Creativity and Humor Across Cultures: Where Aha Meets Haha

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Creativity and humor are two “hardwired” characteristics of human beings (Darwin, 1872/1965; Maslow, 1943). A wide range of research has studied creativity and humor (e.g., Freud, 1928; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010; Martin, 2007), both as isolated constructs and in relation to each other. Evidence suggests that creativity and humor are closely connected: First, they are positively associated (Kellner & Benedek, 2017; Martin, 1998; Murdock & Ganim, 1993). Second, they share common antecedents (e.g., cognitive flexibility; Nijstad, De Dreu, Rietzschel, & Baas, 2010; O’Connell, 1976). Third, they produce similar consequences (e.g., psychological health; Cropley, 1990; Martin, 2001). Building on past research, the present chapter offers a unique approach by deconstructing creativity and humor from a cultural perspective.

To understand how creativity and humor vary across cultures, we first examine their key commonalities in Section 1 of the chapter. We propound that both creativity and humor (a) involve appropriate violations of norms and (b) require cognitive flexibility. Given that norms and cognitive styles differ across cultures, Section 2 details cultural differences in both creativity and humor. In support of this assertion, we systematically review how and why Eastern and Western cultures differ in both creativity and humor, and analyze how cultural differences in creativity often mirror cultural differences in humor.
Finally, Section 3 explores how cross-cultural experiences (e.g., studying abroad, intercultural social relationships) shape individuals’ creativity and humor. Specifically, we summarize recent research on how cross-cultural experiences enhance creativity, and hypothesize how these experiences may analogously facilitate humor.

**Section 1: The Commonalities Between Creativity and Humor**

Creativity is defined as the generation of ideas that are new yet appropriate to norms (Amabile, 1983). Humor is defined as an amusing social experience that “benignly” violates norms (Warren & McGraw, 2015, 2016). From these definitions, it is clear that creativity and humor both involve appropriate violations of norms, which are shared expectations about how things ought to be (Morris, Hong, Chiu, & Liu, 2015). For example, both creativity and humor violate conventional thinking (i.e., thinking outside the box). Puns are creative and humorous because they violate linguistic rules (e.g., “Reading while sunbathing makes you well-red”; “I relish the fact that you’ve mustard the strength to ketchup to me”). Critically, both creativity and humor entail subjective social evaluation: whether a norm violation is “appropriate” is subjective and in the eyes of the beholder. Because a new idea or a joke may be perceived as inappropriate, both creativity and humor are risky. Furthermore, creativity and humor are linked also because both require cognitive flexibility.

**Both Creativity and Humor are Appropriate Violations of Norms**

A novel idea is only creative if it is also perceived as appropriate (or useful, feasible, relevant; Amabile, 1983). A wildly original idea that “loses touch with reality” is likely to be deemed crazy rather than creative. To take one example, Vincent van Gogh, a paragon of artistic creativity, only received critical acclaim after his death; in fact, he only managed to sell one out of over 1,000 paintings during his lifetime because his art was perceived as too removed from
the artistic norms of his era (www.vangoghgallery.com). Importantly, individuals have different thresholds for what is appropriate. For example, individuals who are more open to new experiences and more tolerant of ambiguity are more likely to view novel ideas as appropriate and thus are more receptive to them (Feist, 1998). At the advent of the bikini, while many people criticized it as salacious and inappropriate, others embraced it as creative and fashionable (Alac, 2012).

In a similar vein, a humor attempt is funny only if it is perceived as appropriate (or benign; Warren & McGraw, 2015, 2016). Humor involves violations of communication, logic, or social norms, occurring in multifarious forms such as illogicalities (Berlyne, 1972), paradoxes (Lynch, 2002), surprises (Morreall, 1982), and sarcasm (Huang, Gino, & Galinsky, 2015). Such violations, however, are humorous only if they are appropriate. For example, rough-and-tumble play may provoke laughter when it involves friendly and benign violations, whereas the same behavior is anything but humorous when it is seen as aggressive and malevolent (Gervais & Wilson, 2005). Analogous to the subjective nature of creativity, a joke is funny only if it is appraised as benign by the perceiver, and different perceivers may react very differently to the same joke. For example, racist jokes may be hilarious to some individuals, but offensive to others (Thomas & Esses, 2004). Similarly, children will laugh at their parents’ silly facial expression, exaggerated sound effects, and abnormal body movements, but may cry out of fear if the same behaviors are exhibited by a stranger.

