Target Practice

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Abstract

Chapter 1
Re-evaluating Comic Stereotypes – Dirty but Essential?

Comic stereotypes concern the deep connection between humour and simplified or stereotypical characters. This chapter explores how a tool long considered essential by cartoonists and comedians has in recent times become controversial, examining several case histories in which comedians have been attacked for using stereotypes. The advantages and disadvantages of stereotypes are considered along with relevant humour theories. While much humour depends on compression and focus, visual and performative forms like caricature and farce have a particularly close nexus with stereotyped characterisation. Comic techniques often dehumanise their characters so that audience involvement becomes strategic rather than empathetic, although more complex and sympathetic humorous stereotypes also exist. In the context of modern psychology and ethics, stereotypes and stereotyping have acquired a pejorative connotation. Relevant psychological research is reviewed, noting current limitations in demonstrating behavioural impacts of exposure to and enjoyment of comic stereotypes and suggestions are made about future research. Stereotypes continue to be innate to humour and comedy, and indeed more broadly to human efforts to organise understanding: they deserve more careful consideration of their nature and effects before being dismissed as unsuitable to modern taste in humour.

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Re-evaluating Comic Stereotypes – Dirty but Essential?

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Stereotyping in humour theory and practice

The connection between simplified or stereotypical characters and comedy has been evident since the time of Classical Greek theatre.[1] A tool not just for dramatists but comic writers of all kinds, this treatment of character combined in the early modern era with the then still accepted medical theory of the humours[2] to produce a style of drama known as the 'comedy of humours' and exemplified by the work of Molière (1622–1673) in France and Ben Jonson (1572–1637) in England. Such comedy set out to laugh at a character whose ridiculous behaviour betrayed the fact that their physical body was dominated by one of the four bodily humours whose imbalance produces markedly unsociable traits. Thus, excessive melancholy (depressing the sufferer's companions) was seen as resulting from the predominance of black bile, as in the case of Shakespeare's Jacques in *As You Like It*.[3] While this link with medical theory did

[1] Of the many studies dedicated to this hallowed tradition, one will suffice: Schironi. "The Trickster on Stage". I am deeply indebted to Robert Phiddian and Ronald Stewart for insightful comments on and suggestions about this chapter.

[2] For an account of the theory and how it worked, see Arikha, "Passions and Tempers". I am indebted to Peter Kirkpatrick for pointing to this stage of the development of the modern stereotype.

[3] Like most of Shakespeare's work, it is difficult to date this play, but it was registered (formally licenced) on 4 August 1600; its earliest known text is the First Folio of 1623.

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not survive into later centuries, the concept of dominant behavioural traits certainly did and eventually made its way into experimental psychology following the work of Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) and Gordon Allport (1897–1967) whose approach will be discussed below.

The operation of dominant traits and stereotypes in comedy was probably best theorised by Henri Bergson in his well-known account of laughter being induced by something mechanical interrupting the free-flow of normal life.[4] Bergson pointed out that in comedy, characterisation is shaped by mechanical rigidity just as much as plots and verbal exchanges are. Fascinated by the psychology of caricature, he defined a *type* as a dramatic character who lacks flexibility and is dominated by a rigid mental set.[5] This inelasticity prevents type-characters from adapting to changes in their surrounding circumstances as they would in real-life. Their leading characteristics are exaggerated, rendering them somewhat improbable, but their mental fixations produce a kind of internal logic, so that a comic type will behave consistently within his or her own improbable world. Types are doomed to repetitiveness both in behaviour and mental processes and they are also capable of being repeated (i.e. being duplicated). Bergson's observations help explain why like and unlike pairs of characters are so typical of comedy, both Eastern and Western,[6] whether scripted or stand-up, and especially in clowning and farce which supplied Bergson with many of his examples. In the French tradition, from Molière to Feydeau, pairs and quads of lovers, combinations and oppositions of men and women, the old and the young, twins and doubles, populate the stage. The arranged artificiality signals both a distancing of the characters from the audience and a lessening of their humanity: to the audience, they resemble the products of a cookie-cutter, lacking the flexibility and the individuality of life. They are basically stereotypes.

Type-characters must nevertheless appear plausible enough to be interesting – or audiences would not sit through their performances – but still unconscious of their own limitations. Driven by their rigidity, they act and react blindly. Although they may congratulate themselves on their cleverness or good fortune, any self-consciousness or interiority about how their success came about is lacking.[7] The audience, whether in a live performance or in watching an animated cartoon, occupies a position of privileged insight that allows it to foretell an inevitable comic downfall that is concealed from the type-character him or herself. Bergson succinctly observed that the two necessary conditions for this kind of humour are "unsociability in the comic figure, and a lack of sensibility on the part of the spectator".[8] The audience's involvement with such characters is essentially more strategic than empathetic.

