

PEACE HUMOR

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Summary

According to certain specialists in International Relations the world has been depicted as a place of increasing complexity, disorder and uncertainty. Great minds will be needed to encourage representatives of all countries through dialogue to create a global, peaceful and just environment. This study discusses aspects of two disciplines, International Relations and Humor Studies. Surreal and Black Humor expose a world that appears to have lost its way. While millions of people starve, much money is spent by major powers on amassing a vast arsenal of weapons, capable of destroying the world. A case is argued for a new paradigm, Peace Humor, a universal idea that could potentially play a constructive role in creating a better world.

Research indicates that approximately 80% of all humor is of an aggressive nature. The word 'peace' has not, up to the present, been associated with humor. However humor, as a multi-faceted concept, has historically covered an enormous range of humor types, including Therapeutic humor. Given the present state of affairs worldwide, it is suggested that Peace Humor could work as a coordinator with other humor forms as a means of illustrating that the 'peace route' is the option to follow. Efforts will be needed to get this process underway.

1. Introduction

Peace Humor, a new area of study, supports measures being taken to create a peaceful, united world. The possession of a lively sense of humor acts as a counter-force to

various ‘negatives’ that occur in daily life. Humor supplies another lens or perspective as a means of coping with serious issues and problems in the world.

Both the discipline of International Relations (IR) and the interdisciplinary study of Humor (ISHS) originated in Wales; International Relations at the University of Aberystwyth in 1919 and the First International Conference on Humor and Laughter at the University of Cardiff in 1976, the latter under the auspices of the British Psychological Association. Other disciplines that contribute to Humor Research include sociology, psychology and psychiatry. To an extent International Relations draws upon ideas originating in philosophy. Current issues in IR may relate to matters that preoccupied thinkers such as Kant and Hobbes. The discipline of International Relations (IR), to a degree, focuses on achieving a peaceful world globally. The International Peace Research Association (IPRA), a branch of IR, specializes on finding effective ways by which this goal can be attained.

At the IPRA conference in Sopron, Hungary, July 4-10, 2004, a new specialized area was approved, namely Peace Humor (PH). Clearly PH can provide a legitimate area of research within both Humor Studies and the peace field of IR. Themes of political, military or war humor, published in various journals by humor scholars since 1995, include the following: Humor and the Gulf War; Humor as a Coping Mechanism with POWs; Conflict is Inevitable but War is Optional; Humor as an Antidote for Terrorism.

The general theme, implicit in the above titles, is that humor may act as a counter to war, conflict and violence, basically no longer considered as options on a large scale in the present world. This study highlights Peace Humor, but also draws attention to other forms of humor. The following is a short list among the various types: Aggressive Humor; Sexual Humor; Social Humor; Intellectual Humor; Humor as a Defense Mechanism; Black Humor; Alternative Humor; Therapeutic Humor; War Humor; Absurd Humor. All forms of humor are needed, along with Peace Humor, as a means of revealing the madness and futility of violent conflict. Mainstream IR focuses increasingly, in particular the ‘radical wing’ since the end of the Cold War, on finding means by which a truly global and peaceful world can emerge, wherein values, identities and practices of all countries, civilizations, ethnic and ‘culture’ groups, remain intact.

Humor and comedy cover a wide field and both have been applied, for example, to the workplace, marketing, theology and ethnicity. Fry (1963), psychiatrist, observes that his work *Sweet Madness* has relevance both for the general reader and for scholars in disciplines such as psychiatry, psychology, anthropology, sociology, literature, drama and speech. In fact, humor may be applied to almost every sphere of life, including health and death. Humor acts as a lubricant in softening the edges of prejudice, intolerance, inability to learn from alternative options to one’s own views, and also in breaking down areas of misperception and dissonance within domestic and international areas of decision-making.

2. Therapeutic and Stress Reduction Humor.

The aims of the American Association for Therapeutic Humor include the education of

health care professionals and lay audiences with respect to the value of therapeutic uses of humor and laughter, both considered as positive, healthy forces that counter stress, neurosis, worry, danger and the unknown. Humor acts as a coping mechanism in many distressful and unpleasant circumstances. Therapeutic humor reflects light-hearted, joyful, humorous interaction which is constructively used to preserve or improve well-being. Humor and laughter communicate feelings such as compassion, fear, belonging, anger and delight. They provide shortcuts to closeness; one smile or laugh may express more than hours of talking. As relationships become closer, stress levels normally decrease. Both humor and laughter have constructive effects on the body. The words of Jonathan Swift are as valid today as in the eighteenth century: “The best doctors in the world are Dr. Diet, Dr. Quiet and Dr. Merryman”.

