

Research Paper

## Ethnic Humor: The Role of Culture in Mirth, Comedy, and Laughter

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### ABSTRACT

Humor is the quality of being amusing or comic. Although it is a universal phenomenon, humor takes different forms and styles at different ages or stages in an individual's or society's life. More specifically, ethnic humor is based on ideas, beliefs, and stereotypes about racial or specific groups. The goal of this narrative review was to seek internet search engines for peer-reviewed research articles, books, and publications on ethnic humor's meaning, characteristics, types, sources, dynamics, measurement, benefits, applications, and negative aspects. The results showed a collection of 97 publications with an abundance of narrative essays or descriptive qualitative studies. A topic or theme-wise, and the analysis of results by timelines is reported. The contemporary status of research on ethnic humor appears to be plagued by limitations. There is paucity of studies on data-based, empirical, survey-type, hypothesis-driven, case-controlled, experimental, or higher-order randomized control designs within and across groups in the community of nations. The future of research is recommended as a promise and an invitation to cover ethnic humor in advertising, mass media, digital, or the virtual social worlds.

**Keywords:** *Stereotypes, Boundary, Racial, Dynamics, Measurement*

Humor is communication intended to evoke laughter and provide amusement. There are various forms of humor: slapstick, ironic, sarcastic, deadpan, satire, insult, wit, puns, self-deprecating, playful, aggressive, awkward, impromptu, situational, anecdotal, and double-meaning, to mention a few of them. Styles of humor are classified as affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing, and self-defeating, respectively. Ethnic comedy or humor is a type that operates on stereotypes, ideas, and beliefs about racial or ethnic groups. Ethnic humor is triggered when immigrants, foreigners, members of an out-group, minorities, and so-called "outsiders," or marginalized sections of a society, are targeted. While humor is a universal phenomenon, its form, targets, choice, measurements, mode of narration or expression, and acceptance may not be the same everywhere (Davies, 1990).

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Received: January 10, 2023; Revision Received: September 05, 2023; Accepted: September 08, 2023

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Ethnicity is a slippery term that is difficult to define. It is the state of belonging to a social group that has a common cultural or national tradition. It is a given rather than an earned status for an individual or group. There can be restrictions on social, political, and geographic boundaries for the ethnicity of a particular group (Ridanpää, 2014). Rappaport defines ethnicity as "any racial, religious, national origin, or regional category of sub-culturally distinct persons." Humor occurs in all human cultures and permeates all aspects of human behaviour in a variety of forms and varied modalities (Apte, 1987).

Ethnicity is different from related but confusing terms like nationality, race, and folklore. Races are distinguished based on physical characteristics, especially skin color. Ethnic distinctions generally focus on characteristics like shared culture, language, ancestry, geography, place of origin, customs, practices, and beliefs. The world population can be divided into 4 major races: white or Caucasian, Mongoloid (Asian), Negroid (Black), and Australoid. The humor emanating from targeting different races is different from that that hits ethnic groups (Anderson, 2015; Santos et al., 2010; Bartlett, 2001). In a random survey of the pre-millennium era, it was found that public attitudes about racial-ethnic humor are not polarized between blacks and whites (Banjo, 2011; Jaret, 1999). The term "folklore" originally referred to the stories of common people in rural areas. Now it involves even the urban population.

Stereotypes and ethnic humor are intrinsically connected. Stereotypes are widely held impressions of people, in-groups, and inter-groups that are shared (Ehrlich, 1979). They are usually simplified based on appearance or cultural traits. They offer explanations and help one understand or make sense of situations without expending effort or energy. There can be both positive and negative stereotypes. Negative stereotypes can lead to the stigmatization of targeted minorities at a personal level. When they are destructive, they can lead to prejudice (Mutuma et al., 1977). Ethnic humor has existed across all ages and at different times. Typically, they involve a group member telling a joke to another group member or a non-member, or a non-member telling the joke to a member or another non-member. Hostility, superiority, malice, aggression, derision, and disparagement make up the approaches that are generally referred to as hostility theories that form the basis of ethnic humor. Release theories mention a special kind of relief that helps break inhibitions created by the constraints of society (Williams, 2015; D'Arcens, 2014; Dormann & Biddle, 2009). The various theories of humor are compiled elsewhere (Venkatesan, 2022). However, the theories with an exclusive focus on ethnic humor are less discussed (Lowe, 1986).