4 Bergson, *Le Rire*.

5 Bergson, *Le Rire*, 151–152.

6 See for example matched pairs of clowns in Balinese shadow drama in Mrázek, "Javanese Wayang Kulit in the Times of Comedy", part 1.

7 This is not merely true of a Western approach to comic characterisation and stereotypes, for the Japanese analogue, see below and see also footnote 13.

8 The French original reads *insociabilité du personage, insensibilité du spectateur*; Bergson, *Le Rire*, 149.

This fact does not rule out the existence of more sympathetic stereotypes nor a sympathetic response by the audience to them in more complex forms of humour. Bergson was writing about the brilliant farces of Eugène Labiche and Georges Feydeau that dominated the Parisian stage from the end of the 19th century, which have justly been called laughter machines.[9] But more nuanced humour can also employ stereotypes, for example Charles Dickens' famous creations, Oliver Twist in the eponymous 1838 novel, and Peggotty, David's heart-of-gold nurse in *David Copperfield* (1850).[10] While both these characters conform to a typology (naïve little lost boy, indefatigably patient nurse), they are sympathetic types and have some ability to learn from and adapt to their environments. The warm-heartedness of their stereotype appeals to the readers' sympathy at the same time as they laugh at their whimsical ways. These are based on what Bergson described as a fixed mental set that drives recurring and repetitive behaviour that the reader can predict and laugh at with satisfaction when it occurs.[11] Ridicule is combined with empathy. As I have written elsewhere, Bergson goes on to argue that laughing at this behaviour (i.e. at the stereotype) is "essentially a redemptive act: protesting against rigidities and absurdities, it can help restore a free-living self to those trapped in a mechanised life. This redemptive aspect applies not only to the laugher – and potentially their targets if they could but see the comic in their own situations – but above all to those who can laugh at themselves".[12]

Comically empathetic stereotypes are not merely a Western phenomenon (nor specifically English as French culture likes to assert).[13] When Japanese *manga* まんが moved from predominately humorous comic strips in the pre-war period to embrace more elaborate narratives and anime stories during the post-war period, complex but stylised characters that were both funny and sympathetic and funny and frightening began to feature in elaborate comic books such as we know today.[14] As with Western comic strips, humorous manga characters are often named after their specific identifying character flaw such as the eponymous hero of "Dennis the Menace", a popular strip (later animated TV series) by American cartoonist Hank Ketcham (1920–2001).[15] Lacking self-consciousness (or interiority), these have little or no ability to reflect on and adapt to their flaws. Despite more complex characterisation, however, the later manga characters retain these limitations of type-characterisation, including

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9 Rey-Flaud, *La Farce, ou la machine à rire*.

10 Mahlberg and Weigand, "Charles Dickens".

11 Bergson's succinct phraseology has often resulted in over-simplistic interpretation. His so-called theory of the comic does much more than stress the mechanical element in comedy. Quite arguably, he is a precursor of Bakhtin, putting forward a theory of laughter as liberation and an assertion of the power of the free human spirit (see Milner Davis, "Bergson and the Theory of the Comic").

12 Milner Davis, "Bergson's Theory of the Comic", 113–114.

13 Noonan, "Reflecting Back".

14 Hirohito and Lamarre, "How Characters Stand Out", 84–91. I am indebted to Ronald Stewart for this comparison with the evolution of Japanese manga, and for much else concerning the history of world cartooning.

15 Kitazume, "Themes".

those giving occasional rise to ridicule and laughter, while at the same time engaging the reader's emotions. Sympathetic heroes and heroines flit across manga pages along with terrifying ogre-like stereotypes: all draw in the reader emotionally.

Regardless of whether humour is broad and basic (low comedy) or more stylistically complex (high comedy), the basic premise on which scripts and narratives are offered as humorous entertainment is that the audience will enjoy watching an essentially comic struggle, either between different characters, or between all of them and their circumstances, or both. This entails a certain amount of detachment, as Bergson pointed out. What is required for success, even in the broadest comedy, is a balance between detachment and engagement. If no interest is felt in these chattering puppets on stage, page, internet or screen, the jokes will fail. Beyond such basic involvement, broad comedy and practical joking may move to become more complex humour precisely to the extent that the stereotypically comic victims develop self-awareness, and the audience responds emotionally to their plight. The stereotype, as comic masters like Dickens and Molière taught us, remains even when it is almost fully and believably human.