Because both creativity and humor involve appropriate violations of norms and because what is considered “appropriate” is subjective, expressing new ideas and expressing humor are both risky. The notion that creativity is inherently risky is well captured by a famous remark from Oscar Wilde that “an idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all.”
Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for his unorthodox discovery that the Earth circles the Sun. For the same reason, Galileo Galilei was sentenced to house arrest until his death. Creative ideas are risky not only because it is uncertain how they will be received, but also because it is uncertain whether they will succeed (Dewett, 2004). Indeed, studies have found that while people are drawn to novel ideas, they also tend to reject them—particularly when motivated to reduce the uncertainty in their environment (Mueller, Melwani, & Goncalo, 2012). This ambivalence towards novel ideas may help explain why the failure rate of entrepreneurships—for which creative ideas are the “lifeblood” (Ward, 2004, p.174)—is as high as 90% in contemporary society (Griffith, 2014).

Just like creativity, humor is risky, as it can fail in many ways (Bitterly, Brooks, & Schweitzer, 2017). The expresser must understand the norm to correctly gauge what an audience may perceive as appropriately funny. On the one hand, if the humor is too mild (i.e., benign), then the audience may not even register it as a humor attempt or may consider it dull. On the other hand, if the humor pushes the envelope, it may upset the target and/or the audience.

Given the risky nature of creativity and humor, it is unsurprising that individuals who are risk-averse tend to be low on both creativity and humor. For example, a study by Proyer and Ruch (2009) found that self-ratings of gelotophobia (or the fear of being laughed at) and creativity were negatively associated. Similarly, individuals exhibited less creativity when primed with risk-averse cognitive style than when primed with a risk-taking one (Friedman & Forster, 2001).

**Both Creativity and Humor Require Cognitive Flexibility**

Creativity and humor, in both their expression and interpretation, require cognitive flexibility. That is, one must be able to access and switch between different cognitive schemas,
which are mental representations of knowledge or knowledge structures that guide human behaviors (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). Cognitive flexibility has long been identified as a prerequisite for creativity (Lu, Akinola, & Mason, 2017a, 2017b; Lu, Brockner, Vardi, & Weitz, 2017; Nijstad et al., 2010) and humor (O’Connell, 1976), as both require the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated or conflicting cognitive schemas. The “Yes, Oui Sí Ja” joke in the opening example exemplifies the importance of cognitive flexibility. In order to understand this creative joke, one must juxtapose two seemingly unrelated cognitive schemas: (a) the semantic schema that “Yes”, “Oui”, “Sí”, and “Ja” all represent an affirmative response in their respective languages, and (b) the phonetic schema that the combination of the four words sounds like “Yes, we see ya” in English.

Creative thinking is hardly possible without cognitive flexibility. Consider the famous Duncker’s (1945) candle problem—a popular creativity measure—in which people are given a candle, a pack of matches, and a box of tacks, and challenged to affix the candle to the wall so that the candle burns properly without dripping wax (Figure 1). This puzzle is challenging because people often fixate on the tack box’s typical function as a repository for tacks. One must realize that the tack box also has other functions, including serving as a candle holder. The solution involves emptying the box of tacks and affixing it to the wall as a candleholder (see Figure 1). Another widely used creativity measure—the nine-dot puzzle (Kershaw & Ohlsson, 2004; Lu, Akinola, et al., 2017a; Lu, Hafenbrack, et al., 2017)—asks people to draw four straight lines to connect all of the nine dots without lifting their pen from the paper (Figure 2). The nine-dot puzzle is difficult because people tend to be blinded by a wrong assumption—that they can only draw lines within the non-existing box made of the nine dots. In fact, the solution requires people to think flexibly and literally “outside of the box” (see Figure 2).
Innovations often originate from flexibly combining elements from disparate contexts: The popular “ice-cream mooncake” was created by combining the Western invention ice cream and the Chinese traditional dessert mooncake. Whiteout (white correction fluid for covering writing errors) was invented when Bette Nesmith Graham realized that writing errors could be covered up in the same way that canvas painting errors are by white paint (http://www.liquidpaper.com). Firearm accuracy increased fivefold when gunmakers, observing that an arrow flies straighter if its feathers makes it spin in flight, carved spirals inside gun barrels in order to rotate bullets (Cabane & Pollack, 2017).

