Commentary piece

The enigma of solitary laughter

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Abstract

Very little has been published on the subject of solitary laughter. Yet it appears quite possible that it is experienced by a large majority of people. A pilot study I have recently undertaken involving participants of numerous nationalities, as well as searches through literature and across the Internet, suggest that solitary laughter, while not as common as social instances of laughing, is a widespread human behaviour. It is even accorded special value by some. Seeking to encourage further research into the subject, this article discusses research and examines the forces that have militated against a more thorough research engagement with solitary laughter. It argues that a primary factor may be a pervasive assumption among influential scholars that laughter is an essentially social phenomenon and that laughing in solitude may be explained away as "vicarious" or "pseudo" socialising. Doubt is cast here upon that assumption. It is argued that while the reductionism at work in the extremely broad application of a social hypothesis may be theoretically attractive, it belies the diverse, evolving operations of both laughter and humour; this may be unnecessarily, if unwittingly, restricting the field of enquiry. Solitary laughter is a significant, complex behaviour and worthy of attention in its own right.

Keywords: laughter, solitude, humour, theory.

1. Introduction

> [Myson] was seen in Lacedaemon laughing to himself in a lonely spot; and when someone suddenly appeared and asked him why he laughed when no one was near, he replied, "That is just the reason."
>
> Diogenes Laertius (1980 [1853])

It's one of the hidden gifts of life. When you can be alone and for whatever strange stirring in the brain, you laugh out loud.

Jack Lee Taylor (2015)

We never truly laugh alone. This is the implication one might draw from browsing the scholarly literature on humour and laughter. There is not a single article in any of the humour-specialist journals specifically on solitary laughter. One possible reason for the dearth of research on the subject is that according to an influential school of thought in contemporary humour theory circles, humour and the laughter response to it are "essentially social": "Humour is fundamentally a social phenomenon. We laugh and joke much more frequently when we are with other people than when we are by ourselves," Martin observes (2007: 5, see also 113). This is sourced primarily in Martin's own empirical work with Kuiper which claims to show "the essentially social and spontaneous nature of laughter" (1999: 376) as well as that of Provine, who asserts that "Laughter is the quintessential human social signal. Laughter is about relationships" (2000: 44). Provine's research has been cited extensively not only in scholarly publications but by popular research-based journals such as *Psychology Today*, which states that "most people do not laugh alone" (Greengross 2012), and the American Psychological Association's *Monitor on Psychology*, which in a cover story goes even further by contending that "People...don't laugh when they're alone" (Winerman 2006: 58).

Yet solitary laughter does, as an empirically verifiable phenomenon, exist. In a pilot study I have undertaken, a very high proportion of people reported laughing when they are by themselves. There are good reasons to believe that humans do laugh when they are alone, and that it is not the same as, or simply imitative of, laughing with others. Web forums on the subject reveal almost all respondents declaring they laugh alone, and a number claiming to laugh more freely in solitude, for instance, "I laugh out loud *especially* when I'm alone" (Quora 2013), "I'm far more prone to laugh out loud when alone than I am when in the company of others" (Psychforums 2010). What makes the relative silence around the issue among humour scholars even more intriguing is that solitary laughter not only exists but is highly valued by some, as exemplified by the quote from a young writer above this article (Taylor 2015), and this from a web forum discussion of the subject: "I laugh regardless if anyone is there. It's healthy" (GameSpot 2005). In fact, my informal web searching discovered generally positive or neutral and very few negative comments on the behaviour. A twenty year-old Indonesian respondent to my own survey commented: "It might be weird but I think it's important to laugh on your own sometimes".

The aim in what follows is not particularly ambitious. It is not to condemn the scholarship of those pursuing the social operations of laughter: such research has made an important contribution to developing the legitimacy, rigour and influence of humour and laughter studies. It is rather to argue the case for deeper consideration of the presumption that laughter, and by implication humour, is "essentially" or "fundamentally" social; in short, I want to suggest that the use of those adverbs may hinder a judicious treatment of laughing alone as a subject of study. It is hoped that addressing this issue might help to stimulate research into what is a fascinating and significant, perhaps increasingly important, human behaviour in its own right: the production of laughter, particularly through humour, in solitude.

