

Witty people considered particularly suitable for a fling

What is humour for? Of all the explanations, among the better supported is the idea that it acts as a mating signal. Research with heterosexuals suggests that men, in particular, use humour to show-off their intelligence and good genes to women. A similar but alternative proposal is that wit



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is used by a male or female joker to convey their sexual interest to a person they find attractive. A new study finds some support for the latter theory, in that wittier people were seen as particularly attractive for a short-term fling.

In a departure from the field's reliance on questionnaires, Mary Cowan (University of Stirling) and Anthony Little used real spontaneous humour, which they created by recording 40 undergrad psychology students (20 of them men) as they explained to camera which two items they'd take to a desert island, and why, choosing from: chocolate, hairspray, or a plastic bag. These 'actor' participants weren't told that the study was about humour, but nonetheless 19 of them gave the appearance of trying to be funny in their answers.

Next, 11 'rater' participants (five of them men) were played audio recordings of the actors' explanations, and their task was to rate them for funniness, and to rate the attractiveness of each actor for a short-term relationship (dates and one-night stands) and for a long-term relationship. After scoring the audio, the rater participants did the same for a simple head-shot photo of each actor, and then again for the full video version of their explanations.

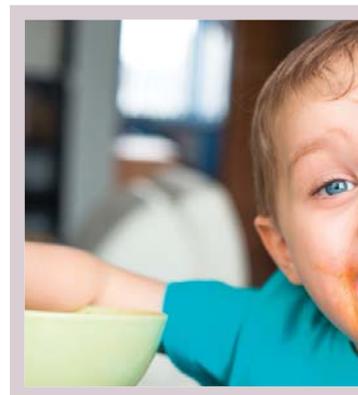
A key result is that attractive actors (based on the rating of their photo) were judged to be funnier in the video than in the audio, which suggests their physical attractiveness led them to be considered more funny.

Wit also boosted attractiveness. Across audio, photo and video, men who were considered funnier also tended to be considered more attractive for both short and long-term relationships, but especially short-term. The link between perceived funniness and attractiveness was not so strong for the female actors, although funniness did still go together with higher perceived attractiveness for short-term relationships. A follow-up study found that funniness ratings were very similar to ratings

for perceived flirtatiousness, and that this perceived flirtatiousness explained the link between funniness and appeal for a fling.

Male wit may be more attractive for shorter rather than longer relationships, the researchers surmised, 'because it nurtures an impression of not being serious or willing to invest in a mate'. Female wit, on the other hand, may be perceived by men as attractive for short-term relationships because it is taken as a sign that 'that she will be receptive to his advances'.

The use of authentic humorous displays is to be applauded, but the study is hamstrung by several weaknesses. Above all, the sample of rater participants was tiny. Also, the attractiveness ratings all tended to be low. This may be because the male and female raters (no information about their sexual orientation is given) were asked to judge the attractiveness of both men and women. For a study about people's judgements of attractiveness in a relationship context, it also seemed strange that no information was given about the gender and attractiveness of the researchers, who may have inadvertently influenced the participants' behaviour and judgements.



The jokes toddlers make

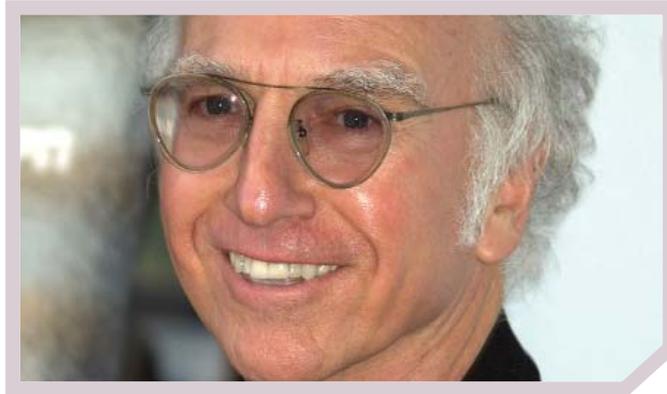
In the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*

Few sounds can be as heart-warming as a chuckling toddler. Often they're laughing at a joke you or someone else has performed, but what about their own attempts at humour? To find out, Elena Hoicka and Nameera Akhtar filmed 47 parent-child pairs (just five involved dads) playing for 10 minutes with various toys. The kids were English-speaking and aged between two and three years.

