Humour and self-concept: A multicultural perspective

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Humour and play have many features in common, both of which are important aspects in children's lives. In this article the focus is set on the relationship between different aspects of children's self-concept, including their humoristic self-concept, and interest in learning, play and local cultural activities. Participants in this study were drawn non-randomly from primary schools in Australia, Norway and the United States. The students in the sample were 8 to 11 years old and were recruited from the majority culture and from Indigenous groups in the three countries. Results show interesting relationships between the humour self-concept and gender. More boys than girls describe themselves as funny. In the majority cultures humoristic self concept seems to be related to interest in free play, free learning and free local cultural activities. Within the Indigenous groups these relations were not significant. There are reasons to consider most of the documented differences to be caused by dissimilarities between cultures, school systems, and how representatives of different cultural groups perceive and think about upbringing and education. In particular, the gender differences found call for further research.

Keywords: humour, self-concept, play, learning, Indigenous people

INTRODUCTION

In this article the focus is on the relationship between different aspects of children's self-concept, including their humoristic self-concept, and interest in learning, play and local cultural activities. Before presenting the findings, two assumptions of relevance for the humour focus in this project will be presented. The first assumption is that there are relationships between humour, joy, play, creativity and aesthetic activities. The second point is that humour is related to the concept of self. These perspectives will be further elaborated below. Especially among children in school, humour plays an important role and makes an impact on their conceptions of themselves. In socio-cultural and gender perspectives there are some differences in humoristic self concept and in interest in play, learning and local cultural activities (LCA). These differences will be discussed in the last part of this presentation.

One important aim of the study was to examine differences between socio-cultural groups in the three countries, primarily between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups. The Navajo and Anglo (north) American in the US, the Aboriginal and Anglo Australian groups, and the Sámi and Norwegian majority groups are in all three countries providing educational challenges. The Navajo people in US and the Sámi people in Norway counts about 1 % of the country's population, and the Aborigines represent around 2 % of the inhabitants of Australia. The Indigenous groups have been found to underachieve in school, and we anticipated there would be differences between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students on learning preferences, attitudes towards play,

motivational orientations and self-concepts, as well as gender differences. An examination of these aspects, comparing Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups in the three countries, was carried out. We hoped the results could provide some insights into the reasons for this underachievement. This was the major aim of the study, but in this article we concentrate on the self concept aspects, relating the humour self to gender, cultural background, and interest in play, learning and local, cultural activities.

THEORY

Like many other broad concepts, humour is difficult to define. Humour is everywhere, and its manifestations will vary between individuals and cultures, but at the same time we can state that humour is an universal phenomenon. In the humour research literature we find many different perspectives in analysing the concept (Ruch, 1998). Plato, Aristotle and Thomas Hobbes explained humour as a result of ridicule. Superiority or disparagement theories state that laughter is a response to weakness or ugliness. Other philosophers and cognitive oriented psychologists have tried to explain humour from the ability to solve incongruities (Martin, 1998). Sigmund Freud (1905) claimed that humour could relieve people from psychological and social pressure. In his description of the development of joking, he put play as a stage before the joke. Play with words and thoughts, precedes the joke.

