A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HUMOUR THEORY

by

ROBERT LAWRENCE PAYET GORDON

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study of humour theory

This qualitative study of humour theory provides a broad descriptive account of the current status of humour theory within the multidisciplinary context of human and social studies. The nature of qualitative research is examined in terms of its relevance to humour research studies. Qualitative research is found to be a generic term applying to a range of types of data collecting approaches that fall outside the ambit of quantitative paradigms. Quantitative methods are shown as having limited applicability to humour studies which are primarily reliant on data collecting. Humour is examined in terms of its biological, phylogenetic and historical antecedents. The emergence of schools of humour theory is discerned; and a study is made of changing social perceptions of humour in terms of the 'ruling discourse'. Humour theory is examined in terms of parameters of contemporary research which entails the processes of defining humour and theorizing about humour in terms of a variety of variables. Critiques are provided of Murdock and Ganim's macro-level descriptive study of humour definitions and theories as well as of Apter's reversal theory of humour. Reflectivity is employed as a qualitative approach to analyse the personal experience of a 'humorous event'. Attention is also given to the relevance of orality, oral tradition and anthropological perspectives to humour research. Finally, recommendations are made for further research.

Keywords:

Humour	**Reversal theory**	**Reflectivity**
Humour theory	**Orality**	**Qualitative research methodology**

I, Robert Lawrence Payet GORDON, declare that, except for quotation specifically indicated in the text, this dissertation is wholly my own and has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.

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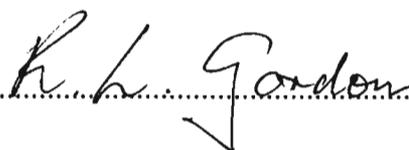
R.L. GORDON

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PREFACE

The occurrence of humour in academic writing is not commonplace. In more whimsical moments, I have hypothesized that this stems from a pious bias that crept into the collective personality of the early *invisible college* who have remained steadfastly unamused while the *ruling discourse* has evolved dynamically along with changing epistemological perspectives. I have also speculated optimistically that this hypothesis may have had the support of no less an authority than Voltaire (in LeGoff, 1997:40) who is credited with once saying:

'People who seek metaphysical causes for laughter are not cheerful'.

There are also times when I have found humour in the notion that Voltaire's ex-cathedra statement is in fact a shrewd example of ironic academic hyperbole. 'Shrewd' because I would like to suspect that Voltaire may have anticipated that one day one of the 'givens' of human studies would be that humour is a difficult concept to quantify, and certainly no laughing matter for those trying to do so. 'Ironic' because I am amused by the equally unlikely possibilities that Voltaire may have not only recognised his statement as hyperbole, but also anticipated that this hyperbole would be lost on Twentieth Century positivists whose first reaction would be to brand it as an 'unfounded hypothesis' and set about identifying appropriate construct variables to create measuring instruments for studying humour theorists' dispositions. 'Ironic' also because there is no doubt that the humour theorists themselves would see the funny side of being subjected to quantitative scrutiny to disconfirm a qualitative notion concerning their own 'cheerfulness' or lack of it, and that most would smile in recognition of the fact that the results of a study of their cheerfulness would probably be about as useful as discovering whether dentists have good teeth.

Then again, perhaps Voltaire was just letting off steam. One thing is certain however, and that is that Voltaire (who if anything was known for his *certainty*) would have been comfortable in a Twentieth Century *milieu* in which high technology and an Utopian belief in scientific progress has bestowed upon technocratic idealists an unfounded sense of *certainty* embedded in the erroneous belief that all knowledge is accessible to those who master the paradigms of empiricism.

This study not only suggests the contrary, but also embraces the aesthetic of *uncertainty* as a qualitative facet of humour.

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CHAPTER ONE

A qualitative approach to humour theory

The central concern of this study is to provide a qualitative perspective of humour and humour theories. This undertaking has three basic elements, namely 'qualitative', 'humour' and 'theories'. In these introductory comments, attention is directed towards these elements in order to identify the parameters of the study. The term 'qualitative' refers to the nature of the methodological approach; whereas the term 'humour' refers to the topic, and the term 'theories' refers to the aspect of the topic that is to receive special attention. Although the issue of methodology is never far from the surface throughout this dissertation, the main focus of the study is on humour in general and humour theories in particular. Consequently, the present chapter deals mainly with the approach that will be taken, and focusses on the nature of qualitative research and its relevance to humour studies and humour theory.

1.1   The term 'qualitative'

Although the term 'qualitative' is commonly used in the English-speaking world to infer excellence, there is a grey area in interpretations of the term's etymology. The

<u>Concise Oxford dictionary of current English</u> (1964:1003) indicates that 'quality' stems from the Latin word *'qualis'* meaning of 'of what kind', and that 'quality' may have either an affirmative or a negative connotation depending upon its usage, as for example in 'poor quality' or 'superior quality'. However, in spite of this, the quality of neutrality is apparently ignored in subsequent dictionary definitions. Four of the five denotations provided by the same dictionary for 'quality' emphasize its positive and judgmental aspects, as follows: (i) 'degree of excellence', (ii) 'faculty, skill, accomplishment', (iii) 'high rank or standing', and (iv) 'distinctive character' (of voice). There is, however, one other entry that allows that 'quality' may have either a positive or a negative connotation, and there is also an indication that 'quality' is used as an opposite of 'quantity'. The semantic implication of the popular usage of 'quality' when juxtaposed with 'quantity' is the assumption that the former is superior to the latter. This has led to the American colloquialism 'quality time' that infers that a limited quantity of time can be used to create a more intense and meaningful experience than normal.

The denotations in the standard language dictionaries are also reflected in early specialist subject dictionary definitions such as Drever's a <u>Dictionary of psychology</u> (1964:237) that defines 'quality' as follows:

> '**Quality**. A fundamental aspect or attribute of sensory experience, differentiating one experience from another, within the same sensory field, of a non-qualitative character, and independently of all aspects of a quantitative character.'

The principal features of this traditional definition have gained universal acceptance among academics as a standard and neutral descriptive basis to denote the meaning

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of the term 'qualitative' in its application to categorise certain types of research studies, and also as a label for studies that are not categorised as 'quantitative'. It is also the definition that applies in this study, however this does not imply that the term 'qualitative' meets with the universal approval of the research community.

A case in point is Renata Tesch (1990:3) who early in the first chapter of Qualitative research, expresses the sentiment that she dislikes the term 'qualitative'. The reasons she gives are convincing, and include the fact that there is ample evidence that in current usage the word 'qualitative' has a positive and judgmental connotation, and that it may be 'rather stilted'. Tesch also argues that 'qualitative' is an unsatisfactory label for a generic category that has the non-membership of another category as the main criterion for its own membership. It is the latter characteristic that appears most irksome to Tesch who sees the origins of the term as not so much deriving naturally from the intrinsic features of the objects it describes, but instead being selected for the extrinsic reason that as a word it sounded like the opposite of 'quantitative'.

Tesch's standpoint concerning the term 'qualitative' appears to be corroborated by information from her comprehensive survey of a vast diversity of research labelled as 'qualitative'. Historical evidence indicates that from the 1920s onwards the burgeoning influence of science and the scientific method ensured that the recognised *ruling discourse* in human studies research methodology was the positivist tradition that emphasized quantitative research. Support for positivism in the so-called 'human sciences' reached a crescendo in the United States during the 1950s when

behaviourism was at the vanguard of human studies research in America. During the past decade, the positivist perspective has continued to dominate the establishment paradigms utilized in many fields of study, as is evidenced by the ongoing popularity of publications by Anastasi (1990), Kline (1993), Christensen (1988) and Berlak and Hersen (1988) as 'recommended' university texts on quantitative research methodology. However in recent years the dominance of the quantitative approach in most fields of human studies has been challenged by the emerging popularity of qualitative approaches.

Although in its application to research, the term 'qualitative' has been used by some observers to identify a disparate group of methodological alternatives to quantitative research, caution should be exercised in not making the erroneous generalisation that qualitative research is derivative in the sense that it owes its existence to being a reactionary alternative to quantitative research. During the high-profile rise to prominence of positivism, many methodological approaches in human studies known today as 'qualitative' approaches were in fact present under a variety of other nomenclature. Examples during the 1950s were the ethnographic studies of George Spindler (1955), the action research of Stephen Corey (1953), and the phenomenological analysis of Adrian van Kaam (1959).

The politics of research have weighed heavily on the development of the so-called 'qualitative' movement, and during the 1950s the early qualitative approaches were viewed as erring on the side of political incorrectness in the sense that they were

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embedded in alternative paradigms to the mainstream empirical paradigms of the positivist *ruling discourse*. To some extent, the early 'qualitative' schools were outcasts in a research climate characterised by the growing ascendancy of positivism and the increasing preoccupation of the *ruling discourse* with observable behaviour and statistics. Positivism and the scientific method became established in the eyes of many as the sacred paths to the holy grail of universal truth.

The inevitable followed. The perceived rigidity of positivism was interpreted by some members of the research community as a challenge to academic freedom, and ultimately appeared to have the effect of provoking the ire of a new generation of researchers who seemed to react against what they perceived as the prescriptive ethos of a limiting 'world view'. In any event, a reactionary movement away from the quantitative perspective gained popularity during the late 1960s. The movement served to voice the collective concern of researchers who were not married to the quantitative perspective *and* who were disturbed by institutional academic policy during an era in which didactic tomes on quantitative behavioural research were distributed to undergraduates on a large scale as the exclusive rule-books of research methodology. Examples of such publications include those of Kerlinger (1973), Cronbach (now 5th ed., 1990), Borg and Gall (3rd ed., 1979) and Carlsmith et al. (1976).

The search for alternative paradigms to supplement the classic experimental paradigms resulted in a variety of approaches. Some of these so-called 'qualitative'

approaches were related, but in general the tendency has been for tertiary textbook writers to identify the primary common denominator of 'qualitative' approaches as being that they were *not* quantitative. Tesch (1990:3) is of the opinion that it would be more proper to label the data under scrutiny as 'textual' and the type of research that is based on the data as 'descriptive' or 'interpretive/critical'. However, at other times, Tesch simply refers to 'non-positivistic studies', and ultimately appears to resign herself to majority rule by accepting the popular usage of the term 'qualitative' with the following refreshingly laconic comment:

> 'However, once a term has caught on in the community, trying to change it is about as fruitful as trying to unteach a parrot'.

(Tesch, 1990:3).

The ironic twist to this little tale of 'untaught' parrots is the fact that Tesch entitled her book '*Qualitative* research'. From the perspective of this study, this final turn of the screw gives the situation all the necessary components of the type of humour that the French refer to as '*rire jaune*' - the rueful 'yellow' laughter of resignation in the face of an insurmountable problem (cf. Chapter Seven). One is left to ponder the probability that Tesch's title has raised more than a few wry smiles from the authoress herself over the years as a constant reminder of her frustration over the inadequacy of available universally-accepted nomenclature.

1.2   Epistemological considerations: schools of approach

There has been a somewhat predictable aftermath to Tesch's (1990:3) observations that qualitative data are by popular consensus 'any data that are not quantitative' and that 'qualitative data are all data that cannot be expressed in numbers'. The fact that the qualitative category did not exist until there was an ex post facto grouping of disparate non-quantitative approaches may to some extent create the false impression among the uninitiated that there has been a fragmentation of 'qualitative' research into numerous schools of approach. In actuality, the truth lies not so much in the deconstruction of the monolith as in the removal of the generic veil.

The diversity within the qualitative research category is a strength as well as a hallmark. A strong spirit of individualism pervades the qualitative research scenario which if anything has its common denominator in an attitude of tolerance towards nonconformity that contrasts starkly with the rigidity of quantitative paradigms. This characteristic diversity is cast into greater relief by the fact that rather than being a natural term with a universal meaning, 'qualitative research' is basically an artificial generic term used as a label for non-quantitative approaches. The situation pertains in which different academic disciplines have developed different qualitative approaches to research, with the inevitable emergence of favoured types of qualitative research in a variety of fields of study.

In the field of Psychology, the well-known case study approach was for many years the popularly established modus operandi of qualitative researchers; whereas in more

recent times, phenomenological approaches have gained increasing support in the field of qualitative inquiry. Likewise, the traditional participant observation approach of Sociology has been joined in recent decades by the newer qualitative field of ethnomethodology. In the case of Education, qualitative research has been conducted in a number of areas including naturalistic inquiry, phenomenography and ethnography.

Because qualitative research means different things to different people in different disciplines, there are also just as many different ways of analysing and interpreting the types of data that reflect these interpretive differences. In spite of their many differences however, qualitative researchers do appear to have common ground in the sense that they almost all defend each other's respective rights to be different. In reviewing literature across the spectrum of the so-called 'qualitative' approaches, one gains the impression that these researchers collectively adamantly reject standardization which they see as another limited and limiting example of the inflexibility that they perceive as characterizing the quantitative approach.

By implicit agreement on a multidisciplinary level, qualitative researchers also appear to have reached a broad consensus in endorsing the principle that qualitative analysis involves a process (however idiosyncratic) of making sense of narrative data. Qualitative researchers in general tend to emphasize the idea of there being no 'one-best-way' (Tesch, 1990:96). Amid the wide diversity of principles and procedures of qualitative analysis that become apparent whenever qualitative researchers

describe methodology, there appears to be a spirit of '*vive le difference*' and sense of variety being the spice of life. The *espirit de corps* of a group that celebrates heterogeneity engenders healthy diversity that is manifested in an implicit encouragement of individual differences in approach as the source of variety that provides a wider understanding of human phenomena.

It is not within the parameters of this study to provide an in-depth comparative analysis of the formidable array of qualitative approaches to human studies. Nevertheless, there is a need to contextualize this particular study within a general epistemological framework of these approaches. For the sake of brevity, information concerning the diverse range of approaches that have been labelled as 'qualitative' is synthesized in **Appendix A** which contains an alphabetical listing of these approaches. From an epistemological perspective, each of the listed orientations represents a school of methodological approach in human studies. The table presented in **Appendix A** is in effect a selective glossary of the best-known of the so-called 'qualitative' approaches, and is drawn largely from Tesch's (1990:21-54) extensive survey of current non-positivistic approaches in various fields of human studies. Many of the terms of reference listed are defined or described by appropriate citations drawn from source references of authorities in these fields. For convenience, a separate list of source references for these citations accompanies the alphabetized list of approaches in **Appendix A**.

Among these so-called 'non-traditional' (Goldman, 1982:87) schools of research are several that through longevity have become entrenched in recent 'establishment' epistemology. Nevertheless, these schools of approach are still referred to as 'non-traditional' because they offer alternative qualitative paradigms to the quantitative paradigms that are associated with mainstream conceptualizations of traditional positivistic research approaches. The more established 'non-traditional' qualitative fields include ethnography, participant observation, case studies, ethnomethodology, reflective phenomenology, and content analysis. These non-quantitative approaches have been in existence for long enough to prompt some observers to describe them as being both unorthodox as well as 'classic'.

1.3   The nature of non-traditional research

In an article entitled 'Defining non-traditional research', Goldman (1982:88) notes that:

> '... precision tends to be associated in people's minds with numbers and with experimental and correlational methods of research. However, there may be a spurious air of precision about those traditional methods and an equally spurious air of vagueness about the 'X' methods'.

The issue at hand is *not* that the 'received view' (Suppe, 1977:116) of the positivistic tradition is challenged as a viable means of knowing, but rather that until recently the academic culture accepted the 'received view' as a *ruling discourse* in research methodology, and by tacit approval conferred upon it a status that reinforced its

implicit promise of certainty. This issue is both methodological and ethical, and Goldman's (1982:88) emphasis of the term 'precision' is very pertinent in this context. The goal of achieving greater precision exemplifies the idealistic ethos of the technocratic society with its hopeful vision that technological improvements will provide answers to *all* questions.

The march towards greater precision is generally accompanied by an accumulating body of scientific knowledge supported by a research community encouraged by tangible evidence of progress that usually engenders confidence and the promise of a light at the end of the tunnel. The implication for research methodology is that the characteristic 'hi-tech' nature of contemporary First World society tends to reinforce the *Weltanschauung* (or 'world view') of the positivistic tradition, and to some extent provides a research climate that is characterized by the implicit notion that all problems can be solved if the appropriate procedure of scientific methodology is followed.

The confusions of technological idealism are an ongoing feature of the contemporary Electronic Age. The key distinction that is made too seldom in this context is that between the physical and the metaphysical. The classic technocratic oversight is the boundary between humankind's material and spiritual worlds. The effect is that the search for technocratic precision is extrapolated to embrace the search for philosophical certainty.

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There is a well-known incident in Shakespeare's <u>Hamlet</u> in which Hamlet's loyal friend Horatio, a man of reason, expresses his bewilderment at witnessing Hamlet's father's ghost, to which Hamlet replies:

Hamlet: 'And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'

(Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act II, sc1. - ref. 1952:878)

These words, written by Shakespeare some four hundred years ago, aptly and inadvertently identify some of the shortcomings of contemporary technological idealism that surface in the shortsightedness of scientific determinism. Hamlet's words signal the need to welcome a diversity of alternative interpretations of physical and metaphysical phenomena in a nonthreatening environment, and this has contemporary relevance to the closeted academic environment that has grown around positivism.

The confrontation between freedom and control is a perennial academic theme. Frederick Suppe (1977:116) indicates that '... the vast majority of working philosophers of science seem to fall on the portion of the spectrum which holds The Received View fundamentally inadequate and untenable'. The synergy between scientific certainty and philosophical uncertainty has been an almost constant source of academic tension over the generations as various social philosophers have challenged 'The Received View'. In this respect, Koch (1981:262) cites Bertrand Russell's statement that '... almost all the questions of most interest to speculative minds are such as science cannot answer', and then proceeds to examine the

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approaches of social and human scientists in general and admonishes those guilty of 'ameaningful thinking' couched in 'method-fetishism'.

Koch's rather colourful criticism certainly doesn't spare the rod, and perhaps there is a healthy measure of playful hyperbole in his castigations of his more positivistic colleagues. This tendency is particularly evident in Koch's somewhat vitriolic definition of 'ameaningful' as '...a fear-driven species of cognitive constriction, a reduction of uncertainty by denial, by a form of phoney certainty achieved by the covert annihilation of the problematic, the complex and the subtle' (Koch, 1981:264). Whereas Koch probably makes few friends among quantitative research methodologists with this provocative statement, he also raises the controversial issue of the tendency towards particularization to avoid 'the problematic', and he identifies this phenomenon as stemming from a scenario in which researchers are the products of a subculture that seeks certainty.

According to Koch's argument, an 'ameaningful' research climate is one that nourishes the undesirable tendency to avoid problematic or contentious topics in formal academic studies, and to opt for the greater certainty of a neat quantifiable project. The substance of Koch's reasoning has relevance within the present context of this 'qualitative study of humour theory'. Koch's view is that 'ameaningful' thinkers tend to take the easy way out by avoiding complex problems and choosing simple projects that portend predictable results. Accordingly, the consequences of 'ameaningful thinking' are that the topics most popularly selected for academic

research tend to be those that conform neatly to what are regarded as acceptable parameters reflecting the prevailing conventions of academic research.

In the context of the present study, it does not require too great a leap in extrapolation to observe that humour researchers may find themselves more attracted by the comfortable certainty promised by the quantitative approach than by the potential perils of the qualitative path. On the other hand, it must be emphasized that the latter observation does not necessarily represent a denigration of quantitative research *per se*. On the contrary, both Koch's ire and my present criticism is directed towards 'ameaningful' thinkers rather than towards quantitative research itself.

Notwithstanding the proviso that the contributions of quantitative approaches to humour research should not be underestimated, the priority in research design should be the nature of the problem under scrutiny. Accordingly, researchers should design their studies to solve rather than avoid problems, and should strongly resist the 'ameaningful' practice of searching among available content for specific problems that may conveniently suit preferred preordained research designs. To do otherwise would be to put style before substance. The findings of this study (cf. particularly Chapter Four and Chapter Five) suggest that studies of the nature of humour tend to lend themselves more naturally to qualitative methodological approaches because much of the focus of attention is directed towards narrative data.

The goal of the present study of humour theory is certainly not to reach the comfort zone of neatly quantified *certainty*. The search for universal truths in humour theory presents something of a holy grail scenario, and the pursuit of some of these truths should not be ignored because the process is problematic or complex. The nature of knowing is itself both problematic and complex. Even our notions concerning objectivity are challenged by the fact that we view the world through subjective eyes which select and emphasize aspects of the particular phenomena being studied. Almost a quarter century after Brand (1974:20) posed the question: 'What colour is a chameleon on a mirror?', we still stand in wonder on the edge of a 'looking glass universe' trying to find ourselves in a universe of ourselves (Briggs and Peat, 1984). Notwithstanding the ambitions of the present study, efforts have been made to conduct it with a sense of awareness of the nature of the beast that embodies the activity of knowing.

A comprehensive philosophical study of the nature of 'knowing' is outside the ambit of this study. Nevertheless, there is a need to recognize that the process of 'knowing' about phenomena associated with human studies cannot be addressed by quantifiable methods alone. Qualitative studies are an essential element of the 'big picture'. Polkingthorne (1984:427) exemplifies this sense of fascination amongst academics with the 'big picture' of knowledge and the universe in his argument that:

> 'The activity of knowing is itself a human phenomenon. How can we turn the tools of knowledge-making on ourselves when we are the tool makers? There is no absolute point outside human phenomena from which to investigate. Moreover, the knowledge gained when we study ourselves changes the object that we are studying'.

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Polkingthorne's observations focus on the idiosyncratic synergy between subjectivity and objectivity that appears to produce a self-reinforcing circularity in the thought processes that are central to the individual's philosophical perspectives of the nature of knowledge. These insights alert observers to both the complexity and the uncertainty of the nature of knowledge, as well as to the need to look beyond the immediacies of what at first appear to be statistical certainties. From the standpoint that the term 'qualitative' is a central referent in the title of this study, it is vital that cognisance should be taken of both the universe we are observing as well as the universe of ourselves as observers. In this case, for example, it is important to look beyond the cybernetics of the issue at hand towards the level of the cybernetics of cybernetics (Becvar and Becvar, 1996:63).

At the level of the cybernetics of cybernetics, researchers recognise science as an activity performed on those parts of the whole that have been selected as objects of particularisation (Becvar and Becvar, 1996:62-66). This recognition is accompanied by a further recognition that the scientist is part of the process. The social implications of the latter recognition are interpreted by some as an inference that the scientist has a certain sociocultural responsibility in the grand scheme of things. For present purposes, the standpoint of Becvar and Becvar (1996:340) on this matter provides what I regard as a satisfactorily organised response to some of the 'big questions' that have relevance to qualitative studies as follows:

'A responsible reply to the cultural mandate to provide answers to questions, to solve the problems, may be to reeducate the culture on the nature and limits of our knowledge. A part of this education might include providing the following information:

(1) We don't know what is real. We don't have a God's-eye view of the world.

(2) The answers we give to the questions posed are limited by the theoretical framework and the methodology employed to study the questions.

(3) The solutions we provide, given theoretical and methodological limitations, are based on the study of a part, which is recursively linked to other parts comprising a whole. Because of our limited frame of reference, such solutions may solve a problem only to generate other problems at a higher order.

(4) The phenomenon we studied is not the way it was before we studied it. It is different by the very act of observation.

(5) Given the logic of our solution to the problem, as it was posed and as it was studied, the object of our attempted solutions will take on characteristics of the theory implicit in our model.'

1.4 'Principles' of qualitative research

At the conclusion of the previous section of this chapter, the question of principles or generally accepted rules of conduct was introduced. When the question of 'characteristics of the theory implicit in our model' (Becvar and Becvar, 1996:340) is applied to this study, it will be observed that its idiosyncratic non-quantitative nature permits its qualification as a 'qualitative' study. The approach taken in this study has been identified as 'qualitative' because its characteristics are consistent with those of the general category of non-positivistic approaches to human study.

In this regard, a brief consideration of the primary characteristics of 'qualitative research' contextualizes the present qualitative study of humour theory. Tesch (1990:95-97) identifies ten so-called 'principles and practices' that she argues holds true for virtually all types of so-called 'qualitative' analysis, as follows:

(1)   It is concurrent with data collection or cyclic, and is never considered as the final phase in the research process. Analysis is open-ended and ongoing.

(2)   The analysis process is orderly, systematic and comprehensive, but not rigid.

(3)   The analysis process involves attending to data through reflective activity that results in a set of analytical notes that guide the process.

(4)   A holistic perspective serves as a frame of reference for the 'segmenting' of data in relevant and meaningful units.

(5)   An inductive process is used to categorize data segments according to an organizing system that is predominantly derived from the nature of the data.

(6)   The main intellectual tool is comparison to accomplish the goal of discerning conceptual similarities, refining the discriminative power of categories, and to discover patterns.

(7)   Categories for organizing segments are flexible working tools, not rigid end products. These categories are tentative at the outset, and remain flexible throughout because research is ongoing.

(8)   Creative involvement is central, and any form of prescription or standardization is avoided. Hence, there is no 'one-right-way' to manipulate qualitative data during analysis which is in fact an eclectic activity.

(9)   Qualitative analysis procedures can and should proceed 'artfully', and these procedures are neither 'scientific' nor 'mechanistic'.

(10)   The final outcome of qualitative analyses is some type of higher-level synthesis that provides further insight into the nature of the data.

These ten principles identify general commonalities in an epistemological terrain where it appears that an escape from standardization is a common goal of most of the

'qualitative' players involved. This collective attitude exemplifies the *Zeitgeist* of the qualitative movement and tends to militate against those naive enough to attempt to identify a set of common laws that can be applied formulaically to all forms of qualitative research. Whereas replicability is a tenet of quantitative research, a persistent theme of qualitative methodology is the recognition of the researcher's individuality as a research instrument. Differences in philosophical stances and individual styles account for the fact that even when faced with the same task, different qualitative researchers may produce different results without jeopardizing notions concerning validity. Nevertheless in spite of the emphasis on individuality, the ten principles provided by Tesch (above) serve as a useful composite frame of reference within which we may contextualize qualitative studies in general and the present study in particular.

In this regard, an interesting footnote that is also of particular relevance to this study is the comment made by Goetz and LeCompte (1984:172) with respect to qualitative research design in ethnographic studies. In considering the 'unscientific' nature of qualitative research (cf. the ninth of Tesch's above principles), Goetz and LeCompte emphasize that flexibility is necessary for creativity, and that ethnographic research may in certain circumstances be done 'playfully'. In this respect, the quality of 'playfulness' is an idiosyncratic but also appropriate feature of the present study.

Corroborating evidence is close at hand to confirm that playfulness is a central characteristic of humour itself. For example, Murdock and Ganim's (1993) macro-

analysis of humour theory indicates that the criterion of 'playfulness' is a primary element of the spontaneity theory associated with the humour process (cf. Chapter Five). Furthermore, the characteristic of 'playfulness' is a central feature of Apter's conceptualization of the 'paratelic-mode' in his reversal theory of humour (cf. Chapter Six). Accordingly, readers of this study are forewarned that at times an element of 'playfulness' may find its way into this text, and for this I am appreciative of the licence suggested by Goetz and LeCompte (1984:72).

1.5   Labelling this study as 'qualitative'

The present study may be characterised as an idiosyncratic descriptive study of humour theory that involves scrutiny of data through reflectivity. The process of analysis proceeds within a relatively systematic framework designed to be comprehensive across a multidisciplinary range of humour-related theoretical approaches. The study commences with an attempt to come to terms with its epistemological locus in terms of methodological perspectives, and then proceeds to discuss the concept of humour and humour theories from a variety of standpoints with the aim or arriving at an integrated Olympian view of the topic (or as many Americans aptly call it: 'the big picture').

The respective chapters of this study represent the stages in the analytical process. Chapter Two is concerned with the retrospective study of humour theory in terms of its historical antecedents and the development of theories associated with humour.

Chapter Three examines the concept of the *ruling discourse* and its treatment of humour, and is followed by a chapter in which the status of humour is considered in terms of its being a subject for contemporary research. Accordingly, in Chapter Four the nature of humour research is examined within the dynamic context of the controversy surrounding the ongoing synergy between the quantitative and qualitative methods of investigation.

The following three chapters of the study are concerned with analyses of three different approaches to humour research. Chapter Five concerns a critique of Murdock and Ganim's 1993 descriptive macro-level study of humour theories which provides a frame of reference for the analyses that follow. By contrast, Chapter Six presents a critique of a single humour theory, namely that of Michael Apter (1989) whose reversal theory of humour is identified as deserving of greater attention. Chapter Seven constitutes a further approach to humour research in an introspective exercise in reflectivity that may be described as a 'micro-study' of a single so-called 'humorous event'.

Finally, to broaden the base of the study, attention is given to two areas that merit further consideration. Chapter Eight confronts the question of humour as related to orality and the oral tradition. Whilst engaged in the process of researching this relatively neglected area of study, I presented three related papers at South African international and national conferences in Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban. Although these conference papers were grounded in the preparation of the text of this study, the

papers themselves should be regarded as separate entities that complement rather than merely usher in this study. Although some of the ideas may recur, the papers themselves have *not* been adapted for inclusion in this study. The papers in question appear as **Appendices C, D** and **E** of this study in their previously published forms. It is suggested that these papers be read as a general precursor to the study itself, and also as they provide a complementary frame of reference for Chapter Eight which presents a further and different perspective of orality and the oral tradition in terms of its relationship to humour theory in the context of this study.

Another significant area of interest receives attention in Chapter Nine, namely the application of humour theory to 'the anthropology of jest'. At this juncture, the licence concerning 'playfulness' (referred to in section 1.4 above) may be invoked to assure anthropologists that the tail-end positioning of this topic is *not* intended as being representative of my opinion concerning the status of anthropology in the social sciences. Quite the contrary, as a person interested in humour wherever it may be found, I have long admired the humorous anecdotes of anthropological fieldworkers who in many cases seem to have needed to cling to a sense of humour as an essential requisite for survival in strange circumstances. The question of humour in academic writing also receives consideration in the anthropology chapter for two reasons. Firstly, in the context of this study, it is a neglected and pertinent aspect of the anthropology of humour prevailing in the behaviour of persons functioning within a culture of academia; and secondly, because frankly I have an idiosyncratic desire to see more of it.

In the final chapter, concluding comments are made concerning the strengths and limitations of this study, as well as recommendations for further research. In the interests of encouraging deeper insights into the nature of humour, the main concern of this concluding chapter is to present a frank overview of the value of this study in the context of the ongoing body of research that contributes to the development of humour theory.

Readers of this study are provided with enough textual evidence of my own preoccupation with the dynamic nature of the ongoing synergy between qualitative and quantitative methodological perspectives to perhaps conjecture that it is a crucial factor influencing my own *Weltanschauung* (or 'world view') of the nature of knowledge and the universe. However, while the latter may well be a tenable idiosyncratic supposition, it must be borne in mind that I also regard 'intellectual anxiety' as existing in a synergy between the certainty and uncertainty arising from the individual's perceptions of the nature of knowledge and the universe. Like the many before me who have decided that life is too short to dwell on the problem of whether the chicken preceded the egg or *vice versa*, I also feel that life is a little short to dwell too long in the realms of the circularity of speculations concerning whether the individual's *Weltanschauung* is a product of intrinsic intellectual synergies or whether idiosyncratic perspectives of these synergies are in fact a product of the individual's *Weltanschauung*. It is however an interesting philosophical conundrum.

Notwithstanding these personal observations, a fuller treatise on the mainsprings of academic inquiry is beyond the scope of this study. For the present, there is always the pleasure of the aesthetic of uncertainty, which is very much within the ambit of this study as I regard it as an important feature of humour.

CHAPTER TWO

Humour in retrospect

2.1   <u>The biological and phylogenetic roots of humour</u>

The objective of this chapter is to provide a thorough but concise historical perspective of the development of the concept of humour and the emergence of schools of humour theory. In order to lay a foundation for this historical perspective, a brief study of the biological and phylogenetic roots of humour follows as a precursor to investigating the development of humour definitions and theories.

On the surface, this appears straight-forward because the obvious starting point of any historical perspective of humour as a human phenomenon is probably a statement concerning humour as a human trait, possibly along the lines of:

> 'In all likelihood, certain characteristics of human behaviour such as laughter, joy and playfulness have been unique features of the human psyche that have endured universally since early recorded sociocultural history'.

In doing so, we would be in good company. The renowned Fourteenth Century French satirist Francois Rabelais once proclaimed that '*le rire est le propre de l'homme*' thereby expressing his belief that laughter was a property peculiar to

mankind (Gordon, 1996:1). However, with an advantage over Rabelais of five hundred years hindsight, not to mention the *big brother* of contemporary behavioural science at our shoulders, current approaches should be a little more circumspect than the either talented Frenchman's or the bland common-sense statement cited above.

In the first instance, statements that commence with the phrase 'in all likelihood' are usually untenable premises upon which to base any logical argument. In the circumstances, it would be more prudent to proceed from the more cautious standpoint that a survey of historical and anthropological research suggests that while humour can be described as by and large a universal phenomenon, the idea that it has been with us since time immemorial has not been proved (LeGoff, 1997:40-45; Driessen, 1997:224-241; Burke, 1997:61-75; Graf, 1997:29-39).

Furthermore, the idea that humour is a *unique* property of humankind is doubtful, irrespective of what Rabelais had to say - and more, especially because he said it well over three hundred years before Charles Darwin published The descent of man in 1871. Cognisance must be taken of the contemporary neo-Darwinian perspective that the idea that humour or other so-called 'human' characteristics are exclusive to Homo Sapiens is not only a product of observer bias, but also represents support for an untenable species-centric Western supposition with no scientific basis. In this regard, McCrone (1993:237-239) produces reliable evidence from his comparative survey of primate studies that indicates not only the presence of playfulness and

presumably light-hearted mischief in monkeys and apes, but also a tendency to bare the teeth and emit a laugh-like primate sound at certain times.

In another survey, Jacob Levine (1968:5) examines the phylogenetic gap between man and the animals, and ironically observes that '... behavioural scientists acknowledge the validity of the most fundamental principle in biology: evolution, but completely ignore it in humour theory and research'. Levine's review of well-known early studies of primates (notably Darwin, 1872; Yerkes, 1929; Köhler, 1961) indicates that apes possess 'primordial signs of a sense of humour', and that these animals have the capacity to communicate pleasure by providing facial and bodily expressions not dissimilar in spirit to smiling and laughing. Levine (1968:5) reports widespread evidence of playfulness among the primates who seem tireless in their teasing and prank-playing. It is reported, for example, that monkeys in zoos readily engage in clowning and comical posturing to obtain laughter from appreciative human audiences.

In discussing similarities between humans and chimpanzees, McCrone (1993:238) observes that studies have shown a strong similarity in emotional expressions, even if the primates' use of laughing behaviour appears more restricted and stereotyped by comparison. To humans, the chimp equivalent of the human smile looks more like a threatening exposure of clenched teeth, and the suggestion is that it may have evolved as '... a watered-down version of the chimpanzee's attack warning'. However, to other chimpanzees, the chimp equivalent of the human smile has a social

purpose as it is a signal of reassurance and appeasement *either* by a subordinate to ward off a potential attack by a dominant chimp *or* by a dominant chimp to reassure a subordinate.

McCrone (1993:238) also indicates that another chimpanzee characteristic that has a strong affinity with the human smile is the so-called 'playface' in which the mouth '... gapes open in a slightly idiotic fashion while the teeth remain hidden', and is generally accompanied by an excited 'ah-ah-ah' breathing sound that seems to be the equivalent of human laughter. This facial expression is generally present when chimpanzees engage in playful wrestling or other forms of social play. It is believed that the chimp's 'playface' expression delivers the social message among other animals of an absence of tension or true aggression, and introduces a tone of playfulness in its place.

This knowledge of chimpanzee 'smiling' and 'playface' behaviour helps put similar human behaviour in perspective, and provides some insight into the relationship between the overt products of humour (such as the smile or the laugh) and the process of humour itself. In human behaviour, for example, the smile is a versatile social device that is often used as a signal in a non-humorous situation to reassure others that the smiler is unthreatening or has friendly intentions. The smile may also signal a polite form of greeting, or a token display of pleasure, or an indication of agreement. A smile may also be a signal of recognition to a joker in a

communication process in which the smile acts as a formal response that registers the message that the smiler has understood and appreciated a joke.

Laughter is primarily an indication of arousal, although it usually signals a response to a humorous event. On other occasions, laughter may be an arbitrary behavioural indicator of excessive arousal, as in hysterical laughter which may be a reaction to a traumatic experience. There are also times when drug-induced high arousal may lead to laughter as a manic reaction to over-stimulation, hence perhaps the association of high arousal laughter and the drug named Ecstasy. In this respect, there are those who claim that the act of tickling a sensitive armpit can produce similar but less life-threatening effects. In the present context, the examples cited above serve to confirm the probability that these forms of laughter are induced by direct physiological arousal rather than by subtleties of the humour process *per se*.

In more recent times, certain emotional reactions have been associated somewhat vaguely with the concept of humour in the sense that, for example, laughter is usually interpreted as a reaction that signifies a response to humour. Likewise, a display of playfulness is sometimes viewed as signifying a willingness to humour someone or gratify their pleasure. However, the task of collating these diverse aspects and clustering them together under the umbrella of a generalised conceptualisation of the process and products of humour has been a relatively recent exercise. This has been accompanied by a renewed interest in the historical antecedents of humour theory, as well as the broad study of the origins and the history of humour. One of the

manifestations of the popularity of this field of inquiry among the academic community was the holding of an international conference with the theme of 'The cultural history of humour' in Amsterdam in January 1994 (Bremmer and Roodenburg, 1997:xi).

2.2   The historical roots of humour

In this section, preliminary attention is given to the usage of the word 'humour' in the living language in order to set in motion a concise review of the historical development of humour theory. The objective is to establish a frame of reference against which contemporary perspectives of humour can be examined in Chapter Three. The historical roots of humour are well signposted in the Oxford English dictionary, 2nd ed. on compact disc for the IBM PC which provides a thorough chronological overview of the etymological development of the term 'humour'. A relevant section of this source has been adapted for use in **Appendix B**. For present purposes, a brief consideration of the current usage of the word 'humour' serves as an introduction to a discussion of its historical antecedents.

The term 'humour' is used most commonly in everyday speech in two senses. As an abstract noun, 'humour' is a name given to any social event or series of such events that involves the transmission and reception of a message perceived by the receiver to be amusing. As a verb, humour refers to the sympathetic act of 'cheering someone

up' or suspending criticism of notions they may express. Accordingly, the Concise Oxford dictionary of current English (1964:592) uses terms such as 'comicality' and 'jocose imagination' to describe the current usage of humour as a noun, and refers also to the act of 'indulging or gratifying another's pleasure' as a description of the current usage of humour as a verb.

Baldensperger's early study of the etymology of the term 'humour' indicates that the modern meaning associated with it had its origins in England in 1682, until which time humour had connoted 'mental disposition' or 'temperament' (Bremmer and Roodenburg, 1997:8). Probably, the most significant early etymological milestone in the usage of the term 'humour' in its current sense came in 1709 when Lord Shaftesbury used the term 'humour' to mean more or less the same as it does today in his essay on 'The freedom of wit and humour' (Bremmer and Roodenberg, 1997:1). Although Bremmer and Roodenburg (1997:1) point out that Voltaire once claimed that the word 'humour' had French origins as it had derived from the French 'humeur', the general consensus is that its present semantic usage had English origins.

From 1725 onwards, there are records in historical documents that '... even the French themselves' acknowledged the term's English origins, and that as late as 1862 the famous French author Victor Hugo, in the first volume of *Les misérables,* spoke of 'that English thing they call humour' (Bremmer and Roodenburg, 1997:8). Bremmer and Roodenburg (1997:8) report that according to their retrospective

studies of French dictionaries, the French in fact only started pronouncing the word 'the French way' from the 1870s onwards (Bremmer and Roodenburg, 1997:8). To reinforce this viewpoint, evidence from historical documents also reveals several acknowledgements from Holland and Germany that the word 'humour' was an English 'import'. Furthermore, in 1810 an early German biographer of Joseph Haydn observed that a cardinal feature of the composer's personality was '... a sort of innocent mischievousness, or what the British call *humour*' (Brendell, 1990:14).

A study of the etymological development of the current usage of the term 'humour' reveals that an assortment of topics (such as wit, comedy, farce and practical jokes) that are currently collectively associated with the term 'humour' had already been studied separately before the generic label of 'humour' was applied to group them together. As a case-in-point, classical scholars have examined humour as a sphere of interest in antiquity. This task has been hampered by the sad loss of major works such as the second book of Aristotle's Poetics, as well as Theophrastus' On comedy and On the ludicrous (Bremmer and Roodenburg, 1997:4). In contemporary homage to these setbacks, Umberto Eco's novel The name of the rose effectively exploits the irretrievable loss of the second book of Aristotle's Poetics. Nevertheless, the principal legacy of antiquity to the field of humour studies is probably the surviving work of Cicero (106-43B.C.) who distinguished between the 'wit of matter' (viz. the telling and / or the re-telling of anecdotes or entertaining stories) and the 'wit of form' (viz. the making of humorous remarks and puns).

The distinction made by Cicero in Ancient Rome in the century before the birth of Christ was adapted and given a broader scope in 1528A.D. by the Renaissance Italian author Castiglione who introduced a third category to complement 'the wit of matter' and 'the wit of form'. This category comprises the '*burla*' or mild practical joke, and was described as being 'wit in action' (Woodhouse in Bremmer and Roodenburg, 1997:4). This insightful addition demonstrates that Castiglione recognised the need to develop ideas concerning wit or comedy beyond the limitations of verbal humour by acknowledging the role of nonverbal humour, and thereby providing a more holistic conceptualization of the nature of humour. Chapter Eight deals specifically with the broader perspective of humour and its relationship with orality and the oral tradition.

Further historical perspectives provide insight into the fact that the mainsprings of ongoing contemporary etiological discussions concerning humour are to some extent mirrored in disparate writings that in modern times have become part of a global cultural history of humour. A brief consideration of the historical development of ideas about humour reveals the antecedents of the principal contemporary theoretical standpoints concerning the etiology of humour.

2.3   The emergence of schools of humour theory

2.3.1 Superiority theory

The superiority theory of humour refers to the tendency of people to find amusement in the mishaps of others presumably because it excites favourable comparison with their own self-perceptions of superiority which are thought to stem from deep-seated anxieties about inferiority. In recent decades, the image of the fat man slipping on the banana peel has become a *clichéd* example of the superiority theory of humour. Typically, this involves laughter with a rather selfish and callous tone which says: 'The-joke's-on-you, and better-you-than-me!'. Basically, most would regard this genre as a rather undesirable form of humour that has been with us for a long time. In this respect, McCrone (1993:232) cites the example of Plato's description of laughter as self-congratulatory pleasure aroused by the recognition of weakness, infirmity and ignorance in others. The evidence of hearsay seems to suggest that certain Ancient Greeks experienced humour as a feeling of delighted superiority. Levine (1968:1) cites Plato's Philebus in which the philosopher expresses his disgust with the phenomenon of humour which he felt brought out the ugly and destructive side of human nature by degrading art, religion and morals. In fact, Plato went as far as to argue that humour should be avoided by civilised men.

During the Fifteenth Century, earlier ideas concerning superiority theory were re-iterated by the English political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, who described

laughter as '... a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly' (McCrone, 1993:233). Perhaps Hobbes' insight into the characteristic nature of humour in England provides a basis for understanding some of the sociocultural trends of English folk over the centuries. A good example may be found in the Nineteenth Century reports of social historians that many seemingly respectable Victorians who spent Sunday mornings in church, also spent Sunday afternoons jeering the inmates of local mental asylums (McCrone, 1993:234). Today it seems astonishing that the level of social acceptability acquired by this malicious brand of 'superiority' humour apparently legitimatized the practice of this form of public cruelty.

In similar vein, Robert Darnton's well-known historical anthropology essay on 'The Great Cat Massacre' presents a startling exploration of the violent rituals practised by mid-Eighteenth Century French artisans. Darnton (1984:75) commences his account of this tale of macabre humour with the sentence: 'The funniest thing that ever happened in the printing shop of Jacques Vincent, according to a worker who witnessed it, was a riotous massacre of cats'. Darnton's historically accurate account of the France of two hundred years ago invites comparison with contemporary vicarious forms of mass enjoyment of humour such as Hollywood-style 'slapstick' comedy that involves exploding cigars, collapsing buildings, and consequently much pain and anguish on the parts of the victims of this form of humour.

Bergson (LeGoff, 1997:40) was one of the earliest humour theorists of the Twentieth Century to describe the sociocultural factors influencing the nature of humour. In 1905, he described laughter as a shout of 'beware!' to others in the community, and discerned the source of much laughter as being directed at those victims of mishaps arising from a failure to adjust (Potter, 1954:22-23). Ultimately, these forms of humour are based on what the Germans have termed *Schadenfreude* which signifies joy at the perceived misfortunes of others (Burke, 1997:66), and in literal translation refers to joy (*'Freude'*) deriving from damage (*'Schaden'*).

Researchers such as Jacques LeGoff (1997) use the term 'superiority theory' to characterise this perspective of humour which basically portrays laughter as the manifestation of a perceived sense of dominance towards the victim of the humour. This genre of somewhat malicious and derisive humour has been of such longstanding and widespread currency on both sides of the Atlantic that *Schadenfreude* has long since been included in both the Oxford (1964:1125) and Webster's (1957:2233) dictionaries as an acknowledgement that it is part of the vocabulary of the living English language. Contemporary sensitivity towards the presence of the humour of *Schadenfreude* is to some extent reflected in the sense of guilt at the base of current preoccupations with 'political correctness', and has found humorous expression in literary works such as Garner's topical Politically correct bedtime stories (Garner, 1994).

2.3.2 Incongruity theory

As in the case of superiority theory, the historical antecedents of present-day incongruity theory also have their roots in the philosophical reflections of the Ancient Greeks. In this respect, McCrone (1993:234) indicates that Aristotle showed an awareness of the phenomenon of incongruity as an explanation of humour. However, it was not until many centuries later that the theory of incongruity was applied directly to humour by the Eighteen Century philosopher, Immanuel Kant who wrote: 'Laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into a nothing' (McCrone, 1993:234).

Kant's conceptualisation of the humour of incongruity is remarkably enlightened even by modern standards. The gist of his argument is that humour is created by an incongruous twist in the tale, with the effect being achieved by the receiver's surprise at the sudden descent of the expected course of events into insignificance through a downward twist in expectations. The so-called 'humorous event' is perceived as a sudden incongruity arising when mundane reality appears transformed into the ridiculous, or when boosted expectations are revealed as unfounded.

Murdock and Ganim (1993:57) cite the Nineteenth Century English essayist, William Hazlitt who in 1819 described the incongruous as being 'the essence of the laughable'. Hazlitt's insights into the nature of humour are also essentially modern in their perspectives. A case in point is Hazlitt's essay 'On wit and

humour' in which he states: 'Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be' (Murdock and Ganim, 1993:57).

Subsequent phylogenetic studies have indicated that monkeys and apes have their own equivalents of laughing and weeping (McCrone, 1993:238 and section 2.1 of this chapter). Nevertheless, the erroneous assumptions of the first part of Hazlitt's supposition can be temporarily set aside in order to consider the import of the second half of his statement. Basically, Hazlitt succeeds in identifying the central standpoint of the modern incongruity theory of humour that hinges upon the effective juxtaposition of 'what is' with 'what should be' in the creation of a situation in which the receiver is '... struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be'.

In another Nineteenth Century context, Leigh Hunt (1859, cf. Appendix B:4) provides further evidence that the concept of the incongruity theory of humour is by no means limited to contemporary humour theories, as follows:

> 'Wit consists in the arbitrary juxtaposition of dissimilar ideas for some lively purpose of assimilation or contrast, generally of both'.

This statement presages the modern perception of the process of incongruity humour as occurring when the juxtaposition of two or more potentially incongruent elements leads to an inspirational 'aha' reaction as receiver of the humorous input recognises the incongruous twist that runs counter to expectations.

2.3.3 Relief theory

The relief theory of humour (also referred to as the 'tension-reduction theory') provides a plausible explanation for certain kinds of laughter as being caused by tension release. In this sense, laughter becomes a safety valve that releases pent-up energies. This category of humour applies, for example, in Shakespeare's great tragedies King Lear and Macbeth where the dramatic tension that is created is leavened by the introduction of humour.

