

# COLLOQUIUM ON HUMOUR AND CONSTRAINT

**For the Australian Humour Scholars  
at the University of New South Wales**

**Monday, 16 November, 1998**

**in**

**Hugh Dixon Lecture Theatre,  
Australian Graduate School of Management, UNSW**

(Entry/Parking Gate 11, Botany Street, Randwick)  
(AGSM Reception: Tel: 9931.9230)

## **TIMETABLE**

- 8.30 – 9.00     **Registration and Arrival Tea/coffee**
- 9.00 – 10.00    “The Use of Gallows Humour by Emergency Workers”  
Dr Carmen Moran, Social Work, UNSW
- 10.00 – 11.00   “The Limits of Humour: Contemporary Stand-Up Comedians”  
John McCallum, Theatre and Film Studies, UNSW
- 11.00 – 11.20   **Morning Tea**
- 11.20 – 12.20   “Social Constraint and the Public Sphere: Methodological Problems in  
Reading Early-Modern Political Satire”  
Prof. Conal Condren, Political Science, UNSW
- 12.20 – 1.20    “Order and Disorder in Farce”  
Dr Jessica Milner Davis, Theatre and Film Studies, UNSW
- 1.20 – 2.20     **Sandwich Lunch**
- 2.20 – 3.20     “Humour and Constraint in Management”  
Prof. Robert Wood and Prof. John Rossiter, AGSM
- 3.20 – 4.20     “Satire, Farce and Courtesy: The Case of Japan”  
Assoc. Prof. Marguerite Wells, Wollongong University
- 4.20 – 4.40     **Afternoon Tea**
- 4.40 – 5.30     “Humour and Constraint: A Discussant’s Perspective”  
Prof. Kevin McConkey, Psychology, UNSW
- 5.30 – 6.30     Debate on Interpretation of Multi-disciplinary Perspectives, with research  
student, Ms Kristin Murray, Theatre and Film Studies, UNSW

## 6.30 Buffet Dinner AGSM with paying bar

### ABSTRACTS AND DISCUSSANT'S SUMMARY (below)

**Prof. Conal Condren, School of Political Science, University of NSW**

***Social Constraint and the Public Sphere: Methodological Problems in Reading Early-Modern Political Satire***

If satire purports to use humour in order to be critical and corrective, it is easy to assume that an oppressive political society will severely constrain satiric activity, hence that, a context of oppressive social and political relationships, practices and institutions will have explanatory power when dealing with what satire there is. As a corollary, it may be concluded that a satirically rich society is likely to be a relatively open one. Hence Habermas's associating the wealth of Augustan literature (so much of it satiric) with the emergence of what he called the 'public sphere'. The validity of what may be called the oppression model of political satire seems to be supported by the experience of societies like Hitler's Germany. If, however, such a model is taken to apply to officially oppressive societies such as Restoration England, it becomes highly problematic. Formally the model easily succumbs to circularity; and in practice, one is dealing with a satirically rich and vibrant society. Does then, as Dustin Griffith has suggested, satire need oppression? The paper explores some of the difficulties in asserting any general relationship between satire and oppressive social circumstances. It does so mainly with reference to satire in 17th and early 18th century England. It argues that: the binary distinctions on which the oppression model relies are inadequate to the diverse functions of satire and to the ambivalent status of humour, at once both licenced and destructively critical: in law to speak or write in jest was a defence; but the provocation of laughter was a principal weapon of rhetoric. that inference from silence and anonymity is not clinching with respect to the oppression model, hence assumptions about self-censorship are dangerous that evidence taken from satiric theory and justifications for satire, often asserting that the world is dangerous for the satirist, must similarly be treated with caution that attention needs to be given to ritualised and taboo targets of satire; a matter complicated by pervasive doctrines of public office that we need to distinguish constraint from restraint that in practice idioms of restrained and indirect satire might more plausibly be explained in many cases without recourse to assumptions of oppression or relative liberty. In short, the wealth of satire written during the Restoration and early eighteenth centuries is not adequately explained by recourse to a model of oppression and constraint; or by a model of an emerging free and open public sphere of discourse. Indeed, such a reconsideration casts doubt on the notion of the 'public sphere'.

