

Chapter 2

Definitions, Theories, and Measurement of Humor

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Abstract This chapter provides an overview of conceptualizations of humor, the most prominent theories, and theories that may be a useful foundation for research on humor at work. Definitions of humor are manifold, ranging from a communicative activity with positive emotional reactions in perceivers to an individual trait (e.g., sense of humor, cheerfulness). Humor is seen as multidimensional and includes the abilities to produce, recognize, and appreciate humor and to use humor as a coping strategy. The three most prominent humor theories are the superiority, incongruity, and arousal-relief theories. We discuss the intra- and interpersonal function of humor in general, the function of humor at work, and humor measurement. Measures of (usually self-assessed) humor range from more trait-focused and internal perspectives to humor styles and humor in work contexts. A collection of humor scales and tests is presented in Appendix A.1.

Keywords Humor definitions • Incongruence theory • Arousal-relief theory • Superiority theory • Humor functions • Humor styles

2.1 Introduction

The complexity of humor and humor theories is comparable to the experience of blind men touching an elephant. This originally Indian (but nowadays widespread) story describes how blind men touch an elephant to get an idea of what it looks like. As each one feels a different part of the elephant, they experience complete disagreement when comparing their descriptions (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant). Likewise, humor is a very complex phenomenon, and although each theory or definition may be correct, it may also acknowledge only part of the phenomenon.

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There are many different approaches, including social and neurological ones, which can be used to grasp the concept of humor or to explain its origins. One can also explain humor from an evolutionary or cognitive perspective (Hurley, Dennett, & Adams, 2011), or collect jokes to diagnose the humor of a whole generation—as Winick (1976) did in the US.

Nearly everyone laughs when a person slips—when it is clear that she or he is not seriously hurt. Slapstick works at work, too. Maybe you have a colleague who often dropped his (full) cup, so that later the mere expectation produces witty comments and laughter in your team. Maybe you share a joke about your supervisors' mood, or your colleague makes everyone giggle by wearing bright colorful shoes to an otherwise expensive, elegant suit. Or some comments of your boss may embarrass yourself while all your colleagues laugh. This list of diverse situations may be continued endlessly and demonstrates the variety of humor. As evolution got us hooked on humor, we long to eat titbits of that “endogenous mind candy” (Hurley et al., 2011).

This chapter explains why such diverse phenomena as described above are labeled humor. More theory about the evolution of humor and laughter can be found in the chapter about humor in teams (Chap. 3). In the following, we provide an overview of definitions, theories, and concepts of humor as well as the ambiguous functions of humor (at work) and its measurement.

2.2 Definitions of Humor

The term “humor” has undergone several changes of meaning and has evolved from a physiological to a mental quality. One of the earliest meanings of humor (humores) was bodily fluids (lat. *umor*: liquid, moistness). According to Hippocrates (400 BC), the regulation of blood, phlegm, and yellow and black bile was central for health (in Schubert & Leschhorn, 2006). During the Middle Ages, humor was understood as a quirky or odd character trait and was brought to the stage by Ben Jonson as objects of the *Comedy of humours* (1600, 1927). The shift toward an active term was initiated by Morris (1744), including the ability to perceive and depict the comic. Paul (1804/1990) was one of the first to develop a full theory of humor, with humor becoming a matter of aesthetics. Establishing a genuine psychological perspective, Freud (1905/1960, 1927/1961) labeled humor as the “most frugal of the types of the comic” and as the supreme defense mechanism in (re)gaining pleasure as he introduced the relevance of humor and jokes into psychotherapy.

Definitions of humor are manifold, depending on whether humor is seen as a communicative activity (e.g., Martineau, 1972) with positive emotional reactions in perceivers (e.g., Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) or as an individual trait-like sense of humor (Martin, 1998) or cheerfulness in personality psychology research (Ruch, Köhler, & van Thriel, 1996). Humor is nowadays seen as having multidimensional characteristics. Martin (2007) summarized humor as (1) the ability to understand jokes and other humorous stimuli, (2) an expression of humor and cheerfulness,

(3) the ability to make humorous comments or have humorous perceptions, (4) the appreciation of diverse types of jokes, cartoons, and other humorous material, (5) the active seeking of sources that elicit laughter (e.g., comedies), (6) the memorizing of jokes and funny anecdotes in life, as well as (7) the tendency to use humor as a coping mechanism. Thus, Martin (2007) describes humor as a characteristic of a person rather than of a statement. Likewise, humor includes the abilities to produce, recognize, and appreciate humor and to use humor as a coping strategy (Thorson & Powell, 1993)—a description that demonstrates circular reasoning. In line with the multitude of humor perspectives, the characteristics of humor vary, including surprise, incongruity, comprehension, and funniness (Aillaud & Piolat, 2012). According to Martin (2007), humor may be viewed as a habitual pattern, an ability, a temperament, an aesthetic response, an attitude, a world view, a coping strategy, or a defense mechanism. Furthermore, Martin (2007) distinguished four components of the humor process, that is, a social context, a cognitive-perceptual process, an emotional response, and the vocal-behavioral expression of laughter.

