

Psychology of Laughter in a Structural-Dialectical Approach

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The article is devoted to the discussion of the psychology of laughter from the perspective of its functional purpose in culture. Addressing the topic of laughter is due to the need of describing its counterintuitive nature, consisting of dialectical contradictions. The study of the laughter formation in the children's subculture and its inclusion in the subject area of developmental psychology is of immediate interest. The purpose of the study is to determine the psychological significance of laughter in culture as a system of normative situations. We assumed that in a normative situation as in a biosocial unit of culture, laughter will manifest itself as a phenomenon of a binary nature, containing relations of contrast. The structural-dialectical method of analysis, which consists in the search for contrast, made it possible to build an explanatory model of the phenomenon under study. In the capacity of binary pairs in the study of laughter as a psychological phenomenon, such antinomies as “freedom-fear”, “good-evil”, “world-antiworld” were singled out. Laughter as a psychological phenomenon has a dialectical structure in which fear gives rise to the desire for freedom; the cultural mission of laughter is associated with the discovery of evil as a violation of the norm and good as the inviolability of culture. The condition for overcoming fear and achieving illusory freedom through laughter is the displacement of evil into the unreal world, which leads to the supra-situation of the subject.

Keywords: structural-dialectical method, laughter, normative situation, cultural congruence.

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Психология смеха в структурно-диалектическом подходе

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Статья посвящена обсуждению психологии смеха с точки зрения ее функционального предназначения в культуре. Обращение к теме смеха обусловлено необходимостью описания его парадоксальной природы, состоящей из диалектических противоречий. Актуальным является исследование становления смеха в детской субкультуре и включение его в предметную область психологии развития. Целью данного исследования стало определение психологического значения смеха в культуре как системе нормативных ситуаций. Мы предположили, что в нормативной ситуации как биосоциальной единице культуры смех проявляется как феномен бинарной природы, содержащий отношения противоположностей. Структурно-диалектический метод анализа, заключающийся в поиске противоположностей, позволил выстроить объяснительную модель изучаемого феномена. В качестве бинарных пар при исследовании смеха как психологического явления были выделены антиномии «свобода—страх», «добро—зло», «мир—антимир». Смех как психологический феномен имеет диалектическую структуру, в которой страх порождает стремление к свободе; культурная миссия смеха связана с обнаружением зла — как нарушения нормы и добра — как незыблемости культуры. Условием преодоления страха и достижения иллюзорной свободы через смех выступает вытеснение зла в нереальный мир, что ведет к надситуативности субъекта.

Ключевые слова: структурно-диалектический метод, смех, нормативная ситуация, культурная конгруэнтность.

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Introduction

The role of laughter is difficult to assess rationally, as it seems to be an excessive phenomenon in human culture. At first glance, the irrationality and futility of laughter are obvious. There is a well-known Aristotelian assessment of the ridiculous, where he notes that “...the ridiculous is a certain error and ugliness, but painless and harmless...” [2, p. 650]. At the same time, the history of mankind convinces us of the paradoxical vitality of laughter. An accidental phenomenon in a culture is unlikely to have persisted in it for so long.

Laughter has long been the subject of interdisciplinary research. L.F. Balina writes about the role of laughter in culture, noting that laughter protects the integrity of culture and is a measure of the correlation of an individ-

ual's actions with the requirements of society. Through laughter, a deep, subtle, emotionally colored harmony of the individual and social in a person is achieved [4].

Following the anthropologist A.G. Kozintsev we'll agree that laughter is a phenomenon on the border between biology and culture. The scientist suggests that it is necessary to differentiate between “animal” laughter and “sentimental” laughter [17]. It is quite clear that laughter cannot be reduced to the physiology of laughter. A.G. Kozintsev emphasizes that it is much more productive to study laughter as a consequence of the meaningful unit of culture — humor. At the same time, he, referring to Propp [23], notes that the laugher has a “due instinct” — an understanding of the totality of acquired cultural norms. Laughter, according to the author, is an attribute of humor as a game in violation of learned norms. One of the world's