**Appendix.** The paper will carry a short appendix on Mary Douglas's claim about the universality of ritual jokes suggesting that her argument, although appropriate to very many joking situations, is either circular or wrong as a universal claim; that contexts other than the social are necessary to explain the existence and functioning of some jokes (e.g. philosophical ones); that the problem of context is directly analogous to that of contextualising satire and parody.

**John McCallum, School of Theatre and Film Studies, University of NSW**

***The Limits of Humour: Contemporary Stand-Up Comedians***

Most general theories of humour include at least some acknowledgement of the superiority theory (with its corollary that all humour involves at least some element of aggression towards its subject); and most functional theories include some recognition of the fact that most jokes have a butt (especially sociological theories concerning the role of humour in in-group and out-group definition.) Recent disputes about 'political correctness' and 'the limits of humour' have revolved around questions of who is or is not an acceptable victim, and with these questions issues of relative power and authority are important. As one recent article put it, 'do they kick up or down?'

In some cases an answer to this question is enough to resolve the issue to most people's satisfaction, but the issue is not a simple one. In different cultures the butts that are considered fair game vary. In Britain Julian Clary might have got away with his notorious 1994 joke on television, about having had sex with Norman Lamont, if the butt in question (so to speak) had not been the recently resigned Chancellor of the Exchequer. In the United States, on the other hand, Letterman and Leno, could

conduct a duel over many months to see who could come up with the most scurrilous Bill Clinton oral sex joke. In both countries there have also been highly successful and very aggressive comedians who routinely kick down, such as Andrew Dice Clay and Sam Kinison in the US and Bernard Manning and Roy 'Chubby' Brown in the UK.

The debate is further complicated by questions of address and readership, and by the extent to which that notoriously slippery idea, postmodern irony, may be admitted as a textual and reading strategy. Even Manning, on the face of it the most sexist and racist comedian still working in England, has invoked this defence. The 'new laddishness' in Britain (represented in comedy, in this paper, by the television work of David Baddiel and Frank Skinner, but more obviously in the popular press by fashionable new men's magazines such as *Loaded*) is a type of anti-PC backlash that is supposedly performed with irony but that clearly, at the least, offers different pleasures to different readers.

This paper discusses the question of the 'limits of comedy' in the light of such complicating considerations, and argues that it is impossible to draw a simple line in the sand, of the sort that the polemic by special interest groups - on the political right and left, each facing comic abuse - suggests can and should be drawn.

**Dr Jessica Milner Davis, Hon Research Fellow, Theatre and Film Studies, University of NSW**  
***Order and Disorder in Farce***

The perception of and response to humour depends in part on the nature of the stimulus and in part on the reactions of the audience. It is a complex interaction which, on investigation, can be separated into the humorous material (verbal and/or visual perhaps enacted or recited), the medium of presentation (which also involve one or more live presenters or jokers), the nature and environment of the audience, both collectively and individually, and especially the audience's and jokers' expectations.

Little attention has been focussed in discussion of humour on the role of expectations, or mutually accepted 'play-frames' within which it is not only permitted, but *expected* that people will find and enjoy humour. Yet the predictive power of such framing is self-evident. Fairs, festivals, certain types of theatres, bars and clubs, TV formats, comic books, even cartoons and jokes, all signal their intentions and play-frames from the outset.

In both east and west, the theatre from its recorded origins has evolved a codified hierarchy of when and how to be funny, which serves to signal not only why an audience may expect humour, but also (at least roughly) what kind of humour to expect and (perhaps) how to prepare to react to it. The key to this codification is the terminology of comedy and comic style. From the 'high' comedy of manners through tragi-comedy and satire to burlesque, slapstick and 'low' farce, the comic label summarizes what to expect in characters, plot, style of acting and "tonality" of laughter.

Traditional expectations are looser for some types of comedy, more precise for others. Of all, farce is the most strictly codified - and interestingly, the most demanding to perform (as any experienced actor will bear out). Its mix of comic elements is also the most potent -at least as measured in terms of successful laughter-stimulation (both in volume and duration). In farce, all kinds of indignities and taboo-violations are permitted: it is after all "only a farce", not to be taken seriously. It is intriguing then to find that this most licensed of comic types is also the most restrictive in its internal structural rules.

