

Complexity of humour is no joke, researcher says

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Rod Martin, who recently retired after more than three decades of teaching Clinical Psychology at Western, dedicated his career to the psychology of humour. Thanks to Martin's seminal work in the field, researchers today take humour seriously, studying the role it plays in all forms of psychology, including developmental, social and biological approaches. Credit: Adela Talbot

Rod Martin remembers when humour wasn't serious business.

In the 1970s, psychologists didn't exactly see humour as a worthwhile topic of study, said Martin, who in July, retired after more than three decades of teaching Clinical Psychology at Western.

Such perceptions towards humour in psychology changed drastically over the years thanks to Martin and his seminal work in the field. Today, researchers take humour seriously, studying the role it plays in all forms of psychology, including developmental, social and biological approaches.

"Traditionally, researchers have been most interested in things that go wrong – like disorders, schizophrenia, etc. And rightly so. Those are the things that are problematic and we need solutions. In the 1970s, there had been a lot of research on stress and the whole topic had come out in recent years – the idea that stressful life events can have a negative effect on people's health," Martin said.

This trend gave rise to what today is called 'positive psychology' – a subfield that focuses on human strengths and what makes people resilient. In 1979, that helped him and his master's supervisor come up with a research topic Martin could focus on.

"(My supervisor) was interested in why some people don't succumb to stress and some people weather the adversity of life better than others. He was thinking of personality traits that might be beneficial in that way. Together, we thought of a sense of humour – if you have a good sense of humour you live longer; you're happy. And I've continued with this topic ever since," he explained.

Early in his academic career, Martin developed questionnaires for measuring a sense of humour. Psychologists tend to use questionnaires to

measure [personality traits](#). Before Martin came along, however, little was available to measure an individual's sense of humour.

Using this newly developed questionnaire in fieldwork during his PhD, Martin found people who scored highest – indicating they had a strong sense of humour – were less likely to become depressed or anxious when they experienced [stressful life events](#). That was a big finding, he said.

"That article we published became, and may still be, my most frequently cited article. I started with a splash there. The article got into popular media. Maybe I hit the high point and it was all downhill after that," he laughed.

Over time, however, Martin's work started to indicate having a sense of humour didn't always correlate with other measures of psychological well-being, such as happiness. While one might expect this to be the case, and while one might think scoring highly in the humour department meant you scored low on depression and anxiety, this wasn't always true.

"It got me thinking – this is more complex. We started with a simplistic idea. But really, humour is a very complex thing, and it's not always positive. There are negative aspects of humour too, aspects that are associated with depression and anxiety – maladaptive humour," Martin noted.

Martin became convinced that what's really important is not how much you laugh or how funny you are, but how you use humour in everyday interactions with people. Do you use it in an aggressive way? Do you put people down all the time? Are you sarcastic? Cynical?

"Self-deprecating humour is positive, healthy. You laugh at yourself. Self-defeating humour comes out of low self-esteem, putting yourself down in a funny way. I saw a lot of stand-up comics do this. John Candy.

John Belushi. Chris Farley. It can be hilarious. These are often the class-clown types, kids who were making everybody laugh by diving head first into a snowbank," Martin said.

But at the end of the day, when looked at closely, this was not a positive side of humour.

"Humour is a form of communication and you can communicate anything. Over the last 15 years or so, this has been the focus of my research – using that questionnaire, developing it further. It's now widely used, and it's been translated into about 40 different languages. It has led to a lot of research, more than 100 studies, supporting this idea that some forms of humour are beneficial and some are detrimental," Martin went on.

Nearly a decade ago, he published a comprehensive book, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, which he considers the highlight of his career. The book has been translated into Korean, Japanese, Russian and Spanish and it is the first publication to cover the whole field of the psychology of humour – not just Martin's research.

"The cool thing about humour is it touches on every area of psychology – biological, social, cognitive, developmental, etc. What's the role of humour from an evolutionary standpoint? It's a really cool topic I sort of lucked into. I had no idea when I first started out, where it would go," he said.

"We feel good when we experience [humour](#). It's a unique emotion; it's different from other feelings. If you're feeling that emotion, which I call mirth, you communicate it through laughter – it's a social signal that evolved millions of years ago. It's made for very interesting research and fun working with my students."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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