

Teasing Out the Effects of Teasing

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Introduction

Shakespeare coined it *merry war*. Today it falls on the spectrum of *bullying*. Somewhere in between is the act of *teasing*, an age old, interpersonal expression of both aggression and affection (DiCioccio, 2001). In the days of kings and queens in their courts, jesters and fools enjoyed high status as royal teasers. The etymological roots include the Anglo-Saxon derivation *taesan* meaning to tear apart and the French derivation *attiser* referencing the stoking of a fire (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998). So whether intended to tear apart or stoke a fire, teasing results in a response from the intended targets and the effects that may be fleeting or internalized for a lifetime.

Teasing as a behavior between humans, date back to ancient Indus Valley with age old wedding customs like *sangeet*¹, in which musical performances by the families included banter and teasing as a means to provoke laughter and wit. Garlough (2008) identified that while these “insult songs” surround kinship and marriage they are simultaneously “challenging and deconstructing social order” (p. 64). Thus, the music created at this pre-nuptial party, gives the bride and groom’s families an opportunity to use humor as a means of introduction and “provides a significant portion of the entertainment” (p. 74). How these biting melodies delivered with a smile are processed or interpreted in the long run is difficult to assess.

Teasing has been present in cultures across the globe for centuries with personal appraisal left largely unknown but it is the purpose of this paper to review research regarding the effects of teasing on human relationships as it is presented today. Concepts such as humor, teasing as communication in families and between children, perceptions and cultural differences about

¹ Sanskrit for ‘singing together’

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teasing, and prosocial teasing will be explored. There is no shortage of research on this fascinating interpersonal phenomenon within a myriad of frames over the past two decades, however most recently, with the Federal Acts such as *Dignity for All Students*, the sociological and psychological implications currently may prove a worthy future study.

Review of Related Literature

According to Hack (1991), “Humor is inherently communicative because it relies on the exchange of a message between sender(s) and receiver(s), and a subsequent interpretation of the message rendering its content humorous.” (p. 6). Teasing and humor are both paradoxical by nature (Keltner et al., 1998, Hack, 1991) depending on intent, which may be either playful or harmful. Teasing is often “subsumed under, and at times conflated with, humour, irony, sarcasm, and bullying” (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001). Some use teasing as a means of masking the literal with levity however a recipient’s perception and *reception* may be less than positive. Kruger, Gordan, & Kuban (2006) assert that it is necessary to accompany a tease with “subtle redressive signaling devices” (p. 12) so that the tease is not taken seriously. Perhaps a wink or a nod with a smile. But is the signal enough to relay the intended humor while shielding the reciever from unintended hurt?

The research of Kruger et al. (2006) suggested that such signals often fall on deaf ears and even with attempts of communicating with facial gestures or ending a tease with “just kidding” is still construed as hurtful by the recipient. The research focused on teasing in three studies: among roommates, romantic couples and friends and family. A scale of 1 (not at all) to 11 (extremely) was given to the participants after they described an incident of teasing between them as either teaser or target. Questions such as, “How light-hearted would you say the tease

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was?” (p. 414) were asked and special care was taken so that the participants did not speak with each other until the end of the experiment. Their prediction was that the teasing target would take it more seriously than the teaser intended. Over-all this was found to be true, however the many nuances such as relationship, gender and awareness had individual impacts as well. Consistent findings in this study showed teasers construe the teasing much differently than those who are being teased. Again, intentions whether positive or negative still result in a less than positive appraisal by the recipient. Keltner et al. (2001) pointed to the lack of differentiation between bullying behavior and teasing as a limitation of research. So how is some teasing more acceptable than other negative forms of communication?

Teasing within families was examined by Chen (2011) across Eastern and Western cultures. It was again noted that the nature of teasing causes reactions that range from laughter to extreme discomfort, with perceptions by the receiver being a key factor. “In its worse form, teasing can be interpreted as criticism and be viewed as disapproval and exclusion. In its best form it can be viewed as harmless fun that brings intimate individuals together.” (p. 3). In this study, it was investigated whether sensitivity was linked to self-esteem. Also whether there were cultural influences on the individual’s perceptions of a tease and if different topics were forbidden or accepted according to cultural differences.

Chen (2011) examined self-construal theory which asserts that members from interdependent cultures thought of self as defined by important roles of others (mainly Eastern) and members from independent cultures that considered self as autonomous (mostly Western). These member groups led to distinct goals of relationships and were examined as contributors to one’s perception of teasing. It was thought that depending on self-construal, sensitivity to teasing would be influenced. Self-construal was not strongly correlated with teaser intent and teaser

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effect. Over-all, as expected, participants from Eastern cultures rated teasing to more positive than participants from Western cultures, however self-construal was not a good predictor of these results.

Teasing (though somewhere on the scale of a gauge for *bullying*) has an inherent interpretation of being less harmful and scarring to children. This may be due to its pervasive nature crossing centuries of cultures, families, and even the animal kingdom (Adang, 1984). However, currently the effects on children have been seen to go beyond playful dismissal. The study by Harwood (2007) sought to gain understanding of how teasing functions within the relationship of siblings and the “characteristics and constraints inherent” to that relationship (p. 1). This was an ethnographic study in which three cases of siblings was observed and data from interviews with both parents and children analyzed. The researcher used an ecological perspective and a perspective of family social influences which gave insight into the importance of context when considering teasing between siblings. The researcher couple the ecology with Theory of the Mind (understanding one’s own mind and the mind of others) as it pertained to distinguishing “between intent and accident, wishes and reality, plans and outcomes, truth and deception” (p. 9) on the most basic level. Once again that dichotomous phenomenon between positive and negative resounds when considering teasing.