According to Long and Graesser (1988), humor is “anything done or said, purposely or inadvertently, that is found to be comical or amusing” (p. 4). Martineau (1972) defined humor as any communication that is perceived as humorous (reflecting circular reasoning), whereas Crawford (1994) highlighted the positive cognitive or affective reactions of listeners when witnessing someone else’s verbal or nonverbal humorous behavior. Similarly, Romero and Cruthirds (2006) defined humor as amusing communications that create a positive cognitive and emotional reaction in a person or a group. All these definitions are problematic in that they refer to the reactions of the audience. They would thus not include attempts at humor.

Also, humor is seen as an international form of social communication (Robert & Yan, 2007) and as a verbal or nonverbal message that evokes amusement and positive feelings by the receiver (Hurren, 2006). Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) emphasized the intentional use of both verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that elicit positive responses such as laughter and joy. Though intention is not a crucial element of definitions of humor (e.g., unintentional humor; Martin, 2007; definition by Long & Graesser, 1988), it is an appropriate characterization of much of the instructional (and also organizational) humor examined so far. All these approaches view humor as a communicative activity, which ideally leads to laughter, but none of these definitions really refer to what kinds of statements are humorous as compared with nonhumorous (apart from the reaction of the audience).

Meyer (2000) defined humor as a cognitive state of mirth. Focusing on humor appreciation, Weisfeld (1993) defined humor appreciation as “a distinct, pleasurable affect that often is accompanied by laughter” (p. 142). Laughter is the most obvious behavioral expression of humor (or rather: is caused by humor) and includes a distinctive behavioral pattern that also has psychophysiological correlates (Ruch & Ekman, 2001). Ruch and Ekman (2001) defined *laughter* as a vocal expressive-communicative signal and provided an overview of laughter in terms of respiration, vocalization, facial action, body movement, mechanisms, and element definition.

In line with Weisfeld (1993), laughter caused by humor is associated with a pleasant emotional state connected with cheerfulness and exhilaration.

There is no fully satisfactory comprehensive definition of humor. However, scholars agree that humor involves the communication of multiple, incongruous meanings that are amusing in some manner (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011; Martin, 2007). In line with this idea, Gervais and Wilson (2005) summarized the fundamental nature of humor as “nonserious social incongruity” (p. 399). In the Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-being Research (Michalos, 2014), Svebak defined humor as a “social phenomenon that is reflected in playful interaction and mirthful communication” (2014, p. 3048). Overall, an appropriate and comprehensive definition will probably have to be based on a theory of humor.

Few attempts have been made to define humor in work contexts. Cooper (2005) defined organizational humor as “any event shared by an agent (e.g., an employee) with another individual (i.e., a target) that is intended to be amusing to the target and that the target perceives as an intentional act” (pp. 766–767). Dijkers, Doosje, and de Lange (2012) presented a model of organizational humor based on interacting communication levels. They built on Cooper’s (2005) as well as Romero and Cruthirds’ (2006) definitions and defined organizational humor as “*non-serious incongruity shared in work settings aimed at the intentional amusement of individuals, groups or organizations*” (Dijkers et al., 2012, p. 76, Italics in Original). Incongruity is a cognitive-perceptual process in which conflicting ideas or events are combined. The attempt to provide a definition for organizational humor is worthwhile. However, it is limited in the sense that it is narrow in scope (only amusement intention).

As humor has internal and communicational facets, our **working definition** encompasses humor as a communicative process that includes incongruence and evokes a variety of emotions, either in the “producer” of humor, in the “receiver” of humor, or in both. Thus, our definition of humor at work as “nonserious social incongruity” follows Gervais and Wilson (2005, p. 399).

2.3 Theories of Humor

Three main theories about the origin of humor are repeatedly drawn on, that is, incongruity theory, superiority theory, and relief/release/arousal theories (e.g., Banas et al., 2011; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004; Ferguson & Ford, 2008; Martin, 1998; McCreddie & Wiggins, 2008; Meyer, 2000). Thus, humor emerges in human thought through perceptions of incongruity, superiority, and relief (Meyer, 2000). Ferguson and Ford (2008) applied the three theories to disparagement humor to explain why it is amusing. In his comprehensive book on the psychology of humor, Martin (2007) provided an extensive overview of several theories.

According to Ferguson and Ford (2008), the theories differ in many ways but particularly in the relative emphasis they place on the structure of the contents of humor versus the centrality of the social context in eliciting amusement: incongruity

and cognitive theories emphasize irony and surprise in the contents of humor (representative: Attardo, 1993; Berger, 1987; Raskin, 1985; Suls, 1972), whereas the psychoanalytic (a type of relief theory) and the superiority theories emphasize antagonistic social relationships between humorists and targeted individuals, groups, or objects in a given context (representative: Berger, 1987; Freud, 1960, 1905). These latter theories focus more on context, thus more directly and fully addressing disparaging humor.

