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The Tears of a Clown: Understanding Comedy Writers

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Humor is an important part of the human condition. A world without laughter would be a world without a soul. Indeed, comedy serves many key purposes in life – reducing stress, defusing social tensions, revealing the absurdity of human behavior, and generally increasing the quality of life (Martin, 2007). One main vehicle by which funny thoughts are conveyed is through creative writing, which can blunt the edge of potentially controversial topics, evoke feelings of mirth in the reader, and contribute to increasing the audience’s health through laughter.

Comedy writing takes many forms: stand-up comedy writing, sitcom writing, political satire writing as seen on *The Daily Show*, comedy screenwriting, comedy writing for Web sites like *Cracked* or *The Onion*, and literary fiction writing with a humorous bent. It varies from the attempts of a novice short story writer to the aesthetic achievements of Cervantes, Rabelais, and Shakespeare. Indeed, nearly any form of creative writing can be enhanced by humor.

But behind every punch line is a person generating that line. What do we know about *comedy writers*? What are they like? Humor has been the subject of a great deal of speculation and, more recently, a rather impressive array of empirical research (Martin, 2007) on a variety of humor-related topics. For instance, research has examined the link between humor and psychological well-being (Kuiper & Martin, 1998; Martin & Lefcourt, 1983; Ruch, 1997), the link between humor and physical well-being (Cogan, Cogan, Waltz, & McCue, 1987; Lefcourt, Davidson-Katz, & Kueneman, 1990; Martin & Dobbin, 1988; McClelland & Cheriff, 1997), defining characteristics of funny jokes (Attardo, 1997; Koestler, 1964; Raskin, 1985; Wyer & Collins, 1992), social aspects of humor (Apter, 1982; Long & Graesser, 1988; Mulkay, 1988; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001), the psychobiology of humor and laughter (Bachorowski, Smoski, & Owen, 2001; Coulson & Kutas, 2001; Goel & Dolan, 2001; Provine & Yong, 1991), the development of humor in children (Barnett, 1990; Johnson & Mervis, 1997; McGhee, 1980), the evolutionary emergence of the human capacity

for humor (Kaufman, Kozbelt, Bromley, & Miller, 2007; Storey, 2002), and the cognitive processes involved in humor appreciation or comprehension (Eysenck, 1942; Suls, 1972; Vaid, Hull, Heredia, Gerkens, & Martinez, 2003).

Considerably less research has investigated cognitive processes underlying humor *production* and the psychological correlates of individuals who are capable of consistently generating high-quality humor. Such persons range from the class clown in school to internationally famed humor writers and stand-up comedians. How can we understand the nature of humor, particularly its production, as manifested in creative writing and elsewhere? In cognitive and personality terms, how can we characterize humorous individuals – including creative writers? To what extent do findings about funny people in general inform the humorous side of creative writing and creative writers? To address these questions, we characterize different styles of humor production and review the correlates of humor production ability in the general population. We finish with a look at the psychology of the professional comedian as a possible means of understanding humor in creative writing.

#### FLAVORS OF HUMOR AND THEIR RELATION TO PERSONALITY

There is more than one “sense” of humor. Some distinctions about humor are content-based: some people are always joking about sex, some are always joking about ethnic minorities, and some are always making puns. Alternatively, one can distinguish stylistic aspects of humor, ranging from bitter sarcasm to good-natured earthiness to hyper-cerebral dry wit to frivolous levity, and so on. Naturally, such distinctions apply to creative writing and writers as well.

People clearly appear to differ in the type and style of humor that they produce, but what exactly are these different styles of humor? To what extent do individuals agree about them? Are there relations between flavors of humor and other personality characteristics? One could imagine, for instance, that comedy writers who are introverted may use milder language and display more intellectually laden verbal wit, whereas more extraverted individuals may use sexual innuendoes and include more social satire and coarse language in their material.

