrain too many groups of people in an increasingly interdependent world.

### **Enriched Perspective from the Stand-Up Comedian**

One of the most popular illustrations of what we know about humor in Western society comes from the work of the stand-up comedians. As with the work of the Medieval jester, these comedians can operate with a “poetic license” that permits them to flaunt the social rules and conventions without serious ramifications. Some scholars have examined this body of work, and some of the comedians themselves have provided reflexive analyses, but much more needs to be done with this vital source of information about humor, especially to relate this more practical application to other bodies of literature. The potential of such inquiry is perhaps even greater for ethnic humor as the stand-up comedians on the Western scene are using their minority, gender, or other distinctive ethnicity as the strategic heuristic for entertaining audiences. This section of the paper will consider some of the potential of this source, at least as an illustration of earlier ideas in this paper. On such a basis we might relate some Western trends to patterns of humorous narrative and storytelling, if not more parallel counterparts, in other cultures.

Incidentally, the spark that ignited this line of inquiry came from a former colleague of the senior author. The scholarship of sociologist Lawrence Wieder has long struggled with the development of a theory of non-verbal communication; his general approach has emphasized the magician who is clearly one of the most skillful manipulators of non-verbal behavior. On parallel with Wieder’s efforts, we believe scholarship about ethnic humor can benefit greatly from the study of a group of masterful practitioners. This approach tends to be ignored because the work of the comedian is perceived to be non-bona fides or abnormally extraordinary (Fine, 1976). That is, however, why we should use this perspective as it may open new and extraordinary ways to grapple with the concept, theory, and applications involved.

Another useful point of departure, Lawrence Mintz (1985) provides a powerful idea: He argues that stand-up comedy serves as a primary means of social and cultural mediation. Through the use of humor and laughter comedians

call our attention to social and cultural norms, problems, and abuses. In a detached fashion their comments provide a cathartic release from the potential seriousness of the topic; they make light of how people abuse each other through deliberate and inadvertent stereotypes, and the perceptiveness of their specific jokes usually comes from incongruities and surprise. If skillful, the comedian helps us to sympathize with those disparaged. Throughout the act or presentation, the performer enhances credibility by accentuating the "character" of the speaker as a person who possesses a sense of humor. Dependent upon the overall strategy of the presentation and the tactics selected, the speaker may variously use all four of Meyer's rhetorical functions. Whatever the approach, the comedian offers a creative interpretation of our social and cultural patterns and permits us to see reality differently, and potentially in a more socially constructive fashion.

The range and versatility of humor is delightfully revealed in Eddie Izzard's recent award-winning performance entitled "Dress to Kill." From this special Home Box Office (HBO) television program one can understand well the first proposition about humorous tactics and strategy. The central theme of this program is gender-related: Izzard is a British transvestite who identifies with a definite minority and spends most of his effort clarifying what he is and how he should be perceived. By making fun of himself he enforces both positive and negative stereotypes, but he differentiates himself in ways that make him not only bizarre, but also a constructive social force. So, we encounter a very creative use of minority status as a strategic element as he demonstrates his credible character on diverse political and social events. He uses many specific tactics in an array of combinations to treat the topics he meanders through. No matter what we may think of transvestites, we come to appreciate them through Izzard's credible sense of humor and a wide array of ingenious verbal and non-verbal flashes of humor. In a roughly parallel fashion, the recent play and movie "Birdcage," based on "La Cage aux Folles," use humor to treat homosexuality.

Stereotypes are central features of comedy routines, as well as of intercultural communication. As a kind of categorization that is essential for coping with the complications of our world, stereotypes can be positive or negative. We cannot eliminate them, but we can learn how to control our use of them and to avoid the negative potential of their abuse. Black stand-up comedians in the USA often use stereotypes about Blacks and others to enhance their performances. Sometimes these manipulations are merely tactical, but often the entire performance may strategically render laughable the silliness of our stereotypes. Among current comedians we encounter a wide range of possibilities from the very subtle play on her ethnicity by Whoopi Goldberg to the aggressive attacks by Chris Rock, Dennis Miller, or George Carlin. In the recent Broadway production of the "Producers" Mel Brooks takes the use of stereotypes to ridiculous, sarcastic extremes causing most of his audience to

raise serious questions about the stereotypes we employ in America. What is so amazing about these comedy programs is how they reflect so much of what the literature confirms within a short time span. What we are missing, however, is a framework within which to capture what the literature partially confirms and what the practitioner seems intuitively to know. Perhaps Mintz's cultural mediation and an intercultural perspective can provide the needed breadth.

