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The Economics and Psychology of Humour

According to the latest research evidence, it happens about 18 times a day. Humans really enjoy it. People in lonely hearts columns refer to this thing regularly; indeed it has its own acronym, GSOH. I am talking, of course, about humour and joking.

Morecambe and Wise was a perfect example. Fawlty Towers was another. Have you noticed how there are few good comedies on television these days? Almost all the best material is old. I think that something has gone wrong with the supply of humour. There is still innate demand for it, but the ability to write comedy appears to be becoming more scarce.

Humour is incredibly interesting. We now know quite a lot about its underlying psychology.

The standard view in the textbooks is that humour is primarily about incongruity. In other words, human beings find it funny when they see things that do not interlock naturally – things that do not belong together. The evidence is that this ability does not develop until age 6 or 7. Thus, although young children also like and engage in humour, initially it is less sophisticated, and can centre on fear or nonsense, as in peek-a-boo games. For reasons not currently understood, at age 6 it is mainly boys rather than girls who tell jokes.

Quite often, it is believed, there has to be an element where someone's esteem is diminished, and thus implicitly the listener's own esteem is raised. This can revolve around an ethnic grouping, like Irish jokes, or around particular occupational groups.

How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? One, but the bulb has to want to change.

ORiley was on trial for armed robbery. The jury came out and announced that the verdict was Not Guilty. Dat's great, says ORiley to the judge. Does this mean I get to keep the money, your honour?

Plenty of humour is about sex, of course. Again this is often about incongruity.

How was your visit to the nudist camp? OK. The first three days were the hardest.

An old lady had two pet monkeys. They passed away, so she took them in a taxi to be stuffed. Would you like them mounted, Madam?, says the taxidermist. No thanks, just holding hands.

Freud had views on humour, unsurprisingly. He thought it was an outlet for repressed feelings about sexuality and dominance.

Personalities matter. We know that tough-minded individuals like sexual jokes; liberal ones prefer nonsense jokes; those with conservative attitudes, interestingly, enjoy incongruity jokes. People who laugh a lot at humour tend disproportionately to be high in extraversion and self-esteem.

Humour and health are linked. Joking acts as a buffer against mental stress. Using something called (yes, really) the Humour Coping Scale, the evidence is that those with higher scores are less upset in experimental settings by unpleasant films. Moreover, in a test in which people had to plunge a hand into cold water, the increase in stress and blood pressure from doing so was less among people with high humour-coping levels.

Why does humour exist? One possibility is that it reduces individual mental strain, so that it gave an evolutionary advantage. In other words, there were tribes of people in pre-history who had no sense of humour, but they no longer bother us today. Another, and more likely explanation, is that humour enhances a society's cohesion. Certainly jokes are a social phenomenon.

So, there is a good reason why the rare hit comedies are well-rewarded. Humour deserves its high price.

Deep down, we all just want to be Friends.