To determine the correlates of different humor varieties, one must first empirically investigate these flavors in the general population. This task was undertaken by Craik and colleagues, who developed a list of 100 descriptive statements intended to capture the important facets of the domain of everyday humorous conduct (Craik & Ware, 1998): for instance, “Has difficulty controlling the urge to laugh in solemn situations” and “Chuckles appreciatively to flatter others.” Each statement was printed on a separate card, forming the Humorous Behavior Q-sort Deck (HBQD). In a typical study, participants sort the cards into piles along a dimension ranging from most to least characteristic of a target person.

In one study, participants sorted the cards to describe a hypothetical person with a good sense of humor, generally speaking (Craik & Ware, 1998). High correlations among participants' card sorts were obtained. Averaging across all sorts for all participants, researchers could identify aspects of humor that were generally perceived to be positively or negatively associated with the concept of sense of humor, as well as those that were seen as irrelevant. Items having to do with skillful humor ability such as timing and quick wit were positively related to general humor. Items involving scorn, smiling inappropriately, and misinterpreting the intent of others' good-natured kidding were negatively associated with general humor. Finally, items capturing enjoyment of intellectual wit and word play, ethnic jokes, and chuckling appreciatively to flatter others were not associated with the humor concept. These results suggest that the Q-sort method captures how people generally conceptualize a sense of humor.

As a further exploration of the major dimensions underlying different styles of humor, several hundred university students were asked to describe their own humor styles using the HBQD, and the card sorts were then factor analyzed (Craik, Lampert, & Nelson, 1996). Analyses revealed five bipolar factors, corresponding to five humor styles. These were labeled as (1) *socially warm versus cold* ("reflects a tendency to use humor to promote good will and social interaction, in the positive pole, and an avoidance or aloofness regarding mirthful behavior at the negative pole" [Craik & Ware, 1998, p. 73]); (2) *reflective versus boorish* ("describes a knack for discerning the spontaneous humor found in the doings of oneself and other persons and in everyday occurrences, at the positive pole, and an un insightful, insensitive, and competitive use of humor, at the negative pole" [p. 75]); (3) *competent versus inept* ("suggests an active wit and capacity to convey humorous anecdotes effectively, at its positive pole, and a lack of skill and confidence in dealing with humor, at the negative pole" [p. 75]); (4) *earthy versus repressed* ("captures a raucous delight in joking about taboo topics, at the positive pole, and an inhibition regarding macabre, sexual, and scatological modes of humor, at the negative pole" [p. 75]); and (5) *benign versus mean-spirited* ("at its positive pole, points to pleasure in humor-related activities that are mentally stimulating and innocuous and, at its negative pole, focuses on the dark side of humor, in its use to attack and belittle others" [p. 75]). These five factors appear to represent the major implicit dimensions by which people characterize one another's sense of humor.

How do senses of humor relate to personality? Ware (1996) examined the correlations between the five factor scores on the HBQD and the big-five factor model of personality in university students. The results were consistent with expected relations between various personality variables and humor styles. For instance, greater extraversion was associated with more socially warm humor styles, but not with any of the other four humor style factors. Agreeableness was significantly correlated with a socially warm, competent,

and benign humorous style. Conscientiousness was positively correlated with a benign humorous style. Neuroticism was negatively linked to the competent (versus inept) humorous style, and Openness was correlated with a reflective humorous style.

These results inform the relations between personality and humor styles in the general population; to what extent do they inform the sense(s) of humor in individuals who are professional humorists, such as writers or comedians? Some insight into this issue can be gleaned from another study in which university students were asked to sort the HBQD cards to describe the styles of humor of the following famous comedians: Woody Allen, Lucille Ball, Bill Cosby, Whoopi Goldberg, Arsenio Hall, and David Letterman (Craik & Ware, 1998). The researchers then looked at the correlations among the humor styles of the different comedians. For instance, according to the researchers, David Letterman's humorous conduct was judged as similar to that of both Woody Allen and Arsenio Hall, whereas Bill Cosby's humor profile was similar to that of Arsenio Hall. Each of these comedians was also judged to have a distinctive set of characteristics that described his or her humor. As an example, compare the characterizations of Lucille Ball versus Woody Allen, which showed only a rather mild correlation of  $+0.31$ . Whereas Lucille Ball was characterized as enhancing humor impact by employing animated facial expressions, playing the clown, and delighting in the implicit buffoonery of the over-pompous, Woody Allen was characterized as engaging in self-deprecating humor, enjoying intellectually challenging witticism, enjoying word play, and manifesting his humor in the form of clever retorts to others' remarks.

