

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

“STUDYING HUMOUR ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES”

**WITH REPORTS ON CURRENT POST-GRADUATE
RESEARCH**

Saturday 16th November 2002 (9.00 a.m. – 6.30 p.m.)

**Australian Graduate School of Management Building
(AGSM) at UNSW**

**Entry: Gate 11, Botany St, Randwick; parking in non-reserved places in the nearby
Parking Station and fore-court is free on Saturdays. In case of problems, collect a
parking voucher from the AGSM Front Desk on arrival.
(a/h Tel: (02) 9931 9200)**

CONVENOR AND CHAIR: JESSICA MILNER DAVIS

TIMETABLE

9.00 – 9.25 am	Registration; Tea and Coffee
9.30 – 10.15	Dr Angus McLachlan, “The Location of Nervous Laughter During Discussion”
10.15 – 11.00	Dr Bruce Findlay, “Self-reported Sense of Humour: What does it Tell Us?”
11.00 – 11.30	Morning Refreshments
Parallel Sessions (A and B) on Current Post-Graduate Research:	
11.30 – 12.15	A: Mr Nathan McGovern “The Relationship between Humour, Alcohol Consumption and Self-esteem”
	B: Mr Yulhenli Thabran, “A Preliminary Report on Joking about Sex and Politics in Indonesia and in Australia”
12.15 – 1.00	A: Mr Neville Nickels, “The Incorporation of Humour Practice and Theory to Develop a Model of Creativity with Reference to the Hero’s Journey of Mythology”
	B: Mr Gerard Matte, “Freud, and the Comedic Behaviour of the Individual”
1.00 – 2.00 pm	Lunch
2.00 – 2.45	Dr Lisa Trahair, “Preposterous Figuralty: Freud, Lyotard and the Cinematic Comedy of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin”
2.45 – 3.30	Dr Alexis Tabensky, “TV and Political Satire: the Case of <i>Les Guignols</i> and the French Presidential Elections 2002”
3.30 – 4.00	Afternoon Tea
4.00 – 4.45	Dr Grace Masselos, “Humour in Early Childhood”

4.45 – 5.30 Dr Carmen Moran, “Humour and the Cost of Coping”

5.30 – 6.00 Plenary Discussion

6.00 –6.30 pm Close and Refreshments

ABSTRACTS

“Self-reported Sense of Humour: What does it Tell Us?”

Dr Bruce Findlay, Psychology Dept, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne

This paper will give an overview of a series of empirical studies aimed at developing and testing a scale to measure self-reported sense of humour. Based on the Multidimensional Sense of Humour Scale of Thorson and Powell (1993), the scale has since expanded to cover assorted aspects of humour, such as production of humour, humour appreciation, using humour to cope, negative use of humour, humour in relationships, self-deprecating humour and more. Variations on the scale have been compared with personality, psychological well-being, job satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, emotional intelligence, buffering of stress, and tendency to tease, with some of these studies including international comparisons. The general findings have been that having a sense of humour relates positively with “good things” and negatively with “bad things”! However, it doesn’t tell us all that much more about these correlates than we already know from broad measures of personality. Obviously, there are problems with just asking people if they have a sense of humour. The talk will say why we did just that, what we intend to do about it, and where we see humour research moving in psychology.

“The Relationship between Humour, Alcohol Consumption and Self-esteem”

Nathan McGovern, Psychology Dept, University of Ballarat

The research was aimed at increasing our understanding of the extent to which appreciation of humour and sociability generally might be linked to alcohol consumption and self-esteem among young adults. Previous research, understandably, has tended to focus on the deleterious consequences of excessive alcohol consumption and its relationship with low self-esteem and poor social skills. However, within this research tradition one can also detect an underlying pattern of results that suggests that within accepted ranges, greater levels of alcohol consumption are linked to higher levels of self-esteem; the more one drinks the more socially competent one is and the better one feels about oneself generally. The study deployed a series of questionnaires including the Situational Humour Response Questionnaire, Alcohol Use Inventory, and the Rosenberg self-esteem scale among a sample of young adults, mainly students in the Ballarat and Bendigo areas. It was anticipated that the results of self-reported humour appreciation, esteem and alcohol use would shed some light on the purpose of alcohol consumption

among young adults, the extent to which it offered occasions for humorous exchanges and whether increased engagement in both activities was related to high self esteem. There was also an expectation that the generally positive correlations between appreciation of humour, drinking and self-esteem among young adults would not hold for those who drank excessively or for those who abstained from alcohol completely.

“The Location of Nervous Laughter During Discussion”

Dr Angus McLachlan, Psychology Dept, University of Ballarat

It is widely recognised that there are many types of laughter, from manic to restrained, from sardonic to sympathetic. It is also recognised that these numerous types can seldom be distinguished on the basis of their acoustic properties alone. If these properties of the laugh are not particularly helpful in identifying the force of a laugh, then clearly other contextual cues must do the work. In considering one particular type of laughter – nervous laughter – two general forms of contextual cues would lend themselves to the identification of such laughter. The overarching context of the particular conversation is likely to play some part, with context delineated by the relative social status position of those talking and the topic of that conversation. For example, Baker, Yoels and Clair characterised nervous laughter as that given by patients disclosing undesirable information about themselves to medical practitioners.

