

## Book review

**Simon, J. C. (2008). *Why We Laugh: A New Understanding*. Carmel, IN: Starbrook Publishing. 301 pp.**

Humour studies and treatises on laughter frequently refer to the superiority, tension relief, and incongruity theories of laughter to help explain this common but mysterious phenomenon. John Charles Simon's book *Why We Laugh: A New Understanding* applies the perspectives of evolutionary biology and ethnology to laughter to uncover the limitations of these three theories and propose an original universal explanation for why we laugh. For Simon, superiority, tension relief, and incongruity theories fail to account for the communicatory function that made laughter beneficial to primate life in the first place. Tracing the origins of laughter back to great apes, wildlife biologist Simon argues that laughter is a nonverbal message that expresses sympathy and understanding. Laughter is not always an expression of ascendancy, a convulsive release of nervous energy, or the apprehension of something out of place. It is, according to Simon's simple, yet convincing, definition, "a vocal affirmation of mutual vulnerability" (p. 46). This signal is meant to convey the recognition of a shared susceptibility to the disruption of what Simon calls "status O" or the "original status" (p. 75). When something occurs to upset this normative state, whereby an individual is perceived to rise above or fall below their station, laughter restores the original status by imparting either a lifting or lowering message. This elevation or degradation can be directed towards oneself or another to re-establish order, and, although the receiver may misunderstand the gesture, the intention is to affirm parity and restore balance.

Over the course of ten accessible chapters, Simon's ambitious "mutual vulnerability theory" attempts to explain "laughter's expression by *every* individual in *every* circumstance" (p. 56; emphasis in the original). Simon is not afraid to make such bold claims and, owing to the scope of his theory, has a tendency to resort to sweeping statements that lack scientific rigour somewhat. For example, the claim that "*everything* is incongruous" (p. 29; emphasis in the original) stands out as an unnecessarily cursory point that leaves the reader wanting clarification. From the outset, however, Simon's disclaimer makes it clear that his intention is to forward a working hypothesis to spark further debate and a thorough testing of his theory. Thus, whilst Simon is assertive in his argument and confidently navigates a range of diverse material from the many types of humour to the complex social interactions between both human and nonhuman animals, he insists the theory is speculative at present rather than definitive. This fact is patent in the book's many analogies and occasional anecdotes to explain ideas. One particularly memorable example imagines the laugh at a person's fear of a porcupine attack, an event so improbable that the laugh conveys the message "I also sometimes lack pertinent information" (p. 71). Such an approach makes the book eminently readable and well paced but it does inevitably diminish some of the scientific authority that a

more technical method would provide. Happily, Simon neatly sidesteps the temptation to be funny, which is a common issue with serious studies of laughter and humour. *Why We Laugh* has jokes and comic strips inserted at the end of each chapter, and these serve to supplement the theory without interfering with the analysis.

Having offered an overview of the three established theories of laughter and outlined his own mutual vulnerability theory, Simon stresses his focus on laughter over humour in chapter four. From an evolutionary perspective, he explains, laughter precedes humour. The signal to indicate a shared vulnerability developed before we acknowledged certain actions, dynamics or circumstances as intrinsically funny. Even so, humour still has vulnerability at its centre, which prompts Simon's definition of humour as "[a]ny deliberate attempt to inspire a feeling of amusement by creating, manipulating, or highlighting the vulnerability of characters with whom we can identify" (p. 86). By now it is apparent that the word "vulnerability" is the fulcrum of this new understanding of laughter and much of the success of the theory rests on the versatility of this term. In Simon's explanation in chapter five, vulnerability applies to both physical and behavioural attributes that determine the success of the individual as a social member. As Simon states, the fundamental meaning of vulnerability in this analysis "is its *potential* consequence to physical survival and reproduction" (p. 116; emphasis in the original). A mutual recognition of these vulnerabilities allows individuals and groups to offset changes to the status quo and reassume their former standings. In this way, laughter is the acknowledgement of a feeling of insecurity in oneself or another that lies halfway between the safety of normality and the peril of deficiency. By examining laughter through the social politics of primate interactions, and loosely in the context of Darwinian survival mechanics, Simon grants laughter a cognisant, purposeful role in the preservation of the species.

As Simon goes on to explore the different sources of humour and varying responses to laughter, vulnerability stands up as a surprisingly resilient concept. As with humour, the author divides vulnerability into four categories: physical, emotional, cognitive, and social. Wordplay, for example, is a form of cognitive humour that produces a laugh when our expectations of words are not met. This kind of cognitive stumble is akin to a physical fall inasmuch as a disruption of convention or normality occurs to expose vulnerability. Of course, mutual vulnerability theory comes into its own in the social context where it proffers an entirely plausible account of how individuals navigate an environment in which each member is constantly jostling for position. Where vulnerability is less compelling is its relationship with the laughter engendered by sheer pleasure or in times of safety. The notion that a vocal affirmation of vulnerability happens because of the destabilisation of an individual's composure during euphoria does not really correlate with the positivity of pleasure. Simon's theory emphasises the anxiety or unease involved in being compromised whilst overwhelmed, as a "testimony to the uncertainty of life" (p. 183), and this does not entirely befit the hearty laughter of joy. Simon accepts that we are more likely to laugh when happy or safe, and yet, dubiously, this implies a more frequent communication of vulnerability.

