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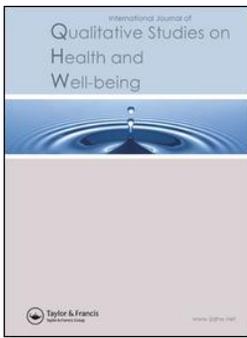
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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The function of humor in relation to affects: A longitudinal case study

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to try to understand humor's function, viewed from a developmental and affect-theoretical perspective, with special emphasis on the shame affect. The methodological approach has entailed a case study, the case of Beatus, which has been a longitudinal attempt based on qualitative interview data collected over a period of 17 years. The findings showed how awareness of humor in relation to the affects' function (appropriateness in time and space) and importance (clarity at the signal level) increased as Beatus grew older. The metaphor "door-opener" is emphasized for humor's function in relation to all affects, whereas the metaphor "moderator" refers to humor's role in balancing the shame affect against the positive affects. The "pendulation function" is stressed. In the theoretical discussion, the term "humor-attunement" is coined. This represents a process-related concept, defined as the capacity to share inner affective states, integrated with a cognitive perception and understanding of humor's content and form, appropriately timed to the social context. The discussion also advances a line of thought wherein the driving force or motivation is the affect and humor is the consequence, which guides attention in a particular direction.

Key words: *Humor, function, affects, shame, well-being, case study*

Introduction

"Shame can power all forms of humor. Of course I know that there is more to humor than shame, and more to happiness than liberation from shame." (Nathanson, 1992, p. 19.)

In contemporary times, we have become more aware of how the shame affect influences children and adults alike. With its typical features of a bowed head and averted gaze, mutual contact is broken and the resulting situation indicates a breakdown in communication. An everyday expression for such a situation is that something feels embarrassing. Modern affect research (Nilsson, 2005; de St Aubin, 2004) emphasizes Tomkins' affect theory (1992, 1963, 1962) and points out the shame affect in relation to the joy affect. Humans seem to possess a multitude of strategies for avoiding this social shame—strategies aimed at defending their own self-esteem and self-image. In describing this striving for strategies adequate for managing shame, Kaufman (1989) related the shame affect to humor and wrote: "Laughter and humor, shared human

activities that recruit enjoyment affect (smiling), are effective means of reducing intense negative affect, particularly shame" (p. 103). Both Nathanson (1992) and Kaufman (1989) have pointed out humor as one defense strategy among others that humans use to deal with the torments of shame. Alternatively, if we see humor as an adaptive strategy, with effects on psychological health and psychological well-being, what kind of discussion do we need on a micro-level? Nieburg (2001) showed the role of the positive affects in development and well-being in relation to excitement and joy; essential to both mental development in infants and the individuation process throughout adult life. Nathanson (1992) stressed the importance of the shame affect and considered that if the child can successfully deal with shame, this will contribute to a feeling of pride and competence. During recent years, affect theories have been increasingly in focus in the field of psychology. The question is: In what way can affect theories be related to humor's function and what significance does the shame affect have in this connection?

Then, the question is whether it is possible to put forward a generally accepted definition of the concept humor? The answer is “no”. Ruch (1998) points out that some probable reasons for this may be that the concept has been used during many eras, by representatives of many different disciplines, and that the concept itself is hard to capture. The concept humor can be seen as a trait (sense of humor) but also as a process (with focus on context). In this study, humor was viewed from a psychological perspective comprising intrapsychic as well as interpersonal aspects, with an emphasis on humor’s function and importance in an affective and developmental perspective.

Positive and negative affects

Modern affect research (Nilsson, 2005, 2002; de St. Aubin, 2004; Damasio, 1999; Nathanson, 1992; Shapiro & Emde, 1992; Stern, 1985; Tomkins, 1992, 1963, 1962) emphasizes human beings’ innate affect systems and sees the important role and function of affects in human emotional development. The affect perspective can be seen with the affects as driving forces in the process through which the individual creates meaning from his/her experiences. The emphasis here is on an intrapsychic as well as an interpersonal perspective, wherein the human psyche is viewed as something that emerges and develops in a pattern of relations. The most frequently occurring concepts are affect, emotion, and feeling. Tomkins (1963, 1962) defined *affect* as having both innate biological and universal bases. The concept *emotion* is defined as a secondary affect, which is developed later, more complex, and colored by personal experiences and memories. The concept *feeling* is defined as a conscious, subjective experience. With respect to research on affects in relation to humor, we find such studies primarily in therapeutic contexts (Ablon, 2002; Gates Weisel, 2002; O’Brien, 2001; Cooper, 2000; Heisterkamp, 2000; Bader, 1993). As concerns research on emotions in relation to humor, examples are Deckers’ (1998) work, which is focused on the influence of mood on humor, Ruch’s (1993) work on emotions in relation to exhilaration and humor, and Forabosco’s (1998) work, in which more pathological feelings in relation to humor are discussed.