Most research has been conducted on the enjoyment of certain types of humor, mainly disparagement humor. Whereas there is some evidence for superiority and incongruity in humor, the psychoanalytic idea of a catharsis or tension relief has not yet been clearly demonstrated (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). In the following, we provide an overview of the three approaches, including a brief discussion of empirical evidence.

2.3.1 *Incongruity Theory*

According to Kant (1724–1804), incongruity is “Humour where the punchline or resolution is inconsistent or incongruous with the set-up” (cf. McCreaddie & Wiggins, 2008, p. 585). Traced back to Aristotle, incongruity is the most widely accepted philosophical theory of humor to date (Morreall, 1989)—“amusement is the enjoyment of something which clashes with our mental patterns and expectations” (p. 1). People understand humorous communication if they are (cognitively) able to resolve the incongruity (Banas et al., 2011). Surprise is a key element (Meyer, 2000), and absurdity, nonsense, and surprise are *typical themes* (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004). For example, a customer might perceive a humorous incongruence if a (usually serious) bank employee wears a clown nose (maybe at carnival time).

Forabosco (1992) views incongruity as the “divergence from a cognitive model of reference” and “resolution” as well as “cognitive mastery” as essential components of the humor process. Thus, incongruity theory emphasizes *cognition*, requiring the mental capacity to note, understand, and categorize incongruous changes and thus to comprehend a situation and its implications before humor (the cognitive state of mirth) can be experienced. Thus, humor comprehension, but not humor appreciation, is at the core of incongruity theories. In a review of the past 50 years of humor research, Westwood and Johnston (2013) extended theory in relating incongruity and the ambiguities of humor as a basis for subversive potential, advocating for a view of organizational humor as subversion and resistance.

Evidence for Incongruity Theory According to the review by Martin (1998), *empirical evidence for incongruity* and individual differences in sense of humor are based on creative thought processes that are involved in the production and comprehension of humor. That is, the creation and resolution of incongruence is inherent in humor and in creativity. He concluded that evidence for a close

relationship between the ability to create humor and creative abilities, in general, is considerable. Accordingly, humor production is positively related to divergent thinking (creativity) and humor comprehension to convergent thinking (intelligence; Martin, 1998). In a comprehensive review of studies about humor and incongruity, Martin (2007) concluded that incongruity theories “do not adequately account for all aspects of humor” (p. 74). In particular, the emotional and social aspects of humor remain largely unexplained.

2.3.2 *Superiority Theory*

Among the oldest theories, dating back to Plato and Aristotle, superiority results “from the disparagement of another person or of one’s own past blunders or foolishness” (Martin, 1998, p. 29). McCreddie and Wiggins (2008) traced the Superiority Theory (or tendentious or disparagement theory) back to another famous advocate: Hobbes (1588–1679) “considered an aggressive form of humour which takes pleasure in others’ failings or discomfort. A ‘sudden glory of some eminency in ourselves, compared with infirmity of others’” (cf. McCreddie & Wiggins, 2008, p. 585) characterizes aggressive humor, including humor used against the self, for example, self-deprecating/-defeating/-disparaging humor. Based on aggressiveness or playful competition (Banas et al., 2011), a *typical theme* is ridicule and making fun of those who are less fortunate or who deviate from a given norm (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004). For example, a superior could demonstrate his/her achieved status by saying something funny at the expense of a subordinate in a meeting; most probably, the people attending the meeting, including the target, will laugh.

According to Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004) and Meyer (2000), humor has a primarily *emotional* function when laughter and mirth result from seeing oneself as superior, right, or triumphant. The superiority or disparagement theory emphasizes the ways in which negative or hostile *attitudes* are expressed through humor (Martin, 1998). Being laughed at threatens our identity, making it an unpleasant experience for the targets of such superiority humor (Meyer, 2000).

Evidence for Superiority Theory Martin (1998) summed up the superiority or disparagement approach as focusing on the ways in which negative or hostile attitudes are expressed through humor and explained “that people laugh more at jokes that disparage people toward whom they have negative attitudes and laugh less at jokes that disparage those with whom they identify” (p. 33). Furthermore, the distinction between the disparagement of a specific social group (i.e., intergroup disparagement) and the disparagement of a person (i.e., intragroup disparagement) serve different functions: the morale and cohesion of the ingroup versus conformity in and control over ingroup behavior (Janes & Olson, 2015). For instance, students who observed other students being ridiculed (in cartoons) conformed more and performed better on a quiz (Bryant, Brown, & Parks, 1981).

Some evidence for superiority has been collected by running experiments that included racial jokes or jokes about specific ethnic or cultural groups—depending on whether the joke teller was part of the group, the jokes were more or less funny; thus, membership in reference groups is important. Humor that disparages social outgroups is funnier than humor that disparages social ingroups (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). Ferguson and Ford (2008) summarized that (informal) attitudinal affiliation with a social group—regardless of whether one actually belongs to it—influences the extent to which humor that disparages that group will be considered amusing; and according to affective disposition (attitude), humor appreciation depends on membership in a social group or attitudes toward the disparaged group (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976/1996; cf. Ferguson & Ford, 2008).