Exploring types of plot-structure, four main categories emerge: (1) the unidirectional, or 'humiliation plot', characteristic of farce at its most basic practical-boring level; (2) the reversal or 'turning the tables' plot, which punishes the rebel or the joker in his/her due turn; (3) the plot of balanced equilibrium in which 2 opposing forces wrestle together (literally or metaphorically) in (Bergson's principle of *le balancier* writ large); and (4) the all-engulfing whirlwind plot, in which the whole cast of characters is caught up in a Bergsonian 'snow-ball of escalating sound and fury, their common status as victims made all too apparent. Adherence to such strict formulae is not a characteristic of any other comic form, but is invariable in farce.

Similarly rigid rules govern the presentation of characters in farce, whether or not they go so far as to adopt the formal 'masks' traditional in broad comedy across many cultures. The rules govern efficacy of action, value systems and psychological motivation, group affiliation and appearance, movement and costume. Combined with content and structure of the plot, they also dictate acting style, which emphasizes exaggeration, and incongruity (a mix of predictability and surprise) in action and speech so as to give the appearance of artificial stylization, not life-like realism.

Exploring these conditions, which over time have come to characterize farce and its comic licence, it appears that such constraint may serve the function of neutering conscious or unconscious alarms at the violence of the- humorous stimuli.

**Dr Carmen C Moran, School of Social Work, University of NSW**  
***Use of Gallows Humour by Emergency Workers***

This paper examines the nature and function of humour in the extreme environments that emergency workers face, such as severe conflagrations, accidents, and conflicts. The emergency worker is expected to show humour, an expectation reflected in the content of popular media such as the television program *M\*A\*S\*H*. At the same time, the emergency worker is expected to be sensitive, hence the use of humour in the presence of others' suffering is cause for concern. The term 'gallows humour' is usually attributed to Freud, following his 1905 discussion on humour in extreme, life threatening-circumstances. Gallows humour has a much longer history, although its recognition has varied with language use and social acceptance over time. Gallows humour differs from other forms of macabre humour, in that the person most threatened generates the humour. For example, the condemned man asks the hangman if the scaffold is safe and the man about to be electrocuted responds to the chaplain's query "Is there anything I can do?" with "Yes, hold my hand". Other forms of macabre humour are variously called sick humour, black humour or grotesque humour. They occasionally overlap with gallows humour so that categorising a particular joke will not always be exact. In many instances the macabre types of humour allow distance between the butt of the joke, the narrator and the audience, whereas gallows humour has its narrator right in the middle of the threatening scenario.

Although various types of humour are used in emergency work and circumstances are not necessarily life-threatening as they are for the man on the scaffold, gallows humour is particularly relevant. There is an increasing recognition that emergency workers are at risk of developing traumatic stress disorder as a result of direct exposure to horrific incidents, or secondary traumatic stress disorder as a result of being constant witness to others' suffering. The potential role for humour to mitigate stress has not been widely studied in the emergency context, despite a large informal literature on emergency humour and its value as a coping strategy. The author's work, in both emergency and non-emergency contexts, indicates the function of humour varies according to the type of humour being considered. Coping humour, which reflects deliberate attempts to see the funny side of things, appears to filter out negative aspects of the environment. In contrast, humour-bias, the tendency to see humour in the environment, appears to filter in positive aspects. Humour production, the tendency to generate humour around others, appears to enhance wellbeing indirectly by increasing social attractiveness and enhancing social support. Humour production is emerging as one of the strongest humour-related predictors of psychosocial well-being. Gallows-humour can be viewed as a form of humour production because it requires a social setting. Its use can be constrained by social factors, for example, the presence of outsiders. Consequently, its beneficial effects are not confined to psychological ones, such as distancing the person from horror, but extend to social ones. Social factors are insufficient to predict the use of gallows humour, however. Years and type of experience in emergency work can also determine when and how humour is used. The nature of the emergency incident can preclude the use of any humour, for example incidents with particular relevance for a worker such as those involving children of a similar age to the worker's. Those who might use humour in one horrific incident might see nothing to laugh at in another. The constraints on humour in the emergency context, therefore, are not only determined by external factors, but are also influenced by individual appraisal of the emergency incident.