In sum, the Q-sort method shows promise for quantifying the degree of similarity in humor styles between pairs of individuals, such as professional creative writers. In particular, this method could help differentiate the different humor styles of comedy writers across domains and even within domains. Across domains, one could compare the different humor styles of those who, say, write humor blogs versus screenplays. Within domains, one could more finely differentiate the humor style differences among stand-up comedians (for instance, Seinfeld-style humor versus the Sinbad variety) or between screenwriters (such as the Woody Allen type versus the Harold and Kumar type).

To further an understanding of potentially beneficial and detrimental humor styles, Rod Martin and his colleagues (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) developed the Humor Style Questionnaire (HSQ). Its focus is on the function of humor in everyday life. Based on a review of the literature, Martin et al. identified two healthy dimensions (affiliative and self-enhancing humor) and two potentially detrimental dimensions (aggressive and self-defeating humor) that likely characterized everyday humor functions. *Affiliative humor* is frequently displayed by individuals who "tend to say funny things, to tell jokes, and to engage in spontaneous witty banter to amuse

others, to facilitate relationships, and to reduce interpersonal tensions” (p. 53). Thus, affiliative humor is used to enhance one’s relationship with others. *Self-enhancing* humor “involves a generally humorous outlook on life, a tendency to be frequently amused by the incongruities of life, and to maintain a humorous perspective even in the face of stress or adversity” (p. 53). As its name suggests, it is used to enhance oneself. *Aggressive humor* “relates to the use of sarcasm, teasing, ridicule, derision, ‘put-down,’ or disparagement humor” (p. 54). It is used to enhance the self at the expense of others. Finally, *self-defeating* humor “involves excessively self-disparaging humor, attempts to amuse others by doing or saying funny things at one’s own expense as a means of ingratiating oneself or gaining approval, allowing oneself to be the ‘butt’ of others’ humor, and laughing along with others when being ridiculed or disparaged” (p. 54). It is used to enhance relationships at the expense of the self.

Martin and colleagues then created a questionnaire to assess all four dimensions, with eight items pertaining to each dimension. Validating their scale on a sample of 1,195 participants, the researchers factor analyzed the data and found that the four dimensions showed high internal consistencies, ranging from .77 to .81. Interestingly, even though the four dimensions were statistically separable, the two healthy dimensions (affiliative and self-enhancing humor) were significantly correlated with each other, as were the two detrimental dimensions (aggressive and self-defeating humor). They also found a reliable correlation between the self-report data and the same ratings by an individual’s dating partner, suggesting that, even though the scale is a self-report measure, it is reasonably valid and in accordance with others’ perceptions.

Other studies reported by Martin et al. (2003) have investigated the relations between the HSQ and measures of mood, psychological well-being, and social relationships. Results show that the two healthy humor dimensions (affiliative and self-enhancing) were positively related to measures of self-esteem, psychological well-being, and intimacy. Furthermore, self-enhancing humor was positively correlated with social support and optimism, suggesting that an optimistic outlook on life is closely linked to using humor for coping, perspective-taking, and emotion regulation. Both healthy humor dimensions were negatively correlated with anxiety and depression.

On the flip side, aggressive humor was positively correlated with self-report measures of hostility and aggression. Self-defeating humor was positively related to measures of depression, anxiety, hostility, aggression, and optimism and negatively related to self-esteem, psychological well-being, intimacy, and social support. Thus, different flavors of humor appear to be correlated with different aspects of psychological well-being.

These four dimensions have also been investigated in the context of the big-five factor model of personality. As reported by Martin et al. (2003), *extraverted* individuals tend to use more affiliative and self-enhancing humor, whereas those who score high in *neuroticism* show no relationship to affiliative

humor, tend to use self-enhancing humor less, and tend to use aggressive and self-defeating humor more. Those who are more *agreeable* tend to use more self-enhancing humor and less aggressive and self-defeating humor, and those who are *conscientious* also use less aggressive and self-defeating humor. Those who score high in *openness to experience* tend to use affiliative and self-enhancing humor. Some sex differences have been also noted. For example, Crawford and Gressley (1991) found that males tended to score higher on both detrimental humor styles dimensions (aggressive and self-defeating) of the HSQ.

