Sociology

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Sociology is the scientific study of social relations and human societies. It is an empirical social science that employs a range of data and research methodologies. Sociology is characterized by theoretical pluralism: there is no one overarching theoretical perspective to which all sociologists adhere. Sociology shares research methodologies and theoretical perspectives with related social sciences like anthropology, folklore, cultural studies, communication, or social history. It differs from these disciplines by its traditional focus on complex contemporary societies and its insistence on including all aspects of social life from micro-interactions to long-term macro-developments.

Although humor and laughter are social phenomena, sociologists have paid scant attention to humor. The majority of sociological research deals with "serious" topics, social problems and policy-related issues. Hence, insofar as sociologists have researched humor, it has been overwhelmingly concerned with forms of humor considered problematic or dangerous, like ethnic, sexist or political humor; and to the relation between humor and social control, conflict and exclusion. Systematic attempts to develop a more wide-ranging sociological theory of humor are scarce, and have remained marginal within the field.

This entry first gives an overview of theoretical perspectives on humor. Then, it discusses important current (and recurring) debates in the sociology of humor, and gives an overview of research methodologies and strategies in humor sociology.

Theoretical perspectives

Sociological perspectives on humor can be divided into five broad categories: functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and comparative-historical sociology. These five perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive: they highlight different aspects of humor and vary greatly in scope. They are associated with specific research methodologies and types of data, and sometimes with wider societal or political views.

Functionalism

Functionalist sociology interprets humor in terms of the social functions it fulfills for a society or social group. Three general functions of humor are highlighted: relief, control and social cohesion. Functionalist analyses have argued that humor maintains and supports the social order, first, by acting as a safety valve, allowing people to blow off tensions inherent in social relations. Moreover, humor serves as a means for social control, by reflecting and reinforcing social hierarchies. In particular, jokes and laughter ridicule and mock what does not fit the social order, thus excluding and sanctioning deviant behavior. Finally, humor upholds the social order through maintaining social cohesion: it brings people closer and cements social bonds. Humor is quite unique in its capacity to perform all these functions at once, combining the seemingly contradictory functions of hierarchy-building and tension-management with bringing about solidarity. The studies of Rose Coser of humor in a hospital setting are important examples of functionalist analysis. Functionalist explanations of humor and laughter are associated

with various research methodologies, ranging from small ethnographic studies to macro-analyses of relations between humor and wider social relations.

Functionalism was the dominant perspective in sociology in the mid-twentieth century. Its insistence that all social phenomena serve to maintain the social order has been widely criticized. This assumption makes functionalist explanations circular and basically untestable. Moreover, functionalism tends to ignore that humor can also be detrimental for the social order, failing to note or explain social change or conflict. Since the 1970s, sociologists rarely employ functionalism as a complete theory or comprehensive framework. However, most social analyses of humor cannot escape paying attention to the functions humor fulfills. Today, sociologists take care not to make a priori assumptions about the functions of humor, or its positive contributions to the social order. Instead, context and content is taken into account when establishing which productive or disruptive functions humor may fulfill for whom and at which moment.

Conflict theory

Conflict theories (also known as critical theories) see humor as an expression of conflict, struggle or antagonism. In contrast with functionalist theories, humor is interpreted not as venting off – and hence avoidance or reduction – but as an expression or correlate of social conflict: humor as a weapon, a form of attack, a means of defense. The edited volume *Humor in society: Resistance and control* by Chris Powell and George Paton offers several examples of conflict approaches to humor. Conflict theories of humor have been used especially in the analysis of ethnic and political humor: in both forms, humor has a clear target, and tends to be correlated with conflict and group antagonism. Conflict

analyses highlight the double-edged nature of humor. Those in control can use humor to exercise power; but people in less powerful positions may use it to express resistance. For instance, political or ethnic humor supports existing power relations when the powerful mock the weak, but the weak can also muster it to satirize or ridicule dominant groups or persons. However, most analyses conclude that "upward" humor is less common and less effective than "downward" humor supporting existing power relations.

Conflict theory, like functionalism, is a broad perspective that claims to capture all forms of humor. It is therefore associated with a wide range of methods, from ethnography to cross-national comparative research. Like functionalism, it has been critiqued for its claim to explain all instances of humor using a single framework, and the danger of circularity inherent in encompassing frameworks. Conflict analyses of humor usually are embedded in wider theoretical frameworks explaining culture and society from social conflict, like (neo-)Marxism or post-structuralism. They also have affinity with superiority theories of humor.

The conflict approach is used most often to explain and analyze potentially offensive forms of humor, and thus is directly connected with societal controversies about ethnic, sexist, or political humor. This approach to humor (like all aggression or superiority theories of humor) suffers somewhat from conceptual unclarity: hostility, aggression, superiority and ethnic or political rivalry are not clearly distinguished or delineated. An important criticism leveled at the conflict approach is that it takes humor too literally, ignoring humors basic ambiguity: even if a joke mirrors societal antagonisms, this does not mean that every telling of this joke expresses hostility or conflict. Also, conflict

theories generally fail to explain why and when people in situations of conflict decide to use humor rather than more serious expressions of antagonism.

