

## Book review

**Gibson, Janet M. (2019) *An Introduction to the Psychology of Humour*, London & New York: Routledge.**

“Two muffins were sitting in an oven. One muffin says, ‘Wow, it sure is hot in here!’ The other muffin says, ‘Ahhh!!! A talking muffin!’” One person may think this is a very funny joke, and another may find it only mildly amusing (p. 1).

This opening of the book may sound like an oversimplification. The potential range of reactions is wide: from indifference, for example, to some negative or even aversive responses. The joke might be considered witty, hilarious, or also not funny, childish, of low intellectual quality, or simply uninteresting. However, this critical remark is one of the very few that should be addressed to the book. And, besides, the role of subjectivity, and of its implications in humour, is anyway taken adequately into account along the chapters.

The main body of the book is articulated into 10 chapters, each of which corresponds to one of ten typical branches of psychology. Some branches, labelled as “industrial/business/work”, “forensic”, “community”, or also “general” psychology, are not presented in a specific chapter, but they are anyway dealt with in various points of the exposition.

The openly didactic approach of the book has its implications. On the one hand, it makes an easy and also pleasant reading; concepts, also complex ones, are clearly presented and illustrated. Chapters are well organised and structured in an orderly way. Every single chapter begins with presenting the “Learning objectives” and the “Assumptions of the field”. Recaps, class exercises, review questions help comprehension and the learning process. On the other hand, being an “Introduction” in intent, not all the topics are (or can be) investigated at length and in depth. Some more readings need to be considered (and some of them are duly suggested) to expand and elaborate on the matters. Each chapter offers a detailed presentation of the “state of the art”. The basic theoretical concepts, and the methodological features of the psychological branch in question are given as a preliminary framework. The contributions to the field of humour studies are subsequently delineated.

To begin with, *Cognitive Psychology* is rightly introduced first. Rightly, because the construct (or theory) of Incongruity Resolution (aka INC RES, or IR) is *crucial* to the structural description of humour. Not a sufficient condition –other factors need also to be taken into account– but for most scholars a necessary one. Also discussed are questions regarding the limitations of incongruity theory, “why we don’t get the jokes?”, the role of memory, the role of attention, the psycholinguistic approach, creativity and divergent thinking, etc.

*Biological Psychology* and its connections with the most recent neuroscientific approaches delineate a stimulating, though complex and still developing, picture of what happens in the body, and above all in the brain, when a humour experience is

involved. What about the different brain areas? What neuronal circuits are called into “action”? What are the technological resources and procedures employed in these explorations? This chapter shows how studies from brain damages and from brain imaging, in particular, are on the way of providing many interesting and promising answers.

*Personality Psychology* offers useful tools of investigation and theoretical models regarding humour as a trait (and state), individual differences, dimensions of humour (typically describing the multidimensional components), and the relationship with other personality models (such as, for instance, the Big Five). Cheerfulness, humour styles, questionnaires dedicated to humour, dark and sick humour are also some of the topics discussed.

*Social Psychology* deals mainly with the social aspects, some of which are in the tradition of the discipline and some have become objects of attention and inquiry in relatively recent years. Among the first, the role of status, stereotypes and attitudes, how race and gender act in favour or against the humour process. Among the latter, the connection between humour (and laughing) and bullying, the role of humour in romantic relationship, and the question of whether “a joke is just a joke” (introducing a controversial socio-ethical issue).

*Cross-cultural Psychology* presents studies that describe how humour manifests itself in different cultural contexts, and what happens when the “boundaries” are crossed. Comparisons are made that reveal similarities and differences. The “American favourite joke” and the “German favourite joke”, for instance, are both entertaining and instructive examples. Gelotophobia, namely the fear of being laughed at, is considered in this chapter not as much for its specificity –it would rather belong to Clinical Psychology– but most likely because extensive cross-cultural studies have been conducted on the subject. Although this chapter is, in general, well documented, it should be noted that the work by Christie Davies is not adequately mentioned. For instance, *Ethnic Humour around the World* (Davies 1997), a fundamental study in this area, is not referenced.

