

Humor and Laughter -- and Play

There was much laughing on the Eskimo film, and as I said I want you to think about this film. Your assignment on the film, due Friday, will replace the Friday question. It can be any comment or question or effort to falsify the following hypothesis about humor and laughter. I am handing out a publication of mine on humor, and calling your attention to a passage in the paper on the evolution of the human psyche that you need to read (see also the passage on play). There is also a comment in *The Biology of Moral Systems* on humor. A point: David Buss in our psychology department has evidence that among college students one of the most important items named as being considered (by both men and women) in selecting a long-term mate is "sense of humor."

Not only was there much laughing on the film but you laughed a good deal too. Here is a list of the times that I noticed when laughter occurred (I didn't have time to out them in a more logical order).

1. When the children were playing outside: both you and they laughed.
2. When the adults were playing with infants inside (did I sense that in the class more women than men were laughing?)
3. When the child had fuzz on its mouth and was trying to spit it out.
4. When the man kicked (or kicked at) his dogs near the seal breathing hole (more men laughed?)
5. When the man threw chunks of ice at his dogs on the way to the breathing hole (more men laughed?).
6. When the man was hauling in his seal and talking to it, and afterward when he and the other men were discussing the episode.
7. When the woman entered someone else's igloo (confronting not only that other person but the camera man). Did you notice the kind of laugh she gave? I might call it a sheepish grin.
8. When the adults were playing games.
9. When the adults were watching the children play.
10. When the puppy kept returning after being carried out of the igloo.
11. When the men were discussing the seal capture and eating its liver.
12. When a man used a piece of ice for a window, you laughed.
13. When everyone was eating terrible looking parts of raw seal, you laughed.
14. When the woman whose husband had caught the seal was overseeing its distribution she smiled (triumphantly? importantly?).
15. When the baby caught its head in the bow drill; and when it replaced the bow drill on its head; you laughed hard.
16. When the girls were drinking blood.
17. When the kid used the knife close to its face.
18. When the baby walked around in too-large boots (I think women laughed louder in the class than men).
19. When the kids rolled together and missed, you laughed a lot.
20. When the last guy was trying to earn his prize from the men's game.

I am sure I missed many. I also suspect that there might have been more laughing because a camera man was present.

So what is the function (reproductive significance) of laughing? Of humor? Tear the hypothesis on the next page apart if you can. And even if you can't, consider how strange it is to imagine that something as seemingly pleasant as laughter might have such a seemingly unpleasant function! Is something badly wrong here? Was Mark Twain's remark more general than even he might have imagined?

dogs are social - have all these signals of dominance + submission - man did NOT win dog - but dog helped as if it had been hurt

Hypothesis (a modification of those suggested in the above publications)

Laughter is designed to elevate (or maintain) the laugher's social status. It can accomplish this effect directly by advertising an ability (especially a keen or superior) abiliity to interpret social events or to recognize incongruities (even incongruities that put the laugher in an embarrassing or subordinate position). Or it can do it indirectly by calling attention to evidence of the social ineptitudes of others, or their failure to see incongruities.

Laughter is also an invitation to others to join in the laughter or amusement, which tends further to elevate the status of the inviter (when it works) and accentuates the put down of the object of the laughter.

As such, laughter is expected to be initiated by anyone feeling a need to deny ineptitude or subordination, pretend superiority, marshal allies (including the reassuring of subordinates. In this hypothesis it can be directed successfully at anything, living or non living; the laugher can be pointing out incongruities in the nonliving world as well as the living, but I think the hypothesis depends on the basic or central significance being social.

Quick laughter is effective because it tends to beat out everyone else at noticing and calling attention to something incongruous; but it is also risky because one of the worst offenses is to laugh out of context or at a "wrong" time. Ever notice how quickly people sometimes initiate laughter in a theater?

Is using laughter to form bonds while simultaneously putting down some real or mythical object of ridicule evidence that cooperation is a form of competition????

What is going on when adults smile and laugh at infants, and when infants begin to turn on beaming smiles and giggling laughter when they are still tiny?

A German joke is no laughing matter

-- Mark Twain