Successful stand-up comedians must be unusually perceptive observers of the social and cultural scene. What they perceive are the unique and distinct ways we develop and use the norms and symbols of our culture. Most provide some critical commentary about the ridiculousness, incongruity, or absurdity of these governing features of our lives, especially when they are taken to an extreme and we are forced to see them for what they are. For example, ethnic and minority identity is a confusing, perplexing, and highly political aspect of American life. George Carlin ridicules our labels, categorizations, and policies reflective of these social issues. Whereas no one can deny the real importance of these matters, we all recognize how taking them too seriously and/or to extremes can compromise the necessary fluidity of our social system. Thus, this humor serves as a shock absorber of the negative potential of our over-zealousness. Thus, Carlin mediates between the varied positions and factions, providing acerbic criticism that permits us to frame these particulars more broadly. In this fashion humor becomes a major vehicle for mediating confrontational circumstances as we can help each other save face and wrestle with some of our deepest social issues.

Another broadening feature of humor is its parallel with the essential features of communication. As with any communicative act, humor comes from a source, entails a message, is managed through verbal and/or non-verbal channels, must be adapted to receivers, and occurs in some context with some effect on the parties involved. Viewed thus, humor, and particularly humorizing, can become a microcosm of the entire communication process. When we study the stand-up comedian, especially their reflexive accounts of success and failure, we are struck by the ways that humorous communication may be a distinctive type of communication, perhaps a variant of epideictic oratory, that achieves its effectiveness or fails according to the parallel criteria of other communication. The distinctiveness partially stems from the risk factors involved. Every rhetorical strategy or tactic can be assessed at one level on a continuum of high to low risk in terms of the user's relations with the receivers. Humor of all types and sorts seems to load toward the higher risk end of the continuum, as failure can be immediate, striking, and forceful on all of those involved. A stand-up comedian can certainly attest to these conditions for the use of humor. As we rely more exclusively, tactically and/or strategically, on humor, the risk involved markedly escalates.

The work of stand-up comedians also suggests some much broader questions. Are counterparts of such performers available in other cultures? If so, who are they? How are they similar or different from those in the West? And, what can we learn about culture and communication from a study of these practitioners' humor? What sorts of inferences might one draw about a culture that relies as extensively as that in the USA on humor to mediate the realities of political and social circumstances? In what ways does this reliance on humor confound our relations with people from other cultural orientations? How do we adapt humor for use in wrestling with inter-group relations within and between cultures? A major factor in the recent selection of the President of the USA was whether one candidate took himself too seriously and whether the other candidate had a better character because he could laugh at his own mistakes. Why must political leaders be so careful about their uses of humor when religious leaders often use humor to convey their message? Perhaps the central question urges us to re-conceptualize humor: What is so distinct about humor and its effective use that it allows groups of people to escape their problems? How then might we use this phenomenon so as to enhance our abilities to address even broader, more global issues? In other words, how can we conceptualize humor to realize its broader value for social and cultural mediation?

### **Conclusions and Projections**

The original purpose of this paper was to examine ethnic humor from the standpoint of the scholarly literature and the work of comedians. That purpose grew significantly when we discovered the difficulty of separating ethnic humor from its broader framework of humor. So, we surveyed the broader literature and made several discoveries about humor and its ethnic deployment. Humor is far greater than a specific concept or variable for social scientific focus. Instead, it has amazing variability and range in its nature and functions. What we need is a broader perspective that can capture its potential. This paper suggested some prospects. Obviously we need to build on the many specifics from the ever-growing literature, but we need to work toward a better synthesis and integration. Because of some unusual features that make humor difficult to pin down, we need to consider even broader ways to frame the subject within the total study of human behavior from artistic and humanistic, as well as scientific, perspectives. Whether that vantage point is a general theory of creativity or a rhetorical perspective acknowledging humorizing as a distinct type of communication or both, we need to expand our perspective. Gruner (1997) accepted this challenge with his conceptualization of humor as a game, but his effort faltered when he limited this perspective to a defense of a single theory of humor. Perhaps, if re-examined, his game conceptualization may hold greater promise for meeting this challenge.