Tomkins’ affect-theory. Tomkins (1992, 1963, 1962) differentiated two positive, one neutral, and six negative affects. Affects are the primary driving forces behind all our behaviors. Affects mark different motoric gestures, and particularly, the face mirrors an affect’s intensity and duration. According to Tomkins (1962), the *positive* affects include *enjoy-*

ment-joy and *interest-excitement*. Tomkins (1962) held that our ability to smile derives from the further development of this affect and that the more sudden and dramatic the reduction in stimulus intensity is, the more inclined we are to burst into laughter. Laughing and smiling have an obvious social function. Nilsson (1994) wrote that enjoyment-joy implies a sharing of the affect in a social interaction, but where sharing concerns two autonomous selves. The situation is different for the affect interest-excitement, in that affect sharing implies an empathic approach involving “absorption” into each other. Tomkins (1962) described the *neutral* affect *surprise-startle* as having the function of “system cleaner,” i.e. of freeing up resources in the mental apparatus so that attention can be directed at that which triggered the affect. Nilsson (1994) considered that this affect is absolutely necessary for human survival. The characteristic facial features of this affect are raised eyebrows, wide-open mouth, and wide-open eyes.

Tomkins (1963, 1991) grouped the *negative* affects into two clusters, where one cluster can be related to the individual’s readiness to deal with danger or threats and the other to object-relating, involving regulation of intimacy and distance. Belonging to the former cluster are *fear-terror*, *distress-anguish*, and *anger-rage*. High stimulus intensity triggers these affects and clear bodily manifestations indicate strain through, e.g. increased pulse rate and tensed muscles. The second cluster includes *dis smell*, *disgust*, and *shame-humiliation*. According to Nilsson (2005, 2002), the affects *dis smell* and *disgust* are also necessary for the individual’s survival. These affects refer to two different sensory modalities, or, *dis smell* to olfaction and *disgust* to taste. Nilsson (2002) described the affect *shame-humiliation* as a super structural affect covering the negative affects *fear-terror*, *distress-anguish*, and *anger-rage*. Kaufman (1989) described how the individual reacts physically to shame when he/she, e.g. “loses face”; both the head and the gaze are lowered. One defense against the shame can be a “look of contempt” and a derisive smile, characterized by a retracted upper lip. According to Kaufman (1989), shame is the source of low self-esteem, and in more serious cases to a disordered self-image and distorted body image. Shame is the affect of the self and for the self, and as such, according to Tomkins (1962), it has an important socialization function as a guide in social interaction.

Nathanson (1992) discussed how the unconscious affective programs are manifested in body posture, motoric activity, facial expressions, and voice quality. The affects are also amplified cognitively by memories of earlier life experiences (cf. Tomkins, 1992).

Shame in a developmental perspective

According to Kaufman (1989), shame is activated in two ways: (1) through insufficient reduction of the affects interest and joy and (2) through interruption of the object-relation. The discomfort of the feeling of shame means that the child is developing strategies for avoiding shame, for instance through expressions of anger, envy or distress. Kaufman (1989) viewed this as an expression of the child's fear of being abandoned and stressed the importance of the adult world reestablishing the relation by providing protection and security (touching and holding). Score (1994) considered that feelings of shame are first observed when the child is between 14 and 16 months of age. At this point in time, all of the child's affects are moderated, and the feeling of shame is a tool in this moderation. According to Kaufman (1989), during later childhood the adult world can use shame as a form of control over the child, with expressions such as "shame on you," or in the form of deprecating humor, with expressions such as "stupid" and "clumsy." Contempt (anger in combination with dissmell) for the child can be shown through cynicism, sarcasm, or arrogance. In these cases, the adult uses the tools of humor to break the child's will.

However, the feeling of shame is also important in regulating exaggerated risk-taking and in helping the child to stop, consider, and make a realistic evaluation, among other things in order to keep the positive affects from leading the child along dangerous paths. Nathanson (1992) considered that if the child can deal with shame in a successful way, this would contribute to a feeling of pride and competence. According to Kaufman (1989), the period of adolescence generally tends to reinforce shame. He pointed out two sides of this: heightened and exaggerated self-consciousness and self-doubt. The positive sides of this developmental period involve development of pride in the self: "Pride in self, in body, in sex and in gender are crucial for an integrated self-identity to development" (p. 44). Kaufman (1989) also took up the various shortcomings of adult life, such as powerlessness, failure at work or in relationships that can create doubt and feelings of shame, as well as how, later in life, the aging body can give rise to body shame.

If the individual is considered in a life-course perspective, then, departing from Kaufman's (1989) description, we can see how the individual has met different forms of humor during his/her lifetime. A meeting that colors self-esteem and self-image in various ways—but also how the individual himself/herself manages and expresses his/her own humor in light of meeting the problems of shame.

