

Decision Processes Colloquia

Monday, February 11, 2013

Where: JMHH 240

When: 12:00 noon to 1:20 PM

Peter McGraw

Associate Professor Marketing

University of Colorado, Leeds Business

The Psychophysics of Humor

ABSTRACT: Why can a tragedy be horrifying at one moment, funny in another moment, and not worthy of consideration in yet another? Answering this question has important implications for happiness (e.g., enjoying life), advertising (e.g., targeting the right audience), coping (e.g., transforming pain into pleasure), and common decency (e.g., avoiding “too soon” comedy fails). I examine two factors that jointly influence perceptions of humor: the degree to which a stimulus is a violation and one’s perceived distance from the stimulus.

A series of studies reveal that the relationship between psychological distance and perceived humor can be positive (and linear), negative (and linear), or even curvilinear depending on the aversiveness of the stimuli. For example, tragedies are more humorous when temporally, socially, hypothetically, or spatially distant, but mild mishaps are more humorous when psychologically close. Finally, for stimuli that fall somewhere between a tragedy and a mishap, the relationship between psychological distance and perceived humor can be curvilinear; moderately distant stimuli elicit greater humor than stimuli that are either too close or too far away.

The results are predicted by the benign violation theory, which contends that humor occurs when something that seems wrong, threatening, or unsettling (i.e., a violation) also seems okay or acceptable (i.e. benign). Consistent with a benign violation account, our inquiry shows how something that is tragic (a violation) can be transformed by the passage of time (or other distancing, threat-reducing mechanisms) into something that is funny (a benign violation) and then into something that is boring (a benign situation). The findings explain the ubiquity of the quip, “too soon,” and the less commonly uttered, but still apt response, “too late.”

An implication of the inquiry is that nearly any aversive situation can be made more or less humorous by varying its perceived distance. I will discuss how the dynamic nature of humor challenges the leading theories of humor and psychological distance. I will conclude by presenting implications for the design of consumption experiences and effective marketing communications.

McGraw, A.P., Warren, C., Williams, L., & Leonard, B., (2012). Too close for comfort, or too far to care? Finding humor in distant tragedies and close mishaps. *Psychological Science*, 25, 1215 - 1223.

Download: <http://leeds-faculty.colorado.edu/mcgrawp/pdf/mcgraw.warren.williams.leonard.2012.pdf>