A classic example is provided by Shakespeare's use of the device of the humour of relief as a natural bridge to heighten the intensity of two concomitant dramatic scenes in Macbeth. The stark introduction of the noisy and rather comical porter-gatekeeper at the opening of Act 2 Scene 3 of Macbeth provides a welcome release of tension to an audience that is enabled to find relief in laughter immediately after the intense drama of the preceding scene in which Macbeth murders King Duncan. Shakespeare's introduction of humour at this juncture also allows a pause of respite before the audience is taken into another highly charged scene in which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth conspire to steel themselves to make a plausible display of grief (Shakespeare, 1969:51). The introduction of the humour of relief in the form of the buffoonery of the gatekeeper is a dramatic *tour de force* that has not lost its effect over the centuries.

Unlike the cases of the so-called 'superiority' and 'incongruity' categories of humour discussed above, there is little evidence of references in classical Greek

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philosophy that may be identified as harbingers of the contemporary relief theory of humour. Nevertheless, as can be seen in the comments concerning <u>Macbeth</u>, there is evidence of the use of 'relief' humour in literature, and there are also well documented historical antecedents that give further meaning to the relief theory of humour.

An excellent example is provided by Peter Burke (1997:61-75) who describes the 'disintegration' of traditional humour in Italy during the late Sixteenth Century. This disintegrative process involved a reduction of comic domains, locales and occasions to the extent that the nobility and clergy no longer participated in certain kinds of humour. Burke's description of the rise in popularity of the *beffa* (or practical joke) in Italy between 1350 and 1750 indicates clearly that this so-called 'comic genre' served a number of sociocultural purposes during times when social taboos created much tension among the upper classes.

In this sense, Burke (1997:66) notes that the *beffa* was supposed to bring aesthetic pleasure through the appeal of its ingenious trickery, but that the *Schadenfreude* factor was brought to the fore by the fact that there was a victim. The presence of aggression, cruelty and sadism created tension among victims as well as spectators, and the constant element of revenge perpetuated the cyclic nature of this tension. Burke (1997:67) notes that revenge (or *bella vendetta)* and cuckoldry are '... a source of anxiety and so of joking', thereby endorsing the rationale of the tension-reduction theory of humour. Burke's study provides an example of an

eclectic perspective of the humour process as being an amalgam of the ingredients of tension-reduction, superiority and incongruity.

The relatively widespread practice of practical joking to relieve tension caused by sociocultural pressures is well documented. In his study of humour in the Tudor and Stuart England of the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Keith Thomas (1977:77-81) reaches similar conclusions to Burke, and identifies sociocultural areas from which laughter was excluded. In this respect, Thomas refers to the existence of a 'cult of decorum' that cherished the values of sobriety and gravity. The period under review also saw the exit of the court jester, and thereby the removal of a source of 'inversionary laughter' that had served as a vicarious source of release of upper class tensions. Amidst this preoccupation with decorum, there was also a reported increase in practical joking among the upper classes, which Burke (1997:79) suggests served to release tensions. Other sources, such as Samuel Pepys' diary of the decade between 1659 and 1669, provide further evidence of the practical jokes relished by the English aristocracy of the time (Bremmer and Roodenburg, 1997:7).

McCrone (1993:235) describes the rationale of the tension-reduction theory of humour in terms of the build-up of a 'certain level of nervous tension' because of stresses and restraints, and of the need to discharge this energy in 'taboo-busting humour'. In this respect, the rationale of the tension-reduction theory of humour has obvious affinities with the ideas expressed by Sigmund Freud concerning the

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use of humour as a defence mechanism to discharge the tensions of the libido. This aspect is dealt with more fully in the following section.

2.3.4 <u>Psychoanalytic theory</u>

Sigmund Freud (1960:52) expressed his views in his well-known treatise, <u>Jokes and their relation to the unconscious</u> (1905), that provided a series of controversial interpretations of the 'real' meanings behind popular jokes thereby raising the general ire of both the joking public and certain humour academics alike. McCrone (1993:235), for example, refers to some of the Freudian interpretations of popular humour as 'improbable', while Jacques LeGoff (1997:47) refers to Freud's treatment of the subject of humour as 'poor'. In Freud's defence, it must be acknowledged that the most vehement criticism has generally emanated from non-psychologists who tend to ignore or misunderstand the main thrust of Freud's theories and consequently focus on one or other of his more dramatic examples, generally drawn from his observations of patients he was treating by psychoanalysis. It must also be acknowledged that along with the highly vocal opposition he seems to have attracted, there is also wide support for the basic principles of Freud's speculations concerning tension-reducing defence mechanisms (of which humour is a component) used by individuals to cope with anxiety or to sublimate the psychic energies produced by their libidos.

Freud's early contributions to humour theory were considerable in spite of the fact that he may have offended some commentators with his speculative interpretations

of examples of word association. Freud observed that the appreciation of a joke signified 'the ability to master its constituent symbolic properties with their multiple figurative and allegorical referents', and likened the humour process to the solving of a problem through sudden discovery involving the reshuffling of symbolic properties into a new relationship (Levine, 1968:2). Freud also identified and analysed the familiar modern humour device known as *double entendre*, and described it in terms of the joy of mastery as represented in the pleasurable experience of grasping a second level of meaning. In this respect, Freud drew attention to the relationship between humour and the universal human attraction towards the enjoyment of exercising cognitive powers to solve problems, decode mysteries and appreciate jokes.

Freud also analysed other cognitive humour devices such as incongruity, nonsense, plays on words, and exaggeration; and argued that these were characteristic of primitive modes of childhood thinking. He drew strong parallels between humour and dreams, both of which were seen in terms of regression to infantile forms of thinking and acting. Freud viewed this process in terms of 'a functionally adaptive mode of withdrawal from reality' into an imaginary world (Levine, 1968:2). The Freudian interpretation of this process was as '... adaptive ego functioning of the capacity to withdraw voluntarily from reality' in order to pursue the pleasures of play, sport, literature and humour. On the other hand, Freud noted that neurotic and psychotic subjects exhibited involuntary pathological symptoms of withdrawal in their attempts to cope with conflict and

anxiety, and in this way lacked the element of control over adaptive ego functioning in selecting appropriate times for their use of humour as a source of tension release.

Further discussion of Freud's contribution to humour theory is provided in Chapter Seven which focusses on the interpretation of a 'humorous event' by means of reflective practice.

2.4   **Concluding comment**

A study of the foundations and fundamental principles of three traditionally popular approaches to the etiology of humour has revealed that mirth derives from diverse sources. These three popular schools of approach have been identified as respectively involving theories of superiority, incongruity and tension-reduction; however the complex nature of the variables involved indicates that in practice these theories are probably not mutually exclusive. In this respect, parallels can be drawn between Darnton's (1984:75-106) tale of 'The great cat massacre' in Eighteenth Century France and Burke's (1997:61-75) discussion of the development of *beffa* behaviour in Italy between 1350 and 1750. Both accounts offer grounds for speculation that all three of the above-mentioned schools of approach played roles in the evocation of the humour in question.

In both Darnton's and Burke's analyses, the element of victimisation appears to be central to the humour created within the confines of an increasingly restrictive social climate in which the norms of sobriety and decorum were emphasized by the upper class. It would not be unreasonable to conjecture that circumstances were conducive to the creation of humorous events based on incongruity. The underlying motive of such behaviour could plausibly be attributed to tension-reduction amidst a repressive environment, and the central element of victimisation may well have been the conscious or unconscious expression of a deeply-felt need to experience a sense of superiority in a situation removed from the norms of the individuals' oppressive class-dominated *milieu*.

By way of a concluding observation to this chapter, it is appropriate to demonstrate that the eclectic theme regarding the superiority, incongruity and relief theories of humour may also be extended to communication theory and reception theory. In considering the mechanisms relevant to the creation of circumstances that may be considered favourable to the creation of humour, it may be hypothesized that humour arises within a communication situation that involves activity on the part of a sender and receiver of a message that is construed as a potentially humorous communication. There are also times when the sender of the intended humour (such as the practical joker) is also the receiver of the humour at the expense of a victim who may regard the event as the product of cruelty or mean-spiritedness rather than humour. In such cases, there may be other receivers of the intended humorous event who are spectators rather than victims, and the practical joker may use the act of intended

humour to seek the gratification of esteem from others in cases where there is an audience present to appreciate (or fail to appreciate) the practical joke. In this respect, reception theorists generally subscribe to the phenomenological perspective that the phenomenon of humour is created in the mind of the receiver.

A brief historical overview has been presented in this section to provide insight into the development of interpretations of the phenomena that have been conceptualized as *humour* over a period of approximately three hundred years. Humour emerges as a somewhat nebulous concept that has been used loosely as a label that has been applied to a diverse range of behaviour associated with a variety of forms of levity, including laughter, playfulness and practical joking. Given these historical antecedents, there is little evidence to suggest the likelihood of universal consensus being reached concerning a precise definition of *humour*, and it is this issue that receives attention in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Defining humour:
a contemporary perspective

3.1 Introduction

The brief survey conducted in Chapter Two of the historical antecedents of the development of the generic concept that has been labelled as *humour* suggests that there is no simplistic route to arriving at a universal definition of humour in terms of either its mainsprings or its process. After due consideration of the task from a variety of standpoints, there seems little option but to concur with the observation of the Dutch anthropologist Henk Driessen (1997:222) that humour is '... an elusive and difficult topic to explore'.

Nevertheless, while the topic of humour demands respect for its complexity, humour is also a commonplace and integral part of social behaviour that needs to be addressed systematically. Accordingly, an important aim of this chapter is to look at humour in terms of contemporary approaches to the understanding of human behaviour. This undertaking involves a survey of a range of behavioural perspectives that have been espoused in varying degrees by the human studies research community, as well as a discussion of the question of the potential effects that these

so-called 'discourses' may have on current practice in human studies research methodology. Particular attention is given to factors with the potential to influence the output of those members of the human studies research community investigating humour theory.

3.2   Identifying the ruling discourse

The term 'discourse' is used in two senses. Firstly, 'discourse' is used as a verb to refer to the act of conversing or holding forth in speech or writing on a subject; and secondly, 'discourse' is used as a name for a 'dissertation', treatise, or sermon' (Concise Oxford dictionary of current English, 1964:342). It follows that the term 'ruling discourse' refers to a particular dissertation or perspective of knowledge that dominates other views in a particular field of study, usually to the extent that perspectives that do not conform to the ruling discourse are labelled as 'alternative'.

Parallels that can be drawn in this regard are, for example, that of conventional medical practice as opposed to so-called alternative medical practices such as acupuncture, where there is a familiar pattern of a ruling discourse which achieves formal recognition by majority consensus, while the alternative discourse is marginalised to minority status. Of course, no aspersions are cast in this study on either mainstream or alternative medical practice; the purpose is simply to clarify the use of the term 'ruling discourse' in regard to fields of academic inquiry. The example already alluded to in this study in both the Preface and Chapter One has

been that of the mainstream 'human sciences' movement with its quantitative research paradigms as opposed to the minority qualitative schools of research.

In respect of the concept of the *ruling discourse*, a few issues require clarification at the outset of this chapter. The first is that although this study is entitled 'a qualitative study of ...', it does not follow that I espouse the qualitative cause to the exclusion of all things quantitative. On the contrary, I am aware of the considerable merits of the quantitative approach, and regard its predominance as being by virtue of natural selection through popular appeal based on the promise of tangible results founded in systematic principles. I also tend to support the broad view that *ruling discourses* generally earn their status on Darwinian 'survival-of-the-fittest' grounds. However, there are also times when popularity tends to promote prejudices against alternative approaches that in many instances have more to offer in certain directions than the mainstream perspectives can ever hope to, and it is some of these aberrations that receive their deserved platform in parts of this study.

The concept of a *ruling discourse* in a particular field of knowledge is relevant from the standpoint that it provides a clear indication of the way in which the essential nature of the field of knowledge is conceptualised by the mainstream of academics operating within the sociocultural context of the times. The idea of the existence of a *ruling discourse* relates to the observation by Becvar and Becvar (1996:350-352) that the concept of objectivity is relative in the sense that people are generally members of a society that punctuates their experience by encouraging a perspective

of reality in terms of a *Weltanschauung* (or 'world view') that is a product of prevailing sociocultural factors.

Irrespective of whether or not they simply philosophize in their armchairs or experiment in their laboratories, few academics involved in human studies operate in intellectual isolation. However idiosyncratic their personal ideological stances or methodological approaches may be, human studies researchers tend to be aware that they are members of a research community that corresponds with the concept that Lancaster (1978) aptly refers to as an *'invisible college'*.

The rampant technological progress of the Electronic Age has brought the *invisible college* of the research community within the context of McLuhan's vision of a 'global village' through a global network of telecommunication links (McLuhan, 1962). The Internet has ensured that the 'real time' concept is now a reality, as members of the *invisible college* and other interested parties from all over the world have become electronically empowered to make immediate communication with their peers. These telecommunicational advances have given new meaning to the term 'distance education', and a new dimension to the concept of a research community.

In this context, further attention needs to be given to the idea of a *ruling discourse* that represents an expression of the dominant collective preoccupations of the *invisible college* of a particular field of study. In this respect, the research

community can in some ways be compared to a sort of extended global family in which the prospective researcher is able to benefit from his study of the collective body of knowledge of theory and practice pertaining to his field of interest, prior to making a contribution to the communal enterprise.

The analogy of the research community and the family is interesting in the sense that specialist research communities have similar characteristics to those of extended families. For example, in the case of the researcher, dominant family values may be conceived of in terms of being the dictum of the *ruling discourse*. Whereas some family members continue to make a contribution within the auspices and protection of the family enterprise, other family members may leave home to seek new and independent pastures. In some cases, where for example the researcher sets out and succeeds on his own and is considered a 'pioneer' in the field, the influence of the *invisible college* (or extended family of fellow researchers) may seem to be limited. However, the maverick theoretician is generally extremely sensitive to the nature of the dominant theories of the *ruling discourse*. This tendency is endorsed by the fact that the maverick theoretician's output is usually characterized as being an alternative or reactionary response to the prevailing *ruling discourse.*

In this sense, the *invisible college* may be the setting for intergenerational conflict in which the *ruling discourse* represents the establishment against which the researcher expresses opposition by means of a reactionary theoretical or methodological stance. This occurs where, for example, the researcher's endeavours are by and large a solo

effort based on the de-bunking of a mainstream belief or theory. In the context of this study of humour theory, this sequence of events pertains in the classic example of Michael Apter's reversal theory of humour which in fact stemmed from the researcher's efforts to offer an alternative explanation for a traditional theory that he had exposed as being invalid. Although Chapter Six is devoted to an in-depth study of the reversal theory of humour, this particular aspect of Apter's approach receives attention in this chapter because of its relevance in context.

Apter (1989:9-29) initially applied his own comparatively unknown reversal theory of metamotivation to de-bunk Hebb's (1955) traditional optimal arousal theory that had stood virtually unchallenged for over three decades and was very much part of the establishment *ruling discourse*. The result was that in the tradition of the principle of 'survival of the fittest', Apter's own position on the fringes of the *ruling discourse* was improved as the gathering support of other members of the *invisible college* of motivational studies propelled reversal theory into a more prominent position. An indication of the fact that Apter has gathered around himself his own *invisible college* of reversal theorists during the past decade may be obtained by a perusal of the bibliography of Apter's own 1989 study as well as the bibliography of this study which lists a host of supporting publications consulted in the course of investigating the current status of reversal theory (cf. Chapter Six). Michael Apter and his colleagues in the school of reversal theory represent a group of researchers who are members of a research community or *invisible college* that technological development has enabled to operate within an electronic communication setting.

The individual researcher's perception of the *ruling discourse* that characterises the global research community to which he or she belongs arises from personal experience of the prevailing *Zeitgeist* within the field of interest. The researcher's vision of this field is generally influenced by an awareness of prevailing epistemological perspectives that are a dynamic manifestation of the *Weltanschauung* (or 'world view') of the *ruling discourse*. In short, there is some sort of subjective frame of reference within which the researcher makes so-called 'objective' academic observations.

In considering this phenomenon, Churchman (1979:5) warns that to ignore the impact of the social and intellectual environment is to court the disaster of the 'environmental fallacy', and concludes that a more appropriate label for it may be the 'fallacy of ignoring the environment'. In the contemporary context, this conceptualization of an academic or intellectual environment that is influenced by a *ruling discourse* has fairly broad application. A pertinent example is the systems approach which posits the theory that no problem can be solved simply on its own basis because it is part of an interdependent global infrastructure. Accordingly, it would probably be more accurate to argue that no problem is independent of a framework of belief that defines it as a problem. In short, every problem has an environment, to which it is inextricably bound.

The implications of this view are that human science cannot be entirely objective because it is created within a subjective framework. It follows that the character and

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content of the so-called *ruling discourse* in any relevant field of study constitutes the sociocultural and intellectual environment of a topic under consideration, and an understanding of the topic's environmental setting is necessary for those attempting to understand the nature of the topic itself. In the present context, the consideration in question is humour theory, and in the next section, attention is given to a qualitative retrospective study of the evolution of sociocultural perspectives of humour within a dynamic environmental context that has influenced the development of the *ruling discourse*.

3.3   <u>The ruling discourse in retrospect</u>

The cultural history of humour was the theme of a recent international conference held in Amsterdam in 1994 (Bremmer and Roodenborg, 1997). Various academics presented a variety of papers within a multidisciplinary setting, and many of their contributions discussed the nature of changes in sociocultural attitudes towards humour as a function of the historical development of this concept. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the origins and nature of the current state of humour theory, attention is now given to a brief overview of the historical development of the concept of humour with particular reference to the manner in which perceptions of this concept were changed and modified over time in response to changes in the character of the prevailing *ruling discourse*. A useful adjunct to this topic is **Appendix B** which provides a selective collection of relevant definitions,

etymological features and quotations on humour extracted from the <u>Oxford English dictionary, 2nd ed. on compact disc for IBM PC</u> (1994).

The contributions to humour and humour theory by the Ancient Greek philosophers were significant, and are discussed in Chapter Two which provides some information concerning the nature of their specific contributions to the origins of contemporary humour theories. In this context, the defining characteristic is that during times of Antiquity, discourses concerning humour were dominated by philosophers and theoreticians such as Aristotle, Theophrastus and Cicero (Bremmer, 1997:11-28; Graf, 1997:33-34; Parker, 1996:306).

By contrast, the Middle Ages saw the emergence of monks and theologians as the dominating figures of the *invisible college*. The legacy of theoretical discourses left by the authoritative sources of this period suggests that the *ruling discourse* had an inhibiting effect on the public development of humour in general. In this respect, the graphic descriptions of LeGoff (1997:40-53) aptly capture the tensions of the *milieu* which he describes in terms of 'the battle between carnival and Lent' (LeGoff, 1997:52).

The Renaissance and Reformation brought further changes in the nature of the authoritative sources associated with the *ruling discourse*, and these changes were reflected in changes in the nature of the humour that characterises these eras. The Renaissance is traditionally depicted as an era characterised by the re-birth of the

human artistic and intellectual spirit. Creative writers, among them novelists such as Rabelais and Cervantes as well as playwrights such as Shakespeare, emerged as popular practitioners and producers of imaginative humour that appealed to wide audiences. It became socially acceptable to attend performances of comedies, and to indulge in ribald witticisms that would have been considered *infra dig* in earlier eras. This was an era that left as a legacy the epithet 'Rabelaisian' that is currently used to describe the humour of wild farcical excess and sometimes gross obscenity, and stems from popular perceptions of 'The divine comedy', a fierce satire by Francois Rabelais (1490-1553) directed chiefly against medieval Catholicism but superficially viewed as an extravagantly humorous burlesque that has been aptly described as 'riotous'.

By almost complete contrast, the Reformation brought with it a renewed social emphasis on morality founded on a reassessment of Christian principles. The prevailing social climate of the middle and upper classes is probably most appropriately encapsulated in Thomas' (1977:17) use of the phrase 'the cult of decorum'. This preoccupation with the need to be 'serious-minded' obviously worked to the detriment of the public development of humour, although there is documented evidence that humour thrived in less public contexts. In Chapter Two, attention is directed towards certain reactionary Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century practices within the Italian upper classes who presumably sought some form of compensatory relief from the oppression of their humourless existence by releasing their tensions in a predilection for malicious practical joking (Burke, 1997:66-67).

The Reformation initiated a longstanding tradition of didactic public reformers who through the years have striven to reify the 'cult of decorum' in the publication of a diversity of manuals of civility and good conduct. The popularization of pious essayists such as Joseph Addison and Richard Steel in England during the Eighteenth Century is an example of this ongoing tradition which still seems to promote the interesting social attitude that humour is frivolous and therefore unhealthy, as opposed to what I consider to be the more rational view that humour is liberating and therefore healthy.

3.4   The ruling discourse in the Twentieth Century

In past eras the existence of relatively distinct sources of power and influence (such as for example the church during the time of the Reformation) made it easier to recognize the identity and character of the *ruling discourse*. However, the greater complexities of the contemporary *milieu* as well as the increasing emphasis on individualism have forced epistemologists to reconsider their conceptualizations of the idea of a *ruling discourse*. The result is that the question of the existence of a so-called *ruling discourse* in the Twentieth Century has to be viewed within a dynamic multidimensional sociocultural context in which the traditional order associated with the social and intellectual class structure has changed   In previous centuries, the European class structure predominated with the upper classes, as custodians of wealth and education, also acting in the roles of patrons of the arts and religious institutions. The European upper classes (in which I include both the aristocracy and the church)

have left their historical legacy as paternalistic purveyors of culture, much in the manner of benevolent dictators.

By contrast, the contemporary era of government by the people for the people has been one of 'future shock' in which the social trends that were anticipated have been supplanted by new and unexpected events (Toffler, 1970:3-4). The power of the aristocracy and church have waned, and the democratization of education and the campaign for universal literacy as a basic human right and tool of empowerment (Freire, 1971) have coalesced in the rise of a 'meritocracy' (Young, 1958) that has not only considerably narrowed the gap between town and gown, but also changed the attitudes and perceptions of the people towards academic inquiry.

During the Twentieth Century, the individual and his role in society have become the focus of attention in a post-industrial era appropriately typified by the popular phrases 'the Me Generation' and 'the Electronic Age'. The concept of the *ruling discourse* has to a large extent been applied within a more specialised frame of reference than ever before. The Twentieth Century *milieu* presents a range of scenarios that are much more varied than the scenarios that pertained in past eras when the intellectual mainstream could be recognised in terms of sociocultural emphases such as the Greek philosophers, the Renaissance literary artists, the Reformation 'cult of decorum' and so on. The contemporary *milieu* has many more areas of specialisation, each with a *ruling discourse* and its own gurus.

When viewed from a traditional perspective, it appears that the various contemporary *ruling discourses* have been largely dominated by the mainstream intelligentsia that may have been physically ensconced in various academic ivory towers but who are part of international *invisible colleges* representing their field of interest on the World Wide Web. In the context of the present study, the various humour theories current in contemporary academics would be recognised as being central to conceptualizations concerning a *ruling discourse*, and the absence of a dominant theory complicates the matter somewhat.

Furthermore, there is also the issue of research methodology in the broader field of human studies as well as the more specialized area of humour studies. In both spheres, the current synergy between the quantitative and qualitative approaches indicates a change in contemporary perspectives of the *ruling discourse* that hitherto had been biassed towards the quantitative paradigms associated with the so-called 'scientific method'. In recent decades, tradition has been challenged by the swing of the pendulum towards qualitative approaches, thereby putting matters into a healthy state of flux as a wider spectrum of alternative methodological paradigms has presented itself to the research community.

While it may be suggested that the current *ruling discourse* in humour theory is the domain of the mainstream intelligentsia in tertiary institutions, there may be more to this seemingly simplistic scenario than meets the eye. As mentioned above, the Twentieth Century has been characterized by rapid change and the democratization

of most aspects of life; and in the context of humour theory, there is a need to look at the possible impact on the *ruling discouse* that may have been brought about by the combined forces of rapid change and the weight of popular opinion. In this respect, we cannot ignore the possibility that the exponential growth of the mass media entertainment industry has produced a Third Force at street level that may be seen as promoting a populist *ruling discourse* in the field of humour itself, and thereby impinging upon the status quo of the adjacent field of humour theory.

This is an interesting line of inquiry in which it may be conjectured that the idea of 'people's humour', like 'people's power', is a Twentieth Century phenomenon that has been fed by contemporary social trends operating at a macro-level. The respective effects of these so-called 'megatrends' (Naisbitt, 1984:2) are inseparable and comprise the total effect of social climates affected by multidimensional post-industrial forces such as the popularization of the concept of democratic empowerment allied with the 'information explosion' and the concomitant force of mass communication media that have brought relevant social issues into every family living room.

The suggested possibility of a 'populist ruling discourse' in the field of humour is relevant in the context of 'a qualitative study of humour theory' from the standpoint that popular ideas about 'what is funny' may shed some light on theories concerning the nature of humour. Section 3.5 (below) on 'popular humour' provides a discussion of aspects of the considerable contemporary growth of the Twentieth

Century First World 'humour industry' in the context of what can be referred to as *humour practice* as contrasted with humour theory. This brief review of the current status of popular ideas about humour serves as a precursor to a discussion of humour theory in the context of academic research. Accordingly, section 3.6 (below) on 'contemporary humour studies' deals with humour theory as well as humour research methodology in terms of the concept of a *ruling discourse* within the context of academic inquiry.

3.5   Popular humour in the Twentieth Century

The Twentieth Century has witnessed the advent of a rampant technological revolution that has provided extensive multi-media communication facilities to the producers of humour. The humour business is no longer limited to authors and actors, as it was during the times of Shakespeare and Dickens. It is now a humour industry in which the various producers of humour are parts of a well-developed infrastructure. Their tribe has increased, diversified and become integral parts of production teams that directly influence the nature of the content emanating from a wide range of mass media of communication.

Marshall McLuhan (1962) has characterised his conceptualization of the 'Electronic Age' as being marked by a revolutionary social transformation from a print-based mentality (which he terms 'the Gutenberg Galaxy') to that of an electronic 'global village' in which the family sit before the flickering screen like urban cave dwellers

and participate in the universal communication experience provided by the purveyors of television. McLuhan's perceptive perspective was attacked by the majority of his contemporaries as being mere armchair speculation; and it must be acknowledged that McLuhan's views are the products of a reflective process that reveals his social philosophy. The conclusions he drew were based on subjective observation and eschewed the conventional empirical observances of the tenets of sampling and systematic data collection, and no attention was given to the question of attaining a balance in the distribution of sociological variables. In other words, McLuhan's futuristic insights were the idiosyncratic outcomes of qualitative reflectivity, much as are many of the insights of the present study. As such, these insights must be addressed at face value.

In respect of humour, the implications of the concept of the global village cannot be ignored. We are regularly informed by television publicists that various American situation comedies, such as Seinfeld and Friends, are translated into umpteen languages and shown in umpteen countries. Whether or not the accuracy of the statistics in these promotional press releases is authentic or not, there is no doubt that popular American television and movie humour is internationally distributed, and has the potential to influence people on a vast scale. A small example of the magnitude of this influence can be gleaned from the fact that Walt Disney Studio's full length motion picture, The Lion King appeared on the South African movie circuit with complete Zulu dubbing during 1995. When the practical implications of mounting this relatively minor venture are considered, some idea is obtained of the

extent of the humour industry which in the latter case would have involved an entire production team of translators, script writers, 'voice' actors and directors, as well as audio production facilities and technical personnel.

There is no disputing the vastness of an international humour industry that is fed by popular demand. There is however, some dispute over the issue of social responsibility and the role of the entertainment industry as a potential shaper of populist morality. The current focus of this issue has been largely upon questions of morality and concepts of social or political correctness. Awareness of these issues has been fuelled by public interest, and they have been the subjects of an ongoing high-profile controversy that closely affects the lives of the vast international audience of broadcast television. However, behind the bombast and posturing that has characterised this public debate, there are grey areas that still require further investigation. A key factor in this issue is the intrinsic nature of the communication relationship between sender and receiver, as well as the extent to which this relationship influences the character of the message. The crucial issue that still needs to be addressed in spite of all this discussion is the extent to which the receiver is influenced by the message.

Participants in the well-worn debate concerning the power of television usually assume one of two conflicting standpoints. On the one hand, those in favour of unrestricted television content emphasize the discriminatory powers of the receivers, and generally argue that the television audience has the choice of either changing

channels and watching something else, or turning off their sets and not watching at all. On the other hand, those in favour of greater control over television content generally ascend the moral high-ground in this issue on the basis of the unproven assumption that the audience of mass media will follow their electronic leaders like sheep.

In spite of the mass of well-documented research that suggests that this controversial issue is grey rather than black and white, a popular attitude persists that there is no middle ground. Views have tended to become polarised between one camp who liken television to ephemeral moving wallpaper that has no lasting impact, and another camp who accept as fact that television moulds the morals of the masses. This issue is one that needs to be addressed on an ongoing basis because there appears to be no emphatic answer that will satisfy either or both camps.

Notwithstanding, the thorough academic attention given to this topic, the public debate continues unabated. Some observers regard the mass dissemination of popular television and/or movie humour designed for mass entertainment as being akin to electronic circuses designed to amuse the proletariat. However once again, a variation of the same question arises as to whether the content is media-driven or simply a case of the humour industry giving the people what they want. If one accepts the argument that the media moguls decide what the public should deem as 'funny', then the implication is that the content of the humour in media productions is inevitably itself a product of a prevailing *ruling discourse* in the humour industry.

Furthermore, if the rationale behind this scenario is accepted, then trends should be discernible in the products of the humour industry that influence what people find funny.

My own reflective impressions obtained from viewing popular American situation comedies (such as Seinfeld, Frasier, Mad about you and The naked truth) shown on South African television is that the content is generated by the acute observation and adaptation of topics that become socially-acceptable targets of humour with which members of the American public can readily identify. As such, programme content reflects a form of populist *ruling discourse* of current humour, and reflects prevailing social mores, attitudes and belief systems. It is also obvious that a corporate infrastructure harnesses ongoing market research and the feedback of viewership ratings to test the waters of the American public's tastes in humour, and at times also plays the role of 'gatekeeper' by selectively exposing certain areas of humour to the public.

In the final analysis, there is a possibility that the nature of the type of comedy presented to the mass audience as a viable commercial entertainment product is subject to trends that are influenced by some sort of *invisible college* or informal *ruling discourse* that vicariously controls the character of the humour and the conventions of its presentation. There is also a possibility that this informal *ruling discourse* tackles issues of morality and sociopolitical correctness on a continuous basis, and is strongly influenced in its corporate decision-making concerning humour

content policy by close attention to feedback derived from ongoing monitoring of the responses of those receiving the humorous messages.

Ultimately, such speculations remain in the realm of whimsy until tested, and this area of study has interesting research possibilities that have already been richly mined by media researchers. This dynamic open-ended field of inquiry holds interest not only for media researchers but also for social philosophers and futurists who like John Naisbitt (1984:2) seek 'megatrends' in the informal *ruling discourse*. In this respect, it seems fitting to conclude this section by citing a selection of *megatrends* identified by Naisbitt (1984:1-2) that are relevant in the present context:

- ‘Although we continue to live in an industrial society, we have in fact changed to an economy based on the creation and distribution of information.’

- ‘No longer do we have the luxury of operating within an isolated, self-sufficient national economic system; we must acknowledge that we are part of a global economy.’

- ‘... we have rediscovered the ability to act innovatively and to achieve results - from the bottom up.’

- ‘We are shifting from institutional help to more self-reliance in all aspects of our lives.’

- ‘We are giving up our dependence on hierarchical structure in favour of informal networks.’

- ‘From a narrow ... society with a limited range of personal choices, we are exploding into a free-wheeling multiple-option society.’

Naisbitt's speculative observations were coincidentally made in 1984, giving them an ominous Orwellian nuance, and they appear to have held up very well into the late

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1990s when it is considered that rapid change seems to be one of the few constants characterising the modern era. Naisbitt's prophetic *megatrends* (above) serve as an interesting introduction to some of the views expressed in the following section concerning *megatrends* influencing the ruling discourse in humour studies.

3.6 'Megatrends' influencing the ruling discourse in humour studies

The concept of a so-called *ruling discourse* in contemporary humour studies which may represent the explication of the mainstream ideas of some form of *invisible college* is a possibility, however in the present research climate there appears to be no single dominating contender for this title. An appropriate starting point in considering this question is to examine relevant sociological variables associated with the concept of the *ruling discourse*. Although an interesting veil of uncertainty presently enshrouds the precise nature of *megatrends* in various spheres, certain factual evidence sheds some light on the situation. An example was provided in section 3.5 of this chapter where it was mentioned that the rapid development of mass communication media, particularly television, had provided a massive and unprecedented boost to the humour production industry.

In this regard, there have also been changes in other areas of interest relevant to this study. Alongside the exponential growth of audiovisual humour production in an era of multi-media mass communication, there has also been a shift of focus in the politics of academics that has modified perceptions of the concept of the *ruling*

discourse. During the past fifty years, the rise of the so-called 'human sciences' have brought psychologists and sociologists to the fore, and more attention than ever has been directed towards aspects of human behaviour. One of the by-products of this particular *megatrend* is the fact that in recent years much reflective discussion and some quantitative research has been directed towards the question of humour and its role in both the human psyche as well as in society at large.

The nature of the *ruling discourse* in a variety of human studies disciplines has been influenced by significant changes in social structures and social attitudes. As mentioned above, one of the sociocultural features of the Twentieth Century has been the movement towards a classless society with an increasing emphasis on individualism and the democratization of educational and socioeconomic opportunities. The Twentieth Century drive towards universal suffrage to provide a platform for the voice of the people has been accompanied by a narrowing of the social distance between the street and the ivory tower. Certainly since World War II, universities have shed some of the traditional mystique with which they were regarded by the lower classes, particularly as tertiary education has now been democratized in many countries where previously it had been reserved for the upper classes. Part of the democratization policy has been a widening of the scope of intellectual pursuits, and it has become standard practice to study areas of human behaviour (such as humour) which have not received their due attention in previous eras.

Another feature of democratization has been the rise of the meritocracy, which has resulted in the status quo being challenged in many spheres of academics (Young, 1958). Positivism reached its zenith in behavioural studies during the 1950s and 1960s when it came to represent the 'Received View' (Suppe, 1977:116) of establishment academics. Since the mid 1960s, certain academic reactionaries have treated quantitative practice with less than customary reverence, with the result that recent developments have given prominence to alternative paradigms in the current epistemological debate in human studies. A variety of qualitative approaches, typified by the recent popularity of trends towards hermeneutic and semiotic orientations in qualitative practice, appear to be asserting their rights to stand alongside the more established positivistic incumbents of the *ruling discourse* in the research domain. These recent changes have had the effect of broadening the horizons of the research community and have benefited fields of study such as humour which does not lend itself readily to quantitative paradigms of investigation.

From a practical standpoint, an indication of the nature of the *ruling discourse* in any field of a particular era is generally provided by a review of the content of the literature of that era. In recent decades, the phenomenon known as the Information Explosion has made this practice increasingly complex because of the exponential growth of the number of available sources on a vast range of topics. Fortunately these difficulties have been offset to a large extent by the advent of automated bibliographic control strategies that have provided researchers with the technological wherewithal to access a far wider range of sources more swiftly than ever before.

In the context of the present study, some idea of the nature of the so-called Information Explosion can be gained by considering the extent of the exponential growth of the mass of subject matter available on humour. Hence, for example, the catalogue of the Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor, contains details of 11,200 volumes in the English language for the period from 1961 to 1993 (Murdock and Ganim, 1993:60). Likewise, the bibliographic indexes edited by the H.W. Wilson Publishing Company listed 530 bibliographies on wit and humour that were published between 1937 and 1993. An indication of the magnitude of the 'Information Explosion' is obtained when one considers that bibliographies are exclusively devoted to providing lists of publications on specific topics, and that there are sufficient bibliographies of publications on humour to warrant the publication of a bibliography of humour bibliographies - in effect, a metabibliography.

The above statistics were drawn from Murdock and Ganim's extensive 1993 descriptive survey of humour and creativity research which is discussed in detail in Chapter Five. The bibliographic procedures of this survey are of immediate interest in this context because they reveal the limitations of contemporary search strategies designed for electronic media with keywords as access points. For example, one of .the drawbacks of the literature review cited in Murdock and Ganim's study is that the researchers do not record a distinction between 'humorous' publications and *theoretical humour* publications. Another drawback, which appears to be the common problem of all attempts to bring together source materials about humour, is

that not all humour is signposted in titles or abstracts. In this respect, personal reading experience has led many to realise that some of the most memorable humour in print occurs as part of a human drama or 'love story' or biographical work that is not usually classified as a comedic work.

Likewise, some of the most significant insights in the field of humour theory derive from sources that may not be classified as dealing exclusively with humour theory. This study contains a number of appropriate examples such as the historian Robert Darnton's (1984) 'The great cat massacre' (cf. Chapter Two), the anthropologist Henk Driessen's (1997) field work experiences in rural Andalusia (cf. Chapter Nine), the psychologist Michael Apter's (1989) extensions of his reversal theory to encompass the concept of humour (cf. Chapter Six), and social commentator Stephen Potter's (1954) insightful comments on the significance of the oral ritual in Westernized joke-telling (cf. Chapter Seven). The uncertainty concerning the location of the sources of both humour theory and humour itself is unfortunate, and as such presents opportunities for further descriptive research.

The content of the first three chapters of this study has provided a theoretical and historical introduction to both the methodological debate in humour studies, as well as the wide range of diversities that characterize the field of humour theory. There is now a need to examine the question of applying quantitative and qualitative perspectives directly to the study of humour and humour theory. In the following chapter, consideration is given to the implications faced by researchers in applying

the conventions of contemporary behavioural research to the task of defining *humour*

and formulating hypotheses and theories that pertain to humour as a specific field of

study.

CHAPTER FOUR

Humour as a subject for contemporary research

4.1   Introduction: quantitative-qualitative synergy

The current debate concerning behavioural research methodology is an inevitable product of an intolerable situation. The source of this aggravation is the need felt by researchers to make meaningful contributions in fields of human studies without either their methods of inquiry or their breadth of vision being constricted by the limitations imposed by their having to conform to the conventions of traditional quantitative paradigms. In the first three sentences of her book on qualitative research, Renata Tesch (1990:1) identifies the crux of the problem as follows:

> 'There was a time when most researchers believed that the only phenomena that counted in the social sciences were those that could be measured. To make that perfectly clear, they called any phenomenon they intended to study a 'variable', indicating that the phenomenon could vary in size, length, amount or any other quantity. Unfortunately, not many phenomena in the human world come naturally in quantities'.

Tesch's introductory observations presage a situation that is symptomatic of the ongoing synergy that exists between the respective standpoints of adherents of the qualitative and quantitative research perspectives. As discussed in Chapter Three,

until relatively recently the locus of power of the so-called *ruling discourse* of research methodology in human studies was heavily tilted towards positivism. This ensured that until relatively recently non-quantitative approaches were viewed by mainstream academia with an element of suspicion, and categorised under the dubious label of 'unconventional methodology'. However, currently the politics of research have veered somewhat from the extreme right, and a group of alternative approaches collected under the label of 'qualitative research' has acquired enough respectability to challenge the status of quantitative research as the sole representatives of the *ruling discourse*. Presently, the two forces of methodological orientation in human studies (namely, the qualitative and quantitative approaches) exist in a healthy state of synergy which in effect represents the current state of the *ruling discourse*, as discussed in Chapter Three.

The place of humour within this context is not entirely without ambiguity because there are many appropriate avenues suited to quantitative humour research; however, by and large, humour studies appear to offer more opportunities for qualitative research because of the preponderance of narrative data. Although the present study is explicitly 'a qualitative study of humour theory', the merits and demerits of the quantitative approach need to be addressed in order to achieve a balanced perspective. The purpose of this chapter is to examine this issue systematically from the perspective of the prospective researcher seeking to evaluate the benefits that traditional quantitative behavioural research has to offer in the study of humour theory, while at the same time not losing sight of the value of the qualitative

approach. From the standpoint of reflective practice, it is hoped that the views expressed in this chapter will provide readers with the required transparency to enable them to detect elements of observer bias in my attitudes towards quantitative studies.

The term 'traditional' is used with some reservation in reference to the contemporary positivist research movement in human studies. When one considers that the heyday of Skinnerian behaviourism in the United States was the 1950s, then one realises that this is a comparatively young tradition. Nevertheless, the term 'traditional' is relative, particularly in a *milieu* that was characterised as being an era of 'future shock' as long ago as 1970 (Toffler, 1970). For present purposes, humour research may be viewed in the context of the so-called traditional conventions of contemporary behavioural research which are outlined in numerous educational texts including Kerlinger's classic Foundations of behavioural research (1973) which describes the application of quantitative conventions within a variety of 'human science' paradigms.

As a starting point, Kerlinger (1973:28-29) distinguishes between concepts and constructs, indicating that a concept '... expresses an abstraction formed by generalizations from particulars', and that a construct is characterised by the fact that it has been constructed for use in human scientific research. An important implication of this approach for humour researchers is that some means must be found to 'concretize' humour as a quantifiable variable in order to subject it to specific observation and measurement. Accordingly, it appears that the crux of this

matter lies in the decisions that must be made before the qualitative concept of humour can be transformed into a quantifiable construct.

A common problem that appears to beset virtually all the so-called 'human sciences' is that quantitative research is dependent upon the formulation of satisfactory definitions of relevant variables in order to apply the basic principles of quantification. A primary consideration facing those attempting to effect the transformation of humour as a concept into humour as a construct is the need to define humour as a quantifiable variable. Kerlinger (1973:29) indicates that certain concepts such as 'intelligence' have received universal attention in this regard, and that the construction of a variety of national and international standardized testing procedures have been used on a worldwide scale in behavioural research. By contrast with intelligence, humour is a concept that has been relatively neglected by human scientists. Consequently, humour's status as an operational construct is less secure than that of intelligence because the field of humour research is comparatively undeveloped. The lack of universality in perceptions of the nature of humour has resulted in there being no universally accepted 'humour tests', whereas by contrast there are a variety of 'intelligence tests' that have achieved levels of acceptability.

4.2   Defining humour in the research tradition

Irrespective of whether humour is considered as a concept or a construct or both, the process of formulating definitions of 'humour' has traditionally proceeded within the

parameters of the conventions of the current *ruling discourse*, namely mainstream behavioural research. In this regard, Torgerson (1958:2-5) makes the important distinction between constitutive and operational definitions in behavioural research. Constitutive definitions are those in which concepts or constructs are defined in terms of other concepts or constructs; whereas in operational definitions, constructs are assigned meaning by specifying the operations or activities necessary to manipulate them. For the purposes of shedding more light on the nature of humour, a discussion follows focussing upon the application of the constitutive and operational approaches to the task of defining humour.

4.2.1 <u>Constitutive definitions of humour</u>

Constitutive definitions of humour abound, and are principally represented by the variety of lexical definitions provided by dictionaries. These attempts at supplying alternative meanings for terms generally reflect the current usage of words in the living language, and usually consist of the provision of lists of other words or synonyms that approximate in varying degrees to the meaning of the word in question. Hence, for example, the <u>Concise Oxford dictionary of current English</u> (1964:592) provides terms such as 'facetiousness', 'comicality' and jocose imagination' to provide readers with a patchwork idea of the meaning of humour in current English usage. **Appendix B** study provides extensive lexical input concerning the definition, etymology and historical development of humour and humour-related topics.

While synonyms and related phrases often provide clues concerning the meaning of the term in question, the constitutive approach has severe limitations for the human scientist because calling something by another name often serves little constructive purpose. At times, however, there are compensations. In the case of humour for example, the use of the word as a verb to imply the act of 'indulging or gratifying another's pleasure' (Concise Oxford dictionary of current English, 1964:592) provides readers with an indication of the empathetic quality that is normally assigned to humour as a broad category in order to distinguish it from the narrower more cerebral concept of wit. In this regard, literary critics and lexicographers alike tend to conceptualize this distinction as being primarily a difference between heart and head. As early as 1900, Hammerton (Appendix B:4) is cited as saying in reference to the literary output of J.M. Barrie: "There is more 'heart' in humour, and more 'head' in wit".

Descriptions such as Hammerton's (above) provide a general sense of meaning but fall short of precise denotation. Although largely unsatisfactory to human scientists, constitutive definitions nevertheless generally serve to provide descriptive starting points for further investigation. In this respect, the product of formulating a constitutive definition of 'humour' is the identification of a range of humour-related concepts. In the example mentioned above, the starting point was that in contrast to the broader meaning attached to humour, 'wit' had a specific denotation as being a more cerebral (and therefore a less sympathetic and more detached) form of amusement based on intelligent word play. By contrast,

humour is popularly conceptualized as a more versatile descriptive term that presents a blander but more emotionally compelling view of human nature than wit.

4.2.2 <u>Operational definitions</u>

Barrett (1995:20) defines an operational definition as follows:

> An operational definition of a concept is a statement of the activities or operations which are needed to measure that concept in practice (or, in the case of an independent variable, a statement of the activities or operations which are needed to manipulate that variable in practice).

In the case of *humour*, Barrett's requirement of 'a statement of activities or operations which are needed to measure that concept in practice' is problematic. Over the years a wide selection of behavioural events have been classified as 'humorous' because they arouse amusement, with the result that a great diversity of types of acts of human communication have accumulated under the generic term of 'humour'. These range from the sharpness of wit to the bluntness of slapstick, and from the superficial flippancy of bedroom farce to the sadly sublime Shakespearean tragicomedy of, for example, <u>King Lear</u>. In this respect, the doomed Lear's ramblings may evoke sympathetic smiles tinged with sadness among those who experience the intrinsic humour of Shakespeare's perspective of the bitter irony of human frailties.

There is a wide gulf between constitutive definitions and operational definitions. The task of collecting synonyms and appropriately meaningful phrases is a far cry

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from converting concepts into quantifiable activities. The application of the basic principles of operational definitions to 'humour' extend the study for greater meaning beyond the familiar territory of description and towards the greater complexities and controversy of process and etiology. Evidence of this gulf is provided in the study of Murdock and Ganim (1993:57) whose analysis of thirteen operational definitions of humour and eleven theories of humour demonstrates the complexities of operationalizing a concept that appears more suited to qualitative description than empirical quantification. Chapter Five comprises a critique of the Murdock and Ganim study as an example of a macro-level humour study.

Kerlinger (1973:31) identifies two kinds of operational definitions, namely measured and experimental. Measured operationalism involves finite measurement, such as for example the measurement of achievement on a standardised achievement test; whereas experimental operationalism involves supplying details of operations of the investigator's manipulation of a variable such as for example humour. In respect of measurement, humour falls into the category that Kerlinger (1973:32) describes as 'difficult', as follows:

> 'Sometimes measurement is easy, sometimes difficult. To measure sex or social class is easy; to measure creativity, anxiety, or organizational effectiveness is difficult'.   (Kerlinger, 1973:32)

Certain implications derive from the process of applying an operational definition either to 'humour' as a general behavioural entity or to 'humorous events' as separate units of the generic term 'humour'. Operational variables are by

definition limited and specific in meaning, and this basic limitation inherent in the composition of the operational definition militates against its ability to encompass, let alone express, the entire meaning of a complex, multidimensional variable such as humour. In this regard, humour emerges as a nebulous concept that means different things to different people.

Kerlinger (1973:32) once observed that 'The creativity studied by psychologists is not the creativity studied by artists'. Ironically, the same may be said of *humour* as a field of study in which, for example, psycholinguists may study the humorous wordplay of different social classes, whereas artists and political scientists may study the humorous characteristics of topical sociopolitical newspaper cartoons. The latter example receives some attention in my article on 'Humour and the oral tradition: it's not the joke, it's the way you tell it' which is reproduced in **Appendix E**. In the present context, it is appropriate to paraphrase Kerlinger (1973:22) in the observation that the humour studied by psycholinguists is clearly not the humour in the political cartoons studied by artists and political scientists.

Despite these obvious obstacles to the question of identifying and constructing suitable operational variables in the field of humour research, all is not doom and gloom for those attracted by the level of control offered by quantitative paradigms. The limitations inherent in the nature of operational definitions inevitably tend to direct contemporary researchers away from the imprecisions associated with the

generalities of a single all-encompassing Olympian definition of 'humour', and guide them instead towards the more limited scope but greater precision of operationally defining the particular aspects of humour that are the focus of the study being conducted.