**Dr Marguerite Wells, Dept of Japanese Studies, University of Wollongong**

### ***Satire and Courtesy: The case of Japan***

Japanese writers on humour argue that the comic theatrical genre of *kyōgen* is satire, developed at a time of social upheaval when the lower social echelons were lording it over the higher. They call this *gekokuujō* lit. ‘tail wagging the dog’. This paper will show that *kyōgen* is in fact farce, in which the low engage in comical, but ultimately failed, rebellion, and the high invariably reassert their power. Whereas neighbouring Korea has a living tradition of biting satire, the humour that in Japan is identified as satire is generally mild, or, like *kyōgen*, is really not satire at all.

The argument from political oppression is typically given to explain the relative absence of satire from Japan's rich comic tradition. As demonstrated elsewhere in this Colloquium, the argument from political oppression is fallacious, and we need to look elsewhere for explanations for the flourishing or the absence of satire in any society or from any pen.

As I have argued in my book on Japanese humour, humour has its negative aspects. Therefore every society, early in the process of making the rules that make social life civil, faces, explicitly or implicitly, the need to control types of humour that have the potential to cause conflict. These rules are fundamental rules of ethics.

The main means of controlling negative types of humour are expurgation and containment. There may be social permission for humour at any time provided it is expurgated, or there may be social permission for humour in particular situations or ‘containers’, such as in performances. The rules that a particular society adopts to constrain humour will result in particular types of humour becoming more or less widely developed in that society or at that period.

When we consider the rules of humour as ethical rules, it becomes clear that, although societies that have a predominantly Christian tradition have inherited a preference for control of humour by expurgation, with taboos on, for example, humour that trades on cruelty and obscenity, there is a dispensation in favour of satire, because it places the overall good of the whole society above the immediate need for constraint on anti-social behaviour. We have a moral right to be rude if it is in a good cause.

In attempting to explain why contentious types of humour are or are not present in certain societies or at certain periods, there is therefore no need to have recourse to the argument from political repression. The matter is much more fundamental, much more deeply embedded in the way our societies function. We need to look at the way the ethics of those societies accommodate conflict.

This paper will examine the Japanese satirical tradition, and especially the tradition of *kyōgen*, in the context of the ethics of humour.

### **Prof Robert Wood & Prof John Rossiter, AGSM, University of NSW *Humor in Management***

In this paper we will focus on the problem-solving and influence functions in the managerial role and consider how humor can impact the effectiveness with which managers perform these two functions. In problem solving, humor often involves the reframing of problem situations in ways that point to the use of different criteria, different standards and different options. The positive affective reactions generated by humor can also be linked to a range of cognitive processes that facilitate more effective decision making. The impact of humor on processes such as memory and judgement offers the opportunity for both more rational and more creative solutions to managerial problems. The potential contributions of humor, however, are often constrained or overwhelmed by commitments to pre-existing frames, the stresses of coping with uncertainty and the view that humor is a release mechanism and not part of the work of problem solving. The use of humor in influence or persuasion scenarios in management is more widely recognised. However, research indicates that there are many contingencies for the effective use of humor.

The organisational constraints of power, rules and performance criteria and their impacts on the effective use of humor will be discussed. The potential for greater integration of humor into the work of managerial problem solving and influence will also be covered.