Thus, the seemingly complex and elusive topic of flavors or styles of humor appears to be empirically tractable. This gives some cause for optimism in ultimately understanding something of the psychology of humor and the different manifestations of humor in creative writing and elsewhere.

#### HUMOR PRODUCTION AND CREATIVITY

In the previous section, we saw that individuals clearly differ in their styles of humor and that people largely agree on the dimensions of the differences. However, many of these data were self-report in nature, which is a limitation; moreover, these data have relatively little to say about the quality of humor that is produced. To what extent does the ability to produce high-quality humor – regardless of style – relate to other cognitive characteristics, such as creative ability, intelligence, or a propensity to self-monitor? In the next three sections, we take up these issues, one at a time.

Conceptually, humor production and creativity share many features, such as playfulness, risk taking, and exploiting loose but meaningful associations between concepts (Murdock & Ganim, 1993; Treadwell, 1970; Wicker, 1985; Ziv, 1980). For instance, Murdock and Ganim's (1993) content analysis of definitions and theories of humor suggested that humor and creativity are closely related and that humor production is essentially a subset of creativity. Both humor production and creativity, generally speaking, require novelty combined with value or quality; these are standard aspects of most definitions of creativity (Sternberg & O'Hara, 2000). Applying this notion to humor, it is easy to see that a familiar, tired joke will likely not be seen as funny; however, neither will a new joke that is so bizarre that it fails to communicate or be understood by the audience.

This conceptual relationship between humor and creativity is supported by empirical research using a variety of methodologies. These include creating humorous captions for cartoons or photographs (e.g., Feingold & Mazzella, 1993; Koppel & Sechrest, 1970; Kozbelt & Nishioka, in press; Masten, 1986; Ziv, 1980), TAT (Thematic Apperception Test) cards (Day & Langevin, 1969), generating witty word associations (Hauck & Thomas, 1972) or repartee statements (Feingold & Mazzella, 1993), and making up funny presidential

campaign slogans (Clabby, 1980). In general, such studies have found positive but moderate correlations between these funniness ratings and a variety of putative measures of creativity, including the Remote Associations Test (Mednick, 1962) and divergent thinking tests in which participants are asked to come up with unusual uses of a common object, such as a brick.

Several representative studies in this vein serve to illustrate the typical sorts of results that have been found. For instance, Treadwell (1970) found positive correlations between the quality of humor production and three paper-and-pencil measures of creativity. Smith and White (1965), studying U.S. Air Force personnel, observed a positive association between wit and creativity. Townsend (1982) found that the quantity of humor positively predicted creative thinking in high school students. Fabrizi and Pollio (1987) found correlations between teacher and peer ratings of the humor of 11th graders and these students' originality and elaboration scores on the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (Torrance, 1974). Finally, Ziv (1988) described studies showing that humor training is effective at enhancing creativity in adolescents. Overall, a meta-analysis of such studies has found an average correlation of .34 between humor production ability and creativity (O'Quin & Derks, 1997). These authors concluded that, although creativity and humor production do involve similar mental processes, they are nonetheless distinct, because the shared variance was only about 10%. Thus, whereas funny people are typically creative, individuals can be creative without being funny.

