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**The Importance of Humor Research**

A serious non-serious research topic.

Published on September 14, 2011 by [Peter McGraw, Ph.D.](http://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/peter-mcgraw-phd) in [The Humor Code](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-humor-code)

[Humor](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/humor) has been around for as long as there has been humanity -- and considering that chimps and other primates [laugh](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/laughter), humor has likely been around even longer than that. In comparison, psychological research on humor is just getting cracking.

Sure, [Freud](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/freud) took a stab at it, but he didn't have the scientific tools to get the job done. We've been fortunate to have the International Society for Humor Studies working on the topic since late 80's. Yet despite several decades of determined effort on the part of this small cadre of humor researchers, the field is still fighting for respectability. The 2,000-page Handbook of Social Psychology mentions humor exactly once - the same number of times as it mentions cliques, Puerto Ricans, and the Gurin Index (whatever that is). Martin Seligman, the father of the [positive psychology](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/positive-psychology) [movement](http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/) even deems a good sense of humor to be one of 24 characteristics associated with well-being, yet the hugely influential field of [happiness](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/happiness) research has largely ignored the topic.

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"Humor research is seen as a non-serious topic," says [Rod Martin](http://psychology.uwo.ca/faculty/martin_res.htm), author of The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach, one of the preeminent books in the field. "Scientists always want to make sure their work is respectable, and to be doing research on humor is seen as not respectable enough. People think there are a lot of other, really pressing problems we have to try to solve."

But when you think about it, humor may be one of the most important topics of all.

**The ubiquity of humor**

Humor is everywhere, for example. Laughter is one of the first things you do as a newborn, and, if all goes well, it will be one of the last things you do before you die. Try going through a day without so much as a chuckle, and you'll find that it's downright impossible. And those chuckles occur much more frequently than other commonly researched emotions like regret, pride, and [shame](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/embarrassment).

People typically approach pleasure and avoid pain. Hence, the pursuit of humor influences many of our daily decisions - the websites, books and magazines we read, the television shows and movies we watch, and the people we decide to talk to (or not). And because humor is valued by consumers, businesses are constantly creating funny advertisements (e.g., Superbowl ads) and funny products (e.g., blockbuster comedic films) in order to get our attention and entertain us. The psychological study of humor may lead to an improvement in humor, in the same way that developing a better [understanding](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy) of language comprehension has led to an improvement in language instruction.

**Humor is (typically) good**

By examining humor's antecedents, we will also better understand (and harness) humor's many benefits.

Humor appears to help people's psychological and physical well-being - for example, helping folks cope with [stress](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/stress) and adversity. Humor even seems to help people grieve: [Dacher Keltner](http://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/dacher-keltner) and colleagues found that people who spontaneously experienced amusement and laughter when discussing a deceased spouse showed better emotional adjustment in the years following the spouse's death.

But humor has physical benefits, too. Laughter - especially a hearty laugh - has been shown to benefit your circulation, lungs and muscles (especially those around the belly area). Humor also helps people deal with pain and physical adversity. Hollywood even made a movie, [Patch Adams](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0129290/), about the benefits of humor in clinical settings.

Let's not forget humor's social benefits. Not surprisingly, funny people receive positive attention and admiration. Your ability to create and appreciate humor also influences who wants to date, mate and befriend you. Most studies find humor to be a highly desirable attribute, which explains why the acronym GSOH (good sense of humor) finds its way into personal and [online dating](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/social-networking) posts. And according to the work of Barb Frederickson and others who examine the benefits of [positivity](http://www.positivityblog.com/), humor is an excellent way to boost your creative prowess. Finally, humor smoothes potentially awkward social and cultural interactions. Think about how much easier an uncomfortable situation can be when you joke about it.

Consistent with historical accounts of the use of humor as a weapon of subversion, research being conducted in the [Humor Research Lab](http://humorresearchlab.org) (aka HuRL) finds that consumers can effectively use humor to criticize brands. The release of Dave Carroll's wildly popular, "[United Breaks Guitars](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo)," on YouTube coincided with a 10% decrease in United stock price, and has since garnered ten million plus views.

**Not getting the joke**

Finally, researching humor is important because it will help us understand why it doesn't always work. While successful humor leads to myriad benefits, failed humor can be downright destructive, from bruised egos and broken friendships to million-dollar [marketing](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/consumer-behavior) mistakes (think Groupon's failed Super Bowl commercial). If we can better figure out what makes things funny, we will end up far better equipped to handle it when we don't get the joke.

In sum, when done well, humor can have a significant positive effect on your life. Isn't it time we use a little more academic rigor to figure out how it works? By developing a better understanding of humor we believe we can then suggest ways that people can live better lives - from helping them cope with pain and stress to encouraging people to use humor to criticize brands that have done them wrong.