Humor in relation to the affects

Nathanson (1992) considered that shame is an ingredient in all of humor's forms and pointed out laughter as perhaps the best defense against the torment of shame. At the same time, he brought forward various forms of humor and wrote: "Comedy, however, rarely does more than hint at the darker side of shame; perhaps some of its success lies in the delicacy with which it plays around the edges of what is hidden within each of us. We all live on some line between shame and pride" (p. 17). Nathanson (1992) also wrote about the different practices of humor's "message" and pointed out the *comic* in our surroundings who gets us to laugh at human beings' general shortcomings. The *clown* focuses attention on himself/herself and gets us to laugh at his/her own "embarrassing moments." The *buffoon*, however, gets us to laugh at ourselves and at our own shortcomings.

To manage and in various ways overcome embarrassment and social shame, the individual possesses a number of strategies aimed at defending self-esteem and his/her own self-image. In what way do positive affects appear, and how are they tied to humor? Like Tomkins (1962), Nathanson (1992) pointed out the strength of the individual's positive affects—interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy—and saw these as important driving forces in his/her development. With respect to the affect enjoyment-joy, a parallel can be drawn to Stern's (1985) emphasis on the importance of positive acknowledgment in close relationships to others, as the foundation for sound development, including the ability to feel joy and interest with regard to oneself and others. Stern (1990) spoke about *affect-attunement*, defined as the parent's capacity to share an inner emotional state with the child, that is, to perceive the child's emotional state and give such feedback that the child is able to read the parental response as something related to the child's original affectual state. The significance of the affects enjoyment-joy and interest-excitement for psychic development seems to be unequivocal; but how is humor actually tied to the positive affects? How, from the perspective of humor, do the negative affects other than shame fit in? There are no answers to questions such as these in the extant literature on affects.

Summarizing this in a fruitful way, we may say that Tomkins (1962), Nathanson (1992), and Kaufman (1989) have stressed that the shame affect occupies a special position as socialization agent in the social interplay. Only in exceptional cases have these authors brought up humor, and then as one strategy among others for avoiding the torments of shame. Kaufman (1989) is explicit in his under-

standing of humor as a defensive strategy, where deprecating and sarcastic humor, with an ingredient of contempt, serves as an immediate obstacle to establishing social bonds. However, if we see humor as an adaptive strategy?

How, seen from a developmental perspective, the affects as tied to humor has hardly been touched upon at all by the above-named authors. The *aim* of the present study is to try to promote a deeper understanding of humor's function, seen from a developmental and affect-theoretical perspective, with particular emphasis on the shame affect. To elucidate this, a longitudinal case study is used (the case of Beatus). *Specific questions* are, in the case of Beatus, in what way can humor be related to all affects? What function does humor have in relation to the affect shame? What driving forces underlie humor in the case of Beatus?

Method

Case study

According to Denscombe (1998), the case-study method is well suited to understanding an individual case in all its depth and complexity, in its natural milieu, and with a focus on relations and processes; it is appropriate when there is an opportunity to examine several sources and methods. The limitation is that one cannot make broad generalizations, yet this is not the intended use of qualitative data.

Kvale (1995) mentioned the researcher's role as either prospector or passenger. The prospector expects to find something given or static that exists in reality and that only needs to be collected. The passenger, however, invites the subject to join in on a research process in which reciprocity applies and dialogue is seen as an important factor. In this case of Beatus, the researcher's role is more inviting (as regards the subject's active participation), but also more permissive of joint and new ideas and explorations, in line with Kvale (1995).

Participant

The present study, connecting to a previous research project and doctoral dissertation (Linge, 1993), takes the opportunity to further investigate one of the seventy interviewees found in the dissertation data. Upon his first contact with the project, the individual was nine years old, and at 25 years of age, 17 years later, he completed his last study session. The intention has been to follow the case of Beatus over the years in an attempt to understand the more fundamental function of humor in one specific case.

The male interviewee Beatus (born 1979) grew up in a relatively small community and is now studying and living in a Swedish university town. Beatus is the youngest of four sons born to an academic couple. Selection of this particular person was based on *ideal-representative selection* (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), in that the conditions for the project during the period 1998–2004 were that the interviewee should be verbally expressive, highly interested in the phenomenon of humor and willing to participate during an extended period of time.

Data collection

The interview data were collected during the period 1988–2004 (see Table I).

Stage I. Data from 1988 and 1991 were included in a doctoral dissertation entitled "Humor and Childhood—developmental psychological aspects of the function of humor" (Linge, 1993) and were audio recorded in the interviewee's school library. During the period 1992–1997, there was a gap with no interview data collected. The first intention in 1992 was to stop the project—when no grants were available. Then in 1998, a new academic situation made possible to get in touch with the interviewee again.

Stage II. Data from 1998–2004 were then audio recorded (in various group rooms) in a typical academic milieu. The interviews were transcribed in their entirety and sent to Beatus for possible changes. Beatus was allowed to change a word's tone (e.g. from aggressive to angry), to clarify a name or to provide a more extensive analysis. In the earlier interviews (from 1988 and 1991), a semi-structured

Table I. A description of the investigative design used in the study (1988–2004).