Humankind has developed various non-violent ways of dealing with bitter emotions and feelings, rage or frustration, which include sport, sex, songs and hobbies. Such activities enable people to sublimate their feelings. Freud was one of the first writers to suggest that humor could provide this role. Since our hostile impulses towards others have been generally repressed since childhood, verbal aggression tends to replace open violence. Clowning, satirical literature, graphic satire, jokes and witticisms enable people to re-channel their aggressive feelings in a disguised and playful manner (Freud, (1905) (1976)

Humor, employed in training programs and teaching, facilitates building confidence, bringing people together and breaking down barriers. Negative emotions – depression, hostility, anger – cause destructive chemical changes in the body whereas positive emotions – faith, love, playfulness, laughter and humor – assist in curing illness and in enhancing health (Kenton, 1988: 10). The constructive aspect of laughter is highlighted in the biblical maxim that “a merry heart doeth good like medicine” (Proverbs, chapter 17, verse 28).

According to the Humor Foundation (HF), a charity dedicated to promoting the health benefits of humor, research has discovered how humor acts as an effective coping strategy. It not only relieves fear and stress but aids recovery. A core project of the HF is “Clown Doctors”, who work in major children’s hospitals in Australia. An organization called “Ambassador Clowns” has visited world trouble spots such as East Timor and Afghanistan.

Of all the health benefits of humor, the most important at the workplace is assisting someone to relax. Jobs may be increasingly stressful, often the result of an unstable business environment caused by foreign competition, corporate takeovers, restructuring and layoffs. Many people experience rapid and disorienting change. Stress in the American workplace was estimated as costing \$750 per worker as a result of absenteeism, lost productivity and company medical benefits around 1990. Many large businesses responded by introducing stress reduction programs, notably for executives. Techniques used to reduce stress included exercise, yoga, meditation and bio-feedback training. Humor, as effective as all these methods, is cheaper, easier and more generally applicable. The most damaging stress tends to be suffered in routine jobs that are not particularly demanding, such as those performed by telephone operators, waiters and

cashiers or in jobs where stress is experienced for lengthy periods, exemplified by air traffic control operators and police work (Morreall, 1991: 361-363).

Humor therapy has been considered as possessing various techniques for relieving emotional as well as physical pain. One of the pioneers in humor therapy, Norman Cousins, wrote a book entitled *Anatomy of an Illness*. In this work he records his battle with a connective tissue disease, ankylosing spondylitis. Cousins believed that he could 'cure himself' even though all the specialist prognoses were poor. However, he used humor as both a painkiller and as a substitute for chemical therapy. Laughter exercises, according to Cousins, a curative effect on the body. He discovered that watching old Marx Brothers movies and Candid Camera shows evoked genuine belly laughter, providing a form of therapy and distraction. This gave him at least two hours of pain-free sleep, an important drop in his sedimentary level. Daily doses of laughter, combined with active participation in his medical treatment, helped him to recover.

Almost 20 years later, Cousins suffered a massive heart attack. Applying the same philosophy of laughter and full co-operation with his physicians, he again recovered. He served as editor of *Saturday Review*, and was a member of the Faculty of UCLA's School of Medicine, Los Angeles, in 1978, specializing in the field of biochemistry related to emotions. Cousins wrote an article on "How laughter can help cure illness" before his death from cancer [http://www.allsands.com/Health/humorthery_vdd_gn.htm].

Doctors and health workers often recommend patients to undertake sessions of laughter so as to free their body systems of tension and to promote physiological and psychological health. Yet in practice the perception of humor is not an essential feature of life, but rather an abnormality. In other words most humans do not need regular experiences of humor to maintain health and well-being. Therapeutic laughter may be required in regular sessions for particularly stressed individuals, but only in moderation for people with a well-balanced value system (Bainy, 1993: 135).

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Biographical Sketch

Christopher A. Leeds, LSE graduate, specializes in three research areas, International Relations, Humor Studies and Cross-cultural Management. He was a Fulbright Scholar and Senior Herman Fellow at the University of Southern California, an Associate Professor at the University of Nancy 2, France and a Visiting Research Fellow, University of Kent at Canterbury, 2000-2001. Publications include *Peace and War* and *English Humour*.