Since Harwood’s study was with pre-school aged children it was necessary to align with a theoretical construct which she termed, “social constructivist ToM” (p. 9) in order to frame the analysis of the teasing between siblings. The examination sought to gain understanding of “elicitors, form, content and emotional meaning, that naturally exists with teasing in various contexts” (p. 12). In terms of social context, Harwood identified that instigating a tease based on social norms would require the children to discern teasing and the ability to tease within all

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aspects of theory of mind. So then, the definition of the term teasing would be crucial to investigation into the effects.

Harwood's work noted that the paradoxical nature of teasing was most often found in its definition. Keltner et al.'s (2001) criticized that much of the teasing literature was ambiguous and limiting in that definitions were hinged to context. This research broadened the definition to "an intentional provocation accompanied by playful off-record markers that together comment on something relevant to the target" (p. 234). This definition was purposed to "clearly delineate between aggression and teasing" (Harwood, 2007, p. 18) important when studying the behaviors of children under 6 years of age. Development of social understanding was also necessary to consider since the nature of teasing becomes more symbolic and playful as children get older. Harwood's investigation on teasing, though limited to the specific sets of pre-school subjects, presented the wide-spread aspects of teasing that makes it a complex subject.

The position that teasing should be viewed as a social interaction that actually benefits relational bonds was explored by (Campos, Keltner, Beck, Gonzaga, & John, 2007). The findings in the four multimethod studies were such that Asian Americans attributed more affiliative intent to teasers and had a more positive target experience than European Americans. The discussion of the findings by Campos et al. addressed the consistency of previous research that showed Asians as less threatened by negative information about self and more willing to over-look the implications of the teasing. Interesting though was that this culturally related difference could not be attributed to the teasing behavior itself. Here it was hinged on the concept of self-differentiation as the defining dissimilarity between Asian and European Americans giving and receiving teasing. Not all teasing then is necessarily debilitating, moreover some teasing may actually be beneficial.

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Research of fifth and sixth graders by Barnett, Barlett, Livengood, Murphy, & Brewton (2010) revealed that negative attitudes with teasing resulted in a negative interpretation of ambiguous teasing indicating an “information processing bias” (p. 61). This bias was seen mainly due to “negative attitudes toward teases and relatively negative experiences as recipients of teases” (p. 67). Teasing appears to have been banished from the lives of school children across the United States, as it may be a factor in the rise in teenage suicides and depression. But it is important to note that not all teasing must be associated with bullying. In fact the social and psychological norms among developing teenagers is particularly effective with learning to laugh at ourselves, and not taking “self” too seriously. Another similar study of Barnett et.al. (2004) showed that the fifth and sixth graders had:

a greater tendency to be prosocial teasers than antisocial teasers by both teachers (Study 1) and peers (Studies 1 and 2) and the children indicated that they generally experienced and observed prosocial teasing more frequently than antisocial teasing at home and in school (Study 2). (p. 305)

This may seem counterintuitive given the current focus on negative behaviors among children. According to Barnett et al. (2004) attention should be given to the prosocial aspects of teasing to gain better insight as “a component of healthy interpersonal relations.” (p. 305). Teasing need not be exclusively a hurtful or anti-social behavior and prosocial teasing learned and practiced at home will likely carry over to interactions with peers.

Research suggests a need to find effective ways of teaching children to discern the differences between aggressive and playful. As Keltner et al. (1998) points out, teasing can also help to increase intimacy and help to integrate members of a group.

Concluding Remarks

Teasing out the nuances that relate to teasing as a sociological and psychological phenomenon is worthy of a careful walk along the fine line between harmful and scarring or spirited and witty. This is a topic with many layers, and provokes much consideration whether viewing from the teased or the teaser point of view. There are also the many cultural and familial implications which add to the complexity.

Today, research on bullying has reached near *plethora* heights. In an effort to extinguish anything that may cause discomfort and angst to the developing child's psyche, many social/behavioral issues that must be mediated in school on a daily basis fall on a cusp. By calling every uncomfortable or undesirable action or remark "bullying" we may be doing more harm than good.

In my mind, it's the notion of protecting from all things negative rather than developing the mechanisms necessary for children to process, learn and cope with the unpleasant. It is like the over-usage of anti-bacterial soap in response to germs. By attempting to scrub out every "germ" we are actually creating a generation that may be unable to naturally resist harmful bacteria in the future. Is there a parallel that with our desire to remove adverse banter it result in a generation that lacks social resilience?

Teasing exists and has been in existence in one form or another for thousands of years. Through the research explored here there arises some generalizations in understanding teasing: 1) It must be defined and the definition needs to be clearly and effectively communicated 2) teasing often begins within the family and this may be opportunity for children to form coping mechanisms when on the receiving end of teasing and constructing discernment as to what is

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hurtful when being the teaser, and 3) there is much to learn from diverse cultures with respect to teasing and may provide foundational principles for teaching children about teasing.

A Final Word

A verse from in the Old Testament came to mind while teasing about with teasing: It is Ecclesiastes 9:11 (KJV):

“Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.”

This speaks to...well, perhaps I should just let that speak for itself.



JAMES COULDN'T FIGURE OUT WHY SUPERMAN NEVER GOT TEASED.

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