

# THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF LAUGHTER AND HUMOUR

# Praise for *The Positive Psychology of Laughter and Humour*

‘The amount of attention to detail given in this book is no joke. It takes you on a journey starting from the history of laughter and humour, all the way to the latest research and application of laughter in a diverse range of contexts. Whether you’re interested in laughter as a general topic or looking to incorporate laughter into your therapeutic toolbox, this book presents you with case studies, the science and future direction of laughter and humour. Essential reading for researchers, practitioners, and anyone with an interest in laughter.’

**Dr Gulcan Garip**, University of Derby, UK

‘I thoroughly recommend this book to those seeking a comprehensive yet accessible introduction to a recent fascinating confluence of laughter, humour, and positive psychology for practical benefits. It is a cutting-edge work presenting diverse academic, practitioner, and personal perspectives. Together, these offer important insights into the current situation, how that evolved historically, and where it might be heading.’

**Mark C. Weeks**, Nagoya University, Japan

‘As an educator who has been teaching humour studies for over 25 years, I am extremely enthusiastic about endorsing this exceptional publication. It is one of the most comprehensive and informative books that I have reviewed on the psychology of laughter and humour. I have no doubt that this book will quickly advance to the forefront in the psychology community as the “bible” for laughter and humour studies.’

**Mary Kay Morrison**, Founding Director, Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH) Humor Academy

‘A bedside companion for anyone interested in laughter and humour. I am truly impressed by all the chapters and have also learned so much. The depth of research and engaging writing style make the book a compelling read that I believe will resonate with a wide audience.’

**Nilgun Kuru Alici**, Associate Professor, Hacettepe University, Turkey

‘Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky and co-authors offer a significant contribution to laughter as therapy in this meticulously researched exploration of humour, laughter, and positive psychology. Gonot-Schoupinsky’s development of The Laughie and The Laugh-Thrive model offers a unique method of prescribing and self-prescribing laughter, encouraging readers to embrace this source

of joy and wellbeing and not leave it to chance. Grounded in a positive psychology framework, the book becomes even more robust. The inclusion of positive autoethnography provides insightful narratives into the benefits and application of laughter and humour in diverse settings.'

**Ros Ben-Moshe MPH**, Adjunct Lecturer, School of Public Health and Psychology, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, and Author of *The Laughter Effect: How to Build Joy, Resilience and Positivity in Your Life* and *Laughing at Cancer: How to Heal with Love, Laughter and Mindfulness*

'This book takes us on a laughter journey with 3 global experts. I wholeheartedly encourage people to read this practical journey to find and experience the joys of Laughter Therapy or Laughter Yoga. Author Merv Neal, was and still is, an inspiration to me and others with chronic disease to help our life journeys be full of laughter. This book is practical, real and the first of its kind. I will continue to use the book and the advice from these experts to help improve the lives of others with chronic disease.'

**Professor Paul Bennett RN PhD FISN**, Griffith University, Australia

'A very interesting and important contribution to humour studies, written in an accessible style, with many useful charts and diagrams relating to humour and laughter and a distinctive focus on positive psychology.'

**Professor Emeritus Arthur Asa Berger**, San Francisco State University, USA

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# THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF LAUGHTER AND HUMOUR

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

We dedicate this book to the science and practice of laughter and humour.  
And to the art of positive laughter and positive humour.

H A H A  
A H O H  
H O H A  
A H A H

Laughter as art in the HaHa Square (Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky).

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# CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	xv
<i>About the Authors</i>	xvii
<i>Foreword</i>	xix
<i>Preface</i>	xxii
1 A Brief History of Laughter and Humour	1
1.1. Introduction	1
1.2. The Greeks and Romans	1
1.3. Medieval Ideas	3
1.4. Renaissance Laughter and Humour	3
1.5. The Enlightenment	5
1.6. Laughter Theories	6
1.6.1. Superiority Theory	6
1.6.2. Incongruity Theory	7
1.6.3. Relief Theory	7
1.6.4. Psychoanalytic Theory	8
1.7. Nineteenth Century	9
1.8. Twentieth Century Laughter	10
1.9. Concluding Thoughts and Ideas for Further Discussion	13
2 A Brief History of Positive Psychology	15
2.1. Introduction	15
2.2. Martin Seligman	15
2.3. The Development of Positive Psychology	17
2.4. Other Positive Psychologists	18
2.5. The Continued Evolution of Positive Psychology	20

