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Findings

What's So Funny? Well, Maybe Nothing

By [JOHN TIERNEY](#)

So there are these two muffins baking in an oven. One of them yells, “Wow, it’s hot in here!”

And the other muffin replies: “Holy cow! A talking muffin!”

Did that alleged joke make you laugh? I would guess (and hope) not. But under different circumstances, you would be chuckling softly, maybe giggling, possibly guffawing. I know that’s hard to believe, but trust me. The results are just in on a laboratory test of the muffin joke.

Laughter, a topic that stymied philosophers for 2,000 years, is finally yielding to science. Researchers have scanned brains and tickled babies, chimpanzees and rats. They’ve traced the evolution of laughter back to what looks like the primal joke — or, to be precise, the first stand-up routine to kill with an audience of primates.

It wasn’t any funnier than the muffin joke, but that’s not surprising, at least not to the researchers. They’ve discovered something that eluded Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Kant, Schopenhauer, Freud and the many theorists who have tried to explain laughter based on the mistaken premise that they’re explaining humor.

Occasionally we’re surprised into laughing at something funny, but most laughter has little to do with humor. It’s an instinctual survival tool for social animals, not an intellectual response to wit. It’s not about getting the joke. It’s about getting along.

When Robert R. Provine tried applying his training in neuroscience to laughter 20 years ago, he naïvely began by dragging people into his laboratory at the [University of Maryland](#), Baltimore County, to watch episodes of “Saturday Night Live” and a George Carlin routine. They didn’t laugh much. It was what a stand-up comic would call a bad room.

So he went out into natural habitats — city sidewalks, suburban malls — and carefully observed thousands of “laugh episodes.” He found that 80 percent to 90 percent of them came after straight lines like “I know” or “I’ll see you guys later.” The witticisms that induced laughter rarely rose above the level

of “You smell like you had a good workout.”

“Most prelaugh dialogue,” Professor Provine concluded in “Laughter,” his 2000 book, “is like that of an interminable television situation comedy scripted by an extremely ungifted writer.”

He found that most speakers, particularly women, did more laughing than their listeners, using the laughs as punctuation for their sentences. It's a largely involuntary process. People can consciously suppress laughs, but few can make themselves laugh convincingly.

“Laughter is an honest social signal because it's hard to fake,” Professor Provine says. “We're dealing with something powerful, ancient and crude. It's a kind of behavioral fossil showing the roots that all human beings, maybe all mammals, have in common.”

The human ha-ha evolved from the rhythmic sound — pant-pant — made by primates like chimpanzees when they tickle and chase one other while playing. Jaak Panksepp, a neuroscientist and psychologist at [Washington State University](#), [discovered](#) that rats emit an ultrasonic chirp (inaudible to humans without special equipment) when they're tickled, and they like the sensation so much they keep coming back for more tickling.

He and Professor Provine figure that the first primate joke — that is, the first action to produce a laugh without physical contact — was the feigned tickle, the same kind of coo-chi-coo move parents make when they thrust their wiggling fingers at a baby. Professor Panksepp thinks the brain has ancient wiring to produce laughter so that young animals learn to play with one another. The laughter stimulates euphoria circuits in the brain and also reassures the other animals that they're playing, not fighting.

“Primal laughter evolved as a signaling device to highlight readiness for friendly interaction,” Professor Panksepp says. “Sophisticated social animals such as mammals need an emotionally positive mechanism to help create social brains and to weave organisms effectively into the social fabric.”

Humans are laughing by the age of four months and then progress from tickling to the Three Stooges to more sophisticated triggers for laughter (or, in some inexplicable cases, to Jim Carrey movies). Laughter can be used cruelly to reinforce a group's solidarity and pride by mocking deviants and insulting outsiders, but mainly it's a subtle social lubricant. It's a way to make friends and also make clear who belongs where in the status hierarchy.

Which brings us back to the muffin joke. It was inflicted by social psychologists at [Florida State University](#) on undergraduate women last year, during interviews for what was ostensibly a study of their spending habits. Some of the women were told the interviewer would be awarding a substantial cash prize to a few of the participants, like a boss deciding which underling deserved a bonus.

The women put in the underling position were a lot more likely to laugh at the muffin joke (and others almost as lame) than were women in the control group. But it wasn't just because these underlings were

trying to manipulate the boss, as was demonstrated in a follow-up experiment.

This time each of the women watched the muffin joke being told on videotape by a person who was ostensibly going to be working with her on a task. There was supposed to be a cash reward afterward to be allocated by a designated boss. In some cases the woman watching was designated the boss; in other cases she was the underling or a co-worker of the person on the videotape.

When the woman watching was the boss, she didn't laugh much at the muffin joke. But when she was the underling or a co-worker, she laughed much more, even though the joke-teller wasn't in the room to see her. When you're low in the status hierarchy, you need all the allies you can find, so apparently you're primed to chuckle at anything even if it doesn't do you any immediate good.

“Laughter seems to be an automatic response to your situation rather than a conscious strategy,” says Tyler F. Stillman, who did the experiments along with Roy Baumeister and Nathan DeWall. “When I tell the muffin joke to my undergraduate classes, they laugh out loud.”

Mr. Stillman says he got so used to the laughs that he wasn't quite prepared for the response at a conference in January, although he realizes he should have expected it.

“It was a small conference attended by some of the most senior researchers in the field,” he recalls. “When they heard me, a lowly graduate student, tell the muffin joke, there was a really uncomfortable silence. You could hear crickets.”

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