

# The emotional appeal of stand-up comedy

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Comics taking to the stage at the Edinburgh Fringe this week should take note: how much of a hit they are with their audiences won't be down to just their jokes. As Dr Tim Miles from the University of Surrey has discovered, the link between humour and emotion plays a large part in how well an audience connects with a comedian, and vice versa.

Writing in the journal *Comedy Studies*, Dr Miles explains: "Clearly there is some relationship between humour and emotion, as the states we associate with laughter are usually emotional ones (joy, pleasure, nervousness, a desire to integrate); but the exact nature of this relationship seems difficult to establish."

Commenting on his study Dr Miles states, "Comedy has often been seen to be a bit frivolous, but it's actually something really important. Research shows that we laugh not so much because something is objectively funny, but because we want people to like us, or we want to feel part of a group that's laughing - it's all about making connections. My work looking at comedians and comedy audiences has shown how live stand-up comedy fulfils a need for feelings of truth, trust, empathy and intimacy between people, which is really important in a society where many people often complain about feeling isolated."

As part of his research, Miles analysed dozens of questionnaires and interviews with both audience members and comedians, including Russell Brand and Robin Williams. What he discovered was a strong emphasis on 'emotional experience' for both stand-up comedians and audience members. Audiences and comedians were connected by bonds

of 'admiration' and 'empathy' and what he calls 'the paradox of identification': identifying with the humour or observations made by a comic, but not being able to identify with them in terms of seeing themselves in their place on the stage.

Miles also observed 'a complex symbiotic relationship between the stand-up comedian and their audience in relation to the body, and well-being – with a [relationship](#) that is, in some ways, similar to a doctor and patient'. Indeed, some comedians felt they offered a 'therapeutic service, or some sort of drug'; references to medicine, therapy and 'feeling better' were made by audience members too.

Miles concludes that stand-up comedy is a 'performance' like any other, so emotional experiences like identification, interaction, empathy, mutual therapy, well-being and a need for recognition all play an important part. He also points to recent research that suggests audiences 'perform' too: their brains enter 'laughter mode whenever there is an expectation of laughter'. At least that's what the performers at this year's Fringe will be hoping as they try to connect with their audiences.

**More information:** "No greater foe? Rethinking emotion and humour, with particular attention to the relationship between audience members and stand-up comedians." Tim Miles. *Comedy Studies*, 2014. [DOI: 10.1080/2040610X.2014.905093](https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2014.905093)

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