2.6. Current Status of Positive Psychology	20
2.7. Concluding Thoughts and Ideas for Further Discussion	21
3 Laughter and Humour in Positive Psychology	23
3.1. Introduction	23
3.2. Humour: A Character Strength Associated with Transcendence	23
3.3. Humour Transcends Transcendence	26
3.3.1. COVID-19 Humour and the Virtues	26
3.3.2. Positive Humour That Defies Classification	27
3.4. Training Humour and Linking it to Social Intelligence, Kindness, and Zest	28
3.5. A Focus on Humour and Creativity	30
3.6. Humour, PERMA, and Personal Development	31
3.7. Laughter as a Natural Positive Psychology Domain	32
3.8. A Positive Lifestyle of Humour and Laughter	33
3.9. Concluding Thoughts and Ideas for Further Discussion	34
4 The Science of Laughter and Humour	35
4.1. Introduction	35
4.2. Disentangling Laughter and Humour	35
4.2.1. Humour	37
4.2.2. Laughter	37
4.3. The Wide-Ranging Benefits of Laughter and Humour	37
4.4. Laughter and Humour Research Studies	39
4.4.1. Large-Scale Laughter and Humour Studies	39
4.4.2. Systematic Reviews	40
4.4.3. Randomised Control Trials	44
4.5. The Laugh-Health Model	45
4.6. Concluding Thoughts and Ideas for Further Discussion	49
5 Applied Laughter and Humour	51
5.1. Introduction	51
5.2. Pioneers of Laughter and Humour Therapy	51
5.3. Applied Laughter and Humour for Health and Well-Being	54
5.4. Suitability of Laughter and Humour for Therapeutic Applications	54

5.5. Types of Laughter and Humour Therapies	55
5.6. Focus: The Laughie	58
5.6.1. What Is a Laughie?	58
5.6.2. What Is the Purpose of a Laughie?	58
5.7. Potential Risks of Laughter and Humour	59
5.8. Implementation Considerations for Applied Humour and Laughter	60
5.9. Prescribing Laughter and Humour	61
5.9.1. Getting to LOL with Laughter Prescription	61
5.9.2. Clear Instructions for Laughter Prescription	63
5.10. Examples of Laughter Prescriptions	64
5.10.1. Laughter-Led Prescription Examples	64
5.10.2. Humour-Led Prescription Examples	66
5.11. Concluding Thoughts and Ideas for Further Discussion	67
6 Laughter Therapy: Insight from a Laughter Practitioner	69
6.1. Introduction	69
6.2. Who Am I?	69
6.3. What is Laughter Therapy and Why Does it Merit Academic Interest?	70
6.4. How Do I Use Laughter Therapy?	70
6.5. Why Humour is Not Necessary in Laughter Therapy	72
6.6. Employing Laughter Therapy in Academic Research	73
6.6.1. Laughter Therapy for Kidney Dialysis Patients	73
6.6.2. Laughter Therapy for People with Chronic Pain	76
6.6.3. Laughter Therapy for Stress	77
6.7. A Moving Story from My Dialysis Research	79
6.8. Concluding Thoughts and Ideas for Laughter Practices	79
7 Laughter and Humour Case Studies	81
7.1. Introduction	81
7.2. Merv Neal	81
7.3. Arthur Asa Berger	82
7.4. Ros Ben-Moshe	83
7.5. Madan Kataria	84

7.6. Mary Kay Morrison	86
7.7. Joe Hoare	87
7.8. Concluding Thoughts and Ideas for Further Discussion	88
8 From COVID-19 to the Laughie Challenge	89
8.1. Introduction	89
8.2. The Shock of Lockdown	89
8.3. It's OK To Be Alone But It's Not OK To Be Lonely	90
8.4. How COVID-19 Fear Eventually Led to Laughter	91
8.5. The Laughie Challenge as a Mental Health Initiative	92
8.6. The Laughie in Practice	94
8.7. A Feel-Good Story About Lockdown Laughter	96
8.8. Concluding Thoughts and Ideas for Further Discussion	97
9 Citizen Science Research: A 30-Day Laughter Prescription	99
9.1. Introduction	99
9.2. Becoming a Citizen Scientist	99
9.3. Research Purpose and Methodology	100
9.4. Group 1: Experienced Laughers	105
9.4.1. Overview	105
9.4.2. Participant Feedback	106
9.4.3. Survey Findings and Thoughts for Group 1	108
9.5. Group 2: Young Business People	109
9.5.1. Overview	109
9.5.2. Participant Feedback	110
9.5.3. Survey Results and Thoughts for Group 2	113
9.6. Future Research Potential	114
9.7. A Story of How I Prescribed Laughter to a Cancer Victim	114
9.8. Concluding Thoughts and Ideas for Further Discussion	115
10 The Future of Laughter and Humour in Positive Psychology	117
10.1. Introduction	117
10.2. Laughter and Humour as Co-Equal Positive Psychology Resources	117

Contents	xiii
10.3. The Laugh-Thrive Model	118
10.4. Laughter, Humour, and Longevity	121
10.5. Positive Autoethnography and Positive Reflexivity	121
10.6. Mixed Methods Evidence-Based Research in Positive Psychology	122
10.7. Focus on the Laughie App	123
10.8. A Final Word on Humour Research Avenues	124
10.9. Concluding Thoughts and Ideas for Further Discussion	124
<i>References</i>	127
<i>Index</i>	155