It is also possible that the immediate linguistic context of the laugh is important in determining whether it will be seen as “nervous”. One such contextual cue is the location of the laugh in relation to the speaking turn. It is hoped to provide some empirical evidence that nervous laughter tends to occur earlier in the speaker’s turn and is also offered more often by a listener. The extent to which a person is inclined to offer both forms of laughter during a conversation and whether that leads to the laughter being described as nervous will also be considered. Finally, the paper will broach the idea that this nervous laughter amounts to a signal requesting solidarity with the other, which is used with greater frequency than would be expected in the particular form of conversation in which the participants are engaged.

“Humour in Early Childhood”

Dr Grace Masselos, Education (Early Childhood Studies), University of Wollongong

In early childhood that is, with very young children under five years, many of us have been witness to the fact that children of this age and stage are well able to enjoy and revel in humorous situations according to their level understanding. As it is, humour can be a great motivator for learning. Child development studies have clearly indicated that the development of skills such as those related to socialisation, language, cognitive and emotional abilities can all be enhanced and encouraged by means of humour once the early childhood educator has mastered the art of understanding the concept of the developmental process of humour as well as incongruity by means of play (Zigler, Levine & Gould (1967); Groch (1974); McGhee & Chapman (1980); McConnell Burt &

Sugawara (1998); Varga (2000). This paper will discuss the types and function of humour in young children and the important role of the early childhood educator in developing humour by means of play in naturalistic situations.

“Freud, and the Comedic Behaviour of the Individual”

Gerard Matte, Performing Arts, ACU (Patrick Campus)

There is a long list of humour researchers (also some journalists and comedians) who have attempted to understand *Jokes and their relationship to the Unconscious*, and the short essay *Humour*. However, even though such research has been extensive, Freud’s contribution towards the understanding of comedy is still viewed as obscure or not particularly helpful. The reason for this is that researchers assume that Freud is fundamentally interested in trying to find out how comedy operates, which is a flawed assumption. A more correct way of appreciating Freud’s work on comedy is to realise that it comes close on the heels of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In this work, which Freud believed was the ‘royal road’ to unlocking the nature of the mind, he presents a structure that determines individual behaviour, and most importantly, he offers a method for dissecting how the language of the individual is expressed. His work *Jokes and their relationship to the Unconscious*, as with the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, are mainly attempts to prove what he discovered in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. This is what he does, but because it is within the unique circumstances of comedy, Freud shows how individual behaviour and its expression is influenced by such a context. From this perspective, Freud’s contribution to comedy is viewed as being determined by particular psychoanalytical principles, rather than the usual procedure where it is investigated without reference to such a theory of human behaviour.

“Humour and the Cost of Coping”

Dr Carmen Moran, School of Social Work, UNSW

The word coping in popular usage means dealing with a stressor or similar event in a successful manner. In psychological use, however, the word tends to be restricted to dealing with a stressor, and does not necessarily imply a successful outcome. Furthermore, work on resilience in children and posttraumatic stress in adults indicates that coping at one stage in life may sometimes occur at a cost. That is, the need to deal with the stressor may re-emerge some years after the initial ‘good’ coping occurred. The notion of ‘cost of coping’ is not new. Hans Selye noted it in the physiological literature on stress many decades ago and cited factors such as illness and exhaustion as evidence of the cost of coping. In coping literature, including that examining the coping value of humour, this cost of psychological coping is seldom explored. The positive bias that is common in contemporary humour literature means humour (measured as a personality trait or a coping strategy) is seldom considered to be a problematic form of coping that be associated with subsequent poor adjustment.

This paper looks at humour as a means of coping with extreme events and the extent to

which this mitigates later distress from those events. It is postulated that while humour works as a good coping strategy in the here and now, it does not help the individual process extreme stressors, thus other coping strategies may be more important for long term well being. These other coping strategies may include some of those normally associated with sense of humour, such as optimism and self-esteem.

“The Incorporation of Humour Practice and Theory to Develop a Model of Creativity with Reference to the Hero’s Journey of Mythology”

Neville Nickels, Research Student, Business, Queensland University of Technology

This purpose of this paper is to develop a practical model from a novel theorization. It explores the relationship between the performance of humour and the performance of leadership, using the mythic narrative of “The Hero’s Journey”. Jungian concepts build a link between the Hero’s search for fulfilment, and the acquisition of humour skills as also experienced by comedians and leaders. Each of the defined steps in the journey is illustrated by reference to the comedy film “Galaxy Quest”. This theorization then informs the development of a humour practice model of “The Working Theory of Humour”, which takes the steps of “The Hero’s Journey” and relates them to humour theories. This enables the creation of humour to be related to the theories and enables practitioners to understand and practice their craft in a meaningful manner. It also confronts the claims by some theorists that their theory explains the complete humour process. The implication of this model for humour professionals is discussed.