Year	Procedure	Time (h)
1988	Interview 1 Beatus	1
1991	Interview 2 Beatus	1
1998	Interview 3 Beatus	2
1999	Interview 4 Beatus	2
1999	Interview 5 Beatus	1
1999	Interview 6 Beatus	1
2000	Interview 7 Beatus	2
2001	Interview 8 Beatus	2
2001	Interview 9 (+analysis)	2
2002	Interview 10 (+analysis)	1
2002	Interview 11 (+analysis)	2
2003	Interview 12 (+analysis)	1
2003	Data analysis (interviewer + Beatus)	3
2004	Data analysis (interviewer + Beatus)	3

interview guide was used including themes concerning form and content, as well as the meaning of humor in different situations. From 1998 onward, the interviews took on the form of exploratory conversations, wherein the intention was to reveal more nuances and achieve a greater understanding of humor's function (with focus on the affects in Beatus) than had been done in the earlier interviews. Beatus was instructed in 1998 to use all affects (feelings) he wanted to explain his experiences and reflections. In this context, an unstructured interview form became a tool for a give and take, whereby the interviewee and the interviewer jointly adopted a *process way of thinking*; that is, humor was also seen in process terms and not merely as a static variable/personality trait. This joint analysis work was carried out during the period 2003–2004 and it included Beatus reading the study's interpretive sections and correcting or supplementing the interpretations made. Beatus approved of the article as a whole and expressed that the study was credible with respect to its affect-theoretical frame of interpretation.

Procedure

The investigative procedure can be seen as more explorative than descriptive. The purpose here, therefore, has been for researcher and subject to explore humor's function together, with Beatus' current life, his life history and his affects as the focus. To that purpose, Beatus, for instance, could initiate an interview; send his reflections via post/e-mail after having read through an interview; begin a new interview with suggestions for discussion points; grasp a topic (affects) during an interview and explore it more deeply; actively participate in the analysis work by giving suggestions for plausible metaphors and patterns; serve as a theoretical discussion partner; as well as concern himself with the temporal and spatial conditions for the interviews.

Analysis of data

The analysis was based on a qualitative interpretative approach. Kvale (1995) discussed three different levels of interpretation during analysis of qualitative data: (a) the interviewee's own interpretation, (b) "common sense" interpretation, and (c) theoretical interpretation. In the present study, the interviewee's own interpretation has been stressed in reflections and citations, integrated with the author's analysis of the main patterns (metaphors) in the result part (Humor as a door-opener, Humor as a moderator, and Humor as a pendulum) in line with Kvale's level a. The "common sense" interpretation,

in line with Kvale's level b, has not been relevant in this case study. The theoretical level of interpretation however, in line with Kvale's level c, has been the author's focus in the theoretical part (see Theoretical interpretation), presented with different theoretical patterns in relation to the affects. The level of abstraction in this theoretical interpretation was connected to the principle of moving from parts to the whole, and back again, in order to find out the deeper affect meaning in the data of humor, and then compared the findings with affect theory, in line with Tomkins (1992, 1991, 1963, 1962) and other researchers in this field. One resulting effect of this theoretical interpretation was a new theoretical concept, inspired of a closely allied concept by Stern (1990).

In the present study, the concept of *affect* has been chosen throughout to clarify the theoretical line of argument. This was done despite the fact that the term emotion, or feelings, would have been more appropriate in certain circumstances (Tomkins, 1962).

Ethics

With focus on participation in 1988, when Beatus was a child, the project got the parents permission. In 1998, the adult Beatus understood all of the ethical guidelines—confidentiality, informed consent, his own active role, and the consequences of participation, in line with principles from Denscombe (1998). Beatus' motivation seemed to be his clearly expressed general theoretical interest. In this case, his interest is in understanding the nuances of his own humor in an affective and relational context more thoroughly.

Results

Humor as a door opener

The results show that the expression "embarrassing" occurs frequently in Beatus' reasoning and can be interpreted as deriving from the shame affect and its socialization function.

Beatus (20 years old): A typical military joke, pick-up tactic—Like you want to come to my place for tea ... then the other person says ... I don't drink tea ... and the first one answers ... I don't either! ... you use humor when there's a risk that you might say something embarrassing ... a door-opener ... with humor you don't know if it's safe or not ... are you serious ... no, I'm just kidding ... you say it like an exaggeration so the person can back out ... you signal with a twinkle

in your eyes . . . both know what it is but you don't say it.

If the affects joy and interest are suddenly interrupted, shame appears as an indication to the individual that something in the situation has gone wrong. In this context, it seems to be humor that steps in and saves the situation. The above example shows how humor can be the "door opener" that wards off shame. According to Beatus' reflections, then, when one has reached the limit of what is socially acceptable, the shame affect is triggered. If, however, the person is able to handle the situation through humor, a release from shame occurs instead. Viewed from a developmental perspective, the examples show how Beatus' awareness of timing increases with age. This awareness is also manifested in the clarity of his signaling language (body language, gestures, and twinkling eyes) and in the content of his jokes.

Beatus (20 years old): So you turn on a bunch of joy, excitement and surprise, maybe you did something completely wrong. You distance yourself from something a lot, you zoom out . . . then you get a completely different picture . . . it's important to be surprised now and then, you get a completely new perspective.