Simon goes a long way towards substantiating his reasoning through the familiar proximity between crying and laughing. Chapter seven is largely dedicated to unearthing the origins of laughter through observations of chimps, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans. The author's expertise in wildlife biology shines through in these sections, with his acute awareness and persuasive inferences on animal behaviour and social activity. Simon describes how great apes also produce laughter-like vocalisations, but he concedes that it is difficult to be sure whether these are identical in nature to human laughter. Nevertheless, it is through these observations of great apes that Simon surmises, "it's in the expression we call crying that we find the origins of laughter" (p. 185). Crying and laughter form a spectrum of

vulnerability, with crying expressing a “particularly vulnerable” state whereas the laugh is “slightly or somewhat” (p. 189). This helps to explain why the intense emotion of euphoria might result in crying as much as laughter, since it displays the particularly vulnerable position of having temporarily lost one’s self-control. Presumably, in less intense moments of pleasure, we continue to anticipate or identify a shift in status, but whether or not the resulting laugh conveys vulnerability, as opposed to the positive change in circumstances or simply the feeling of pleasure, remains uncertain. It is intriguing how Simon’s theory does provide a robust explanation and yet laughter still has the habit of exceeding its limits to express something more.

As was the author’s intention, the book raises some interesting questions. Cases of stifled and silent laughter, for instance, in which laughter is either curtailed or performed inaudibly, present a thorny issue for the idea of laughter as communication. The extent to which stifled laughter retracts the message of mutual vulnerability and silent laughter avoids communication altogether suggests an interesting sub-topic that warrants a closer look. Similarly, in chapter eight, we are told that “[w]e put ourselves in vulnerable positions because this is where we’re most inclined to make significant leaps forward” (p. 215). As a species, we might expose our vulnerabilities in order to critique and overcome them. For this very reason, we might solicit humour as a means of emphasising these vulnerabilities. Yet, Simon also suggests that laughter has “a corrective effect, a restorative quality” (p. 223), which corresponds with the idea of laughter as a conservative activity that he evokes throughout the book. It remains to be seen whether the general tenor of laughter is conservative or progressive. Finally, in an echo of Henri Bergson’s first tenet of laughter (Bergson 1999 [1911]: 9), Simon writes that laughter can be induced by “anything understood to possess, if only in one’s imagination, human attributes” (p. 116). Given the book’s concern with nonhuman animals, however, it seems possible that a more widespread empathy exists on the level of organic life. In other words, we laugh at nonhuman animals not simply because we identify with a real or imagined human semblance, but because of a general recognition of our shared ontology as vulnerable living beings.

Simon reflects on the implications of his theory and the overlaps with other theories in the last chapters of the book. In a particularly effective section of chapter nine, he goes full circle, returning to superiority theory to show why laughter does not only deprecate and reign supreme but also supports others. “Superiority”, he argues, “neglects the most significant and common role of laughter: to raise others *up*” (p. 224; emphasis in the original). In contrast to the conception of laughter as a social weapon, such as in Michael Billig’s *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005), Simon’s laughter is much more benign and integral to the success of the species. Even the bully, a figure associated with the laughter of superiority, is in fact projecting his or her own fear of the victim through this vocalisation. Although the bully’s psychological profile is widely known, this understanding of laughter as a sign of unease gives Simon a potent example for his theory. It is not difficult to see how this revelation expands into a general principle that highlights how laughter helps us to manage changes in our perception of and place in the world.

In *Why We Laugh*, Simon has written an ambitious study that contributes a thought-provoking insight into the nature of laughter, and, at the same time, serves as an introduction to different types of humour, human and nonhuman animal behaviours, and the methodologies of evolutionary biology and ethnology. Simon points out that most of the major ideas included here are repackaged: “nearly every contention put forward in this book has already been made by other authors in support of other theories” (p. 220). Simon rarely mentions any theorists by name, but the book clearly consolidates and redirects its material, which casual

readers will find useful as a broad overview of laughter studies whilst those with research interests in laughter will benefit from Simon's refreshing angle. Although it does not quite make good with its claim to "explore and eventually resolve the mystery that is laughter" (p. 20), mutual vulnerability theory opens up an approach to laughter that deserves critical attention in future studies. Indeed, the theory is in its infancy in terms of its potential contribution and should, as the author suggests, be viewed as "the beginning of your inquiry into laughter rather than the end" (p. 221). In his first contribution to research on laughter, Simon has executed a well-considered, accessible reassessment of why we laugh that mixes the familiar and the divergent to achieve a noteworthy, serviceable theory.

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