leading scientists, T.S. Veatch, quite clearly introduces the cultural norm into the discourse of the funny, Veatch [40]. For Veatch, the theory of humor is inseparable from the context of the culture in which the funny is created in relation to the cultural norm. In his initial assessments of the mechanism of humor, a well-known researcher in the area under discussion, V. Raskin, notes that the semantic model of humor is built around the contradiction between two opposing connotations of one situation. Humor is based on a resource of knowledge, vital scripts. It is the contradiction that is the source of the experience of content as the unity of the factual and counterfactual meaning of the situation [39]. This idea is consistent with our interpretation of culture as a system of normative situations [10]. When creating humor as a source of laughter, there appears a scenario of playing with the norm [9]. Based on this understanding of culture, we've formulated a hypothesis about the psychology of laughter as a cultural phenomenon that manifests itself in a situation of violation of the norm. By developing the idea of the connection between laughter and cultural norms, we for the first time expect to discover the contradictions that initiate the laughter of a person as a subject of culture. This text is devoted to the theoretical analysis of laughter in the context of culture as a system of normative situations.

Laughter, according to G.L. Tulchinsky, "...does not destroy the foundations of culture, but allows you to better feel them, create prerequisites for a new understanding of social reality and your place in it" [27, p. 34]. A.G. Kozintsev identifies two fundamental human new acquisitions "against which laughter is directed: against speech and against cultures [17].

If laughter accompanies a culture for many centuries, then there is a high probability that there is a need for laughter from culture itself. In this regard, one of the modern philosophers L.V. Karasev writes that behind laughter "...there was nothing but a thin layer of self-comprehending culture" [15, p. 43]. The historical incorruptibility of the funny inclines us towards a deeper psychological study of laughter from the point of view of the interaction between the subject and culture, with many questions about who is laughing and what is being laughed at. The origins of laughter are similar to those of myth, which "...arises involuntarily, obeying the forces that squeezed it "from the outside". In this sense, the myth is a child of necessity, not of freedom" [16, p. 68]. To a certain extent, culture gives a priori carte blanche to laughter, being sure of its good intentions for its own self-preservation. In other words, laughter is not a threat to the culture, and it may seem that it is on the leash of culture. This makes laughter similar to the myth, which, according to B. Malinovsky, is responsible for preserving cultural traditions and is functionally significant for culture. Laughter and myth are located in the space of the border of contact between culture and the subject, solving historical problems of culture translation and its generation [20].

In the subject area of psychological research, laughter finds a place to a lesser extent than the myth, fairy tale, or narrative. Among the few works on the psychology of laughter, there are studies by O.M. Popova on the peculiarities of the sense of the comical in preschool children [22]; the comical in the system of behavior regulation was considered by M.V. Borodenko [9]; the role of humor in extreme conditions of life was studied by N.P. Dedov [13]. Quite a lot has been written about laughter in an interdisciplinary context, so, referring to a poet's apt expression, without harassing "thousands of tons of verbal ore", we will focus on the argument of its expediency in culture from the point of view of a structural-dialectical approach [10]. For the analysis of laughter, we did not choose it accidentally. First, the structural-dialectical approach is based on dialectics, and this circumstance allows us to successfully study rather complex phenomena, which is repeatedly shown in the works of L.S. Vygotsky [12].

On the understanding of culture as a system of normative situations, the aim of this study was to determine the psychological significance of laughter in culture. Laughter is paradoxical and contradictory, so we consider the structural-dialectical approach as the most relevant for the analysis of laughter. O.A. Shiyan, in his work on the funny and scary in children's narratives, emphasizes that dialectics has a strong instrumental resource for revealing complex phenomena, and "...the dialectical method clearly becomes necessary in cases where it is necessary to explain transitions from the available to the possible" [30, p. 46]. There is a well-known theory of contradiction, according to which the comical is revealed only when there is a potential conflict of contradictory components in it (A. Schopenhauer, G. Hegel, F. Fischer). Secondly, the structural-dialectical approach is able to explain laughter in a particularly precise way in the context of culture. When defining culture itself, let us turn to that part of scientific thought in which culture is understood through the prism of its normativity (V.S. Bibler, I.B. Bobneva, N.E. Veraksa, Yu.M. Lotman, A.I. Rozov, M.M. Rubinstein, P.A. Sorokin) [8; 11; 19; 24; 26]. Thus, culture, in our opinion, acts primarily as "...a set of typical situations with a set of standard methods of activity prescribed by norms" [10, p. 86]. The key unit of culture is the normative situation, defined as "...a combination of factors, conditions and circumstances in relation to which society prescribes certain actions to the subject" [10, p. 86]. The normative situation exists objectively, outside the subject, but the subject, getting into a normative situation, acts in accordance with the norms set in it, in a normalized way. In our opinion, a given norm that manifests itself in a normative situation is the most important source and cause of laughter generation. After all, a person who acts outside the norm is either blamed or ridiculed [19]. Such a detailed description of the normative situation as a unit of cultural analysis is not accidental, since it is precisely this situation that causes laughter and contains "...a cultural norm (whether it is a rule of behavior in a