Compression and compaction

In terms of narrative structure, one of the ways in which type-characters are barred from exploring their own consciousness is quite simply that the plot allows them no time to do so. They are caught up in a pattern that moves forward to complete its symmetry; and the speed and impetus of events limit the characters to helpless gesticulation, in contrast to the decisive exercise of volition that is permitted a fully dramatic figure. Eric Bentley remarked that this deliberate speeding up of movement "signifies that in farce, as in dreams, one is permitted the outrage but spared the consequence".[16]

In cartooning, the comic types caught in an awkward or hazardous situation are subjected to a parallel artificially constraining effect that is brought about by a combination of stasis and limited space. Many cartoons are single-frame only, lacking narrative sequence or development. Others may be strip-sequences or animations, but the essence of the art form is compaction, not elaboration.[17] In addition, it is bounded by a cartoon border (whether seen or implied). These aspects restrict the reactions of both characters and viewers by compressing – usually freezing into one snapshot – the timeline of action, reaction and consequences found in longer art forms.

Visually, individual characters, animals and objects in cartooning are represented by stressing a limited number of characteristic traits which lend themselves to exaggeration in the same way as type-characters do. This reinforces the simplifying

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[16] Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce", xiii.

[17] Herhuth, "Overloading, Incongruity, Animation".

and condensing effect. In humour more generally, caricature and stereotyping are vital tools in both visual or verbal portrayals of targets, and the more condensed the form (e.g. canned jokes, sketch-comedy), the more essential they are. In his masterly tabulation of forty-five different comic techniques, Berger lists caricature at number eight and exaggeration at number 11.[18]

Caricature versus Stereotype

The Tate website of the Tate Museum in London defines caricature as "a painting, or more usually drawing, of a person or thing in which the features and form have been distorted and exaggerated in order to mock or satirise the subject".[19] It points to the Italian origins of the term (*caricatura*) and the sketch work of Annibale Carracci (fl. 1600) as the first known practitioner. In England, from the pioneering paintings and prints of William Hogarth mid-18th century,[20] caricature developed into a way of commenting on contemporary politics with the work of James Gillray (1756–1815), who is often termed the father of the political cartoon.[21] It took hold in magazines and newspapers as print technology evolved, becoming a staple in everyday political commentary. Caricature still hangs on in that satirical form today, while morphing into new media and formats.[22] It depicts exaggerated ugliness and venality but does not necessarily exclude beauty, particularly in its highly detailed or elegantly stylised versions.

The humour of caricature ranges widely: it may be bitterly black and depressing, as in Hogarthian scenes of suffering and cruel poverty, but it may also be joyfully ludicrous, even fey, as with Max Beerbohm's sketches of well-known figures around town (1872–1956).[23] Caricature combines an artist's immediately recognisable style of human representation with an intense focus on the individual: we would never mistake Searle's Nigel Molesworth for his Fotherington-Thomas, for example, although both are boys at St Custard's School;[24] nor Scarfe's caricature of actor Derek Fowldes playing Bernard, the PM's chief-of-staff, for that of Nigel Hawthorne playing the bureaucrat

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18 Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants*, 54.

19 Tate, "Caricature".

20 For example, Hogarth, *O the Roast Beef of Old England* ('The Gate of Calais'), 1748, painted after Hogarth's return from Calais where he had been arrested as a spy, held at the Tate Museum, London. See also, Annibale Carracci, *Sheet of caricatures*, c. 1595, held in the British Museum, London.

21 Donald, *The Age of Caricature* and Taylor, *The Politics of Parody*.

22 Leon, "The Evolution of Political Cartooning".

23 For example, see the exaggerated heads, spindly bodies and relative disproportions of the collection of artists and critics in Max Beerbohm's *The New English Art Club*, 1907, held at the Tate Gallery, London.

24 See the illustrations to Willans and Searle, *The Compleet Molesworth*, 1984. One boy is the not-so-bright hero of the eponymous novels; the other the excessively sensitive, academic boy. The school's name parodies that of many posh UK boarding schools named for saints. Custard is a boring staple of institutional diets as well as a playground term for coward (e.g. the teasing rhyme, "cowardy cowardy custard").

Sir Humphrey in the British TV series, *Yes, Minister*, although both men dress alike and have beak-like noses.[25] For those who knew him, New Zealand's wartime Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, is instantly recognizable simply from his economically drawn head by Australian caricaturist and artist Noel Counihan (1913–1986).[26] Despite a twisted nose and bulbous skull, the personal warmth for which the Labour politician was famous shines through.

While each caricature belongs to a stereotypical group – ambitious politician, school-boy, dyed-in-the-wool bureaucrat – it is also a distinct individual, marked out by emphasis on distinguishing marks such as hair, shape of nose, stance etc. This combination of group-identity with the personal exists under the umbrella of an aesthetic style that at first glance proclaims its distance from reality while paradoxically insisting on a precise nexus with an actual person. This is the same effect achieved by writers such as Molière and Dickens whose lovingly-crafted individual fictional characters belong to a group but transcend that to become its permanent representative. We speak of Harpagon as the essence of the miser, of Oliver Twist as the archetypal orphan-made-good, and of Nigel from St Custard's as the stereotypical lazy, ungrateful brat.

