

Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

COMIC ART AND HUMOR IN THE WORKPLACE:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY...ZZzzzz

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Change

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
VITA.....	vii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
Chapter One: What’s the Problem? .....	1
The Ubiquitousness of Humor .....	2
Purpose of the Research.....	4
A Serious Study of Humor – Isn’t That an Oxymoron.....	5
Reasons to “put socks on the octopus” .....	7
Summary.....	14
Chapter Two: Literature Review .....	16
Humor Theorizing.....	16
The Humor Literature of Organizations .....	45
Comic Art.....	49
Summary.....	57
Chapter 3: Methods.....	58
Study Design.....	58
Sources of Data .....	60
Data Gathering Procedures .....	64
Human Subjects Considerations .....	66
Analysis.....	67
Means to Ensure Study Validity .....	70
Chapter 4: Analysis.....	71
The Characters .....	72
The Paradox of Presence.....	76
Ridicule.....	82
Towards an Explanation of Funniness.....	93
Humor and the Shadow Side.....	97
Roads Not Taken.....	99
Summary.....	100
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations .....	102
Comic Art May Function Plausibly as a Proxy for Reality .....	102

Ridicule May Play a Significant but Unrecognized Role in Social Development .....	103
Life is Full of Absurdities, Many of Which Cannot Be Appreciated as Such in Real Time..	103
Presence May Function Either as an Enablement or a Barrier to Joint Action.....	104
Humor May be Understood as a Mythopoeic Language .....	105
Recommendations for Further Research.....	106
A Final Implication for the Workplace.....	107
REFERENCES .....	109
APPENDIX A: Functions of Humor in Conversation.....	122
APPENDIX B: List of Books by Scott Adams.....	124
APPENDIX C: IRB Non-human Subjects Determination Notice.....	126

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The perfect cartoon.....	56
Figure 2. Workflow.....	64
Figure 3. Protocol.....	65
Figure 4. Dilbert’s personality.....	74
Figure 5. PHB clips a wing.....	78
Figure 6. Important or not .....	80
Figure 7. Mocked by a sheep.....	81
Figure 8. The goat head issue.....	88
Figure 9. Emotional connection.....	88
Figure 10. Mocked by a sheep.....	91
Figure 11. The stink of unimportance.....	92
Figure 12. Solar Panels.....	92
Figure 13. Bonding through ridicule.....	93
Figure 14. Paradigm-ish.....	94
Figure 15. Dispositional field for tendentious exchanges.....	96
Figure16. Robin Hood.....	97
Figure 17. Artificial intelligence.....	98
Figure 18. Tina gets a new boss.....	99
Figure 19. Kettle of crazy.....	100

## VITA

### Education

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## ABSTRACT

This study is a qualitative, exploratory examination of the phenomena of humor in the workplace. The purpose is to derive a better understanding of how real people enact humor in the workplace by examining the humor depicted by and through fictional characters in comic art. The body of work of cartoonist, Scott Adams, was the primary source of data. The study relies on what the imaginary characters of *Dilbert* find absurd, funny, and ridiculous about an imaginary workplace, the employee-employer relationship, the content of the characters' jobs, or in the social relationships of fictional characters. It involves analyzing specific cultural artifacts, comic strips, as representations of human action.

Utilizing qualitative media analytical techniques, the study explores ethnographic materials (comic strips). A random sample from the universe of *Dilbert* strips was developed and theoretical sampling was used to discern the identities and personality traits of the main characters. Emergent groupings and themes were developed by repeatedly interacting with the data, reflection, extensive note taking and exploring patterns. The research question is answered from within a framework of comic art of the workplace using descriptive language that is informed by theories of humor.

The idea of presence in mediated communication is discussed and the significant themes of ridicule and disparagement theory are explicated. Key findings include the assertion that, in some cases comic plausibly serves as a proxy for reality as well as the implication that ridicule but plays a significant but inadequately understood role in social development. The researcher proposes that humor may be understood as mythopoeic language.

Recommendations for directions in future research include management and organizational studies of humor and communities of practice, learning and development, sensemaking and organizational culture. Further investigation into the relationship between ridicule and bullying could be fruitful. Qualitative media analysis has the potential to produce enormous gains in knowledge creation.

## Chapter One: What's the Problem?

“Laughter is day, and sobriety is night; a smile is the twilight that hovers gently between both, more bewitching than either.”

~Henry Ward Beecher

My former boss, the Chairman of the Board and CEO of a public company – a leader whose native intelligence and financial wizardry I greatly admire -- called out my sense of humor in the recommendation letter he submitted to support my admission to graduate school.

He wrote, in part:

In my opinion, (the author's) greatest strength is based on her sense of humor. Unlike many intelligent professionals who use their intellectual abilities or research skills to manage through the use of a preponderance of information, (the author) uses a rare ability to humanize a situation or information through personal humor and interaction. She has the ability to create change without causing disruption and to lead through communicating responsibility instead of applying authority (Kephart, personal communication, April 29, 2005).

It was a surprise to have my sense of humor endorsed as a professional strength providing leadership and managerial value to my organizations. Arguably, few professionals think of their sense of humor as a strategic asset. For sure, I had no idea that my boss and mentor held that view, that one of my favorite relationship skills had organizational relevance or that I apparently have found a way to operationalize humor to lead people.

The employment situation to which my boss referred was the takeover and turnaround of a public company by a group of venture capital investors. The demands and challenges inherent in working as a key member of the small team of senior managers deployed by an investor group to execute a takeover pushed most of us to the edges of our capabilities and beyond.

I liken my experience of those three intense, stressful years working for the Chairman of the Board and CEO to three years of MBA study at Indy 500 speeds while high on *deal crack*. The management group was confronted by every business problem I've ever studied or experienced, most of them simultaneously. I became infamous inside the company for the high-on-deal-crack remark; it's the perfect description of the altered state of consciousness that takes over managers in and around *the deal*. My colleagues knew exactly what it meant; we were all high on deal crack, imbued with supernatural managerial and leadership powers.

When my coworkers asked how I liked working directly for the Chairman (his ability to outwork mere mortals was legendary), I would smile and say, "It's great! I come to work each day, jam the fire hose into my mouth and open the hydrant. At the end of the day I close the hydrant, remove the hose, wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and I say, "Man, that was good!" For most of us, each day was as exhilarating as it was exhausting and my metaphor reliably produced a knowing chuckle.

### **The Ubiquitousness of Humor**

Everyone loves a good laugh. It eases awkward social moments, bonds us to others, calms certain emotions and simply feels good. Laughter, that unique physiological phenomenon involving muscle movements of the face and chest with associated characteristic sounds, is known to occur in all cultures (Apte, 1985; Provine & Yong, 1991). Laughter is a universal phenomenon that is fundamental to what it means to be human.

Reliably, humor and laughter usually manifest in human beings in the first year of life. Humans are born with the physical and mechanical means for producing laughter and usually produce laughter around four months of age. Generally, the cognitive ability to experience something as funny develops within the first year. Thus, beginning in our earliest days, an

audible pleasure response -- laughter -- is triggered when something humorous in the environment is detected (Sroufe & Wunsch, 1972). Even children who are born deaf and blind can produce laughter (Goodenough, 1932).

People at all levels of society, in both structured settings (such as a team or a family) and unstructured (e.g. an audience, crowd or a cocktail party) trade witticisms, tell jokes, engage in playful banter, tease, quip and laugh together. Prominent figures in pop culture like Fallon, Kimmel, Colbert and DeGeneres, to name only a few, earn extraordinary amounts of money to create and perform humor on a daily basis. The cartoon licensing arm of the iconic magazine, *The New Yorker*, doubles as a creative outlet for cartoonists and an enviably profitable business-within-a-business for the magazine's publisher, Condé Nast. Jokes and single panel cartoons are a Facebook staple. It is common for folks to trade quips while standing in almost any line – bank, post office, grocery store – or even when merely passing one another in a hallway. “If there is a phenomenon that is truly social and solidly entangled in culture, it is humor” (Zijderveld, 1995, p. 341).

And humor is enduring. Viktor Frankl's (1962) poignant account of his search for meaning in the suffering that he and others endured while captive in Nazi concentration camps during WWII shows that humor transcends even the most reprehensible of human circumstances. Concerning his experience in Auschwitz, surrounded by the dead and the dying, unjustly imprisoned by an utterly brutal dictator, Frankl wrote:

To discover that there was any semblance of art in a concentration camp must be surprise enough for an outsider, but he may be even more astonished to hear that one could find a sense of humor there as well; of course, only the faint trace of one, and then only for a few seconds or minutes. Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds. (p. 42)

The Third Reich systematically stripped Jewish citizens of their homes, food, financial assets, health, family, liberty, professional and religious identities, and clothing – even the hair was shaved from their bodies – but nothing could extinguish the humor of these innocent victims short of being themselves extinguished. There is something utterly profound about humor. Gilhus (1997) tries to capture its essence this way: “Laughter is situated at the intersection between body and mind, individual and society, the rational and the irrational” (p. 2). To this short list I would add: between life and death.

From deathbeds to prison cells, cubicles to the confessionals, in good times and times and in bad, people crack jokes. And yet, humor remains a bona fide enigma. To attempt to explain a humorous event or examine a humorous object is to cause the humor to vanish like a soap bubble on a pinpoint. One is left to wonder whether the phenomena existed in the first place. Nothing ensures the immediate demise of funniness quite like explicating a joke to someone who ‘didn’t get it’. A famous quip attributed to one time *The New Yorker* writer E. B. White captures the sentiment well: “Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.” It seems that once told, a joke is like a bell that simply can’t be unrung.

### **Purpose of the Research**

As with all other social domains, the ubiquitousness of humor extends to the workplace, influencing and effecting individuals, workgroups and managers as well as leaders. This study is concerned foremost with humor and workplace relationships as the phenomena of central interest. After all, business is fundamentally a social endeavor powered by relationships and human interaction. Humor and laughter can have positive effects like facilitating desirable organizational outcomes, increasing engagement, easing the assimilation of change, or enabling human relationships – certainly domains of interest to organizational researchers. The guiding,

central research question is: how are the phenomena of humor and social interactions within the workplace depicted in cartoon art?

This dissertation is a qualitative, exploratory examination of the phenomena of humor in the workplace. The cartoon art and body of work of the prolific Scott Adams with a central focus on an imaginary organization and a likeable metaphor for *everyman*, Dilbert, will provide the raw data for this analysis. A multi-disciplinary approach to research and theories of humor from such diverse fields such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, organizational and humor studies will be tapped to explore and illuminate humor's unique role and function in workplace relationships.

### **The Serious Study of Humor – Isn't That an Oxymoron?**

It might appear that I am quite a clever student to claim what might seem the polar opposite of a serious subject as a proper dissertation topic. (What - a book of jokes?) After all, humor is a kind of play (Carrell, 2008; Martin, 2007; Morreall, 2009; Raskin, 1985). The norms and expectations of the *Baby Boomer* work ethic are dismissive of play as frivolous and inconsistent with the dutiful expectations of serious work. Work and earning money *is* serious business in the United States and sobriety might very well be a legacy of those sourpusses of the Industrial Age. It's inarguable that an air of gravitas dominates our standard formulary for business and capital production.

For different reasons, a serious study of humor may be somewhat more of an oxymoron than one might think. The bias towards seriousness and the highbrow, away from the non-serious and lowbrow in business is clearly reflected in the choices of the scholars of mainstream academic specialties where historically it has received limited scholarly attention (Robert & Yan, 2007; Westwood & Johnston, 2013). The professional journal, *Studies in American Humor*, has

published semi-annually since 1982 according to its website. *The International Journal of Humor Studies*, which dominates the publishing space at this time, is fully committed to the study of humor. It first began publishing in 1989. Two new arrivals, *The European Journal of Humor Research* and *The Israeli Journal of Humor Research* began publishing in 2012.

Sociology is a field that one might logically expect to have made major contributions to humor studies. Until relatively recently, however, the study of humor in the United States has failed to achieve a sustainable momentum within sociology, a field on which organizational studies relies (Davis, 1995). Traditionally, humor has enjoyed more serious treatment by the British scholars. Many of the theorists and researchers whose contributions are explored in Chapter Two of this writing are, indeed, British. In the United States, humor has received the attention of many perspectives and approaches but has nonetheless remained in the periphery of most major fields of study.

Davis (1995) attributes the imperialistic attitudes of sociology for erecting artificial impediments to the serious study of humor, pointing out that there are no major research universities with faculty specializing in it. Positivist sociology and other related fields haven't yet generated a standard means by which to delve deeply into humor. And, as with other sciences, sociology has been far more invested in the pursuit of 'serious' problems.

Not so surprisingly, psychology has nearly dominated the field of contemporary humor research. Martin (2007) authored a comprehensive integration of theory and research findings from the literature of the psychology of humor in a single volume. The scope, ambition, and impressiveness of such an achievement notwithstanding, he prefaces his work by saying,

Despite the obvious importance of humor in many different areas of human experience and its relevance to all branches of psychology, mainstream psychology has paid surprisingly little attention to this subject up to now. (p. xv)



Similar accusations of a paucity of interest emanate from the domain of organizational studies. Robert and Yan (2007) assert: “much of the research on humor that is directly relevant to organizations has been published outside of the discipline or outside of the more popular and mainstream management journals” (p. 207).

It seems that research on humor has more or less steadily accumulated over the years yet a major field of study hasn't claimed the topic. For this reason and others, the study of humor stands on a diverse and somewhat fractured scholarly foundation, drawing variously from philosophy, sociology, cognitive and social psychology, anthropology, literature, linguistics, physiology, communications studies, leadership studies and more.

It's a puzzlement that humor, with a documented relationship to elevated mood and other beneficial effects, has received relatively little attention in management and organization studies, especially in light of the ubiquitousness and significance of humor in life and in organizations overall. Having a sense of humor has been linked to lowering depression, anxiety and stress and promulgating positive moods and happiness (Argyle, 1997; Edwards & Cooper, 1988). Therefore, the onus is on organizational researchers is to begin the process of broadly linking theory or research findings to themes in the literature on organizations (Robert & Yan, 2007).

### **Reasons to “Put Socks on the Octopus”**

Feelings of trepidation accompany my thoughts about the prospect of studying of an orphaned, nascent sub-specialty field that isn't organized by an over-arching, unified conceptualization of its central phenomena or generally accepted precepts. As well it should. This won't be easy; James Agee's simile of putting sock on an octopus is apropos.

On the other hand, there are compelling reasons for feeling the anxiety and forging ahead anyway. Humans are naturally curious about the everyday mysteries of who we are, what we

laugh at and why. As a point of justification, our attorney friends might say: *res ipsa loquitur*. The themes and issues people make jokes about are generally central to the cultural, social and moral arrangements of a society. Billig (2005) argues, “humor is central to social life” (p. 2). This is justification enough to study humor in my view but I, nonetheless, point to two cultural megatrends and to important relationships for further support for my perspective.

**The importance of the social experience of the workplace.** Seismic shifts in the social relations of Americans accompanied the evolution of our society from an agrarian, farm-centric culture, through the first and second Industrial Revolutions, to our present Age of Technology. Nearly twenty years ago, Robert D. Putnam, a respected political scientist and professor at the Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government published, *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 1995), fanning a firestorm of public interest and scholarly debate internationally. In his articles and the book that followed, Putnam presented astonishing evidence that “the vibrancy of American civil society has notably declined over the past several decades” (Putnam, 1995, p. 64), where the phrase *social capital*, as used by Putnam denoted the civic engagement and social connectedness of our culture.

For his data, Putnam pointed to the General Social Survey, a scientific, national sample survey that was conducted 14 times in the two decades prior to *Bowling Alone*. As for the civic engagement of Americans, in case after case – church attendance, voter turnout, PTA membership, labor union membership, Red Cross volunteerism, Boy Scouts, Lions, Elks, Shriners, Masons, League of Women Voters, even bowling league participation – the involvement of Americans in civic associations declined from anywhere from 7% (churches) to 61% (Red Cross, p. 69). Putnam’s alarm stemmed not from the perspective that these changes were inherently harmful so much as that they foreshadow a broader decline in the vibrancy of

our communities and in democracy.

Putnam even examined the data for new, so called *mass membership* organizations (i.e. AARP, National Organization of Women) for signs of counter effect. He found political importance in the levels membership but noted the absence of social connectedness (Putnam, 1995). My point is this: if Americans are no longer forging important local associations through participation in extra curricular activities and civic organizations, as Putnam's data suggests, then the social activity taking place in the workplace is more important to cultural order than ever before in the history of the United States. Most people in the U. S. still need to work to make a living. It is debatable that social media replaces face-to-face interaction for connectedness. Time will tell. For now, the preeminent local association for social connectedness defaults to the workplace.

Humor and the workplace should be studied together because of the preeminent place they jointly hold in social reality. Shared smiles and common laughter bond people to one another and hold us together during serious social problems. Koller (1988) summarizes:

...even in the midst of the most calamitous events, there is humor. To share a laugh together is a major social bond. The common denominator of humanity is its vulnerability, its frailty, and its predilection to make mistakes. To move past our troubles, we resort to humor. (p. 12)

Koller is saying that there is much in the social world that is painful and there is nothing that is intrinsically funny. Yet, through the inadequately understood phenomena of humor, humans have a near-magical, natural ability to transform anything in the rational social world into something funny -- thereby evoking all of the benefits of humor and laughter. This is an astonishingly profound observation. Can anything so positive, so redemptive be said about any other human attribute?

**The need for stress relief, more happiness, engagement in the workplace.** Of the many justifications that might be offered for the serious study of humor and the complexities of the workplace, none may be more widely accepted than the beneficial effects of humor on mental and emotional health. While the linkage between humor and its positive effects have been accepted at least anecdotally, there is likewise a growing body of evidence to show that workers are more stressed and disenfranchised in the workplace than ever.

At the human level, people are finding it harder than ever to navigate the relationships and challenges inherent in contemporary places of work. Complexity, diversity and contradiction abound. Whether it's age, gender, ethnicity, educational attainment, sexual preference, country of origin, primary language, religious preference, disability, immigration status, or even dissimilar levels of maturity, an increasingly diverse people occupies the workplace. Heterogeneity of an unprecedented magnitude has emerged rather quickly, in relative terms, infusing a cacophony of differing values, tastes, perspectives and expectations into daily work life.

At the same time these epic demographic shifts are occurring, retirement aspirations of many Americans are increasingly in jeopardy. Benefit plans are at increased risk of reduction or elimination than in years past and workers have less respite from the demands of workplace. Our culture has grown insidiously tethered to work, twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week in sickness and in health as a result of the proliferation of communications technology.

A study conducted in 2012 by Towers Watson (2012), a nationally recognized, human capital consulting firm, explored the issues and attitudes in the global workforce by surveying 32,000 employees worldwide. Their results showed that workers are struggling.

Employees everywhere— in recessionary as well as growth economies —express some level of concern about their financial and professional security, their stress

on the job, their trust in their company's leadership, the support they receive from their managers and their ability to build their careers. Many have been doing more with less — and for less — for over half a decade, and that reality doesn't seem likely to change anytime soon, if ever. (p. 2)

Gallup, a respected Washington, D.C. based polling organization, released the results of its most recent (October 2013) iteration of a massive longitudinal study first begun in the late 1990s. The survey polled a combination of 230,000 full time and part time workers in 142 countries. According to Gallup's figures, 87 % of all workers worldwide are either *not engaged* (63%) or *actively disengaged* ("State of the Global Workplace: Employee engagement insights for business leaders worldwide," 2013).

Unhappy employees outnumber happy employees by two to one. Indications are that even if one finds some measure of enjoyment and satisfaction in one's job, you may be embedded in a group of people who are barely participating and don't really care. The good intentions of even the most engaged workers can't help but be diminished by the epidemic influence of disengagement. If the productivity losses associated with this pandemic workplace malaise could be quantified, they would be staggering – larger than many world economies.

Study after study adds to a growing pile of evidence as to the levels of stress, dissatisfaction and unhappiness in the workplace. The American Psychological Association (2009) reported findings that indicated that 69% of employees say that work is a significant stressor. Forty-one percent of respondents said that they feel tense or stressed out during the workday. Yet another study (Galinsky et al., 2005) showed that one third of employees in the U.S. are chronically overworked. Of the respondents that reported overwork, 39% said they feel very angry towards their employers. These figures, even if only half right, constitute a compelling call to action.

**The perception of a beneficial relationship between humor and well-being.** More support for the relevance of studying humor in the workplace accrues from the perception of a beneficial relationship between humor and wellbeing. Positive health effects of humor have been embraced and popularized in the last three decades by healthcare professionals and the healthcare industry as well as by the general public. Norman Cousins, an American journalist, author and professor with eclectic interests, stands out as a singular historical figure prompting a wave of interest in the health benefits of humor.

Cousins chronicled his *recovery* from ankylosing spondylitis, a painful rheumatoid disease that he *treated* with laughter and high doses of vitamin C (Cousins, 1976). He claimed that ten minutes of laughter per day produced two hours of pain-free sleep and generated other positive physiological effects. Although not a physician, his groundbreaking article, *Anatomy of an Illness*, was first published in the New England Journal of Medicine and later turned into a best-selling book. As if to underscore the credibility of his claim of the health benefits of humor, Cousins lived another 16 years after having been diagnosed with this painful, progressive disease. Cousins' account spawned a humor-consulting sub-specialty; many healthcare professionals and institutions, as well as interests in the business sector, subsequently incorporated a humor practice regimen along with traditional medical approaches.

Broad public acceptance and anecdotal evidence notwithstanding, Martin (2001) in his excellent overview of the literature on humor, health and the associated research findings reports “the empirical research provides little evidence for unique positive effects of humor and laughter on health-related variables” (p. 514). He emphasizes, however, that the research literature suffers from the same epistemological issues alluded to previously. The lack of theoretical consistency in the construct prompts researchers to make choices leading to deployment of

differing methodological approaches. Many studies are incommensurate as to the variables examined and the methodologies employed. Therefore, at least at this time, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from the research literature about the positive effects of humor on health.