public place, a mathematical formula, a piece of music, etc. It has an energy component within itself, which expresses the intensity of the natural principle in the individual, which is limited by this cultural norm. <...> the cultural norm, or culture, is a tense biosocial system in which the natural is opposed to the social" [10, p. 90]. The thing is that the need to define behavior by prescription arises at the point of conflict, in other words, where interests collide. In other words, the rule is required in a tense situation. The prescription channels this tension, turning it into socially acceptable behavior, which is what characterizes the cultural norm. Moreover, the tension of the cultural norm is manifested in the fact that the need is objectified in the normative situation. Therefore, the fulfillment of the prescription is somehow connected with the satisfaction of the need. Given the Yerkes-Dodson law and the concept of emotional reaction proposed by P. Fress, built on the basis of this law, it is logical to assume that a violation of the execution of an order causes an emotional reaction in the form of laughter. P. Fress wrote: "in the set that causes strong motivation, or, more precisely, excessive motivation, is the cause of emotional reactions" [29, p. 137]. Confirmation of the involvement of nature of laughter in the cultural norm is, for example, the theory of deviation from the norm (Gross, E. Obuer), according to which the comical arises at the time of violation of generally accepted cultural norms and rules of behavior. Cultural expectations are always associated with the conformity of behavior to norms, an example of which is the process of socialization of a child, aimed at the formation of cultural congruence [31]. The spectrum of rules of behavior, with all its diversity, has an invariant series, typical for a particular age. Assessing the success of socialization, they determine cultural congruence – the degree of compliance of the child's behavior with the rules typical for his social situation of development. Non-compliance of behavior with generally accepted rules is a clear reason for laughter, which is especially pronounced in children's subculture [3; 30]. The growing ability to distance oneself and maintain a sense of security with age allows us to perceive more and more violations as comical [25], and laughter allows us to distance ourselves from fear and anxiety [14].

Laughter can be used not only for a kind of verification of compliance of behavior to social norms, but also to force to fulfill them, exercising indirect control over the behavior of others [36; 38], and revealing the subject's attitude towards the imposed norms [33]. Laughter allows us to touch upon and discuss various topics that are forbidden in culture [37], and often plays a positive role in society, acting as an indirect and somewhat sanctioned way of destruction, as opposed to directly satisfying the corresponding antisocial desires [28].

A joke often involves violating various norms: practical, epistemological, and aesthetic. Very often, humor – is a reaction to situations or images that are disharmonious, disproportionate, asymmetrical, and disorderly. We

often laugh at the ugly and disharmonious, or at things that disrupt our sense of order or unity. The advantage of laughter is that it reflects the categorization of those norms that are violated in culture. It is precisely when certain norms are violated that successful jokes can reveal a new facet of the nature of the norm itself, its structure and application [35]. Laughter exposes the meaninglessness of certain social relations, a deviation from social norms [23].

