



What's SO Bloody Funny?

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Added: 08/08/2006

Type: Paper

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It is often said that the shared laughter is the shortest distance between two people. If you start paying attention, you will undoubtedly recognize humor as one of the main ingredients in our social connectedness to others. The perspective of Theory of Mind constructs can inform our understanding of humor and why this facet of social relatedness can be so troubling for Asperger Syndrome (AS) individuals.

Let me begin by describing a bit about Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM concepts were initially developed by Premack & Woodruff in 1978. The concepts refer to the mental events that allow us to effectively explain and predict others' behavior and are thought to involve the executive functioning (EF) abilities of the brain. EF skills enable a person to shift attention flexibly, inhibit impulsivity and solve problems in a planful, systematic way. Central coherence theory is also seen as related to ToM constructs by stating that all human beings want to give information context, gestalt and meaning. An interesting difference is noted with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) children, where they can identify familiar faces as well from parts as from the whole gestalt, suggesting that Central Coherence and ToM processes may work somewhat independently in ASD individuals.

Two intervention computer software programs have been developed recently to help people see or hear emotional displays, including those emotions involved in humor and use of laughter in order to allow individuals who struggle with this a more systematic way to study it and improve their skills. These programs have a distinct advantage in teaching these skills in isolation, as they do not require much interpretation of context or planning, skills which are thought to be directly related to the differences in Central Coherence and EF abilities for those with ASD.

Simon Baron-Cohen et al (1999) at Cambridge University in England have studied ToM extensively as it relates to ASD individuals. As part of this work, MIND READING

software has been developed. Mind Reading allows for individuals to track their progress, gives corrective feedback and rewards users after specified amounts of the program have been completed. It is currently not available for purchase, but Mind Reading II is in development. The publishers' website is listed in the reference section of this article.

Tanaka & Schultz (2005) have created another program called "LETS FACE IT". The computerized game is fun and inherently rewarding. Let's Face It teaches face recognition skills using a game format. Currently, Tanaka and Schultz are researching how people respond to the software and individuals who meet the inclusion criteria for the study can obtain access to the software. The research is now in a period of open enrollment and the researchers welcome interested individuals to contact them via the website address, which is also listed in the reference section of this article.

Research on the use of such software is still being conducted, though some initial studies show some promise in helping people improve their interpretation skills. Issues of generalization may still be present, but teaching the outer displays of emotions (facial and voice) may prove to be of great benefit to those who do not easily intuit ToM abilities, which do not lend themselves as readily to explicit instructional strategies. Think about when someone really do not understand your point of view. This occasional interpersonal difficulty that we've all faced can be a pervasive "mindblindness" for ASD individuals. For example, recent research by Golan, Baron-Cohen and Hill (in press, 2006) found that AS individuals scored significantly lower in 12 of 20 emotion concepts on which they were tested, with AS men finding facial recognition of emotion considerably more difficult than voice recognition, where AS-gender differences were not found. The emotion of insincerity was recognized by less than 1/3 of the sample of AS individuals.

Functionally, ToM abilities involve perspective taking, as well as the abilities to infer, predict and understand that: 1) Behavior is based on thoughts, feelings and the interpretation of events from a uniquely individual perspective, 2) Thoughts, feelings and interpretation of events vary widely from person to person.

Enter Mr. Humor-- good or bad, we do expect other humans to recognize him when he shows up. Words of laughter-- "he-he, ho-ho, ha-ha" are universally recognized, are not dependent on the culture we grow up in and actually existed before people spoke language. Laughter is an unconscious response to social and linguistic cues. Basic research in the study of humor finds that a key aspect of humor is the incongruity concept. Individuals must recognize that the events in the situation, joke or otherwise, are not consistent with what one might reasonably expect. Another key aspect present in most higher level humor is the idea of some sort of resolution.

Then things get a bit more complicated. Things are not always funny when people are laughing. Humor also is not a unitary phenomenon and involves a great deal of contextual interpretation--remember the Central Coherence and EF differences that individuals with AS often exhibit. McGhee (1979) reports a study by Giles and Oxford (1970), which found laughter can occur in 7 distinct social contexts, including: 1) humorous, 2) social, 3) ignorance, 4) anxiety, 5) derision, 6) apologetic and 7) tickling.

What types of humor is utilized and appreciated depends on a number of developmental, social and cultural factors, with the categories of tickling, apologetic and social laughter having nothing to do with humor per se.

Individuals with Aspergers are likely to have difficulty with a number of aspects of successful humor use and interpretation. First, humor is primarily social. Because laughter is not generally a conscious act in the average person, a need to intellectualize humor is likely to reduce a neurotypical person's emotional response to humor. The language that is often used in humor falls into the broad category called pragmatic language and is widely recognized as an area of difficulty for AS individuals. For example, use of the word, "bloody" in the title of the column may confuse an AS individual or someone who is not somewhat familiar with British humor. Aspies may recognize the incongruity of the humorous situation, but be distressed by the fact that things did not follow the predictable pattern. It's hard to find something funny when you're upset.

