

PROPOSAL FOR THE AUTISM SOCIETY OF AMERICA CONFERENCE JULY, 2007

What Do You Mean We Lack A Sense of Humor? Examining the Autistic Funny-Bone

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Title: What Do You Mean We Lack A Sense of Humor? Examining the Autistic Funny-Bone

Presenter

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Biographical Sketch: Lars Perner is an Assistant Professor of Clinical Marketing at the University of Southern California. He developed an interest in the autism spectrum after being diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome at age 31 and has since written extensively on the topic. He serves on the ASA Panel of Spectrum Advisers.

Content Area: Communication

Target Audience: All Ages

Understanding level: BASIC - Attendees need to have little or no prior knowledge of the workshop topic

Learning Objectives:

- Understanding difficulties confronting persons on the autism spectrum trying to "get" common humor
- Learning steps that may be helpful in developing both the individual's own sense of humor and understanding those of others

- Appreciating unique forms of humor that may be created in the autistic mind
- Understanding vulnerabilities of individuals on the spectrum in dealing with appropriate and situationally appropriate humor

Description: Many believe that people on the autism spectrum lack a sense of humor. This observation must be viewed in light of the reality that “He who invents the rules wins the game.” An academic on the autism spectrum explores how understanding, perspectives, and expectations of those on the spectrum may simultaneously impair the understanding of common societal humor and provide opportunities for highly creative and humorous expressions. This session may be unsuitable for individuals averse to laughter.

Content Plan: It is commonly believed that people on the autism spectrum tend to lack a sense of humor. Clearly, individuals on the spectrum often have difficulty appreciating certain kinds of humor that are commonly shared within a society. This session examines both reasons for this difficulty in understanding certain kinds of humor and the extent to which certain individuals, rather than fundamentally lacking in a sense of humor per se, may instead differ in what is actually considered funny and how humorous ideas may percolate in the autistic mind, whether socially shared or not.

Some issues addressed:

What, exactly, is funny? For some, this may seem like an absurd “question that only a psychologist could ask.” In fact, although numerous research psychologists have made careers out of studying humor in society, few firm findings have emerged. It has been noted that although human can be formally analyzed, it then “tends to die during the dissection.” Several findings, however, have been made:

1. *Much humor appears to be driven in large part by irony.* Irony, in turn, is driven to a large extent by expectations. This conclusion is supported by findings that exactly what is considered funny differs greatly among cultures. When creative advertising is “transplanted” between countries, humor has a tendency to travel poorly.
2. *Certain sounds are, inherently, more funny than others.* In the English language, jokes that involve the sound of the letter “K” are somehow “funnier.” Jokes involving names, locations, and other interchangeable words involving such sounds may evoke laughter while jokes of the same substance, using different sounds, would not. Given highly idiosyncratic tastes—and phenomena such as echolalia—it is not clear that the specific sounds considered funny will be similar among the general population and the autism spectrum.
3. *In some instances, the distinction between genuinely humorous experience and laughing becomes rather blurred.* Research among U.S. teenagers, for example, has found that the vast majority of instances of laughter and giggling in social groups does not result from explicit attempts at humor. Instead, it comes about mostly as a means of social interaction. In such instances, there

is, in reality, nothing genuinely humorous, and the laughter is used for such purposes as social bonding or the deflection of an embarrassing situation.

4. *In some settings—and as a social bonding mechanism—the use of certain “dirty” words or ideas may, in and of itself, be a source of laughter* even if the amusement is motivated in large measure by defiance or the impudent flaunting of certain social norms rather than substantive irony.

Reasons why individuals on the autism spectrum may have difficulty appreciating and sharing common types of humor. Several reasons will be discussed:

1. *Given differences in perceptions, comprehension of shared social norms, and abilities in theory of mind*, it is not surprising that many individuals on the spectrum will lack the understanding—especially at the intuitive level—of clear or subtle violations of social expectations. Difficulty in intuiting the likely thoughts of others will result in a lack of clues to irony or differences in perspectives.
2. *Non-literal expressions can be a source of humor that may be missed.*
3. *Although an individual on the autism spectrum may, with sufficient time, be able to reason himself or herself to the humor in a situation, this process is often less intuitive than it is in the general population.* Even if he or she has the opportunity to “process” the information for some time to detect the humor, he or she will then be out of “sync” with others in the group. *Lengthy social interactions tend to be exhausting for people on the spectrum.* Those in the general population tend to be considerably less appreciative of humor when in a state of fatigue.
4. *Since sarcasm and ridicule are often expressed in ways that, on the surface, seem to involve humor*, those who have experienced difficulty in distinguishing the two are likely to have unpleasant memories of embarrassment. When others notice this, a vicious cycle can emerge where taunting—and the resultant emotional distress—can beget more sarcasm and bullying. Thus, it is clear that people on the spectrum may experience fewer optimal opportunities for experiencing more light-hearted and enjoyable humor.

Unique types of humor exhibited by certain individuals on the autism spectrum. It has been observed that “he who makes the rules wins the game.” Therefore, it is quite possible that many individuals on the autism spectrum, rather than lacking in a sense of humor per se, may differ instead in *what* is thought to be funny. Some of this humor may or may not be readily appreciated by others while some may not. Some examples of possible special sources of humor among certain people on the spectrum:

1. *The ability to think literally.* As a matter of cognitive efficiency, there is a tendency in the general population to suppress any literal image when a figure of speech is detected. This, then, inhibits many humorous ideas that are based on absurd literal images or word plays. Certain individuals on the spectrum—aware of figurative meanings of expressions—may, for example, be able to

think of Killer Fashions as a firm whose target market is, literally, murderers. Certain individuals on the spectrum may have considerable aptitude for creating clever comic strips and cartoons, writing attention grabbing newspaper headlines and advertising copy, and inventing clever greeting cards.