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# LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

## FIGURES

Fig. 3.1.	Conceptual model of Humour-Induced Laughter and Character Strengths.	29
Fig. 3.2.	Four Circles of Creativity (4CC) Model.	30
Fig. 3.3.	Four Circles of Humour (4CH) Model.	30
Fig. 4.1.	The Humour Laughter Affect Model (HuLA).	36
Fig. 4.2.	The BPSE-B Framework as a Way to Classify Laughter and Humour Research.	39
Fig. 4.3.	The Laugh-Health Model.	48
Fig. 5.1.	Quadrant Classification of Types of Laughter and Humour Therapies.	56
Fig. 5.2.	HMMMMM: From NOL to LOL with Laughter Prescription.	63
Fig. 5.3.	Instructions and Laughter Techniques for the Laughie.	64
Fig. 5.4.	Examples of Laughter Prescriptions.	65
Fig. 5.5.	Examples of Humour-Led Laughter Prescriptions.	66
Fig. 10.1.	The Laugh-Thrive Model.	119

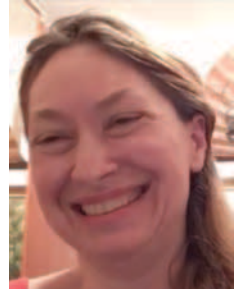
## TABLES

Table 3.1.	Positive Psychology Virtues and Character Strengths.	24
Table 4.1.	Diverse Benefits of Laughter and Humour Highlighted in Research.	38
Table 4.2.	Ten Examples of Large-Scale Participant Study Findings.	41
Table 4.3.	Ten Examples of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis Findings.	43

Table 4.4.	Ten Examples of RCT Findings.	46
Table 5.1.	Contrasting the Pros and Cons of Humour Versus Laughter Therapies.	57
Table 5.2.	Proposed Laughter Prescription Using the WHO Rational Prescribing Model.	62
Table 5.3.	The 7 Laughter Habits (Rx 7).	65
Table 5.4.	The 7 Humour Habits.	66
Table 9.1.	Group 1 and Group 2 Results of the Laughie Experience Questionnaire.	102
Table 9.2.	Group 1 and Group 2 Results of the PPOP and PDOP Measures.	103

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky** completed her PhD in Psychology at the University of Bolton in 2023 following an MSc (Health Psychology) and an MBA in 1989. This book is inspired by her PhD thesis on laughter prescription, and research in laughter, humour, positive psychology and methodology. Her contributions include the Laughie (Laugh Intentionally Everyday) laughter prescription, Personal Development Theory of laughter and humour, HuLA (humour laughter affect) model, pragmatic autoethnography and positive autoethnography, and concept terms of positive reflexivity and solirisy. An independent consultant, Freda lives in Monaco with her husband Xavier.



**Merv Neal** is ‘Australia’s Leading Laughter Expert’, and the CEO of Laughter Yoga Australia. He has appeared on Channel 9 TV *60 Minutes*, Channel 10 TV *The Project*, SBS TV on *Medicine or Myth*, ABC TV show *Catalyst*, and Channel 7 TV *Well Traveler and The House of Wellness* to name a few. He is a professional speaker and facilitator, researcher, Laughter Yoga Master Trainer, and Laughie Practitioner. He is presently working with a variety of health and business organisations throughout Australia, and now Bolton University, UK. He launched the Laughie Challenge Australia in 2022 and runs the annual Laughter Wellbeing Conference.



**Jerome Carson** is Professor of Psychology at the University of Bolton. In 2012, Jerome established an MSc in Positive Psychology at the University of Bolton with Dr Chathurika Kannangara. Jerome is interested in the field of alcohol addiction and recovery from a



lived experience perspective, though interestingly much of his research has been in the field of mental health recovery. Jerome also researches the area of positive psychology and autoethnography. Jerome is a qualified clinical psychologist and is Editor in Chief of the Emerald Journal *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*. He has published over 200 papers.

## FOREWORD

This book is a very interesting and important contribution to humour studies, written in an accessible style, with many useful charts and diagrams relating to humour and laughter and a distinctive focus on positive psychology.

Humour is a supremely enigmatic topic that many of our greatest minds have grappled with – from Aristotle and Thomas Hobbes to Immanuel Kant and Sigmund Freud, not to mention many present-day linguistic scholars, sociologists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts.