As with many investigations of challenging topics, we discovered more questions than answers. Obviously, much of what appears in print about humor comes from a Western, especially USA and western European, perspective. We seriously need to compare what we now have available with conditions in many other cultures. We also need to study the nature and function of humor more intensively within other, specific cultures. Both these tracks of research need more attention. From the results of this work we may discover how to create a broader framework for addressing humor. Any serious student of cultural relations believes that one justification for such study is the potential to locate improvements for one's culture within the differences discovered in other cultures; this holds equally true in our research and scholarship, as we need to overcome the narrowness imposed by cultural bias. If humor can serve as a powerful mediator between disparate forces, then it may have potential for a more systematic and managed resolution of our problems. If nothing else, maybe we could use role-play and other dramatic techniques as an "entertaining" approach to more effective discussion of problems with intercultural relations. Consider, for example, Paula Vogel's use of theatre with *The Baltimore Waltz* to wrestle humorously with several significant issues surrounding AIDS.

The voyage of discovery in this paper revealed some interesting twists about humor and interethnic relations. Perhaps most important was strong affirmation of the potential that study of outstanding practitioners can have for other scholarly work on humor. The two tracks of study followed in this paper hold great promise for the broader purpose of improving interethnic relations: On the one hand, this paper emphasized the need to expand our scholarly approach to humor if we hope to capture the potential this set of behaviors may hold for a comprehensive understanding of human communication. On the other hand, we must also study the extraordinary insights reflected in the artistry of the stand-up comedians and parallel performers in other cultures. Just as rhetorical practice precedes rhetorical theory and research, the intuitive artistry of the humorizing practices by these performers seem well ahead of theory development and research. Perhaps the central question of this study should shift from how do the practitioners reflect what we know from our research to what does their intuitive artistry suggest for future research and theorizing. Even more specifically, how might this line of study generate a broader conceptualization of humor useful as a point of departure for improving interethnic relations.

From yet another and final angle we can affirm this need for better study of extraordinary practitioners: Whenever we take what we know about almost any topic and move it into a different mode for application, we can learn more about what we thought we knew originally. For example, when we examine what happens to a work of art as it becomes adapted into another medium, we witness a parallel phenomenon. Sometimes the original work may change for the better

and sometimes for the worse, but one thing is for certain: We come to know much more about the original work than we might ever have learned otherwise. Similarly, when we saw what happened to current insights about humor as reflected in comedy routines, we began to learn more about humor, as well as ethnic relations. Perhaps the lessons here are merely recycled principles of the learning process: If we stand too close to something, we can develop myopic constraints, and when we step too far away, then we cannot see the prospects others may recognize. These principles suggest that we have located a better perspective on ethnic relations and from this perspective can learn how to use humor more constructively for the management, if not the resolution, of interethnic problems. More effective integration of rhetorical studies of outstanding practitioners and the social scientific studies of humor may provide the avenue of greatest success.

*\*Revised edition of a paper first presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> biennial conference of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies (IAICS), Hong Kong SAR, China, July 25, 2001, and later presented with further revision at the annual conference of the Southern States Communication Association in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, April 5, 2002.*

**\*\*Hill (Ph.D., University of Illinois, 1968) is Professor and Chair, Department of Speech and Drama. Fitzgerald (Class of 2004) is an undergraduate student with major interest in world literature. Both authors are at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas.**

## References

- Bergler, A. A.  
1976 Anatomy of the joke. *Journal of Communication*, 26 (3), 113-115.
- Bippus, A. M.  
1999 Humor in comforting interactions. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas.
- Bippus, A. M.  
2000 Humor usage in comforting episodes: Factors predicting outcomes. *Western Journal of Communication*, 64 (4), 359-384.
- Boskin, J. & Dorinson, J.  
1985 Ethnic humor: Subversion and survival. *American Quarterly*, 37 (1), 81-98.

