THE HUMOUR STUDIES DIGEST
BOOK REVIEW
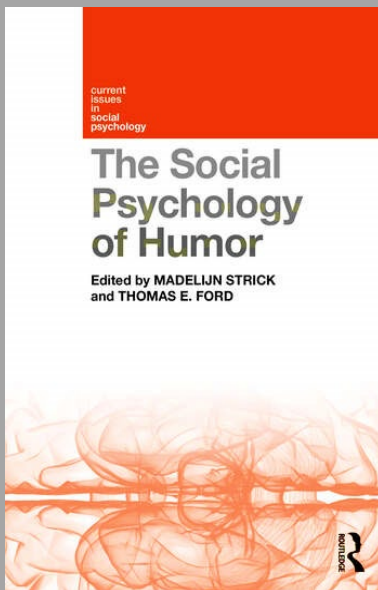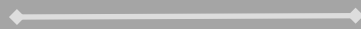
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In the preface of *The Social Psychology of Humor*, the co-editors define the topic as "the use and effects of humor among people in the social environment" (p. xiv). This broad definition is reflected in the organisation of the eleven chapters into four parts, representing four different "levels of analysis" (p. xiv) applicable to the social environment, from individual social processes, through interpersonal relationships and workplace contexts, to intergroup relations. Two broad themes run through most of the book. The first is to establish that humour is indeed an important concept in social psychology; that it does influence attitudes, thoughts and behaviours, and is not "just a joke". Secondly, 11 numerous articles make clear that these effects are not always positive; humour can be negative and "dark", as well as positive and life-enhancing.

Part I, *Individual Social Psychological Processes*, is substantially concerned with humour as a facilitator of attitude change. Whereas humour is generally thought to have a distracting effect, and hence to encourage peripheral route processing and discourage central route processing, Madelijn Strick argues in Chapter 1 that, when humour produces emotional ambivalence, this may lead to heightened elaboration and hence produce attitude change with respect to high-involvement issues. In Chapter 2, Jody Baumgartner provides a comprehensive review of the attitudinal, cognitive, and participatory effects on individuals of viewing political humour. In order to examine relatively recent research on attitude change, Baumgartner differentiates four humour types. According to the writer, *self-deprecating humour* results in a positive shift in politicians' ratings. The use of *simple*

political comedy and *simple satire* tends to have a message-consistent (typically negative) effect on the target, though this is sometimes conditioned by the viewer's political interest and knowledge, whether the jokes are targeted at members of the viewer's preferred party, and whether the issue is of central importance to the viewer. *Complex political satire* comprises an explicit as well as an implicit message. While the intention is for listeners to respond to the implicit message, the explicit message is the one most likely to be processed. In the third article of Part I, Boaz Hameiri introduces an approach to attitude change labelled "paradoxical thinking", whereby individuals are presented with messages that are *consistent* with their strongly held, extreme views, but in an amplified, exaggerated and even absurd manner. This may cause some listeners to reassess their views, leading to identity-threat, unfreezing of held beliefs and attitudes and, finally, openness to alternative viewpoints. Evidence for the effectiveness of the process is presented, and Hameiri integrates this with literature on humour and satire. While different in some ways, Hameiri argues that the similarities between satire and paradoxical thinking point to several research questions whereby each literature may inform the other.

Part II, *Interpersonal Relationships*, is concerned with humour as facilitating social connection versus differentiation. In Chapter 4, John Meyer conceptualises the four key functions of humour on a continuum from high levels of unity to high levels of division. *Identification* engenders unity through the sense that there is shared meaning and common understanding. *Clarification* produces mutual appreciation, but there is also a "sharp edge" produced by the violation of a norm, or the surprise which is generated. *Enforcement* (exemplified by teasing) can either unify or divide, depending largely on the perception of the receivers. *Differentiation*, which often accompanies ridicule, mocking and sarcasm, involves laughing "at" other people; it attempts to demarcate one social group from another. In concluding, Meyer suggests the need, in future research, to examine the ways in which humour is related to play. In his article on humour in long-term relationships, Jeffrey Hall begins by describing the four theoretical perspectives which attempt to explain why humour is an important contributor to relationship satisfaction: theories of natural selection, self-expansion theory, emotion regulation theory, and relational-functional models of humour. A brief account of an earlier meta-analysis by the writer concluded that within-person traits such as humour production and appreciation have limited association with being satisfied with a romantic relationship. He particularly emphasises the importance of relational humour, in which couples share humour and laugh together. He lists the various communicative functions of humour and relates these to the four theoretical viewpoints outlined earlier. Herbert L. Colston argues in Chapter 6 that humour, along with figurative language and its pragmatic effects, are not just "decorative things" (p. 103) that we can enjoy but are necessary to serve crucial social functions that have a neurological (evolutionary) basis. They enable us to get and stay socially connected, to navigate social networks and hierarchies, and to form a sense of self based on socially derived expectations.

