

Why we laugh when we know it's wrong

August 23 2019, by Alice Rudge



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

For the Batek people of the Malaysian peninsula rainforest, laughter can be dangerous. Within the system of taboos of these [egalitarian](#) hunter-gatherers, laughing in certain situations can cause storms, illness or even death. And yet sometimes, Batek people—like anyone else—laugh when they know they shouldn't. In fact, laughter can be especially pleasurable when it's forbidden.

What does this paradox tell us about ideas of right and wrong? My [recent research](#) with the Batek suggests that examining [contagious, uncontrollable](#) laughter can help explain why we do things we say we shouldn't. Rather than always being "wrong," laughing when we shouldn't can be a way of shaping our ethical beliefs by interacting with others, testing out the limits of right and wrong. To understand this, we must look not only at what is funny, but at how people laugh.

In the Batek's forest, to laugh at anything you might be about to eat would risk diarrhea and even death in extreme circumstances. Laughing around fruits, flowers, bees, honey, certain insects or in fact anything that has to do with the ecology of the fruit season carries enormous risks. These include caterpillars coming out of your eyes, a gigantic swelling head, or being unable to speak.

This kind of laughter might also affect the fruit season itself, causing some fruits or flowers not to appear. Laughing too much, too loudly or at certain creatures—in particular leeches and other invertebrates—might risk angering the thunder-being, causing terrifying storms.

Adhering to these taboos is seen as ethical behavior, a way that people demonstrate respect for the non-human persons of the forest that provide the Batek with sustenance. But sometimes people can't control their laughter. So they cannot do the "right" thing every time.

During my fieldwork with the Batek, one night I was staying up late with Na? Srimjam, a Batek friend, when a frog began to croak. This frog's croak sounded a lot like someone breaking wind, causing her to crack up. Na? Srimjam tried desperately to get her laughter under control, gasping through her giggles that her laughter was taboo. As soon as she had stopped laughing, the frog let out another croak. This cycle happened repeatedly until she was weeping with laughter.

Na? Srimjam was fully aware that she was being dangerously taboo, but was reveling in the subversive laughter anyway. She just couldn't help herself. In this instance, her laughter was [uncontrollable](#), erupting even though it was wrong. And yet no one judged her as wrong or bad for having laughed when she recounted the story the next day.

Society or individual?

Scholars have long debated whether our ethics are shaped by society or whether we control them as individuals. But moments of forbidden laughter among the Batek show that both can be true at once.

On the one hand, our ideas about what is funny are shaped by our [social contexts](#). This moment was so funny to Na? Srimjam because she knew that, as a Batek person, it was taboo for her to laugh at this frog. This was demonstrated by how she kept pointing out that we were being taboo, even while she was doing the taboo thing.

On the other hand, people will always have their own reactions to things that happen. Social contexts help shape these reactions but aren't the only thing that determines our behavior. Laughter can erupt whether or not it is culturally or socially appropriate.

When it comes to the ethics of laughter, people may recognize the rules of what's appropriate but also take the rules into their own hands. How much freedom people have to choose what is ethical reflects their broader understandings of their relationships with others.

In the Batek's egalitarian society, where no one person has systematic authority over another, individual autonomy is paramount. This focus on autonomy is why the Batek do not punish one another for inappropriate laughter, even when it is considered wrong and risks dangerous consequences for the group such as the anger of the thunder-being.

Instead, people say, it's up to "them on their own."

Because of this, laughter is a unique tool for socialization. There is a constant interplay between doing the right thing, and doing (just the right amount of) the wrong thing. And understanding how this works through [laughter](#) helps people establish their personal ethical values in relation to the rest of the group. When it comes to what we find funny, we may either follow the rules or just laugh them off. But either way we are learning about right and wrong.

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