I will begin with a brief description of the preliminary surveying I have conducted which in part addresses the phenomenon of solitary laughter. This leads to an examination of the approach to laughing alone in that scholarly literature which has tended to promote the study of laughter exclusively or overwhelmingly in terms of social context and signification. It will also prompt some tentative speculation into this and other forces at work in the apparent

delimitation of the scholarly treatment of solitary laughter so far. This is followed by a brief discussion of why solitary laughter is a phenomenon worthy of study, raising questions (at this point, little in the way of answers) about not only laughter but solitude and the dynamic, changing relationships between selves and societies.

2. A pilot study

The quote above from a young Indonesian woman about the perceived value of solitary laughter comes from a pilot survey on attitudes towards laughter I began with an assistant in 2015. Over time, the survey collected responses to various questions and requests for input on points specifically related to laughter, with an explicit emphasis upon the actual behaviour of laughter rather than the content of humour which might generate laughter as a response. The survey was launched from my university in central Japan and was initially conducted in English through written responses on paper with mostly undergraduate and graduate students but with a significant number of non-students and an age range from late teens to seventies (although most respondents were in their twenties). We have recently expanded the project with a fully Japanese version and both English and Japanese versions that can be distributed and collected digitally. To this point, 104 questionnaires have been collected. 97 of these were distributed and collected before lectures open to university students and members of the public. To test an electronic survey form, seven questionnaires were sent to colleagues and all collected by email. Overall, 66 of the respondents were Japanese, 11 were Chinese; the remaining 27 respondents came from 19 countries: Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Colombia, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Korea, Mongolia, Myanmar, Peru, Russia, Singapore, Switzerland, Thailand, UK and Vietnam. For this study, no attempt has been made to attain proportional cross-sectional representation; still, it is worth mentioning that even at this preliminary stage the study reflects no more demographic bias, and greater diversity, than some previous studies of laughter and of humour styles which have relied exclusively or heavily on university student populations from within a single geographical area.

Our survey, with eight to eleven items, most of which require short written responses, has varied somewhat since we began: some elements have been added, others removed. Here I am concerned mostly with a single item containing three questions in the survey devoted to the subject of solitary laughter which has existed from the beginning, motivated by informal surveying I had previously done through students, colleagues and acquaintances. The first question among these asks respondents if they ever laugh while they are alone. Of the 104 respondents, only three said they do not (all three Japanese, interestingly). Addressing the issue of so-called "vicarious sociality" hypothesised by both Provine and Martin to be in operation when a person laughs in response to humour on TV or other media, we asked, "Do you ever laugh alone when you are not using media (Internet, TV, radio, for example)?" 84 per cent responded "Yes" and a possible cultural difference emerged since all of those who said "No" (16 respondents) were either Japanese or Chinese. (Three questionnaires were incomplete in this section and so excluded.)

As a pilot study, and given that we have as yet gathered nothing about frequency of laughter events, I present this data merely as suggestive, in no way conclusive of anything. Ultimately, I would argue that statistical data *alone*, including frequencies, should not be used to determine the significance of a behaviour anyway, but one thing the initial foray suggests is that there is reasonable cause for doubt about the more extreme dismissals of solitary laughter.

3. The marginalising of solitary laughter

There is one statistic that is most often cited to support the "laughter is about relationships" position. This is the assertion by Provine, from a study with Fischer published in 1989, in which participants (just 28 undergraduate university students) were asked to keep diaries recording various activities for one week, and where it was found that subjects were around thirty times more likely to laugh with others than alone. Crucially, however, this striking figure is qualified by "in the absence of media" (Provine & Fischer 1989: 301; Provine 2000: 45). What is rarely mentioned is that without that qualification, the original research paper observes that "social laughing was over five times as likely as solitary laughing" (1989: 301), a drastically different statistic. It should also be noted that Provine and Fischer give no data about what proportion of the subjects' waking lives was actually spent in isolation. As alluded to by Prusak (2004: 382), without knowing that, strong and generalised claims about laughter's sociality might best be tempered.