In commenting on what is human, caricature often resorts to stereotypes of animal imagery. The connection has deep roots: 16th-century physiognomy saw certain groups of people as sharing similarities with certain animals. One historian of caricature has noted that as the concept of temperament or a person's habitual and innate disposition emerged some two centuries later, it was thought that people shared temperaments with animals they resembled.[27] The art historian Ernst Gombrich believes that the ability to make caricatural fusions in cartoons of humans with animals is one of the most effective weapons in any cartoonist's armoury. Taking the animal as a metaphor, by condensation of meaning the combination of traits and characteristics associated with the beast is transferred to the human under examination.[28] Again, such a tradition is deep-rooted: consider the classical tradition of animal fables such as those of the legendary Aesop, the moral teachings found both East and West in illustrated bestiaries and the masked figures of Carnival and the mediaeval Feast of Fools which often adopted animal shapes.[29]

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25 For examples, see Scarfe, "Yes Minister".

26 Counihan was active in Australia, New Zealand and Europe during the 1930s and 40s, working as a staff artist for the *Melbourne Guardian* and for the World Trade Union Movement in London. His caricature, "The Hon. Peter Fraser", is collected in Counihan, *Noel Counihan Caricatures*.

27 Lucie-Smith, *The Art of Caricature*, 16–17.

28 Gombrich, "The Cartoonist's Armoury", see sections II, Condensation and Comparison; III. Portrait Caricature; and IV, The Political Bestiary.

29 For a Japanese cartoonist employing bestial imagery, witness the last great ukiyoe (wood-block) artist Kawanabe Kyōsai 河鍋暁斎 (1831–1889), whose extraordinary 4m x 17m theatre curtain (supposedly painted over four hours when the artist was intoxicated) was exhibited in 2019 at the British Museum. His humorous, often satirical works use animals and demons (yokai) to make their critical comments.

When the human image combines with the non-human or animal, caricature passes easily from the realm of realism to that of iconographic fantasy where hybrid monsters and demigods live. Here, the moral dimension is conveyed through stereotypical images of good and bad, whether animal or non-human: the devil and his mischievous apes and monkeys; the wily serpent; the dumb but faithful donkey; the many guises of man's best friend, the dog, but also mythical creatures. In many cultures, and particularly the British version of the European tradition from which both Australian and American political cartooning spring, these animals have clear and widely understood meanings that can transfer partially or not at all to other cultures, which in turn possess their own iconography of animals and supra-human beings. Within a mutually understood context, an offense can be conveyed with controlled precision; but without such a shared context, offense may be given unintentionally.

The uses of stereotypes and caricature

There are many good reasons for stereotypes being so central to humour and to cartooning in particular. Being simplified, their identity and signification are easier for a viewer to grasp than more complex portrayals. They communicate these essential messages rapidly and clearly, and, because they tap into pre-existing knowledge, hopes and fears held by their audiences, they take a shortcut around complexity. Comic stereotypes draw on well-known images of famous people and iconic figures from folk-wisdom and social belief-systems. Most comic stereotypes belong to a family group that stretches back to antiquity, and they are instantly recognisable: the miserly old curmudgeon, the panting but penniless young lover, the wily servant, the over-educated lawyer/doctor/philosopher, the cheeky maid, the drunkard, the country bumpkin, the corrupt politician, the unethical priest, the simpleton, the braggart soldier who is really a coward and so on. These all convey a quick message when pressed into service with a modern and familiar face. In terms of emotional and judgmental messaging, stereotypes offer the same satisfaction as polar opposites: this figure is likely to be either good or bad, hysterical or plain, all-powerful or pathetic. For any creator of humour, then, stereotypes form a handy kit. In fact, as Lippmann noted, within our highly differentiated societies, they are a necessary way of creating order out of "the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality".[30]

By the same token, each of these qualities has its disadvantages. Stereotyping simplifies, ignoring what is complex. In that sense, it may very well be unfair to its target and misleading to its audience. On the one hand, its simplification of form and meaning can conduce to a high emotional volume, polarising reactions into black and white, love it or loathe it. Such polarisation is fuelled by the power of preconception to shape interpretation whenever traditional and stock imagery is deployed and also by

[30] Lippmann, *Public opinion*, 96.

the general tendency of simplification to limit the range of likely emotional reactions. When a topic is not given complex treatment, the audience will likely divide into those who agree with the conjunction of stereotype and topic and those who reject it. Nevertheless, stereotyping is also capable of evoking complex and multi-layered responses in the viewer – simple does not equate to easy. Much will depend on the artist deploying the stereotype, how that is done and especially the situation in which it is being communicated: that is, whether the audience concerned has a pre-existing significant emotional investment in the topic and imagery.