The surprise affect, in its capacity as system cleaner, is the affect that opens the door for new unexplored opportunities. Humor, in relation to the surprise affect, creates expectation, which in its turn paves the way for other affects. However, there is a limit for what is socially acceptable and this is determined by the context before the joke is activated.

Beatus (22 years old): You share the joy and the jokes . . . but everybody doesn't laugh . . . you don't get the same sense of community . . . maybe you don't want to expose yourself . . . sort of like looking into someone else's house . . . a personal space . . . you expose yourself a little . . . there's a risk it will be embarrassing if the joke isn't accepted . . . maybe it came too close.

The above example also shows how humor can be triggered by excesses of the joy and interest affects, with shame waiting nearby. Beatus describes how this is manifested in the body in the form of a bowed head and a tenser posture. The affects surprise and shame often follow such an event, and they break off the positive affects joy and interest. Shame shows us that something is wrong and causes the strained humor to subside. The example shows the risks of

humor when reception does not turn out as expected. At 22 years of age, Beatus describes how he is aware of shame reactions, doing so in terms of the fear and shame of being excluded from the fellowship.

Beatus (9 years old): Humor is important to me . . . I usually sort them, if I think it's funny then I check the response!

Beatus (20 years old): I was a buffoon when I was little . . . demanded a lot of attention . . . but now if you're a buffoon the others think you're on an ego trip.

From a developmental perspective, we see how Beatus describes the "buffoon" in the family situation during his childhood; the youngest son wants to be in focus in order to be accepted. In his adult years, Beatus indicates that he wants to tone down the "buffoon role" and instead find the boundaries of what can be perceived as right in the context. However, in the fear and shame of being rejected is also a calculation concerning the form in which the humor will be expressed as well as the type of context that is suitable. However, Beatus considers that if someone outside the group comments on this pleasurable humor process using words like "you're being bloody stupid," the shame affect is triggered, which he describes using the word "embarrassing."

The negative affects *dismell* and *disgust* are associated with dissociation from other objects:

Beatus (20 years old): When I was 8 or 9 I laughed at taboo subjects . . . because they were forbidden . . . what you were afraid of . . . when I was 12 or 13 there was a lot of disgusting stuff . . . you joked about sickening things . . . when you're little you don't notice those things . . . but in your teenage years those ideas develop . . . that you don't get to joke about because it's not appropriate . . . you want to test the limits . . . you explore new areas . . . in like a peaceful way.

Beatus' reflections show that humor tied to these two affects appears quite clearly in the stories and riddles of the teenage years, in which violence and sexuality often have a prominent position. Beatus' reflections indicate how childhood and early adolescence constituted an exploration of the mysteries of sex using a number of different jokes alluding to disgust and distance, but also a fascination with a seemingly forbidden topic, something about which one did not joke. The shame affect makes its entrance, but humor opens things up, tests limits

and makes visible that which teenagers imagine, but are not yet mature enough to try.

The results show humor as a “door opener” also for the combined negative affects fear-terror, distress-anguish, and dismay:

Beatus (22 years old): For instance during basic training out in the mud... we were so cold we were dying... you wanted to cry... go home... then somebody says... if I die I want to be buried someplace warm... then you sit there and laugh... shit, what are we doing here anyway... humor can put you at a distance to shut things out... so you can relax a little, from the sorrow, anguish and disgust.

Using this joke from his time in the service, Beatus reflects upon how mastery occurs through humor that shows the span between the horrible aspects of life and life’s ultimate consequence: death. Liberation lies in the ability to joke and distance oneself from the seriousness of the situation.

Humor as a moderator

Beatus describes how, during preschool, a school-mate, Pelle, succeeded in using humor to deal with different bullying situations brought on by older pupils. The form of humor referred to was gibling, which was used by the perpetrators to ridicule and belittle younger pupils. The gibe was intended to make the situation embarrassing for Pelle, the message involving ridiculing a specific body part (“your big butt”). Nevertheless, Pelle was able, with the help of humor (“my butt, that’s nothing, you should see the teacher’s butt!”), to moderate the shame to avoid being dumbfounded. Instead, he used the same weapon as the perpetrators themselves, but in another direction. The original aim of the gibe was to destroy—but using humor, Pelle took evasive action and passed the gibe on, which caused the group of older boys to respect him.

The results then show how the affect anger-rage is manifested in the data through many different disguises, for example gibes and irony. Beatus describes how he responds to gibes and irony at different times in his life.

Beatus (9 years old): Sometimes my dad is on the edge when he jokes around... I don’t think it’s funny... like he says I should clean my room... yeah, like usual... because I usually say like usual... he thinks it’s funny... I don’t think it’s funny... it’s not humor... cause I didn’t understand it was funny... because I was cross.

