Humor, Intentionality, and Fantasy in Children

Caroline E. Miller

Faculty Advisor: Jacqueline Woolley, Ph.D.

Background & Key Terms

Humor

- Applications of humor
  - Social
  - Therapeutic
  - Medical
  - Learning

- Humor and cognitive development
  - Recognition of incongruity
  - Mastery of new concepts

- Development of humor requires …
  - Recognize incongruity
  - Awareness of reality-fantasy
  - Sensitivity to intention

(Dowling, 2002; Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012; Klein, 2003; Lillemyr, 2009; McGhee, 1976; LaughterTime)

Intention

- Sensitivity to intention
  - Joke-Mistake distinction develops after age 3
  - Children less trusting when adult is joking

- Importance of cues
  - Providing a cue influences child's interpretation

- Reaction to jokes/facts
  - Incongruous "jokes" – funny!
  - Incongruous "facts" – confusing!

(Airenti, 2016; Hoicka et al., 2017; Hoicka & Gattis, 2008; McGhee & Johnson, 1975; Sensory Child)

Fantasy

- Fantasy-Reality distinction
  - Develops in preschool-age children
  - Reflects belief in fantastical beings
  - Levels of Possibility
    - Realistic, Improbable, Impossible

- Fantasy orientation
  - Inclination to participate in fantastical thinking
    - Pretend play
    - Imaginary friends
  - High fantasy orientation encourages belief in fantastical beings

- Cognitive performance
  - Positively influenced by participation in fantasy

(Boeger et al., 2009; Sharon & Woolley, 2004; Taylor, 2013; Weisberg et al., 2015; Woolley, Boerger, & Markman, 2004; Science Friday)

The Present Study

1) Explore how understanding intention plays a role in humor, specifically the distinction between jokes and mistakes

2) Investigate the relationship between fantasy and humor

3) Identify broad themes in humor and observe how they develop

4-10 year olds | 20-25 at each age | even boy/girl | CRC Database

Key Terms

- Intention
  - Mundane error
  - Essential error

- Fantasy
  - Fantasy orientation
  - Levels of Possibility
    - Realistic
    - Improbable
    - Impossible

- Humor Themes
  - Rhyme
  - Wordplay
  - Meaning-Reversal

(Science Friday)

Variables

- Intention
  - IV: joke or mistake, age
  - DV: degree of error

- Fantasy
  - IV: fantasy orientation, age
  - DV: endorsement of level of possibility

- Humor Themes
  - IV: age
  - DV: endorsement of joke theme

(Power of Imagination)

Hypotheses

- Intention
  - Mistakes will be associated with mundane errors, and jokes will be associated with essential errors.
  - This trend will strengthen as age increases.

- Fantasy
  - Improbable events will be rated as funniest across all ages and fantasy orientations.

- Humor Themes
  - Rhymes will be chosen most frequently for younger children, and meaning-reversal and wordplay will be chosen most frequently for older children.

(Imagination and Cognition Lab)

Methods & Measures

Three Sections…

- Intention Stories

- Level of Possibility Story

- Joke Book

- All measures designed specifically for this study

Intention Stories

- Four stories
  - Randomized order

- Two children – one makes a joke, the other makes a mistake

- Two errors – one essential, one mundane

- Task: match the errors to the children

Lisa and Greg are neighbors. They love to play together, but they're really different. Lisa likes being funny and making jokes, and Greg gets confused all the time and makes mistakes. One day, they decided to draw pictures of the flowers in their yards. Here's what the flower looks like! When they finished their drawings, Lisa played a joke, and Greg made a mistake. Here are their drawings – this one is missing the petals, and this one is missing a leaf.
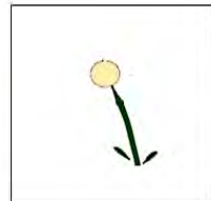
Level of Possibility Story

- Create-Your-Own-Adventure

- Six places to choose the outcome…
  - Realistic, Improbable, and Impossible outcomes
  - 2 presented to choose between
    - Randomized
  - Pairs
    - Realistic – Improbable
    - Realistic – Impossible
    - Improbable – Impossible

- Task: choose the options that will make a puppet laugh the most

Level of Possibility Story

This is Emily. Emily loves the weekend, because she always gets to do fun things.

One Saturday morning, Emily's mom woke her up. "Emily!" her mom called. "Good morning! I made breakfast." Emily walked in the kitchen and saw a bowl of cereal and a big glass of **milk/onion juice.**

Then her dad told her that Emily had to get ready to leave, because she was going to visit her grandparents! She put on her favorite outfit and went to the garage. Her parents were waiting for her with their **car/flying brooms**.

When they got to her grandparents' house, Emily was so excited to see them. She hadn't been there in a while, and she always has lots of fun with them. Her grandma looked the same as always, but her grandpa had **a beard down to his toes/an invisible foot**.

Reality Status Task

- Are these things real or pretend?

- Establishes fantasy orientation

- 8 randomized questions

(Clipart Library)

Joke Book

- Three themes
  - Rhymes
  - Wordplay
  - Meaning-Reversal

- Four sets of three jokes, similar in content, randomized

- Task: choose which joke is the funniest to add to a joke bc

(Clipart Library)

Expected Outcomes

Outcomes

- Intention
  - Jokes will be paired with essential errors
  - Mistakes will be paired with mundane errors
  - This trend will develop with age

- Fantasy
  - Improbable will be selected most frequently
    - Across age and fantasy orientation

- Humor Themes
  - Younger children will select less cognitively advanced jokes (rhymes)
  - Older children will select more cognitively advanced jokes (meaning-reversal, wordplay)

Alternatives

- Intention
  - No difference in choices, especially by age
    - Distinction develops with age

- Fantasy
  - High fantasy orientation predicts impossible choices
  - Realistic chosen most frequently – unclear task

- Humor Themes
  - No differences in choices
    - Individual differences more influential than cognitive development

Questions?

Thank you!