Martin and Kuiper's study which, while not seeking to address the solitary laughter issue primarily, found, with a better demographic sample (80 subjects ranging in age from 17 to 79) with 3 days of self-reportage, that 11.6 per cent of laughter occurred when people were alone (1993: 368), again with no reference to the relative times spent by subjects with or without company. It is apparently in order to explain the quite substantial existence of solitary laughter that Martin later claims, following Provine, that this figure can be significantly reduced by discounting solitary laughter which occurs in the presence of media, from TV to books, as "pseudo-social" (Martin 2007: 5, 113).

It makes sense that those pursuing a broad social theory of laughter will be inclined to accept the hypothesis that all media use constitutes "vicarious sociality", as does Nelson for example (referring to Provine) in a book titled *What Made Freud Laugh: An Attachment Perspective on Laughter*: laughing with media "arguably is a form of distal social relating", Nelson claims (2012: 50). Arguably, but only arguably. Those advancing the hypothesis cite no evidence to support it. This is not to say it is necessarily wrong, but that it remains hypothetical. We might reasonably ask ourselves whether people do in fact consider themselves to be with others when using media. Would it not depend on the situation, the form of media, even the content of that media? For instance, a sense of social context is surely fostered through canned laughter in a comedy show on TV, but perhaps not so much, if at all, in reading a novel, essay or article. In any case, I am generally aware that I am alone: it is not the same as actually being in a physical space with others. Nor is it at all clear to what extent the medium is generating laughter by providing a vicarious sense of social context and to what extent it is supporting laughter simply by providing more humorous stimuli. It should also be kept in mind that if I am alone, no one is expected to hear me laugh; lacking an audience, laughter is not performing that communicative function that "social essentialists" consider to be the sole or primary purpose of laughing. In fact as a solitary laugher I may be acutely conscious that no one can hear me — which in some cases is precisely what allows me to do it: "I tend to do this often, usually laugh at things that make most people (normals) recoil in horror" (Psychforums 2010). Such a phenomenon is acknowledged by Chapman and Wright (1976: 202). So there are important differences, and no overwhelming case has been advanced as to why we should accept that a definitive observable characteristic, physical isolation, can or should be so readily ignored.

The argument seems to become particularly strained when an attempt is made to account for those instances of laughing which are neither social nor "mediated sociality". Provine claims that "Laughing almost never occurred out of a social or media context" (1989: 301), "almost disappeared among solitary subjects not exposed to media stimulation" (2000: 45). Yet, while I have no frequency data, my surveying suggests solitary laughter without the aid

of media is far from absent in many people's lives and certainly apparent enough to prompt the question as to whether laughter as a whole can be so confidently declared to be "about relationships" as opposed to very strongly *facilitated* by social context. While Provine simply discards such laughter as statistically insignificant, Martin makes an attempt to account for the phenomenon, giving the example of a person recalling or imagining some comical event, and indeed in my own research this was readily identified by people from various cultures as part of their everyday experience; it is frequent enough for Japanese to have a common term, *omoidashi warai*, to designate laughing or smiling when some previous comical event comes to mind. Martin's explanation for this experience is that these laughter events too are "pseudo-social" as they usually come from "reliving in memory an event that *involved other people*" (2007: 5), they "typically involve...recalling an amusing experience *with other people*" (2007: 113) [emphases added]. Once more a certain doubt arises. Firstly, it is not always the case that thoughts of other people are involved. Secondly, no empirical support is provided for the assertion that merely thinking of something involving other people places a person effectively in a social context regardless of physical isolation and media disconnection. According to the extreme social hypothesis, one may be alone at sea without a communication device but if one even *thinks* of something involving other people then one is no longer truly alone. It is difficult to avoid the sense that the word "social" is being semantically stretched to preserve the definition of laughter as an essentially social phenomenon.

In fact, my surveying suggests that even if one were to accept the extremely broad definition of "social" problems would remain. Some respondents give examples of unmediated solitary laughter emanating from phenomena completely unrelated to others, such as this: "I come home late at night with a malfunctioning brain and take out my subway commuter pass instead of my key to open the door." Numerous respondents refer to laughter following some such event, even something as innocuous as "I laughed because the coffee stain looked like a flower".