Google (accessed 12 April 2023) offers the following information about various aspects of humour:

TOPIC	RESULTS
Humour	1,390,000,000
Humour and Health	197,000,000
Laughter	1,600,000,000
Health Benefits of Humour	39,200,000
Health Benefits of Laughter	98,000,000

These figures suggest an enormous interest by the general public in humour, laughter and their relationship to health and wellbeing. Amazon.com's internet bookstore offers some interesting information about books on humour and laughter:

TOPIC	RESULTS
Books on Humour	70,000 Books
Books on Laughter	30,000 Books
Books on Humour and Health	50,000 Books
Books on Humour and Laughter	10,000 Books

What the Amazon books show is that there are an incredible number of books on humour, laughter, as well as humour and health and humour and

laughter. These subjects are of interest to people because they have learned, from reading articles in newspapers and magazines, about the many benefits of humour and its relationship to laughter and our physical and mental wellbeing.

This book, *The Positive Psychology of Humour and Laughter*, by Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky, Merv Neal, and Jerome Carson, is an important contribution to the study of humour and is distinctive in its discussion of humour and positive psychology. As the authors explain:

*Laughter has an uneasy relationship with positive psychology, despite being key to communicating joy and happiness. The Positive Psychology of Laughter and Humour aims to correct this disconnect by combining academic insight with real-world experience. Drawing on the authors' diverse backgrounds and expertise, this is the first academic volume dedicated to the rarely discussed topic of laughter and humour in positive psychology. Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky, Merv Neal, and Jerome Carson demonstrate how laughter and humour differ, and how both can be applied within positive psychology to boost mood and maintain positive outcomes. The Positive Psychology of Laughter and Humour includes case studies and real-world insight as well as providing a methodological and theoretical background to the topic, giving rigorous theoretical and methodological insight for researchers, and including pedagogical sections in each chapter useful for teachers and researchers.*

One of the benefits of this book is that its authors have varied backgrounds which contribute to the richness of the book, for it relies on personal experiences as well as scholarly perspectives. The authors are: Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky, a scholar and independent consultant, who completed her PhD in Psychology at the University of Bolton in 2023. Her research interests include laughter and humour for health and well-being, particularly the potential of prescribing laughter, and methodology. Merv Neal is 'Australia's Leading Laughter Expert', and the CEO of Laughter Yoga, Australia. He has appeared on *60 Minutes*, *Today Tonight*, SBS TV on *Medicine or Myth*, and ABC TV show *Catalyst*. He is a professional speaker and facilitator, citizen scientist, Laughter Yoga, and Laughie practitioner. Jerome Carson is Professor of Psychology at the University of Bolton. Carson is interested in the field of alcohol addiction and recovery from a lived experience perspective.

The book is distinctive in that, as its title suggests, it focuses on positive psychology and its role in the study of humour and laughter. It includes chapters on topics such as a historical overview of laughter and humour, humour and positive psychology, and laughter and humour disentangled. As the authors write:

*There is undoubtedly an argument for claiming that the definition of humour as a character strength is currently adequate, as laughter is highlighted within it. Nevertheless, unless we can clearly disentangle laughter and humour, the investigation and harnessing of their joint and, or separate benefits and uses is problematic. As we will see in the following chapters, humour-free therapeutic laughter modalities, and laughter research where humour is not involved, or is secondary, are gaining in importance. So too is research that prioritises the role of laughter, for example investigations into the use of laughter as an audio diagnostic tool for treating depression and Parkinson's disease. A clear separation of laughter and humour is therefore necessary.*

The book also features chapters by Merv Neal with insights from a laughter practitioner and what we might describe as applied positive psychology and humour. It concludes with a chapter on the future of humour and laughter and positive psychology.

Although the book is scholarly, it is written in an accessible style, and has many interesting charts and diagrams on various aspects of humour and laughter, and thus will be of interest not only to psychologists and other kinds of scholars interested in humour and laughter, but also to the general public. As such, it is a significant achievement and a valuable addition to the thousands of books on humour, laughter, and health. It is a pleasure to end this introduction to this extremely valuable book on humour and positive psychology on a positive note: 'Try it, you'll like it.' And it will be not only be of interest but also be useful for its readers.

Arthur Asa Berger\*  
Professor Emeritus

\***Arthur Asa Berger** is Professor Emeritus of Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts at San Francisco State University. He has published 90 books on semiotics, media criticism, popular culture, humour, and tourism. He has authored seven books on humor and many articles on various aspects of the subject, including *Humor, Psyche and Society* (Vernon) and *Shakespeare's 'The Comedy of Errors'* (Anthem).

# PREFACE

We welcome you on this voyage in *Positive Psychology, Laughter, and Humour*. The purpose of our book is, broadly, two-fold: firstly to convey our views of laughter and humour as vital positive psychology resources, and secondly to stimulate more enthusiasm in them by contemplating academic research, theory, case studies, and practitioner insight.

My interest in these fields was ignited during my MSc health psychology studies, when I sought a positive, universal, rapid, effective, safe, legal, and free way to boost positive mood. The Laughie one-minute laughter prescription builds on my conviction that the intentional use of laughter and humour, innate resources we all share, is a positive psychology powerhouse. When Australian laughter professional Merv Neal independently launched his Laughie Challenge in 2022, a fruitful collaboration, powered by the authentic zest of Professor Jerome Carson, the positive psychology expert of our team, began.