Although research evidence of the relationship between humor and positive physiological effects may be mixed, the relationship between humor and positive psychological impacts is on firmer footing. It has been demonstrated that humor performs a role in alleviating stress and helping people cope (Martin & Lefcourt, 1984). It can also facilitate human interaction and communication (Holmes, 2000). Humor is helpful in transmitting information that would be otherwise difficult to articulate and communicate in the serious mode (Mulkay, 1988).

Some qualitative studies have examined the ability of humor to relieve stress, introduce new employees to a culture and engender a pleasant work environment. Vinton (1989) found that teasing is a pleasant way of keeping employees on task and that banter diminishes status differentials making it easier to work cooperatively. Play, a close relative of humor involving components thereof, generates desirable affective states like excitement, enthusiasm and fun. According to Abramis (1990), play “appears likely to increase learning, mastery, and organizational involvement and may additionally increase job satisfaction and a sense of competence and mastery of life “ (p. 566).

Over and above these positive functions, humor has a more subversive but nonetheless valuable dimension in that it can open an avenue for the safe expression of resistance to the dominant social order. This can be of inestimable value in certain organizational circumstances. Humor, rightly handled, has the power to relieve the pressure of organizational contradictions and ordinary absurdities, channeling the residual flotsam and jetsam of daily life harmlessly to aside without long-term negative consequences. Since organizational researchers are necessarily

interested in human resources and because humor can point to truths about a person or about a group of people, it merits the attention of serious scholarship.

**The relationship between humor and creativity.** Arthur Koestler (1964) begins his seminal volume on creativity, *The Act of Creation*, with an analysis of humor. According to Koestler and several prominent analysts who followed (Fry, 1963; Raskin, 1985), creative activity, discovery, imagination and humor share a central cognitive process that does not follow the rules of normal discourse in the rational world. In the rational world, ambiguity, inconsistency and contradiction are problems to be solved. Fixed rules or associations govern the rules of thinking and problem solving. The creative and humorous worlds, however, pivot around the presentation of opposing rational possibilities.

According to Koestler (1964) and others who followed, it is this disruption of expectancy that can result in humor and other acts of creation. Given the kindred or even symbiotic relationship between creativity and humor, their similar or perhaps shared cognitive processes, it's no stretch to wonder whether the investigation of humor could conceivably lead to insight into desirable organizational processes and practices around innovation. Altogether, this is an un-mined area of humor exploration.

## **Summary**

In conclusion, it has been argued here that humor is a widespread, naturally occurring yet incompletely understood, complex construct that has been under-studied by most major academic disciplines. Sociologists study phenomena such as violence or discrimination in the workplace; it has been said that there is a scholarly bias for studying local problems that can be linked to large problems in the over-riding social structure. Do we avoid studying humor because it isn't a problem, is too problematic to study, or because it isn't problem-based? Or is



there another other reason? Since humor unequivocally does not deal with the rational, objective world but rather with the realm of the non-serious, ambiguous and deliberately confused world of multiple meanings, perhaps we don't study it because the irrational doesn't yield to known, rational approaches.

A qualitative, exploratory study of humor is being proposed in an effort to better understand how people enact humor in their relationships in today's complex workplace. In Chapter Two, the major theories of humor will be reviewed and summarized, terms will be defined and working definitions of humor's central concepts will be offered.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Unlike many, if not most, fields of scholarship, the scholarly literature of humor may be characterized as disaggregated or noncumulative. To take a deep dive means to risk cracking one's head on a metaphorical bottom. Conversely, it is possible to swim, fly or run great distances in nearly any direction. Contributions to humor theory span a diverse universe of disciplines, approaches and eras.

This chapter is comprised of three major segments. The first section is a survey of humor theorizing. It is the most extensive of the three sections. Next is a review of the humor literature of organizations and finally comes an orientation to comic art. We begin with an examination of how some of the field's more notable thinkers characterize humor phenomena.

### Humor Theorizing

**Defining humor.** To advance this exploration of the topic of humor, it is helpful to bifurcate two concepts: laughter and humor. Generally speaking, humor and laughter are often indistinguishable in common usage as well as in much of the discourse on humor. Although related and commonly thought of in a loosely, muddled way as inseparable constructs, laughter and humor are, in fact, not synonymous. People laugh for any number of reasons, some of which are sourced in humor and some of which are not. The perspective adopted here is that laughter is a typical humor behavior – but only one – that may or may not arise from humor. Thus, laughter is better taken up separately. Frequently, the two phenomena intersect and are coupled but there can be laughter without humor as well as humor without laughter. (Zijderveld, 1983b)

Perhaps because humor is so common, so familiar, so universally accessible, it is tempting to think that it is easily defined. But humor researchers and writers have yet to agree upon the essential qualities and a descriptive definition of humor. Humor is a complicated

construct that seemingly elicits as many definitions and conceptualizations as there are humor authors, researchers and, perhaps even, fields of study. As if to underscore that observation, subjectivity is attached to all humor, situating each person in the role of ultimate arbiter of one's individual sense of that which is funny and that which is not. A central paradox of humor is that it is all together universal and at the same time subjective (Billig, 2005).

Many definitions of humor are vague or circular (Carrell, 2008; Martin, 2007). Most are inconsistent, if not in their entirety at least in part, with other definitions. Some of the epistemologic bedlam stems from the practice of adopting neighboring, related or even competing terms, of which there is a plethora, and redeploying them to suit the application at hand. Koller (1988), for example, provides an illustrative list of 114 synonyms for humor. Another source of disagreement may arise from the fact that most theorists bring knowledge, biases and practices from their non-humor specialties to the field of humor where general rules haven't yet been established.

Psychologists tend to study humor at the individual level of analysis and definitions emanating from the psychological domain reflect a focus on individual cognitive processes and behaviors. Martin (2007) offers a loosely construed definition that is overall reflective of a psychological orientation:

It is evident from these definitions that humor is a broad term that refers to anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it. (p. 5)

Martin includes the emotion associated with the enjoyment of humor in his definition and by doing so differentiates it somewhat from competing definitions. Interestingly, the literature on humor is largely silent on the emotions of humor enjoyment.

The sociological perspective cites humor is in the enacted space between the sender of a humor stimulus and a receiver(s). Koller (1988) offers the following working definition:

Humor is that universally human quality that finds events, circumstances, behavior, situations, or the expression of thoughts to be funny, joyous, absurd, ludicrous, hilarious, laughable, amusing, clever, and possibly instructive. (p. 12)

He qualifies his definition thereafter by saying that what is funny, absurd or laughable depends on the criteria applied, who is applying them and why. By so doing, he highlights the fact that there are no universal criteria for the humorous.

Martineau (1972) seems to straddle the previous two domains with a social psychologist's perspective of humor, locating humor within the enacted space but with attention to the cognitive processes. His view is that:

Humor is a distinctive type of pervasive social process and medium of communication by which acting units in the social system convey information during the ongoing process of interaction. Humor is perceived as humorous by any of the interacting parties. (p. 114)

Here we see humor positioned as a particular communications technique and the communication is humorous if either the sender or received believes it is. This particular definition is very close to what Morreall calls *humorous amusement* (Morreall, 2009).

From yet a different perspective, Zijderfeld (1983b) points to a philosophy of humor, associating the notion of values in his definition:

Humour is an interaction in which people play with institutionalized meanings within a situation that ought to be defined as being humorous and funny through laughter. In defining the situation as humorous or not, values play a decisive role. (p. 9)

Moreover, as Zijderfeld goes on to elaborate, if humor aspires to anything more than a game or play, it transforms itself into something else quite different such as derision, self-aggrandizement or politics.

Semantics and definitions are undeniably an issue in humor studies but and perhaps especially for the research and theoretically minded. Raskin (1985), a linguist, notes “Many researchers of humor have admitted that the real nature of humor escapes them” (p. 9), which speaks to the mystery that remains at humor’s core. This puzzlement has caused some scholars and researchers to regard and treat humor as unknowable.

The debate around essentialism -- whether humor has a single, vital *thing-ness* that defines it – is one of the central debates in the field of humor studies (Latta, 1998). Anti-essentialists (i.e. Ferro-Luzzi, 1990) argue that humor has no essence and cannot be defined. Some researchers and theorists are either silent on the issue or otherwise postulate that humor maybe a loosely connected, constellation of many different things, such as *play* or *success*.

If humor were a constellation of many different things, the class of humor objects would nonetheless have at least a single quality by which to be a member of the class.

Ambiguity and mystery are dominant attributes of humor, perhaps disqualifying it forever from gaining traction as its own independent field of study. But, while meaning and ambiguity lay at the very heart of humor, they also propel humor and do so with strength and power.

By comparison to the humor literature of psychology, sociology, and philosophy, the scholarship of organizations indicates only limited theoretical and empirical attention to the topic of humor. As may be apparent from the preceding discussion of definitions, it appears that one way to define humor may very well be ostensibly (Latta, 1998). This is to say that, in order to

understand the concept of humor, we must examine the phenomenon of humor – considering example after example of humor to discern what humor is.

At this stage in the research, this study adopts the general definition of humor offered by Robert and Yan (2007) who, in the manner of Lynch (2002), view humor primarily as a communicative behavior and define humor as “an intentional form of social communication delivered by a ‘producer’ towards an ‘audience’ ”(p. 209). Adopting this perspective of humor facilitates the examination the role of humor plays in organizations as well as its relevance to relationships within the organizational context. Moreover, this definition is broad enough to include humorous messages beyond merely that which is spoken, such as drawings and gestures such as are characteristic of cartoon art.

**Classical approaches.** Recorded musings and reflection about the essential nature of humor span roughly a 2,500-year history but, as discussed above, the essence of humor is as elusive today as it was before the birth of Christ. Keith-Spiegel’s (1972) survey of the humor literature is an often-cited, more contemporary resource. While she attacks the topic like a Mig pilot on a bombing run, she flatly states in her conclusion:

To present a summary of the nature of humor by drawing together all of the scattered pieces rent apart over centuries of theorizing would be, to put it mildly, an impossibility. My goal was to line some of them up, or separate them into piles, in an attempt to familiarize the reader with the incredibly complex backdrop our contemporary humor researcher and theorists find draped across the stage.  
(p. 34)

Consequently, there are several taxonomies of humor available by which to categorize humor theorizing and humor research. The most common is an aggregation of theorists and research into roughly three main areas of theorizing: superiority (hostility/disparagement) theories, incongruity theories (cognitive or perceptual) and release or relief theories. The major theoretical areas overlap one another, each explaining something about humor but in no case explaining

everything. Some theorists and researchers are reported in more than one theoretical category. There simply is no single, general account of laughter or humor or how it fits into human life, culture or society.

Davis (1993) gamely points out that rather than competing, the three main theory groups actually complement and supplement one another because collectively they contribute to the explanation of a single universal process:

An individual (1) who perceives through humor an “incongruity” in the outer world, (2) expresses through laughter the “release” or “relief” of being subjectively unaffected by this objective contradiction, and (3) consequently feels his laughingly sustained subjective integration manifest his “superiority” to the humorously disintegrated object. (p. 7)

But each of the three areas of humor theorizing has its adherents and makes a contribution to our understanding. We begin with the superiority theories.

***Superiority theories.*** The earliest recorded ruminations on the nature of humor pre-date the Bible, appearing in the chronicled dialogues of the ancient Greek philosophers. There are philological debates galore connected to the age-old texts but humor scholars rather unanimously point to Plato (427-347 BC) as the philosopher who laid the cornerstone of early superiority theory of humor (Attardo, 2009; Billig, 2005; Morreall, 2009; Piddington, 1963). Most humor scholars, including the aforementioned, reference *Philebus* (Plato, 2001) as the seminal text, a record of the Socratic dialogue between Socrates, Protarchus and Philebus. Although Plato did not directly deconstruct humor in *Philebus*, we are nonetheless able to discern the nascent traces of ideas that subsequently blossomed into a substantial strain of humor theorizing, that of the superiority theories. Superiority theories are affective in nature, concerning the emotions of humor and laughter.

In the work that bears his name the Greek scholar, Philebus, opined that the preferred everyday life is one of enjoyment and pleasure. Socrates, however, contends that wisdom, intelligence and memory are superior and more desirable. Plato believed that human well-being is the highest purpose of moral thought and ethical conduct and that the soul should remain aloof from the pleasures and pains of the body (Frede, 2003).

In his argument, Plato conflates and reduces the complex construct, humor, into what modern theorists now regard as only a singular aspect of humor, that of laughter, and further limits his comments on laughter to that of a single variety – the laughter of ridicule. According to Plato, persons who overestimate their wisdom, physical appearance or wealth suffer from a defect of character. Their flaw is the violation of the Delphic invocation to *Know Thyself*. Those who over-estimate their gifts do not know themselves. Such people may be laughable but, if they were too weak to avenge themselves of others who laugh at their conceit, Plato and his adherents said them to be *ridiculous* (Plato, 2001).

The lack of an accurate perception of one's true self was folly and misfortune according to Plato. Even so, he noted that men feel pleasure but also malice in laughing at the misfortune of the ridiculous. In Plato's time as it is now, comedy was replete with flawed characters: thieves, hypocrites, cons, drunkards, adulterers and the ignorant. Plato was skeptical of man's capacity to laugh at the misfortune of the ridiculous while yet preserving one's honor. After all, laughter can be a form of disdain and jest is often but a brand of mockery. Because comedy evokes these mixed feelings of pain and pleasure, laughter was an offense to the venerable scholar who is so influential in western philosophical thought.



As initiated by Plato, further elaborated by Aristotle (2001), superiority theory was later revived, expounded upon and given its classic form by Hobbes (1651/2013). Hobbes' legacy lives on through this famous *Sudden Glory* quote from Leviathan:

Sudden Glory Laughter. Sudden glory is the passion which maketh those Grimaces call *Laughter*, and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. (p. 48)

Superiority theory holds that laughter is an outward expression of an internal feeling of superiority over the focus or subject of the laughter or even over one's own previous situation. Theories that account for aggression, hostility and derision are generally aggregated under the umbrella of theories of superiority. Superiority theories were the dominant perspective and the only widely circulated understanding of laughter until the Enlightenment – roughly the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Attardo, 2009).

Society's perspective of comedy and humor continued to morph as civilization continued to evolve, taking on different forms and expressions as the tastes and perspectives of the popular culture also changed. The present-day, positive view of humor held by most people conflicts with the negative view of humor held by the classical philosophers. Nonetheless, we continue to laugh at incompetence and inadequacy. Many jokes freely cast someone or a class of people in the role of the inadequate loser: blonds, Pollocks, rednecks, nerds, women drivers, dim wits and retards, children, Catholics, politicians, the sexually inadequate, etc. Example: "Did you hear about the Jew with the erection who walked into a plate glass window? He broke his nose" (Morreall, 2009, p. 134). Superiority theory continues to explain a certain kind of aggressive comedy very well.

***Incongruity theories.*** Simply put, incongruity theories revolve around the principle that humans indwell an orderly world that is organized cognitively according to predictable patterns among things, events, behaviors, etc. Patterns can be objective and external (e.g. weather) or subjective. Incongruity theories assert that humor arises from the perception of an incongruity or clash between an internal expectation or a set of expectations of a pattern(s) and what is then actually perceived. When this is pleasing to the mind, such incongruity prompts laughter or amusement. According to Morreall (2009), incongruity theory is “now the dominant theory of humor in philosophy and psychology” (p. 10). But care must be exercised; as is usual with humor literature, the term incongruity has been used variously to mean disappointed expectation, absurd, illogical, and other conditions not strictly analogous to the word, incongruity.

Incongruity theories are essentialist in nature in that they attempt to name the formal object of humor - the cognitive trick that lays at the heart of many or most humor events. It’s the successful trick that sparks a humor response. The point may be illustrated by the following joke, as offered by Alice Kahn (quoted in Davis, 1993):

A Pole who finds himself in Moscow [in the mid-1980’s] wants to know the time. He sees a man approaching him carrying two heavy suitcases and asks the fellow if he knows the correct time.

“Certainly,” says the Russian, setting down the two bags and looking at his wrist. “It is 11:43 and 17 seconds. The date is February 13, the moon is nearing its full phase and the atmospheric pressure stands a 992 hectopascals and is rising.”

The Polish visitor is dumbfounded but manages to ask if the watch that provides all this information is Japanese.

“No.” he is told, “it is our own, a product of Soviet technology.”

“Well,” says the Pole, “that’s wonderful! You are to be congratulated.”

“Yes,” the Russian Answers, straining to pick up the suitcases, “but these batteries are still a little heavy.” (p. 222)

This joke sets up our expectations around several words appearing early in the joke: time, wrist, and suitcases; perhaps even Pole and Russian. The last line of the joke presents the incongruity and confounds these expectations. Or, as more eloquently stated by Davis (1993): “from an expected continuation within one system, the comic mind pivots around an ambiguity to branch off into another system” (p. 17).

Prominent scholars, e.g. Attardo (2009) and Morreall (2009) et al, attribute the earliest recorded observation of the central role of incongruity in comedy to Aristotle (384 BC to 322 BC). The reference appears in *Rhetoric* within the context of Aristotle’s (2001) discussion of metaphor. He comments that ‘liveliness’ of a metaphor derives from the power of surprising the hearer with a novel comparison of two superficially unrelated objects. The reference to incongruity is indirect; Aristotle does not use the word per se, and does not develop the idea further. In point of fact, he subscribed to and expanded upon Plato’s negative, superiority theory of humor, calling “those whose main preoccupation is with their neighbor’s failings – people like satirists and writers of comedy; ... a kind of evil speakers and tell tales” (p. 53). Yet he may have planted the seed for important theorizing to come.

Perhaps the most famous proponents of incongruity theory are Kant (1724-1804) and Schopenhauer (1788-1860) who didn’t take up the topic until much later – the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries versus three centuries before the time of Christ. Kant (2001) asserts, “Something absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty, convulsive laugh. Laughter is an all action arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing” (p. 112). He uses the following joke to illustrate his point:

An Indian at an Englishman's table in Surat saw a bottle of ale being opened, and all the beer turned to froth, rushing out. The Indian, by repeated exclamations, showed his great amazement.

"Well, what's so amazing in that?" asked the Englishman.

"Oh but I'm not amazed at its coming out," replied the Indian, "but how you managed to get it all in" (p. 113).

According to Kant it's as though a tense expectation transforms into nothing. Schopenhauer modified Kant's view somewhat by noting that what we get is not *nothing*; it's something, but it's something that completes the story in a surprising way.

***Bisociation***. Incongruity theory shifts the focus of the humor experience from the objective to the subjective world, from the funny thing to the inner experience of a person who finds the thing funny. "Even today most comic theorists no longer regard the objective world as intrinsically funny but as somehow made funny by its human observers" (Davis, 1993, p. 11). Bisociation is one of incongruity's most pivotal concepts.

Long after Kant and Schopenhauer's time, Arthur Koestler (1964) put new wind in the sails of incongruity theory with his seminal work on creativity and humor. Koestler claims that creativity and humor share a central cognitive process that does not follow the rules of normal discourse in the rational world. The creative and humorous worlds pivot around the presentation of opposing rational possibilities or *bisociation*, Koestler's term for this central process of most humor.

Koestler noted that the human mind routinely collects and retains observations and assumptions about the perceived world along with notions of how one is to understand and behave in it. Groups of thoughts along with their implications and assumptions are helpful shorthand for the mind. Such constellations of thoughts could be called *scripts* (Bateson, 1972; Raskin, 1985), *meaning structures* (Zijderveld, 1968) or, following Koestler, *matrices*, that

support the mind's sense making activities. Matrices are comprised of notions, ideas, imagination, recollections and knowledge that are accumulated and systematized in one's mind. These systems or patterns are often held at a subconscious level, which may be organized and called to the conscious if the mind needs them.

To illustrate, suppose that in conversation someone uses the word, *friar*. A listener's mind speedily and consistently accesses thoughts and images of, perhaps, a "man of the cloth" along with the associated ideas for friar; i.e. that he is likely concerned with activities of a religious nature, wears a brown robe, lives in an abbey, is probably rotund, uses a rope for a belt, along with any other details that might comprise a frame or matrix for *friar*. The word, the images and associations it evokes are all part of a matrix. Matrices are governed by fixed rules; it's a fixed rule in my matrix that a friar is a man, for instance. Had the speaker used the word *priest* instead of *friar*, the matrix for priest would likely be somewhat related to friar but also different in some substantive details.

For Koestler, the production of humor involves bisociation or "the perceiving of a situation or idea in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" (Koestler, 1964, p. 81). He used a spatial metaphor showing two perpendicular geometric planes intersecting (imagine a three dimensional cross) to explain his concept. At the point of intersection of the two planes lay an idea that has two entirely separate but self-consistent meanings, independent of one another, depending on which plane the idea is in.

Consider the following joke told by Bob Hope to a rowdy, cheering audience of soldiers at an Army Camp Callan during one of Hope's many USO tours: "Camp Callan is right on the ocean, which makes it difficult to conduct the regular war games. It gets so foggy you can hardly see the numbers on the dice" (Hope, n.d.). The first constellation of thoughts or matrix

has to do with the daily work life of a soldier as comprised of activities preparing soldiers to fight in conflict, including mock assaults and maneuvers called *games*. This matrix is set up in the first sentence of the joke.

The second sentence uses *games* in an entirely different context – games in the sense of the ordinary gambling game, dice, which is a cultural artifact of Army life. Soldiers play dice to pass time and entertain themselves. This is the second matrix. The locus of the joke is the word *games*. Upon arriving at the end of the second sentence the mind discovers it has selected the wrong matrix to properly understand the second usage of *games* and it must quickly revisit the word and select a different interpretation of *games* to *get* the joke.