Ethnic humor is also tied to boundaries like geography, history, or the ages. By geography, humor may exist as an ethnic boundary marker for a country. Institutional or workplace boundary-marking humor is reflected in the jokes and banter in police humor, as investigated by drawing on interviews of Swedish police employees. Termed "blue humor," themes or strains of hegemonic masculinity, cynicism, aggressiveness, skepticism, unfriendliness, prejudices, homophobia, sexism, and racism were characteristically found in their content (Uhnoo, 2019). When compared to new-generation post-millennium humor (Vine et al., 2009; Davies, 1982), mediaeval humor in its various styles (wit, satire, irony, parody, jokes, farce, or scatology), as well as ethnic humor, is unlikely to match 18th-century notions of mirth and hilarity. The present-day form of diffused ethical humor appears to prevail digitally or globally without apparent boundaries on Twitter.

Jokes, as a social phenomenon, are an expression of the spirit or mood of a group at a given time. A joke removed from the contextual circumstances in which it is recorded loses its

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sting. There is also a linguistic context for every joke. Ethnic jokes are different from political jokes. All jokes have an insider and an outsider. Much of the humor is determined by who tells the joke about whom, where, when, how, or to whom. First, there is a joke teller whose age, gender, social, economic, religious, and political position matter a lot in the choice or selection of the ethnic joke (Davies, 1991a). There are four recognized stages in ethnic humor. One is humor targeting a particular group. Two, self-deprecatory humor is inner or outer-directed. Three, accepting the integration with realistic humor. Four, types of critical humor target mainstream culture (Mintz, 2008; 1996; 1985).

Humor is universal but culture-specific. Research has noted the characteristic differences in how affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing, or self-defeating types of humor are perceived and used between the east and west (Chen & Martin, 2007). For example, jokes which are too personal involving marriage and family life is discouraged. Even though the humor in a given culture (as noted among the Jews) may appear self-deprecating, and most people seem to laugh at themselves; a closer exploration has shown that the joke tellers are neither hostile to their people nor inclined to endorse or support such stereotypes (Davies, 1991b). However, they would feel very different if someone else laughed at them. Similarly, people in the west are known to use humor for coping with stress and difficulties, whereas those from the east are less likely to do so. As someone aptly pointed out, Westerners are "seriously humorous," whereas the Chinese are "humorously serious" (Jiang, Li, & Hou, 2019; Martin & Sullivan, 2013; Chen & Martin, 2007). Against this heterogeneous background, there appears to be a strong need, justification, and rationale to examine ethnic humor to take stock of the completed research before planning ahead for the future.

### *Objectives*

The objective of this narrative review was to peruse Google and MSN internet search engines on databases like Semantic Scholar, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, Research Gate, and Pub Med to enlist peer-reviewed research articles, books, and publications covering themes like the meaning, characteristics, types, sources, dynamics, measurement, benefits, applications, as well as the negative aspects of ethnic humor. Original research articles published in English ISSN journals and ISBN books showing up with key word search as "ethnic humor" was considered for inclusion in this list. They were compiled, coded, categorized and classified by title, theme, name of journal, year of publication, and names of authors. Although this review is based on secondary data, ethical issues related to authentic representation of rights-based subjective experiences of diverse ethnic groups in varied contexts were kept utmost priority during the preparation of this manuscript.

## **RESULTS**

The search yielded 97 references (including book titles) on the topic of ethnic humor. The compiled bibliography of references was analyzed on two counts: (a) Themes or Topics; and (b) Timelines of their publications.

### **(a) Themes or Topics:**

The themes or topics addressed in the research papers within this compilation mainly covered aspects like race (N: 17; 17.53 %) followed by country-wise targets (N: 16; 16.50 %). Most research on ethnic humor in this review targeted denizens from nations like America, Ireland, Sweden, Soviet Union, Netherlands, Persia, Indonesia, and Hawaii islands. There are also publications (N: 14; 14.43 %) addressing humor in Indian settings. Other themes targeted in the publications in this review, although minimal, included aspects of ethnic humor such as its history, boundaries, dynamics, functions, characteristics, types

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(stand up, religious, or digital), or targeted particular groups like corporate, school or college students respectively. A decade-wise distribution of publications on ethnic humor in present compilation (Table 1) shows the bulk of the research has peaked in the decade of 2010-19.