Our book leans on my PhD thesis, supervised by Carson, and on Neal's laughter practitioner expertise. Let us look briefly at its contents. In Chapter 1, I distil some of the rich history of laughter and humour. In Chapter 2, Carson immerses us in the world of positive psychology with his engaging and pleasantly didactic style. In Chapter 3, I consider laughter and humour within positive psychology. In Chapter 4, I present academic laughter and humour research, and in Chapter 5, I deliberate on their real-world applications. In Chapter 6, Neal draws us into the dynamic world of laughter therapy. In Chapter 7, I showcase six laughter and humour expert case studies. In Chapter 8, Neal recounts how his experiences of COVID-19 led to the Laughie Challenge. In Chapter 9, Neal dons a citizen scientist hat to share his laughter research findings. Finally, in Chapter 10, I contemplate a few of the promising avenues open to us in these exciting and rapidly developing fields.

Acknowledgements are due to Emeritus Professor Arthur Asa Berger for his Foreword, Dr Mark C. Weeks for his helpful suggestions and editing, and Dr Gulcan Garip, Dr Nilgun Kuru Alici, Ros Ben-Moshe, and Mary Kay Morrison for their recommendations.

We hope you enjoy this book and look forward to hearing about your experiences with it, and your ideas as to how we can improve potential future editions.

Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky, PhD

# 1

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF LAUGHTER AND HUMOUR

### 1.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we take a fast train through the long and rich history of laughter and humour. Countless influential thinkers have depicted laughter and humour over the ages. Our ‘stops’, relevant to positive psychology, relate to health, wellbeing and personal development. Many contemporary ideas are linked to ancient Greece, where we start, mindful that this perspective presents a Western worldview. We then contemplate how thinking developed through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Enlightenment, when laughter and humour theories developed. We consider four of these: Superiority, Incongruity, Relief, and Psychoanalytic. Finally, we arrive at the twentieth century and the work of William Fry and Robert Provine.

### 1.2. THE GREEKS AND ROMANS

Hippocrates (c. 460–370 BC) and his humoral theory influenced Western medicine up until the eighteenth century. Humorism posited that our health and temperament resulted from the balance (eucrasia) or imbalance (dyscrasia) of four humours: yellow bile (liver/choleric temperament); black bile (spleen/melancholic temperament); water (brain/phlegmatic temperament); blood (heart/sanguine temperament) (Kalachanis & Michailidis, 2015). While the theory of humours is discredited, it is distantly related to contemporary conceptions of humour, and some ideas, such as the principle of ‘*contraria contrariis curantur*’ or opposites cure (Adams, 1849, p. 77) are still relevant.

Hippocrates endorsed the induction of emotions to restore emotional equilibrium and recommended that physicians have ‘a cheerful countenance’ and ‘endeavour to hearten’ their patients (Sprenghel, 1708, p. 294). While Hippocrates did not explicitly suggest laughter as therapy and viewed ‘uncontrolled laughter and excessive gaiety’ as ‘vulgar’ (Potter, 1995, p. 301), ancient legends depict him endorsing it. When visiting Democritus, ‘the Laughing Philosopher’, whose solitary laughter at the absurdity of the human condition was causing concern, Hippocrates found nothing wrong (Temkin, 1985). Laughter as a coping mechanism is, it seems, long-standing.

Aristophanes (445–386 BC) ‘the Father of Comedy’, brought laughter and humour to the masses. In one of his popular plays, *The Clouds*, he caricatured, sneered at, and mocked Socrates, ‘the Father of Western philosophy’. Plato (428–347 BC), possibly disgusted by the demise of Socrates, highlighted the dangers of laughter, seeing it as a form of derision, a viewpoint also taken on by his pupil Aristotle (Morreall, 1983, pp. 4–5). This negative framing of laughter influenced Western thinking for two millennia (Morreall, 2010). Much has been written about the anti-gelastical position of the church, but these negative stances far pre-dated Christianity. As a political philosopher, Plato was naturally wary of the societal dangers of the laughter of the masses for political rule. In Latin, as in English, laughter denotes many things with *ridere* defined as both to laugh in a friendly manner, but also to sneer, and laugh in contempt (Freund & Riddle, 1866, p. 830).

Aristotle, Plato’s pupil, espoused the idea of achieving eudaimonia (happiness, wellbeing, or flourishing). At a time when the deformity of the one-legged God Hephaestus was a prime source of laughter from Greek Gods to the common man (e.g. Kazantzidis & Tsoumpra, 2018), Aristotle condemned hurtful overly boisterous humour and laughter. In *Poetics* (Halliwell, 1986, p. 272) Aristotle states ‘Comedy must stay within the bounds of the morally and emotionally unthreatening in order to elicit our laughter’. Aristotle explicitly linked happiness to virtue and excellence (Moore, 1890, p. 247). He believed that in laughter, as in other things, ‘the law of the mean holds good’, and that both the ‘buffoon’ and the ‘boor’ were extremes to be avoided (p. 227).