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism here is used to describe a range of micro-sociological approaches to humor (ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, etc.) that focus on the role of humor in the construction of meanings and social relations in social interaction. What all these approaches have in common is that social relations and social reality are not seen as fixed and given, but as constructed and negotiated in the course of social interaction. A key figure in the micro-sociology of humor is Erving Goffman, who analyzed the role of humor in "the performance of self", and coined the term "framing" to describe the separation of "serious" interactions from playful and non-serious modes of communication like humor. Symbolic interactionism also is a common approach in sociolinguistic studies of humor.

Humor, while not very central to big social structures and processes, plays an important role in everyday interaction. Its ambiguity makes it well-suited to negotiations and manipulations of selves and relationships. Symbolic interactionists have analyzed this through detailed studies of social interactions, using ethnographic data or transcripts of conversations. An important theme in this body of research is the relation between gender and the use of humor in interactions. Within humor studies, the micro-interactionist approach gave a strong impetus to small-scale studies of spontaneously occurring humor, as an alternative to the analysis of standardized forms of humor (joke cycles, comedy performances) and joke ratings from questionnaires. Moreover, this

perspective has made laughter a central theme in sociological humor studies, not only as an automatic response to a humorous stimulus, but as a form of communication on its own.

Symbolic interactionist approaches to humor are usually modest in their theoretical and explanatory ambitions. In the analysis of humor, symbolic interactionism has been combined with functionalist, conflict or phenomenological theoretical approaches. It is also quite compatible with the classical incongruity, superiority and relief theories. Critics of this approach have pointed out that symbolic interactionist studies tend to be overly descriptive and particular, and hence hard to generalize. Moreover, the relation between micro-situations and larger institutional and societal structures often remains underanalyzed and undertheorized.

Phenomenology

The phenomenological approach to humor conceptualizes humor as a specific worldview or mode of perceiving and constructing the social world. This humorous outlook is one option among several in the social construction of reality, which phenomenological sociologists see as an ongoing social process. Humor stands out from other worldviews – for instance, the serious outlook dominant in everyday life, or spiritual or religious modes of perception – because of its non-serious, playful outlook. This non-seriousness enables social experimentation and negotiation, and allows people to become aware of the constructedness of social life itself. The playful distantiation provided by humor is interwoven with other modes of perception, and happens throughout everyday interactions. However, it can also become a more sustained outlook that is embedded in

institutionalized roles (the comedian, the satirist), humorous domains like comedy, and rituals like carnival, which can function as an alternative sphere of freedom and resistance. The most complete and sophisticated analysis of the social functions and consequences of the humorous worldview is presented in Michael Mulkay's *On humour: Its nature and its place in modern society*. Most phenomenologists do not collect their own data, but instead rely on findings from other studies, including a wide range of historical, ethnographic or textual data, to develop an integrated perspective on humor.

Critics have pointed out that phenomenological approaches to humor tend to essentialize humor. By focusing on humor as worldview, they neglect other meanings and functions of humor, including negative or dysfunctional effects. Moreover, phenomenological approaches overstate the importance of humor by giving it a unique and central function in social life – a claim that is hard to test or substantiate. Finally, phenomenological sociology often borders on philosophy and is hard to operationalize: it provides inspiring insights but it is unclear how these are to be used in actual empirical research. However, unlike other approaches, the ambiguity and non-seriousness of humor are central to this perspective. Hence, phenomenological sociology takes into account the peculiarities of humor that are ignored or downplayed in especially the functionalist and conflict frameworks.

Historical-comparative approach

Historical-comparative sociology attempts to understand and explain the social role of humor through comparisons in time and place. Strictly speaking, it is a method rather than a theory: comparative-historical studies of humor draw on different theoretical

traditions, and may include insights from functionalist, conflict or phenomenological approaches as well as general sociological theories. Most sociological work on humor since the 1990s is probably best captured by this broad umbrella term. Christie Davies' work on jokes and targets around the world is the prime example of this comparative-historical approach. Comparing joke cycles around the world, Davies found that specific humorous scripts (e.g. stupidity, dirtiness) are found in many places around the world, and are associated with specific relations between jokers and their targets. Thus, comparison both unveils humorous universals (people all over the world tell stupidity jokes), and it uncovers the factors determining systematic variations in joking patterns across cultures (social relations determine who calls whom stupid). In other words: whom people joke about reveals something about the relationship between the jokers and their butt; and what people joke about reflects what they find important and what is a source of concern to them. Other comparative studies have used a similar approach to analyze differences across social groups and historical periods in topics of humor, humorous styles and genres, as well as the status of humor.

Historical-comparative studies require research materials that allow systematic comparison over time and place. Archival research, for instance of folklore or historical archives, as well as secondary data analysis is common in this type of research. Occasionally, historical-comparative studies are based on original data collection, for instance data comparing sense of or use of humor of men and women, or different ethnic groups, or different nations. The main critique leveled against this type of research is that it reveals may be more about the societies or periods it compares, then about humor per se. Indeed, historical-comparative studies may pay very little attention to the specificity

of humor, treating it as yet another cultural expression. Consequently, historical-comparative studies work best when complemented with more specific theoretical insights from theories about humor and laughter.

