

## Laughter: Nature or Culture?

Moira Smith

Indiana University

*molsmith@indiana.edu*

Paper delivered at the 2008 meeting of the International Society for Humor Research,  
Alcala de Henares, Spain.

## What's the Problem?

Sitting at my desk after midnight a few days ago, with the blank pages of this paper staring me accusingly in the face, I asked myself the question that I always ask when trying to write a promised conference paper: what was I thinking??? Why did I promise to do this paper??? Here's why: because I am dissatisfied with the way that we tend to think about laughter in humor studies.

Man is *homo ridens*, the laughing animal. Laughter is universally human—everybody who is human, laughs. It is thought to have arisen about 7 million years ago<sup>1</sup>. It is natural and innate—babies begin to laugh before they can speak.<sup>2</sup>

I do not quarrel with any of this. The problem I have is that humor scholars tend to put too much stress on the naturalness of laughter. Take for example Robert Provine's description: "Laughter," he says, "is an instinctive, contagious, stereotyped, unconsciously controlled, social play vocalization"<sup>3</sup> He's describing something that is primitive, atavistic, outside of culture and bypassing rationality. Provine has been criticized for using a flawed methodology and for over-stressing the stereotyped nature of laughter, and rightly so; but he does express a widespread tendency in the way we understand laughter.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> (Niemi in Ruch and Ekman 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Even deaf-blind thalidomide babies laugh, although they are unable to learn laughter from others. (Ruch and Ekman 2001)426).

<sup>3</sup>(Ruch and Ekman 2001).

<sup>4</sup>(Ruch 2002) – review of Provine's book *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*; (Martin 2007):156-59).

In previous papers I have suggested that there is more culture in laughter than we tend to think, referring among other things to the existence of widespread guidelines for when and how people should laugh. These norms are both explicit and culture-specific. Today, I will go further down the cultural path and try to persuade you that there are also unselfconscious norms that strongly affect physical laughter. Laughter comes in different styles that vary cross-culturally. That is, people from different cultures laugh differently.

### *Faked versus Felt Laughter*

We know, of course, that laughter can be and is subject to control, that it lies between the physical and the cultural.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it seems to me that there is an overall tendency in humor research to stress the spontaneity of laughter. Put simply, the usual assumption is that spontaneous laughter is the real McCoy, and the more it appears to be controlled or voluntary, the more it departs from the paradigm case. In a masterful review of the expressive pattern of laughter, Ruch and Ekman use a most felicitous phrase that illustrates this perspective. Laughter, they suggest, is either “faked or felt.” I quote: “In addition to laughing spontaneously (emotional laughter), we can laugh voluntarily or on command (contrived or fake laughter. . . . These forms of utterances differ in degree of volitional control and—inversely—emotionality” (427). Later they say, “we cannot voluntarily produce emotional laughter” (428).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> (Pfeifer 1994:170).

<sup>6</sup> (Mulkay 1988):93-107 (critiques understanding of laughter as physical reflex); Ruch and Ekman 2001).

The contrast between faked and felt laughter falls along these lines: on one hand, felt laughter is spontaneous and spontaneous laughter is felt; on the other hand, faked laughter is voluntary, and voluntary laughter is fake. I suggest that only one half of these pairings is true: spontaneous laughter is felt, but that does not mean that all felt laughter is spontaneous. Similarly, faked laughter is controlled, but not all controlled laughter is fake. I don't mean to pick on these authors; the distinction they draw is not unique to them.

The properties we attribute to laughter and amusement are associated with emotions of all kinds. Emotions are considered to be “triggered by external events that are beyond the volition of the person experiencing them;” they are contrasted with thought; they are contagious, universal, and beyond the capacity of language to describe them. In *How Emotions Work*, Jack Katz notes the paradox that emotions seem to be both something we do and something that happens to us. In the case of humor, there are times when people “do laughter,” and other times when they are “done by humor.” Being done by humor is his somewhat awkward way of talking about the situation that ethnomethodologists call “flooding out.” Sometimes laughter is something we do—the product of active agency—, but at other times laughter takes over us.<sup>7</sup>

What bothers me about the language we use to talk about laughter is that it tends to eliminate the agency of the people who are laughing. We say that an internal state—amusement, mirth, or the feeling of nonseriousness—*produces* or *triggers* laughter. Or, we say that laughter *expresses* amusement. John Morreall, for example, called

---

<sup>7</sup> (Chafe 2007):66-68; see also (Katz 1999). Emotions are forcible reminders of our corporeal nature; they are experienced bodily. The paradox between emotions as something we do and something we experience mirror the fundamental question, are we in our bodies, or are we constituted by our bodies?

laughter “the natural expression of amusement.” Language betrays us here. The same thing happens when we say laughter is *contagious*. Contagion is a metaphor from disease; a useful way of describing the way that laughter appears to spread in social situations. But the other side of the metaphor, the reference to disease, bleeds through: when we say laughter is contagious it appears to be something that *happens to* us the way that illness happens to us, instead of being something we do.<sup>8</sup>

## Anthropologists and Laughter

Several detailed and painstaking descriptions of laughter exist.<sup>9</sup> These studies show that laughter is extremely variable between individuals and from one occasion to the next, and that it seems to be individually patterned—individuals each have their own “laughter signature”.<sup>10</sup> However, I have found no *cross-cultural* studies of the physical properties of laughter. Traditionally, for cross-cultural comparative approaches we can rely on the anthropologists. Yet the ethnographic record contains very few descriptions of laughter. Most often, all the ethnography says is that the people laughed at this or that, and there is no account of what their laughter was like.