Interest in humour took a practical form with the Romans. In *On Oratory and Orators*, Cicero ([d. 43 BC] 1855, p. 283) states ‘A jocose manner, too, and strokes of wit, give pleasure to an audience, and are often of great advantage to the speaker’. Cicero recounted how Caesar enjoyed *On Jests*, a lost book, but found it ‘foolish’ to ‘deliver rules and principles on that subject’. The Dutch philosopher Erasmus ([1511] 1876, p. 113) said of the Roman rhetorician Quintilianus (c. 35–100) ‘in Quintilian that master of eloquence, there is one large chapter spent in prescribing the methods of raising laughter’.

Interpretations of the works of Hippocrates also fuelled interest in ideas of ‘good humour’ and health. In the second century, Celsus, commenting on Hippocrates, stated that ‘by joy and alacrity of mind diseases are removed, and circulation is promoted’, and equated cheerfulness to longevity and fearfulness to shortened lives (Sprengell, 1708, p. 179).

### 1.3. MEDIEVAL IDEAS

Laughter was early on associated with the spleen. According to Saint Isidore of Seville (died 636), ‘we laugh with the spleen, just as with the gall-bladder we are angered, with the heart we understand, and with the liver we love’ (Throop, 2005, p. 127). These views persisted for hundreds of years. On laughter in the twelfth century, Jones (2019, p. 53) notes ‘the spleen’s laughter was even credited with restoring happiness’. The ‘*Regimen Sanitatis*’ equated ‘frequent laughter’ with a sanguine temperament, ‘good cheer and a robust social life’, and ‘restoring vitality to the heart’. Another twelfth-century document for medical students at Salerno (Jones, 2019, p. 53) asks and explains: ‘Why do we laugh with the spleen? Because the spleen cleans the blood of the melancholic superfluity that induces sadness. The result is therefore the contrary, namely happiness’.

The medieval French tradition of ‘fabliaux’ or ‘contes à rire’ (stories to laugh to) recounted by travelling minstrels and storytellers, aimed to induce audience laughter (Ménard, 1983, p. 175), as did stories found in Boccaccio’s ‘*Decameron*’ (1353) and Chaucer’s late fourteenth century ‘*Canterbury Tales*’.

### 1.4. RENAISSANCE LAUGHTER AND HUMOUR

The court fool was still a fixture at this time. Erasmus (1466–1536) saw them as ‘purposely designed... to be an antidote to melancholy’, ‘welcomed to all places’ and observed that ‘few kings will banquet, walk or take any diversion without their attendance’ (Erasmus, [1511] 1876, p. 69). The German physician Hufeland noted that ‘the custom in vogue among our ancestors of exciting it [laughter] by jesters and buffoons was founded on true medical principles’, including the function of aiding digestion (Doran, 1858, p. 43). In ‘*Il Cortegiano*’ (1528; the Courtier), an early book on social etiquette, Italian diplomat Count Baldassare Castiglione (1478–1529) advised that laughter ‘is a thing grateful to all and he that raises it after a proper manner and in a seasonable time must deserve our applause’ (Castiglione, 1737, p. 177).

François Rabelais (d. 1553) studied medicine at the University of Montpellier and was the first to translate Hippocrates' Aphorisms from Greek to Latin. Despite or because of his academic talents, rather than a treatise on laughter he wrote a series of popular, bawdy, rollicking books intended to induce it. Rabelais' ([1532] 1990, p. 19) dedication in '*Gargantua and Pantagruel*' states, 'I'd rather write about laughing than crying; For laughter makes men human, and courageous'. Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) associates Rabelaisian laughter to the carnival, to 'festive laughter', 'the laughter of all the people', which was 'gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 11). Bakhtin (pp. 5–25) saw folk laughter as 'ambivalent' as it pushes, yet also navigates, social boundaries. It is ultimately linked to 'freedom' and reflected in countless popular festivals such as the 'feast of fools', 'Easter Laughter' (or 'risus paschalis', from the Latin *ridere* to laugh), pageants, street performances with artists and clowns, and the 'commedia dell'arte'.

Laurent Joubert (1529–1582), a French court physician who, like Rabelais, had studied medicine in Montpellier, penned the first treatise on laughter in 1560. For Joubert (1980, p. 17), 'laughter is the principal sign of this frisky pleasure that we like so much, which counteracts old age, is common to all'. A principal cause of laughter is 'desire' 'which follows the imagination' (p. 36), and laughter is related to joy but also 'composed of sorrow', and 'comes from an empty and foolish joyousness' (p. 44). Joubert stated that 'those who laugh the least, and who scarcely ever become fat are the cold and dry people properly called melancholic' (p. 126). A section on death by laughter potentially fuelled suspicion of laughter. Nevertheless, Joubert relates a range of anecdotes, several including laughter induced by monkeys, showing how laughter can heal as it 'reinforces the spirit so much that it can suddenly change the state of a patient, and from being deathbound render him curable' (Joubert, 1980, pp. 127–128).

