

This is the author's accepted manuscript of an article published in the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (2014), ed. Salvatore Attardo. Sage Publications.

## Ethnicity and Humor

Simon Weaver

Ethnicity, in its various forms, is a common subject for humor. Joking and humor about ethnicity have appeared in many societies at numerous points in history. This entry discusses ethnicity and humor by outlining three relationships that have developed between them. The relationships between ethnicity and humor highlight some of the ways in which humor can circulate inside a society, but they also show how laughter is transmitted between societies. In recent times, the ethics of ethnic humor have been the subject of much debate and some of these issues will be discussed as well.

The entry begins with a definition of ethnicity and then presents the three key relationships one by one. All of these relationships are theoretical abstractions and there are contestations, ambiguities, and complexities involved in each that will be mentioned. First, humor that is created about an ethnic group by those outside of the group is examined. This first category is best described as *ethnic joking*. A description of this humor is developed through a discussion of Irish jokes and stereotyping. Although these jokes are dependent on the negative stereotyping of the Irish, there are some complexities and ambiguities entwined with this joking that will be discussed. After that, the entry outlines the humor that an ethnic group can develop and use from inside of its group boundaries. This second relationship between ethnicity and humor is elaborated via self-deprecating Jewish humor, which is also in many ways a polysemic form of humor. Lastly, a final relationship between ethnicity and humor is discussed, which is humor directed outward from an ethnic group. This is humor and ridicule that develops from inside of an ethnic minority group and is directed toward the majority. The relationship is expanded via the concept of ethnic resistance and the image of the Native American trickster.

### Definitions of Ethnicity and Humor

Definitions of ethnicity vary, yet all refer to the classification of a group of people who self-identify as a people. Most definitions include the possibility of a shared lineage, ancestry or heritage, and history, which can be expressed through shared culture or cultural practices, territorial claims, language, dialect, and religion. Aspects of lifestyle and culture help distinguish ethnicities at an everyday level and there may be shared cuisine, dress, and forms of entertainment, leisure, or media. In addition, there are also important bodily elements to an ethnicity and so groups may have shared mannerisms. All of these components help construct a self-identifying group. The factors that make up an ethnic group or ethnicity will differ from one group or individual to the next and so not all examples will be constructed with all of the characteristics that can constitute ethnicity.

Concepts such as nationalism and race significantly overlap with definitions of ethnicity, although there are significant distinctions. Identifications of ethnicity are usually not imposed by a dominant group that exists outside of the ethnic group. Rather, they are the product of an amount of in-group self-determination. This helps separate ethnicity from race, which is usually described as a biological, hierarchical, or political category that is imposed on a group of people. An ethnicity will always be

defined in relation to other ethnic, national, or supernational groups and ethnic groups often find themselves inside other national spaces, with territorial claims or connections to a diaspora, as significant elements of their identity. All of these elements of ethnicity can become the subject of humor and joking. Due to the close connection that exists between racial, racist, and ethnic discourse, there are often overlaps between definitions of ethnic, race, and racist humor.

The relationships between ethnicity and humor can be examined through existing theories of humor. It is generally understood that three historical theories have dominated thinking on humor. These are the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief theory. The superiority theory—the idea that through humor we seek to gain a sense of superiority over the butt of the joke—can be employed to show some of the implicit power relations involved in joking about ethnicities and ethnic groups on the periphery of society. This approach brings with it a strong critique of humor. It can also be used to explain the self-assertion of the trickster. Incongruity theory—the idea that humor is created by putting things together in an unusual and unexpected way—can be viewed as a method for explaining why it is that other ethnicities may be seen as humorous, as ethnic difference is explained as creating incongruity. Relief theory seeks to explain the psychological release of tension that humor offers. This is an idea that elaborates on the release of intergroup tension through humor. Many have used this to explain the function of ethnic jokes as a form of tension release.

### **Stereotypes, Ethnicity, and Humor**

The first relationship between ethnicity and humor to be discussed is humor that is directed from a majority or central metropolitan ethnic group toward a minority or peripheral group. This relationship is frequently entangled with issues of acceptability and offense, which is aggravated because of its dependence on the articulation of stereotype. These jokes are labeled *ethnic jokes* in humor research and are told about national, ethnic, or migrant groups who may have in the past, or even in the present, been referred to as “ethnics” with a prerogative inflection by a majority group. Irish jokes are a good example. In some societies, stupidity and canny jokes are told about different groups. In a number of societies, the Irish represent a group that has been given the characteristic of stupidity. In others, such as jokes about Newfoundlanders in Eastern Canada, it is populations that have a large Irish ancestry that are the butt of the joke. In this case all Newfoundlanders are made fun of even though not everyone is Irish and some people have mixed heritage.