The relationship between humour and play has been scrutinized from different perspectives for many years. Arthur Koestler (1964) considered humour as a result of creative processes, where the original and unexpected plays a central role. Avner Ziv (1989) concludes an analysis based on theoretical views and empirical data that there is a close relationship between humour and creativity. When we link joy and aesthetic activities to creativity, play and humour, we find several common features among these aspects of human life. Using Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1953) discussion of the German word "Spiel", where the different relations and meanings of play and games are described as *family similarity*, we can perceive phenomena like humour, joy, play, creativity and aesthetic activities as being "in family". They seem to have certain features in common, while others are specific for each phenomenon. The common traits are: 1) They often start with a signal (eg. storytelling usually start with standard phrases; concerts start when the conductor raise his baton), 2) they are often characterized by transformations (eg. double meanings of a word transforms the meaning in a sentence; a toy can be person in a play, but suddenly the same toy is given another function in another play), 3) opposition/liberation (eg. many jokes can be off limit, they can express critical views of society; an object of art can provoke the public), 4) sensitivity for critical attitudes in the surroundings (eg. a speaker trying to joke can be stopped by silence in the public; a bad review can stop an artist in further production; a play among kids can easily be stopped by adult regulations) and 5) they are all voluntary based on intrinsic motivation *(*eg. writers and painters create from an "inner force"; a joke can be told without planning on beforehand and play often seems to be something we cannot stop) (Søbstad, 1999). The common traits or overlapping can be illustrated as in figure 1.
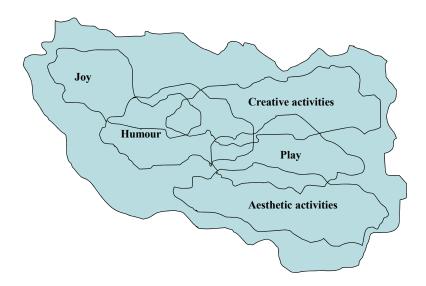
Figure 1: Common and overlapping relations between humour, joy, play, creativity and aesthetic activities (Original figure in Søbstad, 2006, p 66)

There are several arguments for the interrelations between these phenomena. In many ways they express the same mental state and have various psychological processes in common, they overlap, but there is no space here for elaborating further on this. In this article we focus especially on children's self concept. In particular, we have studied different aspects of the self, including the humoristic self, and examined the relations between them.

We know that humour often plays an important role when people are evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. In general, the self-concept is a social product and at the same time a social force. Several studies tell us that people are likely to overestimate their sense of humour; even among preschool children we have results telling that the majority of them want to be perceived as funnier than other children. A positive self concept can in fact promote the development of humour (Søbstad, 1990). But the relation between humour and self-concept are influenced the other way around too. Good humour skills can promote popularity and friendships, which in turn promote individuals to feel better about themselves. Intellectual gains stimulated by humour activities increase the chances for good achievements in school and a better self-esteem (McGhee, 2002) Research shows that humour can predict peer acceptance (Sletta, Søbstad and Valaas, 1995) and helps in achieving interpersonal goals. Accordingly, the role of humour is interesting when we ask children in school about self concept, motivation, and learning. It seems reasonable to assume there would be a close relationship between children's interest in play, interest in learning, self-concept, motivation and achievement outcomes. Indeed, important relations between phenomena like play, experimentation, creativity and effective learning have been emphasized in well-known cognitive developmental theories (for ex. Vygotsky, 1986). The role of humour has not been much discussed in relation to school learning, and research has shown that *direct learning effects* from using humour in the classroom is not easily documented (Søbstad, 2006). However, the *indirect effects* of humour, through play and creative activities, is strengthening children's self concept, and should not be underestimated as a factor in learning. Humour, play and creative activities in school, or at

home, can be considered factors to promote children's motivation and learning in school and contributing to the development of a positive self-concept in general (Harter, 1999; Izard, 2009).

METHOD

The total sample size in this study was 1076 children, aged 8 to 11 years. The children attended grade 3 and 4 in primary schools in Arizona and New Mexico (USA), Australia and Norway. The research was carried out as two studies; study 1 based upon a set of rating scales, and study 2 that was an interview study encompassing semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).

Participants in study 1 were 130 Aboriginal students, 144 Sámi students and 57 Navajo students; and 496 Anglo Australian students, 223 Norwegian students, and 26 Anglo north American students. In study 2 58 Indigenous students (10 Abor, 33 Sámi, 15 Nav) and 83 non-Indigenous students (22 Anglo Aus, 31 Norw, 30 Anglo Am) were interviewed. In addition 33 of their teachers were interviewed, out of which 10 were Indigenous teachers (8 Sámi, 2 Nav). It is not easy to get access to Indigenous groups, especially as a researcher representing a majority group. Thanks to experienced colleagues having done research among these Indigenous groups previously, we were lucky to get access to the schools we wanted to visit.