The Dialectics of Laughter in the Cultural Antinomy of Freedom and Fear

Starting on the path of the structural-dialectical approach, it is necessary to identify those opposites through which dialectics is able to explain laughter as a complex phenomenon that occurs in the context of culture. An indication of the key antinomy related to laughter, – the juxtaposition of freedom and fear-is found in M.M. Bakhtin's classic work "The Work of Francois Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance". The behavior of a medieval person was strictly regulated, which excluded laughter as an opportunity to show his freedom. Fear bound the laughter of the medieval man, so everywhere in the official sites of culture, including literature, laughter was rejected, but remained an island of hope for freedom. Bakhtin directly writes about this as follows: "It was the victory over fear that medieval people felt most acutely in laughter. And it was felt not only as a victory over mystical fear ("the fear of God") and over the fear of the forces of nature – but, above all, as a victory over the moral fear that binds, oppresses and obscures the consciousness of man: the fear of everything sanctified and forbidden ("mana" and "taboo")" [5, p. 104]. Bakhtin sees carnival culture as a force capable of breaking cultural taboos, with the caveat that the medieval person returns to reality after the carnival, which does not give up hope of freedom. Laughter in carnival culture, in our opinion, aggravates the lack of freedom, ridiculing those who encroach on the foundations of culture and its norms, convincing the medieval man of the futility of his anti-cultural intentions. The idea that laughter is a path to post-carnival compounded unfreedom, is a rejection of Bakhtin's view of the nature of the medieval carnival and its laughter culture as "freedom granted by laughter." However, as Averintsev argued, "...coming out of agreement with Bakhtin, you will not lose it; coming out of a dialogical situation – you will lose it" [1, p. 7]. The laughter of a medieval person was, in essence, a path to even greater unfreedom, than which was before the carnival, in Averintsev's words, – "a special moment of the lack of freedom" [1, p. 8]. Laughter guards cultural norms just like the Inquisition, it only creates the illusion of freedom, because "...behind laughter there is never violence, laughter does not build bonfires" [5, p. 109]. The

fact that laughter is not an unselfish product of culture is also noted by Bakhtin himself: "Wine barrels will burst if you do not open the holes from time to time and do not let air in them. All of us humans — ill-made barrels that will burst with the wine of wisdom if this wine is kept in a continuous fermentation of reverence and fear of God. You need to give it air so that it does not spoil. That is why we allow ourselves to be buffoons (stupidity) on certain days, in order to return to the service of the Lord with all the greater zeal" [5, p. 87]. It is not by chance that Averintsev addresses Bakhtin the question of why Christ did not laugh [1]. For Averintsev himself, the answer is obvious: "Christ does not laugh, because at the point of absolute freedom laughter is impossible, because it is superfluous" [1, p. 9]. Following the logic of this answer, it can be argued that laughter is a sign of unfreedom, which contradicts Bakhtin's statements about "laughter". Christ stands on an extra-expert position, which was clearly expressed in the Sermon on the Mount: do not judge, so that you will not be judged. Laughter, to a certain extent, can be seen as a humanistic gesture of culture, as a way of translating norms in a nonviolent way: in laughter, "...the transition from unfreedom to freedom introduces a moment of some new unfreedom. But something else is much more important: by definition, it implies unfreedom" [1, p. 9]. This becomes clear when we refer to the jester as the subject of laughter. The fool, as the author of humor and the initiator of laughter, takes an expert position: for him, the norm is clearly reflected, and he is sensitive to any violations of it. Making fun of the violator, the joker acts as a guardian of norm preservation, turning the violator into an object of laughter. D.S. Likhachev very accurately describes the cultural purpose of the jester in the Old Russian laughing culture — the one who "makes a fool of himself": "What is an Old Russian fool? This is often a very smart person, but doing what is not supposed to, violating custom, decency, accepted behavior, exposing himself and the world from all ceremonial forms, showing his nakedness and the nakedness of the world — a whistleblower and unmasking at the same time, a violator of the sign system, a person who mistakenly uses it" [18, p. 19]. Consequently, culture needs a laughing reflection of its world order as a prevention of doom and destruction. "In smiling and laughing," Karasev writes, "we make our own assessment of the world without forcing it to change, and if the world does change, then it happens in its own order and because laughter has knowledge of what the world should really be like" [15, p. 30]. Laughter appears in culture not for the sake of freedom, but to strengthen cultural shackles. The antinomy "freedom and fear" in laughter as a cultural phenomenon shows that there is a trap hidden in it — the illusion of freedom, leading a person to the fear of being violated by a cultural norm and ridiculed. This is similar, according to Averintsev, to "...the temptation to hold some talisman in your hand — laughter, acte gratuit — to grasp it, as, according to the Russian proverb, a

drowning person grasps at straws, and believe that as long as you feel it in your hand, freedom is not lost" [1, p. 17].