**Prof Kevin M. McConkey, School of Psychology, University of NSW**

***Humour and Constraint: A Discussant's Perspective (full-text)***

**16 November 1998**

### **Introduction**

Thank you for the opportunity to reflect on the papers presented today, to offer some additional information, and to provide a context for the discussion that will follow. My aim is not to overly influence the discussion to follow, but rather to say enough about each paper to remind us of some of the major points and to stimulate us to enter into discussion. I would like to offer a summary comment on each of the papers, and then turn to some issues and implications that need to be addressed. In doing so, I am going to avoid the need and the temptation to engage in a definition of humour and of constraint. Also, I'm going to avoid engaging in discipline comparisons; I don't want to do a "Discipline Inc." version of the routine of Lenny Bruce on "Religions Inc.", although it may be that some of the same points could be made. Let me turn to the papers

### **Summary Comment**

**Moran.** Carmen Moran gave us a theoretically grounded and empirically supported insight into the behaviour of and the dealing with death and despair by the emergency worker. In one sense emergency workers spend their time preparing for, dealing with, and recovering from being associated with the things that most *of us* wish to avoid altogether. Moran told us that "researching humour in the field is not easy", and that for much *of* the emergency humour "you had to be there". These are both important points. The first speaks to the conceptual and methodological difficulties involved, and the second speaks in part to the multiple functions that are served by emergency worker humour. Those functions include identification of group membership, delineation of the situation, and the provision of both separation from and acceptance of the event in a broader sense. Moran told us that "the single biggest constraint against humour at an (emergency) incident is the distress or death of children", and pointed also to other internal and external factors that mean that the "permission to laugh has been removed". That permission can be removed by the silent group consensus *of* the emergency workers themselves, and Moran gave us a nice example *of* this in her description of the northern NSW bus crash in which the emergency workers undertook their task with focused reverence in the absence of humour. Although it may be the case that "we need humour to manage the incongruities of life", it is also the case that those incongruities can be handled through other means; as Moran pointed out, we should not assume that humour is being used to cope or, if it is that it is necessarily an effective way of coping. Whatever the case, emergency workers prefer the public not to know about their humour, in part because when members of the public find out, they may display disgust and anger; also in part, and more importantly, because the public are not part of the in-group. Moran's studies showed a way of bringing research convergence across the field and the laboratory settings, and they underscored the importance of situational and interpersonal context in humour.

**McCallum.** John McCallum reminded us of the societal role of the labelled comedian as a "sanctioned rule-breaker" and as someone who can "speak of the unspeakable". He reminded us also that as the meaning and use of words has changed, "comic license has become a form of social control". This underscores an important point, which is that language is not mere words; rather, language both shapes and is shaped by various aspects of the individual, the social institution, and the cultural context. In his analysis of "the ways in which comedy shuffles up so close to the edge of the acceptable that the law [is] called a 'XXXX'", McCallum told us about Lenny Bruce ("the most

influential figure in modern comedy"), Bernard Manning (a master of in-group/out-group jokes), and Pauline Pantsdown (the local, technology-influenced user of queer discourse). McCallum's analysis of these three comics pointed usefully to the interaction of the characteristics of the individual, the intent of the humour, the context of the humour, the reaction and involvement of the audience(s), the planned and unplanned consequences of the humour, and the predictable and unpredictable reaction of the social institutions that become aware of the humour. All of these aspects, in various ways, serve as "constraints on comedy". McCallum commented also on the "commercial and industrial conditions" that influence comedy and comedians and on the "complex set of political projects and ideological constructions" that are captured in the term "political correctness". McCallum argued for not only the immediate importance, but also the lasting value to society of minimising or at least marginalising these constraints. In doing so, he raised an important point about the degree to which we as a society and comedians as professional commentators on society accept the argument that "comedy is inevitably constrained by its own idiocy and can never operate in the real world of political and intellectual discourse". Of course, comedy can be used very effectively, as both a shotgun and a scalpel, in political and intellectual discourse and there are strong examples of this throughout history. An interesting empirical question from McCallum's presentation that deserves to be investigated further is whether a serious point that is made with humour is taken to be more or less serious than when it is made without humour. There may be an empirical answer to that question, but if there isn't one then it needs to be found.