It is difficult to make sense of this as pseudo-social behaviour. But, actually, it is possible to conceive of a simple device to recuperate even this solitary laughter to the social sphere if one were determined to do so: we could argue that in this case, the self separates from itself and forms an intrapersonal society in which one member finds hilarity in the actions, or perceptions, of another, as suggested long ago by Thomas Hobbes: "laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or *with our own [selves] formerly*" [emphasis added] (Hobbes 1840: 46). This is not the place to rehash the long debate over the credibility of the so-called superiority theory that is sometimes traced back to, or through, Hobbes. Suffice to say that modern incongruity-based theory has convincingly determined that humour-derived laughter is not so much dependent upon a comic butt as upon a resolved or unresolved disjunction between competing scripts (Raskin 1985). This is not to question the existence of ridicule, but only to observe that ridicule is not fundamental, and that the perceived status of a self in relation to another self need not be considered an essential psychological requisite of laughter. To return to the specific case of solitary laughter, there is little reason to posit multiple selves within the same physical body, particularly in the case of laughter produced by something like a coffee stain looking like a flower. Ultimately, if we find ourselves again attempting to recuperate solitary laughter entirely to the social sphere by dissolving the very notion of solitude, we should probably ask ourselves why we are trying so hard to do that. I will return to this question in a moment.

If, in devotion to the absolutist "laughter is about relationships" position advanced by Provine, one radically psychologises the event, if one contends that the context of laughter is to be determined wholly with regard to the perceived or imagined situation of the laugher

regardless of physical or mediated distance from others, further problems arise. Again, it is not at all clear, and as far as I am aware insufficient data exists to make it clear, that people laughing alone necessarily consider themselves to be with others. I have received no such reports in responses to an open question about the triggers of solitary laughter experiences in our surveying. Moreover, it is not self-evident that laughing alone, even if one at some level considers oneself to be in company, is precisely the same psychological experience as laughing in social, physical proximity to others.

If one does take the psychological route in defining the social, there are actually grounds for inverting the whole psychological pseudo-sociality argument through a notion of "psychological isolation". In this regard, let me note another interesting, significant observation drawn from our surveying. A Colombian respondent wrote that he sometimes experienced solitary laughter when, strictly speaking, he was not alone. He gave the example of walking in a public space by himself, "when I'm in no rush", and observing some comical event. In this articulation of the event, the laugher considers himself to be in isolation despite being able to see and hear others, and yet laughs spontaneously. An online forum participant writes, "I tend to laugh by myself often. It gets wierd [sic] when I laugh about nothing in particular, and happen to be in public when it happens" (Psychforums 2010). The Irish writer James Joyce seems to have been given to such laughter, referring to "laughing and singing to myself down the Boulevard Saint-Michel" and proudly claiming "I have more than once upset a whole French café by laughing. An old woman shook her umbrella in my face one day in Dublin — I was laughing so loudly" (Joyce 1975: 18–19). This suggests a perceived experience of laughter that is precisely the opposite of the school of thought, attempting to view laughter as fundamentally social, which contends that the isolated laugher must at least *imagine* her or himself to be in a social context in order to laugh. If we are to accept the notion of "vicarious sociality" (which seems possible in some cases) and to invest so much in it theoretically, then it would be useful to more thoroughly investigate and substantiate its operations, as well as the functions of that apparent counterpart, "imagined isolation". It is possible that the latter might have special significance in relation to laughter due to the sense of social distance sometimes associated with it, so-called "comic detachment".

So far I have focused on laughter, yet, as mentioned at the outset, Martin explicitly draws upon data and assumptions about the social nature of laughter to assert that humour too is necessarily social. In that regard, it may be useful to look at another influential study by Provine, involving observation of 1200 public instances of laughter. Provine there found that only 10 to 20 per cent of prelaugh comments were considered to be "even remotely humorous" by those collecting the data (Provine 1993: 40). That is to say, an overwhelming majority of the social laughter was not generated by humour, but by some other, apparently psychosocial, communicative function of laughing. This is unquestionably an important revelation concerning laughter's social operations. But it also has implications for the study of solitary laughter which have not been mentioned. In our most recent surveying we asked the question: "Do you think there is 'real' laughter and 'fake' laughter?" All 16 respondents stated that they believe fake laughter exists and, when asked to give an example, most often referred to the kinds of socially induced, or "humourless", laughter Provine describes.