**Table 1: Highlights in decade-wise distribution of Timelines & Themes in publications on Ethnic Humor.**

Years	N	%	THEMES*				Total
			RACE	COUNTRY	INDIAN	OTHERS	
<1980	3	3.09	-	-	-	3	-
1980-1989	10	10.31	-	1	2	7	3
1990-1999	14	14.43	3	4	2	5	9
2000-2009	20	20.61	2	2	5	11	9
2010-2019	41	42.27	11	9	4	17	24
2020+	9	9.30	1	-	1	7	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>97</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>47</b>

\*Themes with less than five total frequency counts NOT included in this table

### (b) Timelines:

Wilde (1984) pioneered "the first hilarious collection of jokes that poke fun at just about every one of the ethnic groups across the world." Another later publication authored by sociologist turned humor scholar highlighted how ethnic humor serves as "social thermostats regulation and shaping human behavior" as also they are "social thermometers that measure, record, and indicate what is going on." (Davies, 1990). Much later, Weaver (2014) presented six case study chapters that make up the analytic and empirical body of the book (Weaver, 2014; Wilde, 1984). Kuipers & Van der Ent (2016) investigated the relationship between ethnic jokes and ethnic relations in the Netherlands in the period covering 1995-2012.

## DISCUSSION

Self-directed and self-effacing wit is a **typical response to oppression by the targeted groups in ethnic humor**. It is a masochistic defensive process used by the minority against aggressors in the majority groups (Juni & Katz, 2001; Leveen, 1996). Race-based denigration or discrimination in the context of peer-group dynamics during adolescence results in bullying and victimization, resulting in prejudicial treatment. There are individual differences in the perception of disparaging and subversive racial humor as savage or satire (Miller et al. 2019). Forms of ethnic humor, as measured by formal tools, frequently occur subtly or indirectly as harmful messages against the targeted ethnic groups, with negative consequences for adolescents in the form of stress, anxiety, and depression (Mulvey, Palmer, & Abrams, 2016; Nadal, 2011; Edwards & Romero, 2008). By these means, interracial humor becomes emotionally and cognitively taxing, and for these reasons, it is better avoided (Borgella, Howard, & Maddox, 2020).

Some recorded **benefits of ethnic humor** in multicultural groups are the facilitation of divergent thinking, fostering of positive relations, improving the self-identification of the individual, and an increase in psychological and social cohesion or bonding among other ethnic groups (Gogova, 2016). Another advantage is that they can appear in a variety of contexts, such as cartoons, advertisements, films, literature, information campaigns, educational materials, environmental protests, and various social media applications (Lyytimäki, 2021; Jensen, 2018). However, when they are not reciprocated, failed, or misfired, as with some sarcastic, rude, and offensive forms, there are risks of offending the audience, and they can communicate immaturity and completely shut down all avenues for

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communication. Ethnic humor involves group joking that is embedded, interactive, and referential. These features give it power within the group context. Elements of the joking culture serve to *smooth* group interaction, *share* affiliation, *separate* the group from outsiders, and secure the compliance of group members through social control (Fine & Soucey, 2005). Ethnic humor is not always considered to be at the expense of the target group. Sometimes, they might as well serve a humanitarian function and be a left-handed compliment or expression of appreciation by the majority group in disguise. Ethnic humor serves the functions of reflecting vicarious superiority, releasing tension, reducing boredom, and enabling the joker to escape the responsibility of his remarks (La Fave & Mannell, 1976). Themes of transgression and aggression are noticed in the jokes supporting the tenets of relief theory, wherein laughter is all about the release of the pent-up nervous energy of the victimized groups' fears and tears (Franck, 2021).

**On the negative side**, they can increase antagonism, thwart cooperation, incite ridicule, and aggravate hostility. Douglass et al. (2016) found that close adolescent peers and friends experienced "ethnic/racial teasing" blended with humor, which is largely considered normative and harmless. Their ethnic media stereotypes in everyday talk among friends are taken as routine and acceptable (Sierra, 2019). Therapeutic values of humor, including ethnic humor, are recognized to facilitate social bonding and group development and can be a valuable release for hostilities between people in conflict (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2002). For example, it is shown that ethnic humor in Indonesia is not used to deride or disparage other tribes but rather serves as a unifier of all of them (Lesmana, 2018). Advertising involving the targeting of design and product campaigns to appeal to certain ethnic groups is a growing trend now to bridge the gap between minority and majority groups in a multicultural society (Rößner, Kämmerer, & Eisend, 2017). They have served as a branding strategy in parliamentary political discourse, as noted in Romania through case studies (Saftoiu & Popescu, 2014).