“TV and Political Satire: the Case of *Les Guignols* and the French Presidential Elections 2002”

Dr Alexis Tabensky, Dept of French, Modern Language Studies, UNSW

Politicians, football players, singers, actors, television presenters and other well known faces of contemporary French society are the most exploited targets of "Les Guignols", a humoristic and popular television program in France. Political life is in particular a rich source of satire: attitudes, friendships and rivalries among Presidents and Ministers of all political sides become familiar images for spectators. The traditional confrontation between the Left and the Right is always one of the strong points of the program. Words, gestures and mimicry are typically associated with these somehow funny people who happen to be governing the country. The program is based on a routine that creates complicity between the actors and the audience (in and out of the studio) and, to some extent, humanizes the political character. However the results of last May's Presidential elections broke down the traditional pattern: the candidates of the second round of balloting were not, as it has been the case for the last thirty years, the representatives of the Right and the Left but those of the Right, Jacques Chirac, and the National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen (Head of the Far Right party that fiercely opposes immigration). Following this, the televised presidential debate, a "classic" of French television that traditionally opposes the Left and the Right, did not take place: Jacques Chirac plainly refused to debate with Jean-Marie Le Pen and did not even mention his name at other

public performances! Through the analysis of a selection of "Les Guignols" broadcast during the presidential campaign, the paper will focus on how "Les Guignols" represented (or not!) the odd situation the country was living, and whether they used "the presidential debate that never was" as a material to make people laugh.

“A Preliminary Report on Joking about Sex and Politics in Indonesia and in Australia”

Yulhenli Thabran, Jambi University (UNJA) (Indonesia) and Australian National University, Dept of Asian Studies (Indonesian Studies)

This study takes as its starting point the commonly-held belief that humour may not be similarly appreciated across cultures. This assumption needs to be proven and explored in a particular case of study. The object of my study is close geographic neighbours Indonesia and Australia, two cultures which both appreciate joking. I am focussing particularly on Indonesian political and sexual jokes, which are types of jokes found across both cultures. However, the Indonesian examples may not be recognised and appreciated in the Australian context. I believe that the reason is more than just a linguistic barrier.

The big issue here is the different values adopted by Indonesian and Australian cultures. In recent years, Indonesian has been ruled by autocratic leaders that not used to “direct criticism”. It could be regarded as shameful for the leader to take criticisms aired by their opponents, even humorous ones. To save their “face” was a more important consideration than to preside over freedom of speech considered normal in many democratic systems. Furthermore, given multiple ethnicities, religions and cultural backgrounds in Indonesian culture, sexual issues are still hard to discuss in public in the Indonesian context. It is safe to say that Indonesians are still “conservative” to some extent in viewing sexual matters. Given the fact that Indonesia is Australia’s closest neighbour, Australians can learn much about some Indonesian characteristics and social values through examples of the sense of humour. I hope my study will give some insights for people interested particularly in humour across cultures and for Australian people in general.

“Preposterous Figuralty: Freud, Lyotard and the Cinematic Comedy of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin”

Dr Lisa Trahair, Theatre, Film and Dance, UNSW

The cinema of the early part of the 20th century saw a shift in the constitution of silent comedy from the Mack Sennett era of the 1910’s to the beginnings of the comedian comedy associated with the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton and Harry Langdon. This paper interrogates the nature of this shift in cinematic comedy, in relation to Freud’s theorisation of the joke. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, the comic in general is understood by Freud to rely on a comparison between the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’—say, between the defiance of the laws of physics and

the laws themselves. The comic is always a degradation of the real or ideal. Yet Freud attempts to distinguish within the variety of forms of the comic one which comes from the unconscious. The joke thus involves an unconscious transformation of a thought about to be communicated. Freud speculates that, if the sinking of the preconscious thought into the unconscious, and its unconscious revision, 'could be supposed to occur in the joke-formation, [it] would present the precise outcome that we can observe in jokes'. Another way of putting this would be to say that a conscious thought geared toward the production of meaning, and hence one in accordance with the reality principle, is revised by unconscious processes in accordance with the pleasure principle.

The self-professed reason for Freud's foray into the aesthetics of the comic was his determination to prove to his friend and colleague, Wilhelm Fliess, that the witty dimension that psychoanalysis inadvertently brought forth in its interpretation of the dream could be accounted for by proving that the origin of wit is itself located in the unconscious. By examining Freud's understanding of the operation of the dream we can see the significance of the role played by the visual image in the deployment of wit. In Chapter Six of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud places much importance on the pictographic nature of the dream and its facilitation of the operations of the dream-work. The visual image assists the characteristically unhampered, freely-flowing distribution of energy from one repressed content to another, via the mechanisms of condensation and displacement.

One of the most interesting readings of Freud's concepts of condensation and displacement comes from Jean-François Lyotard's book *Discours, Figure*. Using Lyotard's reading of Freud, I want to argue for a physicality at the heart of cinematic comedy—even if the manner in which such physicality operates in the dream-work is somewhat different to its operation in cinematic comedy. I will do this by analysing the instances of condensation and displacement which distinguish the work of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton.