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Be Relevant, Careful, and Appropriate: Scary Advice on the Use of Humor to the Novice Public Speaker

Judythe A. Isserlis

Humor is considered to be "as universal as language. It is found in the gentle teasing of a friend, in subtle quips understandable to a few," and in "bitter satire." Humor includes delicate forms of wit and much broader bits of satire. Even in the most serious of times, humor and laughter can ease the tension (Mudd & Sillars, 1991, p. 369). "It creates a bond of friendship between you and the listeners [in a public speaking context], and it puts them into a receptive, trusting mood" (Gregory, 1990, p. 335). It is for this reason that humor is an important factor in public speaking. It has the power to influence the audience by amplifying and clarifying a point, and by enhancing the image of the speaker. But as DeVito (1990) states, "humor is an important element in some public speeches, [but] it is not a necessary element, nor is it always desirable" (p. 367).

Because the subject of humor is so pervasive in all communication, it would appear logical that humor would be treated in texts dealing with the principles and practices of public speaking. The use of content analyses of communication texts to examine a specific topic in communication is not new. A recent study (Pelias, 1989), which was conducted on 25 contemporary public speaking texts with a specific focus on the treatment of communication apprehension, found several differences and a number of commonalties among the texts studied. The author concluded that "relatively little attention

[was] given to CA in many of the basic public speaking text-books" (p. 49). A prior study (Bryant, Gula, & Zillmann, 1980) was specifically concerned with the use of humor in communication textbooks. The researchers were concerned, however, with humorous segments in the texts themselves, and did not analyze the advice given to students on the use of humor. To date, there are no studies which systematically examine the treatment of humor in contemporary public speaking texts. As the target audience for this type of text is typically the student speaker, it would seem logical that we examine the information regarding humor in public speaking to determine the utility of this information.

METHOD

Twenty-seven textbooks were chosen for inclusion in this study. All are recent editions of popular texts (see Table 1). These texts had been advertised by their publishers in the 1987-1991 annual programs for the Speech Communication Association conferences of those years. Some represented later editions of popular favorites, such as Principles and Types of Speech Communication by Gronbeck, McKerrow, Ehninger, & Monroe (1990) and Public Speaking: Content and Communication, by Mudd and Sillars (1991), while others were texts in their first edition, such as Public Speaking in a Free Society by Tedford (1991) and Andrews' (1987) Public Speaking: Principles into Practice. Categories of information concerning humor were coded to represent the various treatments of humor which appeared in the 27 texts. Although there were discussions of varying length, treatment, and topic in the sample, the categories did appear to be finite.

Table 1 List of Textbooks Examined

- 1. Andrews, J. (1987). Public speaking: Principles into Practice.
- 2. Ayres, J., & Miller, J. (1990). Effective public speaking (3rd ed.)
- 3. Barrett, H. (1987). Practical use of speech communication.
- 4. Beebe, S.A., & Beebe, S.J. (1991). Public speaking: An audience-centered approach.
- 5. Capp, G.R., Capp, C.C., & Capp, R.C. (1990). Basic oral communication (5th ed.).
- 6. Carlile, C.S., & Daniel, A.V. (1991). Project text for public speaking (6th ed.).
- 7. DeVito, J.A. (1990). The elements of public speaking (4th ed.).
- 8. Fletcher, L. (1990). How to design and deliver a speech (4th ed.).
- 9. Gregory, H. (1990). Public speaking for college and career (2nd ed.).
- Gronbeck, B.E., McKerrow, R.E., Ehninger, D., & Monroe, E. (1990). Principles and types of speech communication (11th ed.).
- 11. Hanna, M.S., & Gibson, J.W. (1989). Public speaking for personal success (2nd ed.).
- 12. Hunt, G. (1987). Public speaking (2nd ed.).
- 13. Lucas, S.E. (1989). The art of public speaking (3rd ed.).
- 14. Metcalfe, S. (1991). Building a speech.
- 15. Mudd, C.S., & Sillars, M.O. (1991). Public speaking: Content and communication (6th ed.).
- 16. Nelson, P.E., & Pearson, J.C. (1990). Confidence in public speaking. (4th ed.).
- 17. Osborn, M., & Osborn, S. (1988). Public speaking.
- 18. Powers, J.H. (1987). Public speaking: The lively art.
- 19. Prentice, D., & Payne, J. (1989). Public speaking today!
- 20. Ross, R.S. (1989). The speech making system (8th ed.).