*Developmental Psychology* considers how humour and related phenomena evolve from childhood. Developmental theories and experimental data provide the basis of knowledge. Many relevant aspects are explored, such as children’s understanding of humour, humour production, how the Theory of Mind plays a role, special populations (children with intellectual disabilities, gifted children, etc.). Also old age is considered, the main questions being “Does humour decline when ageing? What changes intervene?”

*Health Psychology* opens with the word *equilibrium* which attracts the attention on the importance of balance both for health and for humour, in a circular relationship. Immune system, pain, stress, coping are terms that have been recognised to have a close, important connection, positive or negative with humour. Many studies are examined to present a critical evaluation of this connection, discussing, for instance, whether humour can help to tolerate pain and to reduce stress.

*Positive Psychology* presents humour in the context of “*character strengths*”, as a virtue relating to life satisfaction and happiness. Various studies are considered to show how humour, either benevolent or corrective, for instance, has an impact on the everyday (or long term) lives of different individuals. The possibility of improving the sense of humour, and of humour improving subjective well-being is also a matter of discussion. A critical evaluation by the author is that many (if not most) studies are of the correlational type, and that more experimental work would be necessary to rely on significant evidence.

*Clinical Psychology* enters the field of psychopathology and of psychotherapy. Is there an ill side of humour? Can humour be a therapeutic tool? The main perspectives considered are the Freudian psychodynamic theory, the reversal theory, existentialism, the cognitive therapy, and the behaviour therapy. In addition, topics like aggressive humour, complaining with humour, and the relationship between humour and mental disorders (in particular autism spectrum, borderline personality, schizophrenia) are also examined.

*Applied Psychology* selects some of the many areas where humour finds applications. Marketing and advertisements are activities in which humour is frequently and purposefully employed. Issues about the effectiveness of humour are discussed: is the joke, for instance, or the brand which is remembered? How do culture, age, and gender intervene in the process? Humour in the workplace is also examined, in its many aspects relating to stress coping, building relationships, and also as regards to its ambivalent or negative effects connected, for example, with aggression (bullying) and sexuality. A paragraph is dedicated to “non-funny occupations” (e.g. crime scene investigators, or morticians) in which humour has a significant presence and role. The role and presence of humour also examined in relation to educational material and settings in the classroom. Retention, learning, climate: what is the impact of humour on them?

Other books present the key words *psychology* and *humour* in their titles. See, for instance, Roeckelein (2002) and Martin (2007). Additional words help to differentiate and specify: Roeckelein adds *A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography*, Martin *An Integrative Approach*. As for the book by Janet Gibson, “Introduction” appears to be the key term. It is a book that can be appreciated as going beyond expectations for an “Introduction”. It offers a systematic and comprehensive overview of humour within the domain of psychology. At the same time, it may be also seen as an overview of psychology itself, of its theories, models, and methodological approaches from the perspective of humour as a research object.

Twenty-one pages of references give a clear idea of the quantity and quality of specific literature that has been consulted and distributed through the pages of the book. However, something is missing that would have been opportune to take into consideration. That is, for example, the case of the reference to another book whose title is *The Psychology of Humour* (Goldstein & McGhee 1972). Its subtitle is *Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues*. The model describing incongruity-resolution by Suls (1972) was first presented in this volume, whereas in Gibson’s book is referenced as Suls (1983). The book edited by Goldstein & McGhee is by many considered to be the very starting point of contemporary humour research.

Furthermore, no mention is given to the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (GTVH, Attardo & Raskin 1991). Raskin and Attardo are linguists (and, to the present reviewer’s knowledge, proud to be). The theory (a macro model) has been developed in a linguistic disciplinary environment. It has, however, relevant connections with the psychological perspective, in particular as regards the *logical mechanisms* (with their implications relating to cognitive psychology) or, say, *targets* (social psychology). To be noted, incidentally, that one of the most frequently quoted jokes in humour studies - the “bronchial patient” - is reported by Janet Gibson herself as an example, but without reference to *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour* (Raskin 1985) where the joke is extensively analysed.

However, these remarks do not affect the overall value of the book. It is an interesting, useful, and stimulating reading for students, and not only. The reader who should assimilate the book (not memorise it - that would be an unattainable task, given

the amount of information provided), and would do all the home and the class work suggested, would be in a favourable position to be regarded as highly competent in the field of humour studies.

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