

SUMMARY

THE HUMOR CODE

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Summary of “The Humor Code” by Peter McGraw and Joel Warner

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Everybody loves a good laugh, but have you ever wondered why some things are funny and others aren't?

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Introduction

No matter what other differences divide us in life, one thing is truly universal: everyone loves to laugh! We do it when gathered with friends around the dinner table, when someone tags us in a funny meme, or when we're watching a TV show on our own. But have you ever thought about why we do it? If you take just a moment to delve beneath the surface and learn a little bit about the origins of humor, it might surprise you to discover that laughter isn't purely something we do for fun. In fact, as a communication tool our early ancestors developed through evolution, it's come to be part of our biology.

And if you think about all the situations in which we laugh, it makes a lot of sense! Because laughter isn't reserved for the moments when we find something funny-- we also laugh to relieve stress (we all know the nervous chuckle), to make scary things seem a little less intense (ever laughed during a horror movie?) or to connect with others. After all, we've all been in a position where we've met someone new and something embarrassing occurs and we all try to make a joke of it to release the tension. So, because laughter is not only a vital communication tool but an integral aspect of the human experience, this book is dedicated to the study of all things humorous. And through the course of this summary, we're going to learn about the science and psychology of laughter and what makes things funny to us. We'll also take a look at some additional fun facts like:

- Why it's impossible to tickle yourself
- Why everything's funnier in a dark room, and
- How Holocaust prisoners still found ways to make each other laugh

Laughter Helps us Communicate Safety and Stress

If someone tells you a joke that strikes you as funny, what do you do? Instinctively, you laugh, right? But have you ever thought about why your body automatically responds that way or what purpose it serves? Well, for starters, laughter evolved as a way for our early ancestors to communicate safety or stress. For example, let's say that one early man is passing by a bush and the bush rustles as though something might be hiding in it, about to jump out at him. He panics at first, perhaps thinking that a tiger might be lying in wait. But when a bird hops out to his surprise, he would, of course, laugh in response and that laughter would both calm him down and signal to those around him that he was okay.

And although we aren't often in situations like that today, we still use laughter as a means of communicating safety, stress, or strain. However, sometimes this coping mechanism can get away from us, resulting in a type of uncontrollable laughter which can be dangerous. This is sometimes referred to as "hysterical laughter" and one of its most disturbing reported cases was documented in Tanzania in 1962. It occurred when several young school girls who had started boarding school for the very first time were suddenly overcome with laughing fits and became incapable of stopping for hours or even days.

Although a clear explanation for the origin of this phenomenon has yet to be found, many scientists and psychologists theorize that their laughter was a physical manifestation of extreme stress or strain, as the girls were very young and unused to strict rules and being separated from their families. Even though the children hadn't made the conscious decision to laugh, their bodies had processed their stress in this way, proving that-- whether we mean to or not-- we still use laughter as a means of releasing both positive and negative emotions.

The Violation-Benign Theory

Think about the last funny thing you told a friend. Can you remember what exactly made it funny? Or the specific point where you got a laugh? Now, if you can pin down both those things, do you think you could come up with a “recipe” for the perfect joke or humorous anecdote? Chances are, you probably couldn’t! That’s because humor is incredibly complex, so much so that the secrets of a successful joke have largely evaded researchers who have tried to come up with a formula for the perfect joke. And although we still don’t have a single solid theory, many researchers have theorized that humor occurs through something called the “violation-benign theory,” and you’ve probably seen it a few times in funny videos online.

For example, if you watch a video of someone falling in their face in spectacularly catastrophic fashion, your first instinct might not be to laugh because you’re worried that the person is hurt. That’s because this sequence of events triggers our sense of violation or, in other words, the understanding that something went wrong. But if the person immediately gets up again, uninjured, our concern is soothed and we’ll probably laugh. That’s because the violation has been rendered “benign”; once we know the person isn’t hurt, we feel at ease enough to laugh. That’s why most people-- and especially kids-- love cartoons!

But the violation-benign theory can also help us explain laughter in other situations as well, like when we’re tickled. But if you’ve ever tried to tickle yourself, you’ve noticed that you can’t! This question has long baffled researchers (and every human ever), and prompted a substantial amount of investigation as a result. And after a number of studies, researchers have determined that this can also be explained by the violation-benign theory. That’s because when you’re being tickled, it involves someone else invading your personal space and touching you in a weird way, usually against your will, which makes it a violation. But because they’re doing it in a benign, playful way that doesn’t hurt you at all, you feel free to give in to the sensation and laugh.