According to Koestler (1964) and others who followed, it is this disruption of expectancy that can result in humor and other acts of creation.

Many humor theories, especially those of incongruity, rely on the concept of bisociation. Incongruity theories enjoy a preponderance of favor and support today, especially in the fields of psychology and sociology where incongruity is considered to one of the most important concepts for describing and explaining the humor process.

***Release of energy or relief theories.*** Release theories argue that the dominant function of humor is the release of pent up pressure or tension from constrained but purposeless psychic energy. According to Keith-Spiegel (1972), Herbert Spencer (1860) pioneered the release approach to humor theorizing. Spencer opined that, like water flowing downhill, excess excitement follows the path of least resistance to be expelled through the outlets of vocal and muscle spasms known as laughter.

One of the best-known thinkers of all time, Sigmund Freud, found time to write about humor and, perhaps predictably, his relief theory is also the most elaborate and complex of all of

the theorists. He penned a major volume about humor, comic and wit which he subsequently described as humor “from the economic point of view alone” (Freud, 1928, p. 1), implying that his treatment of humor is more narrowly construed than humor is in today’s parlance. Freud revisited the topic of humor twenty-three years later to add a relatively brief postscript (Freud, 1928) but made no modifications to his original perspective. Instead he added process details and clarified the specific operations of the ego and super ego. For Freud, then, his theories had withstood the test of time.

*Freud’s economic view of relief.* To frame his perspective, Freud (1928) notes two ways by which a humor process takes place. Either a single person, the joker, adopts a humorous attitude about himself, his predicament or something in the environment while a second person or other people (onlookers) act as audience; or there may be two people involved, the joker plus at least one other who does not participate in the production of the humor but whom the joker considers in a humorous light.

Gallows humor offers an example of the first setting. When the prolific and infamous writer, Oscar Wilde, penniless and persecuted for being gay, lay dying in a Parisian hotel on the Left Bank, he is reported by some biographers (e.g. Belford, 2000, p. 309) to have quipped, “The wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. Either it goes or I do.” Wilde created the humor and worked it out within himself. Apparently, it afforded him some satisfaction. The observer(s) played no role in the humor process but, according to Freud, nonetheless perceived the humorous effect vicariously, feeling humorous satisfaction as well.

Cartoons provide the example for Freud’s second case; the writer or cartoonist (the joker) depicts the behavior of real or imaginary characters in a humorous way. There is no need for the characters to display any humor. Only the joker who makes his cartoon characters the object of

his humor need hold the humorous attitude. The audience shares the cartoonist's enjoyment of the humor, just as in the first case. In summary then, the humorous attitude – in whatever it consists – may have reference to the subject's self or to other people. Further, we may assume that it is a source of enjoyment to the person who adopts it and finally, observers who take no actual part in it may experience a similar pleasure.

With that as foreground, Freud (1928) distinguished between the tendentious joke, (jokes with a purpose, a hidden or partially hidden meaning), and non-tendentious jokes that are innocent and have no purpose. Freud asserted that there are two purposes of tendentious jokes: (a) the expression of unconscious impulses around hostility, such as aggression, cynicism, anti-social impulses and (b) the 'exposure' of an obscene joke.

He claimed that there is more pleasure associated with tendentious jokes than those of the innocent variety. Tendentious jokes, because they have a purpose, gain access to sources of pleasure that innocent or non-tendentious jokes cannot. The source of pleasure for a tendentious joke is the satisfaction of its purposes (or drives or instincts) but he also contemplates other possible sources of pleasure such as recognition, remembering, appreciating topicality, relief from tension and the pleasure of nonsense and play.

There are constraints or impediments that confound the direct expression of the purposes of tendentious jokes and the barriers are of two types. The first is external, such as when the higher social standing of the hearer of the joke raises the possibility of negative consequences for the telling an offending joke. The second set of factors is internal in nature, such as inhibitions against expressing hostility or using crude language.

Tendentious jokes allow the teller to express sexual and hostile urges by doing so in a joking fashion. Rather than repressing anti-social urges directly, requiring the joke teller to



expend psychical energy to produce prudent restraint, the joke teller avoids the expenditure of that psychic energy. Addressing aggressive and sexual purposes with a tendentious joke instead of directly repressing their expression represents a savings by avoiding the greater energy expenditure of restraint production. The saved psychical energy is discharged harmlessly or even pleasantly as laughter. A tendentious joke satisfies the purposes or drives which are unsafe to express directly in civil society. This mechanism is the basis for Freud's (1905) claim that "economy in the expenditure of inhibitions or suppressions seems to be the secret of the pleasurable effect" (p. 180). It is also the fulcrum about which his relief theory pivots.

Freud's theory presents a sort of pneumatics approach to the movement of psychic energy (largely undefined) which is a bit clunky and, for some, maybe even incoherent. If one feels that way after reading preceding explanation, one is in good company. Freud's conception of humor is problematic for many scholars (see Lippitt, 1995 and Morreall, 1983). According to Attardo (2008), the psychodynamic model Freud bases his theory on has been largely discredited. Whether or not Freud's explanation seems plausible, the most obvious criticisms of it may also be said of most, if not all, theories of humor: the claims are largely intangible, difficult or even impossible to measure, not generalizable to all human beings and do not cover all instances of humor.

We set that debate aside for the moment to consider other psychoanalytic mechanisms that Freud expounds. For, it has been said that Freud is the unacknowledged source of many of the structuralist accounts of humor, relating more closely to incongruity theories and segueing into linguistic theories of humor.

*Freud on humor as a social process.* It is impossible to fully synthesize all that Freud had to say about humor, comic and wit here. Still, there are additional concepts from the

psychoanalytical domain holding particular interest for our focus on theories of humor and relationships in the workplace, calling for further elucidation.

Freud characterizes humor in noble terms. In his discussion of the characteristics of humor, he notes that there is something *fine* and *liberating* about humor that is lacking in wit and the comic, which he defines separately. According to Attardo (2008, p. 104), that which Freud finds fine and liberating emanates from the joker's "triumph over narcissism, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability".

*Freud's structural model of personality.* To make this comment more comprehensible, we briefly visit Freud's conceptualization of a structural model of the psyche for which I rely heavily on Hall (1954). The total personality, accordingly to Freud is comprised of the id, ego and super ego. Even though he refers to these three major systems as structures and an apparatus, they are more properly conceptualized as the functions of the mind, not parts of the brain. In a mentally healthy person, the id, ego and super ego work out a balance, each influencing the other but overall, achieving harmony. Together, the three systems enact transactions with the environment to meet one's needs and attend to one's desires.

The function of the id is to regulate the amount of discomfort or pain experienced within the human mind as a result of excitation by internal or external stimulation. An infant, for example, is thought to consist only of id. When a baby experiences the internal excitation of hunger, it rids its body of tension by discharging energy through crying until food is presented. "Tension is experienced as pain or discomfort while relief of tension is experienced as pleasure or satisfaction" (Hall, 1954, p. 16). Freud called this the pleasure principle – a primordial life force that compels humans to avoid pain and seek pleasure.

The means by which the id fulfills its tension regulatory role (rudimentary muscle movement, for example) are inadequate for attainment of necessities of life and fulfillment of the goals of survival and reproduction. Crying will only take one so far. So, as a function of maturation, the mind develops another psychological mechanism, the ego, for dealing with the reality of the environment and asserting mastery over it. The ego carries out the executive functions of the personality, managing the id and the super ego in such a way as to serve the overriding needs of the total personality in its interactions with reality. In the well-adjusted person, this result is congruence in the personality. If the ego over-functions or abdicates responsibility, disturbance and difficulties ensue.

Freud believed that the reality principle is the primary function of the ego where reality means that which is. “The goal of the reality principle is to postpone the discharge of energy by the id until the actual object that will satisfy the need has been discovered or produced (Hall, 1954, p. 16). The reality principle trumps the pleasure principle enabling a toddler, for example, to be potty trained. The delay of gratification means that the ego must be able to tolerate tension until the tension can be discharged through appropriate behavior.

Finally, the superego is the major personality system that is the internalization of the moral code of parents. It represents the ideal rather than the real and it strives for perfection rather than reality or pleasure. If the executive branch of the personality is the ego, the superego is the judicial branch of personality. The superego is the mechanism where ethics and conscience reside and it must have the power to exact control over the ego in order to enforce its moral rules. Both the ego and the superego avail themselves of rewards and punishments, both physical and psychological to enforce their rules. For instance “the superego punishes the ego for

thinking bad thoughts, even though the thoughts may never be translated into action” (Hall, 1954, p. 22).

*Freud’s structural model of personality used to explain humor.* With the preceding discussion as background, we may now return to that which Freud claims is a fundamental characteristic of humor. He asserts,

Obviously, what is fine about it [humor] is the triumph of narcissism, the ego’s victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure (Hall, 1954, p. 27).

Reconsider for a moment the earlier discussion (p. 31) of Freud’s two ways a humor process takes place, one of which occurs when a single person adopts a humorous attitude about himself or the predicament he is in. The gallows humor of Oscar Wilde was offered as an example.

Oscar Wilde might just have easily have said, *the wallpaper is terrible but it doesn’t matter in the long run because I’m dying anyway*. A hypothetical remark like this would have still displayed Wilde’s encounter with reality and rise to it, as did his gallows humor, but it wouldn’t have had demonstrated a jot of funniness. Freud says that the difference between two such comments is attributable to humor, humor’s revelation of the narcissistic triumph of the ego and the strength of the pleasure principle – which is strong enough to assert itself even in the face such dire circumstances as impending death. That for Freud is the essence of humor.

With these two characteristics of humor – the rebuffing of reality and the victory of the pleasure principle – humor assumes a place in the scheme of reactionary and repressive processes that humans devise to avoid legitimate suffering, “a series which begins with neurosis and delusions, and includes intoxication, self-induced state of abstraction and ecstasy” (Freud, 1928, p. 1). While on the face of it, that sounds like a rather negative conclusion, Freud doesn’t

indicate that humor is a psychopathology. In fact, his remarks about humor are appreciative and complimentary in tone.

As for the second situation of humor, the one wherein the joker adopts a humorous attitude towards others, the butt(s) of the joke, a cartoon was offered as an example. In this case Freud (1928) asserts:

The one [cartoonist] is adopting towards the other the attitude of an adult towards a child, recognizing and smiling at the triviality of the interests and sufferings which seem to the child so big. The humorist acquires his superiority by assuming the role of the grown-up, identifying himself to some extent with the father, while he reduces the other people [the butts of the joke] to children. (p. 2)

If the structure of total personality is added to this analysis and contemplation, this approach – the assumption of the parental role – may also be said of the first humor process, the gallows humor example. Recall the function of the judicial, parental role of the superego in the mental hierarchy. According to Freud the superego often holds the ego in subordination, treating it as a willful child. In the humorous situation, psychical energy is shifted from the ego to the superego and it assumes parental control over the willful child, ego. But it is speaking kindly to the ego. It is saying, “Look here! This is all that this seemingly dangerous world amounts to. Child’s play – the very thing to jest about!” (Freud, 1928, p. 2)

Finally, Freud points out that the principle value in humor is not in the joke that’s made; the value is the intention that humor fulfills. Never simple or uncomplicated in his analyses, Freud writes about humor in surprisingly favorable terms. Almost parenthetically he adds, “We note that it is not everyone who is capable of the humorous attitude. It is a rare and precious gift, and there are many people who have not even the capacity for deriving pleasure from humour when it is presented to them by others” (Freud, 1928, p. 4).

To draw this synthesis of Freud's relief theory to a close and at the risk of stating the obvious, note that Freud's ideas are often times reported as psychoanalytic theory in a separate category from the three-division taxonomy. Freud's theory was extremely influential on the development of modern humor scholarship. While his "pneumatics approach" has been repudiated, the discharge of tension is still considered to be one of the primary functions that humor is believed to fulfill.

Up to this point, the humor theory surveyed, for the most, part pre-dates the development of academic specialties. The intellectuals of Europe broadly challenged the traditional bases for thought in what evolved into a cultural movement in Europe in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Age of Enlightenment, as this period later came to be known, saw onset of a separation between literary and philosophical thought. The division of the sciences into areas of academic specialty brought on the demise the unity of concerns previously apparent in the knowledge and deliberations of the arts and sciences. Theories of humor that were elaborated thereafter were born of distinctive academic disciplines, in some part accounting for the splintered state of theoretical development of humor theorizing and research (Attardo, 2009). The earnest interest in humor began to manifest in the field of sociology only after the 1970s (Kuipers, 2008; Zijderveld, 1983b).

**Contemporary approaches to theories of humor.** The scholarly literature of contemporary sociology offers alternative arrangements for logical grouping of theories. Keith-Spiegel (1972), for example, offers eight categories of theories instead of the classical three: biological, instinct and evolution; superiority; incongruity; surprise; ambivalence; release and relief; configuration; and psychoanalytic. Keith-Spiegel's scheme offers more specificity than is needed for the purposes of this study. However, there are some more modern theories of humor

that are not obviously connected to or aligned with any of the three major traditions that emerged from research in the last half of the 20th century, meriting inclusion in this review.

*Linguistic theories of humor.* Although the special focus of linguists is not central to this study, this survey would be incomplete without mention of the activity of those who have made relatively recent, significant contributions to modern humor theory. Raskin's (1985) research on linguistics and semantics spawned the first script-based semantic theory of humor, opening up a novel area of humor interest and exploration.

Here *script* refers to a word along with a 'chunk' of semantic information, or meaning, that it evokes. For example, the word, *theater* is a script that carries cognitive meaning such as: actors, make up, costumes, audience, sets, lights, tickets, playbill, etc. along with it. Scripts are key because they represent shorthand for a native speaker's knowledge of a small area of his or her world.

Raskin maintains that for a text (semantic theories are text-based) to be funny it must be: a) partially or fully compatible with to different scripts and b) the scripts must oppose one another. The function of a punch line is to "trigger the switch from the one script to the other by making the hearer backtrack and realize that a different interpretation was possible from the very beginning" (Raskin, 1985, p. 308)

The notion that a joke contains an intersection of two scripts is not unique to semantic humor theory; indeed, the concept underlies many incongruity theories (see previous discussion of *bisociation*). Conceptually, scripts have also been utilized in such diverse fields as sociology (Goffman, 1974) and artificial intelligence. What Raskin contributes is that the two scripts, fully consistent with the text, are opposite. However, that which constitutes *opposite* is rather loosely defined.

Attardo and Raskin (1991) collaborated to produce and publish a major revision of Raskin's script-based semantic theory of humor known as the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). No less than six knowledge resources (KRs) are available to inform a joke. The six KRs are: script opposition, logical mechanism, situation (includes the audience), target, narrative strategy and language. The joke teller makes choices from among a list or set of lists of these KRs to fashion the joke.

***Audience-based theory of verbal humor.*** Our final example of research and theory not fitting into the three main traditions of humor is a theory postulated by Carrell (2008). Carrell points out that nothing is inherently humorous. This explains why a certain joke may be funny to one audience but fall flat for the next. Carrell's premise is that the locus of humor is vested in the audience. She asserts that a *humor event* is an irreducible construct made up of four necessary ingredients: a joke teller, a joke text and an audience -- all of which occur within in a context of mutuality. The joke teller and the audience can be the same person or, in the case of two or more people, can alternate roles.

**Research traditions in the sociological approach to the study of humor.** As with other domains, different ways of looking at the social world produce different knowledge. Following the emergence of sociology as an academic specialty, multiple approaches to humor evolved within sociology's literature of humor. According to Kuipers (2008), the contemporary (post 1970s for the most part) literature of sociological studies of humor may be organized by five approaches: functionalist, conflict, symbolic interactionist, phenomenological, and comparative-historical.

***The functionalist approach.*** Functionalist studies attempt to explain humor from the standpoint of the purposes humor serves among and between people in a society or a group –



especially how humor operates to facilitate social order. The literature of the social, communicative functions of humor is quite large, but then again, the social motives and communication goals of users are varied and plentiful. Humor is an exceptionally useful and versatile social tool and its range of applications is as limitless as is the human imagination. A few examples are offered here to impart a flavor for just how important this approach is to sociologists of humor.

Fine (1983) asserts that humor may serve dozens, if not hundreds, of specific social functions but three seem of particular significance: humor promotes group cohesion, it provokes intergroup (or intragroup) conflict, and it provides social control. At first glance, provoking conflict seems to contradict the positivist ideological bias that pervades our contemporary attitude towards humor and which suffuses the preponderance of humor studies. In today's world having a sense of humor is a positive, highly desirable characteristic. Having no sense of humor suggests one is tedious or boring at best, or perhaps even lacking in some way. Humor has an equal and opposite countenance for nearly every positive expression it conveys. The enactment of an in-group by definition creates a person or persons who default to an out-group. Conflict can have consequences in a social system and so it is properly included in a discussion of the functions of humor.

Martineau (1972) and Stephenson (1951) are examples of sociologists who are of the belief that humor serves two major social functions: social conflict and social control. The idea of social control is an important one; Bergson and Freud both expressed perceptions and subsequently theorized that ridicule and derision are necessary to social life. The threat of shame or embarrassment ensures that members of a society comply in some measure with the expectations of one's social situs.

Graham, Papa and Brooks (1992) compiled a comprehensive list of 24 functions of humor in interpersonal communication as reported in the research literature. Their functionalist perspective is shown at Appendix A.

Attardo (2009) aggregates the functional usages of humor into four classes: social management, decommitment, mediation and de-functionalization. As used by Attardo, social management refers to the ways which humor is used as a tool to effect and maintain in-group and out-group membership and interaction. Examples of social management include the use of humor to exact social control (for example disparagement or intimidation), convey norms, ingratiate, manage discourse, repair social injury, etc.

Humor is enormously versatile for the purposes of decommitment, Attardo's second category, whereby one may deny culpability for harmful intention or retract potential negative consequences of an action through humor. *I was only kidding*. Decommittment humor is at the same time face-saving. In its mediation application, humor allows people to introduce or segue into topics that are potentially dangerous or aggressive (e.g. death or sexual innuendo). Humor's mediation treatment builds in the opportunity to escape responsibility for what one is saying, at least in part. Attardo's (2009) final category is defunctionalization, a formal way of labeling humor that has no social work associated with it but is used merely for social play.

An often-cited study in the functionalist vein is that of Coser (1960) who examined patterns of laughter during hospital staff meetings. She was able to show that the amount and direction of the joking during hospital staff meetings mirrored the social hierarchy: doctors got more laughs than residents who got more laughs than nurses. Further, she observed that members of the hierarchy tended to joke down – doctors joked about residents, residents joked about

nurses and nurses joked about themselves or patients. From this Coser concluded that joking functions to maintain and reinforce social order.

***Conflict approach.*** Studies in the conflict tradition focus on the social questions and ramifications of humor as an implement of aggression – a method and means of direct attack or of defense against a direct attack. Irony, satire, sarcasm, burlesque, caricature, and parody are some of the more notable forms of conflict humor. As one might expect, conflict approaches figure prominently in political, ethnic and gender studies of humor. Humor here is a vehicle to express and perform social control, enact resistance and as well as to subvert power relationships between individuals or groups. Issues of power, inequality, and conflict underlie the conflict approaches (Kuipers, 2008; Lockyer & Pickering, 2005). It may sound redundant but, according to Kuipers, the conflict approaches are the most contested; a strictly literal approach to humor denies humor's underlying, natural ambiguity.

***Symbolic interactionist approach.*** Studies of humor in the symbolic interactionist convention focus on humor and how it is used to construct meaning within the context of 'real time,' unscripted social interactions. These studies generally rely on transcripts of specific conversations and interactions or otherwise rely ethnographic data. A study conducted by Holmes (2000) provides an example. Utilizing the extemporaneous spoken conversations in four governmental departments recorded over a period of three years, she explored how humor is used to create solidarity and collegiality as well as how it is used to attenuate threatening behaviors such as threats or insults. She was able to observe how humor is used in the workplace to open and close meetings and at points of change within an interaction. Humor also figured prominently in defusing tension and facilitating difficult negotiations.

Obviously, studies using the symbolic interactive approach present practical difficulties in that human subjects are generally reluctant to have their informal conversations recorded and informal humor is difficult to observe and measure. However, this approach would provide insight into how humor naturally occurs within a given context.

***Phenomenological approach.*** The phenomenological approach to humor is a systematic approach to humor wherein humor is a worldview or a paradigm of perceiving and constructing the social world. A humorous worldview has its own set of rules quite apart from but existing alongside those of the rational world. Usual social rules are held in abeyance so that a humorous worldview imbues the individual with freedom to play with alternative meanings to construct reality. This approach is divergent from the previous approaches in that humor is a separate, parallel domain to the real world. An excellent example might be drawn from the treasured literature of Dr. Seuss (Seuss, 1937). *And to think that I saw it on Mulberry Street* is a classic story about a young boy's humorous experience of the fabulous sights he sees on his way home from school. Kuipers (2008) notes that phenomenological sociology provides useful insights but is difficult to apply in actual research.

***Historical comparative approach.*** The final tradition, the historical-comparative approach examines humor from different social and historical perspectives, comparing it across time and space, often linking humor to disruptive forces in the larger social structure. According to Kuipers, most sociological work done during the decade of the 1990's falls into this vague, umbrella category but she notes that the approach lacks central theory.

Christie Davies (2011), who has studied jokes in-depth, across cultures, is an acknowledged authority on the comparative analysis of jokes. He has written extensively on ethnic humor noting, its near universal appeal and usage. "Usually when a large new joke cycle

or mode of joking gets going in America, it soon spreads to Europe, where the jokes are quickly adapted to local conditions and institutions but remain essentially the same” (Davies, 2011, p. 185). Various cultures rob jokes freely and adapt ethnic jokes to local targets.

