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HUMOR: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS WITHIN CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

Shazia Khalid¹, Sumaya Batool² & Shazia Ashraf³

¹Head of the Department of Psychology, Preston University-Kohat, Islamabad Campus.

²Lecturer, Department of Psychology, University of Sargodha, Sargodha.

³Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Preston University-Kohat, Islamabad Campus.

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Abstract:

The present analysis was undertaken to delve into history and understand the cultural and religious influence in the conceptualization and behavioral manifestation of humor. The inquiry swept the timeline beginning with Plato, discussing his overarching view that humor is a disdainful expression of emotions and refrained 'respectful' men and women from using it. This view profoundly impacted the later religions and code of conduct in social interaction prevailing for the next 2000 years. Until, as claimed by the literature, Lord Shaftesbury, a British reformer presented a radical view in favor of humor and its relevance in interpersonal relationships and emotional coping and changed worldview. In contrast, we argue that during this stretch of 2000 years, Muslims' endorsement of humor and its place in everyday life helped to shed the expected melancholic façade and accept humor, laughter, and desire to joke as part of being human. The article also reviews contemporary research and views to provide empirical support for the psychological and social benefits of humor.

Humor is associated with jokes, smiles, and laughter. Numerous proverbs and sayings are quoted in reference to the benefits of humor. For instance, Charlie Chaplin said: a day without laughter

is a day wasted (Machlev, 2015). However, people have not always been as accepting towards 'humor' and 'laughter' as today. The world generally has been reluctant and confused whether to talk about it or not, despite the fact that humor brings joy, smile and laughter. When we look into the history of humor, our analysis is that one person, that is, Plato (384 BC as cited in Morreall, 2016), played an important role in downplaying the significance of humor in our lives and developing negative attitudes toward it. Plato totally detested the idea of humor, comedy, and laughter (Morreall, 2016). He said no man or woman of worth should indulge in the whims of humor and laughter. And when he read in Iliad that his Gods laugh and make jokes, he was shocked. Thus, he instructed his Gods that they should not surrender to humor and laughter. In fact, he said that it should be left to slaves to make jokes and laugh. His explanation was simple: we make jokes when we feel superior compared to others, that is, when we compare ourselves with others and find ourselves wealthier, or better dressed, or better looking, we make jokes and laugh. In short, Plato equated humor with scorn, derision, and something devilish and therefore proposed that it should be tightly controlled. His view was very influential, centuries after, almost all prominent philosophers, thinkers and theologists followed and accepted his theory of humor and such behaviors.

Stoic philosophers (3rd Century BC as cited in Morreall, 2016), for instance, observed: Let not your laughter be loud, frequent, or unrestrained. Christian theologists (476-800 AD) absolutely condemned humor and laughter and prohibited their people from engaging in this behavior (Joeckel, 2008). They said that their God never laughs and if he does, it is in anger and hostility. Similarly, God's spokesmen, prophets also only laughed when they wanted to express anger or hostility. They equated humor with lack of self-regulated soul or lack of personal dignity (Wagner, 1962).

In congruence with this perspective, Sigmund Freud (1856 to 1939 AD) theorized that joking and laughing is outward manifestation of repressed hostile and sexual feelings (1962). However, subsequent studies did not found support for the explanation given by Freud for humor. Eysenck (1972), in his study observed that individuals who express their sexual and hostile feelings are more inclined to engage in sexual and aggressive humor than who repress such feelings.

In summary, the ancient view held that humor represents an irrational loss of control over oneself, so it should be curtailed. As pointed out before, Plato's influence went on and on for centuries till Lord Shaftesbury, a British social reformer and politician wrote the article: an essay on the freedom of wit and humor in 1709 in which he gave a radical view about humor. He was of the view that humor was discharge of pent-up emotions. In history, it is recorded that his article changed the world's view about humor (Morreall, 2016). However, if you look at the time line, starting from Plato, it is roughly a period of 2000 years before Lord Shaftesbury finds the courage to say something in favor of humor. Our proposition is that in 6th, 7th century, Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the messenger of God in Islam and Abraham's religion became a strong role model for thousands of his followers on how to lead a healthy and normal life. In contrast to previous prophets, many incidences have been related in which Holy Prophet has been found to engage in light jokes and humor with his fellowmen. In one of his hadith, Holy Prophet says: Indeed, Allah loves those who are playful among people without obscenity. We believe that was the turning point for the case in support of humor and laughter (Khan, 2007). Holy Prophet with his simple attitude was able to dispel the spell of Plato and gave a straightforward theory of humor. This position was adopted by several Muslim philosophers such as Al Farabi (872-950 AD), Ibn Sina (980-1037 AD), Ibn Rushd (1126-1198 AD). Their

