

## Book review

**John Morreall (2016) *Laughing All the Way. Your Sense of Humour. Don't Leave Home without It*. Melbourne, Florida: Motivational Press, 288 pp.**

John Morreall's book very extensively explores his 35 years of research in the field of humour, condensing at parts or enlarging when necessary its benefits in organisational and business communication, psychology, healthcare, and education. The cartoons accompanying each chapter title and the Foreword by Robert Mankoff probably make the first contact with the book a very pleasant experience. Although the Foreword sententiously announces that "this book isn't for everyone" (p. 9), the reader gradually discovers a teacher's approach to humour as being funny, catchy, complex, self-explanatory at times, providing "the who, what, where, when, and why of funny" (p. 9). Discovering the necessity of humour for "a well-rounded life" (p. 9) seems to be another very good argument in favour of reading this book, irrespective of your being a scholar in the field or a person interested in enhancing your sense of humour.

The opening chapter of the book (*Wipe That Grin Back on Your Face*) makes a diachronic approach to humour in institutional settings. It represents a passage from the seriousness of the work ethic in the workplaces of the industrial revolution and the humourless school as recalled by the author himself to the need for reversing the prejudice against humour and play. Playfulness is described as a key characteristic of human beings, which enables them "to transcend seriousness, to rise above a practical perspective to indulge in wonder, speculation, fantasy, art, celebration, and humour" (p. 20). These are just a few of the benefits of humour the author considers essential for work satisfaction, fulfilled family relationships and, ultimately, for being a happy person.

The next chapter (*Humour as Play, Laughter as Play Signal*) reveals some of the mechanisms that we employ in order to recognise laughter and make the difference between false alarm laughter (occurring as a psychological shift from fear to pleasure) and laughter at other's expense or in situations that would otherwise be disturbing. The author accompanies the presentation of the incongruity theory with examples taken from his own experience, scholarly literature, media sources, indoor and outdoor signs.

The third chapter, *Laughing about the Unavoidable*, brings a new perspective on the use of humour in relation to death and to funerals. Descending from an oriental tradition, the detachment from mundane can be achieved by adopting a "comic attitude toward death" (p. 45). Experiences of funny funerals, humorous epitaphs on gravestones around the world, and making fun of aging are relevant examples of such an attitude.

In relation to the previous chapter, the fourth one, *The Spirituality of Humour*, proposes an examination of the humorous dimensions of "the Eastern tradition of Buddhism, and the Western tradition of Christianity" (p. 53). The Oriental worldview favours the idea of nonattachment to material things and to the power of reasoning as a means of reducing unhappiness, suffering, and disappointment. Christianity also encourages caring about others above everything else – be they possession or power. Belief is rewarded and the petty concerns about the future disappear when a higher point of view is adopted. Thus, humour is "a gift from God that enables us to step back from the trivia of our daily lives to achieve a higher perspective that's closer to God's own point of view" (p. 60). What do the spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi

and Erma Bombeck, a housewife from Dayton, Ohio, have in common? The impact they had on their fellows by their extraordinary sense of humour.

In the next chapter, humour is treated as *The Ultimate Stress-Buster*, being held responsible for reducing stress-related symptoms and diseases. In the modern world, stress is no longer based on fear and anger, being considered the automatic response of the body to work-related problems. “Laughter sets the spirit free” (p. 76), it helps us deal with change and difficult circumstances, and becomes an effective stress-buster when working in the healthcare system or in the military. Humour changes perspectives and attitudes, reframing events and things from a life-as-work perspective to a playful one that leads us to living more satisfying lives.

Humour in medical contexts is detailed in chapter 6, *Is Laughter the Best Medicine?* The mental benefits of laughter are noticed not only in work-related contexts, but also in handling emotions related to people’s health. Important progress on studying the physical benefits of humour is made by psychoneuroimmunology, while many narratives and anecdotes support the increasing role of humour in hospitals.

