

HANDBOOK OF HUMOR RESEARCH

Volume I

Volume I
Basic Issues

HANDBOOK OF HUMOR RESEARCH

Edited by

PAUL E. MCGHEE *and*
JEFFREY H. GOLDSTEIN



Springer-Verlag
New York Berlin Heidelberg Tokyo

Paul E. McGhee
Department of Home and Family Life
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, Texas 79409, U.S.A.

Jeffrey H. Goldstein
Division of Social Psychology
Temple University
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122, U.S.A.

With 8 Figures

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Handbook of humor research.

Includes bibliographies and indexes.

Contents: v. 1. Basic issues—v. 2. Applied studies.

1. Wit and humor—Psychological aspects—Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Wit and humor—Social aspects—Addresses, essays, lectures. 3. Wit and humor—Research—Addresses, essays, lectures. I. McGhee, Paul E.

II. Goldstein, Jeffrey H.

BF575.L3H36 1983 152.4 83-6675

©1983 Springer-Verlag New York Inc.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1983

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be translated or reproduced in any form without written permission from Springer-Verlag, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010, U.S.A.

The use of general descriptive names, trade names, trademarks, etc., in this publication, even if the former are not especially identified, is not to be taken as a sign that such names, as understood by the Trade Marks and Merchandise Marks Act, may accordingly be used freely by anyone.

Jacket illustration by Stuart Leeds.

Typeset by Ampersand Inc., Rutland, Vermont.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN-13:978-1-4612-5574-1

e-ISBN-13:978-1-4612-5572-7

DOI:10.1007/978-1-4612-5572-7

Preface

About a decade ago we edited *The Psychology of Humor*. Besides the summary chapter and bibliography of about 400 items, the book contained eleven original papers that represented the state of knowledge at that time. We confess that it was not easy to fill that volume with first-rate contributions. In a few instances we invited contributors only on the basis of having heard through the grapevine that they were doing interesting work on humor. Our sources proved reliable and we were pleased with the results. We even made new friends as a result of these blind invitations. But the fact remains that in the early 1970s there was only a handful of social scientists studying humor and laughter.

The history of humor research prior to the 1970s can also be characterized in terms of the short-term commitment to investigating humor among those who did venture out and try their hand at designing humor studies. For reasons that remain unclear, many investigators published only one or two humor studies before abandoning the area in favor of some other research domain. We have the impression that for decades social scientists have been very intrigued by the idea of studying humor. Psychologists have suspected for a long time that humor somehow is very important in the lives of people. We find laughter and humor occurring almost wherever we find people engaged in social interaction. The fact that we usually feel better when we laugh suggests that laughter may somehow be important for our health and well-being. When any of us who are engaged in humor research describe to others what we are doing, we are consistently met with reactions of interest and fascination.

Given all the apparent interest in humor, why did it take so long (until the mid-1970s) for humor research to “catch on”? One reason may be that humor, like play, remains an elusive concept. There is still no agreement on how humor

should be defined. Nor is there agreement on how appreciation or comprehension of humor should be determined. For example, should we simply observe the amount of laughter or smiling shown or should we ask individuals to make some kind of intellectual judgment about how funny something is? Each approach has its own problems and the two measures generally have only a low to moderate positive relationship with each other. Because of this confusion about measuring humor enjoyment, many investigators have simply obtained both measures and reported whichever one produced significant results. Numerous other methodological problems plague the “serious” humor researcher. Most of these have only recently begun to be confronted as an increasing number of investigators from a variety of fields has been drawn to studying humor. Many of these problems are discussed in this book.

A second reason for the long delay in the attraction of investigators toward studying humor has been the feeling among many scientists that humor is a “fringe” area of research. That is, when we don’t understand cancer, nutrition, basic properties of memory, and so forth, how can we justify spending our time studying humor? Fortunately, research in the 1970s has finally convinced a growing number of people that humor *is* important. The two volumes in the *Handbook of Humor Research* attest to the fact that humor has an important link to many areas of human behavior.

Research on different aspects of humor has accelerated so much that in editing the *Handbook* we faced a challenge quite different from that which confronted us a decade ago. In planning for the *Handbook of Humor Research*, we began by listing possible contributors for areas we thought should be represented. It soon became clear that there were far too many contributors to be included in one volume. After our editor at Springer-Verlag suggested that the *Handbook* be a two-volume work, our problem seemed simplified. However, so many investigators were making valuable contributions that we now ran the risk of losing old friends because of our selective invitations. A comprehensive bibliography of publications on humor and laughter could not be included since it would run to more than 100 printed pages. In 1977 such a bibliography contained over 1100 items (Goldstein, McGhee, Smith, Chapman, & Foot, 1977*). Today, a thorough bibliography would contain several thousand items.

Volume I of the *Handbook of Humor Research, Basic Issues*, contains chapters that summarize existing research, discuss key conceptual and methodological issues, and present new theoretical developments. We have made every effort to represent the major disciplines in approximate proportion to their involvement with humor and laughter. There is one chapter each on

*Goldstein, J. H., McGhee, P. E., Smith, J. R., Chapman, A. J., & Foot, H. C. Humour, laughter and comedy: A bibliography of empirical and nonempirical analyses in the English language. In A. J. Chapman & H. C. Foot (Eds.), *It's a funny thing humour*. Oxford Pergamon Press, 1977.

sociology, linguistics, and anthropology, and several that stem from various psychological perspectives. If we have learned anything from the study of humor it is that oversimplified, global explanations are inadequate to the task. The contributors to the *Handbook* have avoided such simplistic answers. The focus on specific issues within the broad area of humor, laughter, and comedy liberates the theorist and basic researcher from premature and unwarranted generalizations. By restricting their field of view, students of humor are better able to deal with the complexity of the phenomenon.