**Condren.** Conal Condren provided an engaging and intellectually challenging analysis of early-modern political satire. Satirists, he reminded, us aim for "exaggeration, ridicule, and insinuation". Usefully, Condren sought to provide some definitional preciseness to constraint and restraint, as well as to what he calls preconditional and contingent constraints. Important issues that relate to this distinction are the degree to which externalised and internalised influences affect the expression and acceptance of humour, and the extent to which we learn and follow particular schemas for our thought, our feeling, and our behaviour. He pointed to the nature and role of satire in the context of social interactions and interconnections, and examined in part the notion that "because satire is critical it will only be found in societies tolerant of a degree of criticism" (the "social constraint model of satire"). Condren's examination of this model underscored the difficulties in knowing the meaning in context of the actions (and inferred thoughts) of others - especially when those others are in a time or place that are not and can not be part of our personal past. He argued that the "social constraint model [is] problematic and insufficient for understanding social satire". In addition to being of interest in and of itself, Condren pointed to the relevance of his analysis of satire in early-modern Britain to the personal and political interconnections of today. The "small and personal" political world of that time is no more, and the use of humour to "ridicule, humiliate and dissolve reputation is ... diluted" now. In this sense, satire now can be said to be of less vigour and less relevance perhaps than it was in early-modern Britain. Nevertheless, in the tradition of Samuel Butler that "no man laughs fully without showing his teeth", Condren reminded us that we occasionally get a "glimpse of the fully flashing teeth as a politician sits down to a meal of satiric destruction". Perhaps the integrity of the satiric impulse is there, but more so in those who are not professional satirists; in this sense, perhaps the professional satirists of today are operating, in Condren's terms, more under conditions of restraint than constraint.

**Milner Davis.** Jessica Milner Davis reminded us that "farce is a type of comedy which treads a fine line between offence and entertainment", pointed to the strictly codified nature of farce, and offered an analysis of the subjects and formal structural elements of farce. She highlighted the importance of expectation on the nature of our reaction to humour and alerted us to the point that the structure of comedy is in and of itself a constraint on humour. Consistent with expectancy theory, she told us that expectation is critical in preparing people for humour, and in that sense we need to understand the role of comedic foreplay, as it were, as well as the comedic act itself if we are to understand humour. Moreover, she told us that the constraint associated with the structure of farce is not a bad thing, because it provided a framework for, in the case of farce, "an independent, short, fast-paced play designed to get people laughing" as well as to convey a relatively "tolerant attitude towards the stupidity of human nature and organisations". As Milner Davis pointed out, the constraints of the style and structure "paradoxically ensure the generation of unlimited laughter in farce", and Milner

Davis argued that her "own analysis shows that the more extreme the outrage and the more directly it is expressed, the more carefully constrained the dramatic techniques will be". The mixture of predictability and surprise, which is an essential ingredient of farce structure, add up to "the pattern of incongruity [that is] so often identified as fundamental to all humour". Milner Davis spoke importantly to the model of disengagement of internal control (which originated in social learning theory), and argued that it provided a number of testable hypotheses about humour, one of which related to the role of expectation and schema in the preparedness for and response to humour. Milner Davis skipped lightly over her commentary on the Feast of the Ass, which is also known as the Feast of Fools. This Feast revolves in part around the notion of the ass as an animal of blessed innocence, divine instrumentality, and sexual voracity. It is important for you to know that I understand that this Feast will accompany the black pudding and sausages (to say nothing of the sex and folly) that will be part of our dinner this evening.

**Wood and Rossiter.** Robert Wood and John Rossiter told us that there has been very little study of humour in management, and they drew inferences from non-management settings about the relevance of humour to management aspects such as problem solving, creativity and innovation, communication of information, influence and persuasion, and employee turnover and performance. They introduced the important notion that moderator variables can serve as constraints on the impact and influence of humour. Wood and Rossiter provided a conceptual framework for their analysis, which was nicely consistent with the notion that people use frames to simplify and cope with the demands of problem solving. In their analysis, they summarise a host of findings, make some predictions, and raise some interesting possibilities for research and management practice. For instance, although a "coffee break", a "toilet break", and even a "stand and stretch break" are accepted in long meetings (and are assumed to reenergise participants), the notion of a "humour break" to re-energise is a challenging (albeit interesting and empirically testable) one for management to include in their armamentarium of meeting tips and tactics. This, of course, is entirely consistent with the notion of the value of interposing a farce "to wake the people up". Importantly, Wood and Rossiter pointed to the need and value of linking the discussion of humour and its effects in the management setting to a broader understanding of human experience and behaviour, such as the affect infusion model; this model tells us, among other things, that the effects of mood can be counterintuitive. For instance, when dealing with new, complex information, being in a "good mood" actually impedes processing and performance; in this sense, humour itself can become a constraint in how people deal with other information and situations. Wood and Rossiter pointed out that "the contingencies for humour's effective use turn out to be dependent on thoughtful anticipation of source, message, medium, and receiver". Moreover, they pointed to the constraints of work culture, performance pressure, bureaucracy, and leadership. Their comments on these issues underscored the importance of considering the way in which humour and constraint are bidirectional in their nature and influence.

