

REVIEW EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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As noted by scholars from various academic disciplines, humor is seemingly an inescapable part of human existence (Martin, 2007; Meyer, 2000). Humor's pervasiveness can be observed in personal relationships (see Hampes, 1992, 1994), places of employment (see Gibson 1994; Ramsey, Knight, Knight, and Verdon, 2011), political and social discourse (Meyer, 2000; Stewart, 2012), and many other contexts of human-based message production and reception. But, what is humor? The Oxford English dictionary has defined humor as "the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocular imagination or treatment of a subject" (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 486). Obviously, countless definitions of humor exist. This is also true for the theoretical explanations proposed to explain humor occurrences. The most popular theories of humor are three unique perspectives aptly labeled the *Big Three*.

Plato and Aristotle are credited for introducing the oldest of the *Big Three*, the superiority perspective (Morreall, 1983). Proponents of this perspective believe that humor is merely a product of perceptual superiority. In other words, humor emerges from discourse tied to inferior social status, physical and mental weaknesses, mistakes, errors, defects, or deviant behavior. Examples of humor embodying this perspective include self-deprecatory humor, put-down jokes, and racist and sexist humor. Gruner (1997), a modern contributor to this perspective, proposed that jokes and other humorous messages contain *targets of aggression*. Moreover, he contended that targets of aggression are observable in all humor incidences. Consequently, humorous messages ranging from simple "knock knock" jokes, where the unknowing participant plays the part of the fool, to gallows humor, where the death of a target is imminent, originate from a sense of superiority. Adding support for this perspective, biologists have argued that human-based humor may have evolved from rough and tumble play, physical play where dominant and submissive acts are performed. Such play is observable in a wide variety of animal species (Gervais & Wilson, 2005; Martin, 2007; Panksepp & Burgdorf, 2003). Although the superiority perspective may explain a large portion of humor, like all theoretical perspectives, limitations abound.

The second of the *Big Three*, the incongruity perspective, explains one aspect of humor that superiority theorists

typically neglect, the cognitive nature of humor. Morreall (1983) noted that the superiority perspective primarily addresses the emotional and affective; however, "for the incongruity theory [humorous] amusement is an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical or inappropriate in some other way" (p. 15). Simply put, humor may be a product of cognitive and/or perceptual shifts. Like the superiority perspective, Aristotle is credited as incongruity theory's initial creator (Morreall, 1983; Martin, 2007); however, this perspective was not fully realized until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the works of Kant and Schopenhauer explicated incongruity humor (Morreall). Much like the superiority perspective, modern scholars have continued to employ incongruity theory in social-psychological works (see Deckers & Devine, 1981; Galloway, 2009; Samson, 2009) and modern communication research (see Meyer, 1997, 2000; Shouse, 2007). Nevertheless, like the superiority perspective, the incongruity theory only offers a partisan approach to humor. Critics of the incongruity perspective have noted that this approach reduces humor to an individualistic and cognitive process (Shouse, 2007). Moreover, all incongruous events are not humorous. Car accidents, unexpected deaths, violations of valued social norms are all incongruous, but they are rarely considered humorous.

The last of the *Big Three*, the relief perspective, examines the emotional, affective, and behavioral nature of humor. The relief perspective has inspired modern researchers to examine humor and arousal (see Berlyne, 1960, 1972) and humor as an emotional coping mechanism (see Harzold & Sparks, 2006; Martin, 1996; Wanzer, Sparks, & Frymier, 2009). Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud are credited with the development of the relief perspective (Martin, 2007), which presents humor and laughter as mechanisms for the release of stressors, tension, and excess energy. From this perspective, laughter may be considered humorous or non-humorous (Morreall, 1983). Humorous laughter is experienced when one laughs at humorous stimuli (a joke, an incongruity, or etc.) and feels a sense of relief from excess stressors, energy, or tension. Non-humorous laughter is experienced without humorous stimuli; however, energy, tension, and/or stressors are released through laughter (Morreall). Moreover, relief laughter can be situational (where tension is built and relieved in

one situation) or cross-situational (where tension builds via multiple events and situations and is relieved at a later time through laughter) (Morreall).

As an early contributor to the relief perspective, Freud (1959) believed that *drives* were responsible for the excess energy, tension, and/or stressors that create humor. He believed that the only *drives* that produce humor are sexuality and hostility; conversely, modern research indicates that almost any number of *drives* may motivate the creation of humor (see Harzold & Sparks, 2006; Vela, Booth-Butterfield, Wanzer, & Vallade, 2013; Wanzer, Sparks, & Frymier, 2009). Like the superiority and incongruity perspectives, the relief perspective is partisan, only accounting for specific humor occurrences. However, when taken as a whole, the *Big Three* perspectives offer humor researchers a firm foundation for empirical and critical investigations. Likewise, the *Big Three* serve as umbrella perspectives for modern theories of humor such as reversal theory, bisociation, expectancy violation theory, instructional humor processing theory, incongruity resolution, arousal theory, and numerous others (see Martin, 2007).

In closing, the current state of humor research is rousing and promising. Modern humor scholars hail from a variety of academic disciplines, and their contributions to humor research encompass a myriad of interesting and rigorous methodological approaches. The interdisciplinary nature of humor research offers scholars, practitioners, and others distinctive glimpses into one of the most fascinating areas of research. This edition of *Proteus* features high quality research and artistic pieces that reflect the best in humor research.

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