

A GOOD LAUGH

By

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A good laugh is one of the greatest pleasures in life. It is generally accepted by psychologists and by medical doctors that a sense of humour is good for both mental and physical well-being. And yet, not that much is known about the psychology of humour. In an attempt to further knowledge in this area (and no doubt to attract public interest in science) the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) announced a plan last September to discover the world's funniest joke.

The project is the brainchild of University of Hertfordshire psychologist Dr. Richard Wiseman and it has been billed as 'the largest ever look at the psychology of humour'. A special web-site was created (www.laughlab.co.uk) and visitors to the site are asked to fill out a brief questionnaire about their age, gender, nationality, as well as a brief cognition quiz. The visitors can submit jokes and vote on those already available for judgement. By December 20th 2001, over 100,000 people from 70 countries had visited the site, submitted a total of 10,000 jokes and rated them on a specially designed 'laughometer'.

Dr. Wiseman hopes that this study will shed light on differences in the ways men and women perceive jokes, on what jokes make children laugh, and reveal why some jokes only appeal to some while other jokes make most people laugh. He would also like to know what the jokes we find funny reveal about the way our brains work. Trends are emerging.

Last December the BAAS announced the Laugh Lab's winning entry, billed as the funniest joke in the world. It was submitted by Geoff Anandappa from Blackpool, and here it is:

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are going camping. They pitch their tent under the stars and go to sleep. In the middle of the night Holmes wakes Watson up: 'Watson, look up at the stars, and tell me what you deduce.'

Watson (irked by Holmes's record of brilliant deductions, decides to make a special effort): 'I see millions of stars and even if few of those have planets, it's quite likely there are some planets like Earth, and if there are a few planets like Earth out there, there might also be life.'

Holmes: 'Watson, you idiot, somebody's stolen our tent!'

Thirty two percent of visitors to the web-site were British, 30 percent were American and the rest were from Canada, Australia, Germany and other places.

About 47,000 people thought that the Sherlock Holmes/Dr. Watson joke was the funniest. And indeed it is funny – but the funniest joke in the world? I doubt it. I thought that the joke ranked a close second was slightly funnier:

A couple of hunters are out in the woods when one of them falls to the ground. He doesn't seem to be breathing. The other whips out his mobile phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps out to the operator: 'My friend is dead? What can I do?'

The operator, in a calm soothing voice says: 'Just take it easy. First, let's make sure he's dead.' There is silence, then a shot is heard. The guy's voice comes back on the line. He says: 'OK, now what?'

Germany topped the laughometer league, belying the stereotype of the people with the least developed sense of humour. Dr. Wiseman also reports a sharp divergence in what men and women think is funny. Men prefer humour showing passion and sexual innuendo and women prefer verbal play. Ten-year olds are also very fond of basic word-play, for example: *'Did you hear about the man who drowned in a bowl of muesli? He got pulled under by a very strong currant.'*

The survey also showed that people warmed to jokes as they rated them. The last joke frequently scored higher marks than the first. Dr. Wiseman concludes that – 'Having a warm-up person before you send on your main comedian is a good idea'.

Different countries favoured different types of jokes. For example the British plumped for the following 'Carry On' style of humour:

A man goes to the doctor and says. 'Doctor, there's a piece of lettuce sticking out of my bottom.' The doctor asks him to drop his trousers and examines him. The man asks, 'Is it serious, doctor?' and the doctor replies, 'I'm sorry to tell you, but this is just the tip of the iceberg.'

French participants preferred the cynicism of: 'You're a high-priced lawyer! If I give you \$500, will you answer two questions for me?' 'Absolutely! What's the second question?'

The Canadians who host the top comedy festival in the world rated very low on the poll of which jokes raised the most laughs. Their funniest joke was: *Question: 'What do you call a woman who can balance 4 pints of beer on her head?' Answer: 'Beatrix.'*

The top German jokes are quite surreal. One joke about a dog rated badly in Britain and America, but was top of the charts in Germany:

'To tell the weather, go to the back door and look at the dog. If the dog is wet it's probably raining. But if the dog is standing there soaking wet, its probably raining very hard. If the dog's fur looks like it has been rubbed the wrong way, its probably windy. If the dog has snow on its back its probably snowing.'

Of course you have to leave the dog outside all of the time, especially if you expect bad weather.

Sincerely, The Cat.'

Now I hope you feel better.

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