- 21. Samovar, L.A., & mills, J. (1989). Oral communication: Message and response (7th ed.).
- 22. Sprague, J., & Stuart, D. (1988). The speaker's handbook (2nd ed.).
- 23. Tedford, T.C. (1991). Public speaking in a free society.
- 24. Verdeber, R. (1988). The challenge of effective speaking (7th ed.).
- 25. Whitman, R.F., & Foster, T.J. (1987). Speaking in public (2nd ed.).
- 26. Wilson, J.F., Arnold, C.C., & Wertheimer, M.M. (1990). Public speaking as a liberal art (6th ed.).
- 27. Wood, J. (1988). Speaking effectively.

RESULTS

In examining the 27 texts specifically for their treatment of humor, it appeared that 11 categories emerged:

- 1. Theories of humor
- 2. Rationale for the use of humor
- 3. Guidelines for the use of humor
- 4. Sources of humor
- 5. Humor as a factor of attention
- 6. Specific techniques to employ
- 7. Injunctions on the use of humor
- 8. Who should use humor
- 9. The use of self-deprecating humor
- 10. How to deliver the humor
- 11. Humorous speaking.

Only three texts (Andrews, 1987; Barrett, 1987; Lucas, 1989) contained no reference to humor in any area of speech preparation. All other texts contained at least one mention of humor, and the levels of analysis ranged from brief descriptions of several paragraphs to entire sections or chapters. The

following texts referred to humor without giving specific examples: Verdeber (1988), DeVito (1991), Powers (1987). All other texts in the sample provided examples for the concepts of humor.

THEORIES OF HUMOR

Only one text, Speaking in Public by Whitman and Foster (1987) included a section on the theories of humor. The authors note that "humanity has long enjoyed the pleasurable state produced by humor and for an almost equally long time has attempted to state reasons why certain circumstances are humorous" (p. 320). The seven categories "offered" by Goldstein and McGhee (cited in Whitman & Foster, 1987) in The Psychology of Humor provide the basis for this discussion of humor. This treatment contained descriptions of superiority, biological, incongruity, release and relief theories, surprise, ambivalence, and configuration theories (pp. 320-323).

RATIONALE FOR THE USE OF HUMOR IN PUBLIC SPEAKING

Most texts attempt to explain the rationale for the use of humor in speeches; these explanations serve to persuade the novice speaker that the use of humor could accomplish important goals for the speaker both relating to speaker credibility and to the audience's perception of the content. Ayres and Miller (1990) suggest that audiences in general enjoy wit and humor (p. 69). Powers (1987) notes that "humor is especially effective in reducing barriers between a speaker and an audience and in binding the individual listeners together into a collective audience" (p. 136). Beebe and Beebe (1991) assert that the use of humor in introductions can create goodwill (p. 206). Gronbeck et al. (1990), Hunt (1987), Metcalfe (1991), and Osborn and Osborn (1988) state that the use of humor by a speaker successfully creates rapport with the audience.

Sprague and Stuart (1988), citing Gruner, suggest that "an infusion of humor into any speech can break tension, [also proposed by Carlile & Daniel, 1991] deflate opponents. enhance the speaker's image [a point also made by Verdeber. 1988; Ross, 1989; and Tedford, 1991] and make points memorable" (p. 286). Indeed, humor can even provide "a relaxation [italics mine] from tension and decrease listener fatigue" (Avres & Miller, 1990, p. 69). Metcalf (1991) states that humor can establish a "positive climate" for the speaker and encourage audience receptivity, as "a humorous anecdote can frequently make a point more successfully than a long theoretical statement" (p. 144). He also notes that a humorous conclusion can leave the audience in a positive frame of mind, both toward the subject and the speaker (a point also made by Verdeber [1988]). Carlile and Daniel (1991) suggest, as do a number of authors (Beebe & Beebe, 1991; Gronbeck et al., 1990; Hanna & Gibson, 1989) that humor serves as an attention-getting technique, for "when people laugh, they attend to the source that provoked the laughter" (p. 132). The use of humor also increases understanding for the listeners (Nelson & Pearson, 1990; Samovar & Mills, 1989) and functions as supporting material, "helping the speaker to emphasize a point, crystallize an idea, or rebut an opposing argument" (DeVito, 1990, p. 367). Ross (1989) makes the point that humor increases the retention of ideas in the listeners (p. 249). Osborn and Osborn (1988) recommend the use of humor in public speaking as "humor teaches all of us not to take things too seriously" (p. 419). Prentice and Payne (1989) state that humor can even assist in setting a serious tone to the speech, as when speakers contrast a serious message with "the lightness of a joke" (p. 286). For Fletcher (1990), humor, even in serious speeches. "makes the speaker sound more human, and thereby helps listeners believe and accept the speaker's ideas" (p. 359).