As disparagement humor is at the heart of superiority theory, research on its effects has provided evidence for superiority theory. In a special issue of *Humor: International Journal of Humor Studies* (2015) on disparagement humor and intragroup and intergroup differences and effects, Ford (2015) brought together several empirical studies.

2.3.3 Arousal Theories

According to Freud (1856–1938), relief or release theory implies “Humour released by ‘excess’ nervous energy which actually masks other motives and/or desires” (cf. McCreaddie & Wiggins, 2008, p. 585). The relief theory focuses on the *physiological* release of tension (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004; Meyer, 2000) by laughing. Berlyne (1972) described two ways in which the associated positive hedonic value can arise: either arousal is raised moderately (“arousal boost”), or a sequence of conditions generates an uncomfortable state of heightened arousal that is subsequently reversed (“arousal jag”). For example, in a meeting with a tense atmosphere, a manager could say something funny and thus take the audience by surprise, resulting in an arousing outburst of laughter and a subsequently looser atmosphere.

An advancement of arousal theory describes pleasure from increasing arousal to an optimal level (Martin, 2007). The shifting from a paratelic (i.e., a playful frame of mind such as humor) to a telic state (i.e., goal-directed, serious) is described in *reversal* theory (Apter, 2013). Arousal theories combine cognitive appraisal with an optimal level of physiological arousal (Banas et al., 2011); thus, cognition and emotion interact (Martin, 2007). The coping functions of humor are based on the tension–relief element of arousal theory (Banas et al., 2011). *Typical themes* are sexual or aggressive (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004).

Evidence for Arousal-Relief Theory The arousal-relief theory has mainly been explored in the psychoanalytic tradition (Ferguson & Ford, 2008) by testing the catharsis hypothesis. A number of studies have examined Freud’s hypothesis that the enjoyment of hostile jokes is related to repressed aggressive drives (Martin, 1998). Many of the studies on psychoanalytic theory and individual differences in

sense of humor reviewed by Martin (1998) were based on samples of psychiatric patients or students and most focused on the appreciation of humor (of prepared cartoons or jokes). Contrary to psychoanalytic theory, most of these studies found that aggressive humor is enjoyed more by persons who express hostility and aggression rather than by those who suppress or repress it, and the majority of the evidence suggests that people laugh the most at humor that is related to impulses that they themselves express overtly—rather than repress (Martin, 1998). Martin (1998) and Ferguson and Ford (2008) similarly concluded that exposure to hostile humor is related to *more* expressions of aggression, though some studies found an association between hostile humor appreciation and reductions in aggression and tension (e.g., Singer, 1968). Psychoanalytic assumptions were tested with negative (i.e., aggressive or hostile) humor because positive humor is not assumed to refer to repressed feelings or thoughts.

2.3.4 *Additional Theoretical Approaches*

In addition, other theoretical approaches might be useful for explaining the functions and consequences of humor. While not claiming to be exhaustive, we mention the following theories because they appear useful for explaining the role of humor at work.

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) is applied to the explanation of disparagement humor, that is, why it elicits amusement and what elicits this kind of humor (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). Social identity theory is aligned with superiority theory. Judging one's own groups as superior to other groups enhances positive social identity and can be achieved with disparaging humor against the outgroup (e.g., Janes & Olsen, 2015), thus accounting for the use of disparagement humor as a social lubricant (see Chap. 3 on teams).

Three more affective approaches are emotional contagion, the Broaden-and-Build-Theory of Positive Emotions and the feelings-as-information-theory (see Chap. 3 on teams). *Emotional contagion* (Hatfield, Rapson, & Le, 1994) might explain how humor actually functions as a social lubricant. Primitive emotional contagion was defined as “the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally” (Hatfield et al., 1994, p. 5). The *Broaden-and-Build-Theory of Positive Emotions* by Fredrickson (1998, 2001) proposes that positive emotions broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and thus build enduring resources—physical, intellectual, social, and psychological. In addition to improved functioning due to positive emotions, Fredrickson (2001) assumed a general transformation of thought and action for the better. Likewise, Schwarz (1990) included negative and positive affect in his *feelings-as-information-theory* and stated that affective states provide an informational basis about the (negative or positive) state of a person's environment.

Banas et al. (2011) introduced the *Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT)*, which is a combination of incongruity-resolution theory, disposition theory, and the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion (Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010). The IHPT is useful for explaining why certain types of humor used by instructors might result in increased student learning whereas others might not (Wanzer et al., 2010) (see Sect. 6.3 on learning).

In conclusion, there is not yet an overarching theory of humor or even humor at work. Rather, different theories explain distinct aspects of humor. Likewise, there are several different functions served by humor beyond amusement. We will examine these functions after introducing specific concepts of humor in the next section.