Part III, *Group Processes*, focusses on humour in workplaces. It begins, in Chapter 7, with Barbara Plester's description of her ethnographic approach to the "separate yet overlapping concepts" of humour and fun within

organisations. According to Plester, positive workplace humour has a variety of benefits, but humour can also have a "dark side". While risk and edge are inherent parts of humour, the increasing diversity of workplaces means that what is amusing to one person or group can be quite hurtful to another. As workplaces have become more "risk-averse, careful, and even litigious" (p.116), there has been a tendency for humour to become more politically correct or to disappear altogether from some workplaces. One immediate next step she identifies is the need to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on workplace humour. In Chapter 8, Ann Frymier and Melissa Wanzer argue that to be a competent classroom communicator requires using communication in such a way as to achieve a desired goal ("effectiveness") in a manner that avoids violating social norms ("appropriateness"). They argue that the three major 12 theories of humour (based respectively on incongruity, superiority/disparagement, and arousal/relief) are most clearly relevant to what makes humour effective (funny), while the communication approach favoured by the writers is particularly relevant to their understanding of appropriateness. According to their Instructional Humour Processing Theory (IHPT), a humorous message must first be perceived as humour and once perceived as such, be appropriate in the sense that it produces positive affect if it is to enhance learning and retention.

Part IV, labelled *Intergroup Relations*, focusses on aspects of disparagement humour and prejudice. On the basis of Prejudiced Norm Theory (PMT), Thomas Ford and Andrew Olah argue in Chapter 9 that disparagement humour acts as a releaser of prejudice by creating a social norm that communicates permission to behave in a prejudiced manner; it provides an implicit subtext that expressions of prejudice can be treated light-heartedly. While such humour can also be used to subvert prejudice, by exposing its ugliness, this approach can backfire, as people may miss the subversive intent of the joke. For Ford and Olah, future research should more fully consider the social and emotional consequences of disparagement humour on members of a target group. In Chapter 10, Gordon Hodson and Elvira Pruszczyk describe and discuss evidence concerning their Group Dominance Model of Humour Appreciation. The model posits individual differences in the degree to which people look favourably on the hierarchical structuring of society (Social Dominance Orientation, or SDO), which is a strong predictor of prejudice. In this article, they are particularly concerned with showing that Cavalier Humour Beliefs (CHBs; beliefs that "jokes are just harmless jokes") can operate as legitimising myths to facilitate the release of social dominance motives; specifically, prejudice towards low status outgroups. In Chapter 11, Julie Woodzicka and Robyn Mallett review research that examines the challenges of confronting disparagement humour. To minimise interpersonal costs, confronters often use subtle confrontations, including witty, humorous responses. These tend to be slightly less effective than non-humorous approaches but may produce at least moderate effectiveness without the social costs.

The articles selected for this comprehensive collection aim to include both theory and empirical data, though some emphasise one more than the other, and some include original data. Another differential emphasis concerns the "Next Steps" section, which is, in some instances, a major section, incorporating numerous suggestions for

future research, and in others, little more than a summary of the article (as in Chapter 6). I did not find such differences of approach detracted from my overall enjoyment of the book. In short, Strick and Ford have put together a collection of relatively brief, well-referenced articles of high quality from diverse areas of social psychology. As such, this text would make a useful introduction to the field for the educated reader with an interest in humour, or for readers from academic disciplines associated with social psychology. A collection as diverse as this one, with its explicit focus on "next steps", highlights the many unanswered questions that make humour in social psychology an exciting area for new researchers.

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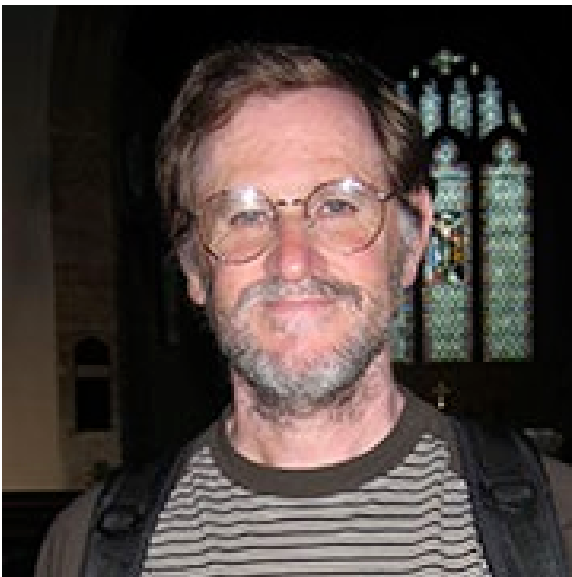
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