Hence, for example, a researcher in the field of humour may decide to measure viewer preferences for certain categories of television situation-comedies by requiring subjects to rank in order of preference a selection of such programmes shown on national television. This process may be further refined by applying parameters in respect of the stipulated type of preference being recorded such as for example: preferred family viewing, preferred comedic characters, and preferred comedic themes. Operational variables concerning humour are the bread and butter of the extensive market research conducted by media studies specialists on an ongoing basis.

4.3   Humour and the current methodological debate

As has been discussed in Chapter One, the current methodological debate is grounded in the argument that the positivist approach is severely limiting because quantitative parameters are generally inappropriate yardsticks to apply to much of the 'qualitative' content that characterises human studies. In the context of this study, this argument has relevance in respect of humour studies, however the benefits of empiricism should not be thrown out like the proverbial baby with the bath-water. In fact,

humour researchers of all persuasions need all the help they can get, including the meaningful contributions of their quantitatively-orientated colleagues in the *invisible college*.

In this respect, the example of Michael Apter's well-balanced body of reversal theory research is highly commendable (Apter, 1989). Irrespective of whether the reflective critic takes issue with Apter's research conclusions or not, few would take issue with Apter's methodological zeal in attempting to give substance to his predominantly qualitative stance by engaging in an extensive follow-up programme of empirical testing of relevant operational variables. This matter receives fuller attention in Chapter Six which comprises a critique of Apter's contributions to humour theory.

In the present context, the example of Apter's ready incorporation of quantitative methodology alongside his qualitative approach serves as an indication that the discipline inherent in positivism has decided advantages in human studies. The cumulative nature of information deriving from the quantitative approach offers human studies researchers the opportunity to contribute to an ongoing dynamic body of scientific knowledge and research in a specific field. However, there is a need to be mindful of the concomitant disadvantages of this approach such as the danger of extreme operationalism which, because it is so restrictive, tends to frustrate the efforts of investigators in so-called 'difficult' fields of human and social research, including humour research. On the other hand, as Skinner (1953:586) affirms:

'The operational attitude, in spite of its shortcomings, is a good thing in any science but especially in psychology because of the presence there of a vast vocabulary of ancient and nonscientific origin'.

In this respect, the presence of a vocabulary of 'ancient and nonscientific' terms in humour studies is undeniable, and is an indication that Skinner's observation is not limited exclusively to psychology. Consider, for example, the ongoing tendency among journalists and newspaper critics towards the imprecise use of terms such as black comedy, slapstick farce, adult satire, practical joke and nonsense verse. Ironically, the term that is probably used most imprecisely of all is 'sense of humour', which does not augur well for those approaching the ticklish question of a humour theory. One can only wonder at the potentiality for imprecision that awaits the investigator who hopes to operationalize concepts such as 'black comedy' and 'adult satire', let alone distinguish clearly between them.

As discussed in Chapter One, the ongoing debate between the respective merits and de-merits of qualitative and quantitative research is presently probably best resolved by accepting the best that both worlds have to offer. Twenty-five years ago, Kerlinger (1973:34) envisaged the role of the behavioural scientist as operating systematically in terms of specific objectives, as 'he shuttles back and forth between the level of theory-constructs and the level of observation'. Contemporary approaches do not deviate greatly from the scenario described by Kerlinger. Breakwell (1995:10), for example, defines a theory as a '...set of propositions which posit the nature of the relationships between predefined constructs (or variables).' Guttman (in Donald, 1995:116), perhaps a trifle more enraptured by the language of

empiricism, defines a theory as: '... an hypothesis of a correspondence between a definitional system for a universe of observations and an aspect of the empirical structure of those observations, together with a rationale for such an hypothesis'.

Guttman's statement emphasizes the need for an accurate formal definition of the area being studied, and the integration of hypothesis and data analysis. The current approach of results-orientated positivists is to achieve some measure of empiricism even in areas not immediately amenable to accurate quantification, by as far as possible operationally defining variables relevant to a hypothesized theory, and thereafter estimating (as accurately as allowed) the relationships between these variables. To their credit, many current positivists have shown laudable flexibility as evidenced by the fact that the operative phrase is 'some measure' (above), which may be vague but it is better than no measure at all.

This approach has clear implications for studies of particular 'humorous events', as well as for more general studies of humour theory. For example, in respect of the latter, the researcher is mainly concerned with systematically building up a knowledge-base that gives greater meaning to variables that the researcher feels have relevance to humour theory. In this respect, the example of Apter's research (cited above in this chapter) deserves another brief mention. Apter's ongoing investigations of aspects pertaining to applications of reversal theory involved follow-up studies to test the validity and reliability of his earlier studies by means of a further series of quantitative laboratory studies in conjunction with Svebak (1984;1985;1986; 1997).

4.4   Applying methodological principles to humour research

Other attempts to marry qualitative studies with quantitative research methodology
have met with varying success. An interesting example is the ambitious descriptive
study of Murdock and Ganim (1993) in which the researchers evaluate humour
definitions and humour theories in the literature of creativity researchers. Murdock
and Ganim's study has been singled out for special further consideration in Chapter
Five as an example of a macro-level humour study. For the present purposes of this
chapter, the Murdock and Ganim study provides appropriate examples of the
application of methodological principles to humour research.

In the course of Murdock and Ganim's study, methodological decisions were made
in order to examine the 'theoretical strengths' of individual theories of humour by
identifying their chief theoretical elements or characteristics (1993:62-66). Content
analysis revealed that certain common characteristics were prominent across a range
of different definitions of humour. These emphases were developed systematically
to a further stage of theorizing about humour.

Table 4.1 provides a concise record of the theoretical elements or characteristics
identified by Murdock and Ganim, and used as criteria in the researchers' descriptive
study of humour definitions and humour theories. The theoretical variables identified
in the Murdock and Ganim study (1993) and summarised in Table 4.1 form the basis
for the critical discussion which follows in sections 4.5 and 4.6 of this chapter. The
remainder of the present section is concerned with obtaining a balanced perspective

of the Murdock and Ganim study by examining its parameters, and identifying a range of contributions to humour theory that Murdock and Ganim omitted from their study.

With reference to the five humour-related variables identified by Murdock and Ganim and presented in Table 4.1, it is clear that humour research has not as yet attained the level of development that has been achieved in spheres such as 'intelligence' research (as discussed in section 4.1 of this chapter). The humour-related variables identified by Murdock and Ganim in 1993 are by no means representative of the consensus view of the humour research community, and should be regarded as being open to ongoing adaptation and modification.

Table 4.1   Murdock and Ganim's perspective of theoretical elements in humour definitions

• **'person'**	refers to human characteristics associated with humour, for example, flexible, handles high stress, open attitude, imagination.
• **'process'**	refers largely to behavioural characteristics associated with humour, for example, release of tension, playfulness, spontaneity, incongruity.
• **'product tangible'**	refers to observable products from humorous events, for example, comic strips, cartoons, plays, television situation comedies.
• **'product intangible'**	refers to products of humorous events that cannot be examined as tangible entities, for example, a comic performance, a humorous episode, a spontaneous jest.
• **'press'**	refers to the environmental influences that may affect humorous events, for example, lack of rigidity, open environment, legitimacy to laugh.

(Adapted from Murdock and Ganim, 1993 : 63-64)

In this respect, cognizance must be taken of the fact that Murdock and Ganim's humour study limits its focus exclusively to theorists dealing specifically with the relationship between humour and creativity. While this is an area of fundamental interest to humour theorists in general, care must be taken not to overlook other areas of concern, not only within the field of psychology itself, but also in other fields of human studies such as sociology, anthropology, oral studies, communication and education. The implication of this cautionary advice is that a more Olympian perspective than that of Murdock and Ganim (1993) may have produced a different selection of 'theoretical elements' than those that appear in Table 4.1.

Murdock and Ganim's narrow vision of humour exclusively in terms of its relationship with creativity has obvious implications for humour researchers concerned with achieving a broader view of humour theory. Although Murdock and Ganim's 1993 macro-level survey has meritorious breadth for the study of the theme 'humour-as-creative-activity', there are omissions in the above-mentioned fields of study that fall outside these parameters. Due consideration must be afforded to contemporary humour theorists not singled out by Murdock and Ganim, including psychologists such as Michael Apter (1989) and anthropologists such as Mary Douglas (1975), Mahadev Apte (1985) and Christie Davies (1990). Accordingly, Chapter Six is devoted to Apter's theory, while the anthropology theorists' contributions are discussed in Chapter Nine. There is also a body of related research by communication theorists who have developed and adapted the early conceptualizations of Harold Lasswell (1956), and have latterly been dominated by

the ideas of the reception theorists. In this respect, my own article of 1989 serves as an example of the approach of a reception theorist applying a structural phenomenological approach to a communication process incorporating educational technology (Gordon, 1989).

Since the publication of Murdock and Ganim survey of 1993, there have been a range of contributions to the growing body of knowledge about humour from a variety of sources. Obviously, no criticism can be levelled at Murdock and Ganim in respect of works published after their own, however none of the studies mentioned below emphasizes the significance of creativity, and this would probably have ensured their exclusion from the 1993 study anyway. The studies in question include those of sociologists such as Henry Giroux (1994), anthropologists such as Henk Driessen (1997), ethnographers such as Peter Burke (1997) and Salvatore Attardo's Linguistic theories of humour (1994). In section 4.5 of this chapter, further attention is directed to the contributions of Apter as well as the reception theorists, all of whom were omissions from the 1993 study of Murdock and Ganim.

4.5   Variables that affect the nature of humour

In the previous section, the limited parameters of Murdock and Ganim's study of 1993 were identified as factors responsible for the omission of a variety of contributions to humour theory. On the other hand, the strength of Murdock and Ganim's study is chiefly that it is a broad goal-directed attempt to identify and

analyse a relatively wide range of humour theories on a comparative basis with the ambitious objective of bringing some epistemological order to this rather uncultivated field of study. In this respect, good intentions are among the merits of this macro-level study, and Table 4.1 provides a synopsis of Murdock and Ganim's identification of five variables that affect the nature of humour. In this section, closer consideration is given to these five variables and their relevance within the context of the present study.

Of the five variables identified by Murdock and Ganim (1993:63), only 'process' and 'press' are what Kerlinger (1973:38) would term 'active variables' that can be manipulated, whereas 'person' and product' are 'attribute variables' that are constitutive in character. In the case of humour, 'press' is very much a subset of 'process' in the sense that it represents the human environment (including psychological conditions and social climate) in which the process takes place.

For the purpose of this study, attention is directed towards three theoretical characteristics, namely process, product and purpose. The discussion will comprise a critical examination of the nature of these variables and their appropriateness to the study of humour theory. Brief consideration will be given to the theoretical implications of these variables and the extent to which they relate to humour theories as well as theories that can be readily adapted to provide meaningful theoretical perspectives of humour, such as Lasswell's classic metacommunication theory and the contributions of reception theorists.

4.5.1 <u>The process of humour</u>

The terms of reference applying to the concept of process in relation to humour are unambiguous. Basically, 'the process of humour' refers to humour in action, and process theories offer explanations of how humour takes place. In this regard, the attention given to process by communication theorists and latterly by reception theorists serves as a working example of a dynamic process definition that has evolved in response to changing epistemological perspectives. Furthermore, this area of study embraces a theoretical frame of reference that accommodates structural phenomenological explanations of the humour process.

Accordingly, an appropriate starting point for a consideration of the process of humour would be to view humour as a communication process that can be described in terms of principles pertaining to communication theory. In this regard, the humour process may be viewed in terms of the classic metacommunication paradigm originally formulated by Harold Lasswell (Hatt, 1976:17) and characterised by the question: 'Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?'.

Figure 4.1 provides a graphic representation of the classic Lasswell metacommunication model, as well as the adaptation of this model to form a process model of a 'humour-in-action' event involving a joke-teller and an audience. An explication of the practical implications of this process model will be developed more fully in section 4.6 of this chapter.

Lasswell's classic model has been criticised justifiably many times over the years as an untenable oversimplification of the communication situation that is misleading because it fails to take cognizance of the significance of the receiver in the process. Emphasis in the classic metacommunication model tends to fall on the sender who in this case is the 'joke-teller'. Reception theorists argue convincingly that the contrary pertains with the receiver as protagonist because an appropriate stimulus is all that is required for a humorous event to take place. While this criticism is particularly relevant in the case of humour studies, nevertheless Lasswell's model (imperfect though it may be) serves present purposes because it provides a basic example of the application of humour within the parameters of a generalised metacommunication model

In this respect, the importance of reception in the humour process must be underlined. In many if not most cases, the receiver is the prime mover in the humorous communication process. In its most obvious form, this may occur when, for example, the receiver witnesses the sender unwittingly doing or saying something whilst unaware of being observed. In such cases, the process of humour hinges on the reception dynamics of a process in which the unintended humour of the sender is perceived as being humorous only by the receiver. In this situation the sender is an unwitting catalyst, whilst the receiver is a proactive initiator who gives substance to the humorous experience.

.In the present context, it is worth noting that the widespread acceptance of the case for reception dynamics is also the death knell of simplistic unidimensional definitions of humour such as that of Bremmer and Roodenburg (1997:1) who define humour as 'any message ... intended to produce a smile or laugh', thereby ignoring the dynamics of the humour process entirely. By contrast, the more unwieldy character of other more multidimensional definitions, such as the one formulated by Michael Apter (1989:139-149) as part of his reversal theory of humour, can usually be attributed to their meticulous treatment of process as the central feature of their conceptualizations of humour. (As mentioned above, Apter's reversal theory of humour receives in-depth attention in Chapter Six.)

Other examples of categories of humour definitions in which the process variable plays a pivotal role include incongruity theory, configurational theory and release/relief theory. These theories are discussed more fully in Chapter Two and Chapter Six. For present purposes, the above example of the adaptation of the classic Lasswell metacommunication model to provide a metacommunication perspective of the humour process serves as a rudimentary illustration of the centrality of *process* to the epistemological stance of structural phenomenologists. In this context, it should be noted that I too am partial to the perspective offered by structural phenomenology, and consider 'process' to be the main course of any well-digested definition.

Figure 4.1 <u>Lasswell's classic metacommunication model and its application in the telling of a joke</u>

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(1) <u>GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF LASSWELL'S MODEL</u>

SENDER ⟹ ⟹ CHANNEL ⟹ ⟹ MESSAGE ⟹ ⟹ RECEIVER

FEEDBACK

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(2) <u>APPLICATION OF LASSWELL'S MODEL</u>

JOKE TELLER⟹ ⟹ VOICE + GESTURE ⟹ ⟹ THE JOKE ⟹ ⟹ AUDIENCE

LAUGHTER
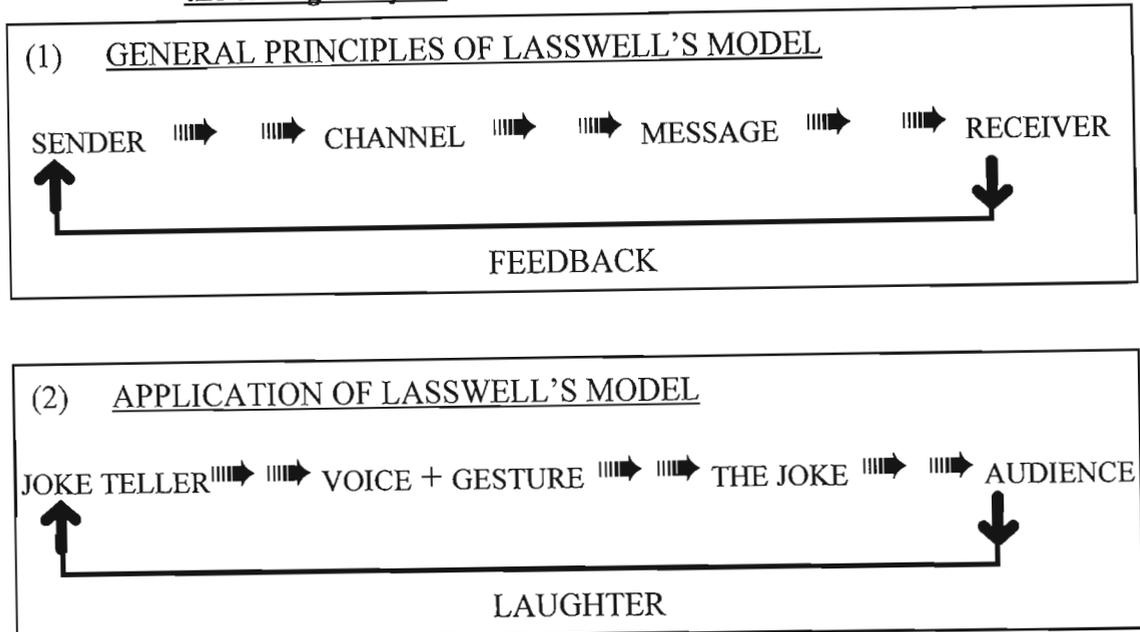
4.5.2 <u>The products of humour</u>

The variable termed 'the products of humour' is the cause of some controversy, mainly because of a basic flaw in the Murdock and Ganim study of 1993. In their extensive descriptive study of humour definitions, Murdock and Ganim (1993:62) inadvertently conceptualize the 'products' of humour as being the tangible artefacts (such as the cartoon) and intangible humorous aspects (such as the buffoonery of the clown's performance) that are part of the humour process. The aspects that Murdock and Ganim have erroneously called 'products' of the process are in fact elements that are integral to the humour process itself.

This misconception can be traced directly to the researchers' misconceived interpretation of the process of humour in terms of the intentions of the sender, and the fact that the logical extension of this line of reasoning is that if humour

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originates with the sender then its products are the jokes told or the cartoons drawn. This is an example of the pitfalls of developing a process theory on the basis of ill-conceived premises. The basic principle is that products derive from process and are not part of it, and the so-called 'products' identified by Murdock and Ganim are in fact elements that are essentially part of the humour process rather than its products.

From the perspective of the present study, the so-called 'products of humour' refer to the evocation of experience in reaction to the humour in process. The outcomes of humour may vary from laughter to a momentary smile or glint in the eye, and are usually recorded in terms of what human scientists refer to as 'response behaviour' because they represent those actions brought about by the receiver's exposure to a relevant variable, namely: the process of humour. In this case, the independent variable is the process of humour, whereas the dependent variable and presumed effect is the laughter or smile that is a product of the process. The process is also open-ended and potentially ongoing in the sense that the laughter that is a product in the process may also become incorporated into the cyclic process by acting as feedback that influences the ongoing nature of the humour process. Hence, a sender of humour may be encouraged by the receiver's laughter, and on this basis may decide to prolong the humour process.

4.5.3   The purpose of humour

While the 'purpose' of humour is generally not mentioned explicitly in most concise definitions of humour, paradoxically it is also the central aspect of Bremmer and Roodenburg's inadequate definition (discussed in section 4.5.1 of this chapter). A consideration of 'purpose' has significance in this context as it is sometimes a factor that drives process. However, 'purpose' is not simply a case of the bringing to fruition of an intention 'to produce a smile or laugh' as Bremmer and Roodenburg (1993:1) would have us believe. The characteristic of 'purpose' in humour refers partially to the intentions of the initiator of the humorous event, but in terms of reception theory it may also refer to the quality that is ascribed to the experience of the event by the receiver.

As humour is often spontaneously or unwittingly evoked through the perception of a stimulus that amuses the receiver, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish a 'purpose' in humour. Humour often has a surprise element and laughter sometimes comes after a momentary shock. Hence, often the attribution of a cause-effect relationship to the humour process is ex-post facto. In such cases, 'purpose' is identified retrospectively, and the process of attributing cause to humorous effect is by no means always valid or reliable.

For example, the same episode of humour may be rationalised quite arbitrarily by the person who experienced it as being either a tension-reducing experience or alternatively a creatively-rewarding experience, depending on the person's

personal disposition at the time of making the attribution. There are times when the purpose of the humorous event in question is the overt reason for the event, and the purpose is the variable that distinguishes it from other events. An example of this would be that of an audience paying admission to hear a comedian tell jokes. In other cases, the 'purpose' may be arbitrary and the humour may occur spontaneously by chance or serendipity, such as, for example, when a person misinterprets a question and gives a 'silly' reply that others present find amusing.

4.6   Humour-in-action : a qualitative approach

As a concluding section to this chapter on the issue of applying research procedures to humour studies, I feel it fitting in the context of 'a *qualitative* study of humour theory' to engage in a relatively brief qualitative exercise in reflective practice in order to shed more light on aspects discussed in this chapter. The result is basically a concise reflective interpretation of two scenarios drawn from my own experience. The main focus of attention of this reflective analysis is an examination of the humour process in terms of the five humour variables identified by Murdock and Ganim (1993), with due consideration to the implications that metacommunication reception theories hold for the respective humour processes involved. On a more general level, these two brief examples of so-called 'humorous events' or 'humour-in-action' serve to clarify some of the practicalities of the process of theorizing about humour.

The examples can be summarised as follows:

Example 1: A comedian in a place of entertainment tells a joke to an audience who laugh uproariously in response.

Example 2: A new boss conducting his first formal meeting with office staff, commences the meeting with a short, mildly self-deprecating joke in order to break the ice. The response is largely one of polite laughter.

The two examples provided are in fact reconstructed from situations that I personally consider as commonplace because I have experienced them on many occasions as both a sender and receiver of the 'humorous events' in question. Like many others before me, I have been on occasions an audience member and a master-of-ceremonies in the situation in Example 1, as well as both the 'new boss' and the polite employee in the situation in Example 2.

The common denominator of the scenarios in both examples is that they involve the presentation of a funny story by a significant sender to a group of receivers. In both examples, the purpose of the process of humour is to produce a laugh or smile through the use of what Murdock and Ganim (1993:62) termed an 'intangible product' which these researchers interpret as the oral performance of a joke. The 'press' or environmental conditions pertaining to each of these humorous events is different and has a significant effect on the reception dynamics of the humour process.

The scenarios described in these examples can be further discussed in terms of the humour variables discussed in more detail in section 4.5 of this chapter, namely

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the process, the product, the press and the purpose. In the first instance, the process is the lifeblood of the humour, and the 'process' should explain how and why people respond to a joke with laughter.   Murdock and Ganim's misinterpretation of the joke-telling or oral performance of the humour as the 'product' of the process has been disputed in section 4.5 of this chapter.

I regard the oral performance as an integral part of the process model of the 'humorous event', and not as a 'product' of it. Oral performance is the medium of the message that links the sender and receiver, and as such represents the process. Laughter is the product of the humour process, and is in fact often the feedback that informs the sender of the effect that the potentially humorous communication exchange has been consummated. Laughter may also serve to either prolong or regenerate the humour process when it acts as positive reinforcement to the sender and receiver of the communication. Conversely, laughter that is considered inappropriate may terminate or modify the humour process by acting as a source of negative reinforcement.

From the standpoints of the respective examples cited above, the actual 'products' of the processes or laughter deriving from the above examples varies greatly in quality. The 'uproarious' laughter in the place of entertainment of Example 1 differs significantly on a qualitative level from the 'polite' laughter in the boardroom of Example 2. In this respect, the process of reflective analysis in considering the qualitative similarities and differences between the examples

involves a strong measure of empathy with the respective senders and receivers in the examples.

Although the nature of reflectivity is essentially idiosyncratic in character, there are certain aspects of the interpretations that are more or less universal. An example would be the consensus view that the emotions expressed as laughter in the respective examples are clearly different. There would probably also be a consensus view that it would be pointless to attempt to 'quantify' the laughter produced in the episodes for comparative purposes even if it were possible, as one may measure, for example, the volume of audience applause on a comparative basis for contestants in a talent contest. In the case of the two examples cited, my own view is that the two laughter responses share little in common other than their tangible behavioural descriptions as 'laughter', and that comparing them is like comparing apples with oranges.

If the examples are analysed in terms of the humour variables discussed in section 4.5 of this chapter, certain insights into the nature of the respective scenarios are forthcoming. In the first instance, the 'press' (or environmental climate) differs in the respective scenarios, in the sense that both situations invoke sets of cultural expectations that are popularly referred to as 'contextualization'. For example, unlike the boardroom, the place of entertainment is a context that has relatively few inhibiting factors that may prevent open displays of mirth on the part of the audience, and one can deduce that any tendencies by spectators towards unbridled

laughter are encouraged by the fact that a comedian is performing as part of an entertainment situation that presents the audience with explicit expectations. By contrast, the boardroom is a context that may have built-in inhibitory factors. Generally, official staff meetings are expected to be marked by decorum and civility, and there is little anticipation of the occurrence of events that may be characterised as 'uproariously humorous', as one may expect in a place of comic entertainment.

Furthermore, the 'purposes' behind the 'humorous events' in the two examples are entirely different. In the case of the comedian, the purpose is very clear. It is the comedian's job to make people laugh; and if he doesn't, he feels unsuccessful. On the other hand, it is the audience's right and usually desire to laugh whenever they feel like it. It can also be reasonably assumed that most of the audience have built-in expectations of laughter because the reason for their attendance is probably their anticipation of being amused by the comedian.

By contrast, the scenario of the second 'joke-telling' example is complicated somewhat by the possibilities of the reception dynamics involved. On the one hand, the 'new boss' has a relatively straight-forward purpose in telling the joke. He wants to motivate the staff by presenting himself positively. By telling a self-deprecating joke, he is actually saying some or all of the following: that he is human; that he has made mistakes and still became boss; that he doesn't mind

being informal if the occasion demands; and that he extends the hand of friendship to his staff.

On the other hand, the staff's 'purpose' in responding with laughter is perhaps a little more complex. Numerous factors present themselves. For example, there may be many members of staff in contrast to the single boss who told the joke, and the question of peer pressure may come into play. In cases where there may be no collective drive towards conformity, it is even possible that each staff member may have a different 'purpose' in laughing. The 'purposes' behind the receivers' responses to the intended humour probably vary among the following: they are polite to the boss; they did not really 'catch' the joke but laugh along with the crowd like sheep; they are showing the boss they like him; they are relieving tension by just laughing out loudly because it seems to be acceptable to do so; they are playing the 'corporate game' and flattering the 'new boss' by their laughter. Individual differences abound, and some may have actually thought that the joke was amusing!

The use of reflective practice at this juncture in the present study has served a few purposes, not the least being as an *entrée* to its further use in later chapters of this text. The qualitative methodological approach of 'critical reflection' (Killen, 1996:1) is further utilized in Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight, however its use in the present context provides a brief introductory example of a qualitative approach

that reveals both its own idiosyncratic limitations as well as the limitations of relying on an exclusively quantitative perspective.

'Critical reflection' permits a level of analysis that underlines the importance of the mulitdimensional nature of humour depicted as an act of communication in the two examples (above). Reflectivity enables the investigator to digest the realization that the scenarios of both examples viewed in juxtaposition illustrate that humour is a more complex behavioural phenomenon when experienced directly on a primary level in practice than it may appear to be in impressions gained from armchair theoretical discussions on an indirect secondary level. The nature of the two relatively straight forward examples (above) also heightens awareness of the differences that obtain between responses to print-based humour *and* responses towards oral performances of humour in a variety of contexts.

Another benefit of considering contrasting practical examples of these types was that it became apparent that the vital role of orality in the process of humour required further investigation. This is forthcoming in Chapter Eight which deals specifically with the question of orality and the oral tradition in relation to the performance of humour. In Chapter Eight, the scenarios in the two examples provided in the present chapter are developed in more detail as case studies that are subjected to further qualitative analysis, against the background of an eclectic perspective of a diversity of humour theories. The reasons for this procedure of separating the two considerations are both practical and logistical. At the present

stage, for example, the presentation and analysis of a few meaningful examples of everyday humour-in-action was considered necessary in order to give a practical perspective to the theoretical discussions that have predominated. At the same time, a fuller discussion was precluded by the fact that the basic frames of reference for further theoretical analysis had as yet not been established in this study.

For this reason, the focus in the intervening Chapters Five to Seven falls upon establishing a more comprehensive knowledge-base to permit the possible assimilation of an eclectic theoretical perspective. Chapter Five deals with a broad descriptive study that encompasses a comprehensive overview of humour theories in general, whereas Chapter Six deals specifically with the status a significant single theory within the context of humour theory in general. Chapter Seven presents a specific example of my own use of reflective practice to systematically analyse a personal experience of humour, as well as provide a broad perspective of a range of theoretical and methodological issues in humour studies. In this way, the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters of this study act as a bridge from the initial humour-in-action examples of the present chapter to the more in-depth explication of an expanded view of these phenomena in Chapter Eight. In other words, the more advanced level of the theoretical discussion attained in Chapter Eight would not have been appropriate in the present chapter because the necessary knowledge-base has not yet been established within this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

Research in humour:
Murdock and Ganim's descriptive study

5.1   Introductory comment

A comprehensive descriptive study of definitions of humour and theories of humour falls outside the parameters of this study. This substantial task was undertaken by descriptive researchers such as Treadwell (1967) and Goldstein and McGhee (1972) some twenty-five to thirty years ago in the era before the Information Explosion had provided automated databases such as PsychLit and SocioFile with the capabilities of delivering exhaustive bibliographies on demand.

In 1972, Goldstein and McGhee were able to produce an annotated bibliography of published papers on humour in research literature from 1900 to August 1971. At the time of writing of this text, an undertaking of this nature would be of considerably greater scope than that of the early 1970s because it not only involves the print materials traditionally associated with bibliographies, but also audiovisual materials emanating from the 'media explosion' that has accompanied the Information Explosion (Gordon, 1989:412). The principle advantage, however, of conducting a survey of this magnitude during the so-called 'Electronic Age' (McLuhan, 1975) is the availability

of a range of highly refined automated search strategies that provide ready bibliographic access to a vast reservoir of sources.

As a consequence of being confronted by this vast and exponentially increasing stock-pile of information on a proliferation of topics and in a variety of media formats, contemporary descriptive researchers in the human sciences tend to lower their sights from the field of macro-analysis, and concentrate instead on specific areas of concern within their already highly specialized fields. In the present chapter, consideration is given to the contribution made by Mary Murdock and Ruth Ganim whose collaborative descriptive study of the relationship between humour and creativity has relevance to this study because it serves to bring some measure of epistemological focus to the rather nebulous development of the body of knowledge about the phenomenon identified as *humour* (Murdock and Ganim, 1993:57-70). The work of Murdock and Ganim has been mentioned in specific contexts in preceding chapters of this study in the course of discussing definitions, theories and the methodology used in humour research. Special consideration is given to the Murdock and Ganim study in this chapter principally because it is a rare example of evaluative humour research that mixes qualitative planning with quantitative methodology, and in its stated aims reaches towards the level of macro-analysis.

5.2 Murdock and Ganim's descriptive analysis: aims and scope of the researchers

Probably the most notable feature of the Murdock and Ganim study (1993) is the breadth of its compass. A literature search reveals that it is probably the nearest contemporary equivalent of a descriptive macro-analysis currently available in the field of humour research. In fact, one of Murdock and Ganim's stated objectives for conducting this descriptive study was that the researchers considered it to be: 'a baseline effort to sort humour definitions and theories for future research' (Murdock and Ganim, 1993:57).

A study of this magnitude involved a fairly exhaustive level of categorization and selection procedures to systematize the descriptive process. Accordingly, thirteen definitions of humour and eleven theories of humour were identified from the body of knowledge derived from the *creativity*-related research community. These definitions and theories were then subjected to analysis, and the resulting findings were systematized for the benefit of further consideration by theorists and researchers in the fields of creativity and humour.

In reviewing the literature in the field, Murdock and Ganim observed that the relationship between humour and creativity had received attention from a number of prominent researchers in the field of creativity, including Maslow (1954), Koestler (1964) and Amabile (1987). Murdock and Ganim found that although there was a great diversity in the respective foci of the research of these creativity researchers, the

general consensus viewpoint was that humour was a form of creative expression. Based on their findings that the expression and manifestation of humour was a particular aspect of the more generalised process of creativity, Murdock and Ganim (1993:66) concluded that humour '... seemed to be sufficiently integrated to be considered a subset of creativity'. They also suggest that this conclusion provides a satisfactory basis for the productive study of both humour and creativity within similar conceptual frameworks.

At the outset, issue must be taken with Murdock and Ganim because of the questionable nature of the conclusion they have drawn in respect of the relationship between humour and creativity. While this conclusion may have a measure of validity within the particular context of the content of the literature cited in Murdock and Ganim's descriptive study, one must bear in mind that the study dealt exclusively with literature on creativity. The result is that in effect the researchers' conclusion that humour is a subset of creativity emerges as something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Certainly it would be too great a leap of extrapolation to apply this conclusion beyond the designated parameters of Murdoch and Ganim's self-limiting study. In other words, the conclusions of the Murdock and Ganim study do not apply to humour studies that were not founded in creativity research.

Notwithstanding the fact that further reservations concerning the Murdock and Ganim study are expressed in this chapter, it should be acknowledged that there is also no questioning the merits or the general relevance of this study. Whatever critical views

may be expressed on Murdock and Ganim's interpretation of their findings, there is considerable merit in their ambitious efforts to present an in-depth descriptive study that strives towards comprehensiveness and is grounded in sound methodological procedures that provide insight into techniques of analysing descriptive data through content analysis involving a variety of qualitative evaluation methods and the technique of constant comparison.

The methodological procedures used by Murdock and Ganim are representative of a conventional descriptive paradigm for the human sciences in general, and have relevance for researchers in the field of humour. The salient features of this methodological approach and can be synthesized as follows:

Step 1: Collection and review of major theoretical and applied literature on creativity and humour through a traditional literature review and use of current media-organizing technology;

Step 2: Establishing criteria for the selection of researchers who combined creativity and humour;

Step 3: Identification of key concepts in theories and definitions, developmental parallels and previously categorized data;

Step 4: Analysis of the relationship among these key concepts by examining the similarities and differences between them;

Step 5: Organization, coding and categorization of similarities and differences, and the identification of descriptive themes;

Step 6: Synthesizing of key data in the content domains of both creativity and humour.

(Adapted from Murdock and Ganim, 1993:59)

In the course of implementing these methodological procedures, the researchers consulted a variety of databases (for example, PsychLit) and bibliographies, and list the following as their most pertinent sources:

- 1937 to present - Bibliographic indexes edited by the H.W. Wilson Publishing Co. There were approximately 530 entries of bibliographies on *wit* and *humor* in this resource.
- 1961 to present - *Catalog of the Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor*: this collection contained 11,200 volumes and published in 33 languages.
- 1967 - Treadwell compiled an annotated bibliography of empirical studies of wit and humour.
- 1972 - Goldstein and McGhee developed an annotated bibliography of published papers on humour in the research literature from 1900 to August 1971.

5.3   A macro-analysis of humour definitions

In implementing a course of action to accomplish their research objective of comparing and categorizing selected definitions of humour, Murdock and Ganim selected four areas of integration as the basis for examining similarities and differences between definitions. The sorting framework was based on Rhodes' (1961) integrated creativity framework of 'person', 'process', 'product' and 'press'. The results for the thirteen key definitions of humour selected for second level analysis are synthesized in Table 5.1 below:

Table 5.1   **Characteristics of humour definitions and their relationship to creative person, process, product and press**

Name of researcher	Person	Process	Product Tangible	Product Intangible	Press
Amabile					open atmosphere
Blatner	imagination, reason, intuition, inspiration	play, spontaneity			
Cousins	positive emotions (hope, faith, love, humour)	play/playing			
Ekvall	open attitude				open atmosphere; tension free
Freud		energy is discharged in laughter			
Goodman	imagination	play			open atmosphere
Gordon		play; play with analogies			atmosphere of play
Koestler		bisociation; incongruity; perception of a situation			
Maslow	mentally healthy; flexible; positive attitude; handles high stress				
Moody	sees self in a detached and distant way and laughs at self; comic perspective	integration of physiological, psychological and social processes	plays		
Parnes		appropriate absurdity; unexpected relationships			open environment
Torrance	skill; ability	playfulness, natural human process; incongruity	comic strips; cartoons		lack of rigidity; legitimate to laugh
Van Gundy	a comic, a catalyst	release of tension			open and free environment

(Adapted from Murdock and Ganim, 1993:62-68)

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It should be noted that the variables labelled as 'person', 'process', 'product' and 'press' are discussed in some detail in Chapter Four because they are representative of mainstream contemporary perspectives of the theoretical elements of humour and relate to the task of defining humour. These variables are also used as the basis for the analysis of the two examples of 'humour-in-action' presented in Chapter Four. In this context, repetition will be avoided, although it should be noted that criticism was levelled at the Murdock and Ganim study in Chapter Four for confusing 'product' with 'process', and the observation was made that this confusion was the product of a restricted perspective of the concept of humour.

At this juncture, it would also be relevant to comment on the Murdock and Ganim's ill-considered use of a theoretical framework suggested by Rhodes (1961) some thirty-two years before Murdock and Ganim's research was published. Considering the magnitude of Murdock and Ganim's research undertaking, it would have been advisable to modify Rhodes' somewhat dated conceptualizations to meet contemporary requirements. For example, if Murdock and Ganim saw fit to dichotomize the 'product' variables into 'tangible' and 'intangible' categories that were barely used in their analysis, then surely they should have seen fit to refine their descriptive base for the 'process' variable to accommodate a wider range of process interpretations applied in contemporary perspectives of humour theory. The result of utilizing too wide a variable category is that the entries tend to be oversimplified for considerations of brevity, and may in some cases descend to levels of over-generalization that create simplistic impressions. An example is Murdock and

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Ganim's synopsis of Freud's contribution to 'process' as being 'energy is discharged in laughter' (cf. Table 5.1 in this chapter), which I imagine may cause some die-hard Freudians to discharge some energy in incredulous laughter.

With regard to Table 5.1 that provides a comparative synthesis of the characteristics of humour definitions, it is of interest to observe that of all the thirteen selected definitions, only that of Torrance (1966) constitutes a fully integrated approach according to the selected four areas of interest. However, this observation may be of relevance if only from the standpoint of the fact that Torrance and Rhodes were contemporaries in the creativity research community in the United States of America during the 1960s, during which time Torrance (1966) developed a series of well-known tests to measure aspects of creativity as a construct variable. The fact that Torrance's definition of humour took cognisance of the criteria deriving from Rhodes' (1961) analysis of creativity is to be expected, and is not necessarily an indication that Torrance's definition is superior to others selected by Murdock and Ganim.

Of greater concern in examining Murdock and Ganim's selection of definitions is the scant regard paid by virtually all their selected researchers to the so-called 'products' of humour. In this respect, all thirteen definitions compare unfavourably with the definition of Bremmer and Roodenburg (1997:1) which was criticised for its other limitations earlier in this study (cf. Chapter Four), but is worth briefly recalling in

this particular context: Humour is '... any message - transmitted in action, speech, writing, images or music - intended to produce a smile or a laugh'.

By contrast with the above definition, all thirteen of Murdock and Ganim's selected researchers omitted references to 'intangible products'. The reasons for this common omission perhaps include the perceived need for definitional conciseness on the part of a selection of authority figures drawn from 'creativity' literature who for the sake of brevity may have felt inclined to put process ahead of the other criteria. While the predilection of 'creativity' academics for process is understandable, there are other vital issues to be confronted in the context of 'intangible products'. In this respect, it must be acknowledged that orality may play a significant role in the humour process, and that the orality factor permeates the entire process of humour from its transmission to its reception and beyond. Chapter Eight provides a discussion of the significance of orality and the oral tradition within the field of humour theory.

5.4   **A macro-analysis of humour theories**

Having examined definitions of humour in terms of a range of variables (described above), Murdock and Ganim's descriptive study proceeds to a further stage in which eleven humour theories are selected from the combined humour and creativity literature, and analysed in terms of (i) the essence of their key concepts, (ii) their emphases in formal definitions in terms of person, process, products and press, and (iii) their theoretical strengths. The results of this analysis are synthesized and presented in Table 5.2 below.

Table 5.2   Humour theories and their relationship to creativity

Name of theory	Essence of theory / Key concepts	Emphasis in formal definition (4 P's)	Theoretical strength
Ambivalence	Basis of humour is in the simultaneous occurrence of incompatible emotions or feelings	person	theoretical viewpoint; speculation
Arousal	Basis is that it creates conflict-curiosity, exploratory behaviour	person	theoretical viewpoint
Biological instinct evolution	Humour potentials are built into the nervous system and serve adaptive functions	person process	theoretical viewpoint; formulation of relationships, systematic statement of principles; some verification
Configurational	Humour is experienced when elements thought to be unrelated suddenly fall into place	person process	formulation of relationships, systematic statement of principles; some verification
Gallows	Amused cynicism on facing disaster; joking relationships, conflict and control	person process	theoretical viewpoint, speculation
Incongruity	Humour arising from disjointed, ill-suited pairings of ideas or situations; presentation of ideas that are divergent from usual customs - bisociation	process	ideas, speculative plan, formulation of apparent relationships, systematic statement of principles
Play/spontaneity	Spontaneous expression of the inner desire; non-work process whereby inspiration enters creativity; a behaviour	person process press	theoretical viewpoint; formulation of ideas, plans relationships; systematic statement of principles; some verification
Psychoanalytic	The ludicrous represents a saving in the expenditure of psychic energy; humour reduces the significance of painful events	person process	theoretical viewpoint; formulation of ideas, plans, relationships
Release/relief	Basis of humour is relief from strain or constraint; release of excess tension	person process	systematic statement of principles; some verification
Superiority	Triumph over other people. One compares him/herself favourably to others;.mockery; ridicule; laughter at the foolish	person process	theoretical viewpoint; speculation
Surprise	Elements of surprise shock, suddenness or unexpectedness are necessary to humour	process	theoretical viewpoint; speculation

(Adapted from Murdock and Ganim, 1993: 62-68)

Basing their findings on these criteria, Murdock and Ganim (1993:65) conclude that the current status of humour theory is 'immature' and 'in need of further development'. Four of the eleven theories were found to show 'developmental theoretical strength' by having systematic statements of principles and some verification. The four theoretical groups in question were the configurational, incongruity, release/relief, and play/spontaneity groups of theories, with the latter being adjudged by Murdock and Ganim as having the strongest developmental theoretical approach.

At the next stage of the methodology, Murdock and Ganim (1993:66) proceeded to collapse the eleven humour theories into three basic categories, namely: (1) play/spontaneity; (2) release/relief; and (3) incongruity/unexpected relationships. The researchers suggest that these three theoretical categories provide an appropriate starting point for 'the conceptual organisation of the construct of humour'.

5.5   A critique of Murdock and Ganim's study

Murdock and Ganim's 1993 study has considerable breadth, and it is not surprising that it courts controversy. In the context of the present 'qualitative study of humour theory', there are several issues that cannot be ignored. Firstly, as a point of semantics, Murdock and Ganim's use of the term 'construct' cannot be condoned in its context within an authoritative scientific report. In the conventional terminology of contemporary research methodology, the term 'construct' implies that a concept

has been rendered quantifiable for use as a 'construct variable' under controlled experimental research conditions. The use of the term 'construct' as a descriptor of relatively generic concepts such as humour or creativity is inappropriate, although it is common for certain *aspects* of both concepts to be adapted for use as construct variables that are amenable to measurement under controlled conditions.

Secondly, Murdock and Ganim advance the questionable claim that the results of their study provide a suitable starting point for the so-called 'conceptual organisation of the construct of humour'. In this respect, it has already been emphasized that the relationship between humour and creativity is the primary area of focus of Murdock and Ganim's descriptive study which was founded upon a consideration of the treatment of humour by researchers of creativity, rather than *vice versa*. In effect, Murdock and Ganim's selection of definitions of humour and theories of humour was largely confined to the output of theorists who had made studies in the field of creativity. For this reason, for example, Murdock and Ganim (1993:67) were able to conclude that their study indicated '... a weakness in *creativity* researchers' elaboration in defining humour' (italics my own).

Murdock and Ganim's 1993 study leaves certain issues unresolved. The most blatant omission is probably the unanswered question concerning attempts to define humour by researchers other than creativity researchers. In this respect, the contributions of a specific case-in-point, Michael Apter, receive attention in the next chapter of this study. A further unresolved issue is Murdock and Ganim's pivotal conclusion that humour is a subset of creativity, which is a premise that has a formative influence on

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the development of the entire study. This conclusion has been described earlier in this chapter as 'something of a self-fulfilling prophecy', and it was argued that the crux of the researchers' argument for making humour a subset of creativity rests on biassed conceptual decisions in defining 'humour'. In certain cases, the element of creativity may be central to the humour process; but on the other hand, the links with creativity become more tenuous if decisions are made to include *Schadenfreude*, practical joking, slapstick, 'pie-in-the-face' comedy, buffoonery and other less *cognitively*-dependent forms of behaviour as humour.

In this respect, it is enlightening to recall Hammerton's statement of almost a century ago that: "There is more 'heart' in humour, and more 'head' in wit" (Appendix B:4, and already cited in Chapter Four). I would suggest that the more cerebral forms of humour such as wit and humour of incongruity may well have an affinity with creativity, whereas the less cerebral forms of humour may depend far less on the creativity of the receiver. I would also go as far as to suggest that the Murdock and Ganim (1993) study would have had considerably enhanced stature had its main title been 'Creativity and wit' rather than 'Creativity and humour'. Although this fundamental distinction would have complicated the process of collecting narrative data and theoretical information, it would also have put the issue of the nature of humour into sharper perspective. Furthermore, it should be noted that this observation is made from the perspective of a humour researcher rather than that of a creativity specialist, and its appears likely that there are at least as many facets to creativity as there are to humour and that perhaps Murdock and Ganim should also have been dealing with specific categories of creativity.

Notwithstanding these reflective observations, it is clear that Murdock and Ganim's descriptive study does not deliver proof that humour is in fact a subset of creativity, although it should be acknowledged that this supposition provides food for thought as regards wit and certain categories of humour. As descriptive researchers, Murdock and Ganim have staked out the parameters of their domain of research explicitly; and as a consequence their study is by design by no means comprehensive. The connection between humour and creativity may well be used as a starting point for 'the conceptual organisation' of ideas about humour as Murdock and Ganim (1993:66) suggest; however the researchers' own restricted parameters indicate that it would be a rather limited starting point.

As has been mentioned above, the consequence of the limited conceptual approach of the study under review is that it ignores humour theorists who eschew the topic of creativity. Among the notable omissions is Michael Apter (1989) who had accumulated a respectable body of published humour research at the time that Murdock and Ganim (1993) conducted their descriptive study. Admittedly, the only explicit reference to 'creativity' in Apter's best known publication <u>Reversal psychology: motivation, emotion and personality</u> (1989:180) is a solitary passing-reference to a study by Fontana (1985).

In spite of this apparent abstinence from indulging explicitly in *creativity* issues, the general principles of reversal psychology have readily recognizable implicit relevance to the concept of creativity. For example, Apter's conceptualisations concerning reversal mechanisms and 'multiple synergy' (Apter, 1989:140) are

compatible with Edward de Bono's conceptualization of 'lateral thinking' (de Bono, 1970, 1980). Furthermore, from a broader methodological standpoint, Apter and Svebak's extensive research in the areas of the telic and paratelic modes has much to offer to researchers in the field of 'creativity' studies (Apter and Svebak, 196, 1990; Svebak and Apter 1984, 1987). A small measure of compensation for Apter's omission from Murdock and Ganim's descriptive study may derive from the fact that the next chapter of this study is devoted to a consideration of Apter's substantial contribution to the growing body of humour theory.

In perusing the overall contribution of Murdock and Ganim (1993) to the body of research on humour, one should always be mindful of the restrictions in scope that the researchers themselves have imposed on their own view of their chosen area of study. At the same time, care should be taken not to undervalue the extent of Murdock and Ganim's contribution in gathering together a disparate collection of humour-related creativity research and systematizing it within a relatively coherent framework. It should also be noted that the term 'relatively' is used reservedly in respect of the coherency of the theoretical framework that represents Murdock and Ganim's epistemological simplifications.

A few problems are presented by Murdock and Ganim's decision to *collapse* the eleven theories into three theory groups. If one accepts the principle of integrating the theories are far as possible, then there may be some areas of agreement in respect of *collapsing* certain theories. For example, some justification may be attributed to the decision to *collapse* the psychoanalytical category of theories into the

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'release/relief' theories category because Freud (1905) is generally credited with being either the originator or chief proponent of the 'release/relief' theory anyway (McCrone, 1993:235; Driessen, 1997:224). However, even this apparently reasonable rationale for the decision to integrate theoretical orientations would offend purists who may argue with equal justification that Freud extended his theorizing about humour from the reasonably conservative base of laughter being 'a release of libidinal energies' to the more radical terrain of psychoanalytical speculation concerning the content of humour.