Contrasting freedom and fear in laughter, it is important to note that freedom itself in the context of culture is understood not as permissiveness, but rather as a certain degree of cultural trust, approval and non-punishability associated with human security in culture. Then freedom as security is a state before laughter and before fear, and fear and laughter stand side by side, since laughter occurs at a time when culture has risks of destroying its norms. From the antinomy of freedom and fear, laughter is preferred to fear, which once bound the Bakhtin medieval man for the sake of preserving cultural norms and does not let go of the shackles in subsequent centuries, since laughter is generated for the sake of fear. Translating this idea into everyday life, let us recall those who violate the foundations of culture, introducing new norms into it — and these people become ridiculous — "cranks", "crazy", "fools". All these roles mean a loss of social position in culture, which is close to depersonalization. This subtle moment of cultural repression is described by Yu. M. Lotman [19]. This is the cruel mission of laughter for a person as a subject of culture in its normative content. To put it bluntly, we can say that laughter is the bullying of culture. The strategy of discrediting the image of the interlocutor is aimed at excluding him from the "circle of friends", sharply lowering his status. "An awkward situation that an opponent finds himself in is a source of joy from the damage caused to the author of the statement and at the same time deprives the object of the joke of respect and authority" [7, p. 101]. In addition, it was found that adolescents using aggressive humor themselves were more likely to experience social anxiety, fear, and social loneliness [32], young people aged 12 to 21, as shown in one study, who are less likely to show anger, tend, to use adaptive humor styles, and less likely to use aggressive humor [34]. It is known that the "ritual violation of norms", joint pleasure from "unexpected violation of social order, which is done "frivolously" and "temporarily"; "laughter as a rest from cultural norms" make the social environment safer [21, p. 58]. The antinomy of fear and freedom in the context of a normative situation gave rise to laughter as a phenomenon that develops the subject of culture.

The Juxtaposition of Good and Evil in the Ridiculous

The next antinomy — the juxtaposition of good and evil in the understanding of the nature of laughter- is just as explicit as the antinomy of fear and freedom. This dialectical moment is noted as a tense but ambiguous confrontation between evil and laughter: "...laughter reflects evil in its mirror and therefore it involuntarily becomes something like it" [15, p. 39].

Laughter is a response to evil, but evil is not absolute, though evil as a danger, understood by culture itself as a threat to violate its own norms. Laughter acts as a way of countering such an anti-cultural evil. Laughter, located on the border of culture, stands on its guard and arises when there is a danger threatening the cultural norm: "Laughter always goes next to evil-then moving away, then approaching it, and this connection makes itself felt in all its manifestations, starting from the most subtle aphorisms and ending with the coincidence of the designations of laughter and "evil" grins in many European languages" [15, p. 33]. Paradoxically, the delegate of culture who "sees the essence and measure of evil" is the one who produces laughter — the buffoon. He sees evil while being suprasituative, which is accurately reflected in the well-known song:

"I 'm a jester, I 'm a Harlequin, I —'m just a laugh,
Without a name and, in general, without fate.
What do you really care about those
Who you came to have fun with?"

Bakhtin notes that "the fool is a disenfranchised bearer of objectively abstract truth", the fool proclaims "universal truth", using laughter [5, p. 106]. The jester, who has shrewdly seen evil, shoots an arrow of laughter at it, but at the same time "the laughing person himself is often not cheerful" [15, p. 43]. Laughter is preceded by the threat of cultural destruction, which delegates a jester who can detect evil and ridicule it. The fool turns evil into a "merry bogeyman" [5, p. 432]. Of course, — the buffoon, dressed up in grotesque images, is only a symbol of the mission of its guardian addressed to culture. If the one who laughs, as Averintsev puts it, holds laughter in his hands as a talisman of illusory freedom, then the fool seizes evil in his hands and drowns it in laughter. It turns out that evil, like the risk of cultural transformation and renewal, is destroyed by laughter, instilling fear in the person being laughed at. Laughter arises as a detection of evil that carries risks to culture. Classic in this sense is the ridiculed Hamlet, who encroached on the foundations of Elsinore, turned into a madman, ridiculous and disenfranchised [6]. Evil as an encroachment on transformation, as the ambition of the creator with his eternal "to be or not to be?" becomes a victim of all-conquering laughter.