When you try to tickle yourself, however, your body understands that it's impossible for you to violate your own personal space and the same sensations don't occur. As we can see from these examples, the violation-benign theory can answer a number of our questions about humor, but not all of them. In fact, we still have a lot left to learn.

How to be Funny

Have you ever known those people who seemed to possess a magic ability to make everyone around them laugh? Those people that seem like natural-born comedians? Well, this raises another interesting question as we explore whether or not some people are inherently funny and others aren't. And the truth is actually quite close to what you would imagine: some people do need a little more help being funny than others, especially if you're talking about the professional comedy circuit. That's because being funny is actually a lot of work! And although everyone isn't born with the ability to be a natural comic, the bright side is that you can actually work at being funnier, the same way you can work at being a more talented writer or dancer.

In fact, there are even a variety of comedy schools throughout the world, including the famous Santa Monica Playhouse in the United States or the New Start Comedy School in Japan. These schools can teach you some basic tips about how to be funny like how to hold the microphone in a way that might be amusing to your audience or even how to say certain words in a funny way. They can also teach you how to tailor your jokes to your audience in the most effective way. This is crucial because not only do the circumstances around your jokes change every time, all your material won't resonate with every audience and this is true whether you're telling your jokes to a particular friend or if you're performing live.

This is owing to a variety of different factors ranging from the environment you're in to a friend's sense of humor to cultural differences. You can then experiment with these different situations to try out new jokes or new types of humor. For example, experiments have shown that the room you're telling jokes in can have a surprising impact on their effectiveness. If you're in a dark room, it promotes a more intimate setting, allowing your audience to feel connected with you but separate from the trappings of their everyday lives. This in turn will facilitate a type of comfortable anonymity, which

means your audience can feel free to laugh at inappropriate jokes that they might feel pressured to dismiss in another setting.

And that brings us to another point: the importance of honesty. Whether it's in a comedy routine or when telling a joke to a friend, you should always strive for authenticity rather than concocting some fantastical story just to get a laugh. That's because honesty doesn't just invite your audience to connect with you-- the fact that it's real also makes your material funnier. So, as you seek to develop authenticity in your humor, it can serve as a reminder to be open and transparent with yourself, even when that's difficult. Because when you cultivate authentic experiences, you're not only a more real person, your humor is more real and relatable as well.

The Simple Joke

You might not have thought about it this way before, but the cardinal rule of joke-telling is that your jokes should be clear and simple so they can best be understood. And if you've ever heard a joke that's unique to another culture, you know exactly how important this is. That's because humor is culturally subjective; a joke that goes over well in England might not be so well-received in Japan. But if you keep your jokes simple, you increase the chances that a broader cultural audience can understand and-- most importantly-- laugh at them!

You can start by removing a lot of the clutter that's common to jokes (extraneous details like the name of a shop someone went into or what color something is) and sticking only to the information that's essential for telling the joke. A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself, "Will my delivery confuse my audience?" If you test-drive your joke and find that it might, then you run the risk of having to dissect your joke in front of your audience to explain what makes it funny. But unfortunately, by that point, it will have already died on the operating table. So, whatever joke you're telling and wherever you're telling it, just remember to keep it simple.

Contextualizing your joke can also help with this because even if you and your audience speak the same language, cultures vary in terms of how they contextualize their jokes. For example, English-speaking people tend to set up their jokes with one sentence that gives some background and hints at what listeners can expect to come next. This is meant to give the audience a clearly identifiable structure which will help them feel at ease and follow along comfortably. By contrast, however, people in Japan rely so heavily on cultural homogeneity that they don't really need to set up their jokes in the same way. Because shared cultural customs enable Japanese audiences to intuit each other's jokes more quickly, they don't spend much time in setting up their jokes at all. Instead, they get to the punchline right away, occasionally relying on a funny gesture as a reference to something that happened in Japanese history. So, unless you're already familiar with

Japanese culture and history, you might not understand their jokes right off the bat!