The case-in-point of *collapsing* the Freudian and relief theories is worth noting because of the emotive factors involved. Although there may be little outcry concerning relief theory, by contrast the speculative nature of Freudian psychoanalytic interpretations of the forces impelling laughter tends to shock and at times unsettle non-Freudians. Evidence of this can be gleaned from an example cited by McCrone (1993:235) of psychoanalytic speculation concerning 'penis envy' being the basis for the suppressed laughter of certain women in response to certain innocent-seeming jokes. In this case, it would not require a vivid imagination to gauge the effect of this imaginative example of Freudian speculation on contemporary feminist observers. My own opinion is that apart from the obvious controversies involved, when the case is considered for *collapsing* humour theories, we should be mindful of the basic Freudian principle that whatever form it takes as a defence mechanism, the expression of the humour is interpreted as being motivated by a desire to relieve inner tensions. Accordingly, if *collapsing* must be done, then

it seems appropriate for the fundamental psychoanalytic standpoint concerning humour to be subsumed into the 'relief theory' category of humour.

While the psychoanalytic-relief theory amalgamation has its controversial elements of debate, the remainder of Murdock and Ganim's exercise in *collapsing* humour theories into three categories can be described as being even more questionable. Whereas it would seem that the play /spontaneity category forms a natural category on its own, the logic behind the *collapsing* of the rest of the approaches into a generic 'incongruity/unexpected relationships' category is difficult to fathom. This observation gathers weight when one considers the inappropriateness of theories grouped under the 'biological instinct', 'gallows' and 'arousal' sub-categories.

'Superiority' theory is an interesting case as well, because of its affiliation with all three of Murdock and Ganim's proposed categories of humour. In many respects, 'superiority' humour results from a release of tensions that are very amenable to psychoanalytical interpretation, but the laughter of 'superiority' humour is also characterised by spontaneity and playfulness as in the well-worn example of the fat man slipping on the inevitable banana peel. Furthermore, the laughter arising from humorous situations with a superiority rationale is often the product of the usually incongruous nature of the subject matter. In practice at least, the 'superiority' theory of humour often also rests on incongruity, spontaneity and playfulness, as well as tension-reduction.

Apart from the above considerations and at the risk of sounding facetious, a question must be asked concerning the researchers' decision to divide humour theory into *three* broad categories. It must be asked whether this is necessary or merely whether the idea of division into *three* is symptomatic of a fashionable trend in humour research? The antecedents are varied. LeGoff (1997:47) notes that Freud (1905) identified and described *three* basic kinds of laughter, namely: wit, the comic and humour. John Morreall (1982) distinguished *three* general categories of humour, namely: superiority, incongruity and relief. Likewise, McCrone (1993:235) speaks of '*three* standard theories of humour' which turn out to be the same as Morreall's. In this tradition, Murdock and Ganim (1993) also seem to feel compelled to select *three* categories, but replace 'superiority' with 'spontaneity and playfulness' when it is clear that superiority needs a category of its own. Basically, there is no reason why there have to be *three* main categories of humour theories, more especially when the respective elements do not logically gather themselves into *three* natural groups.

In the next chapter, the focus of attention narrows from one of macro-analysis to a consideration of the contribution of a single humour theorist, Michael Apter, whose reversal theory of humour involves aspects of all three of Murdock and Ganim's core categories, viz. incongruity, relief and spontaneity/playfulness. However, in spite of this, reversal theory also has a strong claim to being an arousal theory, which should add interest to its analysis.

CHAPTER SIX

A critical study of
Apter's reversal theory of humour

Whereas Chapter Five focussed upon a critical account of Murdock and Ganim's (1993) descriptive study of definitions of humour and theories of humour, this chapter has a narrower focus. The chief concern is a critique of the humour theory of Michael Apter, the British psychologist whose 'reversal theory' of humour represents a pertinent contribution to the ongoing body of research in the field. In effect, the shift of interest is from the level of the macro-analysis of humour theories in general to a level in which analysis focuses on a single current humour theory that I consider to be deserving of further attention. In this sense, the emphasis shifts from a study of a descriptive *secondary* source to an analysis of an investigative *primary* source.

6.1   Reasons for the selection of Apter's theory

The principal considerations that influenced the decision to select Apter's theoretical viewpoint as a special case for study are that his theory of humour provides a systematic statement of general principles and is supported by a measure of psychophysiological experimental verification (Apter, 1989:67-88). The result is a worthwhile example of a relatively comprehensive contemporary theory concerning

apparent relationships that account for humour. Although at times controversial, Apter's theorizing has the merit of confronting the central theoretical concerns of humour in order to arrive at a coherent theory. A further personal consideration that prompted the inclusion of an in-depth appraisal of Apter's reversal theory was that although I harbour some reservations concerning Apter's theory, it is nevertheless my opinion that Apter has not received the recognition he deserves for the weight of his meaningful contribution to the accumulating body of knowledge in the field of humour theory.

An example of this lack of recognition is Apter's omission from the theorists listed in the extensive descriptive study of Murdock and Ganim (1993), discussed in Chapter Five. It may be noted that not only was Apter's theory not among the theories selected for consideration by Murdock and Ganim, but that his omission was compounded by the fact that none of his numerous publications were listed in the bibliography that accompanied Murdock and Ganim's descriptive study (1993:68-70). The reason that was discerned in Chapter Five was that Apter had contributed little at the time to the *specific* study of creativity which was a central prerequisite for Murdock and Ganim's descriptive consideration. However, the explication of Apter's theory in this chapter suggests that in spite of its omission, reversal theory has the potential to make a meaningful contribution in the fields of both creativity and humour.

## 6.2 <u>Background to Apter's reversal theory</u>

The starting point of Apter's theory of humour has a psychophysiological basis. In investigating the validity of what he describes as 'the more prevalent arousal view that laughter is associated with a return to a moderate level of arousal from a higher level' (Apter, 1989:83), Apter draws upon the results of the continuing programme of psychophysiological research of Svebak and his colleagues at the University of Bergen (Svebak, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1986a, 1986b, 1988a. 1988b). Apter (1989:67) indicates that his attention was drawn to Svebak's research because, unlike most other psychophysiological researchers, from the beginning of his research career Svebak had designed his methodological approach to allow him to examine the relationship between physiological records and subjective experience. Basically, Svebak's research programme during the 1980s focussed on four major investigative areas of physiological activity, namely: (1) skeletal muscle tension, (2) cardiovascular activity, (3) respiratory activity, and (4) cortical activity. Experimental studies were conducted to examine the relationship of these physiological activities to the subjects' states of mind. Svebak's methodological stance provided Apter with an empirical foundation upon which to base his theory of humour.

Apter not only took cognisance of Svebak's Norwegian-based research on arousal states, but also from 1984 onwards collaborated with Svebak in a series of empirical studies that sought to examine the psychophysiological bases of reversal theory (Apter and Svebak, 1986, 1990; Svebak and Apter, 1984, 1987). Of particular relevance to the question of humour theory is Apter and Svebak's collaborative study

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of 1987, the findings of which were published in an article entitled 'Laughter: an empirical test of some reversal theory hypotheses'.

Apter's theory of humour grew from his dissatisfaction with the optimal arousal theory postulated by Hebb (1955). The unchallenged longevity of the optimal arousal theory had resulted in its being virtually enshrined within the so-called 'basic-premises' of much psychological research in motivation, and the influence of this theory was also implicit in the research emanating from a diversity of other areas of interest such as humour theory. The essential idea of optimal arousal theory in its application to the theory of humour is that humour arousal or hedonic tone resulted only when an individual's arousal levels changed from a higher or a lower level to a moderate level. In essence, the theory contends that there is a single optimal level of arousal at which hedonic tone is produced.

For the purpose of both clarity and brevity, the discussion of the principles of the optimal arousal theory as well as Apter's reversal theory is accompanied by a series of explanatory diagrams. Figure 6.1 (below) presents Hebb's (1955) diagram depicting graphically the motivational experiences of the optimal arousal theory, and in particular the relationship between arousal and hedonic tone.

Fig. 1 The relationship between arousal and hedonic tone according to optimal arousal theory (Hebb 1955).
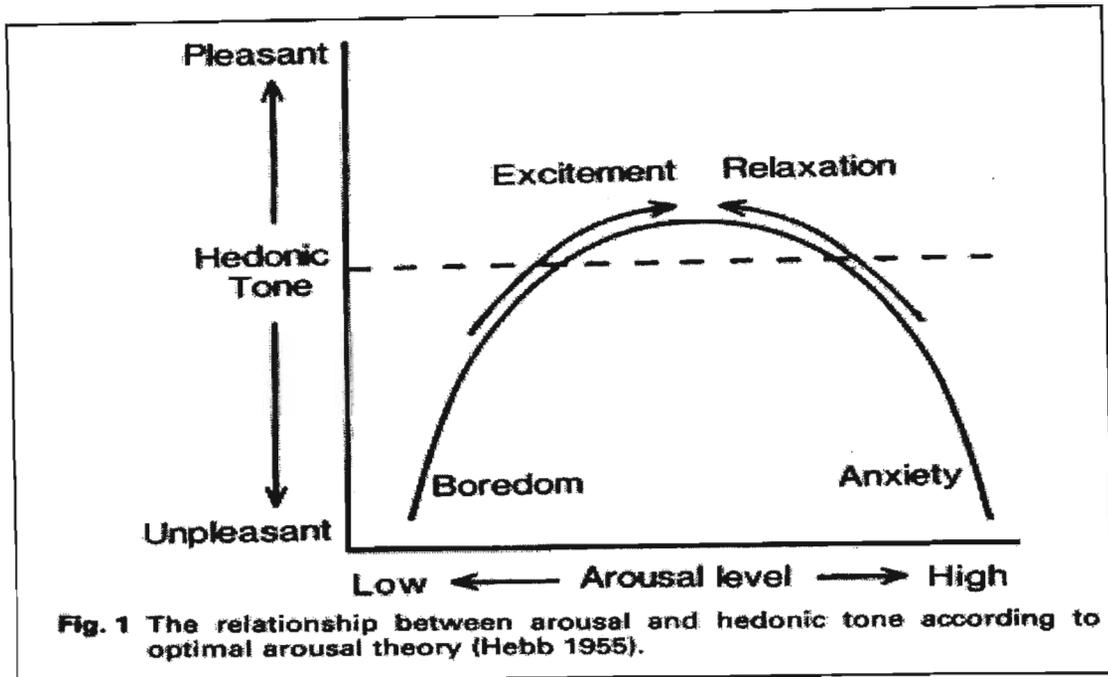
Figure 6.1　The relationship between arousal and hedonic tone according to optimal arousal theory (Hebb, 1955)

6.3　Apter's reversal theory of motivation

In his analysis of traditional optimal arousal theory, Apter (1981b) presents a table depicting a basic set of four contrasting emotions, as follows:

Table 6.1　A basic set of four contrasting emotions (Apter, 1981)

	LOW AROUSAL	HIGH AROUSAL
PLEASANT	RELAXATION	EXCITEMENT
UNPLEASANT	BOREDOM	ANXIETY

Apter (1989:14) emphasizes the diagonal relationships in this table. That is, anxiety and relaxation are related by being opposite to one another, and likewise: excitement and boredom. In structuralist terms, Apter refers to these 'binary opposites', and maintains that these principles apply over the whole arousal range. The inference of

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this stance is that there are two opposing ways of experiencing arousal, in the sense

that increasing arousal may be either increasingly pleasant or increasingly unpleasant.

Figure 6.2 (below) provides a diagram in which Apter depicts the two opposing ways

of experiencing arousal as suggested by the reversal theory. The preferred inclination

of the individual (represented in Figure 6.2 by the hatched arrow-head) may be in the

direction of either lower or higher arousal, and consequently the motivational option

of reversal from one mode to another preferred mode may be selected.
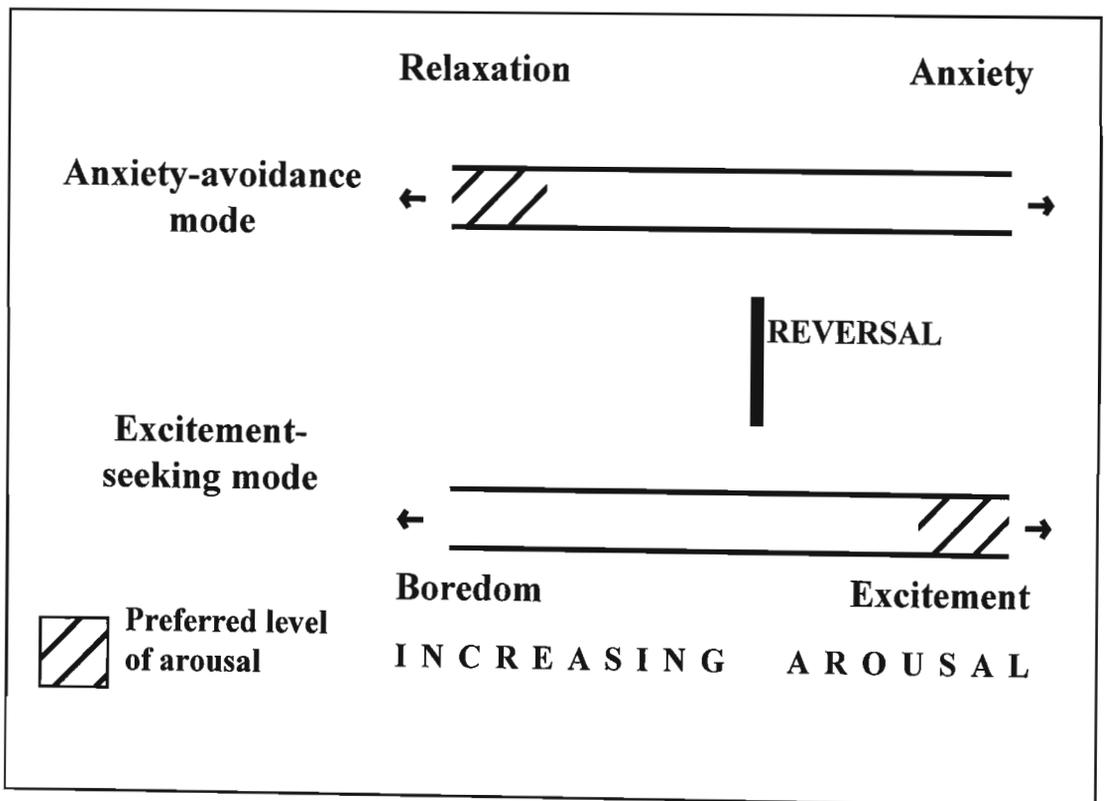
Figure 6.2   <u>**Reversal theory : experiencing arousal**</u>
Two opposite ways of experiencing arousal are suggested by reversal theory. Each horizontal bar represents one of these 'modes', the direction of preferred arousal change being depicted by the hatched arrow-head on each bar. The possibility of reversing from one mode to the other is represented by the double-headed vertical arrow.

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Figure 6.3 (below) presents a further graphic representation of reversal theory that demonstrates that the satisfactory aspects of optimal arousal theory can be retained and incorporated into a single theoretical design of reversal theory. The amalgamation of these approaches involves a combination of the dual modes of the X-formation of reversal theory in tandem with the single inverted-U formation of optimal arousal theory to depict the relationship between hedonic tone and arousal. The quality of greater flexibility enhances the options for reversing perceptions of unpleasant arousal; while at the same time, the design accommodates the optimal arousal principle that extreme arousal (i.e. too high or too low) can be felt as unpleasant and motivates a need for change.
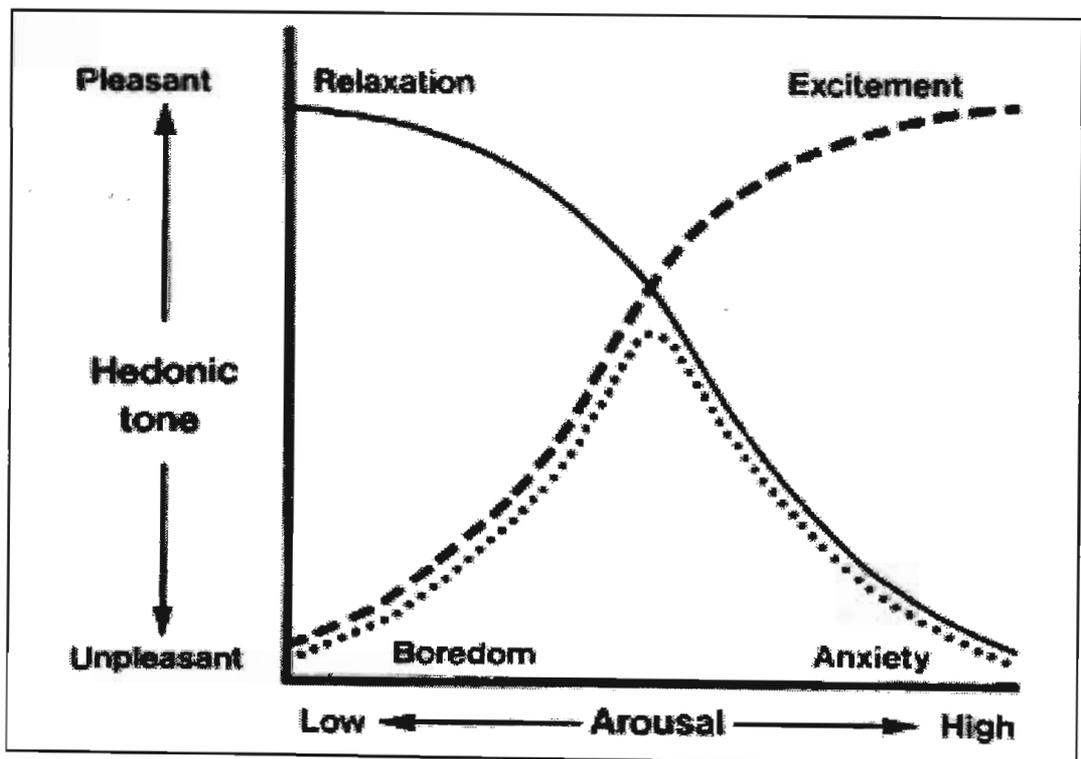
Figure 6.3   The relationship between arousal and hedonic tone according to reversal theory
The two hypothetical curves represented by a continuous and a dashed line depict the two modes postulated by reversal theory. For comparison, the dotted line making an inverted U-curve represents the single mode of optimal arousal theory.

## 6.4   Telic and paratelic modes

Apter's (1989:30-42) interest in motivational theory led to his conceptualizations of telic and paratelic modes which were basically terms used to denote diametrically opposite 'states of mind' (as phenomenologists call them) or 'systems' (as systems analysts call them). On the one hand, the telic mode signified a preoccupation with goal-directed motivation; whereas on the other hand, the paratelic mode signified a preoccupation with activities in which the goal was secondary. People in the telic mode generally place the end before the means and attach value to delayed gratification, whereas those in the paratelic mode generally eschew the rigidity of long term goals in favour of seeking immediate pleasure or the pragmatic convenience of the moment.

Figure 6.4 depicts the difference between the telic mode and the paratelic mode. People in the telic mode tend to be serious-minded and look to the future, whereas people in the paratelic mode tend to be light-hearted and turn away from what Apter (1989:86) calls 'the tyranny of the goal'. These modes fit perfectly into the reversal theory scenario, as each individual ranges between telic and paratelic modes.

Apter's identification of the telic and paratelic modes reinforces his theory of humour because clearly the process of humour requires a paratelic (rather than telic) state to proceed. Apter (1989:43) cites an example of a collaborative study (Walters et al., 1982) in which he was involved that supports the idea of an association between the telic and arousal-avoidance modes as well as between the paratelic and arousal-seeking modes. These findings tend to reinforce the notion that serious-mindedness

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and planning-ahead are associated with preference for low arousal, whereas playfulness and spontaneity tend to accompany the preference for high arousal.
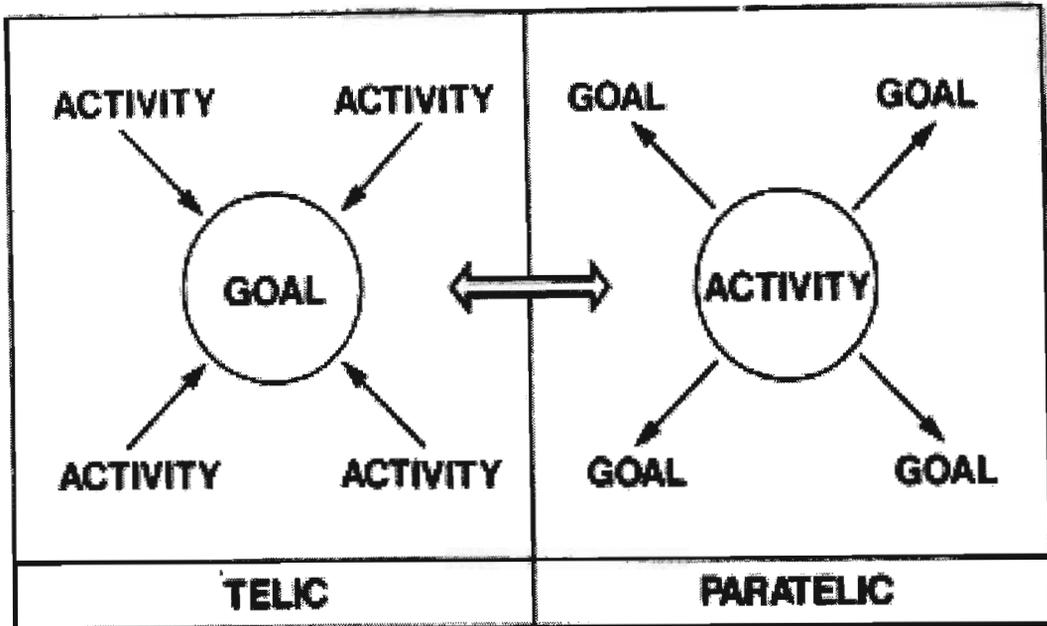
Figure 6.4 <u>**Telic and paratelic modes**</u> **(Apter, 1984)**
A schematic representation of the contrasting way in which the relationship between activities and goals is organized in the phenomenal field in the telic and paratelic modes (after Apter 1984b).

6.5 Apter's reversal theory of humour

Apter's theory of humour is bedded in reversal theory. Apter (1989:139-140) identifies five essential requirements of his humour theory which can be summarised as follows:

(1)   The comic situation should display cognitive synergy or 'the experience of incompatible characteristics in relation to an identity' (Apter, 1989:132).

(2)   The cognitive synergy should involve the 'unmasking' of an appearance that purports to be reality. Comic synergy generally appears to be accompanied by an atmosphere of playful ambience as the structure of conventional reality appears to escape the bonds of logic.

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(3)   The unmasked reality should be *less* than the appearance in some evaluative sense. The comic identity is *less* than it seems, and removes all cues that are serious or threatening in character.

(4)   The humour process is dependent upon the paratelic mode, and the humour will not be felt unless the paratelic mode is either induced or already present. It follows that persons experiencing humour should be in the paratelic mode, and that the induction of the paratelic mode is one of the functions of the comic situation.

(5)   Humour is a form of paratelic excitement which is a function of high arousal, consequently the comic situation should be accompanied by a 'surge of increased arousal' (Apter, 1989:139).

In the latter respect, Apter's use of the phrase 'surge of increased arousal' is mirrored by Foster (1988) who, in discussing so-called 'reversal rituals', indicates the presence of two processes that reflect comic synergy, namely the 'triggering' of a reversal and the provision of material appropriate to the new mode. Foster hypothesized that the enjoyment of humour is heightened by increased arousal and that the longer the increased arousal can be sustained, the greater the enjoyment. Apter (1982b) also contends that the quality of the comic synergies involved in the process of humour relates directly to the nature and quality of the humour involved. He concludes that the more shocking or surprising the synergies, the greater the arousal and the more intensely pleasurable they are. For example, the introduction of taboo topics (such as sex) into humour tends to be more arousing because of their 'shock' impact, and the laughter that derives is accordingly usually more uproarious if the audience is in paratelic mode (Apter, 1989:140).

Apter's study of the 'multiple synergies' in an episode of the British television situation-comedy 'Fawlty Towers' reveals the complexity of what he patriotically describes as 'the best comedy'. The humour process rests upon both the ingenuity of the presentation as well as the audience's abilities to cognitively appreciate the multiple comic synergies of the content in an appropriately paratelic state of mind.

6.6   A critique of Apter's humour theory

The reservations that I have concerning Apter's humour theory are two-fold. Firstly, while the theory is relatively broad in its sweep across the humour spectrum, there are areas that require further investigation. It would be interesting to hear the 'reversal' interpretations of the psychoanalytic defence mechanisms of Freudian humour theory; or how Apter's five humour principles (cited above) apply to the amused cynicism of the 'gallows' theory, or even the 'eureka' experience of surprised humour as described in the configurational approach to humour.

Secondly, in Apter's third proposition (above), he refers to the question of a perceived need for a 'less than' quality in the synergy of the denouement of a joke. In practice, humour does not always conform to this restricted perspective. There are occasions when a 'more than' quality may also be found to be very amusing. There are a number of well-known jokes in which the synergy of the denouement derives from the sudden realisation that the 'simple' character is actually either the one with the brains or the one that fortune favours. The humour in these 'more-than-we-expected'

jokes resides in our empathetic sharing of the simple character's triumph over his circumstances, and we smile because we identify with the fact that the 'right person' has been rewarded in an amusingly heartwarming climax.

On the other hand, reversal theorists could well argue that 'more than' is simply a reversal of 'less than', and that the denouement of the 'simple-man-triumphs' jokes is essentially based upon a reversal of receiver expectations within the phenomenological process of reception dynamics. However, this sort of semantic circumlocution does not alter my opinion that the third of Apter's propositions (cited above) should read: 'The unmasked reality should be surprisingly 'less than' or 'more than' than the appearance in some evaluative sense. The comic identity rests in a qualitative shift or reversal that removes potentially serious or threatening cues' (adapted from Apter, 1989:139).

In conclusion, some final comments on Apter's approach serve to give perspective to the merit of his somewhat controversial theoretical standpoint. Firstly, few will deny that Apter's theory of humour represents a positive contribution to the rather disorganized body of ongoing research on humour. Apter's insight in critically challenging Hebb's (1955) classic motivational paradigm represents a positive starting point to his own contribution to humour research. From this starting point, Apter sets about replacing the traditional optimal arousal theory with his own metamotivational theory as a viable alternative upon which to base his own theoretical perspectives of humour. With the basic planning of the metamotivational structure of the reversal theory of humour in place, Apter (1989:67-88) then tests the

waters of his reflective theorizing against some of Svebak's psychophysiological empirical parameters. The obvious merits of Apter's approach are to be witnessed in his attempts to provide a meaningful and relatively comprehensive theoretical perspective of humour, without losing sight of the need to marry speculation with empiricism (Lachenicht, 1985:1).

Ultimately, we must concede that Apter's theory of humour presents an intriguing picture of a somewhat curious amalgam of subjective reflective practice and objective laboratory testing. Apter's theory is founded in speculative planning and analysis allied with a willingness to test these ideas wherever possible within the controlled regime of behavioural science. The invisible college of reversal psychologists has mushroomed since its inauspicious beginnings in the early 1980s, and the contributions of 'reversal' researchers have enlivened the human sciences. As one of the reversal school's leading gurus, Michael Apter has made a formidable contribution to the behavioural sciences in general, and his initiatives have generated an ongoing body of concomitant research and theorizing. His particular contribution to humour theory is consistent with the basic tenets of reversal theory, and may be described as a natural and meaningful product of reversal theory that enhances the growing body of knowledge of humour theory.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A micro-study of a 'humorous event': reflective practice in action

Humour researchers have found difficulty in identifying and testing valid and reliable construct variables from relevant aspects of the generic concept referred to as humour, and theories of humour tend to derive from particular examples or classes of examples for which the respective theorists offer plausible reflective explanations. This chapter is concerned with employing the qualitative methodological approach of reflective practice in a brief personal micro-study of a so-called *humorous event*. The aim is to apply the observations deriving from this particular example of a personal perception of the occurrence of a *humorous event* to a range of theoretical perspectives. The effect envisaged will be the juxtaposition of Apter's reversal theory of humour (discussed in detail in Chapter Six) with a range of other theories of humour (discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Five), and the textual recording of these perspectives will represent a product deriving from what Smyth (1986) terms 'reflection-in-action'.

7.1   <u>The methodological approach</u>

From a methodological perspective, a primary objective of this chapter is to report the findings of an exercise in self-examination as an example of reflective practice in action. The rationale of this introspective process of qualitative research has been discussed in Chapter One . In Chapter Four, a relatively brief example of the use of reflective practice was presented by employing this technique to examine a variety of humour variables in the context of two contrasting examples of joke-telling scenarios. By contrast, the example provided in this chapter is much narrower, and involves using reflective practice to subject to the scrutiny of 'critical reflection' (Killen, 1996:1) a single seemingly insignificant event that I perceived as being humorous. The approach followed is systematic though idiosyncratic, and the style of expression tends to be more informal in tone than in other chapters in order to capture more accurately the essence of the process of reflective practice. The aim is to provide enough transparency to give interested parties a window to the course and characteristics of reflective activity as the process of reflective practice proceeds.

As was discussed in Chapter Two, the subjective approach of reflection is a fundamental age-old technique of 'non-scientific' social philosophers who traditionally have tended toward 'ex-cathedra' statements of their personal opinions and standpoints on a huge diversity of personal, social and philosophical issues. By contrast, the style of reporting in reflective practice is designed to be transparent enough to provide readers with accessibility to the sequential progression of reflective reasoning. Accordingly, for example, lines of inquiry that a reflective

investigator may have initially followed but later concluded to be of little consequence are generally still reported for the reflective consideration of other investigators reading the report of the study in question.

This modus operandi has particular relevance in the deliberately narrow case-study selected for scrutiny in this chapter. In cases such as this, a technique of systematically 'covering-various-lines-of-inquiry' may be employed in order to identify perspectives of humour that promise more fruitful further investigation. Likewise, a further aspect of the style of the reporting of reflective practice is the recording of the investigator's personal feelings, attitudes and subjective interpretations of various phenomena under scrutiny. This 'open door' policy of transparency provides readers with greater accessibility to areas of subjectivity and possible bias on the part of the investigator.

In this respect, Killen (1996:15) recommends the recording of verbatim data by an observer as 'stable data' that may be analysed at a later time. In the approach taken in this chapter, a more personal and opinionated tone is presented to increase the reader's accessibility to the content. The idea is to give the reader the essential information of both the actual content of the subject matter, as well as an indication of the way in which the author is thinking about this subject matter. On the one hand, we have the enterprise (viz. the analysis of the nature of humour); and on the other, we have what Douglas McGregor (1964) described as 'the human side of the enterprise', which in effect tells us how the investigator feels about humour.

Reflectivity is an area in which many researchers justifiably feel insecure. To many who have been schooled in the research world according to Kerlinger (1973) and Cronbach (1990), talk of introducing 'the human side of the enterprise' into research is tantamount to inviting human error. Likewise, suggestions of incorporating 'the investigator's personal feelings, attitudes and subjective interpretations' (above) into the mainstream of research methodology is something of an anathema to most positivists who would undoubtedly feel more secure timing the duration of laughter with stop-watches. But ultimately we must acknowledge the fact that humour *is* a human enterprise, and that personal feelings, attitudes and interpretations are central human factors associated with the creation of humour.

Furthermore, it should also be borne in mind that the dangers of the application of the products of intuitive study are well known. If proper caution is exercised in the circumstances, the controlled use of reflective practice is probably one of the most viable methodological alternatives at our disposal when we make the decision to venture boldly but gingerly where few positivists have been before. Accordingly, it is hoped that extraneous factors such as observer bias can be partially controlled by critical scrutiny of any value judgements appearing in the details of the reporting of the reflective process in action. The practice of reporting attitudinal standpoints plays an important role in promoting self-awareness of the presence of opinionated content in reporting reflective practice. Killen's (1996:15) concept of 'stable data' provides guidance to those seeking greater transparency in the detection of observer bias.

This chapter contains examples of attention to transparency in the use of reflective practice in the analysis of a *humorous event*. A case-in-point in this context is the fact that self-awareness of observer bias was considered an important criterion in the brief consideration of the psychoanalytic perspective (cf. sub-section 7.2.3 below) in relation to the *humorous event* analysed in this chapter. This bias was reported as 'stable data' as part of the description of the reflective process. Sensitive of the fact that I am personally a non-Freudian, I am also mindful of the widespread and indiscriminate practice of 'Freud-bashing' by both qualified and unqualified persons from a diversity of legitimate academic as well as pseudo-academic persuasions. The result is reflected in my reporting of the reflective process where obvious efforts are made to give the much-maligned psychoanalytic perspective a fair trial by reflection.

The micro-study discussed below concerns a passing *humorous event* involving an expression that brought a smile to my lips as an author engaged in creating this text. The selected example (that appears in the latter part of Chapter Six) is the phrase '*semantic circumlocution*' which is used to refer to a situation involving the circularity of a seemingly pointless and endless game of wordplay. As author of this text, I experienced a sensation of humour in using these words to describe the use of too many words. The etiology of this smile (that was presumably the product of some kind of humour process) is the subject of relevance in this so-called 'micro-study' or 'case study' that in the event may probably be better described as a 'case-in-point' study.

My decision to employ a variety of third person references in this chapter to indicate my own position is a personal perhaps idiosyncratic one, based not so much on pedantry but rather on an attempt to heighten self-awareness as a technique of self-objectification in reflective practice. In order to strengthen an awareness of my own opinions, I found it better to objectify myself in retrospect. Hence, for example, in examining the reasons for my smile in response to a certain phrase, I refer to myself as 'the smiler', and speculate as to why I *became* 'the smiler' who thereby created the so-called *humorous event*. The reason may have included the fact that I was smiling in self-appreciation because in the humour process I am both the sender and the receiver of my own efforts as an author. To clarify my perceptions of this event, it becomes more convenient to use the terms 'the smiler' and 'the author' to refer to my different roles in the proceedings. This provides the idiosyncratic perspective of the 'new-self' looking back on and objectifying the 'old-self' to see why he was 'the smiler'.

7.2   The self-study: reflective practice in action

Based on guidelines in the literature of Schön (1987, 1991), Killen (1996), Wickham (1997) and others, techniques of reflective practice were applied retrospectively to investigate the etiological possibilities of the particular phenomenon under scrutiny, viz. the *humorous event*. Consequently, the nature of the information presented in this study will be both speculative and ex-post facto, but hopefully also systematic and fruitful. A variety of attributions suggest themselves as retrospective

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explanations of the forces giving impetus to the production of the above-mentioned smile.

7.2.1 **The smile of triumph**

At the outset, the possibility must be conceded that the smile reaction may have been the so-called 'smile of triumph' whereby the author may have felt that 'semantic circumlocution' was just the *right* turn of phrase for the situation. In such circumstances, the smile may have been the afterglow of an experience of elation occasioned by a perceived personal triumph of both style and substance. In essence, this may have been a moment of celebratory self-indulgence.

In this respect, we are left to ponder as to whether this was humour at all, and whether in fact the smile was not merely a self-congratulatory behavioural reaction registering success. In other words, was the smile in fact a restrained equivalent of the soccer goal-scorer's punching into the air in celebration? In this case, the more searching question that must be asked is whether a general feeling of well-being and even a whoop of delight that signifies personal satisfaction can be classified as humour at all. Certainly, a smile resulting in these circumstances would indicate that a person was in 'good humour' as a result of being 'humoured' by a therefore 'humorous' event; however, whether the event would be considered humour in the conventional sense is debatable.

7.2.2 <u>The smile of nostalgia</u>

The smile reaction may also have been entirely or even partially the 'smile of nostalgia' as the author recalled somewhat dimly from the depths of memory the amusement he derived in his youth from Charles Dickens' humorous use of the word 'circumlocution' in one of the lighter moments of <u>Hard Times</u> - or was it <u>Great Expectations</u>? As in the first example, a smile in these circumstances could signify a feeling of well-being as it may represent the warm afterglow of vivid memories of past happiness. Once again, it should be asked whether the good-humoured nostalgic smile is valid evidence of the existence of humour at all, or whether the smile is simply a learned behavioural reaction to the experience of pleasure.

7.2.3 <u>Psychoanalytic theory</u>

Whilst we reflect upon abstractions such as feelings of triumph and nostalgia, it must be conceded that we have entered the realm of reflections about reflection itself. In this respect, the term 'metareflection' may be coined, in much the same way as 'metacommunication' refers to communication about communication. In this context, reflection about reflection would involve concern directed towards the inner dynamisms of the sub-conscious, as well as phenomena such as recall that may result in words like 'semantic circumlocution' appearing suddenly in the consciousness. The process of 'metareflection' leads swiftly enough to a confrontation with the issues involved in explaining the reasons for human behaviour in general and humour in particular, and attention is inevitably directed

towards theories of motivation. In this regard, psychoanalytic theory is prominent, especially as Freud (1905) was one of the first theorists to deal specifically with humour and its role in the general scheme of his theories concerning the mainsprings of human behaviour.

Although and more relevantly *because* the author of this text has an Honours degree in Psychology, he is aware that he is not qualified to speak on behalf of the psychoanalytic school or psychotherapists in general. He is, however, qualified to observe that this is not the time or place for premature, petty sarcasm about the manner in which various Freudian concepts (such as 'penis envy' or 'the nipple complex') have been advanced by certain psychoanalysts to explain why certain people have laughed at certain times about certain jokes. These oft-repeated *clichés* in condemnation of Freudian interpretations of humour are often founded in prejudice or emotion rather than knowledge or reason. If one is to pay Freudians and neo-Freudians the customary respect of a fair hearing, then it would be appropriate to examine the possibilities of adapting the ideas of psychoanalytic theory to explain the cause of the particular smile under examination.

The object of humour (viz. the phrase 'semantic circumlocution'), in the present context may be briefly and cautiously subjected to closer scrutiny. Mindful of the proposition that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, there are certain possibilities that suggest themselves in the event of the application of a simple word-association exercise. For example, it is not inconceivable that in certain

cases, depending on the individual, the words 'semantic circumlocution' may be associated with either 'sexual' or 'circumcision', or even both at once. This combination of associated terms may contain the potentiality of sparking into the consciousness an expression of a level of libidinal arousal or anxiety stemming from a subconscious process in which perhaps taboos or a traumatic early childhood experience had led the individual's ego to cope with the situation by instantaneously resorting to humour as a defence mechanism to displace or sublimate the internal force of *Thanatos* (which has been inadequately translated as 'the death instinct').

The psychoanalytic theorist may argue with some conviction that the act of bringing the concept of 'circumcision' to the consciousness produces a classic example of the super-ego reacting under the threat of the expression of an accumulation of id-dominated feelings in this regard, with the result that the ego uses the defence mechanism of reaction formation to subvert an anxiety-driven response into one of laughter or in this case: a smile. The reader should bear in mind that these rather fleeting personal views concerning the formidable psychoanalytic perspective are the tenuous reflections of a structural phenomenologist with a Psychology Honours degree, and are neither the diagnosis nor even the preliminary notes of a clinically trained psychoanalyst.

Despite the proliferation of neo-Freudians, Freudianism has always struck this author as offering little room for compromise in the sense that it is usually either

espoused or rejected with equal enthusiasm. It should also be acknowledged that the criticism offered by psychologists themselves will usually reflect their orientations within the field. Nevertheless, one doesn't have to have a PhD in Psychopathology to realise that the meaningful contributions of Freudians and neo-Freudians cannot be dismissed en-bloc because some of their views are regarded as ludicrous by some or even most people who have never engaged in a formal study of Psychology.

7.2.4 <u>The smile of self-recognition</u>

Self-examination is an important aspect of the introspective 'reflection-in-action' process (Killen, 1997:1), and may lead to what some psychologists have regarded as a 'higher' form of humour. In this respect, Gordon Allport's (in Gerdes et al., 1981:56) analysis of criteria of maturity includes his statement that:

> 'The mature adult is also objective about himself, which gives him self-insight and the ability to laugh at himself'.

This view is affirmed by Gerdes et al. (1981:86-87) who cites the landmark works of Maslow (1954, 1968) and Allport (1961) in identifying 'realistic perception of oneself' as a primary characteristic of maturity, and humour as a vital agent in 'self-objectification'. Gerdes et al. (1981:87) states:

> 'The person who can laugh at himself reflects a capacity for self-objectification and for retaining a sense of proportion'.

The mature person's sense of proportion is maintained by an ability to magnify situations and characteristics to a point of absurdity thereby revealing idiosyncrasies and enabling a distinction to be made between pretension and

genuineness. Allport (1955:54) identified this quality as 'the self as knower', and Maslow (1954) regarded it as a function of 'self-actualisation' at the pinnacle of his hierarchical needs theory.

When viewed from the standpoint of reflectivity, these standpoints offer interesting possibilities for those investigating personal reactions to 'semantic circumlocution'. The possibility should be acknowledged that the smile in question may be a 'smile of self-recognition' that indicates that the smiler has experienced a moment of self-awareness of his own human foibles. The smile may signify a moment of 'self-objectification' (Gerdes et al., 1981:87) in which the smiler has become acutely aware that he has perpetrated another example of his own tendency towards a preoccupation with wordplay and verbal niceties.

In this respect, the smile in question may quite possibly also have a touch of what the French call *'rire jaune'* to refer to the rueful 'yellow laughter' evoked in those who recognise their own foibles or misfortunes. In this case, the smiler's *'rire jaune'* may be the product of a shaft of personal insight. The smile may signify a flash of self-recognition, and may be a signal that he realises that he has perhaps been guilty of the same penchant for style over substance that he has scorned on occasions in reference to certain post-modernists. There is also perhaps the wishful thought that the smile may be a step towards maturity because it is a symptom of a 'realistic perception of oneself' (Gerdes et al., 19881:86).

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7.2.5 <u>Appreciation of aesthetic qualities</u>

The smile in question may be one of appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of language, in the same way that we may smile at the anecdote (apocryphal or not) of Oscar Wilde, locked in a cupboard by his friends until he could amuse them with a worthy pun, shouting from the inside: 'O-pun the door!'. In similar vein, the words 'semantic circumlocution' have a humorous ring to them possibly because they 'turn in' on themselves semantically, in the sense that the words *themselves* are verbose examples of verbiage being used with verbosity to describe 'verbiage'. This process of the nature of words reflecting and reinforcing their own meanings can also be discerned in the Wilde anecdote where the words 'O-pun the door' reflect back to the demand for a pun in order to open the door.

7.2.6 <u>The reversal theory of humour</u>

This so-called *humorous event* (if it is one) can also be viewed from the perspective of reversal theory, and related specifically to each of the five elements of humour that Apter identified as being characteristic of reversal theory (cf. Chapter Six). In terms of the first element, we look for evidence of the comic synergy that sparks the humour, and perhaps find it in the use of a rather grandiose Dickensian phrase (viz. 'semantic circumlocution') to describe a relatively mundane process (viz. 'the circularity of a seemingly pointless and endless game of wordplay').

By contemporary standards, the phrase 'semantic circumlocution' is an archaic and wordy expression that has a playful ambience because it may be perceived by some to be used in an unusual mock-serious context that lifts it from the mundane. Furthermore, in its 'unmasking', the meaning of the playfully-used grandiose terminology is 'less than' the reality. Up to this point, this brief preliminary analysis has revealed that the dynamics involved in the *humorous event* are congruent with the first three of Apter's five essential requirements of the reversal theory of humour, as discussed in Chapter Six.

Apter's fourth and fifth requirements refer directly to the reception of the humour, and in particular to the receiver being in both a paratelic mode as well as a state of high arousal. These reception requirements that demand that the receiver be relaxed and highly aroused are intrinsic factors of the personal disposition of the person who experiences an event as humorous, and are difficult to confirm or disconfirm without reliance on the personal testimonies derived from individual case studies. To examine these aspects more closely, there is a need to consider the context of the words that make up the *humorous event*.

The turn of phrase that elicited the smile is not isolated, but instead contextualized within a study of the nature of humour. Contextualization often promotes expectations. Perhaps some readers of this text on humour read with the expectation of experiencing humour as part of their reading experience, and are predisposed to the reception of humour in any guise. Perhaps even the title of the

dissertation in which humour is a key word, attracted the reader in the first place and led to the anticipation of humour. Likewise, as the author of this text, I am intensely interested in humour, and in writing about it undoubtedly my subconscious is awash with thoughts about humour that may at times find their way into the text.

In terms of reversal theory, the topic of humour alone is conducive to the induction of a paratelic state of mind that may result in the person being more sensitive to the possibility of the reception of nuances that suggest humorous intent. In all probability, the reader of this text has not been discouraged by the style and tone in which this study has been written. Harbingers holding some promise of such *humorous events* have cropped up in the text. There are examples as early as the Preface in reference to Voltaire as well as to the fact that the study of humour is 'no laughing matter', and there are probably humorous nuances in every chapter of this study. For example, in Chapter Four there was a reference to 'the ticklish question of humour theory', and the present chapter has more than its fair share of humour because the technique of reflective reporting involves a more informal approach. For those who require a cue, the next humorous nuance lies between the lines of the second sentence of the next paragraph.

However, taken in balance, there have probably not been enough comic synergies or *humorous events* in this text to establish a pervasive paratelic-dominant mode. The author-as-academic in the true colour (viz. grey) of the telic mode has

exercised considerable restraint in minimizing the *humorous events* in this text, as he genuflects before the altar of scholarship which is after all a serious-minded ('telic-dominant') business. The result is that when a glimmer of humour suggests itself to the reader in a telic-dominant mode, the level of arousal in context may be greater than the *humorous event* seems to warrant. In short, 'semantic circumlocution' may not be funny at all under normal circumstances. However, in the context of the serious endeavour of editing a hopefully scholarly treatise, unusual turns of phrase or tongue-in-cheek uses of academic jargon may well bring that smile that eases the tenser atmospherics of the experience.

In saying this, I am aware that one of my gurus of humour (whose classic accounts of 'one-upmanship' still bring me pleasure) once made this same point with far greater clarity. Stephen Potter (1954:24) expresses the idea with characteristic insight and elegance, with the observation that:

> 'Some literary research workers sink beneath the weight of their materials - buried in their enthusiasm. The historian of wit, scraping his way through the sandy centuries before English humour was created, is inclined, in the desert, to see green spots of humour where it doesn't exist.'

Who is to say then that the author who smiled at the unusual turn of phrase of 'semantic circumlocution' was in fact not clutching at straws beneath the weight of his materials? Perhaps it was a mirage after all - one of those 'green spots of humour where it doesn't exist'.

This process may be very plausibly explained in terms of reversal theory, as follows: The reader of an academic tract may experience the conscious or subconscious motivational impetus to escape the unpleasant arousal syndrome of the telic-state induced by the reading of the dry and perhaps difficult-to-understand academic text. The motivational impetus to escape may grow forceful enough to influence the reader's behaviour to the extent that he effects a cognitive reversal from the telic-mode to the paratelic-mode by taking a break from the task that he perceives as unpleasant; and as a more pleasant alternative, engages in relief-driven joking behaviour with friends. On the other hand, if he finds himself undergoing this reversal but still persists with the task that he perceives as unpleasant, the reader in question may find that his cognitive reversal from telic-mode to paratelic-mode has put him in a jocular mood. His newly acquired light-hearted attitude may be experienced as a spirit of relaxation or exhilaration that may promote a need for humour, and he may even be driven to quench this thirst by reading humour into events that in other contexts may not be funny at all.

The problem with reflective impressions such as these is that the person who does the reflecting may also know about reversal theory (as I do). Consequently, there is always the possibility that even though the person doing the reflecting is convinced that he has the best intentions of maintaining neutrality, the subjective dice may be loaded. Nevertheless, even if allowance is made for the fact that observer bias is a distinct possibility because it is clear that I have singled out reversal theory for special consideration and demonstrated my preference by

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devoting a chapter to this mission, it seems to me that the reversal theory explanation of humour draws strength from the fact that it is grounded in Apter's enlightened metamotivational theory that he suggested as an alternative to Hebb's somewhat outdated optimal arousal theory. In other words, Apter's humour theory is not simply the product of a one-off reflective insight but has been developed as a logical extension of the reversal theory of metamotivation and has received the empirical attentions of Svebak and other members of the *invisible college*. There is no doubt that the reversal theory school has earned its position of strength.