It follows that a more extended form of comic comment and a gentler, more nuanced style of humour might well lead to a more balanced evaluation of the point being made by the humourist. But it may also lack the power of a stereotype to seize and hold the audience's attention. The long-standing tradition of using stereotypes is not because comic artists are simple-minded and unable to produce complex comedy. It is because, for an entertainer, time is money and getting the message across is important. While stereotypes often persist beyond their real cultural currency and may linger on long past their actual use-by dates – business leaders are fat men smoking cigars only in cartoons today, for example – such images persist because they are incredibly useful, based on what is still instantly recognizable even if out of date. As well as being economical, they retain an element of perceived truth.

How did stereotype become a dirty word?

A recent definitional article on stereotypes begins with the bald statement, "stereotypes involve several distinct moral bads",[31] and goes on to make only grudging acknowledgement of any redeeming features. Its stance is mirrored by that of many other scholarly studies that investigate the negative impacts, especially on underprivileged groups and individuals, of stereotyping. Modern sensibilities, in Western societies at least, are felt to have developed to a level at which playing on such conventional shorthand should be eschewed. As adults, supposedly, we should all know better. The criticisms of stereotypes include: that stereotypes are less than fully human (true in most cases); that they are conducive to simplistic thinking and reduce an individual to a thing (mostly true for the duration of the comic image or narrative); and that they always and inevitably imply that the real-life subject of the stereotype is no more than that type (not true for most audience members who understand the nature of comic framing although some may already be predisposed to think that way). Thus, stereotypes and stereotyping have effectively become dirty words.

In part, this derogatory association derives from the etymology of the term. The OED identifies both the verb and noun form of stereotype as stemming from the French *stéréotyper, stereotype*, an 18th–century invention for accurate and fixed reproduction

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[31] Blum, "Stereotyping and Stereotypes", 9.

of images. Thus, by the late 19th century, the noun came to mean figuratively, "Something continued or constantly repeated without change; a stereotyped phrase, formula, etc.; stereotyped diction or usage" (OED sv stereotype, *n*.). Early in the twentieth century, however, the term acquired a less objective connotation given by the OED as: "A preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person, situation, etc.; an attitude based on such a preconception. Also, a person who appears to conform closely to the idea of a type". The allied pejorative use of the verb means to unfairly fix or perpetuate someone or something in an unchanging form.

From the point of view of humour studies, it is significant that this second meaning was picked up by Gordon Allport, the psychologist who pioneered the development of psychological profiling at Harvard in the 1930s. He included a good sense of humour in his questionnaires as a requisite for personal maturity. In 1935, contributing to a handbook of social psychology, he wrote: "Attitudes which result in gross oversimplifications of experience and in prejudgement. . . are commonly called biases, prejudices, or stereotypes".[32] Allport's approach has since proliferated into a wide range of current psychological tests relating to humour use, appreciation, and aversion, although these do not essentially concern themselves with moral judgements about the styles of personal preference. Their primary concern is with correlations with mental and (to a lesser degree) physical health. The distinction most closely resembling that made by Allport is the recent development by Ruch and colleagues of a test that opposes benevolent to corrective humour in individual humour preferences. However, both so-called styles of humour[33] can be viewed as virtuous since corrective humour aims (like satire) to bring about socially useful reform of some aspect or another in human behaviour by others.

Despite Lippmann's positive statement about stereotypes referred to above, he himself had a second and more critical view: the stereotype is something that contrasts with "individual understanding"[34] and needs to be set aside in favour of granting full respect to every individual we encounter either in fact or fiction. Contemporary values seeking to raise consciousness against our less-enlightened past insist on this view. While the aim is noble, as many have pointed out, it led Lippmann to propose an almost Orwellian system of thought and impulse control that runs counter to individual liberty. Nevertheless, the negative critique of stereotypes and their possible effects is now well and truly entrenched in sociological thought and has been extended by some sociological scholars of humour to comic stereotypes. These are seen as reinforcing and perpetuating existing stereotypes in a particularly nasty way, because "what is represented acquires a different value – that of being a warranted

32 Allport, "Attitudes", 809.

33 In literary studies, styles of humour and comedy points to the distinction between various genres or types of humour such as satire, farce, absurdism etc. However, in recent years, psychological studies of humour have adopted the terms "style of humour" and "comic styles" to identify differences in how individuals prefer and use humour in daily life.

34 Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 59.

object of amusement and hilarity in and of itself".[35] It follows that any audience with a proper sense of things should react to comic stereotypes with a regal Victorian "We are not amused", expressing both personal and social disapproval.