2.4 Specific Concepts of Humor

There are several specific concepts that are related to humor, and we will introduce those that are relevant for the work context. The two most frequently researched constructs are sense of humor and humor style. We do not discuss gelotology, the study of laughter, and its effects on the body. However, gelotophobia, the fear of being laughed at, may have implications at work such as self-selecting specific jobs that provide fewer opportunities to be laughed at (Ruch, Hofmann, Platt, & Proyer, 2014). For the recent state of the art on gelotophobia, see Ruch et al. (2014).

Sense of Humor is defined as “habitual individual differences in all sorts of behaviors, experiences, affects, attitudes, and abilities relating to amusement, laughter, jocularity, and so on” (Martin, 1998, p. 17). In his historical review of individual differences in sense of humor, Martin (1998) referred to Eysenck’s (1972) three meanings of humor when ascribing sense of humor to a person: laughing at the same things (conformist meaning), laughing often (quantitative meaning), and telling funny stories or amusing other people (productive meaning). The three are not necessarily related within individuals. In a more recent definition, Svebak (2014) stated that sense of humor is “a characteristic of the individual and reflects readiness for understanding as well as producing humorous cognitive processes and to display related effects of smiling and laughter” (p. 3048). According to Craik, Lampert, and Nelson (1996), overall sense of humor subsumes a delimited and specific set of humor-related behaviors, specifically “socially constructive and competent forms of humorous conduct within interpersonal contexts” (p. 273); for instance, maintaining group morale through humor or displaying a quick wit.

Humor Styles describe the ways in which people use humor (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) and are thus narrower than a sense of humor: *Self-enhancing* humor involves a tendency to be amused by the incongruities of life (e.g., adversity) and helps people attain distance from problems in stressful situations, *affiliative* humor describes a person’s tendency to facilitate relationships by telling jokes and engaging in funny banter. Both styles provide an adaptive

function, thus being called positive humor. *Aggressive* humor refers to irony, sarcasm, teasing, and mockery as well as to sexist and racist humor and is associated with manipulating or belittling others (e.g., Janes & Olsen, 2000). People who tell funny anecdotes or do funny things at their own expense in order to gain the appreciation of others use *self-defeating* humor (Martin et al., 2003). These latter two (negative) humor styles are maladaptive, because humor at one's own or another's expense jeopardizes social relationships and self-worth. There are also two approaches to categorizations: self-directed (self-enhancing/-defeating) versus other-directed (affiliative/aggressive, e.g., Cann, Stilwell, & Taku, 2010) and enhancing the self (self-enhancing/aggressive) or relationships with others (affiliative/self-defeating; Martin et al., 2003).

Humor Styles at Work Building on the two adaptive and two maladaptive humor styles (Martin et al., 2003), Romero and Cruthirds (2006) tied specific ways to use humor in organizations to their respective functions. As we judge this systematization to be especially useful and as it is one of the most prominent in recent research in work contexts, we will introduce it in more detail. In general, the styles are intended to function as enhancers of the self or relationships with others. Affiliative and self-enhancing humor are categorized as "positive" styles; aggressive and self-defeating humor are categorized as "negative" styles. Lang and Lee (2010) reported three functions of humor in the workplace that have similarities with affiliative (liberating humor), self-enhancing (stress-relieving humor), and aggressive or mild aggressive humor styles (controlling humor). According to Mak, Liu and Deneen (2012), humor functions as a regulating (mild aggressive, affiliative) and coping mechanism (self-enhancing) in workplace socialization. Although all four styles might serve interpersonal functions, the self-enhancing style in particular is said to serve an intrapersonal function. Using the literature, Martin et al. (2003) developed these four factors (Humor Style Questionnaire, HSQ) and subsequently empirically confirmed their validity by showing that they are distinctly related to certain consequences (e.g., health). Scheel, Gerdenitsch and Korunka (2016) introduced an adapted shorter work-related Humor Style Questionnaire (swHSQ; see Appendix). The following discussion of the four styles and their functions are mainly based on the review by Romero and Cruthirds (2006).

Affiliative humor serves the (lubricating; Martineau, 1972) function of enhancing liking and nonthreatening perceptions between persons; utilizing this style should lessen interpersonal tension and aid in building relationships. Thus, it facilitates interpersonal interactions and creates a positive environment; the intention is to bring people together (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). By eliciting positive feelings through the successful sharing of humor, affiliative humor may foster group cohesion. Also, socialization is facilitated as interactions are less tense. Communication (e.g., in public speaking) may profit from affiliative humor by creating similarities between the speaker and the audience and through shared humor. Sharing humor is not compatible with being offended and thus involves honest and free communication. Affiliative humor within a group may reduce stress by easing tension from stressful events. Promoting openness to new ideas by making people less critical facilitates risk taking and thus creative thinking.