In the case of this particular example, the crown has rested relatively easily on the head of reversal theory. After all, who is to deny that the reader seeing the words 'semantic circumlocution' in this text, experienced a sense of 'comic synergy' that triggered a reversal from the telic-dominant mode to the paratelic-dominant mode? And who is to say that the now-infamous smile may not have been the result of his 'paratelic' desire to read humour into what is essentially a serious-minded endeavour from which at that time he was finding little respite? In the final analysis, it must be conceded that reversal theory emerges with credit as a meaningful contributor to the ongoing body of knowledge of humour theory. Caution must be observed, however, concerning methodology and extrapolation.

Nevertheless, it would be remiss not to interrupt the positive tone of these sentiments by asking whether this particular intuitive explanation for a particular

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humorous event can be extrapolated to encompass all other events that a particular reader finds humorous. The other significant question that arises from this plausible but idiosyncratic interpretation of the elements of a particular *humorous event* also concerns extrapolation. We need to ask to what degree a personal explanation of the experience of humour applies to other people encountering the stimuli that the reader found humorous. In other words, we need to know if we can extrapolate the idiosyncratic findings of a one-off event that appears to corroborate reversal theory explanations, and apply these findings on a universal level to other people and other *humorous events*. There is no alternative other than to admit that the present answer to that question would be a resounding negative, and to agree that the reversal theory explanation requires further investigation.

7.2.7 **Relief or tension-reduction**

The idea of seeking humour to find respite from the tensions inherent in serious-minded academic pursuits is by no means novel. In fact, humour as a means of tension-reduction is one of the most enduring and popular humour theory categories, and it would be remiss of the reflective practitioner to leave so prominent a stone unturned. Furthermore, it seems a reasonable supposition that perhaps in the situation under scrutiny, I had reached a level of inner tension that I felt impelled to escape. In such circumstances, the smile may have been the safety valve of tension release. Perhaps at the time, the phrase 'semantic circumlocution' may have appeared to be more comical than under less oppressive atmospherics. In any event, the possibility must be considered that the

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manufacture of a *humorous event* could have arisen in the midst of a build-up of tension through a saturation of 'serious-mindedness'.

Reflective reasoning reveals that a good case can be made for the presence of the tension-reduction theory, and also for the not at all far-fetched notion that reversal theory and tension-reduction are not entirely incompatible. In this respect, it has been shown that reversals are associated with a switch from unpleasant to pleasant levels of arousal as a product of motivation. Reversal theory is after all an alternative explanation for the dynamics explained by the classic optimal arousal theory, and both theories are concerned with showing the metamotivational dynamics of what the man-in-the-street refers to as 'coping with tension'. In this respect, it may be suggested that the switch or reversal from the tensions of the serious telic-mode to the relaxed lightness of the paratelic-mode is really just another way of describing the individual's instinctive desire to seek the relief of tension-reduction.

7.2.8 Incongruity theory

The final category under consideration is probably the most popular of the humour theories, namely incongruity theory. 'Semantic circumlocution' is basically an incongruous phrase. It has a mock-serious grandiose Dickensian ring to it that emphasizes its incongruity in an academic treatise in the late 1990s, and this alone is probably enough to evoke a smile. In the Preface of his book The order of things, Michael Foucault (1970) refers to the seemingly weird incongruities he came across in a Chinese encyclopaedia in reference to the qualities of animals,

and in commenting on the cause of his laughter uses the phrase: 'The stark impossibility of thinking *that* ...'. The italics are his, and emphasize incongruity. In this phrase, with its inflection on the word 'that', Foucault captures something of the essence of the reason why we appreciate incongruity humour which depends upon the element of surprise in a fresh perception of the familiar.

A very apt example of incongruity humour appears rather incongruously (which adds to the humorous effect) in the Introduction of an undergraduate Library Studies textbook entitled Classification, as follows:

> 'The normal solemnity of museums is broken by an exhibit to be seen in Exeter.
> In the centre of a room devoted to whales, there is a large model of a giraffe bearing the label 'Not a whale'.
>
> (Langridge, 1992:x)

In the present context, the interesting feature of this (perhaps tall) story is that it is both a prime example of incongruity theory, as well as a perfect fit for those seeking to interpret it in terms of Apter's reversal theory of humour. The situation has comic synergy, a playful ambience in a solemn venue, and the label has a wry 'less than' quality. All that is required is a paratelic or relaxed receiver (or group of receivers) and perhaps heightened arousal, as we may rest assured would be close at hand with the arrival of the first party of school children! Furthermore, it would not be far-fetched to observe that this inventive little homage to humour amidst '... the normal solemnity of museums' could also be interpreted as a classic example of relief or tension-reduction humour, and that doubtless there is a perfectly plausible psychoanalytic interpretation of its humour as well.

At this stage, it is clear that the various categories have their respective strengths and weaknesses, and that at times these so-called 'categories' may have areas of compatibility as etiological factors in the humour process. This prompts a more eclectic perspective and with it a tendency to reflect upon the possibility of the coexistence of alternative explanations. A further tendency is to treat every *humorous event* on its individual merits by avoiding formulaic generalised interpretations in terms of universal theories, and thinking instead in terms of etiological factors in specific humorous situations.

Amidst this blurring of the demarcations between the etiological factors advanced by the various schools of thought, there appears to be one certainty concerning the nature of humour. The truth is that there is no easy answer to the imponderable question concerning the nature of a cause-effect relationship in humour. Whatever the explanation put forward by those experiencing humour, it is evident that the smile is the tip of the iceberg and that controversy awaits those who go below the tip of this iceberg. For the humour researcher, this is tantamount to venturing beyond the solid ground of empiricism, and into the less certain grey areas of introspective reflection. (At this point, as a reflective reporter, I am compelled to confess to having had a titanic battle to avoid succumbing to the temptation of introducing an extended metaphor about the dangers of the researcher steering his ship through unchartered waters!)

On second thoughts however, the apt use of the metaphor of humour theory as an iceberg may not be very original, but it serves as a useful catalyst for a reflective comparison between reversal theory and incongruity theory. Basically, what has happened is that in the process of using the 'iceberg' metaphor in the writing of this text, the author has demonstrated an example of an idiosyncratic tendency to experience humour as part of the decision-making process involved in weighing up the options of whether to use or not use analogies and mixed metaphors in expressing his ideas. In this respect, as a function of this wordplay, he momentarily entertained a fleeting temptation to describe 'the iceberg of humour theory' as 'a tough nut to crack', and perhaps found this comparison amusing because the stark incongruity of the iceberg and nut aroused his sense of the ridiculous. This plausible explanation seems to fit the basic notion that by definition and convention, mixed metaphors represent grammatically unacceptable incongruities that bring amusement as a reaction to the comic synergy that is essential to the incongruity theory of humour.

On closer inspection, it emerges that a notable feature of the humour of incongruity is that it is not simply a case of *vive la difference*, but must also involve the tension of a humorous synergy. If the above example is pursued and 'the iceberg of humour theory' is described as a 'tough nut to crack', I would consider this to be more amusing than for example if the iceberg was described as a 'tough road to travel'. Both comparisons may be incongruous mixed metaphors, but I consider the humour deriving from the 'tough nut' analogy to be more

intense because there are greater elements of both congruity and incongruity between the iceberg and the nut than between the iceberg and the road. Both iceberg and nut are noted for their toughness to crack, and the main source of the humour is in the incongruity of their respective sizes. By contrast, the road has no distinct congruity with the iceberg with the result that their difference in size seems of little consequence because size is not a quality or characteristic I generally associate with roads. From my perspective, this lack of distinctive differences or similarities nullifies the humour of incongruity.

The complexity of the humour of incongruity lies in the connections that exist between the incongruous elements that are humorously appealing. Just as the iceberg and nut are both hard substances of disparate sizes, it may be observed that the whale and giraffe of the earlier example in this sub-section have enough in common as living mammals to make their incongruous juxtaposition amusing. In this respect, a comparison can also be drawn between these combinations and the combinations formed by well-known pairs of comic and cartoon characters who in juxtaposition appear to elicit laughter. Hence, for example, Laurel (small, short, thin, shy and introverted) looks amusing next to Hardy (big, tall, plump, robust and extroverted) in the same way that Tweety (a tiny but cheeky canary) does next to Sylvester (a large, belligerent black cat), or Pinky (a larger, gormless but kindly mouse) does next to The Brain (a nasty little mouse who at times resembles Napoleon and wants to take over the world).

The comic synergy in all these cases is based on the fact that these pairs have an area of commonality that reinforces a starkly obvious sense of incongruity deriving from a comparison of other characteristics. For example, in the same way that the iceberg and the road have nothing in common and do not generate mirth together, Laurel would generally not be considered to be amusing when standing next to a large cow or bus. On the other hand, amusement derives from the juxtaposition of Laurel with Hardy because of the pair's physical incongruity. They have enough in common to make their differences amusing, and are living proof that the humour of incongruity is heightened by its congruent ingredients. Distinguishable elements of congruity are the essential catalysts in the phenomenology of the humour of incongruity.

7.2.9 Derivative reflections

Although it may be a trifle circumlocutory, this sub-section (unlike its predecessors) does not deal directly with the *humorous event* based upon 'semantic circumlocution'. The sub-heading 'Derivative reflections' (above) indicates that the discussion that follows derives from matters arising (in this case, 'mixed metaphors') in the course of the process of reflecting upon the mainsprings of the humour deriving from the phrase 'semantic circumlocution'. The lines of inquiry that follow are presented in accordance with Killen's (1996:15) concept of 'stable data'. The aim is to provide accessibility to those following 'the sequential progression of reflective reasoning' and 'guidance to those seeking

greater transparency in the detection of observer bias' (both quotations from section 7.1 of this chapter).

From the standpoint of self-examination and in the qualitative tradition of the case study approach, there is evidence in my own case history over many years that I have enjoyed the humour derived from both the mixed metaphors of others as well as the mixed metaphors of my own that have crept into my writing or thinking. Examples of this tendency are in fact recorded in the reflective reporting of the previous sub-section.

As an exercise in 'self-objectification' (Gerdes et al., 1981:87), my own case history tends to indicate that one of the currently less fashionable schools of motivational thought has relevance as the source of an explanation for my obvious predilection for the humour of mixed metaphors. In the interests of transparency within the present reflective process, it is necessary that I should also admit that through the years I have never been attracted to the behaviourist perspective which I have tended to regard as sound as far as it goes, and which I have always felt is *not* far enough, thereby limiting the behaviourist approach largely to superficial matters. This somewhat negative attitude is to some extent evident elsewhere in this text, but is probably most obvious in Chapter One where I dwell on the alliance of human 'science' with technocratic idealism, as well as in Chapter Ten where I share Miner's delight in lampooning the pretensions implicit in the jargon

of the 1950s human 'science' movement, at the vanguard of which was behaviourism.

Accordingly, a degree of reticence accompanied my initial realisation of the relevance to humour theory of the traditional learning theory approach in which it is posited that behaviour that is positively reinforced will be learned more effectively, and that successful behaviour will be a source of motivation for future behaviour. Contrary to popular belief, the principles of positive and negative reinforcement do not only apply to rodents seeking food pellets at the end of mazes, but also to humans seeking 'reinforcers' or favourable outcomes such as the gratification of a pleasurable experience, of which the delight found in humour is an excellent example. It follows that the applications of these ideas to humour theory are a relatively straight-forward extension of the observation that a person who is gratified or partially gratified by participating in a pleasurable experience will be instrumental in attempting to initiate a similar pleasurable experience again when the need arises.

These seemingly common-sense ideas have their empirical foundations in the operant conditioning theory conceived by Skinner (1953). Skinner's learning theory approach has the merit of providing a motivational perspective that portrays people as being instrumental in asserting themselves by initiating behaviour that controls or modifies their interactions with others, as opposed, for example, to the Freudian or psychoanalytic perspective which tends to give the

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impression of people as the victims of their intrinsic and extrinsic moral and social environments. In Skinnerian terminology, 'operant' refers to a voluntary response to initiate goal-directed behaviour with the implication that it represents a proactive attempt to change the environment to achieve a desired outcome (Mischel, 1981:77-81). Hence, persons, who accept the hedonistic principle that organisms seek pleasure and avoid pain, will have little difficulty with the operant principle that posits that people are instrumental in both initiating experiences that are successful or pleasurable, as well as avoiding experiences that are associated with failure and unpleasantness.

The logical applications of learning theory to humour theory are that the appreciation of humour is a gratifying pleasurable experience that will be sought by persons; and that if the pleasures of humour become routinized as a regular feature of people's lives, they will become instrumental in creating or re-creating situations that promise repetition of the desirable response of humorous pleasure. A familiar example is to be found in the regular pattern of humorous experiences of people who look forward to their favourite television situation comedies or who never miss the 'Madam and Eve' cartoon in the Mail & Guardian. In doing this, people develop 'humour habits' that they often feel compelled to satisfy on a regular periodic basis. In this regard, Drever (1977:114) indicates that this process is sometimes erroneously referred to as 'habituation' (which is synonymous with 'accommodation' or 'adaptation') when in fact it is a form of 'habit formation'

which in the present context is manifested in the desire to experience a regular diet of humorous experiences, among which is the humour of mixed metaphors.

An interesting facet of this line of inquiry is the fact that people enjoying humour are *not* like locusts that constantly move from one feeding area to another to satisfy their needs. By contrast, humans generally tend to carry a store of past humorous experiences in the recesses of their memories; and either revive these *humorous events* in anecdotal form to others who are willing to listen, or simply recall them privately with a smile or guffaw when these recollections are jogged from memory by a pertinent expression or incident encountered in the routine course of their daily lives. It is for this reason that most people tend to remember 'the good times' and carry within themselves a storehouse of anecdotes about the golden days of their childhood or young adulthood. It is also why people seek out the pleasure of humour from sources and locations where they have experienced successful humour in the past, such as for example the above-mentioned Madam and Eve cartoon strip or their favourite television 'sitcom' or even from the *camaraderie* in the pub at the local sports club.

In the present context with its emphasis on mixed metaphors as the source of *humorous events*, there is no disputing that the use of mixed metaphors by both myself and others in various contexts has been a source of amusement to me down the years. Some of the more memorable examples have been lasting sources of pleasure that have engendered *camaraderie* among friends who shared the

experiences initially and later nostalgically relished their revival in convivial circumstances. One such example was a farewell tribute to a colleague, of whom it was said: '... his footsteps will forever be indelibly etched in the corridors of our memories', which in context had a convoluted sincerity that I found simultaneously touching and aesthetically pleasing as a *humorous event*. While the words of this farewell tribute may no longer be fresh to the ears of the original audience, they are still a source of nostalgic humour shared with friends who were once also vocational colleagues.

The dynamics of the humour of mixed metaphors presents an interesting line of reflective inquiry in which the process of reception emerges as having a pivotal role. At first glance, the impression may be obtained that the humour of mixed metaphors contains an element of *Schadenfreude* with the laughter directed at an unfortunate person falling flat after tripping on words rather than a banana-skin. However from my own more circumspect reflective viewpoint as the receiver of such humour, the analogy with the *clichéd* banana-skin scenario is inappropriate. In my eyes, the incongruity involved is *not* an equivalent of the sort of amusement that may be derived when a pompous person loses his self-styled dignity in incongruous circumstances that demonstrate that pride comes before a fall. By contrast, I perceive the humour of mixed metaphors in terms of the spotlight being not so much on the players as on the play itself, which in this case is the play on words. While the identity of the players may to some degree increase the level of

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arousal and interest, basically the focus is on the denouement rather than the characters involved.

Reflections upon the nature of the responses deriving from my reception of what I consider to be humorous mixed metaphors suggests that the humour derives from the incongruities of the comic synergies of the mixed meanings of the metaphors themselves, rather than from a sense of superiority over the momentary lapses of others. In fact, not only is there an absence of malice but also a willingness on my part in the company of others within a paratelic-dominant climate to volunteer examples of some of my own *faux pas* in this category of humour. Some may interpret the latter tendency in terms of a psychoanalytic perspective as a compensatory defence mechanism to allay anxiety deriving from a sense of guilt stemming from a supposed perhaps subconscious awareness on my part that my laughter is based on *Schadenfreude*. I am sceptical of this interpretation, and also aware that this sceptical reaction may be interpreted as 'denial'. Nevertheless, my own 'world view' celebrates individuals' prerogatives to interpret events as they see them, and I do not discount the possibility that the psychoanalytic perspective may be a valid one.

My own feeling is that in the case of friends and particularly loved ones, inadvertent human errors such as mixed metaphors have an endearing quality, and to some extent reinforce the bonding process through the *camaraderie* of shared humour. Furthermore, this interpretation suggests that in some cases the mutual

appreciation of mixed metaphors may well be a subset of a larger family of *humorous events* that focus on social bonding. In much the same way as Vygotsky (1968) identified a social motive in his reinterpretation of Piaget's reflections on the relationship between language and thought (cf. Chapter Eight for fuller discussion), there is a convincing case for the argument that humour often has a strong social motive that as an end is often considered to be more important than the means (viz. the cleverness of the jokes involved).

In the light of these observations, it may be hypothesized that in many cases humour represents the personal expression of a social need, and is at the same time an agent of socialization that reinforces bonding and permits the easier passage of human relationships. In the present context, reflections upon my own idiosyncratic experience of the nature of the humour of mixed metaphors suggests an affinity with the ideas of the anthropologist Christie Davies (1990) concerning 'ethnic scripting'. The basic similarities are firstly in the respective emphases of the social motive and the absence of malice; and secondly, in the fact that because the humour tends to be personal, sharing it tends to increase social bonding and creates a more intense atmosphere of *camaraderie*. The contribution to humour theory of Christie Davies (including 'ethnic scripting') is discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine which is devoted to 'the anthropology of jest'.

7.3   Concluding remarks

The reflective method reported in this chapter follows Killen's recommendations for providing 'stable data'. The reporting commences with shorter initial reactions to the causes of humour in terms of 'the smile of triumph' and 'the smile of nostalgia', then moves through a consideration of a comprehensive variety of theories to a reflective self-examination involving aspects such as social motives and learning theory. There has been evidence in these reflections of an idiosyncratic tendency on my part of tolerance towards a range of etiological viewpoints as befits the ethos of the qualitative perspective. An implicit acknowledgement of individual contributions to humour theory is reflected in the spirit of eclecticism that characterises my reflections in this chapter.

The reflective process itself represents a systematic subjective journey with the aim of finding out more about non-quantitative phenomena. My subjective interpretation of the *raison d'etre* of my own thoughts and actions is basically an act of self-attribution which is the subject of interest of a vast body of psychological research. Sampson (1976:143-197) and Tedeschi and Lindskold (1976:133-188) provide reviews of earlier research in this field which Martinko (1995) indicates has increased dramatically over the past two decades. For obvious reasons, an in-depth study of self-attribution theories is beyond the parameters of this study.

In the more limited context of this chapter, some pertinent issues are raised by my own tendency to find amusement in mixed metaphors as well as in phrases such as

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'semantic circumlocution'. From the perspective of reversal theory, the suggestion is that the predilection to enjoy verbal humour of this type signifies the expression of a need through a process involving a reversal of a telic-dominant state of mind. The interpretation of reversal theorists is that inner tensions give rise to motives to reverse the telic impetus and assume a more light-hearted paratelic-dominant state of mind that prompts the individual to indulge in humour.

However, reversal theory is not the only way to interpret this situation. A brief consideration of the ideas of relief theory suggests that humour is a convenient means of tension-reduction, whereas incongruity theory suggests that the humour stems from comic synergy created between disparate elements and depends upon the presentation of the content in a creative and memorable way. An almost textbook example of incongruity humour can be found in mixed metaphors which are basically confused or mismatched verbal comparisons that by definition are based on incongruity.

While reversal theory, relief theory and incongruity theory appear to operate within different parameters, there is no reason to assume that they are not compatible in certain cases, or that the theories cannot coexist and reinforce each other. On the one hand, both reversal theory and relief theory deal mainly with the dynamics of reception and the way that the individual's internal psychological state promotes conditions favourable to humour receptivity. On the other hand, incongruity theory focusses mainly on the message, and the way that the humour-receptive individual

interprets elements of the message that are perceived to be incongruent. What is of further interest in this context is that comments concerning the congruence of these theories have been expressed in the language of communication theory and reception theory which are also very relevant to considerations of humour as a process variable.

On reflection, there are several qualities that characterise my own predilection for the humour of incongruous phrases and mixed metaphors. Not only do I find the incongruity of their content amusing for its own sake, but I am also aware of the valid standpoints of relief theory and reversal theory that humour satisfies needs for tension-reduction. Likewise, I tend to endorse the operant conditioning viewpoint of learning theorists that people seek out proven sources of humour that regularly satisfy and reinforce needs that have resulted from habit formation. Furthermore, the social motive is an equally important aspect of my experiences of humour as sources of pleasure that often invoke a pleasing sense of nostalgia by reviving memories of times when I enjoyed pleasurable experiences of humour in the past. In this way, I too am not like the locust, and cherish the storehouse of my inner world. The humour I experience is also ultimately its own reinforcer, and very often the nature of the experience is essentially social and its reinforcement takes the form of social bonding.

The fact that the reflective analysis conducted in this chapter has been framed within the terms of reference used in a variety of theoretical approaches is some indication of the fact that the whole question of humour theory remains inconclusive. Humour,

like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, and explanations of humour usually devolve to the level of individual interpretation. In the absence of a universally accepted theory of humour, it is probably not surprising that my own explanations of the mainsprings of *humorous events* generally rely very much on idiosyncratic eclectic interpretation rather than formulaic adherence to any particular school of approach to humour theory. The spirit of this reflective account favours the view that in the absence of the certainty promised in the technocratic Valhalla, the researcher should embrace the aesthetic of uncertainty by maintaining an open mind towards existing humour theories and an open door policy to new ones.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Humour, orality and the oral tradition

8.1 Introduction

The question of the relationship between humour deriving from print sources and humour deriving from oral situations has received little or no attention in the research literature, and yet this is an area of vital concern to humour theory in general. In this chapter, attention is given to an examination of the question of studying humour in the context of orality and the oral tradition. It is a topic that I have raised before in a paper entitled 'Humour and the oral tradition : it's not the joke, it's the way you tell it' presented at the Vth International Oral Tradition Conference held in July 1997 at the Centre for Oral Study, University of Natal (Durban) on the theme 'Oral tradition and its performance' (Sienaert [ed.], 1998). This conference paper is presented in its entirety in **Appendix E**, and should be read in conjunction with this chapter which approaches the topic differently in terms of its context as part of this study. In this respect, the primary concern of the present chapter is to examine some relevant aspects of orality and the oral tradition in terms of their implications for the *qualitative* study of humour theory.

This chapter also contains another example of reflective practice. Accordingly, the features of transparency and informality that were emphasised in Chapter Seven are once again prominent in the reporting of subjective responses to a range of non-quantitative stimuli relevant to the orality factor in the humour process. By way of introduction to this exercise in reflectivity focussing on the relationship between orality and cognitive perceptions of humour, some comments are appropriate concerning the early use of reflectivity as a necessary approach to the task of formulating theories concerning the relationship between language and thought. Pioneer naturalistic studies, such as those of Jean Piaget, have impacted significantly upon the current development of human studies research methodology, and provide tangible evidence that although the term 'reflective practice' has received recent attention as an in-vogue qualitative methodological approach, it is by no means novel. In fact, the process that is currently referred to as 'reflectivity' has a long and distinguished tradition in the field of human studies.

By way of example, reference can be made to two of Jean Piaget's classic studies of childhood cognitive development (Piaget, 1952 and 1954) that were based on subjective interpretations of his own and his wife's observations of their three children's behaviour on a continuous basis during the period of the children's early development (Ginsburg and Opper, 1969:7). Among the various terms of reference that have been used to describe Piaget's approach, Ault (1977:6), for example, refers to Piaget's use of 'naturalistic observation' in implementing 'the process approach'. This is not to suggest that Piaget was not a proponent of empiricism. On the

contrary, Piaget's observations of early childhood development were meticulous and systematic; however when he reached the inevitable stage of converting observations into theories about process, his conclusions about the relationship between language and thought in early childhood took on a reflective character.

Despite his international reputation for outstanding scholarship, there has always been a lingering sense of reservation concerning Piaget's findings because his modus operandi did not conform to the standard quantitative paradigm of what Ault refers to as 'laboratory experimentation'. Piaget's theories concerning the early development of language and thought were basically qualitative reflections based on his empirical experience, and his conclusions met with criticism from other reflective thinkers, such as for example Vygotsky (1962:9-24) who posits a convincing alternative theory. However, the main issue in the present context is that Piaget made his research contribution in a problematic area of study in the only manner possible in the circumstances, namely naturalistic observation and reflection. He had no recourse to a quantitative safety net, but showed the willingness and courage to eschew 'ameaningful thinking' (Koch, 1981:264, and cited in Chapter One) by tackling a real problem directly although it was clearly problematic.

Piaget's supporters, including Ault (1977:7), readily acknowledge the potential weaknesses and dangers inherent in the naturalistic process approach. For example, although limited and biassed sampling procedures may allow for in-depth observation, there is also the inevitable weakness that they nullify extrapolation

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because the sample is not random. Furthermore, there is no denying that there are dangers inherent in subjective interpretations. Apart from the well-documented perils of observer bias, there is also the issue that a flexible qualitative approach portends a lack of systematization and consequently offers little opportunity for reliable replicability by other investigators.

Nevertheless, there is another side to this issue that cannot be ignored, and this is that quantitatively-orientated laboratory approaches tend to sacrifice natural situations and breadth of vision at the altar of control, and consequently often suffer from artificiality and narrowness of scope. Clearly, the paths of reflective practice are strewn with thorns but also offer potentialities for insights to those who are cautious and brave. In any event, there is merit in following the example of Piaget and not avoiding the paths of reflection because the terrain appears problematic.

The question of examining the significance of orality in the qualitative study of humour theory is very different from Piaget's process studies of his own children's cognitive development. Nevertheless, it is also a topic of great magnitude that must be respected for its complexity, and awaits a more comprehensive treatment than that permitted by the somewhat narrow parameters of a single chapter in this study. The present avenue of inquiry, though limited, presents a range of insights into aspects of the oral nature of humour and also into the fact that the orality factor has been neglected by most humour theorists.

Furthermore, it is also the orality factor that is the vital thread that holds the construction of the present chapter together. At first I contemplated separate chapters on (a) the practical everyday implications of orality as an intrinsic feature of humour, and (b) the relevance of theoretical and philosophical interpretations of the literate and oral traditions as related to process theories of humour. However, I decided against this in spite of the apparent differences between these topics. The main reason was an awareness of a prevalent social attitude that has often led to a misleading distinction being drawn between practice and theory. On the one hand, there seems to be a tendency among many practitioners of associating practice with usefulness, skill, progress and the so-called 'real world', as opposed to what are perceived as the more remote, armchair ruminations of theoreticians. On the other hand, many theoreticians tend to associate the domain of theory with intellectual insight, in-depth analysis and high-level academic participation as opposed to what many perceive as the journeyman mundanities of practitioners 'who like to use their hands rather than their brains'.

In the interests of avoiding the old 'town and gown' argument, and with the hope of bringing the street and the ivory tower closer together, I have incorporated both the practical and theoretical perspectives of orality into this chapter. In the first instance, reflective practice is utilised to reconstruct the essentials of two case studies based on my own personal experience, to provide concrete practical evidence of the vital role of nonverbal performance variables in the humour process. In the second instance, the discussion concerning the concept of orality and its relevance to humour

theory is carried on to a more philosophical plane with reference to the oral and literate traditions and their significance in the evolution of cultural patterns of human behaviour. In this respect the work of Marcel Jousse receives special attention because although his views were produced some seventy years ago, they continue to have relevance as an almost prophetic example of 'critical reflection' (Killen, 1997:15) that applies to the current status of literacy and orality in contemporary academics.

8.2   The performance of humour

The sub-title of the conference paper referred to in section 8.1 above and reproduced in. **Appendix E**, is the well-known expression: 'It's not the joke, it's the way you tell it'. This sub-title serves as a moot starting point to introduce the concept of the role of orality in the humour process. It also brings to attention the universal notion that timing (which usually amounts to doing the right thing at the right time to appeal to the specific audience involved) is the key to effective humour, and thereby underlines the fact that orality is far more than mere verbalisation. On the contrary, the dynamics of humour-in-action are essentially a matter of the gestalt of verbal and *gestual* orality in an interactional communication situation in which sender (or senders) and receiver (or receivers) strike a common chord to achieve a humorous reaction.

Humour arises as the product of the dynamism of a personal reaction to a stimuli perceived as amusing. As such, the level of so-called humorous arousal experienced by the individual is an emotional reaction to communication that often seems spontaneous and usually has an element of cognitive interpretation at its root. The question of laughter as a spontaneous expression of relaxed arousal is to some extent controversial because individual differences prevent a universal cause-effect relationship from being established.

The receiver of the potentially humorous message is often perceived as making an implicit decision as to whether the potentially humorous content is funny or not, and then making this decision explicit by either laughing or not laughing. The phenomenology of the humour process is influenced by environmental factors such as the physical presence of others as well as the immediate impact of the sociopolitical climate at the time the humour is experienced. The *humour* environment also plays a vital role in cases when the question of political or social correctness arises, which some may hypothesize occurs every time humour is shared with another or others.

Contextualization and peer pressure are key factors in a communication situation in which on occasions there may be a marked distinction between the intrinsic appreciation of humour and the extrinsic expression of this appreciation of humour in the presence of others. Common examples of this behavioural pattern may be found in the polite laughter response to a joke that the receiver has already heard and

no longer finds amusing, as well as in the act of laughing perfunctorily after an evident 'punch-line' that the receiver has not interpreted as amusing. In these examples, a convincing case can be made that the scenarios are devoid of humour because the reception of the message has failed to produce the phenomenological reaction that gives life to humour.

The dichotomy between the intrinsic reaction to humour and its extrinsic expression is very much in evidence in the context of humour with content that pivots on social or political correctness (popularly referred to as 'good/bad taste'). Contextualization usually plays a vital role in situations in which decisions may have to be made as to whether the content is in good taste or not, and consequently whether laughter is in order or not. The other side of this coin is that the elements of the latter scenario may be reversed in situations involving certain people in certain circumstances, where laughter may at times be considered to be in order simply *because* the content is not considered to be in good taste.

In this sense, humour may be viewed from a phenomenological perspective with laughter as the potential product of a situation in which the phenomenon of humour is created *in situ* in the process of communication. In most cases, the reception of humour is strongly influenced by situational variables such as the nature and tone of the communicational situation. In the case of the oral transmission of humour, the situational variables generally include factors such as the social and emotional climate of the event, as well as the attitudes and state-of-mind of the other receivers

of the potentially humorous message who are in a sense the individual's 'co-conspirators' in sharing the joke. The importance of contextualization is once again paramount. Quite understandably, for example, the so-called 'humorous' content that may be considered acceptable in a tavern may also be considered to be blasphemous in a place of worship or totally unacceptable at an inopportune time such as at a funeral.

The humour in orality situations differs significantly from humour in literate situations in which the receiver of the humorous message usually has a far greater degree of control over the situational factors involved. Reading material is generally portable, and readers of humorous material are usually able to decide when, where and how much of the content they wish to receive. Whereas the literate tradition is based on what Jousse (1990:133) refers to as 'the dead letters of texts', by contrast the essential ingredient of orality is what is popularly referred to as 'live' performance.

In 'live' situations, actions may often be seen to speak louder than words. However, what is more important in this context is that it is misleading to attempt to separate the actions from the words. Even if the performance is not greater than the sum of its parts, then it is certainly different from the sum of its parts, and likewise the words are different without the *gestual* setting. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus was certainly correct in more ways than one when he said:

> 'You cannot step twice into the same river, for the water into which you first stepped will by now have flowed on, and other water taken its place.'   (Ross, 1962:76)

The same principles apply to the performance of oral humour which at times loses its impact after the first flush of humour is assimilated but which at other times may gain in quality with familiarity.

In order to examine the performance aspect of humour more fully, sections 8.3 and 8.4 of this chapter are devoted to a consideration of two 'live' performances that constitute case studies that serve as the basis for further discussion. These same examples of performances of humour appeared in Chapter Four as the two brief joke-telling scenarios used as the basis for the reflective analysis of certain humour variables. Issues arising from the discussion in Chapter Four served to give notice of the need for further consideration of the role of orality and the oral tradition in the qualitative study of humour. The decision to postpone a fuller discussion of these scenarios until the present chapter was based on the perceived need to provide information pertaining to a relatively comprehensive theoretical frame of reference upon which to base the reflective analysis of these case studies. Accordingly, the necessary theoretical territory has been traversed in the intervening chapters up to this point, and the discussion that constitutes the process of reflective analysis proceeds on the assumption that readers are familiar with the basic tenets of a range of humour theories.

Both case studies are re-constructed accounts of my own 'real-life' experiences of 'live' performances. The first case study represents a scenario that I experienced several times as an audience member in places of entertainment during the era of the

so-called 'post-apartheid' South Africa of the mid-1990s when many contemporary professional comedians were using topical sociopolitical material about the 'Rainbow Nation' as their stock-in-trade to enliven their acts and stimulate audience arousal. High on the list of crowd-favourites were jokes involving impersonations of high-profile South African politicians and public figures such as Nelson Mandela, Gatsha Buthelezi, Frederick de Klerk, P.W. Botha, Archbishop Tutu and Amritraj Rajbansi. The spontaneous laughter nearly always evoked by the these impersonations on virtually every level across the cultural and racial spectrum probably constituted a classic example of tension-reduction because these oral performances provided welcome comic relief amidst a tense sociopolitical climate.

The first case study presented as 'The comedian' (below) is based on a 'live' performance witnessed at a charity *bierfest* at a sports-club in Durban North (South Africa) in 1996. The second 'case study', entitled 'The new boss', involves an adaptation of my own experiences of corporate life within a bureaucracy over a period of many years. During my time as a relatively civil servant, I experienced scenarios based on the introduction of several 'new bosses', and on a few occasions was introduced to others as a 'new boss'. The scenario involving the first formal staff meeting conducted by the newly appointed 'lahnee' will surely strike a chord of recognition among corporate animals everywhere, and it certainly amused those of my erstwhile bureaucratic colleagues who were privy to this 'case study' prior to publication.

The modus operandi adopted in this chapter builds upon the foundations established in Chapter Seven which represents an in-depth qualitative study of a single humorous event, and is grounded in the methodology of reflective practice. In the present chapter, the process of reflectivity is applied to the reporting of case studies that are also necessarily interpreted in a personalised fashion as is the custom in reflective practice. It is my belief that humour, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, and that idiosyncratic perspectives of the humour process have their part to play in the grander scheme of humour theory. It is hoped that readers may offer alternative interpretations of the scenarios provided, which is what sets this approach apart from both the greater certainties as well as the greater limitations of the quantitative perspective.

8.3   Case study : the comedian

In this scenario, a comedian delivers a humorous monologue involving a highly prominent and controversial local politician during a performance in a place of entertainment in suburban Durban (South Africa). The audience are relaxed and ready to be entertained in convivial circumstances that favour the transmission and reception of humour. The humorous story about the well-known politician, which turns out to be a sort of modernised 'trickster tale', is rendered effectively in relaxed conditions in which there is no restraint on 'laughing behaviour'.

The audience particularly enjoy the part of the monologue that involves the comedian's caricatured impressions of a dialogue between the politician and an equally controversial ex-Prime Minister. Several audience members clap while others laugh loudly and uninhibitedly at periods during the comedian's performance in which he contrives to capture the accents, mannerisms and nuances of the speech, expressions, gestures and actions of the characters of his story.

Reflective analysis:

It is not difficult to interpret this 'case study' in terms of basic qualitative approaches. The joke-telling scenario involving the comedian and his audience fits readily into the basic paradigm of communication theory in which the reception process is viewed in terms of an interactive relationship between sender and receiver, as discussed in section 4.5.1 of Chapter Four. As the sender of communication, the comedian is aware of his audience's reception preferences because he enters the communication situation with a set of expectations based upon previous experiences that he proceeds to test against the feedback he receives from the audience. During his delivery of the monologue the comedian experiences the nature of the audience's responses to cues concerning the politicians, and this information prompts him to decide that both politicians are viable vehicles for the humour of good-natured ridicule.

For their part, the audience also enter the communication situation with certain preconceived expectations and their response is to some extent dependent upon

the beliefs, values, attitudes and ambitions that they bring to the scenario. If they demonstrate their glee in uproarious laughter and spontaneous applause when the well-known local politician turns out to be the butt of the joke, this allows for a variety of interpretations of the humorous event. For example, the comedian's message may be interpreted by some as being embedded within a playful mood of *Schadenfreude* with the politician as victim by mutual consent (cf. section 2.2.1 of Chapter Two).

There are as many alternative explanations of the dynamics of this process as there are perspectives of the nature of humour. In terms of the approaches emphasized in the present study, this scenario can also be interpreted in terms of the criteria selected by Murdock and Ganim (1993:57-70) for the macro-analysis of humour theories, as discussed in Chapter Five. From the standpoint of the specific criteria identified by Murdoch and Ganim, the joke-telling scenario (above) represents a straight-forward, highly-structured humorous event conducted under favourable *press* conditions in which the audience fulfills their expectations of the *purpose* of the humour with laughter that is the *product* of the humour.

From the standpoint of tension-reduction theory, it appears plausible to assume that the tensions that the audience have presumably built up in a rather tense sociopolitical climate during the week are released as laughter becomes their safety valve. Furthermore, there is a very small step from tension-reduction theory to incongruity theory that posits that the laughter response on the part of

the audience indicates that they have assimilated the joke's denouement (or in the vernacular: 'caught the joke') by perceiving the incongruities that give a humorous twist to the ending of the story they have just heard.

The scenario can also be interpreted qualitatively by a reflective process of empathy with either the sender or the receivers of the communication. In this respect, my own experience of similar situations leads me to conjecture that the comedian feels a sense of exhilarated relief in reaction to the success of his joke. This may be the culmination of a growing feeling of tension-reduction that he has experienced as a result of the audience's positive feedback throughout his performance. The comedian may regard the audience's laughter as a product of their collective experience of the humorous event of the comedian's own creation. In terms of attribution theory, the comedian would view success as the result of his own personal qualities, and failures as a function of external factors such as racial or political prejudice by others (Tedeschi and Lindskold, 1976:156). In this respect, we may conjecture that the comedian probably regards the response of laughter and applause as a tribute to his personal skills and capabilities as a comedian, and the feedback that the comedian experiences from the audience probably reinforces his self-perception.

In similar vein, a line of reflective interpretation may be employed by empathising with the audience in the joke-telling scenario. My own experiences as an audience member awaiting the performances of a variety of well-known local comedians

leads me to conjecture that audience members are active participants in a scenario in which they hope to fulfill their own expectations of enjoying the humour process they have anticipated. The informal and generally relaxed atmosphere (that in certain cases may have been partially stimulated by the alcoholic beverages that have been imbibed) reinforces the general mood of levity. Reversal theorists have chosen to refer to this relaxed state as 'paratelic-dominance' (cf. Chapter Six). The audience have presumably assumed a 'ludic' frame of reference (Nell, 1988:7), and their new found spirit of playfulness is directed towards the politician 'they love to hate' who in a paradoxical sense has fostered group solidarity because he has emerged as a communal figure-of-fun.

In this example, a meaningful case can be made for the credibility of superiority theory (cf. section 2.3.1 of Chapter Two). At least part of the audience's laughter is produced by their playful but heightened emotional reaction to the fact that the politician emerges as the butt of the story in the joke's denouement when the audience's surprised laughter climaxes. The sudden perception that the politician has become the victim of his own treachery pleases the audience, and seems to feed their need to experience a sense of superiority. Furthermore, reversal theorists indicate that the fact that the joke focusses on a controversial celebrity and not merely a man-in-the-street has the effect of heightening arousal and producing a more intense laughter response (Apter, 1989:139-140).

8.4   <u>Case study: the new boss</u>

The second scenario is a reconstructed case study in which a new boss conducts his first meeting with his newly acquired staff. In assessing the situation, the new boss experiences an awareness of the *press* of environmental conditions that engender a degree of tension and suspicion on the part of the staff who seem fearful or distrustful of him as their new boss. To alleviate this tension, the new boss decides to employ a short joke about a foolish mistake he once made as a young employee. Amidst the rather stilted atmosphere of the staff meeting, the new boss delivers the joke rather awkwardly soon after opening the meeting. Nevertheless, the staff responds with general but subdued laughter, and the meeting proceeds as planned.

Reflective analysis:

As in the previous sub-section, a qualitative interpretation of this scenario may commence in terms of a consideration of the communication interaction between sender and receivers. On reflection, my initial impression was that the reception dynamics of the second scenario presents a more complex picture than the reception dynamics of the first scenario. I attribute the main reason for this impression as being my observation that most of the audience members were probably still in a predominantly telic-mode (cf. Chapter Six : Apter's theory) at the time of the delivery of the joke. In what is described in the case study as the 'stilted atmosphere' shortly after the commencement of the meeting, the same state of telic-dominance could probably also be attributed to the new boss.

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In this respect, the interesting possibility arises as to whether in fact the humour process would be considered as being consummated if the receivers did not actually experience humour in the situation. Bremmer and Roodenburg (1997:1), have postulated that 'humorous' intentions are all that are required for humour to have taken place, but generally other theorists (including phenomenologists, reversal theorists, systemic theorists, communication theorists and others) are far more demanding. The general consensus is that humour involves communication in an interactive process that emphasizes reception dynamics.

As mentioned above, my first impression in considering the possibilities of reception in these respective scenarios was that there was far greater certainty concerning the homogeneity of the audience of 'The comedian' than there was for the audience of 'The new boss'. The comedian's audience was predisposed to laughter, almost as a communal act of collective wish-fulfilment. By contrast, some of the office staff were, if anything, predisposed towards 'future shock'. This is not as contradictory as it first sounds because it must be remembered that the protagonist in the scenario was a new boss who presumably had a new broom in hand, and certain employees probably envisaged their past expectations concerning the future as being swept aside. In the true sense of Toffler's conceptualisation of 'future shock', some of the office staff were confronting their destiny in a scenario in which the new boss may have been seen as the epitome of the future that they had not anticipated (Toffler, 1970).

If we accept that the ambivalence of the circumstances surrounding the staff meeting engendered a mixture of emotions among the audience, then various possibilities suggest themselves to explain the presumably deceptive appearance of consensual laughter among the office staff of the audience. For example, because the joke was about the fallibility of the boss, some of the staff may have laughed because they sensed a feeling of superiority over authority. Another outcome or product in the process may have been polite, somewhat restrained laughter on the part of some of the staff who were wary of decorum and seeking to present an appropriate response in harmony with their conceptualizations of expected employer-employee behaviour.

Others may have recognised the reason for the 'humorous event', and may have decided that their interests would be best served by participating in the corporate game by providing the new boss with the desired feedback of laughter irrespective of whether they found the intended humour to be funny or not. Some may even have laughed as an act of kindness in sympathy with the new boss who was apparently experiencing what they may have perceived as a moment of embarrassment or difficulty as he faced his first confrontation with what may have seemed to him to be a hostile staff. In the latter case, the laughter response could be interpreted as the kind-hearted result of an empathetic reception dynamic. Finally, of course, the possibility should not be discounted that some of the audience may even have enjoyed the joke for its own sake.

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A range of pertinent issues emerge from a brief analysis of the various causal subsets that may have been attributed to the staff's laughter. An important problem area is created by the fact that observers can only measure *observable* behaviour which in this case is the staff's laughter. In the circumstances, this laughter (if indeed it is as 'stilted', as implied in the reporting of the case study) represents a routinized behaviour pattern as a stock response within a familiar situation. Reflectivity is required to investigate the intrinsic elements of the reception dynamics involved. There is a need, for example, to consider the question of the qualitative spirit of the response rather than to simply attempt to use the laughter as a quantitative measure of the effectiveness of the joke. The laughter of different individual members of staff probably meant different things. For example, the laughter of one of the subsets signifies a sympathetic response, whereas the laughter of another may signify calculated self-interest. In both of these subsets, the response of the audience may have been at least partly a ritualistic form of reciprocation to reward the new boss for extending a symbolic hand of sympathy and cooperation towards the staff with his attempt at self-deprecating humour. In both cases, the receivers' roles in the gestalt of this social exchange may have been to respond to the *intentions* of the sender rather than to the quality of his attempt to initiate a so-called 'humorous event'.

Furthermore, as was the case with the reception of the new boss' message, there could also have been a variety of different ways in which the sender of the communication could have reacted. He may have been in sympathy with the

audience and the situation, and passed straight from his 'flopped' joke to the first order of business without any hiatus. Alternatively, the new boss may not have had strong powers of self-perception, and may have failed to recognize the realities of the situation because he was predisposed (perhaps naively) towards his role as an initiator of self-deprecating humour in order to gain the support of the staff. If his reality-orientation was not too strong, or if the acting abilities of the staff were convincing enough, the new boss may even have been gratified to witness evidence of the effectiveness of his contrived use of humour as an agent of tension-reduction and public relations, and this feeling of success may have reduced his own tensions as well. There are also some cynics who would argue convincingly that the entire scenario was an endorsement of Office Rule Number One (viz. 'When the boss tells a joke, everyone laughs') as well as Office Rule Number Two (viz. 'Refer to Rule Number One').

8.5   General comment concerning the case studies

The juxtaposition of the analyses of the two respective joke-telling scenarios provides some practical insights into the benefits of systematic reflective analysis in terms of key concepts or characteristics that may act as catalysts in the phenomenology of the humour process. A further aspect of interest that emerges from this analytical process is that reflectivity by its nature reflects the 'world view' of the observer. In the foregoing analysis, for example, the tendency towards eclecticism becomes apparent in the subjective qualitative considerations embedded in the reflectivity of

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the analytical process. The course taken by the process of reflective analysis tends towards the multidimensional integration of diverse categories of humour theories such as 'play/spontaneity', 'release/relief', and 'incongruity/unexpected relationships', as identified by Murdock and Ganim (1993:66) and discussed in Chapter Five. Reference is also made to reversal theory, attribution theory, communication theory and superiority theory in the analytical commentaries accompanying the two case studies in question.

In the qualitative analyses accompanying the case-study scenarios, an attempt has been made to present a picture of the multidimensional nature of two different, relatively straightforward, top-down communication situations that focussed upon deliberate acts by a joke-teller to initiate the humour process. The analysis of the elements of these situations revealed the complexity of the respective phenomenological reception dynamics pertaining to each scenario. Likewise, no great leap of imagination would be required to appreciate the vast gulf between the reception of print-based humour and the reception of orality-based humour. In this regard, 'orality' encompasses more than the limited 'spoken' or 'word of mouth' interpretation traditionally ascribed to it by lexicographers who are mindful of the word's Latin origins as 'oris' (Concise Oxford dictionary of current English, 1964:851). By contrast, in terms of the vocabulary of academics specialising in this field, 'orality' infers a wide range of performance characteristics, one of the components of which is the verbal aspect.

Nevertheless, the idea of using words to convey thoughts and feelings is vital to a fuller understanding of the nature of the communication process. The difference between words in performance and words in printed form is vast, and this has particular relevance in the case of humour where we have been assured that 'It's not the joke, it's the way you tell it' (cf. Appendix E). In the next section, this issue is viewed from an ethnological as well as a philological perspective in a discussion that demonstrates that there is many a true word spoken in Jousse (1970).

8.6   <u>Translating performance into words</u>

The scenarios discussed in the case studies in sections 8.3 and 8.4 reveal another truth about humour that is difficult to communicate verbally. In fact, this difficulty itself is indicative of the nature of the problem because verbal communication *is* the issue. The ritual of using *words* to describe humour and to attempt to explain the mainsprings of humour is an inadequate and inappropriate means to an end. In this respect, the lyrics of the well-known 1960s popsong 'Words' (penned by the Gibb brothers and sung rather plaintively by the same gents as members of the Bee Gees), communicates this point succinctly as follows:

'It's only words, and words are all I have, to take your heart away'.