Innovative in many ways is Morreall’s chapter on the relationship between *Humour and Mental Flexibility*. Being centred in the cerebral cortex, humour enhances mental flexibility by blocking the stress emotions of fear and anger, which are centred in the lower brain’s limbic system. Humour also “promotes mental flexibility by immersing us in things that violate our expectations” (p. 100), and by favouring what is odd, abnormal, and incongruous. “When we think funny, we think in non-automatic, non-rigid ways” (p. 100) and we transform mental rigidity into creative, divergent thinking. Thus, humour allows reframing and boosts critical thinking and brainstorming techniques.

Chapter 8, *The Social Benefits of Humour* revisits laughter at work from a social perspective, explaining how humour functions as a barometer of workplace atmosphere by way of enhancing solidarity and reducing threat.

*Women’s Humour and Men’s* dwells on gendered approaches to humour. Starting from the stereotype of “boys as humour producers” and “girls as humour consumers” (p. 127), the chapter makes justice to women’s humour, as a shared experience or as support for people in difficult situations. Even when directed at someone’s mistake, women’s humour is not intended to humiliate or belittle the person. An interesting observation is related to women’s preference for true stories, “from their own lives and the lives of people they care about” (p. 129), rather than to fictional jokes. The chapter is rounded up by a section referring to women in comedy and one to women’s humour at work.

John Morreall dedicates Chapter 10 of his book to *Harmful Humour*. He explains the mechanisms of aggressive and competitive humour and offers suggestions on how to handle it. Irresponsible laughter, callous and cruel laughter, mockery, sarcasm, cynical humour, along with racist, ethnic, and sexist jokes are various kinds of harmful humour that are culturally and socially contextualised in this chapter. “The basic way to deal with these types of humour is to make the person aware that the issue they’re treating lightly deserves their concern” (p. 151). Compassion for others and a thorough analysis of our jokes and the impact they have on innocent targets should prevent us from using harmful humour.

In Chapter 11 (*Laughing in the Mirror*), a key humour skill is looked at: the ability to laugh at yourself. Avoiding self-centredness and negative emotions that determine the “tunnel vision – seeing only what is Here/Now/Me/Real/Practical” (p. 157) allows people drop the rationalisations and the privileging of oneself above the rest of the human race. The Buddhist teaching of no-self explains that every cell in one’s body changes constantly and so are “our perceptions, thoughts, desires, and emotions” (p. 158). There is nothing permanent about the self, either physically or psychologically. Therefore, in the absence of a core self, there is no justification for self-centredness. Not defending a big ego and being able to laugh at oneself make the person easier to get along with. Self-directed humour is appreciated both in the

workplace and as a marketing strategy. Humour sells, but self-directed humour sells better, especially in the American business culture.

Chapter 12 (*Handling Conflict with Humour*) commences from Abraham Lincoln's words: "The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend" (p. 165). Humour can end an argument, block violence, and bring parts together in negotiations. "It allows opponents to graciously leave each other a way out of the conflict without being humiliated" (p. 168). Although humour does not solve the problem, it manages "to replace confrontational anger with shared pleasure" (p. 169) and allows people to reason a way through the problem rather than feeling their way through it. "Having a good sense of humour is a big help to lawyers" (p. 171), it reduces the loss of face in apologising, it helps the police officers to neutralise anger in family fights, and it reduces stress in conflict areas. Historical events such as the 1914 Christmas truce or the 1961 Cuban Missile Crisis are brought into our attention as instances in which humour contributed to reducing stress in actual or potential war circumstances.

*Leading with Laughter* analyses leading styles and their relationship with humour. "In contrast with Dominating Leaders, (...) Empowering Leaders foster humour in their organisations for the way it builds camaraderie and team spirit, and encourages creative and critical thinking" (p. 182). Humble humour works miracles when it comes to leaders' gaining trust and respect of employees, subordinates, and ordinary people. The more enlightened leaders do not engage in self-directed humour. They rather make themselves part of the group, and use humour to foster creative thinking and encourage people to express themselves. The clearheaded confidence and control of the situation gain people's admiration and trust. The final section of this chapter is dedicated to "ways for leaders not to get laughs" (p. 187). Eleven mistakes of George W. Bush as president of the U.S. are listed in an attempt to prevent phenomena like laughter at political leaders, raised out of incompetence or arrogance.