The bipolar **character of ethnic humor** comes from its status and functions. It serves both as a social unifier as well a social separator. The sword and the shield metaphor has been aptly used to describe the good and bad or the offensive and defensive aspects of ethnic humor depending on the context of who the hearer is. When the humor is prosocial in intention i.e., used as a shield, it can protect against prejudice and create affiliation between members of minority groups affected by social inequality. They ensure their survival (Boskin & Dorinson, 1985). Ethnic humor has also been identified as a social thermometer measuring and recording the social sensitivity toward specific social groups (Saucier, O'Dea, & Strain, 2016; Benatar, 1999). It is shown that individual recipients or targets of ethnic humor who were temperamentally high on ethnocentric traits were least affected by disparagement jokes as compared to low on ethnocentric scores (Hasenauer, 1988).

The common **sources of ethnic humor include** word-of-mouth transmission of jokes or a repertoire of humorous texts associated with particular social groups. Sometimes, they are borrowed from other ethnic groups and adapted or modified before their proliferation in another location, group, or culture. There may be published or unpublished "jokelore" involving the repeated telling and re-telling of the same jokes, humorous sayings or remarks, allegories, parables, fables, insults, puns, acrostics, riddles, slurs, comics, absurdities, or caricatures on the targeted groups (Littleton & Holder, 2019; Pérez, 2016; Friedman, 2014; Cundall, 2012; RWith changing times in contemporary times, new forms of ethnic humor are appearing as "forwards" in the virtual or online mode, filling electronic mailboxes (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2015). In a corporate setting, they are observed to create an

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amiable atmosphere, remove intimidation, enhance work camaraderie, increase productivity, stimulate creativity, and improve employee performance (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995).

Ethnic humor research is plagued by a **shortage of well-developed and standardized measures** with accommodations for cultural and sociological aspects (Tavory, 2014). There is a need for developing tools to measure the nature, types, extent, or depth of people's ethnic humor in observable, measurable terms. A Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MIEM; Gonzales & Wiseman, 2005) covers three aspects, including the degree of one's ethnic identity, the sense of humor orientation, and their ratings of ethnic jokes on funniness and rudeness targeted at Americans, Asians, and Latinos. The tool found that college students with a high sense of humor showed less offence and more humor toward ethnic jokes, riddles, rhymes, and proverbs, even if they appeared to pass insults or portray them as "stupid, ignorant, or unclean." Similarly, another tool titled "Peoples' Ethnic Attitude towards Ethnic Humor (EATEH)" was developed and standardized on 500 students from ten high schools in Ahvaz, Iran, and covered the dimensions of ethnocentrism, anomie, socioeconomic status, national identity, and gender. Findings showed that the attitude of students toward ethnic humor is rooted in and influenced by sociological factors, most notably their social context and feeling of anomie (Haghish et al. 2012). Future research could focus on developing tools for measuring humor types, depth, extensivity, states, and traits, such as sexual humor, non-sense humor, scat humor, and self- or other-directed humor, both within and outside the domain of ethnic humor.

Ethnic humor practices among school and college students have been the focus of empirical investigation in few studies. The Sense of Humor Scale was tested on 300 university students based on gender and ethnicity to determine its reliability and validity as a measure of humor appreciation for students (Utomo & Diponegoro, 2018). Caparoso & Collins (2015) explored characterizations of racial and ethnic stereotype-based humor among university students using interviews and focus group discussions to generate free lists, rank orders, and pile sorts, which were analyzed on ANTHROPAC software to convert the derived textual data. Results showed that the ethnic humor aligned with the prevailing social stratification in the Hawaii islands (Caparoso & Collins, 2015; Okada, 2007; Labrador, 2004). However, still there are hardly any comprehensive psychometrically valid ethnic humor measurement devices available for ready use by prospective investigators.

**The Indian market** is full of joke books for casual readers (Mallick, 2018; Singh, 2008; 2000; 1987), cartoons (Laxman, 2002), or novels in the humorous genre (Satheesan, 2019). Historically, the jokes of humorists like Tenali Raman, Gopal Bhoire, and Birbal, all court jesters of the old days, and Jaspal Bhatti and Navjot Sidhu more recently, have enthralled the Indian audience. For a long time, comedies in India meant mindless slapstick, as in Bollywood movies, *Mushairas*, and *Hasya Vyang Kavi Sammelans*. The new breed of stand-up comedians evolved post-millennium with globalization and liberalization (Chaturvedi, 2018; Kumar, 2014). Case studies of such comedians show that they thrive on ethnic issues involving the irrationality of racial discrimination and stereotypes in their narratives or how they employ performative techniques like linguistic code-switching and calculative pauses to create humor (Sarkar & Siraj, 2022; Lam, 2021).