Significantly, Provine's "30 to one" and "five to one" statistics concerning solitary laughter make no such distinction between fake and real laughter. It is possible that "fake laughter" exists even in solitary situations, but it appears to be comparatively rare: all of the examples given of solitary laughter by my survey respondents attend some kind of identifiable incongruity; they are what we might call "humorous laughter". Provine and Fischer's observation in the earlier (1989) study is, of course, legitimate, but it makes no distinctions: they admit that their study "strips laughing, smiling, and talking of their richness and subtlety and treats them as motor events distributed in time" (1989: 296). Again, this is

not problematical in itself, but when using laughter as an indicator of the social nature of *humour*, as Martin does (2007: 5, 113), it would seem logical that we should only include humorous laughter, not the "fake" laughter, in making such a determination. If we were then to assume, based on Provine's 1993 study (cited by Martin and Kuiper (1999: 358)), that only 10 to 20 per cent of social laughter is generated by humour (and that a far higher percentage of solitary laughter is humour-generated) we could reasonably expect to find that the statistics comparing social and solitary laughter in general would give way to substantially higher relative rates of solitary instances where specifically humour-generated laugher is concerned. Of course, this requires further empirical study, but there are at least grounds here for again thinking that where *humorous* laughter is concerned social context may be a strong facilitating factor rather than an indispensable requisite.

4. Making sense of the silence

All of this leads to a quite obvious question when viewing humour or laughter theory as discourse: why has there been such a vigorous defence of an essential sociality in laughter and consequent downplaying of laughter in solitude? For the sake of exercising a kind of self-reflexive contextualisation of our theorising, allow me to speculate a little on various possible contributing factors, beginning with a little historical background. It is worth noting that in a chapter in Goldstein and McGhee's *The Psychology of Laughter* (1972) an important figure in the development of empirical approaches to aesthetics, including humour itself, Daniel Berlyne, observed, "Laughter is certainly remarkably amenable to social facilitation and influential in interpersonal relations. But it can occur in a solitary individual, so it seems doubtful that its prime significance is a social one" (1972: 51). Empirical research by Chapman soon confirmed that "subjects did laugh and smile a little in the alone condition" (Chapman & Wright 1976: 202). Of Hertzler's earlier contention that laughter is "a social phenomenon. It is social in its origin, in its processual occurrence, in its functions, and in its effects" (Hertzler 1970: 28) Chapman later concedes that this articulation, while attractive, "borders on an extreme" (Chapman 1983: 135), revealing some discomfort with the socially essentialist position. There was an apparent tension, then, and the existence of solitary laughter was a crucial, if quiet, point of contention which those who sought theoretical reduction, the attractive simplicity and neatness of universals (as offered by a theory propounding laughter's essentially social character) would need to address. Provine's advocating the vicarious sociality hypothesis regarding solitary laughter would help to do that.

While most of us attempt to abide by principles of impartiality and cross-disciplinary cooperation, it is difficult to ignore certain disciplinary investments in theoretical debates and the way they are framed. If laughter and humour are deemed essentially social it would underwrite concentration of research upon communicative aspects, perhaps addressing a perceived imbalance. As Martin writes, "Many of the traditional theories and much of the early research on the psychology of humour neglected interpersonal aspects, focusing instead on cognitive and emotional processes taking place within the individual" (2007: 114). Shifting the theoretical centre away from the individual would serve among other things to curb the excesses of armchair philosophising, perhaps the perceived excesses of philosophy itself which once held so much sway in intellectual discourse around humour. After all, absence of scientific verifiability was inhibiting acknowledgement of the significance of the study of humour and laughter in certain academic fields. In that context the silent sinking of solitary laughter, the most private species of laughing, could be seen as nothing like a conspiracy but a form of strategic collateral damage.