Data about Self-Concept was collected by The Self Perception Profile for Children (SPPC) (Harter, 1979; 1983; 1999), designed to measure children's self perceptions of competence across different domains, or self-concept aspects in main areas of experience. The subscales measuring (academic) competence ("some kids feel they are very good at their schoolwork"), social competence ("some kids find it hard to make friends") and general self-esteem (feelings of worth) ("some kids are pretty sure of themselves") were used. In addition to these aspects of the original scale, a measure of humoristic self concept was added ("when some kids are present there is a lot of laughter"). Each subscale consists of seven items and is measured on a four point Likert scale, with answer possibilities "Really true for me", "Partly true for me", and "Partly untrue for me" and "Really untrue for me".

Accordingly, in this study we ended up with four relevant dimensions of self-concept: Cognitive competence, social competence, humour self and general self-esteem. We used an interest scale in the first study and in the second study we also interviewed students and teachers in the three countries.

Concerning the reliability and validity of the rating scales applied in collecting data for study 1, it can be referred to earlier presentations (Lillemyr, McInerney, Søbstad & Valaas, 2004; Lillemyr, McInerney & Flowerday, 2005), as well as with reference to the instrument developers (Harter, 1982; 1983; McInerney & Sinclair, 1991; Lillemyr et al. 1998), in addition to relevant examination of the application of such instruments in other socio-cultural studies (McInerney & Swisher, 1995; McInerney, 2003; McInerney, Yeung & McInerney, 2001), indicating how psychometric research in cross-cultural research may elicit valid and reliable data, and thus useful information for Indigenous communities. In our study, reliability values for all self subscales varied mainly between .60 - .80 and between close to .50 - .75, with a couple of exceptions in the .40's. There was a clear tendency that the lowest values were found in groups with lowest numbers, which also were Indigenous groups. However a rather low value of reliability found in an Indigenous group did not necessarily mean this was the case in the other Indigenous groups as well. In a closer analysis we found that the reliability values of cultural groups with low numbers could be raised substantially with cutting down to the three best items of the subscale, as found with the social self scale (McInerney, Lillemyr & Søbstad, 2004). Factor analyses supported our interpretations of the scales having satisfactory validity for exploratory research purposes. Based upon these data

interpretations the instruments used with caution, were to a certain extent considered satisfactory in terms of validity and reliability, across the cultural groups included in our studies.

In this article we will not go into further details on the research instruments used in the project or the challenges we had in transcribing and analyzing the data, (for more details, see Lillemyr, McInerney, Søbstad and Valaas, 2004 and Ruch, 1998).

RESULTS

Relationships between aspects of the self concept
How do children perceive themselves regarding humour in relation to other aspects of the self? The answer can be found in this table.

TABLE 1
INTER-CORRELATIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF SELF CONCEPT
(COGNITIVE, SOCIAL, GENERAL SELF-ESTEEM AND HUMOUR)

	Cognitive	Social	General Self-esteem	Humoristic
Cognitive	1	.414**	.527**	.321**
Social	.414**	1	.512**	.415**
General self-esteem	.527**	.512**	1	.336**
Humour	.321**	.415**	.336**	1

** Significant on the .01 level (2-tailed)
N varied between 1052 and 1056.

For boys and girls alike, their conceptions of their humour self are significantly related to the cognitive self, the social self and general self esteem. We also found the same significant pattern, but in the two American groups the number of students was lower than in the other groups in all of the six cultural groups. Accordingly, the pattern was not as clear in these two groups as in the other groups. Still, the results for all groups show that humour seems to be well linked and integrated with the other important aspects of the self. In checking the reliability, we found that the Alpha scores for the humour items were .764 for the whole sample, varying from .66 - .79 for the different cultural groups. This is about the same level as for all the different aspects of the children's self perceptions. There are good reasons to argue that humour seems to be a contributing factor in children's perceptions of their self, and the humour scale seems to function well in comparison with scales constructed by Susan Harter (1979).

Humour self
Using the humour self subscale for humoristic self-concept, the children marked on seven items how accurate the description of a child fit to their self-concept. The descriptions "Really true of me" and "Partly true of me" were made into a positive description of a child's personality, as "True of me", and the negative descriptions "Really untrue of me" and "Partly untrue of me" were made into a negative description as "Not true of me"; on each of the seven items.