Humor Helps us Cope With Stress

As we've briefly discussed in our earlier chapters, humans often laugh to relieve tension during moments of stress. And it's even more beneficial if we have the opportunity to share a joke with someone in the same circumstance because that person will be able to identify both with our stress and with the need for laughter. That's because joking about our situations allows us to acknowledge the fears and concerns we might otherwise repress and in so doing, we're able to release a bit of the nervous tension that bubbles inside us. In fact, the healing power of humor is so significant, it even offered strength and comfort to holocaust survivors during their time in the concentration camps.

As they found ways to secretly share jokes, memories, and cultural references, they were able to regain control of some small part of their lives. Because even if the Nazis had taken their homes, their former lives, and their dignity, they couldn't take those shared moments of laughter or the sense of freedom they derived from enjoying something together. Those small moments of peace allowed them an outlet for quiet rebellion, reminding them that they could occasionally transcend their captors' imposed darkness by enjoying something. They also discovered that laughing at a person can disrupt the power dynamic. That's because when you laugh at someone, he or she can seem less frightening; more an object of derision than a source of fear. That's why humor can often be used as an effective tool for protests.

For example, in 1999, the youth movement Otpor! used jokes and sarcasm as a tool for standing up to authorities and deposing the Serbian president. Because they wanted to use their voices to create change in a non-violent manner, they focused their attention on making fun of the government. For instance, in one demonstration, they painted the president's face on a barrel and caused a scene by inviting everyone who passed by to punch it. But their biggest success came when the authorities actually came to arrest the barrel, generating additional media attention for Otpor! Because

arresting a barrel made the government look silly, this served only to decrease their fear factor in the eyes of the public and further Otpor!'s agenda of ridiculing them.

Humor Can Have Serious Consequences

Remember how, earlier, we discussed the violation-benign theory? That works wonderfully when a “violation” like tickling is rendered harmless through playfulness, but what about when a joke never leaves the violation stage? That’s the point at which something becomes problematic or offensive and this is determined by the audience. That’s because humor is interactive; whether or not something is told in a funny way depends on who’s telling it, but the audience holds the power to determine whether a joke is funny or offensive.

For this reason, humor can cause conflict when it’s interpreted differently than the comedian intended or if the audience approaches a joke from a different perspective. It can be beneficial to keep this in mind when crafting a joke and if you’re not sure how your audience will receive certain material, it’s best to err on the side of caution. For example, a common American joke, “Why do French people smell? So blind people can hate them too!” might not be well-received in France. So, bear that in mind and remember that sometimes, being the victim of a joke can make people aggressive. Because everyone has at least a few topics that they consider too sensitive to be joked about, it’s always a good idea to be cautious when you’re making jokes about someone else, especially if an entire people group takes the brunt of your humor.

That’s what the Danush people found out in 2005 when they published a series of cartoons making fun of the Prophet Mohammed. Although they might not have intended to cause such great offense, the caricatures lead to demonstrations in Muslim countries which involved attacks on Danish embassies and even the deaths of a few Danish people. In this case-- and many others-- the intent of the joke becomes lost as a result of its interpretation. So, sometimes, even when no offense is meant, even when a joke is being told only for the sake of freedom of expression, how that joke is received is ultimately of more importance because of the consequences it can have.

Final Summary

Everyone loves a good laugh, but we don't often consider the many functions of humor in our lives. But as we've seen in this summary, the purpose of laughter isn't limited to those moments when something simply tickles our funny bone. Instead, laughter evolved as an early communication tool which helped us communicate safety and stress, which enables us to connect with others across cultures, and find comfort and joy in moments of extreme turmoil. However, humor varies greatly around the world and it's important to understand this when we try to connect with others through jokes. So, if you want to entertain friends from other cultures, it might pay to learn a little about how a community contextualizes its jokes before you put your foot in your mouth.

Likewise, it's important to consider how interpretation varies among audiences. Because humor is interactive, it does take one person to say something funny, but it takes someone else to determine how that joke is received. So, give a bit of thought to potential offenses and the power of humor before you say something off-color. That's because humor has the power to unite others-- as seen through the example of the holocaust prisoners-- to destabilize governments, as in the case of the Otpor! activists-- and even to end lives, like in the story of one Danish cartoon strip. So, in fact, there's a lot more to the simple joke than meets the eye!



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