Some authors are careful to note, however, that the use of humor is not always appropriate to the speech situation

(DeVito, 1990; Gregory, 1990; Hanna & Gibson, 1989; Mudd & Sillars, 1991) and the subject (Beebe & Beebe, 1991).

GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF HUMOR IN PUBLIC SPEAKING

In addition to the rationale for utilizing humor in a speech, a second category of advice regarding humor appears to be how to include humor in a speech. This advice ranges from the theoretical and abstract to the technical. Most of the authors recommend that humor be appropriate (DeVito, 1990, p. 368; Hanna & Gibson, 1989, p. 162; Sprague & Stuart, 1988), relevant to the topic (DeVito, 1990, p. 368; Fletcher, 1990, p. 366; Metcalfe, 1991, p. 144; Tedford, 1991, p. 210; Shitman & Foster, 1987, p. 325), brief, and spontaneous (DeVito, 1990, p. 368). Tastefulness is another criterion for the effective use of humor, and is advocated by DeVito (1990), Ayres and Miller (1990), Gronbeck et al. (1990), and Prentice and Payne (1990). (The issue of tastefulness will be discussed more fully later in this essay.) Capp, Capp, & Capp (1990) suggest that "the humor should be original, fresh, and entertaining" (p. 124).

SOURCES OF HUMOR

A number of the texts refer to the general categories of humor which can serve as resources for speakers. Hanna and Gibson (1989) refer to these categories as: (a) exaggeration, (b) surprise, (c) absurd, (d) human problems, and (e) playful ridicule (p. 163). The principal sources of humor, as viewed by Carlile and Daniel (1991), are seen as (a) overstatement or exaggeration, (b) understatement, (c) puns or plays on words, (d) irony and sarcasm, (e) unexpected twists, (f) anecdotes, (g) malapropisms, and (h) quips or wit (pp. 133-136). Sprague and Stuart (1988) provide extensive treatment of what they call "the devices of humor," namely, (a) exaggeration, (b) un-

derstatement, (c) irony, (d) anticlimax, and (e) word play (pp. 287-289), with similar categories noted by Ayres and Miller (1990); understatement, puns or plays on words, irony, unexpected twists, and incongruity (pp. 311-312) and by Mudd and Sillars (1991) who add the component of "burlesque" to the familiar categories of overstatement, understatement, irony, unexpected turns, and plays on words (pp. 370-371). It should be noted that the treatments for these categories or sources of humor vary from a brief statement of the categories (Capp et al., 1990; Hanna & Gibson, 1989; Wilson, Arnold, & Wertheimer, 1990) to several pages of descriptions and examples (Carlile & Daniel, 1991; Mudd & Sillars, 1991; Prentice & Payne, 1989; Sprague & Stuart, 1988), Again, a brief treatment of the sources of humor is given by Wilson et al. (1990) in the identification of humor as a "factor of attention." Humor here is identified as the "introduction of exaggeration, incongruity, irony, word play, unexpected turns of thought or phrase" (p. 96).

HUMOR AS A FACTOR OF ATTENTION

As mentioned previously, several authors include a discussion of humor in the context of "other factors of attention." Wilson et al. (1990) provide nine factors of attention of which humor is the last, and note that the first eight (including vitality, specificity, and novelty) are always appropriate, while humor may sometimes be out of place (pp. 94-96). A similar but somewhat shorter treatment is included by Gronbeck et al. (1990), Ross (1989), and Ayres and Miller (1990).

SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES TO EMPLOY

In order to accomplish the objectives for the use of humor, a number of specific suggestions are given. Powers (1987) refers to the *humorous story* which may be made up for the occasion or based on fact; its punch line attempts to make the

audience laugh (p. 136). Several authors also recommend that the speaker use other kinds of humor besides jokes (Gregory, 1990; Nelson & Pearson, 1990). The humor does not have to be hilarious, merely an "attractive" method to bring the information to the audience (Nelson & Pearson, 1990, p. 263). Wood (1988) notes that "much effective humor occurs spontaneously in the speaking situation" (p. 113) which suggests that the humor can effectively be generated by the speaker's careful analysis of the speaking context.

In stressing the importance of creativity, Sprague and Stuart (1988) assert that it is important to have "the ability to spot a potentially humorous idea in your speech and to develop it into a genuinely funny moment" (p. 286). Osborn and Osborn (1988) refer to the speaker's creating "inside humor" — the humor which arises out of the immediate situation (p. 420). DeVito (1990) advises that "one obvious way to secure humorous materials is to create it yourself out of your own experiences and your observations of others and of the world" (also suggested by Sprague & Stuart, 1988) although the humorous materials of others can also be adapted (pp. 367-368). Sarcasm was also mentioned by one text as a useful humorous technique (Samovar & Mills, 1989, p. 168). Fletcher (1990) provides some suggestions for adapting set materials explaining such techniques as changing the "peg" of the joke (the subject, the character, or the setting) and building "bridges" (providing a transition from the joke to the topic at hand and vice versa) (pp. 362-363). Metcalfe (1991) suggests the use of anecdotes, even if the speaker does not feel entirely comfortable with humor (p. 145). Gregory (1990) specifically recommends that the novice speaker not use jokes, as jokes do not always tie in well with the rest of the speech, are difficult to tell. and may be familiar to the audience. He does recommend, however, the use of a "mildly amusing story, quotation or observation" (p. 335). The ability to tell the joke or story well is seen as very important (Gronbeck et al., 1990). but it is still possible to relax the audience with a joke or witticism that fails to get the expected response (Wood, 1988, p. 113). Other specific techniques advocated are the use of confusion and an unexpected twist of language (Hanna & Gibson, 1989, pp. 162-163).

INJUNCTIONS ON THE USE OF HUMOR

Along with the recommendations for the specific techniques employed to create humor, nearly all the texts contained general and specific items to avoid. In general, most of the texts cautioned speakers to avoid "bad taste" and specifically off-color stories (Ayers & Miller, 1990; DeVito, 1990; Gronbeck et al., 1990; Prentice & Payne, 1989; Ross, 1989; Wood, 1988), irrelevance (Gronbeck et al., 1990; Metcalfe. 1991: Mudd & Sillars. 1991), humor that might be offensive to any audience member (Gregory, 1990; Prentice & Payne. 1989), private jokes (Prentice & Payne, 1989), impersonal and stale humor (Capp et al., 1990), and humor used as a substitute for legitimate argument (Samovar & Mills, 1989). Most of the texts do state that the use of humor contains some risks, but several do caution that the speaker must prepare for either a positive or a negative response by not going off the track (Metcalfe, 1991, p. 144).

WHO SHOULD USE HUMOR IN A SPEECH

This advice leads to the issue of who can successfully use humor in a speech. The most extensive treatment of this subject was by Sprague and Stuart (1988) who declare that "everyone is funny. There are differences in terms of frequency, intensity, subtlety, and point of view," but hearty laughs are not the only measure of the humor's effectiveness. The authors then provide several paragraphs demonstrating how speakers can examine their own humor (p. 24b). Wood (1988) notes that "more than most skills in public speaking, the ability to use humor is probably a natural talent that

people have in varying degrees," a point reinforced by DeVito (1990). For speakers without a great deal of talent, a "set" joke is not often effective, but others types of humor may be utilized successfully (p. 113). Mudd and Sillars (1991) imply that an aptitude for humor is required in order to use it, while most other authors take the point of view that humor can be utilized by most speakers (Gronbeck et al., 1990; Hanna & Gibson, 1989; Metcalfe, 1991; Verdeber, 1988). Verdeber also makes the point that to be "riotously funny" is not necessary and can even be detrimental (p. 165).

