

to “undo” negative emotions. However, humor is not an effective means in every disorder. One study showed that humor served as moderator of stress for depressive symptomatology but not anxiety.

### Conclusion

Studies examining humor in psychiatric disorders have elucidated the affective and cognitive components that are essential in understanding and appreciating humor. Both cognitive executive functioning (e.g., verbal fluency, set shifting) and the ability to mentalize dramatically impact the ability to understand and appreciate humor. Emotional components, such as mood states and traits, which affect the susceptibility to humor, and negative processing bias, which impacts humor appreciation, are also of great importance. This brief overview demonstrates the complexity involved in the humor processes that enable positive humor experiences and responses, and how humor can be affected in several disorders because of cognitive or affective subcomponents that are disrupted.

Andrea C. Samson

*See also* Brain, Neuropsychology of Humor; Cognitive Aspects; Gelotophobia; Humor Styles; Incongruity and Resolution; Mirth

### Further Readings

- Bozikas, V., Kosmidis, M., Giannakou, M., Anezoulaki, D., Patrikis, P., Fokas, K., & Karavatos, A. (2007). Humor appreciation deficits in schizophrenia: The relevance of basic neurocognitive functioning. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 194*, 325–331.
- Martin, R. A. (2007). Humor and mental health. In R. A. Martin (Ed.), *The psychology of humor: An integrative approach* (pp. 269–308). London, UK: Academic Press.
- Samson, A. C. (2013). Humor(lessness) elucidated—Sense of humor in individuals with autism spectrum disorders: Review and introduction. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research, 26*(3), 391–409.
- Samson, A. C., Lackner, H. K., Weiss, E. M., & Papousek, I. (2012). Perception of other people’s mental states affects humor in social anxiety. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry, 43*, 625–631.
- Ueckermann, J., Channon, S., Lehmkaemper, C., Abdel-Hamid, M., Vollmoeller, W., & Daum, I. (2008). Executive function, mentalizing and humor in major depression. *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society, 14*, 55–62.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE

When Mark Twain said, “Humor is tragedy plus time,” he intuitively understood how distance from an aversive event can facilitate humor. Mel Brooks also acknowledged the role of distance when he famously quipped, “Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die.” Indeed, experiencing something as close or far away—what scientists call psychological distance—is an important factor in humor appreciation. This entry discusses how distance helps or harms humor and offers a theoretical account of its role in humor appreciation.

### Sometimes Distance Helps Humor

In some cases, psychological distance makes things funnier. This is especially true for highly aversive events. There are four ways that something can seem close or far away, and each can help transform tragedy into comedy: temporal distance, social distance, spatial or physical distance, and hypothetical distance.

**Temporal distance** (e.g., a year is more distant than a day): War stories, like getting lost in the woods or getting hit by a car, are not funny at the time, but are often amusing years later. Similarly, jokes often fail if attempted too soon after a tragedy, but Academy Award-winning movies like *Life Is Beautiful* and *Inglorious Bastards* illustrate that even Nazi genocide can be funny if enough time has passed.

**Social distance** (e.g., a stranger is more distant than a friend): Disparaging jokes are more amusing to people who are not the target of the joke (e.g., sexist jokes are funnier to men). Similarly, disgusting, painful, and upsetting behaviors are funnier when they afflict someone else. For example, laboratory subjects who watched a film clip of a woman eating feces are more amused when they take the perspective of an outside observer rather than the woman’s perspective.

**Spatial or physical distance** (e.g., a mile is more distant than a foot): It is easier to joke about disasters that happen on the other side of the globe than about disasters in one’s backyard. Similarly, highly disturbing photographs are more amusing to laboratory participants when the photographs were presented from a distant visual perspective.

*Hypothetical distance* (e.g., an imagined event is more distant than a real event): Cartoons, like *South Park* and *Looney Tunes*, demonstrate how extreme violence and biting satire is often funny when it is not real. Similarly, laboratory subjects find highly disturbing photographs funnier when the images have ostensibly been altered, or Photoshopped, than when the photos are believed to be real.

### Sometimes Distance Hurts Humor

Although less intuitive, there are cases in which closeness appears to facilitate perceptions of humor, as exemplified in popular expressions like “you had to be there” and “it’s funny because it’s true.” It is interesting that most of the examples in which distance reduces humor involve events that are far less aversive than the examples discussed in the previous section. For example, speaking in an unusual accent might prompt laughter at the time, but later recounting how the accent was used may be less funny.

Recent research illustrates that although tragedies are more humorous when temporally, socially, hypothetically, or spatially distant, mild mishaps are more humorous when psychologically close. For example, a Facebook post about accidentally donating \$2,000 is funnier when the person losing the money is a stranger rather than a friend, but a milder mishap, a post about accidentally donating \$50, is funnier when the person losing the money is a friend rather than a stranger. And whereas a tragedy such as being hit by a car is funnier if it happened 5 years ago than if it happened yesterday, a mild mishap such as stumbling on a curb is funnier if it happened yesterday than if it happened 5 years ago.

### Sometimes Distance Hurts, Then Helps, and Then Hurts Humor

To complicate matters further, even though a tragedy can become humorous with distance, too much distance may inhibit humor appreciation. Although people often quip “too soon” in response to a joke about a tragedy immediately after the tragedy, that same joke can be deemed “too late” at a distant point in time. For example, following the untimely demise of a celebrity, a string of jokes may be immediately disseminated, but the telling and retelling of the jokes typically fade with time (e.g., people rarely joke about Michael Jackson’s death now). These occurrences suggest that the effect of distance is dynamic, with three categories: a “too close” category when something seems disturbing or offensive, a “just

right” category when something seems funny, and a “too far” category when something seems boring.