TABLE 2
CROSSTABULATIONS BETWEEN EACH ITEM OF THE HUMOUR SUBSCALE
AND GENDER

Item on the humour subscale	GIRLS		BOYS		
	Not true %	True %	Not true %	True %	Sign (p)
1 Some kids are funnier than the other kids in class	42,9	57,2	35,7	64,3	0.000**
2 Some kids think of funny things In class	31,1	68,9	27,3	72,7	0.053
3 Some kids tell funny things that makes the other kids in class laugh	38,9	61,0	32,8	67,2	0.003**
4 Some kids are clever to tell jokes And funny stories	36,9	63,1	32,6	67,3	0.240
5 Some kids are clever in playing with words and inventing funny expressions	24,2	75,8	24,7	74,4	0.585
6 Some kids are funny to be with	15,3	84,8	18,5	81,5	0.578
7 When some kids are present there is always a lot of laughter	23,1	77,0	30,1	69,9	0.000**

** Significant (Pearson chi square) on the .01 level; df=3; N= 1066

The reliable answers from the six cultural groups (Cronbach's Alpha for the seven items between .720 and .752) showed that boys had a significantly higher tendency to describe themselves as being funny and clownish (item 1 and 3) than girls. Girls were more likely than boys to state that there was a lot of laughter when they were present (item 7). On the other items we found no significant differences.

Relationships between humour self and interest in play, learning and local cultural activities based on gender differences
Taking the humour self as a point of departure, we found gender differences in relation to their interest in play, interest in school learning and more informal learning in the local environment? (See table 3.)

TABLE 3
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN HUMOUR SELF AND INTEREST IN PLAY, LEARNING AND LOCAL CULTURAL ACTIVITIES, FOR BOYS AND GIRLS RESPECTIVELY.

Humour self related to:	Girls (N= 520)	Boys (N=541)
Interest in free play	,056	,159**
Interest in adult directed play	,020	,066
Interest in free learning in school	,135**	,149**
Interest in teacher directed learning in school	,015	,052
Interest in free, local cultural activities	,019	,097*
Interest in adult directed local cultural activities	,068	,103*

* Significance (Pearson correlations) on the .05 level.

** Significance (Pearson correlations) on the .01 level.

As this table discloses the humour self for boys is significantly related to interest in free play, free learning and free, local cultural activities, in addition there is also for boys a significant relation between humour and interest in adult directed local cultural activities. For girls there is, like boys, a significant relation between humour and interest in free learning in school.

Relationship between humour self and interest in play, learning and local cultural activities in the six different cultural groups
Again, taking the humour self as a point of departure, we wanted to see if we could find cultural differences in relation to interest in play, formal learning in school and more informal learning in the local environment for the six different groups. Are Indigenous groups different from non-Indigenous groups? (See table 4.)

TABLE 4
CORRELATION BETWEEN HUMOUR SELF AND INTEREST IN PLAY, LEARNING AND LOCAL CULTURAL ACTIVITIES, BY CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Humour self related to	Anglo Au (496)	Abor A (130)	Sámi (127)	Norw (221)	Nava (57)	Anglo A (25)
Interest in free play	,112*	,092	,009	,225**	,043	-,107
Interest in adult directed Play	,092*	,146	-,070	,039	,083	-,251
Interest in free learning in school	,133**	,060	,100	,210**	,226	,184
Interest in teacher directed learning in school	,087	,093	-,044	-,036	,159	-,236
Interest in free, local cultural activities	,051	,070	-,073	,143*	,198	,321
Interest in adult directed local cultural activities	,115**	,084	,140	,069	,143	-,133

* Significant on the on the .05 level.
** Significant on the .01 level
Total N = 1056

There are no significant relations between humour self and interest in free play, free learning and free local cultural activities in the Indigenous groups. The humour self concept is significantly related to interest in free learning for the Anglo Australian group. For this group it is also a significant relation between humour self and interest in free play, adult directed play and adult directed local activities. The non-Indigenous Norwegian children also show a significant relation between humour self and interest in free play and free learning in school, but also between humour and interest in free local cultural activities. It's worth noticing that there are no significant results for the two groups from the United States. However these groups were also rather small groups in number. Only the non-Indigenous groups in Australia and Norway show significant relations between humour self and the various free activities. In general, we found adult directed activities not to be popular among students in the three countries. However, for the Anglo Australian

students we found a significant relation between humour self and adult directed local cultural activities, indicating such activities are popular for this group.

