Focus on laughter: a qualitative study of the social dimensions of laughter

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Aim

This paper reports qualitative research carried out as part of the EU ILHILAIRE project looking at the way in which people talk about laughter and the social functions which it performs. The research provides a contribution to the ILHILAIRE project by looking at the social aspect of laughter from a qualitative perspective.

Method

Data was collected from focus groups of undergraduate students who received course credit for their involvement.

Focus Groups originated in the field of market research as a way of getting information about products for use in advertising. In academic research they are a data collection method which enable qualitative researchers to collect data in a way which incorporates interpersonal interaction between participants which provides an additional dimension unavailable in a 1-1 interview.

All participants were female undergraduate psychology students in the first year of their degree programme. The age range was from 18 to 55. The average group size was 5 participants. Each session lasted for just over an hour.

The focus group opened with a question about what made participants laugh and continued to explore positive and negative aspects of laughter, issues of social taboo in jokes and social bonding via laughter and joke telling.

Findings

The participants were universally positive about laughter and were able to discursively position problematic content eg racist jokes in a positive way. They explored the social functions of laughter in a variety of ways and again were reluctant to consider any possible negative consequences of (for example) “in-jokes”.

The interview schedule used for the focus group was open. The aims of the groups were to allow participants to discuss the positive and negative aspects of laughter without too many constraints. Participants were reluctant to consider that laughter had any negative aspects. When the issue of

gelatophobia was introduced by the researcher it was met with incomprehension and disbelief and dismissed relatively quickly.

Discussion

The findings are discussed in relation to two main issues:

The role of gender in laughter and jokes

The use of laughter in emotional and social bonding.

These issues are discussed in relation to broader considerations for the use of laughter in social interactions.

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