

**COLLOQUIUM OF THE
AUSTRALASIAN HUMOUR SCHOLARS NETWORK
AT UNSW, SYDNEY**

“Humour and Coping”

**Monday, 19th November, 2001 (9.00a.m. – 4.30p.m.)
Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM) Building, UNSW
Tel: (02) 9931 9200. Entry: Gate 11, Botany Road, Randwick;
collect parking voucher if needed from the AGSM Front Desk on arrival
and proceed to Parking Station’s upper floors for parking)**

CONVENOR AND CHAIR: JESSICA MILNER DAVIS

PROGRAMME AND ABSTRACTS OF PRESENTATIONS

TIMETABLE

- 9.00 -- 9.30 Registration and arrival tea/coffee, Hugh Dixon Theatre**
- 9.30 – 10.00** Angus McLachlan, School of Psychology, University of Ballarat: Laughter and Stress Reduction in an Experimental Setting
- 10.00 – 10.30** Carmen Moran, School of Social Work, UNSW: Humour, Stress and Coping
- 10.30 – 11.00** Meredith Marra, School of Linguistics and Applied Language Study, Victoria University of Wellington: Easing the Tension: The Coping Function of Humour in Workplace Decisions
- 11.00 – 11.20 MORNING TEA (Following the break, concurrent Sessions, A: Hugh Dixon Theatre; Session B: John Reid Theatre)**
- 11.20 – 11.50 A: Conal Condren, School of Politics and International Relations, UNSW: Coping with Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*: Understanding the**

Problems of Wit and Humour in the World of Philosophic Disputation

B: John Perkins, School of Economics, UNSW: Coping with Life in OZ: A Pommie Perspective on Australian Humour

11.50 – 12.20 A: Skye McDonald, School of Psychology, UNSW: “Is That a Lie or a Joke?”: Understanding the Inference Behind the Inference, a Study of Normal and Brain-injured Speakers

B: Georgios Liangas, School of Women’s and Children’s Health UNSW: Laughter as a Trigger for Asthma in Children

12.20 -- 12.50 A: Jim Davis, School of Theatre, Film and Dance, UNSW: Coping with Degradation: Representations of the English Low Comedian through Caricature and Self-Portraiture(late 18th and early 19th centuries)

B: John Ziegler, School of Medical Education, UNSW: Why is Humour Used in Medical Teaching?

12.50 -- 1.45 LUNCH

1.45 – 2.15 Jessica Milner Davis, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, UNSW: Coping with “Having the Mickey Taken”

2.15 – 2.45 Lindsay Foyle, President, Black and White Artists Club: The Value of the Australian Cartooning Tradition in Coping with Everyday Life

2.45 -- 3.15 Kristen Murray, School of Theatre, Film and Dance, UNSW: Coping with 9-11: The Limits of Humour

3.15 – 3.35 AFTERNOON TEA

3.35 -- 4.30 Discussion, with Rapporteurs from Sessions A and B; Briefing on 2001 International Humor Conference in Baltimore, Maryland.

CLOSE

ABSTRACTS

“Coping with Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*: Understanding the Problems of Wit and Humour in the World of Philosophic Disputation”

Professor Conal Condren
School of Politics and International Relations, UNSW

Although *Leviathan* (the work in which Hobbes chiefly puts forward his much-quoted views on humour) was largely consistent with Hobbes’s earlier writings, his reputation changed fairly dramatically after its publication. Before then, Hobbes enjoyed an international reputation as a serious scholar. After then, he became associated with scoffing polemic, irreligion and libertinism. This paper explores the problem of wit and humour as a partial cause of this change and, once recognised, as a problem in understanding Hobbes and his world. Others have shown that Hobbes’s wit was a principal weapon in his controversial armoury, most notably in *Leviathan*, but that it had no straightforward relationship with his intellectual environment.