point of view can be summarized as: Muslim philosophers and psychologists have taken a very moderate and flexible view of humor in the light of Holy Quran and Sunnah (Marzolph, 1995). Very clear guidelines have been given regarding the significance of 'sense of humor' in one's life and in social contexts. In contrast to historical notions, Muslim philosophers approved of humor in social interaction but simultaneously discouraged a conversation which may involve hurting the feelings of other people.

This flexible and accepting view of humor in our daily life and its significance has shaped the conceptualization and study of humor among psychologists of today. For example, Abraham Maslow in his theory of self-actualization maintained that a self-actualized person is the one who among other characteristics also demonstrates a sophisticated sense of humor.

Now, Muslim philosophers, since their religion allowed them to develop a radical attitude toward humor and laughter and its role in life, found a sympathizer in the age-old Greek philosopher, that is, Aristotle (384-322 BC). Aristotle who was student of Plato and lived in his times, had already given a moderate view on humor and a noble person. He had advised: Life includes rest as well as activity, and in this is included leisure and amusement; engage in humor at right time and right place, and to the right degree. Apparently, nobody endorsed his view at that time. We believe that Muslim philosophers converged Islam's view and that of Aristotle together; their work was translated into different languages in Europe, which may have been picked up by Lord Shaftesbury (a British social reformer and politician, as cited by Weinsheimer, 1995) through Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 AD), who was a churchman belonging to 13th century AD. He summarized his view as: The Sin of playing too much and the sin of playing too little. Aquinas intensely stressed the importance of humor in the life of human beings. He saw humor as a means to provide rest to soul and also a way to develop healthy relationships. He proposed that individuals who are dull and do not engage in humor and play, are burdensome to others and therefore, despised by them. Like Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas regarded humor as a virtue.

In 1936, Max Eastman presented an instinctive theory of humor by pointing out that like other animals, human beings are naturally endowed with the tendency to laugh and relax especially when confronted with painful and traumatic experiences.

Another force which may have influenced psychologists view of humor is Dalai Lama, who in one of his books entitled: *My Spiritual Journey* noted: I Am a Professional Laugher. I have been confronted with many difficulties throughout the course of my life, and my country is going through a critical period. But I laugh often, and my laughter is contagious. When people ask me how I find the strength to laugh now, I reply that I am a professional laugher (2011).

Today, psychological research has yielded several personal, cognitive, health and social benefits of engaging in light humor and laughter. American Psychological Association (APA) has identified humor as one of character strengths and a virtue. According to this contention, humor fosters 'tolerance for ambiguity and diversity, and promote creative problem solving... engenders trust, reducing conflict.... reduces and even blocks negative emotions' (Morreall, 2016). These assertions have found substantial support in empirical research. For instance, it has been found that humor is positively linked with psychological wellbeing (Cann Collette, 2014; Dyck & Holtzman, 2013), stress management strategy (Porterfield, 1987), good health (Cann, Stilwell, & Taku, 2010), emotional wellbeing (Crawford & Caltabiano, 2011), social lubrication and social bonding (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013). Recently, Mariam Saeed, MSc student of Psychology Department, Preston University, Islamabad campus studied humor as a mechanism to cope with stress and enhance psychological wellbeing (2016). As predicted, humor was found to be significant and positive predictor of psychological well-being and stress coping mechanism

among Pakistani young adults. In conclusion we will quote Dalai Lama: I Love the Smile, Unique to Humans.

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