#### HUMOR PRODUCTION AND INTELLIGENCE

Are funny people also more intelligent than other individuals? Research on the link between IQ and divergent thinking in general is mixed. Some researchers have found support for a "threshold effect," in which divergent thinking ability and psychometric intelligence are positively correlated up until an IQ of approximately 120, after which the two constructs are no longer related (Fuchs-Beauchamp, Karnes, & Johnson, 1993; Getzels & Jackson, 1962; Sternberg & O'Hara, 2000). Others have found small to modest correlations across all levels of intellectual abilities (Kim, 2005; Precket, Holling, & Weise, 2006), and others still have found that crystallized intelligence shows a positive and moderate relationship to the generation of creative inventions, whereas fluid intelligence is only significantly correlated with the generation of creative inventions in the high end of the IQ spectrum, but not for those with average IQs (Sligh, Connors, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

Although there is still some doubt on the relationship between IQ and creative potential generally, what is the relationship between IQ and humor production specifically? In an early effort to investigate the relation between intelligence and humor, Feingold (1983) developed tests of humor perceptiveness and humor achievement comprising questions about joke knowledge,

in which participants were required to complete famous jokes (e.g., “Take my wife, \_\_\_\_\_”; Answer: “please”) and identify the names of comedians associated with particular jokes (e.g., “I get no respect” linked with Rodney Dangerfield). Performance on the humor tasks was positively correlated with the WAIS short form measure of IQ (both information and vocabulary subtests were administered). Moreover, individuals with higher IQ scores self-reported greater interest in the films of Mel Brooks and Woody Allen – admittedly, more cerebral humorists than most. In another study, Masten (1986) administered the Vocabulary and Block Design subtests of the WISC-R and found substantial positive correlations between the subjects’ combined score on the two subtests and academic achievement and humor production, measured by ratings given by two judges to cartoon captions.

The measurement of intelligence as a unitary IQ score may, however, be misleading (Horn & Cattell, 1966). A particularly important facet of intelligence for the production of humor in many contexts is verbal intelligence. The relation between humor and this aspect of intelligence has also been investigated. For instance, Feingold and Mazella (1991) developed tests to assess what they referred to as “verbal wittiness”: (1) memory for humor, an aspect of crystallized intelligence, and (2) humor cognition, thought to be comparable to fluid intelligence. They assessed memory by tests of humor information and joke knowledge, whereas they measured humor cognition with tests of humor reasoning and joke comprehension. They found significant correlations between traditional measures of verbal intelligence and tests of humor cognition, whereas memory for humor was not strongly related to intelligence. Humor reasoning was also correlated with performance on the Remote Associates Test, putatively a measure of creative thinking, but one that is apparently more closely related to intelligence than creativity (Andrews, 1975; Mednick & Andrews, 1967). Feingold and Mazzella (1993) suggested that “verbal wittiness” may be viewed as a multidimensional construct consisting of mental ability and social and temperamental factors influencing humor motivation and communication. However, their conceptualization of humor ability was fairly narrow, relating mainly to individuals’ familiarity with well-known jokes and popular comedians.

Even so, studies that have assessed humor using a more open-ended task like cartoon or photo caption creation have also found a relation between humor production ability and verbal intelligence. Feingold and Mazzella (1993) also observed a reliable positive correlation between verbal ability, measured by a multiple-choice test of word knowledge, and the quality of humor production, measured by ratings given by two judges to cartoon captions and repartee statements. Similarly, Koppel and Sechrest (1970), in a study of college fraternity brothers, found a small but reliable correlation between SAT scores and humor production ability, measured by peer ratings of newly devised cartoon captions.

In sum, although the relation between intelligence and humor production ability remains understudied, empirical research to date suggests that people who have knowledge of popular instances of humor, reason well using humor, and can produce funny captions tend to have higher intelligence, especially verbal intelligence. This suggests that professional comedy writers should also possess greater verbal intelligence – a hypothesis that awaits empirical testing.

#### HUMOR PRODUCTION AND SELF-MONITORING

An important aspect of comedy writing is the ability to write jokes appropriate to one's audience. For instance, it would be very poor taste if you were American and told Irish jokes in a bar in Dublin. Thus, it is reasonable to think that funny people may be better at self monitoring – that is, the degree to which one is sensitive to environmental cues of social appropriateness and regulates behavior accordingly (Turner, 1980).