Folk stories are transmitted and survived through word of mouth across generations and are enjoyed even today (Shankar, 2008). Some examples of widely circulated ethnic jokes in India target the Sardar or Sikh community from Punjab or the South Indian community named *Madrasi*. The physical fitness of one group is extolled over the abject intellect of

another. The 12 o'clock jokes or the fictitious characters of Santa and Banta are the most popular examples of this genre. The targeted individuals find such jokes insipid and inappropriate. Their narration has led to retractions, expressions of apologies, or arrests of perpetrators for hurting religious or linguistic sentiments. Some traits attributed to the targeted groups are that they are naive, unintelligent, inept, rustic, or not so well versed in the dominant language (English or Hindi) of the expanding middle class in the multi-lingual country (Hall, 2019; Siegel, 1987). Also note that a society that enjoys jokes about inept, stupid, and ignorant people will also make jokes about tricky, canny, and calculatingly stingy people.

Some ethnic humor writings have been devoted as exclusive repositories of jokes, tracing their history and being contemporary to specific countries such as Russia (Draitser, 1998), the former Soviet Union to Israel (Zilberg, 2018), America (Gillotta, 2013; Orbe, Seymour, & Kang, 1998), Ireland (Spalding, 2010), Italian (Linguini, 2016), New Zealand (Holmes & Hay, 1997), and Indian (Naithani, 1998). Ethnic humor, as in the West, has largely been associated with the ridicule of minorities based on stereotypes. There is always a dominant group's point of view. The jokes are often short, consisting of a single question, with a punch line. As an area for empirical research, the scenario of ethnic humor in India is still an unexplored domain. A general exploration of humor styles and self-esteem, not necessarily ethnically related, among school children in Uttar Pradesh, India, aged between 9 and 12 years in the 5<sup>th</sup> through 7<sup>th</sup> grades and belonging to an upper-middle-class SES, found no significant relationships for both boys and girls (Gidwani, Chaudhary, & Banerjee, 2021). This contrasts with the early reports of as young as three to six-year-old children's appreciation of humor victimizing different racial and ethnic groups in the west (McGhee & Duffey, 1983).

Jovial variations of various gods' characters are frequently raised and shared as "hasyarasa" with caution, distinct from ethnic but close to regional religious humor. The iconography of the symbolic elephant-headed Ganesha riding a rat is even worshipped as a god of laughter; the monkey god Hanuman and the lion-faced Narasimha are all accepted forms of worship across the country. Pure comedy is found, for example, in some of the scenes set inside the magical palace created by the demon Maya for the Pandavas in the great Indian epic Mahabharata (Gerow, 2001; Appachu, 1993; Siegel, 1987).

### *Critique & Promises for Future*

Since different ethnic groups may practice the same religion or vice versa, jokes that target **religion, gender and sexual minorities** are also intrinsically not ethnic humor. Studies on religious humor typically concentrate on perspectives on ridicule, such as those found in Islamic literature's Holy Qur'an, and religious practices (Schweizer & Molokotos-Liederman, 2022). Likewise, in the Old Testament, the story of the left-handed Ehud and the King of Moab, Eglon, involving the brutal murder of the latter by the former Israelite, was originally meant to be funny in the form of satire (Ausloos, 2017; Handy, 1992). It is worth noting that in ancient Israel, the left side of the body was associated with deception or darkness, as well as being outside of the culturally accepted social norm of leadership. Ethnic humor has shown the potential for use as an emotional release in existential forms of counselling and psychotherapy (Maples et al., 2001). In their stereotypes, homosexuals have been portrayed as scat (Mauldin, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

Although no claim is made that this bibliographic listing on ethnic humor is all inclusive, the examination of the topic shows that much is wanting in the field as serious study or textbook writing. Ethnic humor experimentation is probably an unknown area of research. Ethnographic accounts of humor within or between ethnic groups are more common in the west than in the east. "Jocular ethnography" as it is sometimes called, humor experiences, subjectivity, and struggles were examined, for example, among Burmese migrant groups in Malaysia. In this regard, the Indian scenario remains virgin and unexplored. There is need for studies based on development of standard tools for measurement of ethnic humor before data-based, empirical, survey-type, hypothesis-driven, case-controlled, experimental, or higher-order randomized control designs within and across groups in the community of nations. The future of research is recommended as a promise and an invitation to cover ethnic humor in advertising, mass media, digital, or the virtual social worlds.

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### **Acknowledgment**

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Venkatesan, S., Iyer, K.G. & Yashodhara-Kumar, G.Y. (2023). Ethnic Humor: The Role of Culture in Mirth, Comedy, and Laughter. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(3), 3073-3084. DIP:18.01.291.20231103, DOI:10.25215/1103.291