A humorous environment can stimulate creative problem-solving. By the same mechanisms of creating a positive environment for knowledge sharing and interpersonal relationships, organizational culture profits from affiliative humor. Organizational values and behavioral norms are communicated without negative affect for the audience or new personnel. Affiliative humor may reduce the social distance between leaders and subordinates by identifying similarities (e.g., intelligence, values) and because it causes subordinates to perceive the leader as a group member.

Self-enhancing humor is a coping mechanism for dealing with stress and is centered on the person. This style can be found on an individual or a group level. The intention is enhancement of a person's image relative to others in the group or organization (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Self-enhancing humor at the group level fosters favorable perceptions of the group and thus enhances group cohesion. Self-enhancing humor in communication helps speakers to connect with an audience. This type of humor is especially beneficial for stress reduction, for instance, by reframing stressful situations and achieving distance from problems. Self-enhancing humor fosters creative thinking by making light of errors or failures, which inevitably occur with novel ideas. By promoting the ability to cope with problems, self-enhancing humor fosters team-oriented as well as organizationally desired behavior. For leadership, self-enhancing humor may be beneficial for acquiring power from superiors by increasing appeal.

Holmes and Marra (2006) analyzed workplace discourses and likewise found that the positive types of humor were beneficial for strengthening collegiality, softening instruction or a criticism, releasing tension, or defusing anger.

Self-defeating humor is meant to enhance relationships with others by amusing them and gaining their acceptance. At moderate levels, it may reduce status and render people more approachable (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). For instance, the use of moderate self-defeating humor in a speaker's communication may release tension and also temporarily reduce the speaker's status. When credibility is at stake, self-defeating humor is especially unfavorable when leaders aim to secure power over subordinates. However, to reduce their social distance from subordinates, leaders can use this type of humor to help them seem more approachable and appealing.

Aggressive humor is used to victimize, belittle, and disparage others (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Consistent with superiority theory, people with aggressive humor try to enhance their own status and feel better at the expense of others. Aggressive humor (e.g., making jokes about outgroup members) bonds the group, thereby enhancing cohesion. It is also a means for securing power in leadership by defining the leader's status and elucidating power relations. Aggressive humor, targeted toward employees with lower status, demonstrates the initiator's power over others in order to, for instance, gain behavioral compliance. Aggressive humor may be detrimental to relationships and organizational culture when it is used to ridicule and manipulate maliciously. The costs of this negative humor can be particularly high when some people are offended, and lawsuits may even result.

2.5 Functions of Humor

In Janes and Olson's (2015) words: "Humor is ubiquitous in daily life and extraordinarily complex in its consequences" (p. 286). There are several reviews about the general functions of humor (e.g., Banas et al., 2011; Martin, 1998, 2007). Assumptions about how the general or specific functions of humor are related to humor theories are limited. For instance, interpersonal functions such as enhancing one's own liking and status might refer to superiority theories. Also, stress reduction via humor and laughter may be explained by arousal-relief theories.

It is very challenging to disentangle the functions and intended consequences of humor. For instance, the function of protecting the self with an aggressive joke at the expense of a potentially threatening person might lead to protection (e.g., the person is no longer perceived as threatening) or might worsen the situation (e.g., the person reacts with an aggressive joke in return). Olsson, Backe, Sörensen, and Kock (2002) asked 20 people from Sweden what humor means to them and categorized the essence of humor as possibilities/obstacles (e.g., happiness, unforeseen events/situations, real humor/art form, jokes, plays on words/puns, situation comedy) and weapons/protection (e.g., political satire). The contents of both categories demonstrate once more that the functions and consequences of humor, the types of humorous stimuli, and the level of abstraction are intertwined.

The proposed functions of humor are often inductively derived theoretical assumptions or generalizations of empirical investigations of details. Thus, empirical research on nearly every function is recommended. That said, we will now summarize the proposed intrapersonal and interpersonal functions of humor and humor at work.

2.5.1 *Intrapersonal Functions*

Humor may serve to enhance relationships with others (e.g., affiliative, self-defeating) or the self (e.g., self-enhancing; Martin et al., 2003). Humor may also help individuals cope with stress: Humor can help people see the amusing side of problems and can help them distance themselves from stressors (Banas et al., 2011). Humor is said to enable a change in perspective and to buffer the effects of stress by serving as a coping strategy (see also Chap. 7 on Health). In the same way, humor helps to regulate emotions. The intrapersonal function of disparagement humor, according to Freud (1905, 1960), is the venting of aggressive feelings in a socially acceptable way. Based on his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, Obrdlik (1942) saw the main function of gallows humor as morale strengthening—enhancing for the ingroup, disparaging for the outgroup. As this example demonstrates, the boundaries between intra- and interpersonal functions of humor are blurry. Though these functions apply to humor in general, they naturally apply to

work settings, too. However, the relevance and consequences might differ between nonwork and work contexts.