Another contributing factor might be a pervasive sense of social censure — real, implied or imagined — attending solitary laughter. That inhibitions attending solitary laughter have been longstanding and quite widespread is evident in the aforementioned quote from James Joyce, and in survey responses we gathered on the subject such as: "When I was a child I often heard that people laughing alone (especially when they remember something alone) are creeps (or lewd or perverted)" [Japanese female]; "Once, a woman of my guest [host] family reacted puzzled when I laughed alone in my guestroom" [German male]. These instances suggest the existence of both censorship of solitary laughter and a certain defiance of that censorship, an interesting phenomenon.

A related factor informing the relative silence around solitary laughter is perhaps that it simply "feels right" to think of laughter as being extroverted. While laughter has innumerable tones and intensities, the image of laughter which often creates the strongest impression is that of the boisterous, highly kinetic laughter of festivity, of a group or mass transformation in mood. For many this may be the most intense, memorable experience of laughing. It may also be the most attractive since here laughter is associated with various other experiences generally deemed positive such as group affiliation and also, paradoxically, temporary release from the restraints that regular social life imposes.

There may also be an ideological component, affecting the academic domain even more than the broader community: a culturally liberal belief that laughter *should* belong to groups. The most conspicuous articulation of that idea is the notion of communal, "carnivalesque" laughter typically identified with the Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin which emerged in Europe in the 1960s and rose to prominence in cultural studies in the native English-speaking countries thereafter. This rather idealised view of laughter was produced, consumed and disseminated in part as a reaction against the privatised individual focus of psychoanalysis (referred to explicitly by Bakhtin) including Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Perhaps some of this spirit continues to operate in a moderated and less conspicuous form, less consciously and without reference to Bakhtin, in scholarship which has emerged in or after that era of strident reaction against so-called "bourgeois individualism" and the related notion of an autarkic self.

This is not to say that the hypothesis that laughter originated in social contexts in which it served, and often continues to serve, a communicative function is misguided. The evolutionary anthropological approach pursued by Provine, which adopts that line, can only speculate upon the origins, very possibly as far back as our ape ancestors, but it is not an unreasonable hypothesis. An area of considerable doubt is whether laughter continues to perform *only* that function, the communicative function, up to the present time in all places, not least of all in an environment of hi-tech mediation (which is far more pervasive and privatised now than when Provine did his study). It is telling that Provine and Fischer remark the usefulness of demarcating situations with media interaction in their study as follows: "The no-media condition best represents the environment of our ancient ancestors who had less access to such stimuli" (1989: 303). The researchers, who refer again in their conclusion to "our tribal ancestors" (1989: 304), are attempting to explicate behaviour not in terms of the immediate environment but of evolutionary sources.

Let me suggest a further doubt in that respect. Provine's aforementioned comment, "Laughter is about relationships", is made immediately following quotation of an observation by the early 19th century Danish philosopher Kierkegaard: "Answer me honestly... do you really laugh when you are alone". Provine notes that "Kierkegaard concluded that you have to be 'a little more than queer' if you do" (2000: 44). This is a highly selective piece of exemplification; Provine could just as easily have sampled Augustine on solitary laughter for instance: "No one does so readily; but still sometimes, when men are by themselves and no one else is about, a fit of laughter will overcome them when something very droll presents

itself to their sense or mind" (1993: 22). Even if we limit the field of reference to modern European philosophy, there is Friedrich Nietzsche's late 19th century philosophical work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, rendering the solitary laughter of the protagonist in the mountains as a marker of existential transformation, apparently based on Nietzsche's own intense experience of laughing alone in Sils-Maria, Switzerland. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze would claim that understanding that laughter is indispensable for comprehending Nietzsche's philosophical writing as a whole. Something similar is found in the 20th century French philosopher Georges Bataille's *Inner Experience* which, drawing on Nietzsche, refers to laughter repeatedly, including this description of an intense solitary event: "A space constellated with laughter opened its dark abyss before me. At the crossing of the rue du Four, I became in this 'Nothingness' unknown — suddenly...laid bare, as if I were dead" (1984: 34). The sometimes overtly solitary laughter found in Nietzsche and Bataille would eventually, through the agency of Deleuze, Derrida and others, exert an important influence over the development of Continental poststructuralist philosophy with its emphasis upon play and the extolling of a certain kind of laughter as a foundation of becoming.