While these lyrics (like Gertrude Stein's 'A rose is a rose is a rose') may leave a first impression of being somewhat banal and inappropriate in this context, it will shortly be evident that they convey a message that is pivotal in this chapter. In fact, this

seemingly simplistic statement has relevance to the entire endeavour involved in the act of writing a dissertation on humour. The experience of humour is a nonverbal personal emotional experience that may well represent an expression of tension - release as the playfulness of the ludic spirit dominates the consciousness to produce a laugh or smile that for the moment in a figurative sense contrives 'to take your heart away'. Clearly, words are an inadequate vehicle to express this experience. The central paradox is equally simple. Knowledge is embodied in words, and yet experience lies beyond language.

Likewise, knowledge about humour is largely embodied in words, but experience of humour lies largely beyond language. Conceptualizations of humour have great diversity, and may be characterised as verbal or nonverbal, oral or literate, or a combination of all of these. Furthermore, in everyday life the humour process (as, for example, in the two case studies cited above) may be permeated by the characteristic multidimensionality of orality in a performance context containing aspects such as timing, nuance, inflection, gesture, body language, eye contact, impersonation, tonal range, clarity, and enunciation.

In discussing the significance of the performance dimension to anthropological fieldworkers, Fabian (1990:6) emphasizes the difficulty of 'calling up' information about culture and expressing it in discursive statements, and argues that '... actual physical presence in their world is an absolute prerequisite to access their lived experience'. According to Fabian (1990:6), the chief dilemma for the fieldworker is

the recording of observational data because '... most of the relevant information is nonverbal and cannot be called up, but has to be *experienced as performed*' (italics my own). To the author of a dissertation on humour, such as myself, these ideas concerning orality may be enlightening, but they are also ultimately frustrating because 'words are all I have' to convey a multidimensional experience of humour.

There is partial solace in historical antecedents. The inadequacies of the written word are a recurrent anthropological theme reiterated by a long line of academics who ironically use the vehicle of words to complain about *words*. Among their numbers is Fabian (cited above), as well as Scheub (1971:31) whose article 'Translation of African oral narrative-performances to the written word' bears an innocuous-sounding title that surely raises knowing smiles from those conversant with the tradition of oral studies. The reason for the knowing smiles is that Scheub's article title expresses rather cogently the perennial dilemma of ethnologists and anthropologists who are all well aware of the fact that they do *not* have the means or methods to translate oral performance into written language.

Scheub enunciates this dilemma in the form of a rhetorical question, then supplies an appropriate answer himself. Scheub's apt reply to his own question is worth recording in this context because it captures the essence of the dilemma also facing the humour researcher attempting to transform the complex nuances of the multifaceted phenomena residual in humour-in-action scenarios into words that are appropriate for publication in a text such as this one. Scheub (1971:31) seems to

speak for the entire ethnological research community when he expresses his ideas as follows:

> 'How does one effectively translate the verbal and nonverbal elements of such a tradition to the written word? It is impossible to consider the verbal elements of the performance in isolation from the nonverbal, yet there is no useful way of transferring the nonverbal elements to paper.'

The simple words used by Scheub to answer to his own rhetorical question should not be taken lightly because they express an indisputable truth concerning the fallibility of the printed word as a means of recording and storing knowledge. Sadly, the inevitable outcome of an intolerable situation of this nature is to be witnessed in a contemporary First World sociocultural context in which print literacy has been elevated to the detriment of a rich anthropological *gestual* heritage.

In this respect, it must be acknowledged that there is nothing novel in the recognition of the seemingly insurmountable problem of transforming the multidimensionality of performance into a unidimensional textual format. This theme was expressed some seventy years ago in the writings of the French social philosopher, Marcel Jousse (Sienaert, 1990:133, translation) who argues convincingly as follows:

> 'The original and capital sin of our written-style civilisation is to think of itself as the civilisation par excellence, *the* one and only civilisation. Everything which does not 'appear' on its written pages does not exist.
>
> Anthropological facts thus find themselves neglected, and for the most part misunderstood. It follows that the human sciences cannot be the development of what is anthropological in ethnicity, but can only be a light overview of *bookish* ethnicity.

> We have in the face of this attitude, tried to change the method. Instead of narrowing our field of observation to the 'dead' letters of texts, we have brought a methodology which is firstly, and above all, the awareness of a 'living tool': *the human geste.*

In its original context, the passage cited above was a preamble to Jousse's description of the domain of the anthropology of *geste*, and he used it to identify the need for a broader, more in-depth study of *gestual* behaviour. Jousse's criticism is directed mainly towards the prevailing tendency of mainstream academia to deify the written word to the detriment of a holistic perspective of *gestual* behaviour. Jousse's observations retain their relevance some seven decades later in a *milieu* currently characterized as the Information Age in which electronic text has become almost as prominent as traditional text was during the 'Gutenberg Galaxy' when the paper-based printed text predominated (McLuhan 1962) and created an environment in which 'bookish ethnicity' thrived (Jousse in Sienaert, 1990:133).

In the present context, the orality factor remains an enigma to academics mainly because of the inadequacy of words to encapsulate the true nature of communication situations. The urgency in the tone of Jousse's criticism signifies his realisation of the magnitude of the compounded errors of the ways of academics in approaching human studies. In considering the contribution of Verriest, Jousse (1990:70) supports the argument that: 'The written language has succeeded in establishing itself as a bastard variation of the primary language'. Basically, Verriest's argument is that written language is a secondary and limited vehicle of communication because it represents a bastardised version of primary reality. The logical implication of this reasoning is that written language provides a distorted frame of reference because it

has inherent limitations that cannot be overcome to communicate a truer reflection of reality. Jousse (1990:70) is acutely aware of the need to recognize the significance of orality, and the implicit perspective that he presents of Western academia is of a ruling discourse beset by a communication dilemma and clinging to the limitations of a 'parasitic language' as the textual basis for its development.

Jousse's views on the significance of orality have important implications in the context of this qualitative study of humour. In the first instance, traditional perceptions of humour as a phenomenon are challenged because they are bedded in a methodological approach that has relied far too heavily on print-based questionnaires and textual reports. Jousse effectively alerts us to the world beyond the narrow confines of verbal and textual unidimensionality. In so doing Jousse leaves readers with an uneasy awareness that they have inherited a legacy of incomplete and misleading perceptions of a reality that they have been viewing through the distorting prism of words. Herein lies the difficulty not only in finding out the truth about humour, but also in having to explain it in the terms of conventional language that is unsatisfactory because words are unsuitable vehicles to convey the full meaning of a phenomenon than is infinitely broader than mere textuality. In short, the experience of humour is beyond language.

As a case in point, for example, let us assume that a chapter in an academic dissertation on the nonverbal humour of graphic illustrations was to be presented by a phenomenologist. With regard to this example, it may be argued that a committed

phenomenologist would demonstrate commitment to the ethos of the philosophical discipline of phenomenology by presenting the reader with a fresh opportunity for the phenomenological experience of responding aesthetically to art. Hence, rather than selecting the more conventional alternative of presenting the reader with pages of textual verbal philosophical discussion, the phenomenologist may entertain the notion that a humorous picture could be worth a thousand words. In any event, there is the strong probability of an uneasy awareness of the inadequacy of words.

If we reflect upon the implications of the arguments contained in the above scenario, we may ponder the question of whether the presentation of a collection of appropriately humorous graphics (without accompanying comment) is not a more apt *phenomenological* treatment of nonverbal humour than pages of textual discussion of on phenomenological theories of humour? In this context, it should be emphasized at the outset that the question of choice is in fact unnecessary and that it may be advisable for the phenomenologist concerned to employ *both* text and graphics. Nevertheless, an interesting comparison can be made between primary experience and vicarious experience. Bearing in mind that the ethos of the phenomenological perspective is embedded in the dynamics of the act of creativity, there would be a strong argument in favour of exposing the receivers of the communication process to primary experience rather than to the *ex cathedra* delivery of secondary opinion. In this case, primary experience may be interpreted as the opportunity to appreciate aesthetically the humour in graphic illustrations rather than to grapple with wordy attempts (such as this one!) to intellectualize the humorous experience. Accordingly,

many would consider the former course of action to be preferable to that of exposing readers to the secondary experience of words that attempt in some way to explain the wit of the original. It may also be argued that to do otherwise would be akin to claiming that vicarious experience was superior to direct experience. Notwithstanding, it should be noted in this context that the present concern is not so much with an evaluation of vicarious experience per se, but rather with an affirmation that direct experience should not suffer by comparison with its imitator.

Verriest (in Jousse 1990:71) ponders over the consequences of an academic tradition that aggrandizes the imitation rather than the original, as follows:

> 'By a peculiar error it is accepted as an obvious truth that written language is the true and correct language. It is in fact only an image, or copy, or representation of spoken language. But in this case, the original is discredited and the copy believed to be authentic; the model is blamed when it does not exactly resemble the portrait that some extremely bad painters have made of it'.

Jousse, in citing Verriest, highlights a classic case of adding insult to injury. In the 'written-style' civilisation', not only is print preferred to the exclusion of primary spoken language and 'geste', but print is also preferred to the *detriment* of primary language and 'geste'. The implications are clear. As every ethnographer knows, written language is a pale unidimensional replica of original language and cannot hope to encapsulate the holistic experience of the total communication process. The ultimate insult (added to the injury of preference) is when the original forms are discredited because they are dissimilar to their inferior secondary representatives.

Words are at the centre of a paradox in human studies' inquiry. On the one hand, words are commonly regarded by ethnologists as inadequate vehicles to record aspects of orality; but on the other hand, words draw power from their role as humankind's primary symbolic means of recording knowledge. There is no denying the value of language; the problem lies in an over-reliance on language as a means of recording experience so that it becomes a preferred substitute for it.

The aggrandisement of text has led to a situation in which the original has been supplanted by the more socially acceptable 'image' or 'copy'. Instead of serving its masters as a useful vehicle of communication, the written word has become the master itself in a milieu that overvalues 'bookish ethnicity' and fails to cherish the underlying relevance of 'spontaneous gesticulation' (Jousse, 1990:71) that is the life-blood of cultural transmission. The impression that the reader gets from Jousse's vision is that 'written-style civilisation' has subverted the natural order by putting text ahead of orality in an academic environment in which the ruling discourse ensures that anthropological ethnicity falls victim at the sacrificial altar of bookish intellectualism.

8.7 **Humour in words and deeds**

There are uncompromising implications for contemporary human studies researchers to be drawn from Jousse's (1970:70) penetrating argument that the sin of 'written-style civilisation' is to abuse the gift of literacy by undermining human

communication that is not written. A primary criticism is that the tendency for print-literate societies to aggrandize textuality produces a superficial and misguided understanding of ethnicity thereby creating a climate in which substance is sacrificed because in-depth analysis is replaced by a bookish facade. The essential argument is that substance has become servant to style, and in this sense Jousse's views echo the sentiments of contemporary critics of post-modernism who rile at the predilection of certain post-modernists to favour style over substance.

The problem is not with the question of textuality itself, but with 'the human side of the enterprise' (McGregor, 1962). As members of an 'alphabetic culture' (Havelock, 1988:135), researchers have at their disposal a means (imperfect and inadequate though it may be) to store and advance areas of knowledge as part of an ongoing culture of academic inquiry. However, as Graff (1987:70) implies, it is not the written word that is on trial. The 'capital and original sin' is a human one, and it concerns the question of attitudes towards the written word. The coming of the 'Gutenberg Galaxy' (McLuhan, 1962) has produced literate cultures that have established an ongoing legacy of over-reliance on the printed word to the exclusion of primary forms of expression.

This situation pertains in the field of humour research where the reporting of the phenomenon of humour is central to academic studies. Students of humour are well aware of the wealth of humour that can be distinguished as having a nonverbal character. The term 'nonverbal humour' covers a wide spectrum and may vary from

the level of formal 'humorous' performances (such as in mime or dance) to so-called 'informal' nonverbal humour such as may arise in response to someone raising an eyebrow or 'pulling a face'. Likewise, there is a wide diversity of both primary and secondary forms of visual comedy including cartoons, photographs, movies, television or 'live' theatrical performance. These forms of visual comedy may have either verbal or nonverbal elements or a combination of both, and there are variations within the genres of visual comedies themselves.

In this respect, for example, there is a vast legacy of nonverbal black-and-white silent movies featuring the humour of actors such as Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and others who have become cultural icons. Most of the early silent movies juxtapose *gestual* sketches with concise subtitles as an aid to receivers, however the humour is almost entirely nonverbal. There is also an even more vast accumulation of more recent audiovisual video and celluloid motion picture comedies that involve a combination of verbal and nonverbal elements in the humour process. Most of the humour evoked in these audiovisual media presentations does not rely on the printed word, and there is a wide range of audiovisual devices used as catalysts for humorous effects.

Examples of these catalysts abound in the vast television humour industry where there has been a routinisation of the practice of manipulating the collective *sense* of humour of the mass media audience by means of audiovisual cues that rely on studio production and editing techniques. These devices range from the edited insertion of

blatant audio cues (such as 'piped-in' audience laughter) to sensitize viewers to humour content, as well as more subtle audio devices such as appropriate music and sound effects. The television 'sitcom' industry also relies heavily on manipulative visual devices such as extreme close-ups of the facial expressions of relevant comic characters that signpost and reinforce intended humorous situations.

Sadly, the multidimensional nature of humour as a field of study is *not* reflected in a representative manner in the content of ongoing humour research. In spite of the diverse and rich array of types and forms of humour, the vast majority of humour studies focus on *words*, and the explanations provided by humour theories inevitably focus on 'humorous events' involving *words*. In effect, words have formed an alphabetic curtain that screens observers from the 'big picture'. There is an urgent need for researchers to venture beyond the alphabetic curtain of the 'alphabetic culture' (Havelock, 1988:135), and to look more closely at forms of humour other than verbal forms.

Accordingly, in the two 'humorous event' case-studies presented in sections 8.3 and 8.4 of this chapter, the performance elements were considered crucial to the humour or lack of humour in the behavioural events that were described, and an attempt was made to report the salient features of the verbal- nonverbal synergy of the humour as a communication exchange. Like Scheub (1971:31) some twenty-seven years ago, I too found it '...impossible to consider the verbal elements of performance in isolation from the nonverbal', and no amount of head-scratching could produce a '...

useful way of transferring the nonverbal elements to paper'. The frustrations involved were somewhat akin to being able to read a song's lyrics but being unable to hear its melody.

There seems to be no ready-made solution to this dilemma. However, we do live in an Electronic Age; and as urban cave-dwellers of the global village, the new post-print media are at our disposal (McLuhan, 1975). For several decades, it has been possible to make audio-tape recordings and video-tape recordings of events in order to partially circumvent the 'dead letters of texts' (Jousse in Sienaert et al., 1994:flyleaf) as an imperfect means of recording 'oral' events. The results are however usually disappointing because the media representations inevitably seem oddly unidimensional and out of touch with actuality. To some extent these disappointments can be attributed to unrealistic expectations. Audiovisual media are by definition representative and secondary, and consequently seldom if ever capture either the impact or the ambience of the original primary occasion. Nevertheless, in many instances audiovisual media have provided records of performance events in video or audio or photographic forms that have capabilities that are preferable to the 'dead letters of texts', or at least provide a meaningful supplement to them.

Admittedly, non-print media do have certain drawbacks, such as deterioration in storage or lack of durability in transit or even the fact that as software, they need specialised hardware in order to be used. Nevertheless, despite these disadvantages, researchers in the Electronic Age do have technology on their side, as well as a sense

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of optimism that further technological advances are imminent. In many cases where the original primary source of experience is no longer available to us, alternative sources are all that we have at our disposal, and a wealth of examples can be cited regarding the effectiveness of secondary nonverbal sources.

A few relevant examples suffice. Who of us, for example, would rather read a eulogy on the late Nureyev's ballet performances than see a video of him performing? Or for that matter, read an article praising the late Louis Armstrong's musicianship in preference to listening to a recording of him blowing his own trumpet? In similar vein, these principles may be applied to a wide range of humour studies. Are not, for example, ten flickering black-and-white minutes of Laurel and Hardy more enlightening than many critical reviews of their cinematic performances? Once again, the fact is that no choice is necessary because all options can be combined. Our secondary sources are usually pale imitations of primary reality, and the sum of their parts is usually better than just using one of the parts.

Despite the meritorious ongoing international contributions from archivists throughout the world, there is no doubt that academic humour studies have tended to suffer by being tied to the conventions of print. Humour researchers can take partial solace in the fact that they are not alone in their communicational plight. The inadequacies of the written word are a recurrent theme reiterated by a range of diverse academics whose views corroborate those of Jousse. For example, the noted ethnographer, Ruth Finnegan (1991:11) expresses an awareness of the shortcomings

of any approach in which 'the key units are words', and argues that even translation is not an absolute process because '... whatever choices are followed, something of the original will not be conveyed ... or will be communicated in ways which change the original'.

Finnegan's words can also be applied to the current status of humour research which tends to be weighted in the direction of studies in which 'the key units are words'. In this respect, the humour researcher shares the perennial dilemma of the ethnographer, namely: how to convey the oral and the nonverbal without communicating it 'in ways which change the original'. Obviously, there is a strong temptation to bypass the problematic by choosing aspects of humour that are more convenient to record such as studies involving the printed word, and perhaps this is the main reason for the dearth of studies of the humour of orality.

The fundamental problem is of course a lot deeper than mere translation of action into words to achieve a textual approximation of oral actuality. Basically, Westernized perceptions of reality are distorted by the filter of literacy. The need to intellectualize, verbalize and reduce life experiences to fit the 'dead letters of texts' provides a prism through which Literate Man views the world. Havelock (1988:135) speaks of 'the alphabetic mind' in which we may '... discern the invention of a conceptual language superimposed upon a nonconceptual; or alternatively a creation of the abstract to replace the concrete, the invention of an abstract version of what had previously been experienced sensually and directly as a series of events and

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actions'. Havelock's perspective of contemporary man's distorted vision of reality through the filter of the 'alphabetic mind' confirms Jousse's view of the perils of living within 'written-style civilization' in which 'bookish ethnicity' provides the basis for observer bias towards direct experience.

8.8 Parallel synergies

As a concluding observation on this topic, an interesting parallel of sorts may be drawn on a macro-level between the synergies prevailing in two different but not disconnected themes in current epistemology. On the one hand, there is the synergy between quantitative research and qualitative research that exists on a multi-disciplinary level in the current human studies methodological debate. On the other hand, there are the related synergies that exist between the verbal and nonverbal traditions, as well as between the literate and oral traditions in the more specialised contexts of literacy-orality studies as well as the traditionally anthropological studies of ethnographers and ethnologists.

In both cases, the synergies are being played out as tensions created by academics who refuse to conform to conventions created as a function of the politics of the ruling discourse. On a multi-disciplinary level, the conventions of the ruling discourse have been shaped by the traditional ground rules of the approaches employed by researchers relying on quantitative methods. Likewise, in the above-mentioned 'more specialised contexts', the ruling discourse has been dominated by

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the ethos of the verbal and literate traditions whose 'key units are words' (Finnegan, 1991:11), and orality factors have received limited attention.

In both scenarios, there has also been a reaction from academics who have spoken up against what they perceive to be the subtle and implicit tyranny of the politics of the ruling discourse. Credit is due to the integrity of qualitative researchers who refuse to skirt important but potentially problematic issues because these aspects cannot be quantified and made to fit quantitative paradigms. Likewise, there are also those academics who have consistently refused to accept the subtle and often patronizing mainstream denigration of the nonverbal and oral traditions. In both contexts, the efforts of the upstarts appear to be vindicated.

The common thread running through these concurrent epistemological themes is not difficult to detect. Both epistemological debates pivot on the synergies between the finite and infinite elements of discourse. In some ways, the emphasis on the literate and verbal perspectives of reality tends to run parallel to the emphasis on quantitative positivism in the sense that both tend to emphasize control and purpose in the pursuit of the finite and the quest for tangible results. By contrast, the oral and nonverbal perspectives tend to run parallel to the qualitative ideal of reflecting the rich tapestry of reality in all its infinite textures. The *raison d'etre* is not so much the search for the tangible certainty of the finite result, but rather the embracing of a *Weltanschauung* that recognises that control can be relinquished in order to obtain the greater depth of meaningful new perspectives.

Presently, those researchers seeking a compromise to bridge the great divide between the quantitative and qualitative standpoints are forced to wrestle with the question of counterbalancing the factors of control and depth in order to achieve desirable levels of probability in the results from which conclusions are to be drawn. In the context of the present study however, the emphasis is not so much on compromise as on the need to plan humour studies with a greater awareness of the multidimensionality of epistemological perspectives. The aim of this particular chapter has been to emphasize the need to be mindful of the importance of orality factors in humour studies, and to look briefly at the inviting world that beckons beneath the polished surface of 'the dead letters of the text'.

CHAPTER NINE

The anthropology of jest:
the anthropologist as trickster

The chief concerns of this chapter are a brief consideration of some anthropological

perspectives of humour and their relevance to humour theory in general, as well as a

consideration of the attitudes attendant upon the use of humour in academic literature with

particular reference to research reporting. In the Preface of this study, reference was made

to the paucity of humour in academic literature, and to some extent this chapter is a salute

to those anthropological fieldworkers who have enlivened their scholarship with their wry

observations, and in so doing provided their readers with some humorous insights.

9.1   The implications of the chapter title

The double-barrelled title of this chapter stems from two optional provisional titles

that I had penned whimsically during the preparation of this chapter, but eventually

decided to use both because of their appropriateness to the subject matter.

The first part of the chapter title 'The anthropology of jest' represents a somewhat

obscure pun on the title of Marcel Jousse's work '*L'Anthropologie du Geste*' (1974),

the very recent English translation of which is cited in the bibliography of this study.

I felt that this reference was appropriate because of the importance of Jousse's contributions to the study of human behaviour, particularly in the area of the verbal-nonverbal and literacy-orality facets of human communication. Furthermore, the term 'the anthropology of jest' sums up the anthropological perspective of humour theory, in the same way as the second part of the chapter title 'the anthropologist as trickster' identifies the academic as a protagonist in the humour process.

The phrase, 'the anthropologist as trickster', as well as most of the inspiration for this chapter, stems from my reading of the Dutch field anthropologist, Henk Driessen's (1997:222-241) insightful paper 'Humour, laughter and the field: reflections from anthropology' delivered at an international conference on humour in Amsterdam (Holland) in 1994. Driessen (1997:228) speaks of 'the trickster role of the anthropologist' with particular reference to the fieldwork experience. In discussing the fieldwork experiences of the anthropologist, Laura Bohannan in Nigeria, Driessen refers to a passage from her factual novel, written under the pseudonym of Elenore Smith Bowen, Return to laughter: an anthropological novel (1954) in which the authoress reflects upon a humorous oral performance put on for her by Tiv tribal fabletellers who mimicked anthropological fieldworkers as figures of fun. Bohannan comments as follows:

> 'Many of my moral dilemmas had sprung from the very nature of my work, which made me a *trickster*: one who seems to be what he is not and who professes faith in what he does not believe ... . Only in a very sheltered life of the sort made possible by civilisation can one maintain a fine and serious sense of the tragedy of misfortune. In an environment in which tragedy is genuine and frequent, laughter is essential to sanity.'
> (Bohannon in Driessen, 1997:233)

Bohannan's words of some forty-four years ago show their age in a contemporary *milieu* in which Western academia is highly sensitive to even the slightest suggestion of ethnocentric bias, never mind the gross insinuation that theirs is the only 'civilisation'. But this apart, Bohannan's point about the Nigeria of the early 1950s is compelling. Even in the Nigeria of 1998, tragedy is genuine and frequent, and like the so-called 'thin line between love and hate', there may well be a thin line between tragedy and laughter. The field experiences of Bohannon and a legion of other anthropological fieldworkers this century tend to reinforce the homespun view that laughter (even *'rire jaune'* or *Schadenfreude*) *is* essential to sanity, and perhaps also that this supposition applies to *all* civilisations. In this respect, there is much to be said for the insight of Nicolson's observation (Appendix B:2) over fifty years ago that 'Freud was not alone in defining the sense of humour as a defence mechanism having as its main function the protection of the self against discomfort'.

I suggested at the beginning of this chapter as well as in Chapter One that there was a wealth of humour in the anthropological field. This suggestion applies in more ways than one. In the figurative sense of the term 'field' to denote a 'field of study', meaningful contributions to humour theory have been made through the theoretical and descriptive insights of anthropologists, such as Mary Douglas (1975), Mahadev Apte (1985) and Christie Davies (1990). Likewise, in the more literal sense of the term 'field' as used in reference to 'fieldwork', the synergy between anthropological fieldworkers and their human subjects of investigation is a fertile area for humour in the making.

9.2   Humour in anthropological fieldwork

The anthropological fieldwork scenario has all the elements familiar to humour theorists. The fieldwork experience is the product of a process in which there is a consistent element of incongruity as cultures clash and worlds collide. As suggested by Bohannan (above), humour and laughter assume constructive social and personal roles in promoting tension-reduction as laughter becomes a pragmatic and primal means to offset communication difficulties and cultural incongruities.

Chagnon's accounts of his fieldwork experiences mong the Yanomanö in the rain forests of Venezuela and Brazil some thirty years ago have relevance in this context. Reporting on his efforts to record genealogies, Chagnon recounts his efforts to list names in a culture with a tradition of strict name taboos, as follows:

> 'They enjoyed watching me learn these names. I assumed, wrongly, that I would get the truth to each question and that I would get the best information by working in public. This set the stage for converting a serious project into a farce. Each informant tried to outdo his peers by inventing a name even more ridiculous than what I had been given earlier, or by asserting that the individual about whom I inquired was married to his mother or daughter, and the like. I would have the informant whisper the name of the individual in my ear, noting that he was the father of such and such a child. Everybody would then insist that I repeat the name aloud, roaring in hysterics as I clumsily pronounced the name. I assumed that the laughter was in response to the violation of the name taboo or to my pronunciation. This was a reasonable interpretation, since the individual whose name I said aloud invariably became angry. After I learned what some of the names meant, I began to understand what the laughter was all about. A few of the more colorful examples are: 'hairy vagina', 'long penis', 'feces of the harpy eagle' and 'dirty rectum'. No wonder the victims were angry.'
>
> (Chagnon in Driessen, 1997:234)

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Chagnon's South American anthropological fieldwork experiences of 1968 are by no means isolated examples of the suffering endured by anthropologists in the cause of scholarship, public relations and humour, as Driessen (1997:230) testifies from personal experience as well as a catalogue of anecdotes from other anthropological fieldworkers. Playfulness often becomes the order of the day as the locals seize opportunities to play practical jokes or simply make fun of the fieldworker's supposed peculiarities in terms of their own ethnocentric perceptions. When one reflects on the available anthropological textual comment in the light of the tradition of behavioural studies, several possibilities suggest themselves. Perhaps, the humour encountered by the anthropologists is based in tension-reduction and perhaps also in covert resentment towards the unintentionally patronizing attitude of the supposedly 'superior' fieldworker.

The classic Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) experiment demonstrated evidence of the Hawthorne Effect many years ago at the Western Electric Company, showing that the knowledge that one is being observed usually brings an accompanying edge of tension that heightens performance. Perhaps, the subjects were flattered or aroused by the attentions of the anthropologist and felt the need to 'put on a show'. In a way, their behaviour could have been the enactment of a self-fulfilling prophecy, based on the idea that 'This person is interested in me because I behave in an interesting way'.

In this respect, for example, Driessen (1997:232) comments as follows:

> 'Generally speaking, joking relationships between anthropologists and informants are person-oriented, voluntary and based in friendship. They may become patterned and

ritualistic over time. For instance, my height, considerable for Mediterranean societies, remained the object of joking and horseplay in male gatherings during the entire length of my stay in Spain. Men never tired of climbing on bar stools in order to outstrip me in height; putting very small men next to me; joking about the supposed symmetry between my height and penis length, and inventing theories to explain why I never got really drunk: 'It takes too much time for the alcohol to reach your brains', etc. Horseplay was not always pleasant, although I learned to do it in return (which was very much appreciated). The source of the recurrent banter was that my unusual stature touched a sensitive spot in the code of masculinity.'

One suspects that Driessen was not far off the mark with his final observation concerning the 'sensitive spot'. More important in this context is the fact that Driessen's straight-forward factual account concisely illustrates the relevance of observant anthropological field inquiry in situations in which the elements of humour theories can be discerned. By contrast, more flamboyantly humorous accounts of anthropological fieldwork have been written with the intention of amusing readers. Probably the best known of these works are Nigel Barley's The innocent anthropologist: notes from a mud hut (1983) and the above-mentioned Laura Bohannan's Return to laughter: an anthropological novel (1954) (written under the pseudonym of Elenore Smith Bowen).

Barley's much-translated account had the explicit commercial objective of introducing the wider audience to the 'funny side' of fieldwork, and serves to introduce the question of the compatibility of humour and academic literature. In this regard, Driessen (1997:236) observes that Barley's book has been met with mixed reaction by the members of the profession whom he conjectures may be suspicious of the 'popularizing tone' of the text, or perhaps suffer from 'jalousie de métier', or simply do not share the same sense of humour. Driessen's final remark in this respect bears consideration:

'However this may be, it is clear that Barley's critics would not regard Rabelais or Nietzsche as patrons of their profession.' (Driessen, 1997:236)

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Interestingly, Barley's critics are not alone in their negative reactions to the humorous nuances of his literary style. In fact, Laura Bohannan's professor, Meyer Fortes, is said to have been furious at seeing <u>Return to laughter</u>, and to have said that if he had known that she was going to write a book of this nature, he would not have sent her to do the fieldwork (Driessen, 1997:240).

These observations concerning the humour of the anthropologists in the field are thought-provoking in the sense that they create an awareness of the idea that while academics themselves are not necessarily a group lacking in humour, there is a general paucity of humour in academic literature. Although this is largely understandable because there is consensual agreement that scientific journals are not forums for comedians, the question merits further investigation.

On the one hand, academic reporting may be justifiably regarded as a serious-minded business; but on the other hand, the fact that it is regarded as a serious undertaking may also promote an attitude among academics themselves that light-heartedness is by converse undesirable and may in a subtle way undermine the status of their chosen field of study because it is associated with disrespect or a lack of discipline (or both). Once again, credit must be accorded to Driessen (1997:228-229) for his observation that:

> 'The trickster role of the anthropologist is perceived by scholars in other academic disciplines (sociologists in particular) and readers in the wider audience with mixed feelings: some find it fanciful, sympathetic, pleasantly eccentric, while others react in an irritated way and tend to view this role as yet another proof of the not so scientific nature of the anthropological discipline.'

Apart from the playful jibe at the expense of sociologists for which Driessen (1997:229) compensates immediately with a playful piece of self-deprecation (viz. 'Everybody knows now that the average Pueblo family or typical Mexican family consists of a father, a mother, three children and an anthropologist'), the above quotation may well be an appropriate example of the adage: 'There's many a true

word said in jest.' As such, Driessen's explanation may well also support an argument made in Chapter One concerning the position of qualitative observations within a research climate that has been traditionally dominated by the ethos associated with quantitative paradigms. If we are to read between the lines of Driessen's statement (above), it is clear that he shares the feeling among qualitative researchers that the influence of positivism as a mainstream methodological standard bearer has resulted in a demonstrated lack of respect by sections of the *invisible college* towards descriptive qualitative approaches such as those employed by anthropological fieldworkers. Until relative recently, this prejudice has been the cross that qualitative innovators have had to bear in many fields of study, whilst their more conservative colleagues have enjoyed the solace of the quantitative mainstream.

9.3 A Miner miracle

One of the greatest scientists of the Nineteenth Century, T.H. Huxley (1825-1895) once proclaimed that: 'Metaphysicians, as a rule, are sadly deficient in the sense of humour' (cf. Appendix B:2); and the lack of humour in their massive written output since Huxley made this statement in 1879 appears to corroborate this view. Fortunately, not all social researchers have succumbed to the humourless environment of standard deviations, and one such deviation from the mean deserves special mention.

In the following classic case of academic humour published in the <u>American</u> <u>anthropologist</u> journal over four decades ago, Horace Miner (1956:503-507) sets out, tongue very firmly in cheek, to provide a dryly humorous critique of the contemporary American culture of the 1950s. Miner employs a process of defamiliarization by using the language of empiricism to describe mundane-seeming Western behaviour patterns. The essence of Miner's humour is in his assumption of the guise of a serious-minded anthropologist wearing a relatively straight face in employing common anthropological concepts in the conventional vocabulary of behavioural science. The effect is that social customs and so-called 'every-day' behaviour (such as using a toothbrush) are elevated from the level of the mundane to the level of the comically exotic. An excerpt follows:

'Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east. According to Nacirema mythology, their nation was originated by a culture hero, Notgnihsaw, who is otherwise known for two great feats of strength - the throwing of a piece of wampum across the river Pa-To-Mac and the chopping down of a cherry tree in which the Spirit of Truth resided. Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people's time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the people ... . The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man's only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of the powerful influences of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose ... . The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded

with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provided the required charm ... . The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures ... . In addition to the private mouth-rite, the people seek out a holy-mouth-man once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods ... . The medicine men have an imposing temple, or *latipso*, in every community of any size. The more elaborate ceremonies required to treat very sick patients can only be performed at this temple. These ceremonies involve not only the thaumaturge but a permanent group of vestal maidens who move sedately about the temple chambers in a distinctive costume and headdress.'

(Miner in Driessen, 1997:227-228)

When viewed in the context of the ongoing synergy between the respective ethos associated with the schools of qualitative and quantitative research, Horace Miner's seemingly whimsical little study of the behaviour of the average American family comes across as a telling critique of the current status of human studies research methodology. Considering that Miner's article was published some forty-two years ago, the satirical content of the article raises certain pertinent issues that are food for further reflection.

Firstly, the content begs the question as to whether the author achieved this penetrating satirical critique of academic formalism by accident or design. This question has a relatively straight-forward answer because there was nothing

accidental about the timing or placement of Miner's article. It was written at a time when there was a crescendo in the collective voices celebrating the 'scientific' revolution in the human studies research community, and Miner must receive credit for embedding into his text an insightful critique of the prevailing status of human studies methodology with its one-eyed preoccupation with the stilted academic jargon and routine paradigms of the so-called 'scientific method' of investigation.

From the standpoint of humour theory, Miner's excerpt is an example of sustained academic satire that represents an ironic comment on the direction that Miner perceived anthropological methodology to be moving at the time. The article's literary form as a satire enhances its critical value, and increases its impact in making a strong critical statement. The article also has the virtue of *timing* at the height of the 'human science' movement, and in many respects it owes its effectiveness to its *placement* within the context of a so-called 'serious' and therefore esteemed academic journal. By contrast, its placement in a satirical or humorous publication may have dulled if not nullified the effect of the reception dynamics of its humour by telegraphing the humorist's intent.

For the reader, a primary pleasure to be derived in confronting Miner's style of writing is in the subtlety of its dry delivery that enhances the impact of the second level of the message, namely the satirical critique on anthropological trendiness in using formulaic jargon to create a veneer of quasi-scientific 'bookish ethnicity' (Jousse, 1990:133). By assuming the jargon of the quantitative social scientist, Miner

weaves a web of academic terminology to convincing effect, seemingly based on the rationale that if you say anything with a straight face and in the language of science, then it will have credibility.

There is also more to the article than first meets the eye. If we look beyond the article's novelty value or even the fact that its placement in a normally strait-laced academic journal gave it the impact of incongruity, we find that what makes the article a Miner *tour de force* is in fact the marriage of style with substance. By using the form and style of the jargon and formulaic methodological conventions he seeks to satirise, Miner reinforces his message by bringing a humorous twist to the sobriety of human and/or social science reporting.

Miner's piece is also of interest to qualitative humour theorists as a useful primary source of academic reporting from the United States of America of the 1950s era, and serves as a document (viz. 'stable data') that is available for further reflective analysis. Accordingly, as a brief exercise in 'critical reflection' (Killen, 1996:15), I may ask of myself the reasons for my positive appreciation of Miner's somewhat dated article. The first answer that comes to mind is that reading it is a fulfilling experience because it confirms and reinforces some of my views concerning the nature of humour research. This is the 'humour of recognition' that Stephen Potter (1954:174) describes as 'humour by observation', remarking: 'If we laugh, our pleasure is mixed with the blessed sensation of relief through recognition'. In Miner's article, humour derives from a sense of recognition of familiar elements in

an *unusual* context. Hence, for example, humour derives from the recognition that here in the pages of a mainstream academic journal is a kindred spirit that humorously gives substance to my own critical perspective of the state of human studies research.

Another reflective idea that initially nagged me, perhaps in the context of the more sophisticated late 1990s, was the uneasy feeling that Miner had overdone the 'inversion cues' (viz. Nacrema = American, Notgnihsaw = Washington, latipso = hospital and so on), and that he should have put more trust in my sense of humour. But I concluded that perhaps this was nitpicking because the use of the correct words (without inversion) may well have detracted significantly from the exotic effect created in the context of a satirical article in a leading American social science academic journal in the mid-1950s when Comptism, Behaviourism and allied positivistic '-isms' were at their zenith. This was an era when many considered reflectivity to be a fanciful and somewhat eccentric practice, and an irritatingly unnecessary diversion from the earnest endeavours of the pursuit of positivism. When one empathises with Miner's light-hearted satirical vision in the midst of the thunderous serious-mindedness of the prevailing academic milieu, it is difficult not to sense the twinkle in Miner's eye or the smiles on the faces of the enlightened editorial committee who had the courage and humanity to publish this piece at that time in a prestigious journal.

From the standpoint of the methodological emphasis of the present 'qualitative study of humour theory', Miner's approach is something of a curiosity. Whether by accident or design, Miner's study emerges as an enlightened idiosyncratic qualitative comment on the *ruling discourse* of the invisible college of the human studies research community of the 1950s. On the surface, Miner's article may present itself as a cheeky little joust at the pretentiousness of prevailing anthropological jargon, but it also has a satirical edge that reinforces the message concerning the predilection for style over substance.

In this respect, the discussion of Jousse's contribution to the literacy-orality debate in Chapter Eight has direct relevance. Whether he knew it or not (the latter being probable because Sienaert's translations of Jousse appeared many years later), Miner provides an almost copybook explication of the classic situation in which 'bookish ethnicity' is the substitute that replaces anthropological analysis (cf. Jousse, 1990:133). Miner has in fact used 'the dead letters of texts' (Jousse in Sienaert, *et al.*, 1994:flyleaf) to demonstrate effectively that academic jargon is a misleading 'parasitic language' (Jousse, 1990:70).

9.4 <u>**Anthropological perspectives of humour theory**</u>

Anthropology is an area that offers rich promise for further studies within the field of humour research, however thus far the contributions of anthropologists to humour theory have been largely in the direction of descriptive studies. In this section, brief

attention is given to the contributions to the growing body of research pertaining to humour theory by three prominent anthropologists namely: Mahadev Apte, Christie Davies, and Mary Douglas.

Mahadev Apte (1985) presents a well referenced descriptive survey of humour that is a work of great scholarship but little distinctiveness. Apte's descriptive survey of humour and comedy includes topics such as ethnic humour, joking relationships, sexual inequality in humour, children's humour, the trickster in folklore, and the biosocial and evolutionary aspects of laughter and smiling. Apte tends to reject the idea of a general theory of humour, but his own contributions to humour theory are disappointing in the sense that they are largely descriptive. From the perspective of an anthropologist, Driessen (1997:225) expresses disappointment at Apte's decision not to develop his study of humour in the field of cross-cultural comparison as this is an area that is an established domain of anthropology.

Christie Davies' (1990) survey of ethnic humour was published some five years after Apte's (1985) study, and is an even more monumental piece of scholarship. Whereas, Apte discussed some eight hundred sources in his book, Davies provides about double the number of bibliographic entries. In respect of the theme of cross-culturalism, Davies' observations on the functions and modes of ethnic joke-telling provide some enlightened insights into the nature of ethnic stereotyping. In this regard, Davies examines the way in which these jokes generally relate to ambiguous or contradictory situations and may even bring about situations that generate

uncertainty and ambivalence. In this manner, ethnic humour is seen as having diverse social functions. For example, apart from its superficial role of reinforcing in-group solidarity through mildly conspiratorial *camaraderie*, ethnic humour also provides observers with a window into ethnocentric attitudes, and this knowledge may lead to expectations that influence social behaviour in certain contexts.

Davies (1990:307) also introduces the notion of the 'ethnic script' which refers to a commonly-shared conventional but fabricated account of ethnic groups that acts as a springboard for ethnic jokes. In essence, 'ethnic scripts' are testimonies of prejudice but they usually have a constructive rather than vindictive purpose. Many ethnic groups (such as the Jewish) delight in using their own 'ethnic scripts' to tell ethnic jokes about themselves and they seem to generate a spirit of good-humoured *camaraderie* in being the collective butt of their own humour. Clearly, in-group bonding is a primary implicit goal of those sharing the same 'ethnic script' and collectively wallowing in the caricatured imperfections of their own group's stereotypical image.

The concept of 'ethnic scripting' was alluded to in the discussion of the humour of mixed metaphors in sub-section 7.2.9 in Chapter Seven, and its reception dynamics present the humour researcher with an interesting riddle to solve concerning the longevity of this humour category. To some degree, this form of humour can be viewed in terms of the 'gallows theory' (referred to in Chapter Five as 'amused cynicism on facing disaster') in which the in-group members have a joking

relationship concerning their own stereotyped shortcomings, but generally are far less accepting of non-members participating in the same type of shared amusement. In some ways, it may also represent the familiar notion of 'misery finding company', and in this case takes the form of group members finding conviviality and solidarity in exaggerated accounts of well-established (usually negative) stereotypical attitudes towards themselves as a group. However there is more to 'ethnic scripting' than this because basically it also signifies self-acceptance and reinforces cultural group membership in the sense that it demonstrates the capability of group members to rise above the petty squabbles concerning what may or may not be construed as being sociopolitically incorrect. Ultimately, 'ethnic scripting' is a powerful socializing force that enhances group solidarity, and represents a genre of humour that has a strong social motive that is positively reinforced on a regular basis by the ongoing motivational stimulus of operant conditioning, as discussed in sub-section 7.2.9 of Chapter Seven.

By contrast with Davies' observations concerning ethnic humour, the qualitative contribution of Mary Douglas (1975) to humour theory offers insights on both an anthropological level as well as a general level. For example, in discussing the essence of jokes, Douglas' analysis alludes to the role of comic synergy between the formal and informal elements of humour, as well as the role of humour in providing a behaviour mechanism for tension-reduction, as follows:

> '...something formal is attacked by something informal, something organised and controlled, by something vital, energetic, an upsurge of life for Bergson, of libido for Freud'.   (Douglas, 1975:95)

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Furthermore, there is much to be said for Douglas' insight that the joke is in fact a play on form that exhilarates receivers who have the empathy and understanding to interpret its essence. Douglas (1975:96) also alludes to incongruity theory in her observation of the functional elements of the joke as bringing '... into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is somehow challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first'.

In discussing the respective contributions of anthropological humour theorists, Driessen draws attention to the merit of Douglas' insight concerning the nature of humour as being '... the achievement of consonance between different spheres of experience ...[providing] a source of profound experience for the people involved' (Douglas in Driessen, 1997:225). The significance of this observation should not be overlooked in the context of humour theory. Cognitive consonance which is a state the reversal psychologists would refer to as being 'paratelic-dominant' is concerned with a feeling of ease and positivity as ideas and opinions coincide, as opposed to cognitive dissonance which signifies 'telic-dominant' unease and underlying tension due to perceptions of ambivalence or dissonant attitudes or opinions (Sampson, 1976:131-137). Furthermore, Douglas' allusion to humour as 'a source of profound experience for those involved' suggests an awareness of the importance of arousal in the process of humour. Clearly, Driessen (1997:224) was once again on the mark when he suggested with good reason that Douglas was the 'most sophisticated' of the anthropological humour theorists.

The anthropological approach has much to offer humour theory, particularly as there is so much latitude for anthropological studies of humour within the African setting. The emphasis placed by anthropologists on culture perhaps serves as the most apt starting point for further studies of humour by anthropologists. With the possible exception of Mary Douglas, there appears to be little legacy of original humour theory in the discipline of anthropology. Nevertheless, the contributions of anthropologists such as Christie Davies have provided humour theorists with many insights, particularly with regard to descriptive accounts on a cross-cultural level that lend support to the findings of humour theorists. What has emerged thus far from the field of anthropology is a body of carefully observed and well documented descriptive accounts, however there has also been a shortage of distinctive contributions to humour theory.

CHAPTER TEN

Concluding comments

In the Preface of this study, a seemingly playful comment was made concerning the study of humour being no laughter matter, and a fitting concluding comment may well be that behind every jest, there is an element of truth. If we value the opinions of academics, such as Henk Driessen (1997:222) who describes humour as 'an elusive and difficult topic to explore', then we may well also conclude that one of the chief attributes of this study is that it tackles the question of humour at all! In the present final chapter, further concluding comments are made concerning the nature of this study, its strengths and limitations, as well as the hopes and recommendations of the author. The study itself does not stray far from its terms of reference as a 'qualitative study of humour theory', but the nebulous nature of humour theory tends to militate against specificity, and at times the study assumes a broad Olympian stance seeking to give epistemological perspective to a wide diversity of multidisciplinary contributions to humour theory.

The initial focus of the present study was on a critical review of a wide range of literature in the field of humour theory and in related fields, and some benefits of this investigation are reflected in the exploratory exercises in reflective practice that follow. Although the qualifying term 'qualitative' is used in the title of this study, an examination of the nature of *quantitative* approaches to exploring humour theory has been within the investigation's

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parameters because the so-called 'qualitative' approaches are largely a collection of approaches distinguished chiefly by their 'non-quantitative' nature (Tesch, 1990:3). Accordingly, it has been essential to refer regularly to quantitative research and to examine its implications for humour research by way of comparison with what qualitative approaches have to offer. Notwithstanding my self-proclaimed partiality for qualitative methodology, I have also argued that quantitative research is very much part of my vision of further research in this field.

In addition to constituting a value judgement, my own view of the strengths of this study also represents an idiosyncratic statement of priorities. Prominent among these priorities has been a need to confront the pivotal current issue in humour research methodology by examining closely the nature of the synergy in the field of humour studies caused by the respective strengths and weaknesses of the qualitative and quantitative sides of the coin of research.

Although the quantitative-qualitative controversy appears to be endemic in humour research, it needs to be contextualized within the frame of reference of a larger-scale contemporary epistemological debate that pervades virtually all fields of human studies, and which has given rise to a degree of polarisation between the respective protagonists in certain spheres of research. In some cases, the heat generated by the current methodological debate has left something of an illusion of an antagonistic dichotomy between the seemingly divergent quantitative and qualitative methodological standpoints. This aberration exists entirely because of 'the human side of the enterprise' (McGregor, 1960), and it has been shown that researchers such as Michael Apter (1981, 1982, 1989)

are quite capable of harnessing the best of both worlds to accomplish meaningful contributions to humour theory based on research founded in a qualitative approach but corroborated by quantitative follow-up studies.

A general concern of this study has been the testing of the waters of the status of humour research. As mentioned above, on occasions the tone of this study assumes that of a broad Olympian overview of the universe of research in human and social studies from the perspective of the humour researcher, and from this standpoint discerns that the major issues of humour theory cannot be confronted satisfactorily by exclusive reliance on the limited quantitative paradigms of the traditionally positivistic orientation of the *ruling discourse* of the recent past. I subscribe to the view that the way forward is through the greater development of the various approaches to research still accumulating within the generic collection labelled 'qualitative research'. An important proviso is of course that the benefits of empiricism are not ignored, because in view of the current state of the discipline, humour theorists of all persuasions need all the help they can get.

It is important that the quantitative-qualitative debate is viewed from a less simplistic perspective than that which merely posits it as a methodological controversy. In this respect, a leaf can be taken from the book of Marcel Jousse (1990:71) who not only emphasized the need to restore a sense of worth in the oral tradition in the face of the onslaught of textuality, but also indicated that text (the secondary vicarious substitute for primary experience) had in fact usurped the place of orality as a central aspect of the 'bookish ethnicity' of Westernized culture (cf. Chapter Eight). In much the same way as the secondary experience of textuality has been erroneously regarded as superior to the

primary experiences of reality because reality is not more like texuality, the quantitative approach has been promoted to the detriment of the qualitative approach by the erstwhile *ruling discourse* with its strong positivistic bias. These similarities subsist in the underlying rationales of the respective scenarios perceived on the one hand by Jousse in respect of literacy and orality, and on the other hand in respect of the status of positivism as the 'one-best-way' of research methodology in human studies. The *raison d'etre* of the latter assumption is the implication that qualitative approaches are in fact inferior because they do not conform to the standards and principles of quantitative practice.

