

Laughter as a Tool

Laughter Helps One to Manipulate Others

By Liz Lynch (The article is presented courtesy of [HealthScout](#), ©2000)

FRIDAY, April 28, 2000 (HealthSCOUT) -- The sound of your laugh apparently gives a clue as to what you want from a member of the opposite sex.

Often studied for what it reveals of a person's inner state, laughter also is a tool to "tweak the emotional responses of others," says Jo-Anne Bachorowski, assistant professor of psychology at Vanderbilt University.

"What we want to do by producing sounds is to manipulate others to get them to respond favorably toward us," she says. "[Laughter] plays a critical role in eliciting and maintaining cooperative responses."

With Cornell University professor Michael J. Owren, Bachorowski studied recordings of the laughs of 120 undergraduate students in various social pairings as they watched humorous movie scenes.

The laughter included a wide range of sounds, she says, falling roughly into three categories: the high-pitched "song-like," the nasal "snort-like" and the unmelodic "grunt-like." In laughter, the human voice can travel to the stratosphere, with even men matching the pitch of a trained soprano, the researchers say.

Findings of the research, which has been going on for a few years, will be presented this summer to the International Society for Research in Emotions. The painstaking part, Bachorowski says, is acoustic analysis. "We thought that laughter would be an easy signal to look at. It's turned out to be a far more complex and interesting problem than I thought," she says.

Certain types of laughs seem to be targeted to specific situations, she says. For instance, women tend to produce high, variable pitches of laughter when in the company of male strangers. Bachorowski says this sort of silvery sound could be a very instinctive form of self-protection.

"Male strangers are potentially dangerous to females," she says, and a high, melodic laugh could predispose a man to respond favorably to its source.

By contrast, very few men laugh around women they don't know, the researchers say.

Generally, men's laughter seems tied to how well they know their fellow yukkers. Men tend to laugh significantly more in the company of friends of either gender than with either men or women they don't know, the researchers say.

Women's laughter, on the other hand, is far more related to the sex of the laugh buddy, they say. Women laugh more in the company of male friends than they do when alone or with women friends or with male strangers.

None of this surprises Edward Dunkelblau, a clinical psychologist and past president of the American Association for Therapeutic Humor, who spreads the gospel of empathetic laughter as a corporate consultant.

Of course, laughter is not always purely empathetic, he says, and recent Canadian research has examined the "power exchange" of laughter.

"By laughing at someone's joke, you're instilling in them some one-upmanship, which is why you laugh at the boss's jokes," Dunkelblau says.

He says laughter is a way to draw people together. "When you and I are laughing, there's a connection," he says.

On a romantic level, "I believe the connection and shared sense of what's funny is crucial," Dunkelblau says. "Sharing what's funny is a very complex experience. If you think about it, it involves having a similar intelligence, similar cultural references, an openness to the other person being entertaining. It also allows for a sense of intimacy and vulnerability."

And, if you want to experience isolation, try telling a joke that falls flat.

"There is no more lonely silence than a joke not gotten," says Dunkelblau.

What To Do

To read more on related topics, check previous HealthSCOUT articles on whether laughter helps heal [sick children](#) and on why laughter can cause [muscle weakness](#).

For more information and resources on laughter, visit the [American Association for Therapeutic Humor](#) and click on the "Features" folder.