2.5.2 *Interpersonal Functions*

The (*interpersonal*) functions of humor have been viewed as an apparent paradox. Martineau (1972) described the social functions of humor as abrasive or lubricating; laughter, as a result of humor, may create both closeness and distance between individuals (Olsson et al., 2002). Beyond providing amusement, humor can facilitate liking and can bring people together, but it may be also used to disparage others and socially isolate them (Banas et al., 2011). Thus, several authors have indicated that humor can increase/decrease closeness and power and can, therefore, influence the two main dimensions in person perception: liking and status. Among the positive functions is an increase in group cohesion, but it might also serve negative functions such as derision and social isolation. In the same line of thinking, Alexander (1986) distinguished between affiliative humor with its focus on creating or maintaining group cohesiveness, and ostracizing humor, which singles out a victim. Whereas most functions of aggressive humor elicit negative consequences, some may be potentially positive. For instance, relying on the face-saving ambiguity of humor may enable groups to resolve conflict without engaging in destructive behavior (Kahn, 1989).

The lubricating and abrasive functions of humor continue in communication. According to Meyer (2000), humor serves four basic functions in communication: Two tend to *unite* communicators (mutual identification, clarification of positions and values), and two tend to *divide* communicators from each other (enforcement of norms, differentiation of acceptable vs. unacceptable behaviors or people). These functions of humor in communication as, alternately, unifier or divider, allow humor to be used to delineate social boundaries.

2.5.3 *Specific Functions at Work*

The interpersonal functions—or rather the consequences—of humor at work encompass attention and immediacy (see Chap. 6 on Learning), cohesion (see Chap. 3 on Teams), and emotional contagion (see Sect. 2.3.4 on additional theories), status and power (see Chap. 4 on Leadership), face-saving (see Chap. 5 on Negotiation), and norm enforcement (see Chaps. 3 and 4 on Teams and Leadership).

A core function of humor in workplace talk is to provide entertainment or amusement (Holmes & Marra, 2006). However, humor in the workplace involves more than telling jokes (Vinton, 1989). In his review, Duncan (1982) discussed management humor as an influence on group characteristics (cohesiveness,

communications, power, status) and a link between group dynamic variables and performance. Morreall (1991) listed three benefits of humor in the workplace: to promote health, enhance mental flexibility, and smooth social relations.

2.6 Measuring Humor

According to the variety of definitions and conceptualizations and to state/trait perspectives, measures of (usually self-assessed) humor range from more trait-focused (e.g., State-Trait-Cheerfulness-Inventory, STCI; Ruch et al., 1996) and internal perspectives (e.g., Sense of Humor Questionnaire, SHQ-6; Svebak, 1974, 2010) to the more behavior-related humor styles (Humor Styles Questionnaire, HSQ; Martin et al., 2003) or humor assessment in work contexts (Questionnaire of Occupational Humorous Coping, QOHC; Doosje, De Goede, van Doornen, & Goldstein, 2010; Humor Climate Questionnaire, HCQ; Cann, Watson, & Bridgewater, 2014). For an extensive overview of established but also lesser known scales, please see Appendix A.1.

Several compilations of measures exist: In a special issue on the measurement of humor, Ruch (1996) provided an overview of several measurement approaches. Also, Martin (1998) reviewed approaches to the study of sense of humor and described several measures in his integrative book about humor in psychology (Martin, 2007). In a book on sense of humor, Ruch (2007) provided an extensive appendix with a list of humor measurement tools sorted by the method that was applied (e.g., questionnaire, cartoon test, etc.). Ruch's (2007) list is very useful for researchers interested in general tools for state and trait measures of humor. In a more specific attempt, Beermann and Ruch (2009) discussed the relation between virtue and vice with regard to 12 different humor tools. On the basis of their review of positive humor at work, Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, and Viswesvaran (2012) provided a comprehensive list of the humor scales used in the 49 studies they analyzed (including conceptualization and sample items). There is a considerable amount of overlap between the instruments we introduce in Appendix A.1 and these lists, but we focus on scales that seem useful in field research and in a work context.

Appendix A.1 provides a selective overview of (mostly self-report) measures that might be relevant for the assessment of workplace humor or were even designed for such a purpose. Among the various measures, the HSQ (i.e., affiliative, self-enhancing, self-defeating, aggressive styles) is currently one of the most frequently used as it recognizes the adaptive and maladaptive functions of humor. It seems worthwhile to rely on the HSQ for the assessment of humor at work as it seems to provide a solid basis and has often been used in the work context (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). In this regard, the application of the HSQ to the workplace by developing the short and work-oriented version (swHSQ; Scheel et al., 2016) seems promising. Also, the Humor Climate Questionnaire (HCQ; Cann et al., 2014), which is based in part on the HSQ, measures employees' perceptions

of the role of humor in the workplace with four factors. Whereas the HSQ has a clear focus on a person's own use of humor, the HCQ shifts between perceptions of coworkers' and supervisors' use of humor and a person's own use of humor as a group member. In addition, the positive factor of the HCQ combines the two distinct factors of the HSQ (affiliative, self-enhancing), and the negative factor represents aggressive humor while not adopting the self-defeating style of the HSQ. The outgroup humor factor operationalizes only management as the outgroup, whereas the fourth factor (i.e., supervisor support) is reverse coded and actually represents supervisors' nonapproval of humor in the workplace. However, the measurement of humor provides other potential pitfalls. As "sense of humor" is a highly valued characteristic, people might be biased in their ratings. Also, for instance, prior exposure to a named (known!) comedian primes an expectancy of forthcoming humor, and this expectancy influences humor ratings (Johnson & Mistry, 2013). As mentioned, more scales are presented in the Appendix (A.1).