Cases of reaction and attempted suppression

Is some form of retaliation (such as a Lippmanian system of thought suppression) or even formal censorship and an appeal to law appropriate for an audience and the target? This was certainly the case when recently in Australia, senior management of the affiliate of British Petroleum in Perth, Western Australia, sacked a worker and appealed against his ordered reinstatement and compensation.[36] On this occasion, an employee made a home video that he shared with co-workers portraying their top managers as the stereotypical Hitler[37] and his generals in a scene taken from the often-memed movie *Downfall* (2004, director Oliver Hirschbiegel).[38] Interestingly, this particular legal objection to comic stereotyping came from exactly those powerful people whom satirists in Australia have normally assumed to be fair game, rather than from any underdog. This was a kicking-up piece of stereotyping, which was responded to with legal kicking down. Eventually, the worker's appeal was upheld, and the courts found against the company.[39]

The underlying assumption of this censoriousness seems to be that there is a direct link between being "amused at" something and "disrespecting" or hating it. Only superiority humour, it seems, can be applied to stereotypes, and the other two broad categories of the relief and incongruity functions are treated as irrelevant.[40] There are of course anecdotal accounts of people welcoming a comically stereotyped persona as a convenient correlate to real-life bias: it is said that the racist bigot Alf Garnett of the 1960s British TV series Till Death us do Part became "a role model for racists"[41], despite his being clearly framed as a comic butt in the series. Indeed, in the debate about whether Nazis and Nazism should be presented as satirical entertainment at all, given the heinousness of what they stand for, it has certainly been argued that while one might think one was only making fun of fascism and xenophobia by adopting it pro tem, for the time being, and in irony, the real thing can easily creep up and take you over.[42] This "adoption effect" or transfer into real-life behaviour has

[35] Pickering, "Stereotypes", 737.

[36] Bonyhady, "Scott was fired over a Hitler meme".

[37] Nickl, "How Hitler memes made their way around the world".

[38] *Downfall* was originally released in 2004 as *Der Untergang*. It has given rise to a multitude of comic memes and applications, a fact welcomed by its director, Oliver Hirschbiegel.

[39] BBC News, "Downfall".

[40] For an account of these three so-called classical theories of humour, see Morreal, "Philosophy of Humor".

[41] Pickering, "Stereotypes", 740.

[42] Scott, "When We Laugh at Nazis".

echoes in a Japanese stereotype that is widely used both domestically and abroad which presents all Japanese people as having the "samurai spirit" (equivalent to the concept of bushido 武士道, literally the way of the warrior, or the code of honour and morals developed by the Japanese samurai). Despite the relatively recent invention of this fictional concept, dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it has a powerful hold on belief.[43] Japanese people do tend to revel in the image at sporting events for example, comparing themselves favourably to other cultures, and the stereotype is also one which right-wing nationalists and nativists love to deploy. It is a seductive stereotype in its relationship with reality but not one to which many either in or outside Japan take exception.

Perhaps a more clear-cut case of the misuse of stereotypes is that of the truly powerless such as famous children who are too young to have sought their media-star status but who nevertheless fall foul of comedians who are irked by the endless hype associated with them. In 2016 in Québec, for example, stand-up comedian Mike Ward was fined 35,000USD in moral and punitive damages by a human rights tribunal over ridicule that he dished out to Jérémy Gabriel, a young emerging singer, who was disabled from birth. The ruling sparked much debate over the issues of freedom of speech, victim impact and consequences for the profession of comedian. Eventually, in 2021, a long-awaited appeal on the grounds of freedom of speech was narrowly upheld by Canada's Supreme Court. The ruling sought to strike a balance between "a person's right to live in dignity and the right to free speech in the context of a comedian's act".[44]

More recently, the American HBO cartoon series on the British royal family, *The Prince* (2021, director Gary Janetti), which features not only the older generations but also harsh cartoon versions of eight-year-old Prince George and his younger siblings, has proved contentious.[45] George is caricatured as an entitled child worried about his weight and resenting his siblings. The same arguments have been advanced in both cases: that comic stereotyping imposes actual or possible risk of playground mockery and bullying when other children take the stereotype at face value. This was argued in court in Ward's case: "[T]he joke attacked Gabriel's human dignity . . . Ward's comedy routine was widely available online [and]. . . accessible to Gabriel's peers at school. He was mocked and intimidated".[46] The young man certainly paid a high price for his fame as a singer who overcame cruel disability to sing before the Pope: it is not only satirists, but other children too who can be cruel.

[43] It was promulgated by the writings of Inazo Nitobe (Niitobe Inazō, 1862–1933), especially his 1899 work, published in 1905 in English translation as *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*.

[44] Zimonjic, "Comedian Who Mocked Disabled Child Singer".

[45] Hassan, "Brits Outraged by U.S. Animated Series".

[46] Dib, "Comedian Mike Ward's Case before Supreme Court".