In part Hobbes belonged to a long-standing Lucianic tradition of philosophic dispute. Yet his works also exhibit less combative uses of humour which tie him to a more benign attitude to laughter. Once the humour in his works is taken seriously, reading him gains an extra, if problematic dimension; and it becomes more difficult than has been thought to pin-point the significance of his wit. Some of his critics operated in the same Lucianic tradition in attacking him. The result was an image that floated free from firm moorings in specific works, and so did not require reference to sustain controversial plausibility. He may not even have been the real target of putative attacks on him. Outlining these themes suggests (tentatively) that, (a) the image of Hobbes may have been more pervasive during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in philosophical quarrels about science and between the ancients and moderns than is often thought; and (b) that screening out attention to humour in philosophical argument somewhat anachronistically reduces the cut and thrust of early modern philosophy to the more anodyne ideals of propositional order; but also that, (c) restoring a context of humour hardly solves problems of historical interpretation.

“Coping with Degradation: Representations of the English Low Comedian through Caricature and Self-Portraiture (late 18th and early 19th centuries)”

Associate Professor Jim Davis
School of Theatre, Film and Dance, UNSW

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries English low comedians were frequently rendered in portraits, prints, illustrations and caricatures, as well as prose descriptions. Since the time of Hogarth, however, there had been an ongoing debate in art criticism over the respective merits of comic painting as opposed to caricature. The terminology used also began to appear in dramatic criticism and commentary from the late eighteenth century onwards. In this paper, based on current research on the iconography of 18th century & 19th century English comic acting, I suggest that the degradation implicit in low comedy performance (and also in caricature generally, according to essays by Gombrich and Kris) is offset by a Hogarthian use of observation and detail by the more successful performers. Additionally, this distinction is also implicit in the visual representations and critical discussions through which these performers are now remembered.

Reference:

Ernst Kris and E.H. Gombrich, ‘The Principles of Caricature’ in *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, N.Y. Schocken Books, 1964 and other essays .

“The Value of the Australian Cartooning Tradition in Coping with Everyday Life”

Lindsay Foyle
Cartoonist at *The Australian*
Past President of the Australian Black and White Artists’ Club

Australia is one of the few countries in the world that can demonstrate records of almost every step of its history in cartoons. Like it or not, humour is one emotion that is present in every facet of our lives. We can laugh at birth, death and personal hurt. We laugh at our selves and at others. We laugh at situations and we laugh just because we want to.

Cartoons and comic strips have given us a method of recording humour that is quick to consume and which can be used to record almost anything that makes us laugh. All you need is a pen and paper to create the cartoon, and a printing press to make it public. For most of the 220 years of European history we have had access to both. But despite the popularity of cartoons they have not always enjoyed the acceptance by newspapers one might expect. It is just over 100 years since running a daily newspaper became the

accepted norm. And it is almost 80 years since comics became part of what we expect to find in newspapers.

But while Australia has produced some of the best political cartoonists in the world over the past 100 years, we have let their memory disappear almost as quickly as their cartoons yellowed on our notice boards.

“Laughter as a Trigger for Asthma in Children”

Georgios Liangas
Honours Student, School of Women’s and Children’s Health,
Faculty of Medicine, UNSW

Asthma, the most common chronic condition in children, is a very complex condition with many different pathways involved. Asthma episodes are precipitated by stimuli referred to as *triggers*, and these include infection, allergens and exercise. Psychological factors such as stress and suggestion are also well documented as triggers of asthma. One trigger that seems to quite common but not well documented is laughter. Our study attempts to explore the prevalence in children and the mechanisms of laughter-triggered asthma (LTA), and its association with asthma severity and control. There are four components to this study: two relating to a questionnaire, and then a laughter challenge and a laughter diary. The questionnaire was given to parents of children who presented to hospital with an episode or a history of asthma and asked questions regarding severity, control and triggers of the children’s asthma, and questions more specifically relating to LTA. The laughter challenge was an attempt to provoke a fall in lung function after application of a laughter stimulus. The laughter diary was something the parents were asked to fill out at home on occasions that the children laughed or were excited, and was an attempt to document a fall in Peak Expiratory Flow with laughter. Results are currently being analysed, but we have shown that there is a 31.9% prevalence rate of LTA in children who presented to Sydney Children’s Hospital with an episode of asthma in a six-month period. We failed to develop a reproducible laughter challenge test, mainly due to inherent problems in making children laugh in the relatively threatening atmosphere of a respiratory function laboratory.