Beatus (20 years old): When I was little I couldn’t tell the difference between irony and pure criticism... at 12 I understood irony... at about 15 I started using it myself... it’s not at all the same as in adulthood... there’s a completely different tone... small details, pauses... it feels like if you’re gonna make a gibe it should be nimble and swift... contain a little message... because it’s only a joke it’s not so bad... I’m just kidding... giving it a chance without losing face.

Seen from a developmental perspective, the examples show how Beatus has more trouble understanding, dealing with and responding to a gibe or ironic comment during his childhood. As an adult, however, Beatus sees the pleasurable joke in the underlying message of irony or in a light gibe, and he is able to push aside the shame that dumbfounds him. He can deal with irony in another way, without apologizing, for example, by being ironic back. The humor seems to have been triggered by the underlying anger, but the anger has been moderated and put at a distance so it can be dealt with more easily. The pleasure in an ounce of joy lies in the mastery itself, to moderate shame and not be nonplussed.

Humor as pendulation

Beatus’ girlfriend has broken up with him and we see how Beatus expresses the affect distress-anguish. His sorrow brings to the fore previous memories and experiences, which in their turn trigger other negative affects.

Beatus (22 years old): It feels better when you can joke about it... it felt like the pain and sorrow were like a great big hole I’d fallen into... you couldn’t see the surface... but when I made a joke I got a new perspective and could see that the hole wasn’t as deep as I’d thought.

In this context, where humor is like a door opener for opening up and distancing oneself from sorrow and anger, Beatus experiences that he can deal with the situation and at times gain access to the positive affect joy. In the above example, Beatus shows how a complex of affects is activated when his girlfriend breaks up with him and how humor enters, giving him a new perspective on the events and helping him to relax in the midst of a difficult situation. Beatus consciously reflects on how the pendulum swings between the different affect states. *Pendulation* between the positive and negative affects, however, does give Beatus the feeling that there is, in spite of everything, something “higher up out of the deep hole” and the hope that through humor he will come

into contact with joy in the future. The next results show how the factor of *time* plays an important part:

Beatus (20 years old): For instance a math test . . . my girlfriend joked about my test . . . talk about brain death, now I'm going to go and check my test . . . maybe a week later this joke about me would have been funny . . . but if I'm sad about it then it's not funny.

According to Beatus, when the sorrow affect is present, it is so tangible that it can sometimes be difficult to see a joke as funny. In such cases, the joke requires additional distance from this strong affect, which Beatus feels can be a question of different "periods of time", depending on the affect's strength.

Theoretical interpretation

Humor's relation to the affects, with special emphasis on the shame affect

Beatus recurrently used the expression *door opener* to clarify humor's role in relation to the affects. The expression refers to another expression, *gatekeeper* (cf. Nilsson 2005, 2002; Tomkins, 1962), a term used to stress shame's function in regulating the relationship between the positive affects joy and interest and the negative affects. Tomkins (1962) pointed out the important socialization function of shame, which is for the benefit of the individual in his/her continued social interplay. My thought is that humor's role is to open the door for all affects and particularly to balance the negative affects against the positive. The balancing role of humor is often stressed by Beatus. He describes how he uses humor as a door-opener for positive affects (interest and joy), where balancing entails only opening the door "a little" in the communication so that the situation will not become embarrassing—that is, so that he will not come too near the private sphere, which could imply activation of the shame affect. Humor communication is described in terms of a signal function, in the form of body language (winks, gestures, or facial expressions) or in the form of "verbal games."

Closely connected to the shame affect is the surprise affect. Tomkins (1962) viewed this affect as a "system cleaner" for the other affects (cf. Nilsson, 2005, 2002). The results of the present study show that the adult Beatus associates the surprise affect with the shame affect, and he considers that surprise tied to cognitive reflection can also give an entirely new perspective on the situation. The affects fluctuate in humor, but surprise is the affect that gives an expectation of what will come,

with the other affects always in tow. Referring to the early teenage years, the adult Beatus describes the exploration of the mysteries of sex through various jokes with sexual allusions. In these cases, humor's function is to allow testing of unexplored areas in relation to others' reactions. The balance in humor, in close association with shame, serves as a door opener for the positive affects interest and joy—but also for the negative affects, dissmell and disgust in the examples.

If humor can be seen as the door opener intended to let in both the positive and the negative affects, then it is also evident how Beatus reflects upon the *pendulation* between the different affectual states. This pendulation is seen in the example of the girlfriend who broke up with him, showing how it is possible to deal with anger and distress through humor and sometimes to gain access to the positive affect enjoyment-joy, even if the shame affect is constantly waiting nearby. "Humor is important," says Beatus, "because it indicates the hope that the joy affect is available somewhere close by". The example with his girlfriend shows how the adult Beatus views his humor in a difficult life situation and how he considers that even more latent humor experiences, e.g. comedy films, can help him.