**Summary.** The three classical approaches to humor theorizing were reviewed with an emphasis on some of the more pivotal contributors. Special attention was devoted to Sigmund Freud because I found his writing to be surprisingly intuitive, logical, and perceptive as well as remarkably additive to a comprehensive explanation of humor. Prior to this exploration, I did not know that Freud’s contributions are so essential to understanding humor. He was a nice surprise!

After reviewing the main theories of humor, the common approaches employed in contemporary sociological investigators of humor were highlighted. Functionalist studies have fallen out of fashion within sociology overall but are still dominant in the narrower silo of humor studies in sociology. With apology to scores theorists whose contributions were omitted or treated incompletely, I close this section with some observations about the body literature of humor theory.

The three classical perspectives of humor theorizing are not all-inclusive but they do form the theoretical basis for the vast majority of humor research. To the three classical approaches, I added the most noteworthy contemporary outliers. Some researchers have reached for a comprehensive theory of humor that combines facets of all three classical approaches (e.g. Morreall, 1983).

Some reviewers survey the field on a contributor-by-contributor basis. Piddington’s (1933) review, for example, catalogues and summarizes 49 authors; it is respected as one of the most authoritative. Keith-Spiegel’s (1972) review is equally, if not more, respected. She list

eight categories of humor theory: biological, instinct, and evolution; superiority; incongruity; surprise; ambivalence; release and relief; configurational; and psychoanalytic and reviews individual theorists within the categories. Her categories combine and collapse roughly into the three main categories already covered herein.

Keith-Spiegel also ambitiously attempts to compare positions on specific humor issues or approaches on an issue-by-issue basis. Her list enumerates 22 areas of disagreement among humor theorists; her reference list for a 31-page book chapter has a whopping 163 entries. Raskin (1985) and Morreall (1985) have also authored reviews. Graham, Papa & Brooks (1992), citing Gruner (1978) and Ziv (1988), point out that there are over 100 documented theories of humor. Contributors span several millennia, come from all walks of life, claim numerous and diverse academic disciplines and many are known, not for achievements in humor, but for contributions in other domains of arts and sciences.

Because there is little to no agreement on language and terms or even approaches, it's difficult to predict where a journey such as a review of the literature might take one, or to understand where "there" is when one finally arrives. There are an infinite number of ways to be humorous and seemingly almost as many ways to explain it. When one sets sail on the ocean of humor theorizing, one must trust that conditions are favorable and that one can find one's way home again. The major groupings of humor theories are but channel markers in a very vast theoretical sea.

By comparison to where we've just been, where we are going will be a much shorter journey. The humor literature of organization studies will be reviewed before turning our attention to comic art. Humor studies have only a small presence, if that, within the scholarly literature of organizations.

## **The Humor Literature of Organizations**

Contemporary researchers working on the topic of humor are inclined to share and express a common lament: that despite its enduring nature, the beneficial aspects of humor are under-researched, under-appreciated and humor's beneficial effects are not fully realized. When it comes to management and organization researchers, I'd like to add one more *under* to that sentence: the lament is understated. Psychology has recognized the value of humor for wellbeing, trailed at some distance by sociology; these disciplines are responsible for the preponderance of humor research. And, the great majority of these studies are of the functionalist ilk. Management and organizational scholars have shown comparatively little interest.

Some supporting observations are as follows. The topic or role of humor is conspicuously absent from the first and second waves of scholarly interest in organizational culture, the exemplar of which is the seminal work of Edgar Schein (1992). Cameron and Quinn's (2011) competing values framework, where one might logically expect an acknowledgement of the significance of humor in culture, stands on 30 years of data -- all silent to the role of humor. Bolman and Deal's (1997) reframed organization relies on four foundational pillars: structure, human resources, politics and symbolism. But the originators are silent as to a role, frame or theory of humor even though humor has a conspicuous relationship to human resources, politics and symbolism. Humor has a known relationship to learning but the literature of organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Senge, 1990) is utterly silent on the significance of humor. The same may be said of the theorizing of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), communities of practice (Wenger, 2000), as well as teams (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). All of these are extremely important, relative, central domains of

interest for the organizational researcher with tremendous upside potentiality for the influence and practice of humorous expression.

Taking note of the insignificance with which management and organization studies have historically treated humor, Westwood and Johnston (2013) remark that *humor, frivolity* and *play* are an anathema to the prevailing paradigm of work, organizations and business as the domains of the rational and the serious. Equally as indicting is the assertion that “rationalist and the functionalist assumptions have strongly informed the paradigmatic frame of mainstream management and organization studies facilitating the marginalizing or delegitimizing of humor as a phenomenon of study” (p. 220).

Westwood and Johnston point to the monopoly of the functionalist mindset, with its rationalist assumptions and managerial concerns for order and control, as a kind of blinders that management and organizational researchers are tacitly wearing. Citing Jackson and Carter (2000, p. 5), they note that the aims of capital are not completely altruistic: “behavior can always be manipulated so that it ‘better’ serves the purposes of the organization or of management.” Management and organizational scholars then, are immersed in a prevailing worldview that values the functional and the rational over and above any other perspective.

Gareth Morgan writes:

Throughout history, organization has been associated with processes of social domination where individuals or groups find ways of imposing their will on others. This becomes clearly evident when we trace the lineage of the modern organization from its roots in ancient society, through the growth and development of military enterprise and empire, to its role in the modern world. (Morgan, 1997, p. 303)

The residual effect is that humor in the main has been either marginalized as irrational and irrelevant or narrowly considered for its functional value as a variable to be engineered to



achieve valued organizational outcomes. This is one explanation of why management and organization studies of humor are largely of the functionalist perspective. It leads one to wonder if humor is indeed so enigmatic or if it just unresponsive to manipulative efforts.

**Should humor in the workplace be encouraged?** There are several well-known, successful businesses that credit success, at least in part, to embracing and leveraging humor and play as part of corporate culture. For instance, the antics of the long time CEO of Southwest Air, Herb Kelleher (now retired) are legendary (Labich & Hadjian, 1994). Most who travel SWA have by now enjoyed a chuckle as evoked by a flight attendant singing the mandatory FAA flight safety announcements or peppering an otherwise boring delivery with jokes. Southwest Air is consistently among *Fortune Magazine's* top five most admired corporations in America. The affable Ben and Jerry of Ben & Jerry's ice cream fame come to mind. The employees of Zappos stage office parades through their corporate offices on Friday afternoons and Google is famous for the fun and games opportunities incorporated into its office culture (Hsieh, 2010; Smith, 2013).

To try to understand humor's potential contribution to organizational and employee effectiveness Mesmer-Magnus, Glew and Viswesvaran (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of positive humor in the workplace, covering 49 independent studies of prior humor research spread over three decades. The meta-analysis was limited to the use of positive humor where the aims are to assist individuals in maintaining perspective, lowering stress, minimizing conflict, and improving relationships. By contrast, negative humor is the humor of disparagement, ridicule, sexism and racism, self-defeat, and teasing with goals such as diminishment, resistance and control. There were an insufficient number of studies of negative humor to include in the meta-analysis.

The authors delve into the possibility of a relationship between positive humor and employee health as well as work related outcomes such as performance, job satisfaction, and engagement. Leader effectiveness (e.g. perceived leader performance, follower approval) as well as the ability of humor to mitigate the harmful effects of workplace stress on employee burnout was also examined.

The key findings suggest that employee performance, satisfaction, workgroup cohesion, health, engagement and coping effectiveness are related to the use of positive forms of humor in the workplace. When people experience the workplace as fun, inclusive of humor and supportive of a sense of humor, they experienced a reduction in stress and burnout.

Moreover, when supervisors use humor in their everyday dealings, workers demonstrated improved performance along with an improved satisfaction with their supervisor and their supervisor's performance. The cohesion of the work group was enhanced and engagement improved.

The findings of Mesmer-Magnus, et al confirm that humor can be successfully used to help deal with disappointment or make social interaction easier in stressful situations. However, their investigation was hampered but that now old bugaboo: "...in order to make meaningful strides in our understanding of the role of humor at work and in life, researchers will need to more cleanly articulate the humor construct" (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012, p. 176).

The indications are that humor has the potential to help to change behavior and motivate people to access their creativity to deal innovatively with complex workplace problems. Humor appears to improve performance under stress and enhance one's openness to constructive feedback. Functionalist studies, however, point the way for humor to be usurped as a

management tool. But because there is simply not enough input as to the non-functionalist type approaches, their resistive, disordering potential has not been mined.

## **Comic Art**

The premise of this proposed study is that comics, perhaps more properly referred to as sequential art (Eisner, 2008), are a special case of communication deserving of consideration by organizational scholars and practitioners interested in the enactment of relationships in the workplace. The final section of this review of the literature is intended as an orientation to the study of American comic art, the mass production of which only is about 100 to 150 years old in this country.

**Concepts and definitions.** Waugh's (1947) pioneering book on this art form, *The Comics*, as cited by Horn (1971) offers the first, widely accepted definition of comics as "a form necessarily including the following elements: a narrative told by a sequence of pictures, a continuing cast of characters, and the inclusion of dialogue or text within the picture" (p. 9). Comics are often serialized, appearing daily or weekly in newspapers, as well as in magazines and other media outlets. Comic strip characters have ongoing relationships within the strip that are established before the reader arrives and, apparently, continue after the reader leaves; the characters and the action aren't bound by time. This definition is adequate in so far as it goes.

McCloud (1993) points out that a definition such as Waugh's does not differentiate the static nature of comics from animated art and also omits the intentionality of the artist. He offers the following alternative definition to capture the essence of the difference between comic art and animation: "Comics are juxtaposed [separated in space] pictorial and other images [words and symbols] in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an

aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). With this clarification, we have a more complete understanding of the meaning of the term, sequential art.

Neither Waugh’s nor McCloud’s definition makes mention of topical category or genre (e.g. crime, science fiction, romance, satire, mystery, horror, etc.), nor are materials, color, degree of abstraction, quality, tools or subject matter specified. Such are the raw materials of the artist. Waugh’s and McCloud’s definitions leave ample room for longer narratives such as comic books or even graphic novels. Strictly speaking, however, single panel cartoons, the stock-in-trade of *The New Yorker*, would be excluded from *comics* by McCloud’s definition; there is no sequencing in the single panel cartoon.

Further, neither Waugh’s nor McCloud’s definition includes a requirement for the comic to be funny. For them, cartoons are a style or an approach (much like caricature is a style based on exaggeration) whereas comics are a medium that often relies on the cartoon approach to making pictures. Just as film is media that can hold a dramatic style, comic is an art form which, like a vessel, which can hold any number of styles, ideas and images (McCloud, 1993).

As noted in previous sections, humor researchers frame humor theories most frequently for verbal humor, especially scripted verbal jokes, rather than comic art. Lowis and Nieuwoudt (1995) indicate that researchers of comic art most often assume full compatibility between theories of humor formulated for verbal humor and expressions of comic art. However, this may not be so, indicating one of many gaps in the literature.

The realization of the expression of a comic relies on the interplay of text and artwork. The fundamental building block of a comic is the panel and the panels are to be taken together as a unit forming a kind of gestalt that is greater than the sum of its parts. (Horn, 1971). Construction of a comic is subject to many of the same conventions and considerations as

filmmaking. The artist has a myriad of decisions to make with regard to lighting, angles, composition of the shot, foregrounding and backgrounding, what to show in the frame and what to leave to the imagination of the reader.

Unlike cinematography, however, a comic is the work of a lone artist or a small team of people who bring characters to life from the space of a flat page. The strip must be compelling enough to entice readers to return to the comic page on a daily basis and most do so in about 45 to 60 seconds of time.

But exactly where the lines between comics and cartoons are drawn, so to speak, is a matter of some debate. The form continues to evolve, as do standards and criteria. Hempelmann and Samson (2008) state “Cartoons are understood as a humor-carrying visual/visual-verbal picture containing at least one incongruity that is playfully resolvable in order to understand their punch line” (p. 614). Citing Nilsen and Nilsen (2000), they go on to say “cartoons are jokes told in a picture (drawing, painting, etc.) comprising one or only a few panels” (Ibid, p. 614). It is safe to say that while there is a relationship between comics and cartoons, they, in fact, are not the same artifact.

While I am open to the expansion of the definition of a cartoon to include a stories or jokes told in several panels and not just a single panel, I am more skeptical of the requirement for either a cartoon or comic to be funny in order for it to qualify as a cartoon. To this point, Redlich, Levine and Sohler (1951), who used a self-titled *Mirth Spectrum* for their study of humorous responses to comic art, comment, “We recognize that this method at present may be an oversimplified analysis of more complex behavioral reactions. The affective response to cartoons is unquestionably much more complicated than is manifest by a mere smile or even a laugh” (p. 721). More often, cartoons rise only to the level of droll, clever or, perhaps, only to

the level of entertaining. *Peanuts*, drawn by Charles M. Schultz for nearly 50 years and loved by many, is one of the most successful comic strips in American history. Yet, it was rarely laughably funny. To this very point, Inge (1987), who I quote at some length, remarks:

Not all things “comic” are necessarily funny or laughable. Comedy implies an attitude towards life, an attitude that trusts in man’s potential for redemption and salvation, as in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* or Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Since comic strips always conclude with resolutions in favor of morality and a trust in the larger scheme of truth and justice, they too affirm a comic view of the social and universal order. While *Krazy Kat* and *Smokey Stover* may appear absurd, they do not reflect on the world around them as being irrational or devoid of meaning, as in the drama of the absurd. Comic art is supportive, affirmative, and rejects notions of situational ethics or existential despair. (p. 81)

These seem like key points to remember in this proposed analysis of a special case of comic art.

Topically speaking, cartoonists rarely venture onto the ground of serious, contemporary social concerns such as gay marriage, slavery, legalization of marijuana or abortion and when they do, it is an uneasy place for the cartoonist, editor and readership alike. From time to time Garry Trudeau takes up polemic issues in his popular and famous *Doonesbury* strip but more than once he has found himself at the center of controversy with his comic strip sidelined by wary editors (Fung, 2012). Note, however, that Trudeau did receive a Pulitzer Prize in 1975 for his work in *Doonesbury* so, obviously, there are personal choices, exceptions and trade offs for the cartoonist to make for the sake of his or her integrity and for the craft.

**Brief history.** Pinpointing the very first comic strip is an impossibility and any point of origin one might name would be open to challenge. Public lands in the several southwestern states of the U.S., for instance, are dotted with original rock art or petroglyphs, estimated to be about 1,500 years old. It requires little or no imagination to envision a Paiute Indian with time on his or her hands amusing fellow tribesmen by telling stories with pictures and symbols carved on a canyon wall – rather like prehistoric *PowerPoint*.

McCloud (1993) mentions The Bayeux Tapestry, circa 1070 AD, as one of the earliest and most famous instances of sequential art in the western world. Made of ordinary linen canvas and woolen embroidery, the 230-foot textile survived in tact in Bayeux Cathedral's treasury in Normandy, France before being discovered around 1729 AD. It is believed that the half brother of William the Conquer, who served as a bishop of the cathedral, commissioned the work that depicts the Norman conquest of England in pictures and which captions in Latin embroidered onto the tapestry ("Bayeux Tapestry," n.d.).

The word, *cartoon*, is taken from the French word, *carton*, which is the name given to small sketches or the practice studies artists often draw on pasteboard as a preliminary step to creating larger works of art. In 18<sup>th</sup> century France and Italy, these sketches along with unifying captions, or *cartons*, became fashionable among the public and were appreciated for humorous or satirical content and appeal. Around that time two British artists, Rowlandson and Hogarth, innovated in the art world by creating and displaying artistic sequences around a unified theme. Equally or even more importantly, they first used word balloons with dialogue that flowed from the mouths of their characters (McCloud, 1993). Their large sequential panels were displayed and viewed as art on a display wall.

In the United States, the introduction, acceptance and popularity of comics as an American, mass produced art form can be traced rather directly to the confluence of two forces: the introduction of the printing press and advanced printing techniques and an epic competitive war between two titans of the newspaper industry, William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close, these two, larger-than-life adversaries, one an entrepreneur and the other an heir, engaged in a hotly contested circulation battle for supremacy and dominance of New York's lucrative newspaper market. Both newspapermen engaged in

rapacious competitive tactics: price wars, hiring away one another's employees and by outrageously sensationalizing the news of the day. In an attempt to gain competitive advantage, both newspapers introduced a Sunday supplement that included free extra pages of copy, puzzles, games and, after the adoption of the advanced printing technology, color cartoons (Walker, 2011).

Cartoonist Richard F. Outcault was the author and artist of the first popular comic strip *Hogan's Alley*, penned for Pulitzer's New York newspaper. The strip featured a yellow nightgown-clad central character known as The Yellow Kid. Hearst hired Outcault away from Pulitzer and Pulitzer responded by hiring another cartoonist to continue the strip with the same The Yellow Kid character -- a choice that would be illegal in the today's world of intellectual property. For a time, the city enjoyed The Yellow Kid in both newspapers and a new artistic form emerged from the competitive chaos. As Horn (1971) states, "The comic strip, child of commercialism and technology, inadvertently conceived and born by accident, was to grow and proliferate in all directions before anyone even thought of giving it a name (p. 8).

**The *New Yorker* cartoon - homage to an icon.** Today, comics and cartoons enjoy widespread popularity and mass media distribution worldwide. The cartooning industry, if it may be called that, is comprised of the work of many talented cartoonists, illustrators, animators, syndicators, editors and publishers. Notable among the cartoon art produced by this flotilla of talent are the concise comic ideas expressed as single panel cartoons in *The New Yorker* magazine. The magazine has published approximately 80,000 single panel gag cartoons over the course of an illustrious, nine-decade history, creating a unique chronicle of American culture and achieving a cult-like following (Mankoff, 2014). In their choices for publication, the magazine's



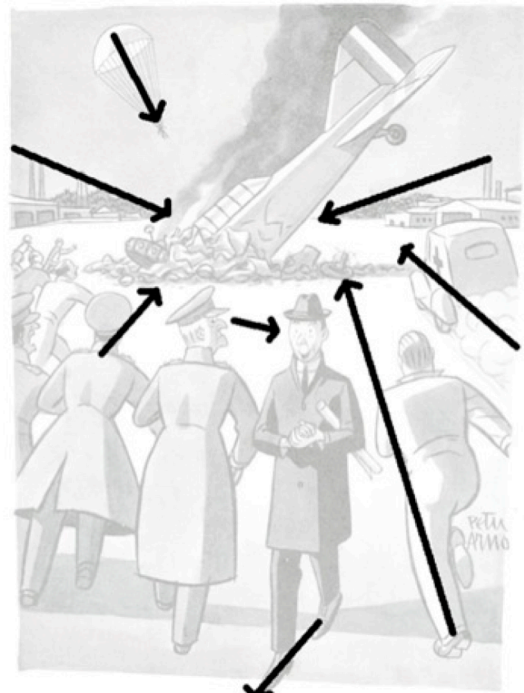
editors privilege cartoons that are a balance of art and writing and jokes that tend toward the cerebral even if, at times, it is at the expense of humor.

Robert (Bob) Mankoff began selling his idea drawings to the *New Yorker* in 1977, became a contract cartoonist with the magazine in 1980, and achieved one of the pinnacles of the cartooning profession in 1997 when he became the *New Yorker* magazine's cartoon editor. In 1992, he founded The Cartoon Bank, the licensing and reprint-marketing platform for the magazine's vast library of cartoon art. In his role as cartoon editor, Mankoff estimates that 1,000 cartoon submissions cross his desk each and every week in fierce competition for one of the 16 or 17 coveted positions in the weekly magazine. Mankoff often writes a short article for the magazine, blogs on The New Yorker website, makes public appearances and lectures about humor. He discusses various aspects of cartoon art and the cartooning process, as well as his approach to selection of appropriate art for the magazine (Mankoff, 2014).

While it is doubtful that Mankoff will contribute to the scholarship of cartoon art in the strictly academic sense, he is nonetheless an esteemed educator, impassioned steward and custodian of the art and craft of the cartoon, one who offers extraordinary perspective, experience, insight and expertise. Mankoff and a guest author, Paul Karasik, wrote about the ingredients of the perfect cartoon in a recent blog, noting the importance of the complementary relationship between the art of the cartoon and the caption (<http://www.newyorker.com/cartoons/bob-mankoff/the-perfect-cartoon-part-two>). Either element should be strong enough to exist alone but together create a synergetic whole that is greater than either component is on its own. The following example was offered to illustrate the perfect composition and balance between word and art.



*"Well, back to the old drawing board."*



*"Well, back to the old drawing board."*

*Figure 1.* The perfect cartoon. Cartoon by Peter Arno, 1941. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/cartoons/bob-mankoff/the-perfect-cartoon-part-two> on July 10, 2014. Copyright 2014 by Condé Nast. Reprinted by permission.

The added emphasis of the arrows in the image on the right directs our attention to the manner in which the cartoonist used every element in the composition to direct the readers' attention to the central event -- an airplane crash. All elements with directionality point the reader's eye to the wreckage. The attention of the onlookers is focused on the crash with only two exceptions: the General and the engineer. The General's face and nose point to the engineer and the engineer, who is leaving the frame, elegantly points to the caption with his left foot. Many or most of us have quoted this caption in our everyday language without knowing its origin.

## **Summary**

This chapter is a survey of the scholarly literature of humor theory with an emphasis on the three most common theoretical divisions: superiority theories, incongruity theories and relief or release theories. The literature was found to be diverse, fragmented and non-cumulative. Scholarly interest has been sporadic across the last two and one-half millenia with slightly more interest emanating from the academy in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is little agreement on terms or definitions and the humor construct lacks a certain definition. Therefore, humor may be said to be under-specified and under-theorized and possibly inadequately understood – a surprising state of affairs for such a universal phenomena. Rational thinking, functionalist aims and reductionist habits of mind may impede the understanding and appreciation of humor. However, the power of humor to communicate, transform, enlighten, facilitate, unite and entertain makes and keeps it intriguing, relevant and a significant human phenomena.