Why this paucity of ethnographic data about laughter? I can think of several reasons, most of which I don’t have time to go into here, but the most relevant one is this: since anthropologists, like the rest of us, assume that laughter is universal, they do not

---

<sup>8</sup> (Morreall 1983):59).; see also Chafe 2007; Martin 2007; for a critique of the contagion metaphor, see (Hempelmann 2007)). Cf (Holland 2005):42-43: the belly laugh *escapes* us, it defies rationality; (Douglas 1999):167; (Douglas 1975): a joke is an attack on control; its expression in laughter mirrors this out of control characteristic).

<sup>9</sup> (For an excellent review see Ruch and Ekman 2001; Martin 2007; Chafe 2007).

<sup>10</sup> (Edmonson 1987):25-26; quoted in Chafe 2007:38f).

look for cultural differences. Detailed descriptions only appear when they encounter styles of laughter that is markedly different from what they consider normal.<sup>11</sup>

## **Bushman laughter**

This is what happened to Colin Turnbull in his fieldwork among the “Pygmies” of southern Africa (now usually referred to as Bushmen or Mbuti). Turnbull noticed that the Mbuti had a distinctive way of expressing amusement:

When Pygmies laugh, they hold onto one another as if for support, slap their sides, snap their fingers, and go through all manner of physical contortions. If something strikes them as particularly funny they will even roll on the ground. . . The Pygmy . . . likes to laugh until tears come to his eyes and he is too weak to stand. He then sits down or lies on the ground and laughs still louder<sup>12</sup>(1962:56).

I submit to you that if we saw adults laughing in this way in our own society, we would not simply assume that they were highly amused. Instead, we would probably think them a little crazy. In any case, we would be judging the Bushman style of laughter in terms of our own preferred cultural laughter style.

---

<sup>11</sup> cf (Seiler, 2005 #2510):234-37). Ethnographers simply report laughter rather than describing it; moreover, they rarely go on to examine what the laughter means or to ask why an audience laughs. It is as if the meaning of laughter is obvious. In part, this attitude stems from the belief that laughter is universal. Further, laughter itself discourages analysis. When we are overcome by laughter, it seems we are unable to observe others or to question or analyze what is going on (Katz 1999):121; (Chafe 2007):23). Laughter thus helps construct the illusion of shared collective experience; we assume that when we laugh with others we are all laughing for the same reason. Accordingly, when ethnographers see others laughing, it is easy to assume that we know what is going on here; no analysis or explanation is necessary. Similarly, expressions like “non humorous laughter” assume what needs to be proved; they are based on a priori definitions of what humor is; therefore laughter cannot be used to indicate the presence of humor.

<sup>12</sup> (Turnbull 1962).

## Tamil laughter

Another example of a cultural laughter style comes from south India. In her book *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*<sup>13</sup> Susan Seizer describes the audience laughter during a slapstick comedy scene between a husband and wife:

“Everyone (apart from me) laughed,” she writes. “While it seemed at times uncontrollable and uncontrolled, coming in big breaking guffaws, it was nevertheless contextually normal and regular: laughing out loud was the proper response. From where I sat, as usual among the women in the audience, I was surprised to see that rather than the usual shy giggles, women too laughed openly at the ... scene” (268). Video of scene at <http://stigmasofthetamilstage.scrippscollege.edu>.

Although it seemed to be uncontrolled, Seizer finds that the Tamil audience’s laughter was actually very regular. It was “quite regularly timed to the stage action;” moreover, the onstage musicians matched the rhythm of the laughter with percussive beats. “The sound track helps keep the audience on track with the action,” she notes: “Pow laugh clang laugh whoosh laugh slam laugh” (268).

Gail Jefferson made a similar discovery about laughter when she transcribed a recording of the telling of a mildly dirty joke by some American speakers. Although the laughter looked to be out of control, and although participants said things like,

---

<sup>13</sup> (Seizer 2005)234-37; 267-68).

“She can’t help but laugh,” a detailed transcription of the event showed that the laughter was deliberately inserted into the utterance.<sup>14</sup> In other words, even when people appeared to be “done by” humor, they are doing laughter.