Recent developments and debates in the sociology of humor

The main debate in the sociology of humor (and in humor studies generally) has to do with the potential serious implications of humor. This debate has focused on "dangerous" or "contested" forms of humor like political, ethnic and sexist humor. Conflict theorists (and some symbolic interactionists) typically stress the serious potential of humor in social conflict. For instance, they argue that anti-hierarchical humor – e.g. feminist humor, political satire in totalitarian regimes – functions as resistance, and that "top-down" humor supports power structures and oppresses the powerless. Their opponents in the debate typically counter that such theorists overstate the import of humor: its fundamental ambiguity makes its "real" meaning impossible to establish, and its impact negligible compared with real exercise of force.

This debate has been rekindled in the 21st century with a broader scope. After many centuries in which humor and laughter had a bad reputation, modern humor studies have stressed the beneficial character of humor, both for society and for the psyche. Phenomenological humor sociologists also stress the positive aspect of humor. This has sparked a counter-reaction: the emergence of the "critique of humor". Scholars like Michael Billig, Sharon Lockyer and Paul Lewis have pointed to the "dark side of humor": its capacity to hurt, shame, exclude, and exercise social control. This debate repeated many arguments of earlier debates about the seriousness or harmfulness of

ethnic and political humor. However, it differed in its greater nuance in discussing various types of humor, and in its inclusion of claims from psychological studies, distinguishing clearly between "positive" and "negative" forms of humor.

Another important recent development in the sociology of humor has been the growing attention to mediated forms of humor. People increasingly "consume" and share humor via (electronic) media. This leads to new questions, as well as the rephrasing and reframing of old questions. First, the question arises whether the functions and social mechanisms associated with humor in interactions are the same in mediated interactions. For instance, in mediated interactions jokers cannot always foresee or adapt to their audience responses. Second, the rise of mediated humor leads to the increasing globalization, or cross-national diffusion, of humor. As a consequence, humor audiences are increasingly culturally diverse. This may lead to a greater diversity in responses, sometimes with unexpected consequences. However, the globalization of humor also provides researchers with fascinating new arenas to explore cross-national differences in sense of humor: what jokes travel where? How are jokes adapted as they move across cultural or linguistic boundaries? Finally, the growing attention to mediated forms of humor has brought to the fore the issue of "genre". Most sociological humor scholarship has been concerned with a limited number of humorous forms. People increasingly enjoy humor not in face-to-face interaction but through a variety of media: print, television, the Internet. This mediatization of humor and the rise of the Internet has resulted in the emergence of new, mediated, humorous forms, and to the reinvention of older humorous genres, many of which are derived from earlier folk genres. Sociologists, as well as

communication scholar and folklorists are currently debating the meanings and functions of these new humorous genres and forms.

Research methodologies

Sociology is a predominantly empirical discipline: attempts to theorize humor as a social phenomenon are usually combined with empirical inquiry, and theories are tested on the basis of empirical evidence. Early sociological studies of humor typically draw on rather impressionistic "armchair analysis"; recent theoretical explorations of humor have also drawn on a wide variety of sources and personal impressions to substantiate theories. However, most studies today rely on systematically collected data.

An important research method for studying humor, in particular non-scripted or conversational humor, is (ethnographic) observation of small-scale interactions. Observations and ethnography of humor have become increasingly systematic, using sound or video recordings of humorous interactions, and coding schemes to analyze data. Sociologists of humor also have relied on surveys and questionnaires, especially to map and compare use and evaluation of types of humor in different social groups. Many researchers have asked respondents to rate jokes, and then compared responses of for instance people with different ethnic backgrounds, genders, political affiliations, or degrees of hostility against the groups targeted in jokes. A third common method for sociologists is to rely on recorded instances of humor, such as comic texts and registration of performances, archival materials, jokes, historical writings, cartoons, literary sources or historical accounts by others. In this type of research, various mediated forms of communication (e.g. Internet humor, television programs) are also increasingly

analyzed – although this is more common in the adjacent field of communication studies. In humor research, such materials are especially important because it is difficult to "catch" humor in the everyday interactions where it is most common. These materials can then be analyzed further, for instance through qualitative or quantitative content analysis. Moreover, sociologists have studied the reception of such secondary materials, using other sources (e.g. newspaper reviews, commentaries). The rise of the internet has enabled researchers to "trace" the spread and reception of humorous materials with increasing ease and sophistication.

Other sociological research methods have been less commonly employed in humor studies. Experimental research is common in humor psychology but rarely used in sociology. Interviews and focus groups (group interviews) are used occasionally to elicit humor tastes and opinions on humor. A recurring problem in this method is the problematic relation between people's statements and their actual behavior. Finally, mixed-methods studies, which combine different research methodologies to answer a research question, are increasingly common in humor sociology.

See also Culture; Ethnicity and humor; Gender and humor - Sociological aspects of; Political humor; Social interaction,

Suggested readings

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