**Wells.** Marguerite Wells' analysis of satire, farce and courtesy in Japan nicely linked together the issues of the structure of the form and the structure of the society in determining the nature and influence of humour. Her analysis showed that "satire in Japan, when it has existed, has been typically mild by comparison ..., [and] ... that much of what has been identified in Japan as satire is not really satire at all, by European standards". The notion that satire that has no corrective intention is not satire raises the important issue of the intention of the humour in the place and time in which it occurs. Moreover, the fact that Japanese scholars early this century apparently tried hard to label some of their humour as satire underscores the constraint of cultural comparison. Just as there is perhaps a cultural cringe of comedy, there is perhaps a cultural cringe of humour analysis and interpretation. Certainly, humour both in practice and analysis experiences fashions across cultures and time, as Wells points out in her comments about the impact of swift social change and cultural dislocation in Japan during the last century and a half. Wells highlighted that 'the fluidity of values that has gone with these changes, on top of the cultural preference for externalised standards, has meant that the twentieth century has provided stony ground for Japanese satire'. The constraints on humour that are imposed by anticipated and unanticipated change need to be considered in any understanding of the nature and function of humour at an individual, social, national, and international levels.



## Issues and Implications

From the very many issues and implications that arise from the material presented today (and Kristen Murray is going to help guide us through those later), I want to focus on assumptions and definitions, influences and constraints, purpose and impact, and theory and research. In commenting on each of these, I want to set out the issue, link it to what we have heard and to other material, and offer a comment or suggestion when appropriate.

*Assumptions and definitions.* We have to be careful not to assume and/or define humour as good and constraint as bad. Humour may not always be good or appropriate, and constraint may not always be bad or inappropriate. In terms of humour, the nature, form, and context is critical; for instance, a verbal quip about "crispy critters" and "greenies" by emergency workers may be fine, but a mime performance of this by the same person would probably not be well-received even by the in-group. The point that the form of humour is critical in terms of how it is perceived and received was made by du Pre (1998) who looked at the role of humour in health care settings. She investigated the use of humour in times of embarrassment, camaraderie, pain, and uncertainty, and argued that humour is a powerful and versatile communication technique in that setting. It is, however, a technique of fragile power, and perhaps its most important effect is in defining group membership. Through shared humour, you know who understands, who is like you, who you don't have to explain things to, and who you don't have to be on guard with, as it were. Group membership, thus, is a constraint that both confers ability and inability to give or receive humour. In terms of constraint, our presenters interpreted constraint in quite varied and different ways; on the one hand, for instance, constraint associated with the structure of the humour could be said to be necessary for the humour to occur, and on the other hand constraint associated with the societal and judicial reaction to the humour could be said to both punish that humour and limit the humour of the future.

*Influences and constraints.* Thinking of constraint in the sense of influence, it becomes clear that there is a wide range of influences and constraints on humour. For instance, there are important individual differences in capacity to engage (as sender, receiver, or interpreter) in humour; for example, we change across the life-span, and our personality, cognitive, and emotional characteristics differ in various ways. Ruch (1998), in an edited book, recently provided an overview of "the sense of humour" from multiple perspectives in both a disciplinary and an individual sense, and the chapters in that book underscore the complexities of what we are about today. We know relatively little about how humour develops in humans. For instance, McGhee (1971; see also McGhee, 1974) pointed to the range of theoretical and empirical issues relating to the development of humour in children, and essentially only noted the wide range of methodological problems confronting a developmental approach to the study of humour. Saying that research is hard to do is an excuse, not a reason, for not doing research. Of course, a lack of theory and a lack of money are good reasons for not doing research'. We know a little more about the adult life-span and humour. For instance, Solomon (1996) reported a straightforward study of humour and "aging well". This study found that not being married was associated with finding humour in most situations; also, men used more humour, were quicker to catch onto jokes, and were more likely to see themselves as humorous across the adult life span. Notably, physical health and relationships with family and friends were associated positively with humour. In addition to the influences of individual differences, there are the influences and constraints associated with the social context of humour, the cultural setting in which it occurs, and the formal and informal political environment of its expression and appreciation.