DISCUSSION

In this article we have analysed relations between humour and other aspects of self concept. In doing so, we have related the humour self and other aspects of the self, to students' interest in play, learning and local cultural activities. Gender and cultural background are the two main variables for the statistical analyses. What are the major conclusions from these examinations? Taking samples from such different parts of the world might seem difficult, although there are quite a few arguments in recent research for the legitimacy of such samples of Indigenous groups (Duncan & Greymorning, 1999; Reynolds, 2005).

The first conclusion is that the children's humour self in this study seems to be well integrated into other aspects of the self, like the cognitive and the social self, as well as to general self esteem. Humour seems to be an important aspect when we perceive and evaluate ourselves, as it has also been confirmed to contribute to the learning environment and the learning context. Humour and joy are found to characterize play and some times contributing to learning through intrinsic motivation (cf. Apter, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Izard, 2009). According to our reliability analyses, the items measuring the humoristic self are reliable and fit well into the rating scale developed by Susan Harter (1979). This means that the scale can be useful in future research studies. In principle this is actually taking on a combination of a unidimensional and a multidimensional perspective of self-concept research (Craven & Bodkin-Andrews, 2006).

The second conclusion is that we found gender differences when comparing responses on different aspects of the humour self concept. Boys have a stronger tendency than girls to see themselves as being funny and tell funny things that make others laugh. We might call this a tendency by boys towards seeing themselves as being more clownish. On the other hand girls want to conceive themselves as being able to stir up laughter on the social scene. Our findings confirm earlier research stating that boys often are taking initiatives in creating humour, and that their humour can be characterized as clownish or silly-like, and they have more grimaces. Girls are more socially and verbally oriented in their humour behaviour (Kubo, 1979, McGhee, 1979). The children in this study, aged 8 to 11 years tend to conceive themselves according to findings in previous research on humoristic behaviour (Søbstad, 1990; Søbstad, Lillemyr & McInerney, 2006).

The third conclusion in this discussion is that gender also makes a difference when we studied the humour self in relation to interest in free play, free learning and freedom in local, cultural activities, but also in relation to their interest when these activities are directed by adults. The humour self is significantly related to interest in free play for boys, but not for girls. Boys and girls with a high humoristic self-concept are significantly more interested in free learning in school. The interest in free play and free learning activities in school seem to be related to the humour self. This confirms the more theoretical discussion we had in the beginning of this presentation, that humour and play are closely related. Freedom is crucial in humour, play, creativity and aesthetic activities. We also see that boys with positive conceptions of their own humour are interested in adult directions, but also freedom, when they engage in local, cultural activities. To be introduced to the local cultural traditions, like handicraft, by parents and kinsfolk seems to be funny in general for boys.

A fourth conclusion is that there are cultural differences when we relate the humoristic self to play, learning and local cultural activities. Interestingly, the humour self in the three Indigenous groups does not seem to have a significant relation to any of the research questions about play,

learning and local cultural activities. Two of the three non-Indigenous groups, the Anglo-Australian children and the Norwegian majority group, disclosed significant relations between humour self and interest in free play and free learning. The Anglo-Australian Group was also more positive to adult directed play and adult directed local cultural activities, while children from the Norwegian majority had a more positive attitude to free, local cultural activities.