- Booth-Butterfield, S. & Booth-Butterfield, M.  
1991 Individual differences in the communication of humorous messages. *The Southern Communication Journal*, 56 (3), 205-218.
- Chapman, A. J. & Gadfield, N. J.  
1976 Is sexual humor sexist? *Journal of Communication*, 26 (3), 141-153.
- Cousins, N.  
1979 *Anatomy of an illness as perceived by the patient: Reflections on healing and regeneration*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Cousins, N.  
1989 *Head first: The biology of hope*. New York, NY: E.P. Dutton.
- Fine, G. A.  
1976 Obscene joking across cultures. *Journal of Communication*, 26 (3), 134-140.
- Futch, A. & Edwards, R.  
1999 The effects of sense of humor, defensiveness, and gender on the interpretation of ambiguous messages. *Communication Quarterly*, 47 (1), 80-98.
- Goldstein, J. H.  
1976 Theoretical notes on humor. *Journal of Communication*, 26 (3), 104-112.
- Graham, E. E., Papa, M. J. & Brooks, G. P.  
1992 Functions of humor in conversation: Conceptualization and measurement. *Western Journal of Communication*, 56 (2), 161-183.
- Gruner, C. R.  
1965 Is wit to humor what rhetoric is to poetic? *The Central States Speech Journal*, 16 (1), 7-13.
- Gruner, C.R.  
1997 *The game of humor: A comprehensive theory of why we laugh*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Hackman, M. Z. & Barthel-Hackman, T. A.  
1993 Communication apprehension, willingness to communicate, and sense of humor: United States and New Zealand perspectives. *Communication Quarterly*, 41 (3), 282-292.
- Hill, L. B.  
1996-97 Ethnic relations and the decline of civility. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, VI (2), 1-13.
- Hill, L. B. & Kennan, W.R.  
1979 Mythmaking as social process: Directions for myth analysis and cross cultural communication research. In W. G. Davey (Ed.). *Intercultural Theory and Practice*. Washington, D.C.: SIETAR, Georgetown University. Pp. 44-66.

- Honeycutt, J. M. & Brown, R.  
1998 Did you hear the one about? Typological and spousal differences in the planning of jokes and sense of humor in marriage. *Communication Quarterly*, 46 (3), 342-353.
- Koestler, A.  
1964 *The Act of Creation*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- LaFave, L. & Mannell, R.  
1976 Does ethnic humor serve prejudice? *Journal of Communication*, 26 (3), 116-123.
- Meyer, J. C.  
2000 Humor as a double-edged sword: Four functions of humor in communication. *Communication Theory*, 10 (3), 310-331.
- Mintz, L.  
1985 Standup comedy as social and cultural mediation. *American Quarterly*, 37 (1), 71-81.
- O'Donnell, D.L.  
May 2001 Why we laugh, why we don't: The sympathy hypothesis. Paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, Washington, D.C.
- Payne, D. & Goya, S.  
May, 2001 Perceptions about and use of self-disparaging humor in romantic relationships. Paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, Washington, D.C.
- Provine, R R.  
1996 Laughter. *American Scientist*, 84 (Jan./Feb.), 38-45.
- Ullian, J. A.  
1976 Joking at work. *Journal of Communication*, 26 (3), 129-133.
- Wanzer, M. B., Booth-Butterfield, M. & Booth-Butterfield, S.  
1996 Are funny people popular? An examination of humor orientation, loneliness, and social attraction. *Communication Quarterly*, 44 (1), 42-53.
- Wickberg, D.  
1998 *The senses of humor: Self and laughter in modern America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Winick, C.  
1976 The social contexts of humor. *Journal of Communication*, 26 (3), 124-128.
- Zillman, D. & Stocking, S. H.  
1976 Putdown humor. *Journal of Communication*, 26 (3), 154-163.