### Chapter 3: Methods

This dissertation is a qualitative, exploratory examination of the phenomena of humor in the workplace. The cartoon art and body of work of the prolific cartoonist, Scott Adams, will serve as the primary source of data. Adams' hugely successful comic strip, *Dilbert*, bears the same name as the central character of the strip. Dilbert, the strip's protagonist, is a likeable amalgamation of *everyman*. He and an ensemble cast of recurring characters perform the regular duties and rise to the ordinary challenges of work and relationships in an imaginary, non-specific technology organization. Their imaginary work lives are acted out in three panels (weekdays) or six panels (Sunday edition). The guiding central research question that will be addressed through the research is: How are the phenomena of humor and social interactions within the workplace depicted in cartoon art? Through this study, I hope to explore the multifaceted, situated nature of humor in organizations.

#### Study Design

A qualitative, exploratory approach to the research has been chosen as the best means to fulfill the intent of this study: to discern a better understanding of how people enact humor in the workplace by exploring workplace humor in comic art. Creswell (2003) defines a qualitative approach as:

...one in which the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives (i.e. the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, with an intent of developing a theory or pattern) or advocacy/participatory perspectives (i.e., political, issue-oriented, collaborative, or change oriented) or both (p. 18).

The goal of this research is to discern and rely, as much as possible on what others (cartoonist, characters, audiences) find absurd, funny, and ridiculous about the workplace, employee-

employer relationship, the content of the characters' jobs, or in the social relationships of the characters.

Social constructivism is a perspective that is based on the assumption that individuals seek understanding of the world in which we live and work and that people ascribe subjective meanings to their experiences. These meanings are complex and varied; therefore, as a researcher, I hope to evoke through my research the opposite of a narrow, reductionist understanding of the workplace by relying, as much as possible on the insights discerned from the humor of others as the basis for my claims on knowledge. Creswell (2003) aligns this posture towards knowledge claims with the qualitative approaches. The mass adoption of new technology as well as theoretical developments have opened the door to the extension of qualitative approaches to the analysis of documents and representations of human action (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). Therefore, a qualitative approach is viewed as a best fit for aligning the elements of inquiry of the planned research with the design processes conceptualized herein.

The qualitative research will be exploratory in nature, as exploratory research is not intended to lead to final decisions or conclusions. This feature is particularly suitable for the study of humor in cartoons from which it is expected that patterns and meanings will emerge as the researcher interacts with the data. The field of humor studies or *humorology*, as some like to call it, is not organized around a single central, or a set of central, definitions and constructs. No comprehensive theory that explains all instances of humor has been advanced. Many believe that because humor is under-researched and under-theorized, such a construct may yet emerge. Others, the anti-essentialists, believe there cannot be a central construct because humor doesn't have a single thing-ness to it. Regardless, the matter is unsettled.

Exploratory research with its goals of discovery and insight generation helped advance the discussion and assisted in filling in a gap, even in a small way, in the scholarly literature while the debate about essentialism continues to bubble among researchers and theorists. Similarly, comic art studies have only begun to emerge from the shadows of illegitimacy and academic ill-repute and so exploratory research is particularly well suited to this instance.

The general flow of my study is movement from my original idea about my topic to relevant ethnographic materials (comic strips) by use of Internet access to the library of comic strips, identifying and collecting relevant documents, collecting data from them, organizing the data, analyzing the data and to report findings.

### **Sources of Data**

**Size of the universe.** *Dilbert*, first created in 1989, is one of the most successful syndicated comic strips in history (Adams, 1995a). The comic strip is serialized and appears daily in 2,000 newspapers in 70 countries. *Dilbert* enjoyed a brief run of 30 episodes as an animated television show on the UPN network in 1999 and 2000. Adams, the author and originator of the comic strip wrote and executive produced *Dilbert*, the television show.

Adams has created an abundant body of work in twenty-five years of publication of *Dilbert*. During the early part of the decade of the 90's, the strip was still evolving and had not yet settled into its niche of comic art of the workplace. Adams noted that until the 90's it hadn't occurred to him that there was a market for a comic about work (Adams, 1995a). "Dilbert had a job, but it was simply a shorthand way to define his personality" (p. 40). Mostly Dilbert was shown at home where the conversations were between Dilbert and his dog, Dogbert, or he pursued other daily activities like going to the doctor or going on a date. The strip was mostly about Dilbert's personal life as opposed to his professional life.

In 1993, Adams began publishing his email address in the strip. Prior to his usage of email and the launch of Dilbert.com, in 1995 Adams had only indirect ways of assessing on the success of his strip. Obtaining the direct feedback proved pivotal in helping him define his market and target his audience. Therefore, early years of the strip were developmental for the purposes of this study; the strip did not solidify its current focus on the workplace until 1993. In *real life* Adams continued working his *day job* until 1994 (Adams, 2008).

Adams' body of work includes five books that are a combination of text and comics, two of which appeared on the New York Times' best-seller list. He has released two books that are collections of comics *left on the cutting room floor*, so to speak, in the sense that these cartoons were never published in newspapers, a common industry practice for the more successful cartoonists.

He has published 32 books that are reprints of comics organized into various compilations around topical themes. The first twenty-years of Dilbert comic art is compiled into a single, large tome, *Dilbert 2.0* (Adams, 2008). The number of cartoons in the volume is estimated to be between 2,000 to 2,500 unique comic strips published between 1989 and 2009. In addition, Adams has written three books of fiction unrelated to comics. The reprint books are generally available for purchase from only from Dilbert.com, Adams' website. Appendix B shows a list of Adams' books.

**Other artifacts.** Adams pioneered the online presence of a syndicated comic strip by establishing Dilbert.com in 1995 where it is reported to be the most widely read, syndicated comic on the Internet (Adams, 1995). The site has distinctive elements. Applications (widgets) are provided that enable users to download and embed *Dilbert* strips in user email, blogs and on social media websites. In this fashion, Adams further leverages *Dilbert's* popularity by

encouraging website visitors to follow and propagate the strip. In this fashion, Adams accesses and encourages viral phenomena.

Adams' routinely blogs on his website and the blogs are archived from 2008 to the present. Additionally, Adams is interactive with Dilbert fans. His website features Dilbert's *mash ups* where website visitors are invited to try their hands at being "funnier than Adams" by inserting a different punch line than the one that Adams actually published by rewriting the last frame of a strip and posting it for a possible reaction from the fan community. Visitors and aficionados may leave comments and give direct feedback on individual strips. Examination of any artifacts other than the library of cartoon art contained on the Dilbert.com website will not be a part of this study

**Sampling.** There were two layers of sampling for this study: random sampling to define the universe and theoretical sampling to define themes and categories. First, three tranches of strips were drawn utilizing a random sampling technique too delimit the total universe of strips in the Dilbert.com Internet library. The initial tranche was comprised of 12 random strips per year for years 1989 to the beginning of 1993 for a set of 48 strips. The same random sampling technique was utilized to draw 12 strips per year for the years 1993 to 2007. And a third tranche of 12 strips per year for the years 2008 to 2013 was drawn.

The purpose of the first tranche was to segregate the data for the earliest years, when workplace cartoons were uncommon, from ensuing years where workplace cartoons were generally more available. This was in order to examine the data set of the early years separately in the event that some kind of adjustment for scarcity was needed. The remainder of the universe of data – years 1993 to 2013 was sampled in two more tranches. The first was a data set for years 1993 to 2007 represented the era prior to the Great Recession. The last draw was



representative of the post-Great Recession years after 2007. This was done in order to examine for impacts of the recession on topicality.

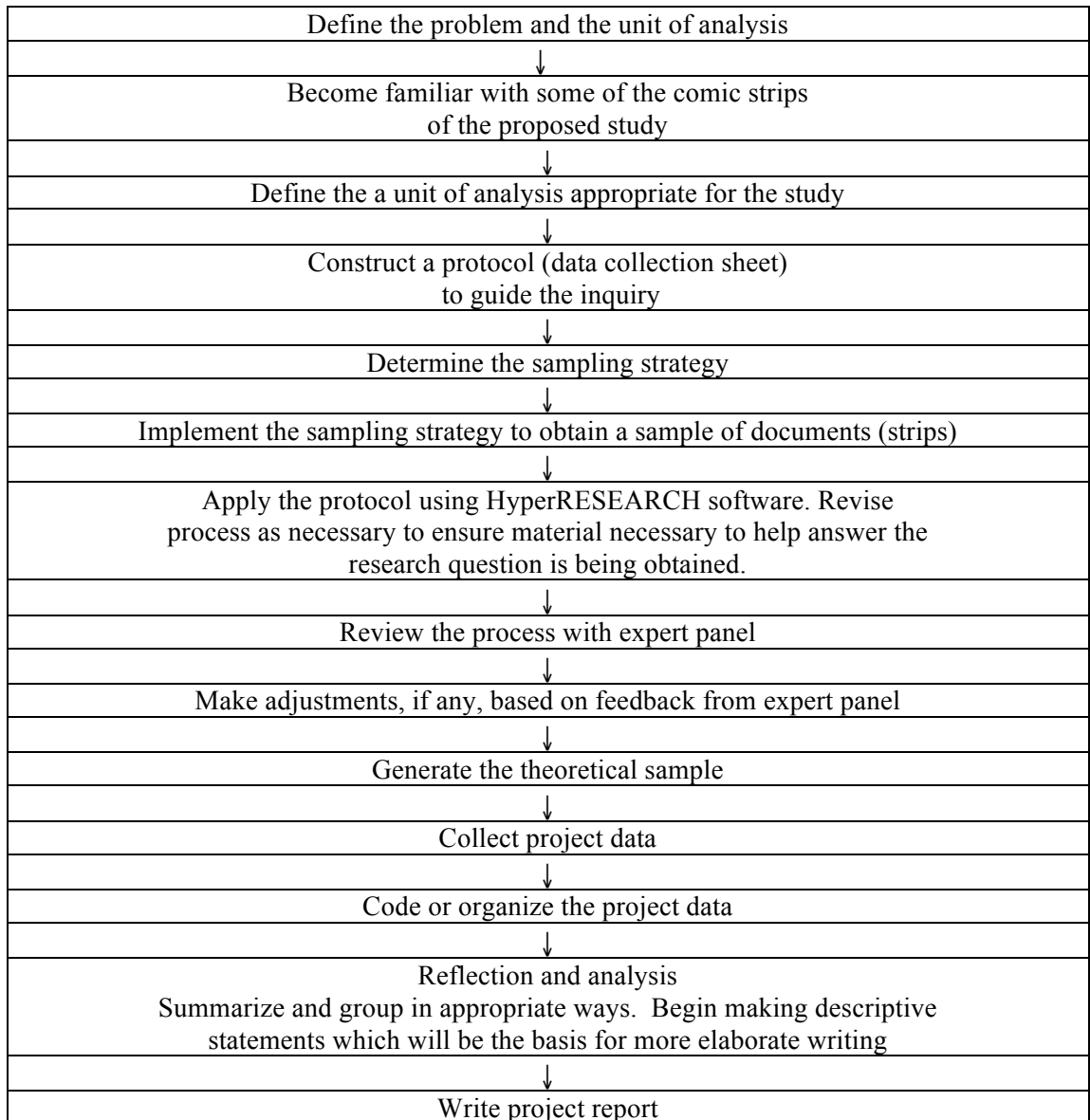
The unit of analysis is the object about which the researcher wants to comment at the end of the study. The unit of analysis for this study was the comic strip, as opposed to the single panel or a character. Forman and Damschroder (2008) citing Patton (2002) point out that the unit of analysis can be “individual people, groups, programs, organizations, communities, etc. There may be more than one unit of analysis in a study” (p. 43). However, the strip was deemed the proper unit of analysis for this early exploratory type micro study. Although other options were available, changing the unit of analysis proved to be beyond the scope of interests at hand.

**Further refinement of the initial pool.** Several criteria were to necessary effectively narrow the universe to achieve a sample with maximum relevance. First, only strips showing interaction occurring within the context of the workplace were included in the randomly drawn samples. In the early days, the strip mostly depicted Dilbert’s non-work life before Adams and the strip concentrated on the arena of work. Secondly, the strip had to contain two or more characters. Again, in the early years, the dialogue of the strip most often occurred between Dilbert and Dogbert, Dilbert’s anthropomorphized dog, in non-work settings.

The initial data set for the years 1989 to 1993 reflected the early focus. Of the 48 strips randomly selected, only 16 met the criterion for workplace setting. The odds of meeting the criteria vastly improved after 1992. After 1992, whenever a cartoon failed to meet the two criteria, another was simply randomly selected to replace it. In this fashion, the total available universe was reduced to 16 strips for years 1989 through 1992 and 12 strips per year for years 1993 through 2013 or 247 strips.

## Data Gathering Procedures

The data collection steps included setting the boundaries for the study, collecting information -- in this case through document analysis and evaluation of visual material -- to help the researcher best understand the research problem and establish the protocol for recording information and observation. The detail of the workflow I followed is shown below as Figure 2.



*Figure 2.* Workflow. Based on research process suggested by Altheide and Schneider (2013)

The workflow diagram is the basis of the discussion of the data gathering and procedures as well as the proposed analysis that follows. The processes, procedures and guidelines for Qualitative Media Analysis offered by Altheide & Schneider (2013) are particularly applicable and were foundational to the approach endorsed herein.

The methodologists note “qualitative document analysis relies on the researcher’s interaction and involvement with documents selected for their relevance to a research topic” (p. 42). The main emphasis in qualitative document analysis is on capturing definitions meanings, processes and types. One primary function of the protocol or tool, therefore, is to join the research from the perspective of a participant, dissolve the demarcation between objective and subjective meanings, thereby uniting the researcher with the relevant documents of the study.

In the study at hand, “how are the phenomena of humor and social interactions within the workplace depicted in cartoon art” might be broken down into “what social interaction took place within this specific comic strip;” “what kind of humor was presented;” “who was present” and “who was the butt of the joke?”

Face validity, the extent to which the protocol, subjectively viewed, measures that which it is planned to measure is built through the iterative crafting of the tool. The protocol is included as Figure 3.

1.	Source
2.	Date
3.	Length (3 panels vs. 6 panels)
4.	Topic of the humor
5.	Focus of the humor
6.	Who is present (Recurring character? Role?)
7.	Who delivers the punch line?
8.	What’s the action?
9.	Who or what is the butt?
10.	Presence of archetypes
11.	Theme
12.	Research notes
13.	Author’s notes

*Figure 3.* Protocol. Approach to querying the data.

## **Human Subjects Considerations**

The federal government of the United States tasks Pepperdine University with the responsibility for protecting the rights and the welfare of human subjects participating in the research activities of students and faculty of Pepperdine University. For Institutional Review Board (IRB) purposes research is explained as a systematic investigation designed to create and contribute to generalizable knowledge. Research conducted by Pepperdine students with the intention of contributing to generalizable knowledge must be supervised by a faculty member, in this case a dissertation chair.

A review of the federal guidelines for Institutional Review Boards (IRB) accessed at <http://community.pepperdine.edu/irb/graduate/> plus 45 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 46, as shown on the Health and Human Services website, indicates that because the planned research does not research involve human subjects, it does not rise to a level requiring GPS-IRB continuing oversight. It is, therefore, exempt from the mandated oversight requirements and processes of the CFR. The necessary non-human subjects (NHS) form was filed and approved by the GPS-IRB indicating that my study did not qualify as Human Subjects Research. A copy of the GPS-IRB approval letter is in Appendix C.

This study does, however, require access to copyright protected works, which are guarded against unauthorized use as a matter of law. Pepperdine University is responsible for ensuring that the research activities of students and faculty comply with all laws. United Media, the syndicator of *Dilbert* manages the permissions for the Dilbert.com website. United Media and the cartoonist provide for the usage of *Dilbert* for educational purposes as defined in their Educational Usage Policy shown at [http://universaluclick.com/licensing\\_permissions/education\\_use](http://universaluclick.com/licensing_permissions/education_use). To be absolutely certain of a

correct application of the policy, my usage was confirmed with Uclick. A license was purchased for the strips presented herein over and above the free examples provided for in the policy.

## **Analysis**

The goal of this qualitative analysis was to create, improve upon, or increase the understanding of a phenomenon, humor in the workplace, as opposed to an endpoint of the production of statistically inferred generalizations from a data set. These are two very different ambitions. My goal was to answer the research question from within a frame of comic art, using everyday language that is informed by theories of humor, in a manner that inspires face validity and delivers internal validity.

Data analysis for my research purposes involved a media analysis technique defined by Altheide and Schneider (2013). The content analysis was predicated on having the protocol properly categorized and well articulated, described richly in field notes and memos, accessible (organized and searchable) as combined with the mental processes of the researcher (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). The planned process became problematic for unforeseen reasons and adjustments had to be made as described below.

**Software.** The success of the analysis is reliant upon the categories of the protocol and the descriptions of what is seen in the text and in the comic art. The completed protocol is intended to be a summary that can later be grouped into logical groupings or according to relationships that suggest themselves or emerge from the data. This is an inductive process that seemed ideally suited to the usage of content analysis software, in this case *HyperRESEARCH*. A software license was provided by Pepperdine University. Two problems arose from using the software that ultimately, in combination, forced me to abandon the use of the software for the analytic process.

The software was purported to accommodate the used of visual as well as text media. Certainly the mechanics of the software were suitable for many such applications; however, it was ultimately proved unsuitable for my purposes. I could easily import a strip into the software. However, the software precluded the making of typewritten remarks within the visual content imported as a strip. It was possible to code and make notes or make annotations within the individual codes but annotations were not searchable. This forced an attempted workaround of importing each downloaded strip into a Word document, making remarks in the Word document, uploading the Word document into the software and coding it.

Ultimately the workaround also had to be abandoned because once uploaded, any changes or additions in the remarks had to be made in the Word document before returning to the software to make coding changes within the software. I followed this process for approximately 50 strips before becoming slightly crazed like the characters I was viewing. At its heart, content analysis of cartoons is highly iterative – one must be able to examine the cartoons and alter comments many times – so the process quickly broke down and became unmanageable. It was determined that the study couldn't be conducted within any reasonable timeframe and perhaps not at all following the workaround process.

The second problem arose from the activity of coding following the protocol. Coding, at least in the way I implemented it, drove the analysis to a level of detail that made the humor become indecipherable and fall apart. A metaphor from systems theory seemed to apply. If a system is reduced or deconstructed below the level from which the system arises it loses its essential nature (Gharajedaghi, 1999). The same turned out to be true for humor. Perhaps it is fundamentally a system?

For approximately 50 strips I annotated characteristics such as characters, keywords, the use of humor cues, visual cues in the pictures, humor mechanisms such as exaggeration or sarcasm and the like. At the conclusion of that portion of the exercise I determined that all that was being achieved was the counting of things; that I was using a reductionist approach, no patterns were emerging and my analysis was off track. The software was abandoned in favor of *Word* documents that I could print and sort for patterns.

It occurred to me every joke began with an underlying thought and identifying the thought behind the joke would be helpful. I worked with a sentence stem, “This is a story about...” and identified the thought behind every joke in the random samples. I was able to review and make notes in the *Word* documents many times over, to sort and put jokes together that reminded me of one another. I was able to take a longer view of characters. In this fashion the cartoon strips began to speak to me. From this I was able to assemble theoretical samples.

Surprises, random thoughts, questions, intuitions, curiosities were annotated in my research notes. Periodically in the analysis, I stepped back from the data in an effort to gather a more holistic view, my reaction to a bigger perspective, and any further reflections I had about the activity. The key was my familiarity with and immersion in the strips but not at the level of detail that my coding had originally produced.

The next step, as described by Altheide and Schneider (2013), was to

Put your various categories in files and read them carefully. Basically, you analyze all of the data by comparing specific categories, within and then between categories, and then ‘typical’ cases that have certain thematic and presentational characteristics. Strive for two or three sentences summarizing the range, the extremes, the most typical, and what this suggests at this point in the analysis. After statements have been made about each category, read the protocols over again, glancing at the original documents. Add any relevant comments to your notes. (p. 72)

After accomplishing the tasks in the paragraph above, I summarized the themes of categories noting examples from individual case (strip) detail to illustrate as appropriate. Variations in the humor, and there were many, were examined. It was important to continually query the process and documents. What were the outliers? How were they same? How were the strips different? Did anything not fit? What was missing or odd? From this, findings were written up in Chapter 4.

### **Means to Ensure Study Validity**

In the context of qualitative studies, validity is associated with authenticity, integrity, and trustworthiness. Creswell (2003) presents eight primary strategies for checking the accuracy of findings. Because this is a qualitative document analysis, some of the strategies are not available to the researcher for this study (i.e. triangulation, or member checking). The findings of qualitative media analysis are generally reported in tables and in narrative. But, Creswell's strategy, "Use of rich, thick description to convey findings. This may transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196) is particularly fitting. The success of a comic strip is based in the cartoonist's successful articulation of a piece of the world that is part of the shared experience of the audience. The analysis flowed from the combined effect of the text and the visuals. It meets or exceeds the levels necessary to ensure internal validity.



## Chapter 4: Analysis

The phenomenon of emergence is central to the approach of this study. Concomitant to the emergence of impressions about humor came intuitions about the cartoonist. It seems as though the more one reads and assimilates another person's body of work, the more transparent that other person's thought life becomes. If insight into another's thought life is added to knowledge of the humor aspect of another's personality, it is possible to derive something of a hologram of the other person's personality. This premise is foundational to the new, American snooping industry leader known as the NSA (National Security Agency) and it's also my premise about understanding Scott Adams.

From reviewing Adam's comic art as well as reading interviews he's given (e.g. Gendron, 1996; Postrel, 1999; Stein, 1999), a picture of him has emerged to which I attach the following adjectives: industrious, disciplined, intelligent, humble, environmentally oriented, geeky, self-confident, ambitious, independent, business-like, discrete and kind. And bright. Did I say bright? Of course, all of those traits have dark sides: driven, calculating, arrogant, weak, and so on. Both light and dark characteristics appear in the characters Adams creates. *Dilbert* is a thinking and working man's comic strip. And I'm thinking you can't create what you don't, at some level at least, already know.