Additionally, AS individuals appear to have considerable challenges when they must interpret nonverbal information, which often comprises a large percentage of what makes humor "funny" and allows us to discern those situations where laughter is being used and things are NOT funny. Temple Grandin (1995) reports her own perceptions of how speech and laughter follow a rhythm when several people are having a good time and that she finds it very difficult to "fitting in with this rhythm, and I usually interrupt conversations without realizing my mistake." It may be that the clues to cracking the code of the "rhythm" Grandin refers to lies in the nonverbal subtleties of the interactions as well. These nonverbal social deficits are less visible to others initially and even when encountered, are difficult for people to articulate. However, it often leads others to feel a lack of social connectedness to the AS individual, who may be criticized for "not getting it" as they miss the more subtle warp and woof of the social fabric of communication. This hypothesis is corroborated by studies of stroke victims, where individuals who suffer from R hemispheric stroke have a much more difficult time with humor recovery than L hemispheric stroke victims (Provine, 2000). This is relevant for AS individuals, whose language may be quite intact or advanced, but who miss all the paraverbal cues that are frequently the majority of the joke's gestalt. These subtle, yet powerful differences in the use and understanding of humor may be a critical problem in the formation of close interpersonal relationships, never allowing for the more natural bridges of progressively more intimate interactions to develop.

Some work suggests that AS individuals may also have more fundamental neurological differences when it comes to humor that make appreciation of humor problematic. Robert Provine's work on contagious laughter suggests that hearing laughter may innately cause others to laugh, with or without cognitive understanding of the basis for the laughter. AS individuals are often less likely to engage in contagious laughter and even may find tickling offensive because of its inherent social nature.

OK...now you're wondering, what to do about all this. Since we know that laughing on a regular basis is good for most people and often socially expected, we need to have some work-arounds to the basic differences AS individuals encounter when trying to be funny

or appreciate humor in others. Here are some ideas to try.

First, remember that humor appreciation requires some fundamental skills (reading nonverbal communication, perspective taking) that you may be lacking, so it's difficult. Be gentle with yourself and help others understand that you most likely "won't get it" but want to try and figure it out. Look for ways to analyze all aspects of humor, as studying the phenomenon may help you look at more systematically. Recent work with Aspies show wide variations in their ability to see the humor or understand why it's funny when reviewing Abbot and Costello film footage (O'Connell, 2005). Movies or cartoons can be a great way to begin this work as you can pull the action apart and re-look or rewind the action. TV comedy shows that use laugh tracks may also help you pinpoint what makes people laugh, as they have usually been placed within the show at the most typical "laugh point". You may even want to read about the science of humor and laughter as well as the art of comedy to help you organize your thinking about it. It may help you determine what types of humor you already understand pretty well and which ones are harder for you. Understanding that laughter does not always mean it's funny and being able to categorize what type of situation it is might also help you feel much less socially awkward. A number of good references follow this article.

After you feel fairly comfortable that you understand the basis for why people are likely to laugh, try asking a few people that you are really comfortable with to help you practice being funny and responding to their humor. You can continue to analyze movies, cartoons and other humorous materials, read jokes to each other like stand up comedians or develop some other type of scripted situation that reduces the amount of spontaneous behavior you have to engage in while trying to learn how to do humor. Because humor typically requires close interpersonal contact, make sure these are people that you can be face-to-face with and exchange regular eye contact with. You might even agree to have a nonverbal cue that you can use between you for when you need to stop, with the idea that this cue can be used in more typical social situations later on as you become more comfortable sharing humor in public.

Another great vehicle is consider joining a drama club or if you feel you are ready for a more challenging situation, trying out for a play. Drama clubs are increasingly common as a place where people can come together and do improvisation or develop scripts and plays. Though this work is not likely to focus exclusively on comedy, the social and analytical nature of drama allows you to learn a lot about emotions as well as facial expressions and how to improve your presentation of affect. If you choose to use these situations to practice, be sure to evaluate them for their supportive nature before getting involved. Some theatre situations may require a very thick skin (not getting upset by things that happen) and not be sensitive to your needs to try many times before being successful.

Remember that humor is primarily social and laughter is very context dependent. To increase your probability of success, it is suggested that you begin to practice these skills in casual atmospheres, larger group settings or festive events. There is a more forgiving attitude among people for the use of humor that might not gel with the social context in larger, less formal and interpersonal settings. This is important as you learn how to do

humor, because you're likely to make mistakes about timing, audience and when to laugh. A key ingredient of understanding and using laughter is that speakers (the person telling the joke or humorous story) will laugh more than the audience, so think about what role you are "playing" in the interaction. Keep in mind that some forms of humor, such as those that involve sexual or aggressive themes, can only be used with people you know very well and that someone's gender is a big factor in how they interpret humor or whether someone might be offended. Males and females each have humor that is used only with their own gender and using it across gender lines often results in someone being offended by it. Because women generally laugh a lot more than men and women laugh more at men than men at women, it is likely best to use someone of your gender when looking for role models to emulate.

As you build your understanding and skills around humor, begin to appreciate it first and then experiment with its use in more complex situations, such as work environments or in romantic situations. Using humor on the job is more difficult because humor is often used, but there is an expectation that individuals will make jokes, laugh, etc. quickly and then return to work, moving quickly between humorous social exchanges and work related activity. Also, as with gender, telling a joke to a supervisor or customer is likely to be very different than sharing it with a co-worker. Because romantic situations are often very tentative initially and people judge how comfortable they are before moving to the next level of intimacy, you need to be careful that the laughter is always shared with your partner and that any mishaps using humor are repaired.

When you first are doing this in more public settings, try exploiting the contagious laugh effect by seeking out more good-natured people who like to have fun and laugh. Join in with them when they laugh and note whether you understand the reason for the laughter. Remember that things are funny because of the truth and pain that they express. If you do not get it, try and use the categories of laughter to determine why the laughter occurred and determine whether the situation was a humorous one. Ask a close friend or relative to help you understand what happened before you no longer remember the details of the event. Try not to get frustrated by this challenge in understanding, be ready to laugh again and even laugh at how ridiculous this is that you can't readily understand what is so BLOODY funny! HA- HA!!

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