The Suprasituativeness of the Ridiculous in the Contradiction of the Real and the Unreal

Fear and evil, paradoxically enough, are antitheses that have defeated freedom and good, and are essential to the nature of laughter. However, laughter, along with its rational purpose in culture, also has an aesthetic, irrational component, which manifests itself in the antinomy of the real and the unreal. The antinomy of the real and unreal in laughter is due to the fact that, most often,

laughter is detected at the moment when evil moves from the place where it was, to another, usually the opposite. The subject who turns the fear and evil of culture into unreality gains suprasituative freedom. On the one hand, it is the same freedom over fear. On the other hand, the ridiculous in unrealistic circumstances becomes unattainable, distant, and from that, visible from the outside.

Laughter often occurs when the context of evil changes. All the "make-believe", "reverse", and "upside-down" techniques known in humor are no more than techniques that allow you to grotesquely show evil. For example, in Old Russian laughter, it is customary for the fool to turn his clothes outwards, putting on his hats backwards. These actions of the fool are a pathetic and audacious display of his violation of cultural norms, followed by his adventures in the "wrong world". For culture, a clear alternative to laughter is the repression of evil, as evidenced by the history of attitudes to freethinking. Here it can be noted that repression and laughter have the same purpose, which is to preserve the foundations of culture, but repression and laughter have different traces. Repression leaves vital fear, and laughter — social, cultural. "Laughter is a change of vision, a change of glasses that allows you to see the world every time from such a distance that it will look safe and funny; laughter — is a work with the space of meaning, thanks to which evil loses its effectiveness, in other words, it appears in a form that has the opposite effect on its very essence, in the form of which excesses this essence and deprives it of meaning" [15, p. 31].

In order for evil to be funny, it is necessary to see it in unreal, unusual circumstances. D.S. Likhachev calls such unrealistic circumstances "the world of anti-culture": "The following scheme of the construction of the universe is typical for Old Russian parodies. The universe is divided into a real, organized, cultural world, and a non-real, non-organized, negative, anti-cultural world" [18, p. 16]. Evil as an encroachment on cultural norms, bold, strong and terrible, in new circumstances should become weak, confused and ridiculous. Then the mission of laughter can be considered complete.

Conclusions

The structural-dialectical approach to assessing the psychology of laughter reveals the nature of laughter as a cultural phenomenon generated by the interaction of the subject and the rule in a normative situation: the funny appears at the moment of the violation of the norm as a repressive cultural reaction.

When discussing a laughter reaction to a violation of the norm, one should keep in mind the "energetic" aspect of the normative situation. From a dialectical point of view, a norm is introduced when a need arises for it. In other words, the normative situation itself latently contains a conflict between the individual and society, which can manifest itself in the form of the indicated an-

tinomies. That is why a cultural norm is introduced to overcome this conflict. Thus, according to the structural-dialectical point of view, violation of the norm causes conflict experiences in the form of an emotional reaction.

Laughter is a consequence of contrasting the antinomies of fear and freedom, good and evil, the real and unreal; laughter initiates fear as a prevention of deviations in cultural norms; for laughter, violation of cultural congruence acts as an evil that destroys the normative architecture of culture.

The aesthetic form of the ridiculous, which goes back to the antinomy of the real and unreal, allows the subject

to move the situation of a threat to cultural integrity to an unreal world — to a carnival, to a shifter, and vice versa.

Laughter implies cultural expediency in terms of broadcasting and preserving cultural norms, so the problem of the comical requires studying in children's subculture from the point of view of the development of both means and forms of the comical at different stages of socialization in ontogenesis; the study of the comical in the field of child psychology opens up new opportunities for understanding the mechanisms of forming a child's behavior in a normative situation.

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