“Easing the Tension: The Coping Function of Humour in Workplace Decisions”

Meredith Marra
Language in the Workplace Project
School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies
Victoria University of Wellington

Meetings can be fraught with tension, not only through disagreement but also in the quest for the best results. Consalvo (1989) argues that as problem solving meetings progress and levels of disagreement decline, instances of humour increase. Groups are using humour to ease built-up tension.

Analysis of meeting data in my own research into decisions has revealed that humour provides a discursive clue indicating that participants anticipate an acceptable solution has been found. Humour provides a release valve for the pressure that has developed throughout the interaction. This manifests itself as a clustering of humour around the final stages of decisions, closely resembling patterns found by Pizzini (1991) in her study of humour as tension release during childbirth.

This paper will focus on a case study of one decision made by a meeting team to illustrate how colleagues use humour to “cope” in workplace settings.

References:

Consalvo, Carmine (1989). ‘Humor in management: no laughing matter’, *Humor* 2, 3:

285-297.

Pizzini, Franca (1991). 'Communication hierarchies in humour: Gender differences in the obstetrical/gynecological setting', *Discourse in Society* 2, 4: 477-488.

“Laughter and stress reduction in an experimental setting”

Crystal Lewis, Emma Lourey & Angus McLachlan
School of Psychology, University of Ballarat
Dr Angus McLachlan

This paper will focus on a traditional experimental examination of laughter and mood that employed a student experimenter and twenty student participants. The study attempted to create a set of conditions such that an experimenter's laugh could be construed by the participants as “offensive”, when it followed a mistake by the participant, or “defensive”, when the laugh followed an unfortunate malfunction of the experimental equipment. It was expected that the offensive laugh would produce an increase in the stress experienced by the participants, while the defensive laugh would produce the reverse. Though the various conditions failed to produce the expected mood changes, a significant correlation was found between the extent to which the participant smiled or laughed and her comparative lack of stress. The possibility that this finding emerges because there are some people who are simply disposed to laughter, irrespective of the prevailing social situation, will be explored. Data pertaining to other aspects of the character of such temperamentally cheerful souls will also be considered.

“ ‘Is that a lie or a joke?’: irony and brain research”

Dr Skye McDonald
School of Psychology, UNSW,

This paper concerns research into the underlying cognitive processes that are needed in order to understand inferred meanings such as those associated with jokes, especially sarcastic jokes. The intriguing facet of sarcastic jokes is that the speaker says one thing, and yet the (astute) listener hears them to mean something completely different, often the reverse, e.g. “*No! You haven't put on weight! You're as slim as ever!*” said to a corpulent friend. Often the joker's true meaning is apparent from the context in which the literally false comment is made, i.e. the context (in this case a mirror reflecting a spreading girth) contradicts the literal meaning. Interestingly, lies are very similar to sarcasm in that they **also** comprise literally untrue comments. However, they serve a different communicative function, i.e. to deceive rather than ridicule the listener. So how do normal speakers determine the speaker's intention and differentiate between the two?

In order to address this question, we compared a group of people with traumatic brain injuries to a group of normal speakers. Brain injury is known to impair the ability to understand sarcasm, although the reasons for this are poorly understood. We examined different facets of comprehension that are theorised to differentiate lies from jokes. Both brain injured and normal speakers watched a series of videoed vignettes in which actors were engaged in everyday-type conversations, half of which entailed a lie, and the other half of which entailed sarcastic jokes. They were asked to make judgements about what each of the participants in the video believed to be true in the context, what kind of emotions were being expressed, what the intended meaning of the remarks were and finally the communicative intention of the speakers.

The brain-injured group understood lies far better than sarcastic jokes. But in both cases they had trouble determining what each of the speakers knew or what they intended by their comments. They also failed to understand the implied meaning of the joke but not the lie. These results are discussed in the context of what we know about the cognitive deficits of the brain-injured group.