Are funny people really higher self-monitors? Turner (1980) examined the association between humor production ability and self-monitoring. Turner administered the Self-Monitoring scale (Snyder, 1974), a measure of self-control of expressive behavior, self-presentation, and nonverbal affective display guided by situational cues. Humor ability was assessed three ways: (1) Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they considered themselves to be witty and the extent to which their close friends considered them to be witty; (2) participants were given 5 minutes to make up witty captions to go with a series of cartoons in which the original captions had been removed; and (3) participants were seated at a table with 18 miscellaneous objects, like a tennis shoe, a wristwatch, and a bread basket. The participants were instructed to create a 3-minute comedy monologue, describing these objects in a funny way, after being given only 30 seconds to collect their thoughts. In both the second and third methods, judges rated the participants' humorous productions for humorousness.

The results revealed that, as predicted, individuals with higher scores on the Self-Monitoring scale rated themselves as more humorous and produced responses that were rated as significantly more witty on both humor production tests. In a second study, Turner found that high self-monitors were also more likely to offer humorous comments during a group discussion, even without explicit instructions to be funny.

Turner suggested that the effective expression of witty statements may be attributable to the interest of self-monitors in initiating and maintaining social interaction in the early stages of friendship and their ability to control their affective displays – a skill that is essential for the appropriate execution of humor. According to Turner, “in attempting to meet these situational opportunities, the self-monitor, aided by control of his affective display, should develop an ability to be humorous” (p. 169). Research has indeed found a

positive correlation between self-monitoring and a self-report measure of the tendency to initiate humor in social interactions (Bell, McGhee, & Duffey, 1986). Thus, the tendency to self-monitor may be an important contributor to the development of the ability to produce humor. In this view, high-quality humor production may be viewed as a type of social skill (Dewitte & Verguts, 2001). Although research has not directly examined the relation between self-monitoring and humor in the context of professional comedy writers, it is reasonable to assume that the ability to anticipate reactions to the written (or, in stand-up comedy, spoken) word would be a useful skill in the development of humor production ability.

#### THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE PROFESSIONAL HUMORIST

The aforementioned studies on different styles of humor and their relation to personality, creativity, verbal intelligence, and self-monitoring mainly deal with individual differences in aspects of humor in the general population. Although these investigations suggest potential characterizations of professional humorists and humor writers, they have not typically targeted such individuals directly. If professional comedians represent the pinnacle of humor ability, insights into the mind of the comic writer may be gleaned by looking at this specific population. What are professional humorists like? To what extent do professional comedians have particular personality traits, preoccupations, and backgrounds that differ from those of the general population? How and to what extent do they differ from amateur or less effective humor producers?

Two sets of researchers have investigated the psychology of professional comedians. Adopting a psychoanalytic approach, Janus (1975; Janus, Bess, & Janus, 1978) studied the intelligence, educational level, family background, and personality of 69 comedians, all of whom were said to be famous and successful. They collected data using a variety of methods: clinical interviews, accounts of early memories, dreams, handwriting analyses, projective tests, and the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS). After analyzing these sources of data, Janus concluded that comedians tended to be superior in intelligence, but also angry, suspicious, and depressed. In addition, their early lives were frequently characterized by suffering, isolation, and feelings of deprivation; in many cases, the comedians learned to use humor as a defense against anxiety, converting their feelings of suppressed rage from physical to verbal aggression. However, many comedians were also shy, sensitive, and empathic individuals whose comedic success was apparently due partly to an ability to accurately perceive the fears and needs of their audiences (cf. Turner, 1980). However, the rather dubious assessment methods – especially from the point of view of a more scientifically grounded psychology – and the lack of a control group make it difficult to know whether these characteristics are unique to comedians, are shared by noncomic entertainers, or extend to creative writers more generally.

Fisher and Fisher (1981) conducted a somewhat better controlled interview study of professional humor producers. They assessed the personality, motivations, and childhood recollections of 43 professional comedians (including 15 circus clowns) and scoured published biographical and autobiographical accounts of 40 comedians and clowns, from Woody Allen and Jackie Gleason to Jerry Lewis and Beatrice Lillie. They also administered the Rorschach inkblot test and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) to identify themes and preoccupations in the thoughts of the comedians. As a control, they included a sample of 41 professional actors. They also interviewed amateur humor producers, consisting of nonprofessional individuals who indicated on a questionnaire that they initiate humor frequently, along with children who were brought to them for treatment for behavior problems but who were frequently described by teachers and parents as demonstrating class clown qualities.