Chapter 14 discusses *Humour in Presentations*. Lists of benefits, tips originated in best practices in the field, and sources of humour to be used in speeches, reports, and presentations are the core ingredients of this chapter. Professionals can find in a nutshell the do's and don'ts of the use of humour in presentations.

John Cleese's words "He who laughs most, learns best" set the scene of chapter 15 (*Humour in Training and Education*). In opposition to traditional views that ban humour from schools and work settings, "recent research has shown that humour has at least five benefits in training and education" (p. 205): reducing learner anxiety, improving relaxation and attention, increasing retention of the learned content, and fostering mental flexibility. The shift in focus from teacher's comfort to learners' needs made teaching and training a beautiful challenge, as demonstrated by John Cleese's video arts training programmes based on learning from mistakes. Similar programmes function in US for defensive driving courses or even for teaching world's religions.

*Learning from Poor Writing* is the chapter dedicated to printed gaffes occurring in official documents from various sources – school evaluations, church bulletins, newspaper headlines, government, business, and medicine. The list of mistakes include: inflated jargon, typographical errors, wrong choice of words, deficient word order, *double entendre*, stating the obvious, unclear writing, "expensive-sounding language" (p. 223), and excessive use of business jargon. What all these examples have in common is that the humorous reaction raised by such mistakes was not intentional. The chapter ends with a list of ten tips for clear and concise writing.

Chapter 17 (*Humour in Sales and Marketing*) opens a new challenge for the reader – that of identifying the strategic use of humour in commercials. John Morreall discusses eight ways in which humour work. Humour grabs people's attention and determines them to remember the commercials. It also creates instant rapport and enforces friendliness towards products that do not have a friendly image. Humour opens venues of communication and facilitates negotiation between producers and consumers. Humour is enhanced by the element of surprise and the cleverness that gets people involved in processing the message. An interesting observation is

related to how men and women react to various types of humour in commercials. A list of ten tips for using humour in sales and marketing concludes this chapter.

*Humour in Customer Relations* appears as a necessary follow-up of the previous chapter. Provoking an unexpected delight is the core ingredient of humour in customer relations. Humour adds value to a successful business relationship and restores good relations in cases of tensed ones. Humour is a friendly gesture that goes well with the hospitality of hotel businesses, restaurants, and airline services.

Chapter 19, *Humour across the Globe*, introduces aspects related to the variation of humour “not only across cultures but also within one culture over time” (p. 259). After discussing some of the problems related to translating humour, the author approaches ethnic humour from the perspective of ‘stupidity’ jokes. Several cases of expensive mistranslations are explained along with their consequences for businesses and people.

The closing chapter of Morreall’s book (*Now, Let’s Get Down to Play*) is an invitation to “nurturing” (p. 268) one’s sense of humour. Five exercises to be done individually or in groups are followed by a list of twenty general tips for enhancing playfulness. Twenty tips for a happy workplace along with final advice for a happy and fulfilled life complete this chapter.

The abundance of examples and their variety make this book a wonderful reading experience and a real gem for teachers and students in search for real-life experiences and relevant case studies. They accompany the otherwise dull theoretical background and anchor the readers in the diverse representations of everyday humour. Although some of the issues (such as the origins of laughter or the social benefits of humour) may appear as recurrent, they serve as necessary arguments in the explanation of more complex concepts and approaches.

The useful lists of tips throughout the book respond to the needs of professionals in the fields of education, training, and organisational communication and display the author’s preference for a didactic approach. The deliberate omission of highly theoretical content allows the general public to equally enjoy this reading. Depending on their particular research interests, scholars in the field of humour studies may find interesting viewpoints and useful directions for further research.

Given the very diverse approaches to humour in Morreall’s book, one can find particular issues (such as the richness and importance of intercultural and ethnic humour) insufficiently developed. Another drawback of the book, at least for a non-American reader, could be the centeredness on American culture.

Overall this is an enjoyable book. John Morreall makes a strong case for the complexity of humour and laughter and draws very effectively on his own extensive research to support his arguments. Researchers in the area of humour from many disciplines, teachers, students, and professionals will find this book highly stimulating. John Morreall’s passion and expertise in the field of humour and laughter transpire from the book, and readers will find it stimulating and memorable.

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