Joubert credits Meletius with the idea that 'laughter is caused by the abundance of heat and of blood' and states that it 'is called *gelos* by the Greeks, and *gelos* comes from *hele* which means heat' (p. 105). This root is seen in *Philogelos* (love of laughter) the name of the earliest extant joke book, *gelastic* (of laughter) as in *gelastic* epilepsy, *agelastic* (without laughter), and *gelology* (the study of laughter, a term conceived by William Fry). Laughter comes from the Germanic *hleahor* (later *lachen*), in Old English *hlehhan*, which Ruch (1993) states is of echoic (sound-imitating) origin.

A few years later the Italian Girolamo Mercuriale (1530–1606), chair of medicine at the University of Padua, published the first work on sports medicine. Mercuriale's '*De arte gymnastica*' (1569) captivated the headmaster

of St. Paul's School London, Richard Mulcaster (1530–1611). Mulcaster embraced the new scientific insight on exercise physiology of 'a verie learned Italian physician' (p. 129). In his book '*Positions*', Mulcaster ([1581] 1888, p. 65) recommends 'laughing in the nature of an exercise' as 'healthful', adding 'this kind of help will be of much more efficacy if the parties which desire it can suffer themselves to be tickled under the armpits'.

In '*Anatomy of Melancholy*' (1621), Robert Burton (1836, p. 269) (1577–1640) describes laughter as a symptom of melancholy when it is excessive or 'intempestive', thus highlighting both the notion of balance raised by Aristotle, and the issue of its appropriateness. Burton mentions the medical school of Salerno and the 'three Salernitan doctors, Dr. Merryman, Dr. Diet, Dr. Quiet which cure all diseases'. He also cites the Spanish physician Juan Luis Vives (1493–1540): 'Mirth...makes the body young, lively and fit... the merrier the heart the longer the life' (p. 369). Referring to himself as Democritus Junior, Burton laments: 'never so much cause of laughter as now; never so many fools and mad men' (p. 38). Laughing at the world was already an enduring coping mechanism. Thomas Sydenham (1624–1689) the 'English Hippocrates', and another Montpellier medical graduate, did not explicitly espouse the benefits of laughter in his writings. Nevertheless, Sydenham is credited with the remark that 'the arrival of a good clown exercised a more beneficial influence upon the health of a city than that of 20 asses laden with drugs' (Baas & Handerson, 1889, p. 505).

## 1.5. THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Charles II encouraged the return to the pleasures of the theatre during the Restoration period (1660–1688), and the Comedy of Manners that mocked social conventions was a popular genre (Bakewell & Read, 2018). The Enlightenment saw the decline of court jesters, fools and dwarves. Debate on laughter blossomed. René Descartes (1596–1650) known for mind–body dualism, thought laughter still involved the spleen, and resulted not only from joy, but also hatred and wonder (Descartes, 1985, p. 126).

The founder of the *Spectator* journal, Joseph Addison (1672–1719), concluded from Hobbes' ideas that laughter was closely related to pride (Addison, 1730, p. 466). Voltaire (1694–1778) refuted that, stating 'was it pride which caused the master of the golden ass to laugh when he saw the ass eat his supper? He who laughs is joyful at the moment, and is prompted by no other cause'. The golden ass relates to the anecdote of the Stoic Chrysippus who seeing his donkey eating figs from a silver basin enquired whether the

donkey might also enjoy some wine, and finding his own joke so hilarious could not stop laughing and died. Notable here is Voltaire's word-play (an ancient humour technique) appreciated by Victor Hugo (1864, p. 92): Chrysippus means 'golden horse'. Incidentally in French the equivalent of LOL is MDR (mort de rire), which literally means death by laughter. Addison was one of the first to popularise current notions of humour. In one cutting commentary Addison (1730, p. 439) was vicious towards laughter, associating 'humour' to 'truth, good sense, wit, and mirth' and 'false humour' to 'falsehood, nonsense, frenzy and laughter'. Another negative view of laughter can be seen in a 1748 letter of Lord Chesterfield (1838, p. 179), to his son: 'I could heartily wish that you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh while you live'.

The Scottish physiologist Malcolm Flemyng (1759, p. 91) reignited the idea of laughter as exercise: 'Laughter, when moderate may be serviceable by recreating the spirits and by affording a kind of exercise in shaking the sides. But when immoderate may have tragical effects, of which many instances are recorded'.