Humor's function on the intrapsychic and interpersonal levels in relation to an affect-theoretical perspective

The intrapsychic level. From a developmental perspective, we see the childhood Beatus—described from the perspective of adult reflection—as the buffoon: The child who must always be funny to get attention. Beatus describes the shame and, with time, the fear of being excluded from the fellowship. This is in accord with Kaufman's (1989) description of the child's fear of being abandoned and with a constant striving to re-establish bridges to others. Beatus' strategy for being accepted is to resort to humor, as the buffoon. This is a risky strategy, however, as exaggeration lies close by. When the joy and interest affects are triggered with too much intensity and without reason, Tomkins (1962) showed how the shame affect can be triggered and break off the situation, with Kaufman's (1989) remark "shame on you." It appears that the 9-year-old Beatus actively strived to use the humor strategy to belong to the group, unaware of the possible consequences of exaggerated buffoonery. It is first in his adult years that Beatus reflects upon "the inner controlling voice" (an anticipation of the adult world's norms and remarks), which is reminiscent of the external control: "you're being bloody stupid" (cf. Tomkins, 1992). In other words, Beatus becomes aware of the presence of shame in the

humor process and, therefore, tones down the buffoon role in order to gain access to a more mature humor strategy, which entails consideration of the social context with its actors and demands for reciprocity. In this connection, humor can be seen as a *moderator* for balancing shame in relation to the positive affects. According to Beatus, there is always a limit to what is socially acceptable and this limit is implicit in the context before the shame is activated.

Kaufman (1989) claimed that shame could be the source of low self-esteem, a disordered self-image, and a distorted body image during childhood, but that the child possesses a number of strategies for avoiding shame. Beatus refers to the example of Pelle, who is able to ward off the shame of being ridiculed in a bullying situation on the schoolyard. Using humor, this 6-year-old deals successfully with a vulnerable situation and passes the “gibe” (“your big butt”) along to another target—the teacher—arousing admiration in his circle of friends. Based on this example, we can suppose that Beatus probably accepts humor as a strategy and as a way of maintaining self-esteem and an intact body image. The example of Pelle shows the perspective of the vulnerable, but if we take the perpetrator perspective (that of the bullies), we can imagine the difficult negative affects anger, fear, and dissmell as features. According to Nilsson (2005, 1994), *malicious pleasure* is hidden in this combination of affects, from which the element of the socialization affect shame is excluded. Malicious pleasure in combination with pathological deprecating humor, intended to harm the vulnerable object, can have devastating consequences for the self-esteem of a child who does not have strategies for dealing with the “gibe” and passing it along to another target.

The interpersonal level. If we consider the humor process in Beatus, several general features of the affects are revealed, namely infectiousness, communicative strivings, and latent messages. Interpreting the results, we can see Beatus’ humor, on a relational level, as a maturity-related capacity, also entailing the ability to perceive, understand, and share another person’s inner emotional state on a deeper psychic level. Tomkins (1962) mentioned the infectiousness of the affects, where the individuals read one another’s facial expressions, body language and gestures and where particularly the face and the eyes’ vitality are amplifiers of the affects. With respect to the affects’ infectiousness, what Beatus expresses is in line with the notions of Tomkins; this suggests that Beatus uses different signals to read that a humor process is in progress. In this case, infectiousness implies that the body signals for the affects joy and interest are so tangible that the “reader” is

unconsciously drawn into the situation (cf. Nilsson, 2005). Thus, the affects become the bearers of humor’s various messages. One can speculate about the humor process in several steps. The first step would entail an affect pattern in Beatus, which in the next stage arouses a similar manifestation in the recipient, that is, memories of previous experiences with similar affects. These, in turn, are triggered and checked against the sender’s affectual state. This leads, in the next step, to a smile or a laugh. Here we find a parallel to Stern’s (1990) concept of affect-attunement (the ability to share inner emotional states), which develops during the child’s first year of life. If, during this period, the parents practice turn-taking and reciprocity with the infant—according to Stern at the intersubjective relating level—then the child is also participating in the mutual exchange of affects, such that the child’s experience of affect reading will help him/her to emotionally and cognitively develop his/her inner emotional world. A tentative conclusion is that the underlying message in humor is also the sharing of affects. Beatus communicates through humor on many planes: on an external plane with verbal statements of differing degrees of complexity as well as different bodily signals and on an inner affect-based plane with underlying messages concerning different and varying subtle affectual states. Perhaps this is why a humor situation is in certain cases experienced as unpleasant? Beatus describes how he sometimes needs to create a distance from a strong affect (in his case, distress-anguish) so that, in the humor situation, joy can have an impact. Thus, affect-attunement does not appear immediately when the sender and recipient share the same affect pattern. Then the humor process functions only on an external plane involving cognitive understanding of the joke’s content, but not on a deeper level involving sharing the same affect (e.g. enjoyment-joy). Parallel to Stern’s (1990) term affect-attunement, we could thus coin the term *humor-attunement*, defined as the capacity to share an inner affectual state, integrated with a cognitive perception (cf. Tomkins, 1992) and understanding of the humor’s content and form, appropriately timed to the social context.