5. Some implications

In a sense more striking to me than the intellectual history, because more immediate, are the kinds of positive assessments of laughter cited at the beginning of this article such as that survey response, "It might be weird, but I think it's important to laugh on your own sometimes." Such comments raise important questions. Are evaluations of solitary laughter culturally specific? Are they indicative of social changes? If the latter were the case, then what changes? Is there more solitary laughter these days? Are people simply talking about it a little more liberally, overcoming a traditional stigma? The impression I get from surveying, Internet searches and informal discussions with colleagues and acquaintances is that a traditional inhibition towards solitary laughter is being quietly eroded. If this were the case, could it be something like the changed view of solitary sex (autoeroticism) and the increase in popular and academic discourse around that behaviour in European-American cultures in recent decades? (Lacquer 2003). Either way, it is worth noting that the Provine/Fischer work is now 27 years old.

I should emphasise that I am speculating, but if there were a change in attitudes to solitary laughter what would be the causes? The rise of neo-liberalism and increased economically, technologically driven isolation? That intriguing statistic our surveying produced on solitary laughter, that only some Japanese and Chinese reported no solitary laughter without media, could well reflect cultural differences but it could also reflect cross-cultural dynamism, the fact that the other respondents (mostly visiting students) were more itinerant and therefore more inclined to practice autonomous laughter for various reasons, somewhat like Joyce in Paris. And what might be the effects of such solitary laughter? My research is not at a stage where I could even begin to answer such questions, but they may be productive, worthwhile questions for the scholarly community to consider. My point is simply that this is unlikely to happen if solitary laughter continues to be regarded, insofar as it is regarded at all, as a statistically insignificant species of pseudo-behaviour.

Like talking to oneself or writing to oneself, laughing to oneself appears to have functions related, among other things, to conceptual and pleasurable experimentation less restricted by social censure or the need for social approval. One could call it a kind of "internal socialing" if one likes, but to leave it at that would be to overlook the important function that social distance and separation appear to play in human existence. That does not at all mean that this behaviour is unconnected to the social or that it resides beyond the realm

of social science, only that functionally such behaviour may often be not simply "pseudo" but conspicuously, functionally "other". It is epitomised by the ancient Greek sage Myson's laughing *because* he is alone (Laertius 1980: 113). Even as its vocabulary and grammar are inextricably bound to the culture, one function of solitary behaviour may be precisely to undertake operations and experiences at a remove from social context.

There are implications too for the study of humour, which may or may not generate the laughter response. In this sense, solitary laughter may be seen as the tip of an iceberg. Recall that laughter's supposed absence, along with joking, outside social or media context is used by Martin to buttress the assertion that humour is essentially social. Laughter and joking are presented as indicative of the presence of humour, but we know that much humour does not generate laughter. If even laughter is not *essentially* social then the potential for humour to be produced and enjoyed alone, without even the verbalisation of joking or the overt expression of laughter, would very likely be even greater.

There are other issues that have emerged during consideration and discussion of my preliminary research with colleagues. The most obvious is the matter of sampling demographics. As noted, my study has been heavily skewed towards Japanese. As a preliminary study and as research quite modest in its explorative purpose this may not be such a serious problem. For those advancing universal theories of humour and laughter, demographic issues clearly require continued attention, ideally including conducting surveys in the native language of respondents, which we have just begun to do. People can reveal more, including vocabulary-related cultural differences, in their own language. My own experience, the considerable limitations that my own work contains to this point, suggests the importance of this matter. On the other hand, if I may say so, what my ongoing study is exposing to some degree is a possible problem with overreliance upon the production of "normative" data; that is, the statistical erasure of phenomena that may be less conspicuous and yet highly significant. This is particularly true if we consider not only cross-cultural and intra-cultural differences but ongoing and accelerating cultural change. Alongside the clearly valuable normative studies there is plenty of room and even a need for active scholarly excursions into the different: for these, various methods of researching should be encouraged. It is to that end that most of our survey questions have become open questions, including an invitation for respondents to write absolutely anything at all related to laughter which they have noticed or considered, and to suggest questions about laughter they would like to ask of future respondents.

As for solitary laughter itself, what might be concluded at this point? Nothing, except the obvious: it exists. There are reasons to suspect it is even a norm. And it is worthy of further investigation.

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