### Why Does Distance Influence Perceptions of Humor?

Humor theories generally have a difficult time explaining why distance sometimes helps and sometimes hurts humor. One theory offers a plausible explanation for the different effects that distance has on humor perception. It does so by taking into account the way that psychological distance helps reduce the threat of aversive events. The benign violation theory, which proposes that humor occurs when something that seems wrong, threatening, or unsettling (i.e., a violation) also seems okay or acceptable (i.e., benign), suggests that either too much or too little threat can inhibit humor perception. Some threat is necessary in order to perceive a violation, but too much threat may make it difficult to perceive a violation as benign.

This theory explains why distance typically makes tragedies more humorous: Distance reduces the threat associated with a severe tragedy, making it easier to see the violation as benign. It also explains why distance typically makes mishaps less humorous: Distance completely eliminates the threat in a mild mishap, making it difficult to perceive a violation.

Finally, the benign violation theory explains why joking about a tragic event can change from “too soon,” to “just right,” to “too late.” At first there is too much threat associated with the event to find jokes about it benign. However, increasing distance reduces threat, initially making it easier to perceive the violations as benign but later making it difficult to perceive any violation at all.

Overall, the benign violation theory and research findings on the role of psychological distance on humor appreciation illustrate how there is a sweet spot in comedy. It is important to get the right mix between how bad something is and how distant it is in order to make people laugh.

A. Peter McGraw, Lawrence E. Williams,  
and Caleb Warren

See also Appreciation of Humor; Benign Violation Theory; Humor Theories

### Further Readings

Hemenover, S. H., & Schimmack, U. (2007). That’s disgusting! . . . , but very amusing: Mixed feelings of

- amusement and disgust. *Cognition and Emotion*, 21, 1102–1113.
- McGraw, A. P., & Warren, C. (2010). Benign violations: Making immoral behavior funny. *Psychological Science*, 21, 1141–1149.
- McGraw, A. P., Warren, C., Williams, L., & Leonard, B., (2012). Too close for comfort, or too far to care? Finding humor in distant tragedies and close mishaps. *Psychological Science*, 25, 1215–1223.
- Veatch, T. C. (1998). A theory of humor. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 11, 161–215.
- Wolff, H. A., Smith, C. E., & Murray, H. A. (1934). The psychology of humor. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 28, 341–365.

---

## PSYCHOLOGY

---

Often defined as the scientific study of human behavior, psychology is a very broad discipline with a number of subfields. Psychologists employ quantitative experimental and correlational research methods to study thinking, feeling, and social behavior. Psychologists have always played a leading role in academic humor research. Many interesting questions about humor may be addressed by each of the subdisciplines of psychology, including cognitive (e.g., What are the mental processes involved in “getting a joke?”), social (e.g., What role does humor play in interpersonal relationships?), biological (e.g., What parts of the brain are involved in the enjoyment of humor?), personality (e.g., How does a sense of humor correlate with other personality traits?), developmental (e.g., What do children find funny at different stages of development?), and clinical (e.g., Does a sense of humor contribute to better mental health?).

### Cognitive Psychology

Cognitive psychology focuses on the study of mental processes involved in thinking, feeling, and behaving. Much of the research on cognitive processes in humor comprehension has been based on incongruity theories, which suggest that humor involves the bringing together of two normally incompatible ideas, concepts, or situations in a surprising or unexpected manner. Psychologists have employed a number of research methods to investigate these theories. In some studies, ordinary jokes were modified to manipulate the degree of incongruity and resolution that they contain, and researchers then observed the

effects of these manipulations on funniness ratings given by participants. Other researchers have used more artificial types of stimuli to quantify incongruity in terms of the discrepancy between items, such as the semantic distance between pairs of words, or weight differences in a weight judgment paradigm. More recently, researchers have used semantic priming techniques to explore schema activation during the processing of humorous materials. This research has generally supported the importance of incongruity in humor, although more study is needed to fully understand the cognitive processes involved.

In addition, researchers in psycholinguistics, a subfield of cognitive psychology, have investigated humorous uses of everyday language, such as irony and sarcasm. They have sought to understand, for example, how people recognize that these sorts of speech are intended to be interpreted as humor rather than to be taken literally. Studies indicate that this is a complex process, requiring the hearer to combine information from the social context as well as linguistic factors to arrive at an interpretation of the intended meaning.

Researchers have also studied the ways humor may influence other cognitive processes. Experiments have provided considerable evidence that exposure to humor produces an increase in creativity, cognitive flexibility, and problem solving, and the findings suggest that these effects are due to the increased positive emotion associated with humor rather than to cognitive factors. Other research has shown positive effects of humor on memory, largely due to the increased attention and rehearsal given to humorous material.

### Social Psychology

Social psychology is concerned with the study of how people influence one another's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. One topic of investigation has been the various purposes for which people use humor in their everyday social interactions. Because humorous messages are inherently ambiguous, they can often be used to communicate messages indirectly in a way that allows both the speaker and the listener to save face. For example, playful teasing can be used to convey mild criticism in a socially acceptable manner. Humor can also be used to enhance group identity and cohesiveness, to enforce social norms, and to establish status.

Social psychologists are also interested in the role of humor in social perception and interpersonal