Such jokes both rely on and create stereotypes. The presence of stereotyping can be detected if the ethnic group that is the butt of the stupidity joke is replaced by a different ethnic group and the joke fails to make any sense. If the joke fails to make sense, it is not applicable to all groups and thus connected to a stereotype of a particular group. Although not all participants involved in the joking need believe that a stereotype is true, a stereotype of the group has to exist in society for the joke to work. This is also the case for other characteristics given in joking in addition to stupidity, such as canniness, aggression, and cowardice. For example, the case of jokes about cunning or canny Jews is a clear example of a pejorative, and in certain social contexts, dangerous, ethnic stereotype that appears in humor.

In relation to Irish jokes, Laura Salisbury (2002) explains how humor has historically been essential for the stereotyping of the Irish. The relationship between humor and ethnicity has seen the English and British joke about the Irish as stupid alongside a colonial relationship that subjugates the Irish. This is a colonialism that is marred by violence and starvation. The humor has therefore developed in an historical context that does not favor the Irish. Salisbury explains how “Paddy” is the image of the Irishman that becomes a stereotype in this humor. Paddy is both stupid and nonrational but Paddy also provokes a number of other semantic associations. The irrationality and stupidity of the Irish soon leads to a description of cowardly behavior, unreliability, and a lack of fit with English or British ways of life. Christie Davies (1996) sees this style of joking as directly related to the development of modern rationality. This can be extended to include colonialism because the colonial and the rational projects were never distinct. Enlightenment philosophers of reason, like Immanuel Kant, were keen to make anthropological comments on other races that were only possible because of colonial encounters and only seemed accurate because of colonial paradigms. The development of modern rationality, capitalism, and colonialism were very much a part of the same historical movements in the West. The stereotype of the Irish focuses on the incongruities of language use and rationality, particularly the misuse of language. These stereotypes have also been used to describe other groups, such as Black people, who were similarly dispossessed by colonial encounters.

Although this humor is a clear expression of superiority being lauded over the image of the Irish as colonial subjects with risible dispositions, intelligence, and speech, not all Irish jokes that use the concept of stupidity will necessarily encourage stereotype in every interpretation. There are times when the stereotype is diverted and some resistance formed. In these jokes, the English are presented as inelastic and the Irish rise above them through a paradoxical logic of the absurd that emerges from their “illogical” expressions.

### **Self-Deprecation, Ethnicity, and Humor**

The second relationship between ethnicity and humor is one that sees the ethnic group direct humor inwardly. This style can also employ stereotype but for the purpose of self-deprecation. Humor research has most often associated this style with Jewish humor, frequently with the examples presented by Sigmund Freud in his writings on humor and the unconscious.

Freud's psychoanalysis offers one theoretical explanation for this relationship. He interpreted self-deprecating humor as the super-ego (the internalized authority in the mind) looking down on the ego (the self) and laughing at the narcissism or self-importance felt by the individual. This idea allowed Freud to separate self-deprecating humor from externally directed jokes and to see this humor in a more favorable light because there is no expression of superiority toward others. Michael Billig (2005) explains how Jewish humor was one remaining expression or fragment of Sigmund Freud's “Jewishness” or ethnicity. This suggests that humor can remain after other more “serious” aspects of ethnicity have become less noticeable or have been forced to disappear. Freud saw the humor as a waste material of the mind that could be used to make serious points about the social world and the ethnic.

Jewish jokes provide a useful example of self-deprecating humor with an ethical potential. Simon Critchley (2002) explains how this self-deprecating humor could be liberating and cathartic, and certainly a more ethical activity than externally directed joking. To laugh at your own ethnicity is a fundamentally different activity than laughing at ethnic jokes told about another group. In Freud's interpretation of the self-deprecating joke, where the ego ideal (or the narcissistic element of the personality) is made comic by the super-ego, humor may work to relieve some of the absurdities confronted in the serious expression of our own ethnicities, nationalisms, and associated cultural practices. The joke may be an important way of negotiating the external pressures of stereotype and the internal contradictions of identity formation. Examples of self-deprecation appear in Freud's discussion of humor and also have a strong presence in Jewish comedy post-Freud. Recent examples from U.S. comedy include the late Rodney Dangerfield and his "I get no respect" routines, and the numerous neurotic and self-abasing characters of Woody Allen. The latter is, of course, also significantly influenced by Freud.