Fisher and Fisher found that professional comedians did not differ from actors in depression or overall psychological health, but did uncover several differences between the groups. The majority of the comics came from lower socioeconomic strata. Quite early, they displayed a talent for being funny, often acting as the class clown in school. Many in the sample entered comedy professionally through their interest in music. Compared to the actors, the professional comedians had to take on considerably more responsibility at an early age. They were also more likely than the actors to describe their fathers in highly positive terms and were more inclined to refer to their mothers as disciplinarians, aggressive critics, non-nurturing, and non-maternal. This finding was also discovered in a sample of amateur humor producers: the more that college students considered themselves to be comics, the more they saw their mothers as controlling and the fathers as softer in their child-rearing practices.

To corroborate these patterns, Fisher and Fisher also administered the Rorschach inkblot test to the parents of children who displayed class clown attributes in school. They found that the mothers of such children had significantly less symbiosis imagery, indicating that they displayed less of an interest and inclination in forming close attachments to other people. Additionally, they found that the fathers displayed more of a preoccupation with passive images or fantasies than a control group of fathers, suggesting that the fathers of these children were drawn to a passive stance.

Fisher and Fisher related these findings to those of Heilbrun (1973), who found that people who are raised by controlling, non-nurturing mothers tend to develop schizophrenia. Heilbrun found two types of men (Heilbrun's sample consisted only of men) who are raised by a non-nurturing mother. The "closed style" type was characterized by defenses such as isolation from social interactions and depression, whereas the "open style" type was characterized as extraverted and alert to ways of winning social approval. Also of note,

Heilbrun's open-adapters were considered to be "broad scanners" of the environment, looking for cues of what people expect of them, again in line with Turner (1980). Fisher and Fisher related this open style personality to the comics in their sample and argued that the comic's style of relating to people may partly mirror their early adventures with their mothers. They become experts in "reading" their mothers and then later learn how to "scan the world in a very sensitive way, looking for contradictions to decode and reconcile, hunting out cues as to how to win approval and support" (p. 207).

Fisher and Fisher also noticed that the professional comics displayed significantly more themes of contrasts and opposites. Among these contrasts, professional comics displayed a fascination with themes of good versus evil in inkblot fantasies. Fisher and Fisher linked this fascination to the comics' early life of having to maneuver between their fathers' call to goodness and their mothers' accusations of wrongdoing. They hypothesize that this situation may catalyze comics' obsession with themes of good versus evil and motivate much of their comedy.

What are some of the other motivations of the professional comedian? Fisher and Fisher hypothesized that comedians learn, through early life experiences, that life is absurd. They then spend their lives telling jokes to help them understand the absurdity of their own position. They note that much of humor involves spotting and giving meaning to ambiguities and that comedians are obsessed with instability, perhaps because of experiences with their mothers. They hypothesized that this focus on inconstancy may represent an effort at mastery and that comedians seek to adapt to a threat that was of painful intensity in their early childhood.

The researchers also noted that professional comics frequently seemed to put up a screen by retreating behind a barrage of jokes, as suggested in interviews and inkblot responses, in which they conjured up images about concealment. Compared to actors, they were more likely to refer to people wearing masks, creatures hiding, and objects that cannot be distinguished properly because they are obscured by darkness.

Fisher and Fisher also found that the majority of professional comedians in their sample conjured up imagery of smallness. The comics tended to have lower self-esteem and to say bad things about themselves, which the researchers linked to concerns of social relativism. They argue that the comedians' focus on their smallness may be a result of the reduced significance they felt as children and that much comic behavior is aimed at reducing the discrepancy of smallness between themselves and others. A main motivation may be to defend their basic goodness. Rorschach inkblot responses showed that many professional comedians would first depict a threatening creature as bad or ugly and then deny that the creature had negative qualities and portray it as good. "There is no question but that size strategies pervade the comic's codes and metaphors. . . . He is forever reducing or magnifying. He never reports things

in their immediate proportions” (p. 216). According to Fisher and Fisher, declaring that badness is a meaningless concept may be an important form of self-defense for the comic. They also note that the low self-esteem and feeling of smallness existent among the professional comics may actually set the comic on a unique path: “We would emphasize . . . the possibility that in some paradoxical way these negative self-feelings provide a durable base for shaping one’s identity and going off on an independent trajectory” (p. 200).