Impact of humorous stereotypes

It remains moot, however, whether auditors and viewers enjoying the joke do mistake the stereotype for the reality. It is also unclear which conditions if any are conducive to the incorporation of the stereotype into our belief systems and daily lives. The impact of satire in general on its audience (both immediate and long-term) is a hotly debated topic, the subject of ongoing research in the field of psychology as well as that of political studies. All this suggests caution in drawing any quick conclusions about laughing at stereotypes. To date, published studies looking at the effects of exposure to and enjoyment of comic stereotypes have focussed mainly on sexist, racist and anti-gay jokes, testing attitudes before and after exposure in lab conditions to a pre-selected range of texts. As far as I am aware, none have looked at the duration of effect for any impact that was found on subjects' reported views and tolerance for racism, sexism etc. Usually, no timeframe for post-testing is stated but Ford's 2000 study makes it clear that impact measurements in that case were only taken "in the immediate context" of the experiment, i.e. immediately after exposure to the stimulus-stereotyped material.[47] Duration was not tested for, therefore nor could subsequent behaviour in real life be monitored.

To the scholar of comic stereotypes, it seems entirely plausible that any increase in immediate self-reported antipathy to the subjects of a tested comic stereotype might well be transient, resulting from state-like effects, rather than more permanent trait-like effects which dictate stably held attitudes. Even in a lab, exposure to jokes takes place within a playframe in which we suspend belief, indulge in humour, and permit a temporary Bergsonian anaesthesia of the heart.[48] Changes in attitude might well be related to a range of such factors: playfulness, compliance with the instructions of the tester, general group behaviour during the experiment and so on. And outside the playframe, any shift in norms for the subject being tested might well evaporate. The issue is important and hopefully one that will attract attention from future research students.[49]

As so often in humour research, many interesting questions remain to be asked and answered. Turning to the impact of experimental exposure to comic stereotypes on actual real-life behaviour, some studies have looked at the social effects of disparagement humour and also at the impact on voter behaviour of political satire.[50] Satire and disparagement both by definition involve intentional personal animus for a specific topic, which is not always true for comic stereotypes. In addition,

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[47] Ford, "Effects of Sexist Humor on Tolerance of Sexist Events", 686.

[48] On playframes for humour, see Handelman, "Framing"; and Chafe, *The Importance of Not Being Earnest*.

[49] I gratefully acknowledge expert assistance in forming this conclusion from humour psychologists Willibald Ruch and Sonja Heintz (Ruch, personal communication, 8 December 2023; Heintz, personal communication, 10 December 2023).

[50] Ford et al., "More Than Just a Joke: The Prejudice-releasing Function of Sexist Humor"; Ford et al., "Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory"; Ford et al., "Effects of Exposure to Sexist Humor on Perceptions of Normative Tolerance of Sexism".

methodological challenges are rife and it remains exceedingly difficult to prove any universal link between humour and actual subsequent behaviour.[51] Perhaps research in advertising comes closest, showing the impacts of humour on buying decisions as well as attitudes toward brands.[52] For comic stereotypes, the topic seems ripe for exploration combined with suitable trait and state measures as well as attitudinal and personality ones. It would be important to consider environmental effects such as entry into (and exit from) a play-frame as well as duration and impact on actual future behaviour. Controlling for both cultural differences and humour preferences might also be important since studies such as those of Kuipers and Friedman have clearly demonstrated that even within a single culture such as those of the Netherlands and the USA, there are marked differences between highbrow, lowbrow and perhaps middle brow taste in humour[53]. Since comic stereotypes can be more or less sympathetic to their human subjects, humour taste in them may vary.

O'Connor's research demonstrated that in evaluating a political candidate, the effects of viewing satire about that person did not differ substantially from the effects of exposure to even negative news about them. This illustrates how difficult it is to pin down what humour is doing. In fact, under some conditions, disparaging jokes and satiric coverage even improved the evaluation of the candidate in comparison to results from a control group that viewed more benign humorous material about the same candidate. For stereotypes as for satire, the safest summary may well be that of Robert Phiddian dealing with political satire. He concludes that "[it] doesn't often cause political change . . . but it can certainly reflect and accentuate that change when it occurs".[54] The Canadian Supreme Court ruling on Ward's jokes found that they "did not seek to incite others to mock Gabriel and [that] he cannot be blamed for the actions of Gabriel's classmates and others who parroted the jokes".[55]

A somewhat parallel Australian case occurred in 2009 as part of a nationally popular satirical TV program by the Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC) called *The Chaser*.[56] The offending program was a sketch called "The Make a Realistic Wish Foundation" in which child actors impersonated children in a cancer ward being visited by well-intentioned representatives of the aforesaid foundation offering them gifts as a distraction from their terminal illnesses. The target parodied a well-known real-life charity called The Starlight Foundation, known for its ubiquitous solicitation

[51] On methodological challenges, see O'Connor, 2017; Ford and Olah, "Disparagement Humor and Prejudice: Advances in Theory and Research".