In general, the non-Indigenous groups were more positive to free learning and free play. The Indigenous groups, according to other results in this project, seemed to endorse more directed learning in school and were not freedom-oriented as much as other groups (Lillemyr et al, 2008). These results can seem contrary to what others have found in earlier research (Harris, 1990). However, we find this is not the case; as we think this primarily confirm the Indigenous people's *perception of what has traditionally been the Western culture's concept of learning,* even if the concept of school learning has changed in many Western countries now (Lillemyr, 2002), as recent reforms advocate more free learning in schools. Indigenous people's traditional opinion of learning from their culture's perspective originates from a perception of freedom in learning, as it has been indicated in research (Nystad, 2003). Furthermore, the Indigenous groups in this study seem to endorse a combination of free and directed learning, to a larger extent than the non-Indigenous groups. In doing so, the perspective of scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1986) seems even more relevant with Indigenous students' conception of learning than with non-Indigenous students. It might even also pave the way for a broader conception of learning than has often been practiced in schools. This is also in correspondence with the holistic approach to knowledge and more complex learning styles found with Indigenous people (Christie, 1997; Hughes & More, 1997). In general, this seem to indicate it is not easy to interpret the results found in this and other studies, in terms of what type of learning or preferred learning style students from different cultures endorse. When we link these attitudes towards learning to their humoristic self-concept, we do not find a significant relation for Indigenous students. Why did we find these indications? We believe that we have to look into national values and traditions in relation to schooling, play and cultural activities in the neighbourhood. In our opinion the results might reflect that within the Indigenous societies traditional, teacher or adult centred learning is still dominating, because of what has been signalled from the majority culture. For this reason Indigenous students expect learning in school to be more directed by the teachers, in contrast to free learning at home? In the majority groups new theories of learning and new curricula seem to have had more impact in school practice, at least in some countries. We see this especially in Norway, where the play aspect is more strongly emphasized, and where children-oriented views of learning are more widespread (Lillemyr, 2002). In sum, in this project, we consider most of the documented differences to be caused by dissimilarities between cultures, school systems, and how representatives of cultural groups perceive and think about upbringing and education; and not least because of how they perceive each others' cultures. We must also remember the advantage but also increased challenge for Indigenous cultures to adapt to and develop relatedness to at least <u>two</u> cultures. This should to a greater extent be flagged as an advantage and a valuable resource in today's society. We find this is actually what Reynolds (2002) is talking about in his search for relevance and identity, which is also affecting upbringing and education related to humour. Another important fact is that indigenous students have an extra challenge in relating to two cultures. Attending school is demanding and calls for serious attitudes for students from Indigenous groups. Humour tells us something about the culture we live in, and how we relate to this culture. Children's relatedness to themselves, to others and to the culture surrounding them can be studied from many angles. The humour perspective might be an unusual, but not uninteresting, angle when we study learning, motivation and relatedness in different societies.

We have found data that confirm our theoretical assumptions, especially the relations between

humour, play and more freedom-oriented activities. The data documents differences in relation to gender and confirm earlier research. On the other hand we have seen some differences between children in Australia, USA and Norway that need more explanations. In particular, the cultural differences found call for further research. Our present explanations of differences tend to be general educational and traditional. However, until more research is done, we are left with more questions than answers in this concern.

We can see several implications for practice based on these conclusions. If humour can strengthen the student's self concept and promote social interaction in school, humour should have a stronger position in the classroom. Since the relationship between play and humour seems to be strong, young students in elementary school could profit in several ways by giving play an important role in the learning processes. If teaching Indigenous children are based on an understanding of their life world (Craven & Bodkin-Andrews, 2006), they could learn better. Of course this will require more cooperation between the children's homes, the local community and local school authorities, as has been successfully attempted recently (Lee & Thompson, 2007), and possibly as early as in early childhood (Storjord, 2009). The primary reason for this is to obtain a strong sense of relatedness for Indigenous students and strengthen the sense of self-determination for Indigenous people, as relatedness is considered one important need to satisfy to increase students' intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Furthermore an increase of intrinsic motivation goes through a strengthening of students' general self-esteem, as indicated in our studies. Indigenous traditions and culture must be the basis for the curriculum. Harris (1990) argued for a culture domain separation. He considers this the most positive form of biculturalism. Two separate cultures must be established in each school. For Aboriginal schooling in Australia Harris recommend local curriculum development and promotion of training of Aboriginal teachers. He also argues for an Aboriginal school administration, as we do have in several Sámi districts in Norway, as well as in some districts in US (cf. McCarty, 2002; The Sámi, 2000). In general it seems to be necessary to work differently in the classroom, on curriculum development, teacher training and school administration rooted in Indigenous traditions and values.

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