*Purpose and impact.* It is the case of course that what you want to achieve and what you actually achieve are only sometimes (and sometimes accidentally) related. The purpose and impact of humour, and the relevance of real or imagined constraint (or perhaps restraint) as a moderator variable is important in this regard. At the level of social and political discourse, for instance, Speier and Jackall (1998) provided an analysis of wit and politics. In this analysis, they pointed to wit as a weapon, the crucial element of surprise, the uses of nonsense, the laughter of the mighty and the weak, whispered jokes in totalitarian regimes, and wit and death. An important point of their analysis is the paradox of timelessness, or the recurrence of similar forms of political humour (even identical jokes) in different centuries and among different people. In this sense, the purpose and impact of humour to achieve

political ends appears to be relatively resilient and even resistant to the passing constraints of the day. For most of us, of course, the primary constraints of the day are most felt in the organisations in which we work. Standing in the AGSM reminds me that common sense becomes difficult to achieve when wearing a suit and thus management training is needed; this leads me to a piece of research on humour and management. Hatch (1997) considered how managers used humour to construct and organise their cognitive and emotional experiences during management meetings. Her analysis pointed to a heavy use of irony and socially constructed contradiction in the language of managers, especially in relation to their organisational roles and responsibilities. Thus, in a way that is conceptually similar to what emergency workers do, these managers used particular strategies to deal with the horrors before them; in one sense, humour helped them to overcome the constraints of the organisational setting.

*Theory and research.* Theories of humour and the methodology of humour research appear to be in relatively early stages of development in a technical sense. For instance, Veatch (1998) argued for a particular theory of humour that he believed explained a variety of humour-related phenomena, and that suggested a way forward for research, for practice, and for understanding our everyday lives. Gutwirth (1993) sought to provide a typology of theoretical approaches to assist with understanding and investigation, and that typology is useful in at least organising what research needs to be done. In a more sophisticated way, Wyer and Collins (1992) provided a theory of humour elicitation, and conceptualised the humour elicited by actions and events that are neither intended nor expected to be humorous, including one's own behaviour in social situations. One critical feature in this theory is the cognitive elaboration of the implication of the action or event. Notably, this is dependent in large part on the individual's information processing abilities and objectives at the time of the action or event; this underscores the place of individual differences and situational demands and cues on the generation and interpretation of humour. One specific research issue that this theory would allow us to investigate relates to the casual observation that emergency workers may not easily remember the humour used at the emergency event. If this was supported through empirical research, then it would give us a clue about the nature and processing of that humour, and would speak also to the role of context in the encoding and recall of memorial material.

### **Concluding Comment**

In concluding, let me make three very brief points. First, from listening to the papers it is clear to me that humour is an area that needs interactionist theorising, and a multi trait-multi method approach in research. Clearly, also, the area needs interdisciplinary involvement and energy, and that is a major aim and hopefully outcome of today. Second, although we have talked much about humour and constraint we have said nothing about the constraints on humour research. As some of you may know, Robert Wyer's groundbreaking research on the cognitive processing of humour, which is supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation, is under attack in the USA by the lobby group, Citizens Against Government Waste; this group is saying that the government is wasting taxpayers' money on Wyer's research because humour is not worthy of research. Third, humour requires an understanding of the cognitions, emotions, and behaviour of the person - in context; as such, it is an inherently complex and intriguing phenomenon. And that understanding, perhaps, is what we have been seeking today. It is also what we will continue to seek in our discussion. In that discussion we should look at what we have in hand from today, what we need, and how we need to get there. Thank you.

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