How do comics view themselves? Fisher and Fisher found that they viewed themselves as healers. Many of the professional comedians expressed a dedication to being altruistic. They see their central duty as that of making people feel that events are funny. At the same time, the professional comics also viewed humor as a technique for controlling and dominating the audience. Indeed, Fisher and Fisher were impressed at how this view of the comic as a fool-priest is consistent with scholarly reviews of the history of the clown, the court jester, and the fool. They also noted how the contemporary comic serves a similar function as the court jester in earlier times. On the one hand, the comic presents him- or herself as the silly fellow who jokes, amuses, and entertains. On the other hand, the comic initiates opposing currents, uncovering truths that many people usually try to banish from awareness.

Overall, Fisher and Fisher found that this array of common patterns displayed among the professional comedians held across age, sex, national prominence, and ethnicity. They also found their patterns to hold across stage of career – professional humorists just starting out displayed the same patterns as those who had been in the business for years. However, Fisher and Fisher did find a significant difference between professional and amateur comics. College students who described themselves as funny did not produce the same pattern of inkblot fantasies as the professional comedians. The amateur comic scores (that is, the extent to which they initiated humor) were not significantly correlated with the number of good-bad images, “not bad” themes, descriptions depicting objects as small, themes of concealment, and images of hostility. In contrast, amateur producers (regardless of the extent to which they produced humor) were typified not by frequent references to things being small, but instead focused on bigness. Also, the amateur comics described themselves as not inclined to submit to working under pressure and were found to not push themselves to make deadlines. They also were found to score high on impulsivity and invested a great deal in observing others and anticipating their actions. This suggests that it might be particularly useful to study professional humor producers independent of college students, as “there is a unique pattern of qualities in the professional comic, who has dedicated his whole life to being the funny one, that we have yet to see duplicated” (p. 203).

Taken together, this research suggests that humor in professional comedians serves as a defense or coping mechanism in dealing with their early family experiences and the burden of having to take care of themselves. Comics may

be motivated to make people laugh in order to gain acceptance and to reveal the absurdity of life to make sense of their own lives.

There is reason to believe that these results can also apply to comedy writers. As Runco (see Chapter 11) notes, writing is often a form of problem solving. Many writers are motivated to write to solve problems in their lives. Comedy writers may use comedy in their writing to help them understand themselves and the world and to do so in a fashion that controls the reader's emotions.

#### CONCLUSION

So what are comedy writers like? Stylistically, professional humorists and other funny individuals span a variety of flavors of humor. There is some evidence that they are more creative and verbally intelligent and adept at self-monitoring. Those who tell jokes for money tend to have had to overcome adversities in life and seem to use humor as a coping mechanism.

Although this short review has covered a few basic issues on the nature of humor and its relation to comedy writers, much research remains to be done. Indeed, even in the areas we have discussed and offered some tentative conclusions, there is a dearth of sound empirical studies and solid theoretical models – and for other issues in the study of humor, not even that. For instance, one ambitious objective would be to relate what is known about the psychology of humor to understanding the literary giants who have historically expanded our collective sense of what is funny – or somewhat less ambitiously, just to understand how domain-specific expert knowledge on writing enters into the process of humor. How do professional humorists differ from others in more cognitive aspects (rather than factors of personal background, motivation, coping, and so forth, which have been studied to date)? What is the time scale of generating humorous ideas and then developing them, in the context of creative humor writing? How accurately can professional humorists gauge the likely impact of their jokes? What theoretical models make the most sense of humor writing? Finally, in focusing here on the comedy *writer*, we have neglected the comedy *reader* and the processes by which he or she makes sense (and nonsense) of humorous writing. Researchers in general have only just started to study how humor emerges in creative writing, but with the use of new methodologies and an appreciation of the different styles of humor, we hope that the scientific study of humor production will not be a laughing matter.

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