Briefly, the facts about Adams (Adams, 1995, 2008) are: born in New York state, showed cartooning interest at an early age, graduated high school as valedictorian of a small class. He earned a degree in Economics from Hartwick College in New York. Adams' true education in the fine points of business life started with a career position at the foot of the corporate ladder after graduation. He returned to school for an MBA from UC Berkeley. He worked "in a number of humiliating and low paying jobs" (<http://www.dilbert.com/about/>) for

seven years at Crocker National Bank in San Francisco before leaving the bank to move to Pacific Bell for the following seven years. Most of his jobs were technology related, helping to explain the decided technology bent of the strips. It was during his employment at Pacific Bell that he began developing Dilbert in earnest.

The Horatio Alger-esque aspect of Adams' success story comes from the period of time between 1989 and 1995 when he tapped unusual maturity and inner resourcefulness to hold down a 'day job' while cartooning morning, evenings, and weekends. By my calculations he would have been about 33 years old at the time. Most of the rest of us at that age were partying, chasing down toddlers or otherwise squandering our callow youth trying to find and set a direction. But Adams pursued his true north.

He couldn't have predicted the success that followed. According to his website, "*Dilbert* appears in 2,000 newspapers in 70 countries, making it one of the most successful syndicated comic strips in history" (Adams, 1995). Copies of Adams' first fifty strips, the ones that attracted the interest of United Media, can be viewed at [http://dilbert.com/first\\_50/](http://dilbert.com/first_50/). His art has become more refined through the years and his jokes are better but it's clear even from the earliest versions that comic art – which demands artistic ability, writing, thinking *and* humor -- was Adams' calling.

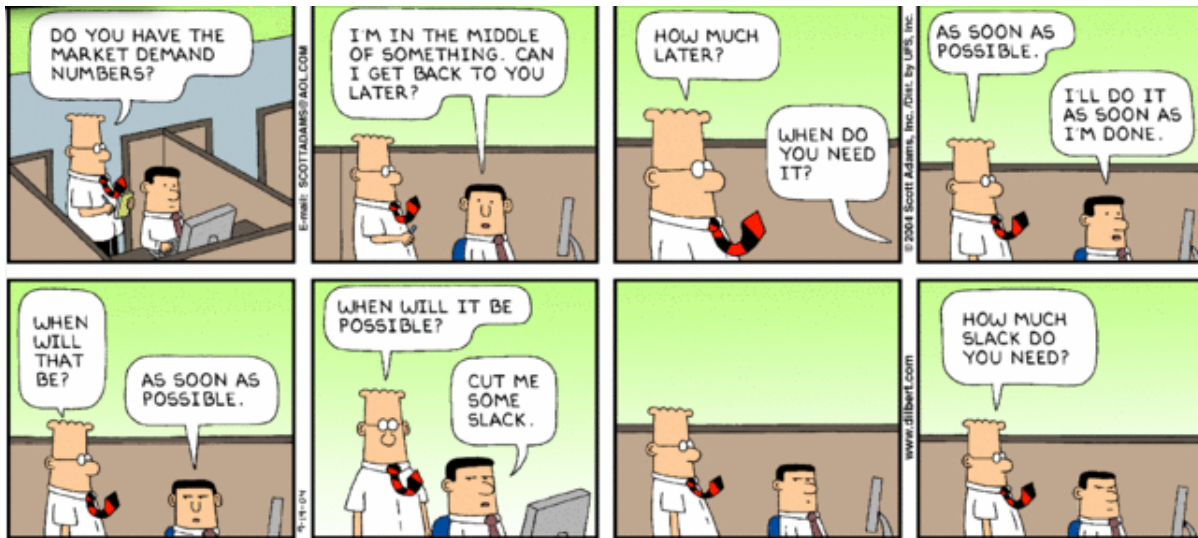
## **The Characters**

The main characters and characters of the greatest interest for the purposes of this study were Dilbert, Pointy Haired Boss (PHB), Wally, Alice and Asok. One of these characters was always in the strip in the random sample drawn for the analysis. Also appearing regularly were Catbert, Dogbert, and Ratbert, three anthropomorphized animal characters who play less central roles. Asok, Carol, Ted and Tina are often in the strip but only infrequently could be construed as

protagonists. There are other characters that make appearances and add comedic value. Cartoon art is driven by stereotypes and Adams produces some unique and creative ones from time to time. But the above characters comprise the core ensemble cast.

**Dilbert.** The comic strip and its main character share the same name. Dilbert is an engineer with the upper body shape of a potato. The ripples that form the shape on the top of his head that might be hair or might be skin. It's hard to say. Dilbert wears glasses but his eyes have no pupils. His mouth disappears when he isn't using it, leading me to wonder if Dilbert's eyes have no pupils because he's not using them to see. Dilbert is an engineer and about 30 years old (Adams, 2008, p. 24). He is almost always dressed in the uniform that has come to be associated with engineers: dark trousers, a short-sleeved white shirt, and a tie that turns up whimsically. This is one of the most important signifiers of his humor trope, engineer. When asked the reason for the upturned tie, Adams has given both no reason and, at different times, different reasons. In a more recent interview Adams remarked: "It's a metaphor for his inability to control any part of his environment. Or maybe he's just happy to have a job. It can go either way" ("Interview with Scott Adams," 2012).

Dilbert speaks and behaves in ways that our culture has come to associate with *engineer*. He takes matters quite literally. He perceives his world in terms of facts, data and details; he's intelligent, thinks concretely and tends to see matters as black or white but not both. Dilbert's responses to ridicule tend to be introverted and he is, in the main, kind in his exchanges with his peers -- at least kinder than he has to be. Adams is quite skilled at giving Dilbert scripts and jokes that are consistent with Dilbert's character type, allowing the character's personality to emerge over time through his dialogue and behavior. The following strip shows Dilbert acting consistently from within his personality and revealing something of his character to the reader.



*Figure 4.* Dilbert's personality. Dilbert Comic Strip 2004-09-19 from Dilbert by Scott Adams. Copyright 2004 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

**Pointy haired boss (PHB).** PHB is one of the more amusing characters in that he is usually oblivious when he is the butt of the employee's humor. Holding the rank of a middle manager in his hypothetical organization, he doesn't seem to understand the leadership style and direction of the strips' CEO. PHB also isn't versed in the technical aspects of systems engineering and tries to hide his ignorance from the staff he supervises. He is often the foil for the superiority humor of the staff he supervises. They play jokes on him for their own amusement.

PHB is a metaphor for a certain type of manager that is, unfortunately, all too frequently found in mid and large sized corporations in America. He is someone the audience relates to easily and is one of the keys to the strips' success. PHB is superficial; he has leadership completely confused with bossing people around. He doesn't think independently and does often not relate to his staff on the human-to-human level. Of course, if he did, the strip wouldn't be particularly funny. PHB character is probably fundamental to any rancor stirred up by the strip

in corporate America. If managers believe that the strip is mocking corporate America, it may be because the characters of PHB and Catbert represent management in a ridiculously poor light with which the rancorous ones subconsciously identify.

**Catbert.** An anthropomorphized cat plays the role of the Evil Human Resources Director. He can be reliably depended upon to behave in ways that are most damaging to employees; Catbert sets a variety of organizational traps to place Dilbert and his coworkers in the worst possible light. He prompts employees to quit, get fired, setting them up to get laid off or receive a cut in pay and or benefits. He gets along well with PHB – they seem to understand one another – and Catbert often purrs or exhibits other catlike behavior. Interestingly, Adams portrays Catbert as a male cat.

**Wally.** Wally also dresses like an engineer but without the upturned tie. He has exactly six hairs. From reading the strip, my sense is that Wally is an experienced engineer who has simply been beaten down by the absurdities and uselessness that accompany a sort of wasting away that besets many mid and late career professionals. Wally is committed to doing the least amount of work possible while always trying to improve his salary. Some of the funniest lines in the strip are attributed to Wally. He's quick and insightful but his motivations to exercise those features are in the service of his avoiding work and his creative lack of ambition. Although Wally and Dilbert often trade places as the butt of one another's jokes, I have the impression that they are friends.

**Alice.** Alice is a peer of Dilbert's who is intelligent, hardworking, intense and ambitious. She has a wry sense of humor and a hair trigger temper that she often expresses unexpectedly through her 'fist of death.' Like Dilbert and Wally /Alice is an engineer. She has a huge triangle shaped hairdo, wears a pink suit that she pairs with pink lipstick and pink shoes

that she almost always wears. Alice is a feminist who believes that her lack of career progress is associated with being a female in a man's world. Kathy Griffin voiced Alice in the animated series lending the perfect human voice to Alice.

**Asok.** Asok rounds out the cast of characters who command the most strip space in the strips that were in the random sample. Asok is an engineering intern from India. He is very bright, eager and intelligent. His character flaws are that he is idealistic as well as naïve to American ways. Asok frequently runs afoul of PHB through his unfamiliarity with American customs and culture.

These are the primary comedic actors of the Dilbert strip. They are office workers in a hypothetical technology company that provides the context for the strip. Each strip is a joke with an absurd-but-true idea at its core. The overall purpose of the strip is humor and the content doesn't stray into controversial matters, current events, or politics. Perhaps this is because the strip plays extensively internationally and the humor has to surmount differences in customs and culture.

### **The Paradox of Presence**

An immediate and substantial barrier to penetration of the data, not to mention understanding and analyzing such a complex phenomena as humor in comic art, relates to the experience of *presence* by the researcher. Presence in this sense is:

the perceptual illusion of non-mediation. The term "perceptual" indicates that this phenomenon involves continuous (real time) responses of the human sensory, cognitive, and affective processing systems to objects and entities in a person's environment. An "illusion of non mediation" occurs when a person fails to perceive or acknowledge the existence of a medium in his/her communication environment and responds as he/she would if the medium were not there. (Lombard & Ditton, 1997)

Of course, the study of comic art and the humor of the workplace is a mediated experience. However, certain exchanges between Dilbert characters, surely by the cartoonist's design, approximate real, humorous conversations, depending upon the strip. Sometimes presence changes from strip to strip, but presence can change even from frame to frame within the strip. This is where presence gets tricky.

If the researcher brings the perspective of *audience member*, she is somewhat voyeuristically viewing the comic strip from behind the fourth wall, thereby comprehending and assimilating a case or vignette of performed humor. Her understanding and perhaps even her appreciation of the humor will be materially different from that perspective as opposed to the researcher as real-time eyewitness and potential humor participant.

The shifting sand of presence in the humor of comic art is intensified by depictions of cartoon characters that portray aspects of real people accompanied by text that is printed but intended to imitate realistic verbal exchanges. All of this has considerable impact on one's perception and understanding of the humor conveyed therein. The difference between pre-planned, or so-called canned jokes – such as performed humor – and naturalistic, conversational humor is like the difference between riding a camel and riding a bicycle. Both are transportation but...

Perspective drives significant, material differences in the humor. Yet all humorous comic art is planned humor. Here are three examples to illustrate the point. In the first example, Pointy Haired Boss is stuck in the ductwork of the company's office building and presumed to be dead. The engineering staff has devised a means for getting his body out of the ventilation system. Alice and Dilbert are having a go at the task of carcass removal.

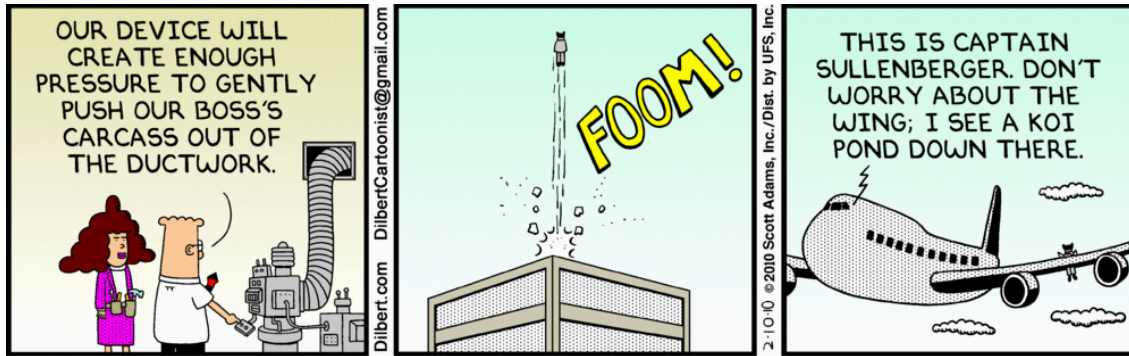


Figure 5. PHB clips a wing. This is an example of an audience member's perspective. Dilbert Comic Strip 2010-02-10 from Dilbert by Scott Adams. Copyright 2010 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

For this example, the researcher is clearly behind the fourth wall in the audience. To me, this strip is quite funny but it couldn't be hilarious if I weren't behind the fourth wall to capture what happens to Capt. Sullenberger's airplane and his über calm response.

Figure 5 refers to an actual incident that happened in 2009 in which a US Airways Airbus suffered a catastrophic loss of all engines when it hit a flock of Canada geese minutes after taking off from LaGuardia Airport enroute to Charlotte, North Carolina. Captain Chesley Sullenberger, the commander of the aircraft, and his co-pilot, Jeffrey Skiles, successfully performed an unprecedented, no-power, water ditch of a passenger airplane by executing a perfect water landing in the Hudson River near mid-town Manhattan. The lives of all 155 passengers on board were saved. The feat was so astounding that the incident came to be known as the *Miracle on the Hudson* (Sullenberger & Zaslow, 2009).

This humor might be classified as an example of surreal humor. Or some might call it slapstick. Or absurd. There is no function to the humor other than to amuse and entertain. But clearly, the strip is experienced as mediated humor and there is little sensation of presence.

Although this case meets the criteria of my study protocol, it opens the door to another question:



does this constitute an instance of workplace humor? Exploring the question of whether and how employees use humor in the workplace simply to amuse themselves would make for an interesting study; however, exploring that question is best left to others and the decision was made to leave the strip in my sample.

Before moving to the next example, it is worth noting another interesting principle at play in this strip. The strip does not make the list of most popular strips that Adams compiles on his website. It's one of those jokes that you either *get* or it leaves you flat. While I'm not usually particularly engaged by surreal humor, for me this joke is quite funny. Reflecting on the question of why I was particularly amused, I came to the conclusion that the joke is funny to me because I actually met Captain Sullenberger at a conference. In person, he exudes an utterly commanding aura of professionalism, leadership, confidence and mastery. He is a charismatic and memorable figure who inspires me to believe that if anyone can land an Airbus in a koi pond it is Captain Chesley Sullenberger. I suspect that Adams has met Sullenberger too (they both currently live in Northern California) and that this is an instance of shared knowledge that serves as the basis for humor. More is said about this in Chapter 5.

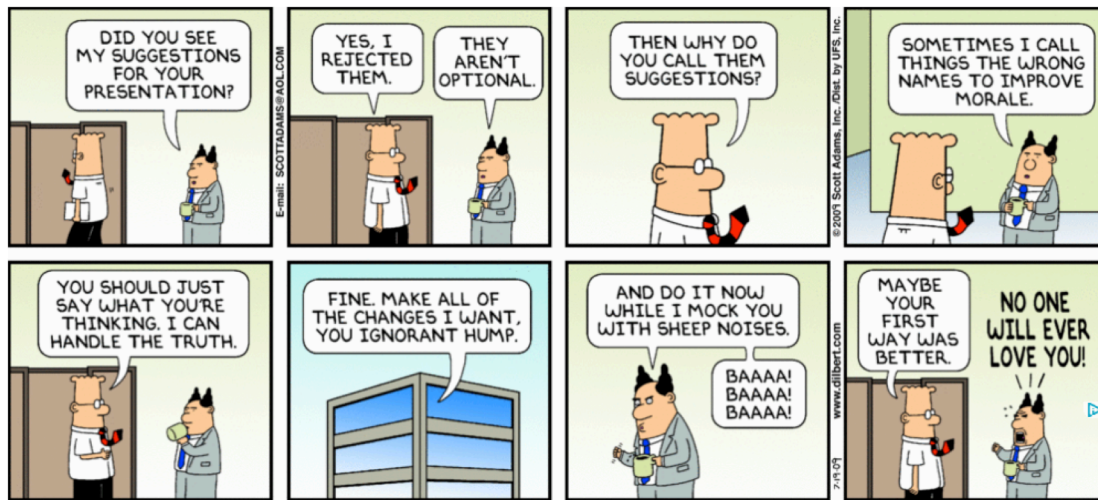
The second case depicts a context that is more amenable to an experience of presence for the researcher. One can imagine being at such a meeting to experience the humor for one's self and possibly even participating in the humor creation. Presence contributes to the funniness of the example.



*Figure 6.* Important or not? This is an example of presence. Dilbert Comic Strip 2011-04-24 from Dilbert by Scott Adams. Copyright 2011 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

This strip, too, is hilarious but an entirely different category of humor provides the source of amusement. The locus of the humor is in the room and not in the audience. If this kind of humor had a name it might be called situational humor, observational humor or conversational humor. Yet, it still is mediated humor.

Finally, Figure 7 is an example of a strip that blurs the lines of presence for me.



*Figure 7. Mocked by a Sheep. Example of mediated effect of ridicule. Dilbert Comic Strip 2009-07-19 from Dilbert by Scott Adams. Copyright 2009 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.*

It might be possible to witness this brand of humor in real-time but it likely wouldn't be funny to me if I were present. When the ridicule begins in the sixth panel, I want to dive into the audience where I might enjoy the humor from behind the protection of the fourth wall. From there ridicule has the potential for funniness to me.

Because presence is a perceptual illusion, it is a property that travels with a person and is unique to each individual. Presence is an emergent phenomena arising from the interaction between formal content characteristics of a medium as joined with certain characteristics of the media user. Also, although presence can change from person to person, it can even vary within the same person at different times (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). It seems likely that presence is unproblematic for Dilbert's audience broadly but it is a problem for a sole researcher exploring comic art qualitatively.

## **Ridicule**

The humor and comic art of *Dilbert* is suffused with the decidedly sarcastic, perhaps even cringe-worthy, flavor of ridicule -- so much so that it appears to be one of the thematic ingredients in the recipe for *Dilbert's* success. Consider some of the titles of Adams' books: *Build a Better Life by Stealing Office Supplies*, *When Did Ignorance Become a Point of View?* Or, how about *I Sense a Coldness to Your Mentoring?*

In stark contrast, a spate of Internet bullying stories reported by the media in the last several years informs us that, taken to the extreme, ridicule may become so serious as to provoke a child to commit suicide in search of permanent relief from the pain of ridicule. Intuitively, my internal reaction to ridicule doesn't reconcile with the pleasant feelings of amusement and the enjoyment most frequently associated with comedy. These impressions stand in direct conflict with the indisputable success of the *Dilbert* comic strip through which runs a conspicuous vein of derision, mockery, disdain, sarcasm and teasing. So rich is the vein that it has proven to be a veritable mother lode of raw material to be mined by Adams for the span of his twenty-five year body of work.

By far, the preponderance of analyses in the scholarly literature of humor adopts a positivistic stance towards humor; a sense of humor is a desirable personality trait. In our culture we respect and revere humor, especially its transformative, palliative powers. What about the blacker, more loathsome sides of humor? How is the social practice of ridicule, with its potential for humiliation, belittlement and hurt to be calibrated with laughter, amusement and enjoyment? Or does it?

**The disciplinary role of humor.** Building on the humor foundations of Bergson and Freud, Billig's (2005) treatise on laughter and ridicule of the same name, argues that while humor

is a central, defining feature of social life, humor does not consist solely of the ilk commonly enjoyed and welcomed by most: moments of liberating, creative enjoyment. Instead, he argues, “ridicule lies at the core of social life, for the possibility of ridicule ensures that member of society routinely comply with the customs and habits of their social milieu” (p. 2). Billig accuses humor’s social theorists of focusing on the liberating, rebellious features of humor to the exclusion of humor’s disciplinary effects. Without an understanding of ridicule, any understanding of humor is quite incomplete.

To develop a case, Billig (2005) traces the history of ridicule through the ages, reminding that ridicule was one of the few forms of humor actually approved by Plato and the ancient Greek scholars as discussed in Chapter Two of this writing. Plato didn’t postulate a fully formed superiority theory of humor; rather, he mentioned humor while discussing other topics, such as morality and harmony. Plato is more correctly pointed to as the father of the idea of superiority as a source of humor that later evolved into the superiority theories of humor. Billig (2005) concurs with Plato’s perspective that superiority theory is “basically a theory of mockery for it suggests that laughter results from disparaging or degrading others” (p. 39) or from overcoming a state, condition or object unaffiliated or no longer affiliated with one’s self.

Billig draws on the work of British psychologist, James Sully (1902) to further explicate his line of reasoning: “The function of laughter is to accompany and give voice to what may be called the derogatory impulse in man, his tendency to look out for and to rejoice over what is mean and undignified” (pp. 119-120). Rather than pushing ridicule away from humor’s center, Billig positions ridicule at the humor’s core, owing to its social ordering and disciplinary effects as well as the role ridicule plays in the maintenance of power. So, how does that work?

To answer that question, Billig elaborates on his argument by turning to Hobbes (2001) whose contribution includes the modern formulation of superiority theory. Hobbes asserted that humans are fundamentally competitive and selfish. “He [Hobbes] assumed that we see, or hear about, the misfortunes or deformities of another. This triggers off a cognitive comparison with our own selves. This comparison then produces a feeling of superiority, which is a pleasant experience and which provokes the reaction of laughter” (Billig, 2005, p. 51).