Methodological issues are discussed in several chapters, but they form the primary concern of Marianne LaFrance's chapter. She directly confronts one of the key problems in using smiling and laughter as an index of degree of humor appreciation, namely, that it is difficult to tell the difference between genuine humorous laughter and social or artificial laughter. She provides a framework for using Paul Ekman's scoring system for facial expression of affect to distinguish real from feigned signs of funniness.

Chapter 2 by Paul McGhee examines psycho-physiological research and issues associated with humor. The first part of the chapter discusses the role of arousal in humor, summarizes existing data on physiological correlates of humor, and examines the nature of metacognitive processes involved in making judgments about funniness. The second half discusses the differential roles of the right and left hemispheres in humor.

The next two chapters focus on cognitive aspects of humor. Jerry Suls's chapter reviews theories and research concerned with cognitive processes involved in humor appreciation, giving special attention to the extension of incongruity-resolution theory to disparagement humor. William Pepicello and Robert Weisberg summarize existing findings from linguistic analyses of humor and draw attention to issues that must be addressed before real progress can be made in our understanding of linguistic forms of humor. Considerable attention is given here to developmental changes in children's linguistic humor. Chapter 6 by McGhee is entirely devoted to developmental studies of humor, focusing primarily on issues that must be addressed in order to investigate humor development across the life span.

Chapter 5 by Dolf Zillmann reviews theories and research in the area of disparagement humor. Special attention is given to the "evolution" of these theories and to attempts to integrate disparagement theory with other attempts to explain humor.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with social and sociological aspects of humor. Tony Chapman discusses the many functions served by laughter and humor in the context of social interaction. He is critical of many researchers' failure to obtain measures of laughter in studies of humor and calls for greater rigor in the conduct of humor research generally. Several pitfalls are discussed that may interfere with the obtaining of valid findings in studying laughter and humor. Gary Fine reviews sociological approaches to the study of humor. In discussing humor and social roles, attention is given to the fool, the clown, the wit and

joker, and the comedian. Studies of the use of humor in context are examined along with reference group humor and the relationship between humor and group culture.

Mahadev Apte's chapter discusses methods used by anthropologists to study humor and also reviews selected areas of anthropological theories and research related to humor. Specific attention is given to joking relationships, humor in religion, and trickster studies. Problems in conducting anthropological humor research are also discussed. Finally, Chapter 10 by Howard Pollio presents a field theory of humor. This phenomenological theory depicts laughter and smiling as "embodied social events" and stresses the importance of the feelings of the laughing or smiling person.

Both volumes of the *Handbook of Humor Research* are intended for students, researchers, and practitioners in psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, mass communications, medicine and nursing, education and human development, interested in (a) a handy source of information about humor, laughter, and comedy, (b) a rich source of fresh theoretical and research insights into the nature and functioning of humor, and (c) a guide for the enhancement, use, and application of humor. With regard to information, the *Handbook* summarizes current and classical literature on humor and laughter. Literature reviews focus on theories of the nature of humor, on the relationship of humor to language, cognition and social functioning, on biological and physiological features, and on the presence, use, and effects of humor in a wide variety of settings. Included also are theoretical integrations, philosophical speculations, methodological suggestions, and thoughtful analyses of humor and all its attendant phenomena. Indeed, we hope the *Handbook* will serve as a fertile ground for research ideas. Finally, the *Handbook of Humor Research* contains chapters that instruct on the development and enhancement of humor, both in oneself and in others. As a whole, then, these chapters should help the reader to further develop his or her own sense of humor as well as to understand the nature, development, and functions of humor.

Paul E. McGhee
Jeffrey H. Goldstein

Contents

1	Felt Versus Feigned Funniness: Issues in Coding Smiling and Laughing	<i>Marianne LaFrance</i>	1
2	The Role of Arousal and Hemispheric Lateralization in Humor	<i>Paul E. McGhee</i>	13
3	Cognitive Processes in Humor Appreciation	<i>Jerry M. Suls</i>	39
4	Linguistics and Humor	<i>William J. Pepicello and Robert W. Weisberg</i>	59
5	Disparagement Humor	<i>Dolf Zillmann</i>	85
6	Humor Development: Toward a Life Span Approach	<i>Paul E. McGhee</i>	109
7	Humor and Laughter in Social Interaction and Some Implications for Humor Research	<i>Antony J. Chapman</i>	135
8	Sociological Approaches to the Study of Humor	<i>Gary Alan Fine</i>	159
9	Humor Research, Methodology, and Theory in Anthropology	<i>Mahadev L. Apte</i>	183
10	Notes Toward a Field Theory of Humor	<i>Howard R. Pollio</i>	213
	Author Index		231
	Subject Index		245

Contributors

Mahadev L. Apte, Department of Anthropology, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina 27706, U.S.A.

Antony, J. Chapman, Department of Applied Psychology, University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom CF3 7UX.

Gary Alan Fine, Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455, U.S.A.

Marianne LaFrance, Department of Psychology, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts 02167, U.S.A.

Paul E. McGhee, Department of Home and Family Life, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas 79409, U.S.A.

William J. Pepicello, Hahneman Medical College, MS 503, 230 N. Broad Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102, U.S.A.

Howard R. Pollio, Department of Psychology, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee 37996, U.S.A.

Jerry M. Suls, Department of Psychology, State University of New York-Albany, Albany, New York 12222, U.S.A.

Robert W. Weisberg, Department of Psychology, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122, U.S.A.

Dolf Zillmann, Department of Communication, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47401, U.S.A.