Despite these observations, Jewish humor should not be shoehorned too easily into the category of self-deprecation. Just as in the example of the Irish joke, there are ambiguities and complexities in this form of humor. Many of the Jewish jokes identified by Freud may appear at first glance to be self-deprecating but in fact refer to provincialism and colloquialism and are specifically about eastern European Jews. This form of humor could therefore have more in common with the stereotyping ethnic joke. Much self-deprecating humor may appear to be about ethnicity, or about an ethnic group commenting on itself, yet it can have as much, if not more, to do with notions of social class, social and cultural capital, and civility and vulgarity that exist inside of the ethnic group. Such examples perhaps highlight the "imaginary" nature of many ethnic associations and the cleavages that exist inside of ethnic groups. These jokes can fit neatly with the superiority theory of humor that explains how humor seeks to look down on and create distance from the butt of the joke. Michael Billig also identifies how much of Freud's humor was more rebellious than self-deprecating. The humor about Jewish beggars and matchmakers (or marriage brokers) can be seen to resist and overturn established ways of being in the world and so may also have a lot in common with the next example.

### **Ethnicity and the Trickster**

The final relationship between humor and ethnicity relates to the idea of the ethnic joker as trickster or agent of resistance working against the hegemonic or colonial power of a society. This relationship to humor is described by Gerald Vizenor (1988) as one that works against imposed representations to create an uncertain humor that could counter the restrictive translations of minority or peripheral ethnicities by dominant groups. His work develops these ideas from an understanding of the humor of Native Americans. Here, humor can be seen to elude dominant ethnic or racial representation through mockery, displacement, and counterexample.

Jonna Mackin (2002) discusses numerous comedy tropes in the Native American figure of the trickster that act as an important political opposition to relations of domination. The trickster has developed as this particular expression of ethnicity and humor from a powerful Native American symbol, which is a mythic and sacred ideal in some Native American tribes. This is a figure that is described as asocial. The

trickster works and acts on the outside of social mores. It is a form of humor that is able to step outside of the box of conventional or dominant ways of seeing. It is also a humor that intends to destabilize language, offer political critique, and act as a site of resistance for Native Americans. Specifically, it is constructed through techniques of satire and draws on cartooning and literary texts to attempt to render political and territorial disputes humorous.

Similar relationships or patterns between ethnicity and humor have developed in other ethnic groups. We saw that much of Sigmund Freud's Jewish humor can be read as rebellious. In sociology and cultural studies, research has also shown how the humor of Black and Asian comedians can work to attack racial stereotypes and racism. The U.S. comedian Chris Rock is especially good at this in relation to African American social issues and White political domination. Often the humorous techniques that are most effective in creating resistance humor are those that can show the absurdities of racism and racial stereotypes through juxtaposing them with alternative readings of race relations. This humor has an aggressiveness and vulgarity to it that is seen as necessary to overcome what might be described as the imposed civilities of dominant representation. This style of trickster humor can be elaborated through superiority theory because the ethnic comedian looks down on the butt of the joke, which is the majority group. Yet it is also a method of release for members of the ethnic group, who may not have other forms of expression available to them. This relationship between ethnicity and humor can be seen to move beyond the binary of self-deprecation and stereotype through the paradoxical assertion of both group identity and the absurdities and entrapment of group identity. This is best achieved through the explosion of serious stereotypes and categorizations in humor. However, this format is also not without its failings and trickster humor can also fail and fall victim to other readings if it does not strike the correct note. The trickster is not always the best agent of resistance.

Three relationships between ethnicity and humor overlap in the telling of humor by those on the inside and outside of ethnic groups. This means that the relationships between ethnicity and humor are frequently ambiguous and that humor can be used for a variety of purposes. Some of these encourage or challenge our understanding of ethnicity but others simplify and stereotype.

**See also** Ethnicity and Humor; National and Ethnic Differences; Stereotypes

Simon Weaver

Further Readings

Billig, M. (2005) *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour*. London, UK: Sage.

Critchley, S. (2002). *Humour*. London, UK: Routledge.

Freud, S. (1985). *Humour*. In *Art and Literature* (pp. 427–433). London, UK: Penguin. (Originally published 1927)

Freud, S. (1991). *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. London, UK: Penguin. (Originally published 1905)

Mackin, J. (2002). Trickster-outlaws and the comedy of survival. In G. Harper (Ed.), *Comedy, fantasy and colonialism* (pp. 189–204). London, UK: Continuum.

Salisbury, L. (2002). Laughing matters: The comic timing of Irish joking. In G. Harper (Ed.), *Comedy, fantasy and colonialism* (pp. 158–174). London, UK: Continuum.

Weaver, S. (2010). The “other” laughs back: Humour and resistance in anti-racist comedy. *Sociology*, 44(1), 31–48.

Vizenor, G. (1988). *The trickster of liberty: Tribal heirs to a wild patronage*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.