Coding of the videos revealed seven forms of humour performed by the toddlers: using objects in an unconventional way (e.g. brushing a pot); deliberately mislabelling things (e.g. holding a cat but saying 'here's a fish'); making deliberate category errors (e.g. making a pig go 'moo'); breaching taboos (e.g. spitting and saying 'that's disgusting'); performing funny bodily actions (e.g. falling back and putting their legs in the air); tickling and chasing; and playing peekaboo.

There were signs of maturing humour abilities. The three-year-olds more often made conceptual humour than the two-year-olds, and they showed a trend towards more label-based humour. Two-year-olds depended predominantly on object-based humour. Moreover, whereas the two-year-olds were just as likely to copy or riff off their parent's jokes as to make their own original attempts at humour, the three-year-olds most often came up with original jokes.

There was also good evidence that the toddlers were



being deliberately humorous and not just making mistakes. When engaged in a funny behaviour versus an unfunny act, they were four times as likely to look and laugh at their parent, twice as likely to laugh without looking, and three times as likely to smile and look. 'Children only increased smiling in combination with looks to parents, indicating parents should share their humour,' the researchers said.

An online survey of 113 British parents (nine dads) about their children's humour largely supported the observational data, producing an extended timeline of humour-production. Before one year, infants mainly produced humour through peekaboo; from one year they graduated onto chasing and tickling and funny body movements; from two years they started object-based, conceptual and taboo-based jokes; and from age three they started label-based jokes.

The authors said the results showed that 'toddlers produce novel and imitated humour, cue their humour, and produce a variety of humour types'.

The new psychology of awkward moments

In Group Processes and Intergroup Relations

The fascination of socially awkward moments certainly hasn't been missed by comedy writers. Millions of us have cringed our way through series like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *The Office*. In contrast, psychology before now has largely neglected to study this fundamental part of social life.

In a new exploratory study, Joshua Clegg proposes a model. Social awkwardness, he posits, is what we feel when the situation threatens our goal of being accepted by others. The feeling prompts us to direct our attention inwards, to monitor our behaviour and attempt to behave in a way that will improve our chances of achieving acceptance.

Clegg invited 30 undergrad participants (13 men) into a carefully prepared room in groups of three. Each trio sat facing each other on chairs arranged in a triangle. They knew they were being filmed through a two-way mirror. There was also a table with a microphone and five cookies on.

For the first three minutes, the participants were given no instructions. Then another participant (actually a stooge working for Clegg) arrived with a chair and sat down with them. Three more minutes passed, a researcher appeared and instructed the trio to begin an ice-breaker task (the stooge exited at this point). After three minutes discussion he would ask each of them to introduce each other to the group. Once this was done, the participants left the room and moved to another where they watched back the footage of themselves. They used a slider box, like the kind used in audience research, to indicate how awkward they were feeling during the social interactions on a moment-by-moment basis.

Clegg noted those moments that participants recorded a dramatic increase in social awkwardness and he cross-checked with the videos to see what was happening at the time. Moments of feeling awkward fell into distinct situational categories, which we can probably all relate to. These included times when participants didn't know what was expected of them or what the social rules were (such as when they first sat down in the room without instructions); when a social norm was broken (e.g. one person interrupted another; someone infringing on another's personal space); a social standard wasn't obtained (e.g. a person stumbled with their speech, there was a long silence); norms around eating

were broken (e.g. spilling food from mouth while eating); negative social judgements were made by one person towards another, either explicitly or implicitly (e.g. by pulling a face); when names were forgotten or people weren't recognised; and when social processes were made explicit, such as during the ice-breaker task.

There were also five kinds of moment when social awkwardness plunged. This included: when people were sharing common interests, when one person helped another, when one person was positive about another, and humour. It's notable that a lot of the humour was actually about social awkwardness – joking about it seemed to make it go away.

The study is a tentative first step but Clegg argues it raises all sorts of interesting avenues for future investigation. Perhaps most significant is the similarity of participants' descriptions of social awkwardness to typical accounts of full-blown social anxiety – they talked about feeling 'pressured', 'anxious', 'nervous' and 'crazy'. In attempting to understand problematic social anxiety, Clegg said psychology has tended to focus on the individual, on traits like shyness and attention to the self. His new psychology of awkward moments, focusing on understanding the situations that trigger social discomfort in all of us, and how people deal with it, could provide new insight into why and how socially anxious people come to feel awkward nearly all of the time.



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