In my view, the arrival of the current Information Age has in some ways exacerbated the already deleterious situation described in the writings of Marcel Jousse (1990, 1997) who seventy years ago painted a convincing portrait of a serious imbalance in academic perceptions of human behaviour. Jousse's disturbing vision was of a world of knowledge distorted by the effects of a text-biassed perspective of reality endorsed by an academia blindly attached to 'the dead letters of texts'. Jousse viewed the preoccupation of literate cultures with textuality as creating what Havelock (1988:135) later referred to as the 'alphabetic culture' which devalued primary experience.

Although the Information Age has promoted the rapid development of vastly more accessible communication links and has opened up dynamic new worlds of interactive dialogue that are dramatic improvements on 'bookish ethnicity' rather than static preoccupations with 'the dead letters of texts', the fact remains that surfing the Internet is basically a further form of secondary experience performed by sedentary individuals who sit enthralled by the flickering screen. While they may be more proactive than the so-called

'couch potatoes' watching mass media television, the electronic communicators are still experiencing reality vicariously through the secondary unidimensional source of the monitor - unless of course, they are hooked up to Virtual Reality!

The fact that the so-called 'information explosion' has been accompanied by a 'media explosion' has resulted in a situation in which the audiovisual benefits of the Information Age have put the paperless communication experience ahead of the 'dead letters of texts' by providing a superior secondary substitute for reality that has been enhanced by CD-ROM technology. However, the dangers of the Information Age are similar to the dangers portrayed by Jousse in his observations that textuality was popularly conceived of as being both preferable and superior to primary experience. We have now entered an era of electronic text, interactive multimedia and Virtual Reality technology in which a similar scenario subsists but where paper-based textuality has been superseded by a compelling new force. Society now worships at the feet of a fresh demigod that it has placed at the top of its communication hierarchy. The new Third Force in the politics of communication is more powerful and more attractive than traditional paper-based textuality, and considered by many to be even more preferable and more greatly superior to primary experience than traditional textuality was ever misconceived as being.

From a personal standpoint, one of the primary strengths that I perceive in this study is that it is opinionated and makes statements on questions of principle, as befits its self-proclaimed status as a 'qualitative study'. Apart from tackling the quantitative-qualitative issue directly, the study gives prominence to the long-neglected issue of the role of orality in humour, albeit from within the limited context of the parameters of this study. Attention

is also directed towards the question of defining *humour* in order to create a basic frame of reference for further study, and this in turn led to the rejection of the definition of humour proposed in the introductory address of a recent prominent international 'cultural history of humour' conference held in Amsterdam during 1994 (Bremmer and Roodenburg, 1997:1). There is also an in-depth analysis of Murdock and Ganim's 1993 macro-level study of humour theories, in which I take issue with the researchers and criticise both the methods and content of the survey itself as well as some of the theories included in it.

This study has also taken upon itself to give prominence to worthy causes. In this respect, Chapter Six is devoted to an evaluation of the contribution of Michael Apter (1989) to humour theory, and gives credit where it is due by acknowledging the worth of Apter's reversal theory of humour which was needlessly omitted from the Murdock and Ganim study (1993). However, the Apter chapter, although appreciative of the contribution of reversal theory, is not merely a panegyric, and contains what I consider to be valid criticism of Apter's humour theory. In the context of worthy causes, another has of course been qualitative research in general, and reflective practice in particular. In the spirit of putting my pen where my heart is, I have even undertaken a few exploratory expeditions into the relatively uncharted territory of reflective practice, for which I have already claimed qualitative immunity! In this regard, one of the most worthy causes that can be promoted among humour researchers is that of maintaining an 'open door' attitude. Like most other qualitative researchers, I espouse the cause of open-mindedness and willingness to consider at face value the merits and demerits of all viewpoints, however idiosyncratic. It follows that differences of opinion from my own are both expected and welcomed.

The question of my expressing my perceptions of the limitations of this study is an interesting one. The parameters of this study do not permit an in-depth study of self-attribution theories (cf. Martinko, 1995; Sampson, 1976:156-174; Tedeschi and Lindskold, 1976:148-228); however, in this context, experience has shown that the expression of notions concerning perceived 'limitations' tends to reflect to some degree the *Weltanschauung* (or 'world view') of the person defining the limitations. The result is that in such situations one generally learns more about the person expressing these opinions than about the object of the self-critique. Hence, for example, a positivist may observe that this study is lacking in empirical research; and to this, my immediate response would be total agreement as well as a reminder that empirical research is beyond the parameters of this particular 'human enterprise' which has been described in its title as a *qualitative* study of humour theory.

From a personal standpoint as the author of a study of humour, the term 'limitations' has meaning for me primarily from the perspective that I experienced disappointment at the current underdeveloped state of humour research. My perception of the limitations of the present study is dominated by my perception of the limitations inherent in the nature of the field itself, and consequently is linked by logical extension to my recommendations and hopes for future progress in the field of humour theory. To be more specific, from my own perspective of the limitations discerned in reviewing the literature relevant to this study, I was disappointed to find a lack of humour research within the South African context in general, and in the area of orality-literacy and the oral tradition in particular. There is an obvious need for further research in this relatively undeveloped field of inquiry, and the character of such studies may vary from, for example, ethnographic studies of traditional

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patterns of humour to more recent accounts of the effects of acculturation or cross-cultural influences on the nature of humour. This is a potentially vast field of research that offers wide possibilities, such as for example studies of aspects of humour in the so-called Information Age.

In respect of more specific recommendations for further research, it is appropriate that I should refer to my own qualitative pilot study of a few years ago (Gordon, 1995), which was inspired originally by an argument referred to again earlier in this chapter. I refer to my endorsement of Jousse's critical perspective of the lopsided view of reality produced by the overvaluation of textuality to the detriment of the experience of '*geste*', and also to my submission that the 'media explosion' accompanying the 'information explosion' had effectively exacerbated the situation by complementing textuality with a range of sophisticated electronic substitutes for direct primary experiences. It was this 'neo-Joussean' perspective that fired my interest in the development of the above-mentioned pilot study to contrast elements of orality (such as traditional 'trickster tales') with the bookish products of popular Westernized culture as typified in the term 'pulp fiction' (also the title of a popular movie of the time of writing).

The conference paper in question, 'Trickster tales to pulp fiction' (Gordon, 1995, reproduced in Appendix E) is an example of grounded research that arose from a problem perceived as part of my study of orality and the oral tradition in a situation of sociopolitical transformation that involved the process of acculturation as the young-adult subjects of the pilot study tested the waters of an integrated society in the so-called 'New South Africa'. The investigation focussed on the leisure behaviour and preferences (viz. reading, television

viewing, music, etc.) of young-adult urban-based Library and Information Studies students, and also related to a retrospective survey of aspects of the subjects' childhood leisure experiences including the experience of the oral communication of trickster tales. From a methodological standpoint, the pilot study involved the qualitative analysis of data derived from the combination of a predominantly quantitative questionnaire approach together with a qualitative interview approach.

The relevance of the 'trickster tales' study to humour studies was immediately evident in the interviews in which the subjects almost without exception recounted their experiences of trickster tales with bright nostalgic enthusiasm and a willingness to laugh at their younger reactions to the worlds of their childhood imaginations. Although these retrospective testimonies were undoubtedly of the order of 'vignettes of childhood innocence, adventure and chivalry' (to borrow a phrase from Henry Giroux, 1994:31), nevertheless the results of the 'trickster tales' pilot study can be usefully applied to examine possibilities of further local studies of popular culture in general, and the study itself generally revealed the need for more qualitative research of an ethnographic nature. This need is also an implicit theme of the present study, and I harbour a nagging feeling that perhaps this study is limited by the fact that it constitutes a discursive *dissertation* rather than a full-blown research *thesis* which includes extensive fieldwork within a South African setting.

Humour theory is a multidisciplinary enterprise, and I have attempted in this study to address humour research from a broad base. The net has been spread across diverse fields such as Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy, Communication and Reception

Theory, and Orality. My parting hope is that specialists from various disciplines associated with human studies are encouraged by the reading of this study to undertake humour studies of any sort across the entire spectrum of qualitative-quantitative research approaches.

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Appendix A

Purposes of qualitative research:

a select glossary of relevant terms

from

Qualitative research:
analysis types and software tools
by

Renata Tesch
New York: Falmer Press, 1990.
Pages: 27-30; 39-41; 50-51.

Glossary of terms used in describing the purposes of qualitative research

action / collaborative research	improving practices by or in cooperation with practitioners
case study	intensive and detailed study of one individual or of a group as an entity, through observation, self-reports and any other means
content analysis, ethnographic	'the reflexive analysis of documents' (Altheide, 1987:65) 'used to document and understand the communication of meaning, as well as to verify theoretical relationships' (Altheide, 1987:68)
content analysis, classical	'making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context (Krippendorf, 1980:21) 'objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication' (Berelson, 1952:489) 'making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within text' (Stone et al., 1966:5)
critical emancipatory research	to 'disclose self-evident and unnoticed biases, habits of thinking, customary conventions, and so forth' through dialogue (de Boer, 1983:155)
dialogal phenomenology	to study human experiences as articulated in language taking 'stories [as] starting points for all further thinking and theory building' (von Eckartsberg, in Valle and King, 1978:186)
discourse analysis	'the linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written discourse' (Stubbs, 1983:1) providing 'insight into the forms and mechanisms of human communication and verbal interaction' (van Dijk, 1985:4)
ecological psychology	to 'describe behaviour and discover the laws of behaviour' (Jacob, 1987:5) through studying and 'behaviour stream' that constitutes itself as 'behavioural episodes' as nested in socially defined 'behavioural settings' (von Eckartsberg, in Valle and King, 1978:199)

1

educational connoisseurship and criticism	critically describing (disclosing), interpreting, and evaluating social phenomena (similar to arts appreciation)
emancipatory action research	enlightenment for emancipation
empirical phenomenology	to 'understand the general psychological meaning of some particular human way of being-in-a-situation, ... through a number of descriptions of this way of being-in-a-situation from people who have lived through and experience themselves as so involved [called protocols]' (W. Fischer, in Valle and King, 1978:177)
ethnography (structural)	'classifies and highlights the social organization and distribution of subjective meanings as native and diverse field realities', being 'concerned with ... cataloguing their forms and relationships in time and space' (Gubrium, 1988:26) where we 'think of culture as a cognitive map', and where 'both tacit and explicit culture are revealed through speech' (Spradley, 1979:7;9)
ethnography (holistic)	'to describe and analyse all or part of a culture or community by describing the beliefs and practices of the group studied and showing how the various parts contribute to the culture as a unified, consistent whole' (Jacob, 1987:10)
ethnography of communication	describing the patterns of interaction of the members of a cultural group (related to sociolinguistics)
ethnography	describing and analysing practices and beliefs of cultures or communities (as consistent wholes)
ethnomethodology	to study how members of society, in the course of ongoing social interaction, make sense of 'indexical expressions'. Indexicals are terms whose meaning is not universal, but is dependent upon the context (Bailey, 1978:249) 'how members of situations assemble reasonable understanding of the things and events of concern to them and, thereby, realize them as objects of everyday life' (Gubrium, 1988:27) 'how people in society organize their activities in such a way that they make mutual sense, how people do things in such ways that others can recognize them for what they are' (Sharrock and Anderson, 1986:56)

ethnoscience (cognitive anthropology)	'to understand participants' cultural categories and to identify the organizing principles that underlie these categories ... through the study of semantic systems (Jacob, 1987:22) 'to define systematically the meaning of words, or labels - in short, the names of things in the context of their use' in order to 'construct lexical-semantic fields of linked propositions' (Werner and Schoepfle, 1987(2):29;38)
event structure analysis	to examine and represent series of events as logical structures, i.e., as elements and their connections (including the assumptions that govern these connections) that can serve as explanatory models for interpreting actual or folkloristic sequences of events (Heise and Lewis, 1988)
existential-phenomenological psychology	to 'reveal the structure of experience through descriptive techniques', thereby 'disclosing the nature of structure in the form of meaning', structure being 'the commonality running through the many diverse appearances of the phenomenon' (Valle and King, 1978:15;17;16)
experiential phenomenology	'... the investigators question, explore, and arrive at conclusions regarding psychological processes within themselves [so as] to generate testable experiential hypotheses' (Price and Barrell, 1980:76)
grounded theory construction	to 'discover theory from data' through the 'general method of comparative analysis' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:1)
hermeneutics	textual interpretation, applied to human actions 'to elucidate and make explicit our understanding ... by providing an interpretation of them' through 'progressive uncovering and explication' (Packer, 1985:1088;1089)
heuristic inquiry	'to know the essence of some aspect of life through the internal pathways of the self' (Douglas and Moustakas, 1985:39)
imaginal phenomenology	'seeks to understand psychological life by going to those sources most pregnant with imaginative potency' through 'metaphorical refiguring' (Aanstoos, 1987:17;18)

life history study, document case study	an 'unstructured and non-quantitative' approach using personal documents (Bailey, 1978:273), often resulting in typologies or 'through which to examine and analyse the subjective experience of individuals and their construction of the social world' (Jones, 1983:147)
naturalistic inquiry	a non-positivistic approach to research in which the researcher is the instrument, and the focus is on understanding the meaning the people under study give to their experiences
perceptual description	to investigate 'psychological phenomena which either are beyond human experiential awareness or which cannot be communicated' through 'the observation of lived events' (Colaizzi, in Valle and King, 1978:65;62)
phenomenography	describing conceptually perceived qualities of a phenomenon through contextual analysis
phenomenological research	illuminating intersubjective human experiences by describing the essence of the subjective experience
qualitative / illuminative evaluation	evaluation that employs the tenets of naturalistic inquiry and emphasizing the process by which outcomes are produced rather than merely judging the outcomes
reflective phenomenology	'aims at a descriptive understanding of psychological phenomena by reflectively disclosing their meaning' 'through the imaginative presence to the investigated phenomenon' (Colaizzi, in Valle and King, 1978:68;62)
symbolic interactionism	'to see how the process of designation and interpretation [participants are defining and interpreting each other's acts] is sustaining, undercutting, redirecting and transforming the ways in which the participants are fitting together their lines of action' (Blumer, 1969:53) 'understanding how individuals are able to take one another's perspective and learn meanings and symbols in concrete instances of interaction'(Jacob, 1987:29)
transcendental realism	describing as precisely as possible the range and the local and historical contingencies of social regularities in social behaviour

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Appendix B

Humour and sense-of-humour, wit, comedy and jokes:

a select collection of relevant definitions, etymology and quotations

from

The Oxford English dictionary

HUMOUR

humour, humor ("hju:m@(r), "ju:m@(r)), *n.* Also 4 **umour, -or,** 4–6 **humure,** 5 **-ore,** 5–6 **-oure.**
[a. AF. *(h)umour,* F. *(h)umor, -ur,* mod.F. *humeur* (= It. *umore,* Sp., Pg. *humor*):–L. *hu͞moͬrem,* more properly *u͞moͬr-em* fluid, moisture.
For the spelling cf. HONOUR; *humour* is now usual in Great Britain, *humor* in U.S. The English formations, *humoured, humourless, humoursome,* are here spelt like the n. and vb.; but the derivatives formed on a Latin type, as *humoral, humorist, humorous,* are spelt *humor-* as in L. *humo͞roͬsus,* etc. (This agrees with Johnson's use.) The pronunciation of the initial *h* is only of recent date, and is sometimes omitted, esp. in the senses under II: see H (the letter).]

a. That quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun.
b. The faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject. Distinguished from *wit* as being less purely intellectual, and as having a sympathetic quality in virtue of which it often becomes allied to pathos.

1682 tr. *Glanius' Voy. Bengala* 142 The Cup was so closed, that 'twas a difficult matter for us to open it, and therefore the General gave it us on purpose, to divert himself with the humour of it.
1709 Shaftesbury (*title*) Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour.
1712 Hughes *Spect.* No. 525 ¶3 Writings which once prevail'd among us under the Notion of Humour.
1727 Swift *To Earl of Oxford,* The priest..shew'd some humour in his face.
1728 — *Intelligencer* No. 3 Humour..in its perfection is allowed to be much preferable to wit, if it be not rather the most useful and agreeable species of it.
1759 Goldsm. *Pol. Learn* ix, Wit raises human nature above its level; humour acts a contrary part, and equally depresses it.
a1854 H. Reed *Lect. Eng. Lit.* ii. (1855) 63 The happy compound of pathos and playfulness, which we style by that untranslateable term humour.
1870 Lowell *Stud. Wind.* 132 Humor in its first analysis is a perception of the incongruous.
1874 Green *Short Hist.* viii. §10. 585 The strange deficiency of humour which Milton shared with the Puritans generally.
1887 Lowell *Democr.* 3 That modulating and restraining balance-wheel which we call a sense of humor.

SENSE OF HUMOUR

1874 L. Stephen *Hours in Library* (1892) I. v. 197 A delicate sense of humour, which is the best preservative against all extravagance.

1879 Huxley *Hume* x. 196 Metaphysicians, as a rule, are sadly deficient in the sense of humour.

1886 *Athenæum* 24 Apr. 551/1 A dispassionateness and a sense of humour quite rare in her sex.

1892 'Mark Twain' *Amer. Claimant* xxi. 205, I do not suppose that any other statesman ever had such a colossal sense of humour, combined with the ability to totally conceal it.

1898 'Merriman' *Roden's Corner* vii. 74 The exquisite sense of humour had also slightly evaporated. People said, 'Oh yes, very funny,' than which nothing is more fatal to humour.

1902 E. Banks *Newspaper Girl* 210, I am not, I believe, without a saving sense of humour.

1909 *N.Y. Herald* in *Daily Chron.* 8 Mar. 5/2 Both have that great life-saver for men who have to endure periods of stress and storm–a sense of humour.

1929 *Sat. Rev.* 24 Aug. 221/2 But in the dialogue of the rustics it shows a delicious Hardyesque sense of humour.

1936 J. Nehru *Autobiogr.* xlviii. 387, I remember a frequent complaint of my father's that his Responsivist friends had no sense of humour.

1937 *News Chron.* 20 Feb. 8/6 Slang also appeals to our elementary sense of humour, as when we say of a man who is drunk that he is..stotious.

1938 C. Morgan *Flashing Stream* 31 He who wrote the Sonnets, or Hamlet's bidding to Ophelia..had no moderation, no smell of the sixth form, no sense of humour.

1946 H. Nicolson *Eng. Sense of Humour* 49 Freud was not alone in defining the sense of humour as a defence mechanism having as its main function the protection of the self against discomfort.

1949 Koestler *Insight & Outlook* v. 69 In the gradually emerging sense of humour, we have a further outlet mechanism.

1960 G. Maxwell *Ring of Bright Water* ix. 123 As a useful by-product of his [*sc.* the otter's] impish sense of humour, the cattle tended to keep farther from the house, thus..reducing the number of scatological hazards to be skirted at the door.

1966 R. Jeffries *Death in Coverts* iii. 93 We all joked about it and Bill got really ripe. No sense of humour.

1966 F. Spiegl in F. Shaw et al. *Lern Yerself Scouse* 12 Here the Scouser's sense of humour outweighs his *Schlamperei*, for he will never use a single word when he can think of some more or less long-winded picturesque phrase in its place.

1967 *Daily Tel.* 15 Apr. 9/3 The average gent is of an aggressive disposition and a lavatorial sense of humour.

1968 *Listener* 3 Oct. 428/2 One student outlines his own theories to me. 'This whole scene began with Dylan, the Beatles, and of course pot.' Another complains that the militants need a sense of humour and hopes the Yippies move in with their

'politics of ecstasy'.

1969 *Times* 13 Dec. p. v/2 These represented the British sense of humour, our genius for sending ourselves up, but they seem to me rather to be reinforcements of such attitudes.

1971 *Guardian* 8 Sept. 8/3 His pawkily British sense of humour.

1974 M. Moore *Silver Birch Country* 43 The lady I'm looking after is a dear old duck, completely weirdo, but she's got a terrible sense of humour, and I like her.

1977 *New Wave Mag.* vii. 12 Numbers are fast and slow. Some are only about thirty seconds long. This ain't minimalism. It's a sense of humour.

1977 *Birds* Summer 59/3 Twitchers are difficult to identify because they are polymorphic. Best clues are behavioural including carrying Zeiss binoculars and *Where to Watch Birds...* Known to have nested in Wandsworth and possess a sense of humour.

1984 *Sunday Times* 26 Feb. 10/5 They started winding her up, which is not difficult since she does not have a great sense of humour.

WIT

wit (wIt), *n.* Forms: 1– **wit**, 3–6 **wyt**, 3 (*Orm.*), 4–8 **witt**, 4–6 **wytt, wyte**, 4–7 **witte, wytte**, (4 **wiit, wijt, whit**, 4, 6 **wite**, *Sc.* **vit, vyt**, 5 **whytt, wette**, 6 *Sc.* **wott**, 7 **weet**).

[OE. *wit* neut., more commonly ¼ewit(t I-WIT *n.*, corresp. to OFris. *wit*, OS., (M)LG. *wit*, OHG. *wizzi* (MHG. *witz(e*, G. *witz*), ON. *vit* (Sw. *vet*, Da. *vid*), Goth. *un-witi* ἀφροσÊνη, ἀγνο¬α: f. *wit-* (see WIT *v.*[1]).]

7. Quickness of intellect or liveliness of fancy, with capacity of apt expression; talent for saying brilliant or sparkling things, esp. in an amusing way. *arch.* (Cf. sense 8.) Formerly sometimes opp. to *wisdom* or *judgement*; often distinguished from *humour* (see quots., and note s.v. HUMOUR *n.* 7).

1579 Lyly *Euphues* (Arb.) 61 As the Bee is oftentimes hurt with hir owne Honny, so is witte not seldome plagued with his owne conceipt.

1597 Shakes. *2 Hen. IV*, i. ii. 11 Men of all sorts take a pride to gird at mee:..I am not onely witty in my selfe, but the cause that wit is in other men.

1650 Davenant *Gondibert* Pref. (1651) 27 Wit is not only the luck and labour, but also the dexterity of thought.

1665 Boyle *Occas. Refl.* i. iii. iii. 37 That nimble and acceptable Faculty of the Mind, whereby some Men have a readiness, and subtilty, in conceiving things, and a quickness, and neatness, in expressing them, all which the custom of speaking comprehends under the name of Wit.

1704 Yalden *Sir W. Aston* 187 His flowing wit, with solid judgment join'd, Talents united rarely in a mind, Had all the graces and engaging art, That charm the ear and captivate the heart.

1765 Chesterfield *Lett. to Godson* (1890) 180 If you have real wit it will flow

spontaneously and you need not aim at it... Wit is so shining a quality, that everybody admires it, most people aim at it, all people fear it, and few love it unless in themselves.

1777 M. Morgann *Ess. Dram. Char. Falstaff* 163 It being very possible, I suppose, to be a man of humour without wit; but I think not a man of wit without humour.

1782 Cowper *Gilpin* 169 Now Gilpin had a pleasant wit And lov'd a timely joke.

8. a. That quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness (for particular applications in 17th and 18th century criticism see esp. quots. 1650, 1677, 1685, 1690, 1704, 1709); later always with reference to the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way.

1542 Udall *Erasm. Apoph.* Pref. **vij b, Neither dooe I esteme it a thyng worthie blame..with laughter to refreshe the mynde.., so that the matier to laugh at bee pure witte and honeste [orig. *modo risus sit argutus ac liberalis*].

1633 G. Herbert *Temple, Ch.-Porch* xxxix, Laugh not too much: the wittie man laughs least: For wit is newes onely to ignorance.

1650 Davenant *Gondibert* Pref. (1651) 26 Wit is the laborious, and the lucky resultances of thought having towards its excellence..as well a happinesse, as care.

1677 Dryden *State Innoc., Apol. Her. Poetry* c 2 b, The definition of Wit..is only this: That it is a propriety of Thoughts and Words; or in other terms, Thought and Words, elegantly adapted to the Subject.

1711 Addison *Spect.* No. 62 ¶2 Mr. Lock's Account of Wit, with this short Explanation, comprehends most of the Species of Wit, as Metaphors, Similitudes, Allegories, Ænigmas, Mottos, Parables, Fables, Dreams, Visions, dramatick Writings, Burlesque, and all the Methods of Allusion.

1744 Corbyn Thomas (*title*) An Essay Towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule.

a1859 Leigh Hunt in *Jrnl. Educ.* (1884) 1 Feb. 79 Wit consists in the arbitrary juxtaposition of dissimilar ideas for some lively purpose of assimilation or contrast, generally of both.

1900 Hammerton *J. M. Barrie & his Bks.* 78 There is more 'heart' in humour, and more 'head' in wit.

b. With qualification (see quots. and *sheer wit* s.v. SHEER *a.* 8 b).

1633 G. Herbert *Temple, Ch.-Porch* xi, When thou dost tell anothers jest, therein Omit the oathes, which true wit cannot need.

1653 R. Flecknoe *Misc., Disc. Lang.* 100 Jests, Clenches, Quibbles, Bulls, &c.,..which although properly they be not Wit (excepting Jests onely, which is a kind of sportive and wanton wit).

1792 D. Stewart *Elem. Philos. Hum. Mind* v. I. 305 *note*, I speak here of pure and unmixed wit, and not of wit, blended, as is most commonly, with some degree of humour.

† **c.** A witty saying or story; a *jeu d'esprit*: in the collocation **wits, fits, and fancies**. *Obs.*

1595 A. C[opley] (*title*) Wits, Fittes and Fancies. Fronted and entermedled with

Presidentes of Honour and Wisdome.
1626 W. Vaughan *Golden Fleece* i. 12 Except you season your *Auisoes* with some light passages with wits, fits, & fancies.
1632 Brome *Northern Lasse* i. ii. B 2 b, Hee..breakes as many good iests as all the Wits, Fits, and Fancies about the Towne.

10. (*transf.* from 7.) A person of lively fancy, who has the faculty of saying smart or brilliant things, now always so as to amuse; a witty person.
1692 R. L'Estrange *Fables* ccclxxi. 343 Intemperate Wits will spare neither Friend nor Foe.
1727 Gay *Fables* i. x, Wits are game-cocks to one another.
1824 W. Irving *T. Trav.* I. 180 There is no character that succeeds so well among wits as that of a good listener.
1835 Dickens *Sk. Boz, Lond. Recreations*, Uncle Bill..is evidently the wit of the party.
1848 Thackeray *Van. Fair* xviii, Go on joking, Ann. You're the wit of the family.

IV. 14. Combinations.
e. Special Combs.:
wit-crack, the 'cracking' of a joke (cf. CRACK *v.* 5), a brisk witticism;
so **wit-cracker,** one who makes witty or sarcastic remarks;
(b) exercise of one's wits;
wit-jar, an imaginary vessel humorously feigned to contain the wits or senses (in allusion to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* XXXIX. lvii);
wit-monger, a 'dealer' in wit, an utterer of witty sayings (*contemptuous*);
wit-worm (now *rare*), one who has developed into a wit (like a 'worm' or caterpillar emerging from the egg);
† **wit-would,** † **wit-would-be,** a pretender to wit, a would-be wit;
† **wit-wright,** a maker of wit, an author of witty sayings.

1599 Shakes. *Much Ado* v. iv. 102 A Colledge of *witte-crackers cannot flout mee out of my humour, dost thou think I care for a Satyre or an Epigram?
1596 Shakes. *Merch. V.* iii. v. 54 What a *witte-snapper are you.
1632 Brome *Crt. Beggar* ii. i. (1653) O 6 b, This humorous wity Lady is a *wit-sponge, that suckes up wit from some, and holds as her own.
1750 Fielding *Author's Farce* i. vi, Nor was it cram'd with a pack of *Wit-traps, like Congreve and Wycherly, where every one knows when the joke was coming.

COMEDY

comedy[1] ("kQmIdI). Forms: 4 **comedye**, 4–6 **commedy**, 6–7 **com(m)odie**, **-y(e**, 7 **comœdy**, **-ie**, 5–7 **comedie**, 5– **comedy**.
[a. F. *comédie* (14th c. in Littré), ad. L. *co¯mœdia*, a. Gr. κωμῳδ¬α, n. of practice f. κωμῳδ¾ς comedian; a compound, either of κὲμος revel, merry-making, or of its probable source, κῨμη village + ἀοιδ¾ς singer, minstrel, f. ἀε¬δ-ειν to sing (cf. ODE). The κωμῳδ¾ς was thus originally either the 'bard of the revels' or the 'village-bard': see Liddell and Scott.]

1. A stage-play of a light and amusing character, with a happy conclusion to its plot. Such are the comedies of the ancient Greek and Latin writers, and of the modern stage. But in the Middle Ages the term was applied to other than dramatic compositions, the 'happy ending' being the essential part of the notion. In the English use of the term the following stages may be distinguished:
† **a.** Its mediæval use for a narrative poem with an agreeable ending.
[Probably taken from Italian; cf. the *Divine Comedy*, the great tripartite poem of Dante, called by its author *La Commedia*, because 'in the conclusion, it is prosperous, pleasant, and desirable', and in its style 'lax and unpretending', being 'written in the vulgar tongue, in which women and children speak'.]

c1430 Lydg. *Bochas* Prol. v. i, My maister Chaucer with fresh comedies..that whilom made ful piteous tragedies.
1430 — *Chron. Troy* ii. xi, A comedy hath in his gynnynge, A pryme face a maner complaynynge, And afterwarde endeth in gladnesse.
† **b.** Applied to mystery-plays or interludes with a prosperous ending.
1616 Bullokar, *Comedie*, a play, or interlude the beginning of which is ever full of troubles and the end joyfull.

c. Applied to the ancient comedies, as they became known after the Renascence.
d. The modern use, arising out of b and c.
'*Roister Doister* is regarded as the transition-play from the Mysteries and Enterludes of the Middle Ages to the Comedies of Modern Times' (Arber *R.D.* Introd. 6). '"Ralph Roister Doister" is the first regular comedy in our language' (Hazlitt *O.E.P.* III. 54).

2. a. That branch of the drama which adopts a humorous or familiar style, and depicts laughable characters and incidents. (Sometimes *personified*.)
Old, Middle, and New Comedy: the three stages of Attic comedy; the first two were largely farcical or burlesque in character, and indulged freely in political and social caricature; the last corresponded to modern high comedy.

1387 Trevisa *Higden* (Rolls) I. 315 þere [in Sicily] was commedy a song of gestes firste i founde.
1581 Sidney *Apol. Poetrie* (Arb.) 44 The Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life.
1598 B. Jonson *Ev. Man in Hum.* Prol., Persons, such as comedy would choose, When she would shew an image of the times, And sport with human

follies, not with crimes.

1769 Johnson in *Boswell* 19 Oct., Comedy..exhibits the character of a species, as that of a miser gathered from many misers: farce..exhibits individuals.

b. *comedy of manners*, that kind of comedy in which the modes and manners of society are amusingly presented. Cf. MANNER *n.*[1] 4 e.

1877 G. Meredith in *New Quart. Mag.* VIII. 3 Our English idea of a Comedy of Manners might be imaged in the person of a blowsy country girl–..transforming to a varnished City madam.

c. Humour; humorous invention; the action or quality of being amusing. Cf. *cut the comedy* (CUT *v.* 21 b).

1877 G. Meredith in *New Quart. Mag.* VIII. 9 Comedy is the fountain of sound sense.

1933 P. Godfrey *Back-Stage* iii. 37 When an actor complains that his 'laughs' have been 'killed' he means that the audience have been prevented from laughing at his comedy.

1947 D. Lean in O. Blakeston *Working for Films* 29 The answer lies in a very old comedy maxim: Tell them what you're going to do. Do it. Tell them you've done it.

JOKE

joke (dZ@Uk), *n.* Also **7** **joque, joc, 8** **joak**.

[Appeared in second half of 17th c., app. originally in slang or colloquial use: cf. JOKING *vbl. n.*, quot. 1670; app. ad. L. *joc-us* jest, joke, sport: cf. It. *gioco* 'game, play, sport, jeast' (Florio).]

1. a. Something said or done to excite laughter or amusement; a witticism, a jest; jesting, raillery; also, something that causes amusement, a ridiculous circumstance.

practical joke, a trick or prank played upon some person usually in order to have a laugh at his expense. Phr. *to cut, crack a joke*; *to turn a matter into a joke*, etc.; *a joke is a joke*: a joke is not to be taken seriously (freq. with the implication that the matter referred to is too serious for jokes); *joke over*: the joke is finished (usu. implying that the speaker is not amused by the words or behaviour of the person addressed).

1683 E. Hooker *Pref. Ep. to Pordage's Myst. Div.* 15 Jocs, or Witticisms, Railleries and Drolleries, Quirks and Quillets.

1726-46 Thomson *Winter* 623 The simple joke that takes the shepherd's heart.

1741 Fielding *Ess., Conversat.*, Tossing men out of their chairs, tumbling them into water, or any of those handicraft jokes.

1748 Richardson *Clarissa* Wks. 1883 VII. 410, I..should not forbear to cut a joke, were I upon a scaffold.

1790 Beattie *Moral Sc.* i. i. §7 The practice of turning every thing into joke and ridicule is a dangerous levity of imagination.

1837 Dickens *Sk. Boz* 2nd Ser. 123 A joke's a joke: and even practical jests are very capital in their way, if you can only get the other party to see the fun.

1870 E. Peacock *Ralf Skirl.* I. 186 All practical jokes do seem to be particularly foolish to those who suffer from them.

1930 R. Gore-Browne *By Way of Confession* vi. 52 'Goes too far, 'e does!' agreed an elder with a walrus mustache. 'A joke's er joke.' 'And politics is politics!' The retort came from a skinny-necked man.

1961 Partridge *Dict. Slang* Suppl. 1153/2 Joke over! or when do we laugh?

2. *transf.* An object of or matter for joking; a laughing-stock.

1791 'G. Gambado' *Ann. Horsem.* x. (1809) 109, I am the joke of the road wherever I go.

1823 J. F. Cooper *Pilot* xvi, I shall be the standing joke of the mess-table, until some greater fool than myself can be found.

Appendix C

Humour and the oral tradition: it's not the joke, it's the way you tell it

by Lawrence Gordon

Humour and the oral tradition:
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The performance of humour

By dint of repetition in a variety of contexts, the popular colloquial saying 'It's not the joke, it's the way you tell it!' has become so established a part of the living language that it serves as a constant affirmation of the significant role of performance in the evocation of humour. The current status of this saying has relevance to the question of oral tradition because it reflects contemporary attitudes concerning the nature of humour as a phenomenon of human communication.

The saying 'It's not the joke, it's the way you tell it!' has the plausible ring of a populist proverb. Arguably, it gained currency because it made an impression on those hearing it for the first time as being an acute observation and common sense explanation for the failure of a potentially witty or humorous joke to evoke laughter. Whatever its ethnolinguistic history, the saying appears to occupy a somewhat ambiguous current status as a colloquial expression. In the ongoing tradition of current Westernized language usage, a variety of social attitudes are associated with the phenomenon of the popular repetition of a phrase or saying that appears to have 'caught on' in everyday conversation. Such is the case with: 'It's not the joke, it's the way you tell it!' where the currency of the expression has generated ambivalent attitudes as an outcome of its own ongoing oral tradition. On the one hand, some folk dignify the saying with the label of 'maxim', described by Webster (1939:1017) as a 'principle generally received or admitted to be true'. By contrast, other observers regard 'maxim' as an inappropriate description for what they perceive as a *cliché* with a depreciating currency value.

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The point of difference in these social attitudes appears to pivot on the question of whether the value of an adage diminishes as its currency increases. At this point, it is appropriate to consider a paraphrase of the saying under scrutiny, notably 'It's not the saying, it's the way you say it' in which a fundamental distinction is made between the end (viz. the content) and the means (viz. 'the way you tell it'). In this respect, phenomenologists would hasten to point out that a *cliché* is **created** in the act of mechanically trotting out an oft-repeated stock oral or literary procedure; whereas by the same token, similar words or gestures may be presented with enough insight and sensitivity to prevent this act of communication from being stigmatized with the label of *'cliche'.*

In the contemporary Westernized context, the term *cliché* carries negative social implications. In current usage, the word offers a built-in value judgement based on the inference that certain aspects of communication may be rendered stereotypical by repetition and thereby become socially *infra dig. Clichés* evolve as public opinion deems certain forms of expression as becoming debased through insensitive repetition. Accordingly, the individual's experience of a particular aspect of oral communication as being *clichéd* is idiosyncratic and highly contextualised. The nature of this experience will vary according to a variety of factors which may be either intrinsic (such as, for example, the individual's temperament) or extrinsic (such as, for example, the individual's ethnolinguistic environment). In this respect, one man's meat may be another man's poison, in the sense that one man's *cliché* may be another man's source of enlightenment.

Ironically, those who are particularly wary of avoiding *clichés* often feel compelled to preface their jokes with the stock expression: 'Stop me if you've heard this one before'. This popular saying has the familiar ring of a colloquialism that generally inhibits deeper consideration; however; on reflection, its implications may be somewhat disconcerting to some ethnographers as it appears to promote the curious notion that no story is worth retelling. When viewed from this standpoint, it is not surprising that concepts such as the *cliché* are of concern to idealists, traditionalists and purists alike because established notions concerning the status of the so-called 'eternals' are seemingly challenged by the implication that content is devalued by repetition. Contemporary Westernized cultures appear to be driven by a

predilection for change which is often confused with improvement and promotes the value of 'newness'. This trend has not been restricted to science and technology, but also appears to permeate many aspects of everyday life including the way in which many people think of life itself.

The repercussions of this First World need for 'newness' are felt in diverse areas, including populist social attitudes towards traditional beliefs. The effect is that, as a social observer, the so-called 'man-in-the-street' is prompted to look beyond the popular elementary proposition immortalized by Keats that truth is beauty and vice versa, and perhaps to wonder how many times the truth in question must be repeated in order to lose its beauty, or whether ultimately beauty is 'fresh truth' and whether its corollary that truth is 'fresh beauty' has validity. Such questions are not merely restricted to either whimsical armchair speculations concerning the vagaries of populist taste, or even the fanciful ruminations of the 'man-in-the-street' as to whether the aesthetics of appreciating the beauty in say the Venus de Milo or Leonardo's Mona Lisa has been debased by the worldwide dissemination of millions of reproductions or miniaturisations of these artworks.

On the contrary, the implications of sociolinguistic phenomena such as the *cliché* are infinitely wider because they create ambivalent social attitudes that influence popular perceptions of oral tradition. An obvious example of this would be a disenchantment towards 'standard versions' of well-known folktales, and perhaps a desire to 'regenerate' them through humorous modulations. However, there is also the likelihood that the *cliché*-induced mindset will be extended to fundamental questions such as, for example: 'If a traditional greeting is a formality, then is it not *cliché*?', and whether or not this in fact represents a contradiction in a society that on one hand belittles certain actions as *clichés* and on the other hand takes umbrage against those who breach the etiquette of formal greeting procedures. Questions such as these, if taken to their logical conclusions, point to the need for a closer examination of aspects of what Jousse describes as the '*geste*' of human communication. In this respect, for example, seemingly perfunctory human gestures associated with greeting behaviour (such as a smile or a wave of the hand) merit deeper consideration, and it does not require a great leap

of insight to realise that this approach offers promising possibilities for what many outsiders perceive as the predominantly descriptive fields of ethnography and ethnolinguistics.

Contemporizing traditional humour

These winds of change in the groves of academia are an inevitable response to the realities of the contemporary status of the field as reflected in the ongoing patterns of development of oral traditions currently being established within a variety of settings. On the one hand, ethnographers continue to pursue the task of dutifully chronicling the dynamism in the style and content of traditional stories told over the centuries by tale-tellers who have modulated folklore to suit occasions and audiences. On the other hand, folklorists in contemporary Western societies need no reminding that traditional tales are constantly being 'freshened up' for the consumer market by the commercial sector through the introduction of various market-related strategies to give the old tales a new look.

The application of contemporary modulations to traditional tales by corporate organizations like Disney inevitably involves changes with a view to contemporizing style and content. These changes are market-driven and vary accordingly from the level of mere graphic embellishment to the level of radical modifications to the plots, characters and locations of the stories. The modifications may occur in an isolated or fragmentary fashion, or they may occur as a well-orchestrated campaign across a range of commercial communication media including print material, movies, coffee mugs, T-shirts, and music videos. The populist, market-driven Disney modulations of *Aladdin, Beauty and the beast* and other tales are monuments to postmodern commercialism in which considerations of content are mercilessly sacrificed at the altar of marketable style, and where the ring of truth is superseded by the ring of the cash register.

Humour is one of the most frequently employed new ingredients used to 'spice up' the traditional tale. Under the supervision of Hollywood moguls, tales with rich oral traditions (such as *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Snow White*) are no longer presented to children as

serious didactic experiences, but instead have assumed less threatening plots littered with comic characters. In fairness, however, it must be acknowledged that the folktale genre is 'public domain' by definition. In his anthology, <u>The trials and tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood</u>, Frank Zipes presents a highly selective collection of thirty-eight different versions of the popular *Red Riding Hood* saga ranging from Perrault's 1697 tale to Gearhart's 1990 adaptation. This selection of international transcripts is indicative of the fact that tales such as *Red Riding Hood* and *Snow White* have been modulated (at times, radically) by generations of tale tellers to surprise and delight their intended audiences. For example, in Ungerer's inventive version of *Red Riding Hood,* Little Red and the wolf elope and find conjugal bliss; whereas in French's stylish recasting of *Snow White*, the heroine is a New York jazz singer singing with her band, The Seven Dwarfs.

The mechanisms involved in the communication process for the reception of modulated folktales focus on a relatively high level of empathy between sender and receiver because the effectiveness of the communication depends to a large extent upon the sender's adroit manipulation of aspects of a shared oral tradition to the satisfaction of the receiver. Contextualisation plays a primary role in the evocation of humour in these modulations which rely for effect on the reader bringing the baggage of a degree of knowledge of the original tales to the reception process in order to derive greater benefit from the communication experience. The authors' modus operandi is to contrive to achieve humorous effects through an unspoken collusion with their readers who are light-heartedly invited to participate in escapist exercises in 'hijacking' classic tales for the purpose of playfully tampering with their plots, characters, and locales in order to experience delight in the resulting incongruities.

A contemporary manifestation of this widespread desire to delight in the humour of incongruities in traditional tales is found in the burgeoning commercial industry of cinematic animation which thrives upon adaptations of classic children's tales. As with the literary format, the offerings found in the cinemas and on television are characterised by great variations in quality. In the context of Hollywood, the concept of folktales as 'tales for the people' is interpreted literally, and many of the cinematic modulations of the tales are aimed directly at market researchers' predictions concerning what will bring joy to the marketplace.

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Hence, for example, those entrusted with 'Disneyfying' the classic tales have given cute names to the Seven Dwarfs, a happy ending to *The Little Mermaid*, and an Oscar-winning soundtrack to *Beauty and the Beast*. They have also nurtured a generation of children who identify the voice of the genie in *Aladdin* with that of the well known screen comedian Robin Williams, which is a little confusing as he also played the role of a middle-aged Peter Pan in the <u>Captain Hook</u> movie.

Nevertheless, for all its apparent irreverence and insensitivity, Hollywood's seeming fixation with harnessing the traditional folktales for commercial gain is not entirely without its upside. The positive side-effect of these developments in the entertainment industry is that for the modulated experience to be effective the concept of modulation must be embraced by the public at large. The result has been a widespread resurgence of interest in folktales by Hollywood's consumer market. While the focus of this interest has not delighted purists because it veers towards sensationalism, there is no disputing that Hollywood has created a wide audience with an offbeat fascination for the classic tale and its possibilities for entertainment. This inevitably leads us to consider the case for populism, and to ask the perennial questions concerning the advisability of Mohamed journeying to the mountain. In this respect, arguments emphasizing the passivity of the audiovisual experience in contemporizing the classic tales are worth noting but not entirely valid. The advent of electronic technology has enhanced and extended this trend in contemporizing folktales by introducing interactive performance dimensions. As a result, children are empowered to harness CD-ROM technology to participate in interactive computer games based on the plots of the classic tales. If they play their cards right, they may even experience the 'virtual-reality' equivalent of flying off to Never-Never Land with *Peter Pan*.

Traditionally, children have been thought of as the chief consumers of the Westernized classic tale. Consequently, when the commercial popularization of modulations of the classic tales ushered in the neo-folktale revival, literary output has also been directed mainly at children in publications such as Dahl's <u>Revolting rhymes</u> and Wilson's <u>There's a wolf in my pudding</u>. Consumerism, however, holds the key. As a result of market demands, the content of a fair proportion of the humorously modified traditional tales is directed at adult readership but does

not exclude precocious children of all ages. In fact, many of James Thurber's celebrated fables of the 1950's that stand out as landmarks in this tradition were originally published in the distinctly adult New Yorker magazine. Thurber's tales accompanied by his own humorous sketches contain an imaginative mixture of pure farce and sophisticated nuance, and were clearly designed for a 'crossover' audience of both children and adults.

More recently, adult audiences have been targeted specifically by the introduction of topical approaches such as James Finn Garner's Politically correct bedtime stories in which the author establishes an 'adult' tone in the preface by drolly explaining that the wording of the book's title was selected in order to avoid the *cliché* 'fairy stories' lest it should be considered 'homophobic'. The chief merit of Garner's collection of recast traditional folktales is 'the way he tells it', as evidenced in modified titles such as The Three Codependent Goats Gruff, as well as new insights into *Snow White*'s relationship with the seven 'vertically challenged men'. However, for all the sustained irony and stylish humour of Garner's approach, the reflective reviewer is left with certain question marks concerning the traditional folktale and its ongoing status in the oral tradition.

On the one hand, Garner's meticulous attention to the originals leaves an initial impression that the publication is a humorous monument to the heritage of folklore. On the other hand, the author's adroit reworking of the traditional tales is essentially congruent with the post-modern predilection for style over substance, and some readers may feel that the irreverent tone constitutes a cynicism towards the values inherent in the tales and their role in cultural transmission. However, a third view is perhaps more pertinent than the other two. This is that Garner's collection has **both** style and substance, and is first and foremost a social satire directed at the prevailing hysteria surrounding 'political correctness'. Garner's recast stories are rhymes for the times that cheerfully use the traditional tale as a stylish commercial vehicle for humorous social comment. Although the author's *modus operandi* may offend folktale purists, Garner's central concern may **not** be a critique of the values inherent in the tales but instead may be the expedient use of poetic licence to adapt the tales as the medium for his message.

The oral tradition of using humour to take the edge off social criticism is probably as old as storytelling itself, and it has a diverse and well-documented history. Amongst the major players are renowned literary icons such as Rabelais, Cervantes and Pope, as well as a host of social satirists through the decades. Of relevance in the contemporary African literary context are well-established popular works such as Chinua Achebe's penetrating Sixties satire of African politics, <u>A man of the people</u>, as well as Tom Sharpe's novels about apartheid South Africa, <u>Riotous assembly</u> and <u>Indecent exposure</u>.

By contrast, Garner's <u>Politically correct bedtime tales</u> represents a stylish but minor contribution to an oral tradition in which humour forms the basis for presenting relatively nonconfrontational social criticism. In Garner's case, the use of the folktale as the vehicle is commercially inspirational because the content of the tales combine contextual accessibility with emotive familiarity. The tales have an appeal to a wide and mainly adult readership with a nostalgic and arguably retentive attitude towards the literary roots of childhood. Furthermore, the satirical effect of injecting 'political correctness' into time-honoured plots is whimsical enough to appeal to mature readers with a sense of oral tradition.

Humour across the verbal-nonverbal divide

The oral tradition of using humour as the basis of incisive social comment applies on a universal level to ordinary folk in conversation, as well as to 'performance artists' such as traditional tale-tellers, court jesters and their contemporary Western counterparts who include 'stand-up comics' telling jokes and politicians making speeches. Newspaper cartoonists, for example, contrive to use illustrations to portray relatively radical sociopolitical ideas humorously, thereby circumventing the more confrontational route of presenting messages in words only. In view of the vast differences between the respective communication processes pertaining to the reception of words and pictorial material, comparisons across the verbal-nonverbal divide are generally odious. Statements such as 'A picture is worth a thousand words' may be fair comment as hyperbole but definitely betray muddled thinking when taken less figuratively.