Early research used methods from ethnography such as participant observers (e.g., Roy, 1959; Seckman & Couch, 1989; Vinton, 1989). For instance, Sykes (1966) acted as a participant observer in a glass production company and "analyzed/classified" joking relationships between old/young women and old/young men. Horowitz et al. (2004) conducted focus groups with 11- to 14-year-old US middle school children guided by semistructured interviews to identify sources of teasing and bullying.

As experimental approaches are less applicable to the work context, the respective instruments are not presented in the Appendix but briefly introduced here. A range of experiments have included humor production (e.g., Terror Management Theory; Long & Greenwood, 2013). One of the first attempts at research on humor focused on humor appreciation and assessed the appreciation of jokes and cartoons (e.g., Eysenck, 1942). Cartoons have often been applied in experimental settings to assess humor appreciation and creation. For instance, the 3WD consists of a set of 70 jokes and cartoons (Ruch, 1995, unpublished; cf. Hempelmann & Ruch, 2005). The humor questionnaire (in Hebrew, Ziv, 1981; cf. Ehrenberg, 1995) is a 16-item self-report scale that captures pleasure from humor and is accompanied by a test of humor creation (10 cartoons without captions). This cartoon-caption test covers the use of humor for emphasis, the originality of funny ideas, and the ability to make someone laugh. It also includes a sociometric humor measure. Likewise, the Humor Appreciation Scale (HAS; Overholser, 1992) includes 14 captioned cartoons to be rated for funniness, and the Humor Creativity Ratings (HCR; Overholser, 1992) contain eight cartoons (drawings on stressful situations) without captions. Participants are asked to provide a humorous caption for each cartoon. The Cartoon Measure of Perspective-Taking Humor (CMPTH; Lefcourt et al., 1995) is a composite of the Cartoon Measure of Funniness (CMF) and the Comprehension of Perspective-Taking Humor (CMPT). Six cartoons are rated for funniness (CMF), respondents are asked to explain the humor in each cartoon (CMPT), and the level of abstraction of their explanations is rated. The composite score combines the enjoyment and comprehension of perspective-taking

humor. Finally, the Escala de Apreciación del Humor (EAHU in Spanish, Carretero-Dios, Pérez, & Buéla-Casal, 2010; “Humor Appreciation Scale”) is a 32-item scale involving the contents of humor (incongruity-resolution, nonsense) and the structure of humor (sexual, black, disparaging men, and disparaging women); the items are rated on funniness and aversiveness.

Among the promising newer approaches are diary studies. As early as 1926, Kambourpoulou tested the sense of humor of 70 female students with daily diary entries for a period of 1 week. She discovered that they used different types of humor, that is, passive and directed personal as well as impersonal humor involving incongruity in ideas or nonsense. Also, a higher frequency of laughter during a week was related to higher abilities (academic success, psychological tests). Kuiper and Martin (1998) recorded the actual frequency of laughter for a 3-day period and stressful life events every evening. For men with a higher frequency of laughter, stressful life events were positively related to positive affect. One recent study by Guenter, Schreurs, Van Emmerik, Gijssbers, and Van IJterson (2013) implemented a 2-week-long diary study and found that adaptive humor was related to engagement, and emotional exhaustion was related to maladaptive humor (see also Chap. 7 on health).

Thus, self-report measures may suffer from the participants being primed with the knowledge that they are participating in “a humor study.” These scales may be adapted for other ratings, of course. Although observations of interactions would be especially fruitful for research, such observations do not address all—especially intrapersonal—aspects of humor and may also be very extensive. Mixed-method approaches seem most recommendable.

2.7 Conclusion

Humor is a multidimensional phenomenon and has ambiguous functions within and between persons—in general as well as in work contexts. Our working definition describes humor at work as “nonserious social incongruity” (Gervais & Wilson, 2005). This definition is essentially an invitation for researchers to proceed elaborating on concepts and definitions of humor at work.

Three different theoretical approaches for the explanation of humor are mainly used, that is, incongruity, superiority, and arousal. In the following chapters, they will appear again in the context of work. Specifically, in the following Chaps. 3–7 we provide overviews with regard to teams, leadership, negotiations, learning, and health at work. We discuss humor research in these areas and give implications for future research and practice. Now, we invite you to dig deeper into the ambiguous but fascinating nature of humor at work.

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