Here’s the rub: our fundamentally competitive and selfish nature is in direct conflict with our innate need to live in community. Perhaps with different words and certainly with a more complex view, Freud would later agree that man has inherent desires and instincts, some of which need to be denied through the process of socialization in order to avoid running through the grocery store naked and live in a socially ordered world. We can begin to see a constructive utility for the laughter of ridicule emerging from the thinking of the philosophers gone by.

At this juncture, Billig brings in the incongruity theorists of the eighteenth century to help advance our understanding of ridicule. Incongruity theories place the subjective experience of the disruption at the point of intersection between opposing rationalities (bisociation) at the heart of humor and laughter. As a personality, British philosopher, The Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1999) possessed sensibilities that echoed the respect for harmony and order so prized by the ancient Greeks. Noting that incongruity disrupts the harmony and order that is imprinted on the human soul, Shaftesbury adds to the case, in the words of Billig, the implication that “our senses are aesthetically and morally repelled by incongruity. The sense of ridicule expresses this repulsion” (Billig, 2005, p. 77). Therefore, by expressing repulsion through the laughter of ridicule, the social world is shamed into returning to harmony and order.

Link by link, a chain of humor philosophizing is being forged which will, when taken together, provide a well-reasoned argument for placing ridicule at the core of social life. With the forgoing as foundation, all that remains to be added are the contributions of Bergson and Freud and with those, Billig will have fashioned the structure of an argument that will have elegance and structural integrity in the end.

**Bergson.** The historical surveys of the literature that were reviewed in preparation for the writing of this dissertation each mentioned the contribution of French philosopher and Nobel prize winner, Henri Bergson. Specifically, a compilation of his writing on humor entitled, *Le Rire: Sur la signification du comique* or *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic* (Bergson, 1900) carries significance for many humor researchers. Bergson's philosophy opened the door for contemporary theorizing to shift from considerations about *what humor is* to deliberations about *what humor does*. It comes as no surprise that Billig finds Bergson's contribution pivotal.

Bergson (1911) begins his work on *Laughter* with a simple, general question: What does laughter mean? He then brings into sharp focus three observations about comedy and laughter that he presents as truths. The first observation is that comedy is uniquely human. People laugh at other people or the things they do. If we laugh at animals we are laughing at their human traits and behaviors. We don't laugh at nature or inanimate objects unless they have some human connection.

His second point is chilling. Bergson (1911) asserts that there is no emotion associated with laughter; rather, laughter denotes an *absence of feeling*.

It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. (p. 4)

Bergson insists that laughter is purely mental, that it's not an abundance of feeling but an absence of feeling that lay at the heart of laughter. Being able to laugh requires detachment and emotional distance from the subject of our laughter, momentary coldness or cruelty as it were. When we laugh we take a break from the demands of feeling empathy for the subject of our laughter. Indeed, subject becomes object.

Perhaps you've heard the following joke; it's an old one. Reportedly (Billig, 2005), this joke is used in a standard psychological test of responses to humor:

A blind man enters a department store, picks up his dog by the tail and begins to swing it over his head. A clerk hurries over and says, 'Can I help you sir?' 'No thanks,' the man replies. 'I'm just looking around.' (Mindess, Miller, Turek, Bender, & Corbin, 1985)

The purpose of sharing this joke here is to underscore Bergson's second observation that often there is pain and cruelty (rib poking, eye jabbing, head chopping, coffin dropping, banana peel tripping, lightning zapping and falling piano squashing) along the pathway to a snicker. It seems to me that with the addition of Bergson's second 'truth', we edge closer to understanding the phenomena of bullying.

Bergson's final point is that laughter has a social function; laughter needs to be shared. It is an intelligence that needs to stay in contact with other intelligences. "You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo" (Bergson, 1911, p. 5). Bergson implies that to understand laughter, we need to look outward, to extrovert our experience when we laugh as opposed to capitulating to the inner experience of laughter. "To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one" (Bergson, 1911, pp. 7-8). By repointing his inquiry away from what laughter is,

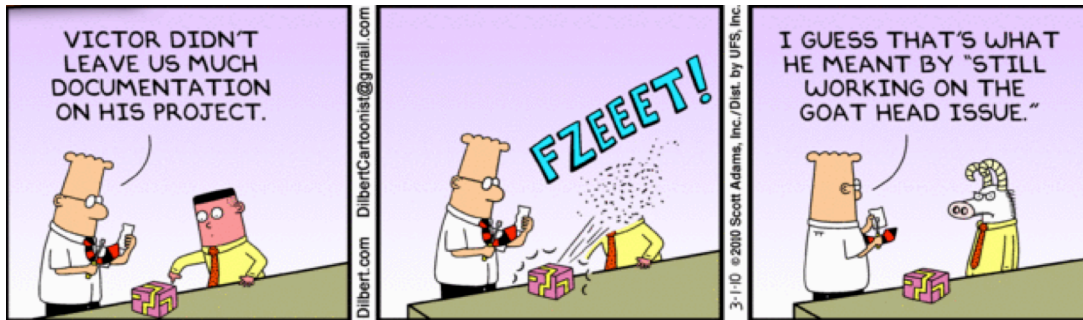


the nature of laughter's essence, to the functions of what laughter does in the social domain, Bergson opened a portal for contemporary theorizing that was to follow. Bergson's third 'truth' proved to be something of a theoretical reorientation for the field.

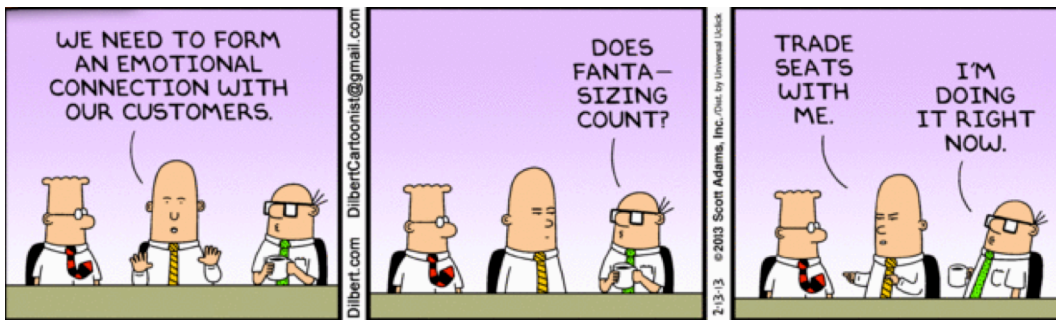
The social functions of humor are the dominant paradigm of contemporary humor studies today. As reported previously, Graham, Papa and Brooks (1992) purport to have identified twenty-four such functions. Other contemporary humor researchers who conduct research in this vein include Holmes and Marra (2002) and more (see Mesmer-Magnus, Glew & Viswesvaran (2012) for a meta-analysis of positive humor in the workplace). The word, *functions*, somewhat automatically predisposes our thinking toward utilitarian type applications of humor and laughter.

Billig (2005) concludes his explication Bergson's philosophy of humor with the following astute observation: "Bergson was depicting humour to be essentially negative, while at the same time he was suggesting that it possesses useful functions" (p. 125). One more link in the causal chain remains to be added to completely encircle an underlying rationale for ridicule.

**Freud.** We continue the discussion of ridicule by returning to Freud's (1928) assertion that jokes may be divided into two categories: tendentious and non-tendentious jokes. Tendentious jokes are jokes with a purpose -- a hidden or partially hidden expression of unconscious aggressive or sexual impulse. Non-tendentious jokes are innocent and have no particular purpose. According to Freud, non-tendentious jokes tend to be less funny than tendentious jokes. The following, Figures 8 and 9, are offered as illustrations of the two types of jokes. See if you agree with Dr. Freud, as do I, that non-tendentious jokes are less funny.



*Figure 8.* The goat head issue. Example of a non-tendentious joke. Dilbert Comic Strip 2010-03-10 from Dilbert by Scott Adams. Copyright 2010 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.



*Figure 9.* Emotional connection. Example of a tendentious joke with an implied sexual innuendo. Dilbert Comic Strip 2013-02-13 from Dilbert by Scott Adams. Copyright 2013 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

Freud’s contributions to psychiatry, psychology and psychotherapy came after than his writing on humor and, unfortunately, overshadow his abundantly rich contribution to humor theorizing. However, Billig’s (2005) careful elucidation of Freud’s (1990) analysis of a child, ‘little Hans’ (which later served as a basis for Freud’s theory of Oedipal Complex), illuminates important observations about the disciplinary function of laughter.

In his case study analysis of little Hans, Freud focused on the drama of the love and hate relationship that takes place between parents and children and in the active imagination of the child. In his intense engagement with the fantasy aspects of the child, Freud failed to elaborate on little Hans' reaction to his father's laughter at one of the child's gaffes. Little Hans had incorrectly remembered a vacation trip as two visits when in reality there had only been one.

Why are you laughing?' asks the little boy. The father does not answer by referring to his own feelings. His reply suggests that there is something out there that is objectively risible. He laughed, he explained, because Hans is a fraud. The father thereby provides Hans with an example and explanation of the rhetoric of mockery. Adults can use laughter to indicate displeasure rather than pleasure – to discipline rather than to enjoy the rebellion. You mock what has been said, indicating that you are not taking seriously words that have been seriously uttered. It is a powerful rhetorical tool...Hans will have learnt something about the laughter of mockery. His turn to use this laughter will come. When it does, it will not constitute the return of the repressed but the return of the repressive. (Billig, 2005, pp. 148-149)

The incident seems like a small detail in a long and richly described case study but it shines a harsh light on the one of the commonest of parental practices – chuckling and lightly mocking as corrective to the babyish mistakes our children make. The parental motive may be to make light of a mistake or to point out the non-serious nature of a childish slip-up in a most benign way. It is doubtful that a child understands the secondary motive. What is clearly conveyed is the superiority motive of correcting an error. But it is a correction of a particular sort – mocking or teasing laughter as corrective. The child learns new, ostensibly more civilized, behavior and learns to repress any associated feelings of shame or embarrassment.

We are now ready to examine Billig's (2005) summary argument about ridicule. It is straightforward and uncomplicated.

Everyday codes of behavior are protected by the practice of embarrassment. If one infringes expected codes of interaction, particularly if one does so unwittingly, one might expect to be embarrassed. What is embarrassing is typically comic to onlookers. Social actors fear this laughter. Accordingly, the

prospect of ridicule and embarrassment protect the codes of daily behavior, ensuring much routine conformity with social order. This is likely to occur within all cultures. Therefore, ridicule has a universal role in the maintenance of order. (Billig, 2005, pp. 201-202)

My intellectual curiosity about a popular form of negative humor, ridicule, demanded to be satisfied in the name of understanding this phenomena in the comic art as well as in our culture more broadly. My review of the scholarly literature of humor showed that there are so few studies of negative humor that the category could not be included in the meta-analysis of Mesmer-Mangus et al. (2012).

I suspect this exposition of ridicule has been tedious for the reader. Having dragged you through this analysis all for the benefit of an explication of ridicule, let's recompense our perseverance by examining examples of ridicule from *Dilbert*. If Billig is on track, we should be able to observe the characters exhibiting coldness for the targets of the ridicule. We should also be able to observe the use of derision to: a) discipline others, b) exercise power and hierarchy, and c) attempt to restore social order through the use of derision.

Figure 10, Mocked by a Sheep, was previously used to illustrate presence as Figure 7, page 81. It is repeated here for the sake of reader convenience. PHB's articulation of a feeling of superiority is easily seen in the sixth frame followed by direct mockery in the seventh frame with shaming and rejection in the final frame. Dilbert capitulates, "Maybe your first way was better," pointing to an absolute triumph for power and hierarchy. PHB demonstrates no affect for Dilbert's feelings in the moment of dominance and victory. PHB is utterly cold and oblivious, ostensibly to the feelings of another human being. Further, Dilbert gives no external indication that he has experienced the unpleasant feelings of shame, embarrassment and rejection.

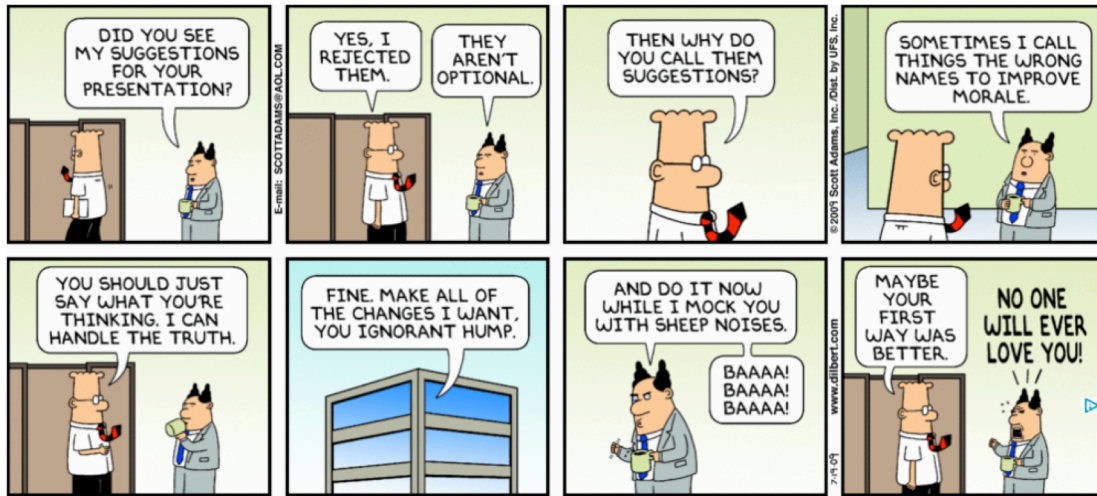


Figure 10. Mocked by a sheep. Illustration of the cold-heartedness of ridicule. Dilbert Comic Strip 2009-07-19 from *Dilbert* by Scott Adams. Copyright 2009 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

Figure 11 below is another example of ridicule. It illustrates a covert organizational caste system that is commonly practiced in organizations. The employee who actually executes the work product is simply too insignificant, title and salary-wise, or is otherwise unimportant by virtue of membership in the *wrong* gender, group or race so as to insult the highest executives and directors by his or her mere presence.

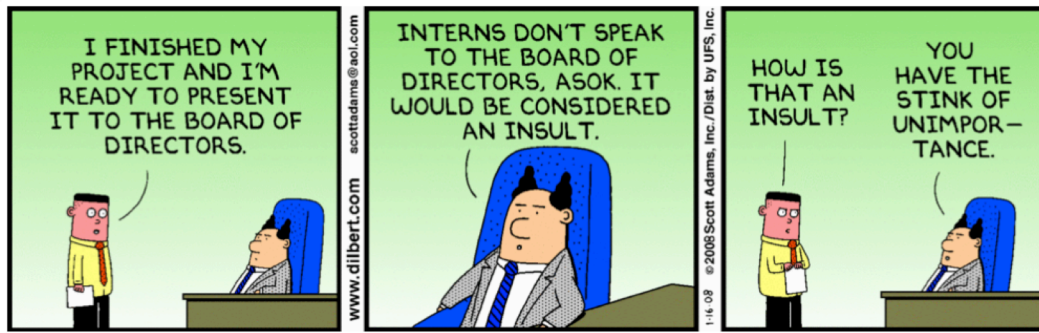


Figure 11. The stink of unimportance. Dilbert Comic Strip 2008-01-16 from *Dilbert* by Scott Adams. Copyright 2008 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

During a recent business meeting with a large, well-known, Japanese firm, in-country in Japan, I observed the covert caste system conspicuously enacted in the seating arrangements pre-assigned by my Japanese hosts. In a large hall, the persons of greatest importance (all male) were seated center, front. The persons of the least importance were seated furthest from the front and center of the room. As Figure 12 shows, organizations may actually experience and express feelings and attitudes of superiority over customers as well as certain employee groups.

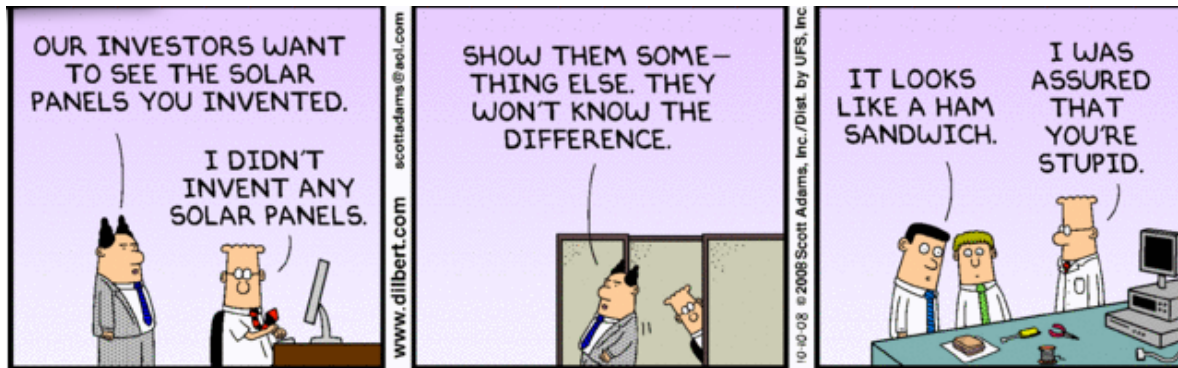


Figure 12. Solar Panels. Dilbert Comic Strip 2008-10-10 from *Dilbert* by Scott Adams. Copyright 2008 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

Happily, ridicule can go both directions. Next we see the employees dishing out ‘as good as they get’. In Figure 12 the employees are having fun at PHB’s expense, simply for their own amusement. This is also an example of how people use humor to define in-groups and out-groups as well as to promote group inclusion.



Figure 13. Bonding through ridicule. Example of uploading ridicule. Dilbert Comic Strip 2009-12-09 from *Dilbert* by Scott Adams. Copyright 2009 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

These examples and others raise a question: within the context of ridicule and derision, why are some strips so much funnier than others?

### **Towards an Explanation of Funniness**

Not unlike photography, attaining the right depth of field for viewing *Dilbert* comic strips has everything to do with bringing the right focus and clarity to the ideas and images of the strips. When their secrets began to emerge, my creative spirit soared; unpacking the jokes and images was surprisingly rewarding. A thoughtful appreciation for the cartoonist and his craft took on form, direction and bearing.

Still, having figured out something of the underlying formula and allowing for funny words and names, I wanted to understand what made some jokes funnier than others. Was my

subjective sense of humor asserting itself or was something larger at play? The peer-to-peer exchanges between Dilbert, Wally, Alice and their coworkers without PHB, Dogbert or Catbert tended to be kinder than the jokes where one of the trio of sarcastic ridiculers were involved as protagonist. See Figure 14 below.

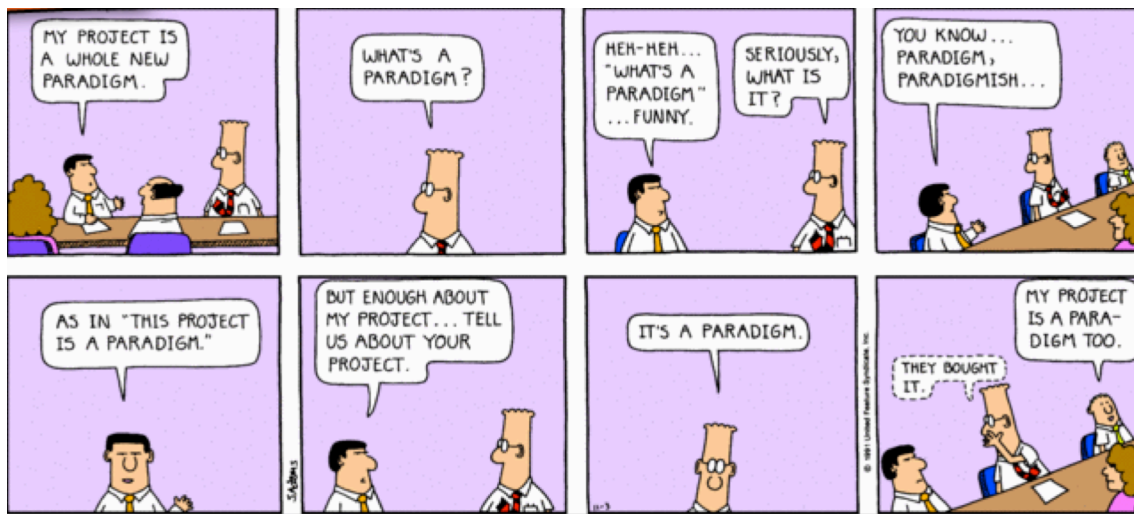


Figure 14. Paradigm-ish. Dilbert Comic Strip 1991-11-03 from *Dilbert* by Scott Adams. Copyright 1999 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

Because of the parallels in form, I was prompted to explore the humor literature on sitcoms (situational comedies). This inquiry brought me to the work of Dorf Zillmann, a past faculty member of the University of Alabama, who along with Jennings Bryant (Bryant & Zillmann, 1991), formulated the disposition theory of humor.

The comedic exchanges between sitcom actors or cartoon characters may be thought of as a unit of analysis. In any given strip the characters are either *victims* or *victimizers*. Victims are those who are disparaged or who are on the receiving end of ridicule in a contentious exchange between characters. Victimizers are victors who perpetrate and ‘win’ the mockery

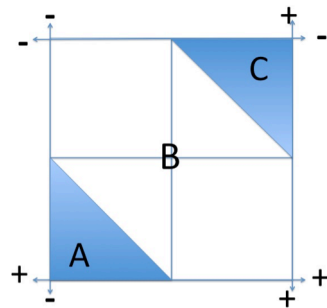


contest. The affective response or emotional attitude of the comedy viewer towards the victim or victor may then be related to what may be thought of as a four-cell model. Disposition theory is supported by four propositions:

1. The more intense the negative feeling a viewer has towards the victim, the greater the mirth (we didn't like the victim so what happened to him was pretty funny).
2. The more intense the positive feelings toward the victim, the lesser the mirth (victimizing someone who is well-liked isn't funny).
3. The more intense the negative feelings for the victor, the lesser the mirth (Boo, the bad guy won).
4. The more intense the positive feelings toward the victor, the greater the mirth (the good guy overcame the bad guy and that's darn funny; Bryant & Zillmann, 1991).