The dichotomy between pictures and written words stems from the fundamental differences between the media of communication involved. Written words are unidimensional in the sense that they are presented in textual form and must be decoded by readers who assume the onus of responsibility in the reception process through their proactive roles in the act of reading. By contrast, the multidimensional nature of the graphics and messages within cartoons produces a qualitatively different set of communication dynamics from those pertaining to the reception of text. Cartoons contain visual cues that telegraph the cartoonist's message thereby modifying the nature of the proactivity demanded of the receiver to consummate the reception process. The result is that cartoons effectively provide conditions that shift some of the onus of responsibility in the reception process from the receiver by increasing visual immediacy and decreasing dependence on the act of reading. In spite of this, the locus of control still remains predominantly with the receiver who may accept or reject the cartoonist's efforts on the basis of personal conclusions concerning the cartoon's content.

The communication process places demands on a diverse range of situational factors that include the receiver's predispositions and attitudes towards the sender, as well as the sender's perceptions of the receiver from available feedback. Inevitably, the graphic communicator has an initial advantage over the wordsmith in respect of the immediacy of message's impact on the receiver of the communication. Furthermore, the nature of the cartoonists' genre offers inherent features that provide the artist with a potential advantage over the writer in evoking humour. Whereas the humorous writer has the headline and lead-in sentence, the cartoonist has the whole picture. Cartoons are more immediately accessible because visual perception of pictorial material operates on a holistic level, as compared with the more fragmentary perceptual process involved in the decoding of words in text. Furthermore, the illustrator is usually able to preempt the reception of humour by providing a variety of comical visual cues (such as caricature sketches of well-known public figures) that predispose the receiver's attitudes towards the content prior to achieving the insight required to 'catch' the joke.

The appearance of comical sketches or caricatures amidst newspaper text tends to set the tone for relaxation that is reinforced by the prior development of a communicational relationship between the regular reader and the cartoonist. Usually, this relationship is based on hedonism,

as readers are conditioned by the anticipation of pleasure through the expectation of achieving a gratifying response to the cartoon. The development of a 'mindset' or predisposition on the part of the receiver of a cartoon facilitates a climate in which the cartoon is usually approached with expectations of the undemanding enjoyment of topical lampooning. In addition to taking advantage of the receivers' predispositions towards a humorous response, the art of the cartoonist is generally to obtain the desired spontaneous response by minimizing the required investments of time and intellectual effort on the part of the receiver. The relatively nonthreatening climate pervading the cartoon format probably contributes significantly to the reason why cartoons are generally considered less offensive than text with either the same or far milder messages.

The art of sociopolitically-conscious cartooning has a relatively well developed historical tradition in which generations of cartoonists have operated effectively in an area of communication across the so-called 'verbal-nonverbal divide'. The cartoon genre has played significant roles in national newspapers and well-known publications such as <u>Punch</u>, <u>Private Eye</u>, and <u>National Lampoon</u> in reflecting social attitudes in various contexts and in a variety of styles. In addition to the conventional 'single-sketch' sociopolitical cartoon that is a standard feature in most newspapers, a more recent addition to this tradition has been the topical sociopolitical comic strip that takes advantage of the fact that many members of its audience have been nurtured on a diet of Walt Disney and DC comics rather than the Brothers Grimm. To some extent, cartoonists using the cartoon strip format as a vehicle for the sociopolitical message enjoy the advantage of appearing alongside nonthreatening and largely apolitical comic-strips such as *Dagwood*, *Peanuts* or the *Flintstones*. Many of the newspapers' adult readers will have been conditioned since childhood to the relaxed and jolly atmosphere associated with the experience of comic-strips, and the policy of newspapers to group comic-strips together has resulted in the apolitical syndicated strips becoming the unwitting allies of the cuckoo in the nest. In many cases, familiarity breeds content with the result that tensions are eased and defences are lowered for the potential reception of communication with content that in other circumstances may be considered to be threatening.

In South Africa, for example, the immensely popular *Madam and Eve* comic strip series takes fairly broad satirical swipes at a wide range of controversial topical issues to the obvious delight of an audience sensitized to a social environment in which the moral high ground of political correctness is well trodden. In the case of *Madam and Eve*, both the comic strip format and the sympathetic way in which the characters are drawn are important qualitative factors enabling the cartoonists to convey their message to a relatively relaxed and positively receptive audience. The cartoons' form and treatment decreases tensions by predisposing the audience to the reception of a humorous message that cartoonists are able to convey within a relatively nonconfrontational climate. Clearly, the graphic medium for delivering the cartoon's message is integral to the gestalt of the message itself. The implications for reception theory are that the medium of the message prejudices the nature of the relationship between sender and receiver in the communication process.

In essence, words are a neutral medium whereas cartoons introduce observer bias by preparing the audience for humour. On the one hand, there is little other than the title to predispose the reader to the humour in a word-based textual medium such as Spike Milligan's <u>Puckoon.</u> On the other hand, the immediacy of the graphics-based cartoon medium predisposes the audience to the reception of the humour in the cartoonists' message, whilst simultaneously desensitizing the audience from elements of message that otherwise may have been considered confrontational. These contrasting scenarios call to question established notions concerning the relationship between the medium and the content of the message in the communication process. Clearly, the reality of the reception dynamics of communication processes is more complex than Marshall McLuhan's sweeping generalisation that 'the medium **is** the message' would suggest, however those ignoring the significance of the medium are at peril. While there is no doubt that the medium is an integral aspect of the *'geste'* of cartoon communication, there is equal certainty that cartoonists are the orchestrators of a process in which the content of the message is conceived in empathy with the target audience.

Humour in the communication process

A comparative study of the communication processes involved in the transmission of textual words and graphics provides some insight into the complexity of the elements and mechanisms operating in communication processes in general. The fact that text and graphics are 'hard copy' captive sources that can be perused and analysed at the convenience of the analyst is a clear indication of the relatively greater complexity inherent in the process of analysing behaviour representing aspects of the dimension of oral performance with its multidimensional shades of meaning for both sender and receiver.

Human performance is an elusive phenomenon that defies replication, and the methodological trials of human scientists in this particular field are a tapestry of frustration. Granted, the researcher has recourse to traditional sources such as textual transcripts of the overt verbal transmission of the oral performer, and perhaps photographs or sketches of aspects of the oral performance. Furthermore, technological advances have placed audiovisual media such as video technology at the disposal of the human scientist for the purpose of recording human behaviour. Prospects of developing some meaningful source material on aspects of orality have been encouraging, but the results are usually an approximation rather than replication of the oral performance under scrutiny. Nevertheless, researchers in this field have a tradition of being thankful for small mercies, and need all the help they can get, however imperfect.

A primary task of the human scientist is to apply the scientific method to the selected area of focus in order to systematically examine the available evidence that may permit relatively reliable and valid conclusions concerning these aspects of human behaviour. In this context, humour arising from the performance dimension may be viewed in terms of the perspective of phenomenological functionalism that individualises each communication situation in terms of an existential act of creation. In this respect, the humour created within the communication process is perceived as residing in a dynamic fusion of the performance elements of 'the way you **tell** it' with 'the way you **hear** it'. It should be noted that in view of the poetic licence with which the specific terms 'tell' and 'hear' are used to include related aspects such as

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'write' and 'read', it would be more appropriate to substitute them with the more academically acceptable, generalised terms 'send' and 'receive' respectively.

Humour may be viewed from a holistic perspective as the outcome of a communication process that may be affected by a variety of variables. In this sense, humour is created under suitable conditions by the conjunction of a sender (who, for example, may be a storyteller, author, dancer, mime artist or cartoonist) and a receiver (who, for example, may be an observer or listener, or both). There may also be cases, as in *reparteé*, where individuals are active participants in a dynamic interactive process in alternating roles of sender and receiver. This humorous interaction may occur as part of a performance observed by a nonparticipating audience, or it may involve a performer who initiates audience participation as a strategy to create opportunities for enhancing a humorous performance.

The concept of humour is too complex to be encapsulated in a 'quick-fix' definition, which in some degree accounts for the popularity of the phenomenological functionalist perspective. Few would dispute the view that humour is evoked as a state of arousal that arises from a perception formed within the dynamism of the communication process. The arousal of a humorous disposition or attitude in the reception of a message signifies the existence of a dynamic affective perspective of reality. As such, humour is a qualitative phenomenon that defies quantification, and its quality is dependent upon a number of factors that are relevant to the reception process. For example, the degree of behavioural activity and passivity of the protagonists in the process varies according to the nature of the humorous communication involved, as does the degree of verbal and nonverbal input. However, the performance of humour cannot be measured in words or deeds. In this respect, the vast comedic legacy of the era of silent movies provides evidence in the flickering monochromatic images of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and others that 'the way you **tell** it' did not necessarily have to be verbal or textual.

One of the more enlightening of the many dictionary definitions of humour is that it is the 'character of a complex situation exciting joyful, and in the main quiet laughter either directly, through sympathy, or through empathy' (Drever, 1964:123). This approach from a so-called

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'dictionary of psychology' alludes to the consensus view that laughter often represents a release of tension rather than a sense of humour, and informs us that humour is 'excited' as joy obtained from sympathy or empathy. This observation appears to be corroborated by a random survey of other dictionary definitions of 'humour' which reveals that lexicographers, along with human scientists, are of the consensus that the links between the sense of humour and the act of laughter are tenuous. The general view is that humour is no mere laughing matter, but is best described in terms of a state of mind created in particular situations under particular circumstances. However, the survey also indicates that less certainty can be attached to explanations concerning the mainsprings of the nature of this humorous evocation of joy.

Etiological perspectives

These insights into the nature of humorous communication signify the need for a consideration of humour from a standpoint beyond the etiological perspectives offered by phenomenological functionalism. In this respect, a review of academic literature indicates that three basic schools of thought predominate, and that while they have intrinsic differences, they are not entirely mutually exclusive. Firstly, the superiority theories emphasize that pleasure derived from the misfortunes of others appears to bring a sense of security and well being, particularly if the misfortune concerned is not too serious. In this respect, the Germans have given the world the term 'schadenfreude' which literally means 'joy from damage'; while the French speak of 'rire jaune', the rueful 'yellow laughter' evoked within those suffering misfortune.

Secondly, relief theories emphasize the laughter response as a mechanism that brings a release of tension. Freudian theorists in this category indicate that the process of releasing tensions through laughter may have the cathartic effect of displacing latent aggression. A familiar example of this category is the excessive merriment derived from a group of suppressed children when the strict schoolmaster releases their tension by making a humorous remark. Further examples of the relief theory of humour relate to Freudian defence mechanism theories. Hence, for example, the process of reaction formation is said to occur when a person is seen as releasing tension by reacting in a way that is the antithesis of expectations, such as in hysterical laughter as a response to hearing sad news.

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Thirdly, incongruity theories generally postulate that humour is derived from perceptions or insights concerning unexpected phenomena under conditions that are conducive to humour. The latter is probably the most common type of so-called 'adult' humour, and generally involves an element of surprise or an unexpected twist to a tale. Into this category falls the so-called 'inverted' traditional tales where the humour stems largely from unexpected changes to the anticipated plots, characters, locations and themes of traditional tales. A well-known example is provided in Roald Dahl's Revolting rhymes when Little Red Riding Hood removes a revolver from her knickers and 'terminates' the wolf without mercy. Another interesting example of this category is Rapunzel's revenge: fairy tales for feminists which is collection of traditional tales that have been modified to delight feminists of all ages. Both examples derive their humour largely from incongruity laced heavily with 'Schadenfreude' as the traditional tales are twisted to humorous effect, and readers are invited to delight in damage done to the characters clearly identified as being deserving of receiving their comeuppances.

The broad etiological spectrum associated with humour suggests that we are dealing with a social phenomenon characterised very much by its diversity. As a consequence, 'humour' has become a generic label applied to many aspects of communication behaviour which may occur in an almost infinite variety of settings. Hence, for example, humour may be formalised in the recounting of oral or literary jokes in which the intention to entertain is announced, thereby predisposing the receiver to a state of humorous arousal. On the other hand, humour may creep informally into varying oral and literary situations, such as for example when humour filters slowly into a lengthy discourse, or when it is evoked in an instant with a voice inflection or the raising of an eyebrow. It is difficult to identify a common thread that runs through all humour, other than that it is a state of arousal created in the phenomenological moment and that it involves a 'connection' with the individual's perspective of reality which in turn involves a measure of understanding or insight.

The degree of understanding that lies behind the evocation of humour appears to have an empathetic base that encompasses a variety of emotional implications that may range from the sublime to the ridiculous. Shakespeare, for example, in the finest bittersweet tradition, used humour to heighten the sublime tragedy of his great literary works *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and

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Hamlet, thereby providing almost textbook endorsement of the case of relief theorists. However, at the other end of the scale, the TV comedian Gerry Seinfeld humorously appeals to our collective sense of the ridiculously incongruous by enquiring quizzically whether Bozo the Clown was so-named in order to distinguish him from Bozo the Accountant or Bozo the Brain Surgeon.

Conclusion

The task of getting to grips with the essence of humour is no laughing matter. The phenomenon of humour is created as the product of a communication process that starts with 'the way you tell it' and is fulfilled by 'the way that you see it'. An active receiver in this process perceives a message as being humourous by relating it to the intrapersonal context of his or her own individualized world of experience. Likewise, each person's so-called 'sense' of humour is a state of mind that signifies an individualized quality of receptivity to incoming messages. As an intrinsic state, it is influenced by the way that the individual is impacted by a wide range of qualitative factors which may be intrinsic (for example, worry, illness or hunger) or extrinsic (for example, noise or visual distractions). Humour, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, and must be respected for its complexity.

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Appendix D

Revolting rhymes: humour as a subversive activity in children's literature

by Lawrence Gordon

REVOLTING RHYMES: HUMOUR AS A SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITY IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

by Lawrence Gordon

A sense of humour

Over fifty years before Shakespeare conceived his first dramas, the French humorist Francois Rabelais proclaimed with remarkable insight that '*le rire est le propre de l'homme*', thereby affirming his belief that laughter was a property peculiar to humankind. Laughter is an overt expression of mirth popularly associated with conceptions of humour. Laughter is also the source of popular misconceptions concerning humour because laughter is frequently a response that does not signify a joyous insight into the nature of humanity. Nevertheless, the so-called 'sense of humour' is highly esteemed as an essential prerequisite for human survival amidst the pressures and demands of life in highly complex post-industrial societies.

Humour is a leveller that facilitates a social climate in which a shared experience allows human beings to bond in spite of their differences. Humour defuses tensions by providing a platform on which individuals preserve their own sanity whilst also cementing human relationships. A 'sense of humour' is a highly valued personal and social asset in contemporary society for both enjoying life as well as coping with it. This standpoint is reinforced by the popular belief that humour implies insight into the human psyche because it stems from a sense of humanity that is the mark of a sympathetic response to the human condition. Not surprisingly, a sense of humour is considered a highly desirable personal characteristic.

This desirability results in the common practice of confusing behavioural characteristics (e.g. repeated laughter) with the cognitive capacity to make humorous insights concerning the human condition. Furthermore, humour (like love) is associated with emotional warmth and understanding, and many people regard these qualities more highly than less emotive and more singular pursuits such as skill in abstract reasoning. Most people willingly admit to

human frailties such as being impractical or unambitious or even unintelligent, but very few admit to lacking a sense of humour.

Humour and humanity

With a collective sense of satisfied anticipation, millions of children and young-at-heart adults have witnessed a recurring in-joke on the popular Star Trek television series over the past twenty-five years. The familiar scenario is that the human hero Captain Kirk (William Shatner) passes a humorous remark that puzzles the extraterrestrial super-intelligent Vulcan Captain Spock (Leonard Nimoy with elongated false ears). There is that customary pregnant silence as the joke falls flat, while the intellectually superior Spock looks quizzical, and finally mutters in confusion: 'Humour - it is a difficult concept. It is not logical' (12 : 232).

This response induces conjugal warmth within the global village as electronic cave dwellers everywhere share yet another affirmation that being clever is not all there is to life. Spock may be of sound moral fibre and a genius, **but** he is not human. He does not possess that magical 'sense of humour' that virtually all human beings claim as a birthright. It is the latter quality that kindles a sense of brinkmanship that enables the vast Star Trek audience to feel comfortable with the outsider Spock's unquestionably superior intellectual capabilities.

Emotional warmth is associated with what is commonly referred to as a 'sense of humour', and both are highly valued as 'human' traits. In the same way as Spock's alien origins are characterised by his inability to 'see' the joke, there is also an implicit belief that our own humanity is somehow measured by the depth of our humorous insights. The mature person is one who can rise above the immediacies of personal problems, and 'see the funny side'. A sense of humour is considered an important element of personal and social development as it allows the individual to cope with the human frailties of self and others.

Human frailty and humour are inextricable. It has been said almost to the point of cliché that: 'To err is to be human', and there seems to be a universal acknowledgement that human frailty

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is an acceptable and normal human characteristic. Certainly, it is written into Western belief systems that man is basically a humble sinner because he is human and not a god, and that the meek shall inherit the earth. The socially acceptable face of Western man's self-image is founded on the Christian ethics of humility and tolerance. On the surface at least, this perspective traditionally aggrandizes the virtues of modesty and concern for others, while deploring inordinate self preoccupation as manifested in the so-called 'inflated ego'. An abiding defect usually attributed to the latter is a nonexistent sense of humour - perhaps the unkindest cut of all!

John Donne's observation that: 'No man is an island' is a central consideration in a social climate in which the development of a sense of humour is part of an extended awareness of others in relation to ourselves. Concepts of humour are rooted in a process of identification with others as individuals interpret the nature of human behaviour. Human sympathy derives from empathy towards others, and humour is the result of perceptions derived from a contagion of feelings that have been referred to as 'primitive passive sympathy' (4 : 290). As such, humour is a qualitative response deriving from a state of 'being human'. Humour is man's humanity to man.

Defining humour

Precise and satisfying definitions of 'humour' are hard to find. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (2 : 592), for example, uses rather unsatisfactory terms such as 'facetiousness', 'comicality' and 'jocose imagination'. It is more useful to follow the lead provided by the use of 'humour' as a verb that implies the act of indulging or gratifying another's pleasure. This gives an indication of the empathetic basis of humour that is so evident in the distinction made between the meanings of humour and wit as being primarily a difference between heart and head. Wit is generally regarded as a more cerebral, less sympathetic and therefore more detached mechanism. By contrast, humour is characterised as relying less on intelligent wordplay but more on the emotional well being derived from insights into incongruencies in human behaviour.

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The value of the distinction between humour and wit is also enlightening when considering allied terminology such as 'comedy' or 'farce'. These terms may be regarded as denoting forms or vehicles in which humour may appear as a device or mechanism. Therefore, for example, a critic may refer to the 'lack of genuine humour' in a 'weak comedy' or 'poorly contrived farce'. On the other hand, the mechanism of humour may be employed tellingly to heighten the impact of a tragedy, as for example in Shakespeare's dramatic use of the gatekeeper scene in <u>Macbeth</u>. In a similar respect, the tragic atmosphere of <u>King Lear</u> is heightened by the sad humour in the old king's ramblings. Humour has many faces but here it has the sigh of *'la doce vita'*, the bitter sweetness of human frailties.

The use of humour in children's literature is perhaps in most cases less sublime, but common threads can be identified. Authors using humour as a device in children's literature usually derive a sense of 'funniness' from an ability to empathize with their intended audience as receivers of textual communication. These insights deriving from 'primitive passive sympathy' are the basis by which the author interprets the attitudes and cultural values of potential readers of the work. The author's insights into the nature of human behaviour under certain conditions and in certain situations are reflected intrinsically in the treatment of aspects such as character, plot, theme and setting.

Humorous subversions

Literary tradition cannot be ignored. Authors of fiction write within the context of what Leavis once called 'the great tradition'. This awareness of past and contemporary performance in the field extends to practising authors of children's literature where the classic folktale also has a 'great tradition'. Humour is also a vital ingredient of children's books, but is a device used pervasively across the genres with the result that many of the more humorous children's books are not in fact categorised as 'children's humour'. In practice, the majority of books described as 'children's humour' are based on the 'situation comedy' (e.g. the farmer and his wife exchange roles for the day), and the humour derives from the author's treatment of the central dilemma. In recent times, the label of 'humour' has become identified strongly

with the sub-genre known in the literary circles as the 'subverted text'. The appeal of this sub-genre to both adults and children has led to it rapidly becoming a well-patronised source of revenue in the children's book trade.

The so-called 'modulated' or subverted texts in children's literature refer to manipulations of established literary models. Godwin (9 : 303) indicates that 'modulation' refers to any such manipulations, whereas 'subversion' refers to a 'more radical overturning of prior text, meaning or generic convention'. This form of literary subversive activity is founded in the post-modernist tradition of reevaluating both function and form. The result is that the structure and function of the traditional tales are reformulated to varying degrees as part of the creative writing process. This involves a process of reconstruction and development of the tale, and is far more than merely a case of a stylistic or cosmetic updating of the text.

Reactions to textual humour are symptoms of pleasurable physiological release aroused by an insight that an unexpected turn of textual events has subverted the readers' expectations. This may involve the use of unexpected wordplay, as in Garner's 'politically correct' perspectives of the emperor who was not essentially naked *per se* but merely endorsing a clothing-optional lifestyle. However, usually the unexpected textual events involve radical plot subversions such as in Roald Dahl's <u>Revolting rhymes</u> where Red Riding Hood shoots the wolf, or in Anne Sharpe's <u>Not so little Red Riding Hood</u> (18 : 324-7) where the heroine has a black belt in karate and flattens the wolf without ceremony.

The elementary basis of the humour in the subverted text lies in the irony perceived by the audience initiated to the original text prior to its subversion. In a sense, the effect on the reader is a sort of painless 'future shock' with a smile. The events that are anticipated do not in fact transpire as the reader's expectations are pleasurably subverted. Godwin (9 : 299) refers to this as irony perceived by an 'inner circle' of readers who recognise textual incongruities in terms of the conventions established by a prior model.

An oft-quoted example is Roald Dahl's undermining of the traditional Little Red Riding Hood plot conventions by having the far-from-innocent Miss Riding Hood use a lethal weapon to

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eliminate the wolf. Furthermore later in the anthology, the redoubtable Miss Hood, her appetite whetted by her first kill, demonstrates all the hallmarks of a psychopathic killer. She extends her subversive activities in new directions. Firstly she unhesitatingly eliminates another wolf who had been bothering the three little pigs, and secondly both figuratively and literally bags the last surviving pig as well.

> Once more the maiden's eyelid flickers.
> She draws the pistol from her knickers.
> Once more, she hits the vital spot,
> And kills him with a single shot.
>
> Pig, peeping through the window, stood
> And yelled, 'Well done, Miss Riding Hood!'
>
> Ah Piglet, you must never trust
> Young ladies from the upper crust.
> For now, Miss Riding Hood, one notes,
> Not only has *two* wolfskin coats,
> But when she goes from place to place,
> She has a **PIGSKIN TRAVELLING CASE**.   (3 : 47)

The politics of entitlement

With rather heavy academic licence, the phraseology used in the title of this paper borrows from two sources. The first and more conspicuous is 'Revolting rhymes' drawn directly from the title of Dahl's anthology of 'twisted tales', while the second concerns the reference to 'humour as a subversive activity' found in the subtitle of this paper. This phrase is borrowed from the title of Postman & Weingartner's radical sixties publication Teaching as a subversive activity in which the authors express their vehement criticism of the prevailing American teaching 'establishment' and urge a more radical approach based on overturning traditional educational conventions. In many ways, this post-modernist desire to critically examine structures and functions rather than simply blindly accept past conventions out of

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reverence for their longevity is reflected in the subversive activities of the authors of subverted tales. This spirit is found rather pointedly in Dahl's bland irreverence. It also resides in the greater subtlety of more thought-provoking and more innovative essays than Dahl's within the sub-genre of the subverted classic children's tale, such as for example in the works of Tomi Ungerer, and Philippe Dumas and Boris Moissard.

However, whatever may be said of the lack of subtlety and twisted logic of the content of Dahl's book, there is no doubt that the title is a semantic *tour de force*. 'Revolting' is popularly used to signify extreme distaste but may be granted a positive connotation when used colloquially with a humorous cue. Little encouragement is needed to understand the playfully conspiratorial inflections in phrases such as 'How wickedly hilarious!' or 'How delightfully revolting!', both having very British nudge-nudge wink-wink cues to shared humour. In this sense, the term 'revolting' probably accurately describes the popular perception of Dahl's so-called 'devilish' sense of black humour that combines elements of the macabre with an air of subversiveness.

However, there is more to the phrase 'revolting rhymes' than the implication of a collection of stylishly distasteful humorous tales. 'Revolting' derives from 'revolt' that means to overturn or subvert, and describes what Dahl does in subverting traditional folktales to produce a humorous response from readers who find his plot details at odds with their conventional literary expectations. The reader is called upon to embrace the subversive activity by joining the 'revolt' and taking pleasure in the unexpected. An intimate conspiracy is forged between author and reader with the aim of both having fun in bringing down the status quo which is after all fair game because it is a folktale that belongs to the people. This is a literary *toyi-toyi* with verbal toys.

A further point of irony in Dahl's title is the use of the term 'rhymes' that connotes a modest literary form of little intellectual significance, as used in the phrases: 'nursery rhymes' or 'rhymes for the times'. Irony rests in the fact that Dahl's recasting of the classic tales cannot simply be dismissed as 'rhymes' that some may find revolting. In essence, Dahl has modified the conventional plots to suit the times. Dahl's Red Riding Hood is at first glance the modern

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woman, defending her honour and dealing uncompromisingly with the wolf. However, in Dahl's very next story, <u>The three little pigs</u>, the intrepid Miss Hood flatters to deceive, when she emerges as a seemingly assertive feminist role model extending a handgun of friendship to the male (chauvinist?) pig who is destined to become her travel bag. These little macabre touches involve modern plot subversions that journalists would currently describe as 'pure Hollywood', as testimony of their populist appeal.

Dahl's dialectic, in which textual conventions are undermined and new structures created, is generally aimed at arousing laughter while at the same time demonstrating a little heavy handedly that 'crime does not pay'. The humour at the base of these functions resides in Dahl's cheerful assault on the reader's textual expectations. This pleasurable enough process is made all the more painless by Quentin Blake's appropriate cartoon-style illustrations that clearly signpost the author's devilish intentions. Between them, Dahl and Blake succeed in removing all the tension from any future shocks within the text. The readers anticipate the 'shocking' humour on the horizon.

Typecasting the subversive activities

The subverted tale has distinctive literary characteristics. The mechanisms of subversive activity in this sub-genre can be classified in terms of the aspects that are subverted. The following categories pertain:

i) **plot** subversion in which the author alters plot elements as in Tomi Ungerer's inventive version in which Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf elope and find conjugal bliss;

ii) **character** subversion in which the humour resides in the fact that the personality of the characters has changed radically (such as Dahl's gun-toting Miss Hood), or the characters themselves are subverted (such as in Ahlberg & McNaughton's <u>Big bad pig</u> that gives sympathetic treatment to the three little wolves);

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iii) **setting** subversion in which humour derives from a re-creation of the setting as in French's stylish updated account of <u>Snow White in New York</u>;

iv) **standpoint** subversion in which the main thrust of the humour stems from a changed viewpoint in the retelling of the story from a new angle, as in Scieszka's device in using A. Wolf as narrator in telling <u>The true story of the three little pigs</u>;

v) **theme** subversion in which the underlying theme of the tale is humorously subverted so that the thrust of the tale receives new meaning, as in the selected series of tales under the title <u>Rapunzel's revenge : fairy tales for feminists</u> that is self explanatory; and

vi) **style** subversion in which the literary style of the work is subverted to achieve a humorous effect as in James Finn Garner's <u>Politically correct bedtime stories</u> in which the pseudointellectual tone parodies the simplicity of the original versions of the classic tales (e.g. 'Snow White and the seven vertically challenged men').

These mechanisms of subversive activity in children's literature are of course not mutually exclusive. For example, Sciexzka's <u>The true story of the three little pigs by A. Wolf</u> employs a range of interesting plot, setting and theme subversions while being told from the Wolf's perspective. The publication also has a lively Runyonesque stylistic tone as befits a 'hard luck' tale told by an imprisoned wolf indignantly insisting that he was 'framed'.

Similarly, Fiona French's <u>Snow White in New York</u> not only enjoys a downtown Manhattan setting, but also has interestingly understated plot and character innovations such as the wicked queen being a ruthless socialite and the seven vertically challenged men as comprising a jazz band who (in the spirit of the original tale) accept Snow White at face value and are instrumental in her instant success as a night club singer. The heroine's prince charming is the dashing New York Time's society page reporter who puts her on the front page, thereby igniting the ire of her explosive step mother. The modernised plot details run true to theme, and the story ends with a wedding and a sunset. French's tale is subverted primarily on the level of setting (i.e. the modern concrete jungle replaces the traditional dark woods).

Dahl's 'revolting rhymes' have an interesting modulation in the didactic literary style that ultimately effects a standpoint subversion. Dahl uses the aside to the audience as a feature of his informal literary style, taking readers into his confidence, and at times conspiring with them as to the fate of characters whom he intends to punish. Of Goldilocks, Dahl (3 : 29) says:

> This famous wicked little tale
> Should never have been put on sale.
> It is a mystery to me
> Why loving parents cannot see
> That this is actually a book
> About a brazen little crook.
> Had I the chance I wouldn't fail
> To clap young Goldilocks in jail.

The eye of the beholder

The process of contextualisation is a focal concept in determining the nature of humour as the product of the reception dynamics of experiencing children's literature. The subverted text draws its sources of humour from the overturning of the expectations brought to the reading experience by the readers themselves.

The aetiology of the humorous reading experience is difficult to encapsulate in metacommunicational formulae. However, it may be safely assumed that humour (like beauty) is in the eye of the beholder. The reception of textual humour requires reading activity that enhances the hedonic or pleasure-orientated experience, and the phenomenon of humour is created as a product of the reading experience. Contextualisation is the key in a phenomenological process the active receiver 'sees' the humour within the intrapersonal context of his or her own literary background and personal value system.

Three fundamental humour theories tend to predominant. Firstly, the so-called superiority theory, typified by the German term '*Schadenfreude*' (i.e. malicious glee), is generally based

on the pleasure derived from the misfortune of others that brings a sense of security. Secondly, the so-called incongruity theories are based on the idea that humour stems from insights deriving from perceptions of unexpected phenomena. Thirdly, the so-called relief theories are chiefly Freudian in origin, and focus on the view that laughter affords a release of tension and has a cathartic effect that cleanses aggressive instincts.

Attention should also be given to reasons for the failure of receivers to see humour in texts obviously perceived by authors as 'humorous'. Dahl's subversions are viewed with horror by purists wishing to preserve the status quo, and leave others unsmiling for a variety of reasons. There is no doubt that the perception of humour (or lack of it) within the reading experience resides in the unique reception dynamics with which each reader encounters the text. For example, the sophisticated folktale specialist would immediately recognise Dahl's version as a stylish seventies reworking of James Thurber's shorter 1939 version in which Little Red 'took an automatic out of her basket and shot the wolf dead' (18 : 229). But the derivativeness of the plot may not be the only reason Dahl's version of <u>Little Red Riding Hood</u> has been seen as lacking in humour. Some regard the tale as being distasteful in the extreme for a variety of reasons, not the least being the unsympathetic treatment of Miss Hood or indeed the fact that the tale has been perceived as a monument to specie-ism, insensitively perpetuated by Dahl. Nevertheless, as Little Red Riding Hood has proved to be a remarkably adaptable folktale that has survived in many forms and with coats of many colours.

In Frank Yipes' scholarly treatise on Red Riding Hood, many versions (some subversions) of this folktale are presented with varying plot resolutions, including Tomi Ungerer's inventive version in which Little Red and the wolf elope and find conjugal bliss (18 : 261-4). Apart from the fact that this tale is species-friendly and affirms the concept of a 'suspension of belief' as a dominant feature of the author-reader relationship in the 'once-upon-a-time' context, it also imaginatively captures the whimsical air of French humour. One imagines that if Ungerer were asked to account for his tale's denouement, he would probably smile and say: 'If a dog can laugh and a cow can jump over the moon, then surely a wolf can marry the girl of his dreams'.

A rhyme for all times

The survival of folktales through the ages is a fascinating phenomenon. There was a time when the almost uncontrollable drive towards automation seemed to threaten the very existence of print media. In the aftermath of publications by Lancaster and others concerning the looming 'paperless society', there was a spate of journal articles focussing on the imminent demise of the book. To some extent, a similar scenario pertains in respect of the classic tale that must endure the onslaughts of both intrinsic and extrinsic pressures.

Extrinsically, the so-called 'media explosion' has threatened the textual basis of classic tales by placing them in a new audiovisual dimension through the growth of the film and videotape and audiotape industries. The trend, has been extended into an interactional dimension in which children may now use CD-ROM technology to participate in computer games based on the plots of the classic tales.

Intrinsically, modulations of many sorts have subversive effects on traditional aspects of classic tales. Not least among these are media intrusions such as the 'Disneyfication' of the classic tales. This has extended far beyond homely practices such as giving cute names to the Seven Dwarfs. It involves modifying plots to produce happy endings as in 'The Little Mermaid', and it involves tampering with the story to provide opportunities to include enough musical items to compile an LP for audio-disc or CD marketing as in 'Beauty and the Beast'. We also have a generation of children who think that Captain Hook looks like Dustin Hoffmann, and that the genie in Alladin sounds like Robin Williams.

The unparalleled increase in the popularity of subverted folktales seems to beg the question as to whether this phenomenon threatens the survival of classic folktales. Purists who seek to preserve the integrity of the classic tales face an uphill struggle in the face of corporations driven by the profit motive. There is no doubt that the prospect of the quick dollar has made the classic children's tale something of an endangered species. Nevertheless, the popular children's text cannot be regarded in splendid isolation. The overwhelming reality of the

market-oriented multimedia environment cannot be conveniently waved aside and labelled as 'crass commercialism' from a position of moral high ground.

Certain facts are incontrovertible. The humorous subverted classic tale has gained strength from its appeal to adults as purveyors and purchasers of children's literature. Likewise, children who grow up amidst a heritage of traditional 'classic' tales do so in a social milieu in which change is regarded as a goal, and in which the printed page is generally a poor second to the 'flickering screen'. The increasing sophistication of the children as 'media-consumers' constitutes a power group that has placed radical new demands that effect the survival of traditional children's tales.

Through all these pressures, the hardy classic tale appears to have adapted to the nature of this onslaught for a variety of reasons, not the least being that subverted tales owe their existence in no small measure to the popularity of the tales towards which the subversive activity is directed. Genre and sub-genre are by definition juxtaposed like unidentical twins. The results have been witnessed in the assimilation of the subverted tale as an integral part of an ongoing dynamic literary tradition. In traditional or subverted forms, the classic children's tale is a rhyme for the times as well as a rhyme for all times.

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Appendix E

From trickster tales to pulp fiction: reception dynamics in a transforming South Africa

by Lawrence Gordon

FROM TRICKSTER TALES TO PULP FICTION:
RECEPTION DYNAMICS IN A TRANSFORMING SOUTH AFRICA

by Lawrence Gordon

The term 'a transforming South Africa' is well known, but few people think in terms of the full implications of transformation which goes beyond change. The 'transforming South Africa' is taking on <u>new forms</u>, politically, socially, technologically and culturally in an era of unprecedented upheaval on almost every level. It is also an era that has witnessed increasing demands on library and information services, and in consequence there is an ongoing need for LIS <u>user</u> studies to enable the profession to obtain more clarity concerning the type of user service appropriate to the objectives of the LIS facility.

This study falls into the category of a 'transformation' LIS user survey, and is of relevance to public libraries because it involves a pilot user study that focuses on the leisure reading behaviour of young 'traditionally disadvantaged' students specialising in the National Diploma: Library and Information Practice at the M.L. Sultan Technikon in Durban. While this study is basically a small scale localised user study of a specialised population, it should be seen in terms of a broader canvas than this. This is a small step forward in a journey to gain a better view of the South African young adult black reader within the sociocultural dynamics of these times.

There is no doubt that the sociopolitical changes that have radically affected the <u>public</u> lives of citizens within a transforming South Africa have also impacted significantly on the private lives of South Africans of diverse cultural backgrounds. The post-apartheid freedoms and the pressures of the market-driven economy have accelerated urbanisation and peri-urbanisation to generally unanticipated levels. These demographic trends have significant ethnographic implications, among which is the erosion of traditional rural family life and its consequences. One of the consequences for rural young adults transplanting themselves to the urban jungle in search of employment or further education has been a combination of future shock and culture shock. The big city world is indeed usually <u>not</u> what they were led to expect, and the vast urban-rural sociocultural differences impact significantly on their efforts to make the

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adjustment to life in the 'fast lane'. A key aspect of this adjustment concerns <u>reception dynamics,</u> in this case: the transformation of the individual's communication environment from an orality-based tradition to one based on the written word and the flickering TV screen.

This paper scrutinises the transformation experience of the South African black young adult moving from the traditional 'trickster tales' scenario to the Westernized 'pulp fiction' scenario. Trickster tales epitomize the oral style associated with folklore, popularly conceptualised as the collective voice of the people because these stories appear to have grown from the roots of the culture. In the South African context, the term 'trickster tales' is commonly used to refer to folktales in which a human or animal trickster who is 'up to no good' ultimately receives a come-uppance in a morally correct denouement. 'Trickster tales' is also the title of a book by Trevor Cope, former University of Natal (Durban) Professor of Zulu. This collection of Zulu tales translated into English conjures up images of venerable grandmothers around evening fires in the heart of KwaZulu thrilling their grandchildren with traditional children's stories (*izinganelwane*) that had the purpose of teaching them traditional values in preparation for life.

The morality motive has far less prominence in pulp fiction. Webster's dictionary (p. 1337) describes 'pulp' the noun as 'a mixture forming the basis from which paper is made', and probably more relevantly 'pulp' the verb as 'to reduce to a soft cohering mass'. What we understand by 'pulp fiction' is forgettable, unenduring, unremarkable storytelling that is good to be read once, then pulped in order to provide paper for more of the same, and so on in a continuing cycle. The overriding feature of 'pulp fiction' is its reliance on clichés in language, plot development, characterization and moralizing.

The movement from trickster tales to pulp fiction is viewed as a central dilemma of the media reception behaviour of black young adults in a transforming South Africa. On the one hand, **trickster tales** represents the oral style steeped in tradition, rich in social conscience and explicit morality. It is part of a communication process that is interactive and participative, and serves to reinforce family values. On the other hand, **pulp fiction** represents the slick modern text or its media equivalent. Pulp fiction is generally characterised as being shallow and cliché-ridden, and is popularly viewed as an expendable distraction from reality. By

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contrast, the storyteller in the oral tradition is a primary source in a meaningful interactive process. People nurtured in this rich but bookless tradition will develop reception styles very different from those of people reared in a text-based tradition.

At this point, it is necessary to introduce a note of caution. Not all pulp fiction is as morally bankrupt as the movie of this title; and not all old tales are venerable. There is a nostalgia attached to old things that often causes them to be over-valued. Likewise, not all old folktales are exactly monuments to right living or morality, as I am sure those who have read Roald Dahl's account of Goldilocks will testify. In the same way, modern fiction has an impressive array of talented authors who write fiction rather than pulp fiction;,but at the same time, pulp fiction represents a consumerist sector of the publishing market that obviously satisfies the reading needs of millions world-wide. It is debatable whether the product(i.e. pulp fiction itself) plays a role in shaping these needs and creating its own market.

There can be no disputing psychosocial and cultural differences between the oral and textual styles, and these differences are reflected in the reception dynamics of these styles. Reading is essentially an encounter between the individual and the printed page. Notably, one of the most significant books on reading behaviour is entitled 'Lost in a book' (by Victor Nell), which reflects the fact that reading is basically an introspective act that severs social contact. It is solitary unless the reader is reading aloud to another person or other persons; and when this takes place, we have entered the realm of the oral style. In this case, the reader interfaces between the listener and the text, and in effect becomes a second intermediary between the author and his audience.

The communicational relationships involved may be explained by the use of metacommunicational models. The classic Lasswell model of the late 1940s emphasized the role of the sender of the communication as follows:

Sender----> message------>channel----------> receiver

This approach was later developed to acknowledge the fact that the receiver was not merely a receptacle, but rather a human being who brought attitudes, needs and knowledge to the communication process. In short, the receiver interprets and <u>gives</u> meaning to the message.

Sender----> message------>channel<-----⟨⇐⇨⟩-----> receiver

In the case of the oral style, in which a storyteller recounts a folktale and provides a participating audience with an interactive communicational experience, the process can be depicted as follows:

Sender	**message**	**channel**	**message**	**receiver**
FOLKTALE	EVOLVED CONTENT	STORY TELLER	PERFORMANCE CONTENT	AUDIENCE

In the oral style, the storyteller is virtually a primary source in an interactive process. With regard to communicational pursuits such as television-viewing and radio-listening, it has been suggested that the audiovisual aspects of the latter have a greater affiliation with the oral style than reading. More complete answers to questions of this nature await further research. An interesting finding of the study described below was that there is little evidence of a culture of fictional reading amongst young adult South African librarianship students from the traditionally disadvantaged groups.

DETAILS OF THE STUDY

A small scale pilot study was conducted on the readership and viewership behaviour of student librarians at the M.L. Sultan Technikon in April 1995. This questionnaire survey was offered to the 83 students studying towards the National Diploma: Library and Information Practice on a voluntary basis. Forty-eight students participated in the survey. Of these, 38 were Zulu, 6 Xhosa, 2 Northern Sotho, 1 Southern Sotho, and 1 Tswana. The gender distribution was relatively balanced with 26 males and 22 females. The age of the students was between 18

and 23 years. The demographic features of the students participating in the study were described in terms of groups representing their domestic status. The domicile of the student was viewed in terms of the site of the traditional family home. It was found that some students still resided at home, while others resided in Technikon residences, boarding houses or with relations who are city dwellers within Durban and its environs. Four groups were identified, as follows:

Durban-urbans:	27	urban dwellers, urban born and still at home;
Peri-urban:	7	peri-urban dwellers, peri-urban born and still at home;
Rural-urbans:	11	11 urban dwellers with rural upbringing whose parent or parents have moved to the city while they were in high school;
Rural-rural:	13	urban boarders who return to rural homes for all holidays.

Trickster tales experience:

Storytellers: Parents have no real role in the traditional setting, and as grandparents will be expected to carry on that tradition. This is not expected to change. Without exception, all students reported that the storytellers were grandmothers, either their own (most common) or a 'grandmother' figure who was known as a tale teller.

Time, place and circumstances: The time that stories were told was almost without exception in the late afternoon or early evening, and sometimes (but not necessarily) coincided with the evening meal. More often however, the grandmother's storytelling function was combined with the function of safely collecting all the children of the home or kraal into a single location to ensure all were there and safe for the night. In many cases, the grandmother told stories every night until most of the children fell asleep, and then slept alongside the children.

Sender, receivers, reception dynamics: The stories were in nearly all cases remembered with amusement and nostalgia. The storytellers (the grandmothers) obviously had a bond with

children, and told the stories to their enjoyment even if the plots had been previously known. Children participated by responding loudly, often in cheering or laughter reactions which were encouraged. In many of the tales, the children were taught to participate actively in the story by chanting formal lines of encouragement or praise in unison.

The content of the stories

Plot and theme: The stories adhere to the oral traditions of the trickster tale. There is a hero figure, sometimes a human, sometimes an animal. There are problem situations, dilemmas, and obstacles to overcome. There is generally an evil or 'no-good' character who is sometimes a cannibal or sometimes has troll-like characteristics (such as the *'tokoloshe'* in Zulu tales). The villain of the story may also be a devious animal such as the jackal (or *ujakalashe* in Xhosa tales), and as expected the plot is worked around a situation in which the tables are turned on the trickster who receives some sort of just punishment. The stories are strongly moralistic - at times not too dissimilar to Aesop's Fables, and have heavily emphasized lessons at the end of the story.

Characters: A great variety of types of characters populate the stories. Generally, the stories concern humans and animals who can usually converse across-the-species through a universal vernacular. However, a bean converses with a lump of coal in Xhosa folklore; while in Zulu folklore, humans converse with the sea, or parts of the body converse(for example, the ears talk to the eyes). There are a variety of heroes, and the villains may be giants, cannibals, *tokoloshes,* or even evil witches and witchdoctors. Ultimately, love conquers all, and good triumphs over evil.

Pulp fiction

In observing the subjects' current reading behaviour (i.e. April 1995), several trends were significant:

- Only five out of the 48 subjects showed any evidence of having read **novels** since passing matric. There was a general sense of amused embarrassment about this, and the reasons given were chiefly: pressure of studies and assignments, noisiness of the

living environment (especially the Technikon residence), and time taken travelling to and from the Technikon. The length of novels was also mentioned as a reason why the shorter stories and articles in magazines were generally preferred.

- All 48 subjects claimed to have read at least one **magazine** during the month before the survey, and virtually all could provide the titles of at least two magazines. The most popular magazine amongst males was <u>Drum</u> (both Zulu and English language), and amongst females: <u>You</u> (an English magazine), followed by <u>Cosmopolitan</u>, then <u>True Love</u>. Amongst a certain group of the subjects, the young adult magazines <u>Pace</u> and <u>Thandi</u> were popular.

- As regards **newspapers**, the <u>City Press</u> and <u>The Sowetan</u> were most popular, followed by the local Durban dailies, the evening paper <u>Daily News</u> and morning paper <u>The Mercury</u>, both published by the Natal Newspapers Group. None of the students claimed to read the paper on a daily basis, with the average being twice a week. About 10% of the students said that they read only one of the Sunday newspapers and no other newspapers. None of the subjects lived in a home that had a newspaper subscription.

- **Television** viewing was a daily past-time for about 60% of the subjects, while others watched only for specific purposes. The most popular programme was 'The News' which was watched by approximately 75% of the viewers who watched on a daily basis. The most popular programmes amongst both sexes were what the subjects described as 'stories'. When asked to rank their favourite type of television fiction programmes, the males rated action first, comedy second and love third; while the females rated love first, comedy second and action third. Only about 10% of the male viewers admitted to watching the 'soapies' such as 'Loving', 'Egoli', and 'The Bold and the Beautiful', as compared with approximately 70% of the female viewers. About half of the male viewers watched TV soccer on a regular basis, and about 35% tried whenever possible to watch interview and 'talk show' programmes such as those hosted by Felicia Mabuza-Suttle and Dali Thambo. Approximately 45% of the viewers claimed to be able to exercise the main decision as to what station to watch.

About 80% of the viewers watched mainly CCV, and preferred to view programmes broadcast in the 'home language'.

- **<u>Music</u>** was popular with virtually all students, and the radio was a very popular source of communication. In a straight forward choice between ethnic traditional music and pop music (both local and overseas), approximately 70% favoured the latter. However, only about 55% of those who preferred pop music said that they actually disliked traditional ethnic music. Of those who liked pop music, soul was ranked first, fusion second and rap music a poor third. 'Boyz II Men', a black soul ballad harmony group, were ranked most popular vocal artists, and Kenny G., a white fusion sax player, was voted most popular instrumentalist. American pop music was favoured over British pop music, and the favourite female artists were the Americans, Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey.

In certain cases in the interview situation, the responses seemed to confirm popular notions concerning the so-called 'Americanization' of worldwide urban youth culture. A small subgroup within the pilot group had seemed to experience a significant implosion of the so-called universal urban 'pop' culture on traditional culture, as reflected in their television viewing, leisure reading, musical tastes, and mode of dress. We have heard the term 'African-Americans' applied to USA citizens; and in this case, one is tempted to refer to 'American-Africans'. But, young adulthood is an age dominated by a search for identity, and the 'city' sophistication aspired to by these young adults may be a thin and temporary veneer. There is still a distinctively 'African attitude towards the role of the public libraries as centres for personal upliftment providing spaces for study, in contrast with the traditional Western perspectives of public libraries as sources of leisure reading.

In conclusion, a word of caution is necessary. It must be borne in mind that this research, while interesting and informative, is to be approached tentatively by persons wishing to draw generalised conclusions from the findings. The data from this study derives from a small scale pilot study conducted on a particular localised group of student librarians in April 1995, and extrapolations cannot be made validly or reliably in respect of the general student population, let alone young adult black library users in general. A more thorough research study, based

on the pilot study experience, has been prepared for implementation early in 1996, and it is hoped that the findings of this study will shed further light on this fascinating topic.

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