[52] Marc G. Weinberger, Charles S. Gulas and Charles R. Taylor. *Humor in Advertising: Classic Perspectives and New Insights*.

[53] Kuipers, *Good Humor, Bad Taste*; Friedman, *Comedy and Distinction*. Unsurprisingly, individual differences are an important qualifier of results in the use of humour in advertising also, see G. Gregory and H. Crawford, "Cross Cultural Responses to Humorous Advertising: An Individual Difference Perspective".

[54] Phiddian, "Have they no shame?", 259.

[55] Zimonjic, "Comedian Who Mocked Disabled Child Singer".

[56] The Chaser team at that time comprised Julian Morrow, Craig Reucassel, Chris Taylor, Andrew Hansen and Chas May; it was typically a group of like-minded young male university graduates who prided themselves on dissecting contemporary politics and mores and were no strangers to controversy.

of funds to grant dying children their dearest wish regardless of expense (e.g. flying them from Sydney, Australia, to Disneyland, Florida).[57] The gifts offered in the sketch were derisory such as a lead pencil and the children suitably deadpan and bemused.

The backlash to this perceived pillorying of sick children was such that the following day (4 June 2009), the team as well as the ABC recorded an on-air apology. Reparation was made to the Starlight Foundation as well, although they can scarcely have suffered from the unexpected publicity. Rusted-on fans were outraged, and many comments can still be found online (e.g. at the YouTube hosting sites for the remaining versions of the video-clip). However, a more reflective (if self-interested) response came in the shape of a letter to the Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* from a practising cancer specialist at the John Hunter Hospital in Newcastle, NSW, who wrote, "I can tell you all a sick child really wants is firstly to go home and secondly to get better. . . Making the donation may make an adult feel better but the money would be better spent on medical research".[58] No doubt the young satirists had exactly such a focus in mind, the conspicuous compassion involved in those who run and those who support such fund-raising. However, they spectacularly failed to allow for the emotional charge innate in images of head-bandaged and wan little children laying listlessly in hospital beds. The stereotype carries such force of persuasive sympathy that it deflected the attack from its true target and, in the heat of the moment, convinced viewers that their beloved young radicals had gone too far this time.

Jokes using stereotypes or individuals reduced to cardboard simplifications may risk producing side effects but, in this case, as in the Canadian one discussed above, the actual comic target was the recurring, often mawkish fuss that is made about famous and/or pitiable people; and, the self-satisfaction of those who contribute to it. The foundational work of the late Christie Davies, an expert analyst of joke-lore bodies around the world, demonstrated the connection between excessive and melodramatic presentation of people and events on television and social media and the subsequent rise of joking about the topic.[59] This link remains as true in the tragic case of the death of Princess Diana as it did in the sinking of The Titanic so long ago.[60] Overreach invites reaction and inflation invites deflation using succinct humour, surgically delivered by the satirist or cartoonist.

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57 Rowlph77, "The Chaser's Parody".

58 Letter to the Editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 June 2009.

59 See Davies, "Jokes on the Death of Diana"; Davies, "Jokes That Follow Mass-Mediated Disasters in a Global Electronic Age".

60 Chovanec, "Early Titanic Jokes".

Comic stereotypes' essence

Comic stereotypes combine the incongruities of humour with the observable social and personal dissonances of their time, whether those be egocentrism and hypocrisy, callousness and mawkishness, greed, abuse of power or simply unfairness of all kinds. They may not be entirely fair to the human beings portrayed, who are in real life undoubtedly more complex than the caricatures that represent them. However, they are a powerful shorthand that works for a wide audience because they are economical, readily communicated and grasped, and based on truths perceived as recognisable, even if they are neither completely accurate nor up-to-date and not necessarily endorsed by the audience. Cartoonists and humourists using such shorthand for their critical commentary are the slaves crouching behind the leaders and celebrities of today, whispering "Remember, Caesar, thou art mortal". Their targets will indeed suffer – sometimes unfairly – from being presented with such a *memento mori*, particularly if they have not personally sought out the limelight accorded them by the media. But equally often, it is the slave who gets it in the neck. There is a social benefit to permitting such simplification. To quote Phiddian again, with the use of comic stereotypes as with satire more generally, public culture needs to allow for "there being a play space for intemperate views, since pushing them underground cannot actually suppress them, as authoritarian regimes of all stripes have in the past discovered to their cost".[61] The medicine may be harsh or gentle, but both its corrective and entertaining functions deserve their licence.

[61] Phiddian, "Have They No Shame?", 261.

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