2. *Those who have had to learn to “manually” identify the perspectives and thoughts of others—rather than relying on a more efficient theory of mind process—may become especially sensitive to differences in information and background held by others.* This can result in a fondness of “inside” jokes.
3. *Research in the neural structures of individuals affected by autism tend to depict a system with vastly more “local” neural connections and far fewer “long distance” channels than those in the brains of the general population.* This brain structure raises the intriguing possibility that individuals on the autism spectrum are able, under some certain circumstances, to make connections that escape the ordinary mind. This hypothesis is supported by the unique creativity observed in many individuals on the spectrum. Such creativity is likely to find expression in the humorous ideas that one originates.
4. *Those who have learned rules of life—and expectations—more explicitly may be able to conceive violations of these norms that, simply, are not conceivable to most people.*
5. *A variety of factors—such as more time spent alone and possible discomfort with certain types of social interactions may contribute to the development of a more “dry” sense of humor.*
6. *To those for whom conformity does not come naturally, certain conformist tendencies in society—some of which are not entirely rational—may stand out as illogical.*
7. *For those who have at least gone through a phase of insistence of rigid adherence to rules, the impunity with which these rules are flaunted by others “due to the circumstances” may be amusing even if it remains an irritant and source of concern.* For someone who values logic, hypocrisy among others may also be more evident and significant than it is among those more accustomed to taking an approach of expediency.
8. *Differences between oneself and others may—for those secure in their own identity—become a source of humor.*
9. *Humor may become a coping mechanism in dealing with a frustrating and unpredictable world.* The actual humor that results from these factors can take varying forms depending on individual dynamics and the environment. Some types of resulting may be positive while others may be centered on sarcasm, alienation, self-deprecation, or other unconstructive approaches.

Vulnerabilities of individuals on the autism spectrum. As has been previously mentioned, failure to understand what is intended to be humorous and not humorous can make one vulnerable to bullying and ridicule. This is likely to be especially significant problems during the late elementary, junior high, and high school years. Other potential vulnerabilities may result from:

1. *The attempt of others to get the vulnerable individual into trouble by (a) Using language that, although readily encouraged among same sex peers, may result in serious sanctions when used in the presence of the opposite sex, parents, or authority figures, (b) Joking about topics not considered appropriate among some elements of society; and (c) Joking about topics that may invite retribution or other undesirable consequences.*
2. *Failure to understand situations that require “serious action” rather than joking that may be considered frivolous by others.*
3. *The tendency to repeat the same joke or expression without significant variation so that what may initially have been funny soon loses appeal to others.*

Developing an appreciation of common humor among people on the autism spectrum. There are clear social and instrumental benefits in being able to relate to and respond to humor expressed by those around us. Humor can also be tremendously enjoyable. Therefore, it is likely for people on the autism spectrum to develop a clearer understanding of what others find funny. Some approaches discussed are:

1. *Explicit discussion of what makes specific jokes funny.* Most people in the general population will tend to learn to understand humor largely by “osmosis,” but a more explicit approach may be needed for many on the spectrum. This is a process that will tend to take time. Parents may want to introduce this idea gradually. It is also important to help associate joy with humor to the greatest extent possible. Some specific ideas that may need to be discussed include: (a) irony, (b) differences in expectations, perceptions, knowledge, and values among individuals and how these can contribute to incongruity, (c) plays on words, figures of speech, proverbs, and other sayings, (d) the joking presentation of an absurd idea, and (e) “loopholes” in rules or expectations.
2. *Learning to appreciate the respective non-verbal cues associated with constructive joking, sarcasm, shared mischief, and other sources of laughter.*
3. *Learning what it is “safe” to joke about.* This involves both subject matter in general and the appropriateness of the subject matter in specific situations.

Opportunities for others to appreciate and nurture the unique sense of humor of an individual on the spectrum. Several strategies to support person on the spectrum and for others to develop an appreciation of his or her contributions are discussed, including:

1. *Helping the individual understand what elements of his or her sense of humor may be more readily understood by others and ways of increasing understanding and appreciation among others.* Someone who understands what may mean to be clarified—or deliberately left ambiguous—to create a sense of irony or surprise among others is likely to be received more favorably among others.
2. *Helping the individual appreciate his or her own sense of humor as it is.*

3. *Helping the individual understand that humor soon loses its appeal to most others while, at the same time, not being a “kill joy” who sends overly negative messages about the repetition of favorite jokes.*
4. *Genuine attempts by family members, caregivers, friends, and other social contacts to understand the humor of what is said by the person on the spectrum given his or her perspective, perceptions, and experiences. It is said that some types of humor reflect an “acquired taste.” Few who have grown up outside upper and upper middle class British society can immediately appreciate genuinely “dry” humor, but those with the requisite learning tend to be rewarded by tremendous enjoyment. Learning to “get” the humor of an eccentric—and seemingly naïve—individual may take serious effort, but the rewards could be tremendous.*