To sum up: In the case of Beatus in what way can humor be related to all affects? Humor has the function of opening the doors to all affects, with the metaphor *door opener* to elucidate this process. What function does humor have in relation to the affect shame? Humor has the function of balancing the shame affect in relation to the positive affects, with the *metaphor* moderator to describe this balance. The deeper meaning of the humor-process is to understand the *pendulation* between the different affectual states and the role of all the affects lying behind. The

new term *humor-attunement* will highlight the capacity to share these inner affectual states. “Humor is important, because it indicates the hope that the joy affect is available somewhere close by”, in Beatus’ own words.

Discussion

What driving forces underlie humor in the case of Beatus? Tomkins (1992, 1991, 1963, 1962) viewed the affects as the primary driving forces behind all of our actions and the affectual system as the primary motivational system. The affects are both psychological and biological phenomena, the process that binds together conscious and unconscious, psyche and soma, as well as thought and action. On a meta-theoretical level, Beatus’ humor can be discussed from a motivational perspective. In this case, of Beatus it is considered that the driving force or motivation does not derive from humor itself, but instead arises through triggered affects, which guide attention in a certain direction. Beatus’ humor seems to develop in a flow of affects, benefiting his “developmental tasks” at different ages. It follows from this that, in a communicative perspective, humor includes external noticeable signals (body language and verbal statements) as well as relatively latent and unconscious affect patterns, and where the shame affects has a prominent role as socialization agent. Nathanson (1992) particularly stressed the importance of the shame affect and considered that if the child can successfully deal with shame, this will contribute to a feeling of pride and competence. Beatus’ adaptive strategy is thus to use humor to moderate shame in order to gain access especially to the positive affects enjoyment-joy; on the intrapsychic plane, this contributes to a “feeling of me-ness” (cf. Tomkins, 1992, 1991, 1963, 1962; Nilsson, 2005, 1994), focused on individuation, competence and a feeling of well-being. This, in turn, promotes the feeling of also being able to share different humor sequences in which the interest affect is central; on the interpersonal plane, this contributes to a “feeling of our-ness”, focused on togetherness and the capacity to share inner affectual states (humor-attunement).

Yet humor also involves defensive strategies with features of the negative affects. Viewed from a bullying perspective, the outcome can be devastating, which is in line with Kaufman’s (1989) ideas about deprecating humor. If, on the other hand, mastery of the situation occurs, for instance through a clever evasive maneuver (humor involves adaptive strategies); this enables *pendulation* of the affect pattern toward the positive, resulting in the maintained self-esteem of the individual. Using the

affect-theoretical perspective as a filter, it appears that it is not humor itself that has a rejective function—through, e.g. deprecating humor—but instead it is the underlying affects that constitute the driving force.

The *implications* of this kind of case study can be seen in two ways: (1) the question of generalization, and (2) the benefit of humor in relation to affect-theory. In the first point, we can raise the question if it is a *generalization* problem with a case-study, including experiences and reflections from one single person. However, if we want to have rich data during a longer period of time, and a deep understanding in all its complexity, with focus on relations and affect processes, it is not reasonable in time and cost to include many people. The case of Beatus is important to show the function of his humor, both at the intrapsychic level with all the longitudinal aspects and individual changes, and at the interpersonal level with humor as a process phenomenon, with focus on togetherness—to share inner affectual states. If Tomkins (1992, 1991, 1963, 1962) had a good theoretical point, that affects have both biological and universal bases, then we can discuss if these affects also colour the phenomenon of humor in all of us.

The next point is the *benefit* of humor in relation to affect-theory. It is useful to stress the function of humor in the field of health and well-being and the importance of the affective aspects in all human beings. Beyond the cheerful face of humor, I will say, there it is a deep meaning of affective message, colored of either negative affects, aggressive/frightened elements (as irony, cynicism, sarcasm), or a more delightful feeling of positive affects (as good stories). If we see the individual in a life-long perspective, then we can see how the individual will meet different forms of humor during his/her lifetime, a meeting that will colour self-esteem and self-image in various ways—but also how the individual himself/herself will manage and express his/her own humor in light of meeting the problems of shame. There can be a coping effect in humor in relation to the shame affect and that can have an impact on feeling of pride and competence.

Conclusions

Viewed from a developmental perspective, we see how Beatus’ awareness of humor in relation to the affects’ function—implemented in a social context and with signification at both the verbal and signal levels—increases with age. From an affect-theoretical perspective, Beatus used the metaphor *door opener*, a term referring to humor’s function of opening the doors to all of the affects. The metaphor

moderator refers to humor's role in balancing the shame affect in relation to the positive affects. On an intrapsychic level, *pendulation* between the different affectual states can be visualized, which colours the humor sequence in its various phases, with features of both adaptive and defensive elements. Considering the interpersonal level, the term *humor-attunement* is coined to highlight the capacity to share inner affectual states. On a meta-theoretical level, Beatus' humor can be discussed from a motivational perspective.

The importance of further research in the field of humor and affect-theory is a task for researchers, who are interested in keeping a very complex and sometimes inaccessible humor phenomenon in focus. A new idea could be to highlight the humor in relation to affects in a broader perspective, included more participants. That, however, is a topic for another article.

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