## Finally, Samoan laughter

More than 130 thousand New Zealanders identify as Samoans, making them the largest and most visible Pacific Island ethnic group in New Zealand. Their visibility is increased by the fact that the most of them live in Auckland and because Samoan language, culture, and family ties remain strong for most people in this group. As a New Zealander and reformed Aucklander, I grew up around Samoans and hearing Samoan laughter. I think that it has a markedly different style from Anglo American (or Pakeha New Zealand) laughter: even when the laughers are men, the Samoan style tends to be distinctly hi-pitched, almost falsetto.

You do not have to take my word for it. I will show you two minutes’ worth of video clips that illustrate the Samoan laughter style. The clips are all taken from *Samoan Wedding*, a 2006 comedy feature film made in New Zealand and shot in Auckland. The film was written, directed, and acted by an Auckland comedy troupe named The Laughing Samoans.<sup>15</sup>

[FILM CLIPS: 2-3 minutes]

---

<sup>14</sup> (Jefferson 1985).

<sup>15</sup> (Graham et al. 2006).



4 [My Girl Exists] :17 sec

3B [Stanley]: :06

Magic Stick: :12

Gotta Girlfriend: :26

Laugh Bro: :15

In every case, we see four male Samoan actors playing Samoan males joking together and at each other. You might disqualify these clips as evidence for culturally patterned laughter because the laughers are only acting; accordingly, all of their laughter is “fake.” And you would be right. Nevertheless, the actors’ goal is to mimic what Samoans consider everyday natural male laughter, and as I mentioned before their representation matches the sound of Samoan laughter that I have personally experienced.

## **Implications**

The existence of culturally patterned laughter styles has implications for the question of whether laughter is something we do or something that overcomes us. It complicates the tendency to contrast felt laughter with faked laughter. If Samoans really do laugh differently than others, then their laughter is learned behavior. If it is learned, then it must be voluntary—even when the laughers are rolling on the floor and it appears that they are not doing laughter but being done by humor. Going further, if we can accept that laughter may be both voluntary and genuine at the same time, then we can restore agency to those who laugh.

When I hear talk of human behavior being instinctive, I get suspicious. The more that people insist that something is universal and natural, the more likely it is that the thing in question is culture-specific. Each culture draws the boundaries between nature and culture differently. Moreover, in modern western thought, to call something universal is a way of validating it. When we say laughter is universal and natural, we give it a hefty dose of importance and positive value (and humor and laughter, so often trivialized, can use all the validation they can get).

I am not trying to say that spontaneous laughter does not exist. However, I do want to widen the scope for the relevance of voluntary laughter and to insist that agency is relevant in both laughter and humor. In the end, the question of whether or not we do humor or are merely overcome by it does not admit simple answers.

## References Cited

- Chafe, Wallace. 2007. *The importance of not being earnest: the feeling behind laughter and humor*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Douglas, Mary. 1975. Jokes. In *Implicit meanings: essays in anthropology*, edited by M. Douglas. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- . 1999. Do dogs laugh? In *Implicit meanings: essays in anthropology*, edited by M. Douglas. London: Routledge
- Edmonson, Munro S. 1987. Notes on laughter. *Anthropological Linguistics* 29 (1):23-34.

- Graham, Chris, John Barnett, Chole Smith, James Griffin, Oscar Kightley, Iaheto Ah Hi, Robbie Magasiva, Shimpal Lelisi, Teuila Blakely, South Pacific Pictures (Firm), New Zealand Film Commission., NZ On Air, Village SkyCity Cinemas (Firm), and Magnolia Home Entertainment (Firm). 2006. Samoan wedding. Los Angeles, CA: Magnolia Home Entertainment.
- Hempelmann, Christian F. 2007. The laughter of the 1962 Tanganyika 'Laughter epidemic'. *Humor* 20 (1):49-71.
- Holland, Michael. 2005. Belly laughs. In *The anatomy of laughter*, edited by T. Garfitt, E. McMorran and J. Taylor. London: Legenda.
- Jefferson, Gail Sacks. 1985. An exercise in the transcription and analysis of laughter. In *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by T. van Dijk. London: Academic Press.
- Katz, Jack. 1999. *How emotions work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Martin, Rod A. 2007. *The Psychology of humor: an integrative approach*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic Press.
- Morreall, John. 1983. *Taking laughter seriously*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mulkay, Michael. 1988. *On humour: its nature and its place in modern society*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Ruch, Willibald. 2002. Review of Robert R. Provine. *Laughter: a scientific approach* (New York: Viking, 2000). *Humor* 15 (3):335-344.
- Ruch, Willibald, and Paul Ekman. 2001. The expressive pattern of laughter. In *Emotion, qualia and consciousness*, edited by A. Kaszniak. Tokyo: World Scientific.

Seizer, Susan. 2005. *Stigmas of the Tamil stage: An ethnography of special drama artists in south India*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Turnbull, Colin M. 1962. *The forest people*. New York: Simon and Schuster.