## 1.6. LAUGHTER THEORIES

In this section, we consider the four main laughter and humour theories; Superiority theory that emerged during the Renaissance, Incongruity theory that developed during the Enlightenment, the Relief theory that was proposed in the nineteenth century, and the associated Psychoanalytic theory, that became popular in the twentieth century. In Sections 1.7 and 1.8, we contemplate nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in more detail.

### 1.6.1. Superiority Theory

Plato's negative view of laughter was foundational to the Superiority theory (Morreall, 1983, p. 4) often associated with the political philosopher, Hobbes (1588–1679). For Hobbes 'The passion of laughter is nothing else, but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly' (Beattie, 1809, p. 138). According to Hobbes, as disapprovingly recorded by Nietzsche (2017, p. 187), 'Laughing is a bad infirmity of human nature, which every thinking mind will strive to overcome'. Superiority theory brings attention to the darker side of laughter, yet it could be seen as *misogelastic* (or laughter hating). Basu (2007) reports *misogelasticsm* in the Puritans who 'were

adamant that the Bible disavowed human laughter in favor of a behavioral norm of conspicuous lamentation'. More positive views on laughter are found in Hobbes' contemporaries Shakespeare and (1564–1616), Molière (c. 1622–1673). A contrast to puritan laughter is seen in the Catholic priest (and patron Saint of laughter and joy) Philip Neri (1515–1595) known for his good humour (Beaumont, 2018).

### 1.6.2. Incongruity Theory

The Incongruity theory has its roots in Platonic thought and is associated with Frances Hutcheson's *Reflections on Laughter* (1750), and with the works of James Beattie (1735–1803) and Emmanuel Kant (1724–1804) (Davison, 2020). Beattie (1809, p. 152) stated:

*Laughter seems to arise from the view of things incongruous united in the same assemblage, I. by juxtaposition, II. as cause and effect, III. by comparison founded on similitude, or IV. united so as to exhibit an opposition of meanness and dignity.*

According to Morreall (1983, p. 16), Kant's idea that 'Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing', was foundational to the Incongruity theory, as was Schopenhauer's (1788–1860) later insight that laughter arises when there is something we do not expect. Hegel (1770–1831) differentiated subjective and objective humour. Psychologist James Sully (1842–1923) mocked these 'Hegelian thinkers' in his 1902 *Essay on Laughter* (Sully, 1907, p. 5) stating, 'How remote this kind of conception of the ludicrous is from the homely laughter of mortals'. Incongruity theory is popular with humour academics. There are many variations including that of Bergson, who we meet later.

### 1.6.3. Relief Theory

While Superiority and Incongruity theories focus on what we laugh at, Relief concerns physiology. Relief theory is credited to Derby-born Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). In *The Physiology of Laughter*, (1860) Spencer (1863, p. 105), influenced by the psychologist Alexander Bain (1818–1903), critiques the Superiority theory: 'Some have alleged that laughter is due to the pleasure of a relative self-elevation... there are various humiliations to others which produce in us anything but laughter'. He also remarks the incompleteness

of Incongruity theory: ‘How comes a sense of the incongruous to be followed by these peculiar bodily actions?’. He notes that ‘pleasurable feeling stimulates the viscera in general into greater activity’, that ‘sensations excite ideas and emotions’, and hypothesises that ‘the excitement of certain nerves should generate feeling...they may pass on the excitement to one or more motor nerves’ and ‘that laughter is a display of muscular excitement’ (pp. 107–110).

Relief theory views laughter as a release following ideas and emotions that excite and thus cause nervous tension. As well as emotional release, Spencer also talked about retention: ‘the suppression of external signs of feeling makes feeling more intense. The deepest grief is silent grief... people who conceal their anger are habitually found to be more revengeful than those who explode in loud speech and vehement action’ (p. 109). Darwin (1896, p. 76) noted the ‘undirected over-flow, as Mr. Herbert Spencer insists, of nerve-force’ that results in extravagant movements of the body and the utterance of various sounds.

#### 1.6.4. Psychoanalytic Theory

Spencer influenced Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Freudian laughter and humour theory is often combined with the Relief theory (Morreall, 1983, p. 27). Humour scholar Arthur Asa Berger (2013) makes an important point to distinguish this approach: ‘The fourth theory is the Freudian psychoanalytic theory of humor, which ties humor to masked aggression and other forces in the unconscious’. In ‘*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*’ (1905), Freud (1963, p. 101) writes that the purpose of jokes is to ‘make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way’. Freud (p. 236) separates the pleasure of jokes that relate to inhibition, from the pleasure of the comic that relates to ideation, and the pleasure of humour that relates to feeling. Freud, after having shared countless jokes in his fascinating but challenging work, somewhat poignantly summarises his model in this way:

*In all three modes...the euphoria which we endeavour to reach... is the mood of our childhood, when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humour to make us feel happy in our lives.*

This insight is important, since one of the features of laughter therapy is that whatever our age, we do not have to rely on jokes, the comic, or humour