When the propositions are arrayed as a four-cell model, a drawing like Figure 14 is the result. The lower right hand corner, Zone A, where highly negative dispositions toward the victor (usually PHB or Catbert in *Dilbert*) together with highly positive dispositions toward the victim (often Dilbert), define the area of minimal mirth. Zone C, where highly positive feelings toward the victor combine with negative feelings held for the victim is the region of maximum mirth.

### Audience's Attitude Toward Victor



Audience's Attitude  
Toward Victim

*Figure 15.* Dispositional field for tendentious exchanges. From *Responding to the screen: Reception and reaction processes* (p. 271), by Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, 1991, Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. Copyright 1991 by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. Adapted by permission.

A previous example, Figure 11, page 102, where PHB accuses Asok of having “the stink of unimportance” is an excellent illustration. According to Zillman and Bryant’s model, negative feelings towards PHB and positive feelings for Asok predict a joke with minimal mirth. Region B is an area of intermediate mirth. Region C is where the viewer is favorably disposed towards the victor, often Dilbert or other employees, and negatively disposed to the victim of their humor. Region C is the zone of maximum mirth.

In case that follows, Figures 16, an interaction between Dilbert and the Customer Care Manager provides a terrific example of humor in Region C. A joke from the domain of Region C is like having your favorite teams win a home game.



Figure 16. “Robin Hood,” an example of dispositional humor, area of greatest mirth. Dilbert Comic Strip 2009-02-11 from *Dilbert* by Scott Adams. Copyright 2011 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

We are favorably disposed towards Dilbert. The Collections Manager is a cold-hearted, collections agent and Dilbert wins the mockery contest with the perfect solution. It’s a recipe for a very funny joke. Zillmann and Bryant (1991, pp. 270-271) define the remaining areas, or B in the figure, as the area of intermediate mirth.

### **Humor and the Shadow Side**

I arrived at this point in the work, feeling that I had been able to embrace and maintain the spirit of exploration throughout, trusting the lead of my intellectual curiosity and freely exploring wherever my interests and inquisitiveness had taken me. There was, at times, a sense of free-floating aimlessness, frustration and false starts, but the exploration was always fed by the promise and the excitement of discovery. At times my study had an out-of-control feeling to it but new horizons and rewards faithfully appeared and on time. The investigation of ridicule was particularly gratifying to me but I emerged from it not exactly buying into the whole premise of ridicule as humor. Ridicule seemed like something else to me. Deconstructed, teasing didn’t seem funny. And then I came across the next strip, Figure 17.

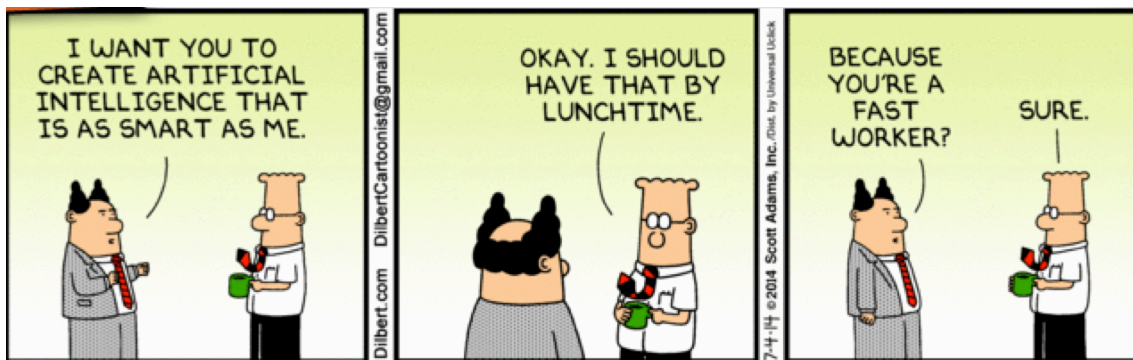


Figure 17. Artificial intelligence, a personal portal to my shadow side. Dilbert Comic Strip 2014-04-14 from *Dilbert* by Scott Adams. Copyright 2014 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

This case was hilarious – almost knee-slappingly funny -- to me and I wanted to understand why. It's not a complicated joke as jokes go, but even in light of all of my study and exploration, having read hundreds upon hundreds of comic strips, I couldn't explain my personal sense of hilarity about this strip to my complete satisfaction. I reflected on it for several days, rolling the matter around in my mind, reading and re-reading the joke, looking deeply inside myself to try to get at and identify the source of my delight. Why was this so funny to me?

Eventually, the answer percolated into my conscious awareness, popping to the surface like fishing bobber. The source of my delight was my sense of superiority, as shared with and communicated by Dilbert in his one word punch line, "Sure." In my maturation and socialization processes, processes that we all go through, my feelings of superiority have been split off and repressed, hidden from my awareness in my shadow side; nice girls don't ever feel superior. The feeling was hidden and inaccessible to me and but, perhaps, apparent to others? I had to own it. Ridicule could be funny to me, maybe even very funny.

Freud believed that dreams and jokes are made of the same raw materials: unconscious mental factors sourced in the conflict between natural human instincts (aggression, hostility, anti-social impulses, sexuality) and society's demand for social order. Beginning in childhood, these dangerous, unacceptable urges have to be repressed but repression is little more than self-deception. The impulses don't disappear; they are simply squelched. The subconscious allows such mental debris to float to the surface of our awareness in the form of dreams, jokes and gaffes known as Freudian slips (Freud, 1905). Although he greatly appreciated jokes and was known for his collection of Jewish jokes, Freud placed humor squarely under suspicion. His work on humor, as would be seen later, part of his larger formulation on the structure of personality.

### Roads Not Taken

A common strategy often applied in humor studies is the examination of questions of race, gender and sexual orientation in humor. There were cases in my random sample to hint that such an opportunity might be present in *Dilbert*. The following two strips, Figures 18 and 19, are examples of humorous content signaling a potential for a mining opportunity along the lines of referent groups and protected classes.



*Figure 18.* Tina gets a new boss. Dilbert Comic Strip 2005-01-19 from Dilbert by Scott Adams. Copyright 2005 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.



Figure 19. Kettle of crazy. Dilbert Comic Strip 2005-01-19 from *Dilbert* by Scott Adams. Copyright 2005 Scott Adams Inc. Distributed by UFS, Inc. Reprinted by permission, Uclick Policy for Educational Usage.

It isn't possible to tell from such a small sample whether the cartoonist demonstrates any bias or whether he's simply holding up a mirror of current conditions in our culture. At the end of the day, there weren't enough cases in the random sample to form a theoretical sample. To pursue such questions, more cases would need to be elicited, probably utilizing a different search strategy in order to secure a proper data set.

## Summary

A random sample from the complete universe of *Dilbert* comic strips was drawn and theoretical sampling was used to discern the identities and personality traits of the main characters. Emergent groupings and themes were developed by repeatedly interacting with the data, reflection, extensive note taking and exploring patterns. The idea of presence was discussed and the significant themes of ridicule and disparagement theory were explicated. Many examples of *Dilbert* art were provided to demonstrate principles emerging from my exploration. My sense is that to stretch the data further would be over-reaching. However, there is promising evidence of many more topics and angles with potential to be explored.

I interacted with the data in a concerted fashion in a rather compressed timeframe over a period of weeks before writing about my observations and experiences in Chapter 4.

Nonetheless, even after my writing was long finished, new learnings and awarenesses continued to emerge for weeks afterwards. Still, I find the topic of humor and comic art to be intriguing and provocative; I feel as though I could write about humor endlessly.

My admiration for cartoonist Adams remains unshaken. I once had the privilege hearing Dr. Warren Bennis speak about the topic of leadership in a private salon session for the Organization Change doctoral students of Pepperdine University. One of Dr. Bennis' pieces of advice for students of leadership was to become *world-class noticers*. By this he meant that we should become keenly observant of the world and of others in order to be good leaders. My experience of the humor of Scott Adams is that he has successfully become a world-class noticer.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

The voyage that this exploration proved to be was not unlike that of Christopher Columbus. When he set sail, Columbus didn't know where he was going; when he arrived, he was unsure of where he was. And he did it all on someone else's money. That's part of an old joke but it is nonetheless a fitting metaphor. My 'ship' was a loosely constructed affair of theory combined with parts and pieces of the philosophies and scholarship of others. With the cartoon art of *Dilbert* for a sail I set out for and made landfall in a New World. Ah, the New World! The New World is a treasure trove of unexplored territory for Management and Organization Science scholars and researchers. There is much possibility in this virtually untapped domain of research. There are six conclusions to be offered here.

### **Comic Art May Function Plausibly as a Proxy for Reality**

One of my keenest skepticisms at the onset of this study had to do with whether an analysis of cartoon characters could present valuable knowledge and insight into the attitudes and behaviors of real humans. Before undertaking the study, I was doubtful. However, my mind has been changed. It may be true that other comic strip genres, the content of which is pure fantasy (e.g. science fiction or action adventure), bear a lesser relationship to reality.

In the case of *Dilbert*, however, it is my opinion that both the content of the jokes and the techniques of the gags are common everyday occurrences in organizations—more common than we care to admit. The stereotypes that Adams employs capture some of the essence of people who are commonly known to all of us. And, as I acknowledged about myself in Chapter 4, maybe Adams reflects back on us parts of ourselves that we prefer not to know about. Possibly it is this self-reflective quality of his work, rather than the making fun of management, that has



lent controversy to *Dilbert*. Mostly, Adams is holding a mirror up to the organizations and its inhabitants and we aren't pleased by everything we see.

### **Ridicule May Play a Significant but Unrecognized Role in Social Development**

*Dilbert* is a comic strip about people first and foremost. The comic art of *Dilbert* depicts characters using humor to enact power, social control, hierarchy, discipline, autonomy, rebelliousness and in-group relations. Bergson believed that we would be unable to find humor in *Dilbert* if it weren't fundamentally about people. Trees, rocks and clouds aren't funny – that is, unless we see something about them that reminds us of a person. Apes that act like humans are funny. Subtract the real and intellectual property from an organization and all that's left are people, the essential and only ingredient of an organization with the potential for levity.

Maturation and socialization processes require that people learn to control their anti-social impulses. A technique on which parents and other authority figures rely is derision and shaming wherein childish mistakes are made light of. This is how we learn what in us must be repressed if we are to make authority figures like us, be proud of us and want to be around us.

There is an endless supply of comic fodder in that which has repressed in us so that we become adults who can function in socially acceptable ways. It is that in-built capacity for repression and the threat of shaming and embarrassment that makes us vulnerable to the social control mechanisms of others.

### **Life is Full of Absurdities, Many of Which Cannot Be Appreciated as Such in Real Time**

Recently, someone I know was embarrassingly involved in a noisy row with a boyfriend that resulted in the summoning of police. Some weeks later, the same two people were laughing about the incident and their own foolishness. As this simple example may further illustrate, my

third conclusion is that life is full of absurdities but we learn to tune them out or repress the absurd aspects so that life may conduct life in real time and living doesn't turn into anarchy.

But I wonder if it isn't this same *tuning out* process that leads to some of the outcomes noted in Chapter One, specifically that the workforce tunes out organizational absurdities so that organizational life may proceed. Or, perhaps people arrive for work already tuned out to absurdities emanating from home and elsewhere. Such an idea could help explain the anxiety, stress and detachment discussed in Chapter One.

A seasoned and wise CEO once told me, if you want to know how your company is doing, your customers will tell you. I would extend his comment to employees: if you want to know the health of your organization, the employees will tell you. One of the ways the organization tells you is through what employees are expressing in humor. As a follow on to this study, it would be most interesting to walk an office space and note the specific *Dilbert* cartoons that employees clip and post in their offices.

The statistics on stress and detachment in the workplace point Organizational Development and Organizational Change professionals to the importance of noticing what is being expressed and repressed in the workplace as well as what is spoken and enacted in humor.

### **Presence May Function Either as an Enablement or a Barrier to Joint Action**

New technologies have emerged in recent years that increasingly work to achieve presence for their users: video conferencing, such as *Skype*, *FaceTime*, and applications that increasingly approximate reality such as 3-D and IMAX are some examples. Studies that explore the role of presence in such endeavors as: working from home, remote or distributed work, virtual teams as well as learning and development efforts might be enlightening as well as useful since presence may have implications for their success or failure. So much of that which

is communicated in organizations is mediated – most often through others—that my curiosity is raised as to its role and impact.

### **Humor May be Understood as a Mythopoeic Language**

Some of my more provocative thoughts have to do with the nature of humor. One of the central debates in humorology has to do with defining the “thingness” that is shared across all kinds of humor. As a result of this exploration, I have arrived on the shores of the anti-essentialists. I think humor is many things and, although I’ve never read this, for now, my best understanding of humor is as a mythopoeic language.

From birth we learn how to dance the dance of humor. We learn a step here, a move there, improving our skills along the way as our brains develop. As we master more of the mental moves of humor, we gradually liberate ourselves from the known pathways and routine drills to an innate capacity for free-dancing our own humor choreographies.

A jazz pianist spends years learning how to master notes, scales and written music before knowing how to free form a piece of music that “makes sense” to our ears. Once the song is played, it disappears. To me, the naturalistic humorous interactions that we create in our daily live are instances of communication using a common mythopoeic language. Others recognize it when they hear it. Like dancers and musicians, some of us are better at it than others.

The broad success of the *Dilbert* strip (70 countries) is driven by the cartoonist’s ability to routinely access knowledge that both he and the audience possesses – that is held in common. Shared knowledge of the behavior of others is depicted in *Dilbert’s* cartoon art of the workplace. For the humor to succeed in its humorous purposes, knowledge held in common by the cartoonist, his editors, the syndicators, the editors of the thousands of newspapers that purchase the *Dilbert* strip, as well as the reading audience must be a fundamental part of the

strip. Otherwise the humor fails. That's the essential element of the subjective truth in the comic art of the workplace. The implication is that, at least in part, we are more alike than different and we communicate in parallel in a mythopoeic language.

Some theorists characterize the humorous world almost like a parallel universe intractable to rationalist methods of thinking and accessible any time we please. I have avoided using the word, paradigm, thus far but I think it applies. One way of understanding humor is as an alternative paradigm that exists in parallel to the rational world. That may be so, but I believe that humor is also an alternative language. Through it we may know things we might not otherwise know, learn things we might not otherwise learn. But, it will take another dissertation or two to develop that thought.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

One of the neat benefits of qualitative media analysis is that at the conclusion of a study, the researcher ends up with a database that doesn't change; not only that, the database can be maintained and extended further as time and interest permits. This would require only a modicum of effort. Continuing to add to the database would easily facilitate extending this or any study in whatever direction one's interests lay. For instance, I did not analyze race and gender in my sample. I did have that thought but didn't have enough cases in my theoretical sampling. It would be easy to add to the sample size to attain a theoretical sample later. If new interpretations of old data emerge, the database can be reinterpreted. This would be time well spent.

A second area that is ripe for further research is in the arena of ridicule, bullying and young people. Time spent mining this area might prove useful for improving our organizational skills, since bullying does occur in the workplace, and our parenting skills as well. It is imperative that

we examine these phenomena closely and participate in creating better self-protection skills in children. Educators can't be our best line of defense.

The wealth of potential for future research, particularly in MOS studies, is overwhelming. One of the most conspicuous gaps in the literature is between humor and creativity. Other inviting areas holding promise and that are seemingly within reach for MOS scholars are: organizational learning, communities of practice, organizational culture and sensemaking.

To the best of my knowledge, the misattribution study of Zillmann and Bryant (1980) based the early work of Zillmann and Cantor (1976) has never been repeated. Replicating it would make a particularly fun and interesting study and at the same time make a contribution to humor studies. Anyone aspiring for a tenured faculty position with publishing requirements could easily make a permanent home in humorology.

Finally, although the content analysis software wasn't quite the best match for the purposes of this study, I am smitten by both the possibilities of the software and the techniques of qualitative media analysis. This is especially so in light the ocean of unanalyzed media content that has been produced in the last 25 years and is unanalyzed at this time. Many scholars could put a straw into that ocean but be unable to drain it in many lifetimes.

### **A Final Implication for the Workplace**

My closing thought has to do with where this study began: in curiosities and puzzlement about the role and value of humor in the workplace. Humor is something that needs to be attended closely by people who are responsible for hiring and retention. At one of my previous places of employment there was an employee who was exceptionally boisterous and gregarious. He continually made himself the center of attention with a constant stream of humorous dialogue. He was gifted at sidetracking a meeting. Everyone seemed to be truly amused by his

antics. It was good to be seated at his table at a business dinner meeting because a stream funny dinner dialogue was guaranteed to entertain.

I regret that I was unable to listen to the humor with the education in humor that I now enjoy. I know I would have picked up on the toxicity that lay behind this man's humorous screen. I was in a position to block his later advancement and I should have. But I didn't get wise in sufficient time to prevent the terrible split in the company that he caused and help the people he was able to get fired. I wish I had known better; now I do.

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## Appendix A

### Functions of Humor in Conversation

This is a list compiled by Graham, Papa and Brooks (1992), created by culling the scholarly literature of humor theory and research to aggregate the functions of humor identified in the literature. Humor serves a large variety of functions. These include:

1. To transmit verbally aggressive messages
2. To demean others
3. To entertain others
4. To show a sense of humor
5. To disarm potentially aggressive
6. To allow others insight into another's state of mind
8. To play with others
9. To decrease another's aggressive behavior
10. To minimize anxiety
11. To reduce boredom
12. To facilitate relationship patterns
13. To help others relax and feel comfortable
14. To ease the tension wrought by new or novel stimuli, such as new information
15. To disclose difficult information
16. To let others know what I like and dislike
17. To increase liking by others
18. To develop one's own sense of humor
19. To control others
20. To express feelings

21. To defend my ego against possible damage
22. To put others in their place
23. To avoid telling personal information about myself
24. To allow one to cope with a serious subject

## Appendix B

### List of Books by Scott Adams

#### **Dilbert Books with a Combination of Text and Comics**

*The Dilbert Principle (#1 New York Times Best Seller)*  
*Dogbert's Top Secret Management Handbook (#1 New York Times Best Seller)*  
*The Dilbert Future*  
*The Joy of Work*  
*Dilbert and the Way of the Weasel*

#### **Dilbert Books with Comics Never Published in Newspapers**

*Build a Better Life by Stealing Office Supplies*  
*Clues for the Clueless*

#### **Non-Dilbert Fiction Books**

*God's Debris*  
*The Religion War*  
*Stick to Drawing Comics, Monkey Brain!*

#### **Dilbert Comic Reprint Books**

*Always Postpone Meetings with Time-Wasting Morons*  
*Build a Better Life by Stealing Office Supplies*  
*Clues for the Clueless*  
*Shave the Whales*  
*It's Obvious You Won't Survive by Your Wits Alone*  
*Bring Me the Head of Willy the Mailboy*  
*Still Pumped from Using the Mouse*  
*Fugitive from the Cubicle Police, 1996*  
*Casual Day Has Gone Too Far*  
*Seven Years of Highly Defective People*  
*I'm Not Anti-Business, I'm Anti-Idiot, 1998*  
*Journey to Cubeville*  
*Don't Step in the Leadership*  
*Dilbert Gives You the Business*  
*Random Acts of Management*  
*Dilbert: A Treasury of Sunday Strips*  
*Excuse Me While I Wag*

## **Dilbert Comic Reprint Books, cont'd.**

*When Did Ignorance Become a Point of View?*  
*Another Day in Cubicle Paradise*  
*What Do You Call a Sociopath in a Cubicle?*  
*When Body Language Goes Bad*  
*Words You Don't Want to Hear During Your Annual Review*  
*Don't Stand Where the Comet Is Assumed to Strike Oil*  
*It's Not Funny If I Have to Explain It*  
*The Fluorescent Light Glistens Off Your Head*  
*Thriving on Vague Objectives*  
*What Would Wally Do?: A Dilbert Treasury*  
*Try Rebooting Yourself*  
*Positive Attitude*  
*This is the Part Where You Pretend to Add Value*  
*Your New Job Title is "Accomplice"*  
*I Sense a Coldness to Your Mentoring*

APPENDIX C

IRB Non-Human Subjects Approval Letter



Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board

June 6, 2014

Kella Brown

Protocol #: N0614D01

Project Title: Comic art and humor in the workplace: An exploratory study

Dear Ms. Brown,

Thank you for submitting the Non-Human Subjects Verification Form and supporting documents for your study entitled, *Comic art and humor in the workplace: An exploratory study*. The IRB appreciates the work you and your faculty advisor, Dr. Kay Davis, have done on the proposal. As required by the Code of Federal Regulations for the Protect for Human Subjects (Title 45 Part 46) any activity that is research and involves human subjects requires review by the Graduate and Professional Schools IRB (GPS-IRB).

After review of the Non-Human Subjects Verification Form and supporting documents, GPS IRB has determined that your proposed research<sup>1</sup> activity does not involve human subjects. Human subject is defined as a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains (1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or (2) identifiable private information. (45 CFR 46102(f)).

As such because you are not obtaining data through intervention or interaction with living individuals, or identifiable private information, then the research activity does not involve human subjects. Therefore, GPS IRB review and approval is not required of the above referenced study.

Should you have additional questions, please contact Kevin Collins, Manager of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu). On behalf of the GPS IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Thema Bryant-Davis".

Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis  
Chair, Graduate and Professional Schools IRB  
Pepperdine University

<sup>1</sup> *Research* means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. Activities which meet this definition constitute research for purposes of this policy, whether or not they are conducted or supported under a program which is considered research for other purposes. (45 CFR 46.102(d)).