ON THE USE OF SELF-DEPRECATING HUMOR

A number of the texts identify self-deprecation as a particularly effective humorous technique (Gregory, 1990; Hanna & Gibson, 1989; Hunt, 1987; Mudd & Sillars, 1991; Whitman & Foster, 1987; Wood, 1988) although the research findings concerning its effectiveness have been mixed (Ross, 1989, p. 250). Fletcher (1990) seems to disagree, as he recommends that the speaker not put down his or her own jokes or use self-deprecating humor. He explains that comedians such as Joan Rivers and Rodney Dangerfield who use self-deprecating humor are able to do so because they have "built their images over years of performing" (p. 365).

HOW TO DELIVER THE HUMOR

There appears to be another facet of humor that gets mixed reviews from several authors. Gregory (1990) advocates delivering the humorous line or joke without showing the audience that the speaker expects laughter (p. 336). Fletcher (1990), on the other hand, advises the speaker to "let your audience know you expect them to laugh" or the humorous intention will be lost (p. 364). Ayres and Miller (1990) seem to disagree by stating that a joke should not be previewed as

hilarious in case it is not perceived so by the audience (p. 313). In a discussion concerning speeches to entertain, Prentice and Payne (1989) suggest that the speaker be sure to "pause for laughs" as comic timing is crucial to the proper reception of the humor (p. 395). Whitman and Foster (1987) advise the speaker to exercise control by not laughing until the audience does (p. 325). It should be noted, however, that most of the other authors do not include such practical suggestions in their discussions of humor.

HUMOROUS SPEAKING

A number of the texts focus their treatments of humor on particular types of speeches. Prentice and Payne (1989) devote most of their discussion of humor to an analysis of the "speech to entertain" and a category of the speech to entertain known as "the humorous speech." Hunt (1987) notes that four principles which guide speeches to entertain are: (a) being relevant. (b) keeping a sense of humor. (c) staying in a good mood. and (d) keeping the speech good-natured to ensure that no one in the audience will be offended (pp. 308-309). Metcalfe (1991) explains the after-dinner speech and toast in an entire chapter devoted to special occasion speeches. He notes that the after-dinner speech should contain only one theme in order not to appear to be a series of disconnected jokes and stories (p. 329), and urges after-dinner speakers to adopt their own style and to learn smooth delivery and timing. He then defines what is meant by a "toast" and provides some practical suggestions (p. 330).

Another rather extensive treatment of humorous speeches is provided by Carlile and Daniel (1991) in a chapter which explains the purpose of these speeches, as well as providing sample topics and suggestions for preparation. Creativity and originality are recommended, as well as the incorporation of all the sources of humor (pp. 139-140). Mudd and Sillars (1991) also include a brief description of the speech to

entertain in a chapter entitled "Speaking on Special Occasions." Fletcherin (1990) includes an entire chapter "Entertaining," and provides a separate treatment for humorous techniques to be included in informative and persuasive presentations as well as a three-page section describing after-dinner speeches, travel talks, roasts, and theme talks. Avres and Miller (1990) devote several pages to a discussion of humorous speaking, and provide advice on subject selection and organization, the use of tact, and delivery style. They also discussed the humorous speech. Capp et al. (1990) also include a three-page treatment of the entertaining speech, giving advice on the purpose, arrangement of ideas, and delivery. Specific suggestions are to (a) seek novel subjects and original ideas. (b) adopt plans to the audience and the occasion, (c) avoid heavy subject matter and complicated arrangement, (d) avoid a string of unrelated jokes, and (e) use a variety of types of humor.

CONCLUSION

As has been previously noted, the content analysis of 27 public speaking texts yielded 11 categories of information regarding the topic of humor in public speaking. The texts varied in length of treatment provided from a few lines (Nelson & Pearson, 1990; Powers, 1987; Samovar & Mills. 1989; Wilson et al., 1990) to much more elaborate treatments of chapter sections (Ayres & Miller, 1990; Beebe & Beebe, 1991; Capp et al., 1990; Devito, 1990; Gregory, 1990; Gronbeck et al., 1990; Hanna & Gibson, 1989; Hunt, 1987; Metcalfe, 1991; Mudd & Sillars, 1991; Osborn & Osborn. 1988; Ross, 1989; Tedford, 1991; Verdeber, 1988; Whitman & Foster, 1987; Wood, 1988) to entire chapters dealing with humor (Carlile & Daniel, 1991; Fletcher, 1990; Prentice & Payne, 1989; Sprague & Stuart, 1988). It should be noted that with the exception of Fletcher (1990), the chapters concerned with humor were primarily on the speech to entertain.

Most of the treatments of humor appeared to concern humor in the abstract, and this included the theories of humor, guidelines for the use of humor, rationale for the use of humor, and humor as a factor of attention. The greatest amount of attention to humor occurred in discussions of the speech to entertain in the context of humorous speaking. Discussions containing the sources of humor, such as understatement, overstatement, irony, and the like, were somewhat less abstract, and usually contained examples. Shorter segments were generally devoted to specific techniques that should be employed, how to deliver the humor, what to avoid, and whether or not to use self-deprecating humor. With the exception of Fletcher (1990), little attempt was made to develop specific techniques of humor in the novice speaker. Sprague and Stuart (1988), while providing specifics in the sources of humor, do not recommend that the speaker analyze his or her own humor in order to determine which of these categories would be most appropriate.

In analyzing the sum of the various treatments (see Table 2), it appears that the advice on the use of humor taken as a composite elicits much information. For the novice speaker, however, there seems to be an emphasis on principles rather than techniques. It would seem logical that a new speaker, after digesting all these texts, would have a sense of whether or not to incorporate humor in a particular speech, and could identify some types of humor recognized by the various texts, but still might not have an idea how to be creative, appropriate, relevant, and tasteful, or how to go about finding an example of contrast or understatement. Fletcher's (1990) playful treatment of adapting jokes to individual speakers' situations is an exception to this rule

What is necessary, I believe, is to supplement the useful standards for the use of humor supplied in most of the textbooks with a specific section or chapter on techniques. Would it be possible for students to generate their own puns and plays on words? Is it feasible for students to learn the art of

humorous story-telling in the form of anecdotes? Can the student of public speaking learn specific methods of referring to the occasion? If one believes, as Sprague and Stuart (1988) have suggested, that everyone is funny, to one degree or another (p. 24b), then it may be possible to cultivate this humorous sense by opening the keys to the public speaker's creativity. The 27 texts present, with a variety of descriptions, insightful information regarding the topic of humor. The specifics, at least in this sample of texts, have yet to be generated for the novice student of public speaking.

Table 2 A Summary of the Treatment of Humor in 27 Contemporary Public Speaking Texts

- 1. Theories of Humor: Hanna and Gibson.
- Rationale for the Use of Humor: Ayres and Miller; Beebe and Beebe; Arlile and Daniel; De Vito; Fletcher; Gregory; Gronbeck et al.; Hanna and Gibson; Mudd and Sillars; Nelson and Pearson; Osborn and Osborn; Prentice and Payne; Ross; Samover and Mills; Verdeber.
- 3. Guidelines for the Use of Humor: Ayres and Miller; Capp et al.; Hanna and Gibson; Metcalfe; Prentice and Payne; Sprague and Stuart: Tedford: Whitman and Foster.
- 4. Sources of Humor: Ayres and Miller; Capp et al.; Carlile and Daniel; Hanna and Gibson; Mudd and Sillars; Prentice and Payne; Sprague and Stuart; Wilson et al.
- 5. Humor as a Factor of Attention; Ayres and Miller; Gronbeck et al.; Ross; Wilson et al.
- Specific Techniques to Employ: Metcalfe; Nelson and Pearson;
 Osborn and Osborn; Powers; Wood.
- 7. Injunctions on the Use of Humor: Ayres and Miller; Capp et al.; DeVito; Gregory; Gronbeck et al.; Metcalfe; Mudd and Sillars; Prentice and Payne; Whiteman and Foster; Wood.

- Who Should use Humor in a Speech: DeVito; Gronbeck et al.;
 Hanna and Gibson; Metcalfe; Sprague and Stuart; Verdeber;
 Wood.
- 9. On the Use of Self-Deprecating Humor: Fletcher; Gregory; Hanna and Gibson; Hunt; Mudd and Sillars; Ross; Whitman and Foster; Wood.
- 10. How to Deliver the Humor: Ayres and Miller; Fletcher; Gregory; Prentice and Payne; Whitman and Foster.
- 11. Humorous Speaking: Ayres and Miller; Capp et al.; Carlile and Daniel; Hunt; Metcalfe; Mudd and Sillars; Prentice and Payne.

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