“Coping with ‘Having the Mickey Taken’ ”

Dr Jessica Milner Davis
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, UNSW

From white settlement onwards, being able to “take a joke” has always been a defining characteristic of being Australian. Members of the former British colonial power provided convenient butts, followed by migrants with limited English language, and racial minorities unable to answer back. Now the joke has turned. Under the pressures (both good and bad) of political correctness, public joking now celebrates the self-deprecating joke. Thus, Aboriginal comedian Ernie Dingo is a successful TV star (following the path blazed by black American entertainers), and last year’s hit movie was *The Wog Boy*, starring Australian comedians Nick Giannopoulos (second generation Greek-Australian) and Hung Le (born Le Trung Hung in Vietnam). Is this the triumph of a “sensitive new-age” Australia? Or is Australia merely following an international trend? This paper argues that it is all part of the hallowed Aussie tradition of hazing the newcomers by “taking the mickey”.

“Humour, Stress and Coping”

Dr Carmen Moran
School of Social Work, UNSW

There is a large popular literature extolling the stress mitigating properties of humour. This literature is paralleled by a growing body of research into the relationship between stress, humour and coping, but the conclusions in the research literature are more modest, complex or in some cases contradictory. This paper looks at empirical research on stress, humour and coping, and posits that conclusions are currently limited by problems of definition for all three terms. It also considers the problems of measurement in empirical research on humour and stress. Sense of humour questionnaires, for example, can be culturally biased or appear irrelevant to the experience of humour. Asking people to rate their own sense of humour does not appear to be a good alternative, as nearly everyone rates their sense of humour as above average. Despite these and other methodological limitations, research suggests humour is associated with enhanced coping in stressful circumstances. The paper concludes by considering whether humour mitigates the impact of stress directly or indirectly.

“Coping with 9-11: The Limits of Humour”

Kristen A. Murray
PhD candidate
School of Theatre, Film and Dance
School of Sociology, UNSW

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, resonated throughout the world and engendered a variety of responses: shock, anger, confusion, profound sadness and even humour. This paper explores perceptions of humour about this tragedy, and in particular focuses on the limits of humour: the ways in which we restrain and re-evaluate what is funny in the face of devastating events. The author suggests that current attitudes and practices associated with death (in both Australia and the United States) create an environment in which black humour is increasingly likely to emerge. As a result, we engage in a process of continual questioning about the creation and appreciation of black humour.

NOTE: The title of this paper refers to the American way of writing dates in numerical form, with the

month first. These numbers also happen to correspond with the emergency telephone number in the United States: 911.

“Coping with Life in OZ: A Pommie Perspective on Australian Humour”

Associate Professor John Perkins
School of Economics, UNSW

Australians lack a sense of humour: they take themselves so seriously. There was a sense of humour here once. That, however, disappeared with the disappearance of inhabitants from the Outback. There has been an attempt to resuscitate a highly derivative form, of Pom origins, in the “rust bucket” known as Melbourne. In Sydney even that is absent. This paper tries to explain this phenomenon from the perspective of a Pom, reared on *The Goons*, *The Goodies*, *Monty Python* and points beyond.

“Why is humour used in medical teaching?”

Associate Professor John B. Ziegler
School of Women’s & Children’s Health, UNSW
Department of Immunology, Sydney Children’s Hospital

Humour is used regularly by medical (and other) teachers. However there is almost no literature on the use of humour in medical education, and a paucity of research on its use is educational generally. Claims have been made about the value of humour in educational settings but there have been few published controlled studies of the use of humour to enhance learning and only about half of these have demonstrated improved learning outcomes. There is almost no medical literature on the use of humour in teaching. For example, in a bibliography of almost 200 citations in humour, health and medicine maintained by the International Society for Humor Studies, only 13 papers relate to education of health professionals, mostly in nursing journals. Only two relevant articles in medical journals or books have been identified. In the medical use of humour we thus appear to have a paradox. Humour is widely used in medical teaching though rarely mentioned in medical educational writings and apparently virtually never researched. There is significantly more literature on the therapeutic value of humour, yet its clinical use is so rare that it attracts media attention.

Possible roles for humour in teaching include:

- Enhancement of student learning (for which there is little evidence)
- Improvement in rapport between teacher and students
- Mechanism by which teacher attempts to enhance status with students
- Mechanism by which student and teacher interact
- “Seduction” (the “Dr Fox” experiments)
- Entertainment of students by way of compensation or reward for their attendance
- Component of social interaction without educational connotation