Figure 1. Duncker’s candle problem. Left = puzzle, right = solution.

Figure 2. The nine-dot puzzle. Left = puzzle, right = solution.
Cognitive flexibility also plays a key role in humor (Martin, 1998). Humor requires the resolution of seemingly incongruent cognitive schemas. The process of humor unfolds by placing the stimulus of humor in one mental context (i.e., frame of reference), and presenting the punchline in a different mental context (Martin, 2007). Take the following joke:

“Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. “No,” the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. “Come right in.”

The first part of the joke activates in the reader’s cognitive network a typical “doctor” script, where the patient has come to see the doctor for his bronchial throat but the doctor is not there. Based on the common “doctor” script, the reader likely assumes the wife’s response to be something like “Please come tomorrow,” and therefore is surprised when reading the incongruent response “Come right in.” To understand the situation, the reader must resolve this incongruity by invoking the “lover” script from the cues that the wife is young and pretty, that she whispered, and that she is inviting the patient in despite the absence of her husband (Martin, 2007). Therefore, individuals will only find this joke funny if they can resolve the incongruity between the two cognitive scripts by flexibly switching from the doctor script to the lover script. Similarly, the joke “How does a train eat? – It goes chew chew” requires one to flexibly connect the cognitive schemas of trains, the sounds they make (choo choo), and eating (chew chew).

The necessity of cognitive flexibility for humor is further demonstrated by research showing that individuals who have difficulty in switching between cognitive schemas tend to have trouble in understanding humor (Ozonoff & Miller, 1996). Specifically, individuals with Asperger syndrome are unable to switch between cognitive schemas flexibly (Asperger, 1944) and thus unable to comprehend certain forms of humor (Samson & Hegenloh, 2010).

Section 2: Cultural Differences in Creativity and Humor
Culture refers to a system of values, beliefs, and norms shared by a group of people about the world (Hofstede, 1980). The desires to be creative and humorous appear to be universal across different cultures (Erez & Nouri, 2010). However, given that creativity and humor involve appropriate violations of norms and require cognitive flexibility, and given that norms and cognitive styles vary across cultures, it is likely that both creativity and humor differ systematically across cultures. In this section, we focus specifically on cultural differences between the East and the West.

**Cultural Differences in Creativity**

A common perception in the contemporary world is that Easterners are less creative than Westerners (Mahbubani, 2002; Ng, 2001; Wong & Niu, 2013). A tally of Nobel prizes—the epitome of scientific creativity—reveals that Eastern countries lag far behind Western countries, particularly in the domain of science (www.nobelprize.org). For example, Japan, a world economic giant for decades, pales in comparison with smaller and less populous Western countries like Switzerland. The Needham Question (or “Li Yuese nanti” in Chinese), a conundrum raised by the historian Joseph Needham, asks why China’s scientific innovation, once so progressive, waned in the middle of the 15th century? (The Economist, 2008). After all, the Four Great Inventions—compass, gunpowder, papermaking, and printing—appeared hundreds of years in China before they were adopted by the Europeans. The Needham Question has inspired scholars to publish thought-provoking bestsellers such as *Why Asians are Less Creative than Westerners* (Ng, 2001) and *Can Asians Think?* (Mahbubani, 2002), and prompted Asian policy makers to develop programs to elevate creativity (Morris & Leung, 2010).

However, it is noteworthy that “creativity” in these contexts often centers on the “novelty” dimension rather than the “usefulness” dimension. To understand cultural differences
in creativity, one needs to scrutinize cultural differences along both dimensions. Importantly, whereas Western cultures prioritize the novelty of ideas, Eastern cultures prioritize the usefulness of ideas (Erez & Nouri, 2010). For example, although both Westerners and Chinese individuals regard “imagination” and “innovativeness” as components of creativity, Chinese individuals are also inclined to view “contribution to the progress of society” as an important component (Rudowicz & Hui, 1997). Relatedly, Chinese individuals are more likely to attribute creativity to socially influential individuals (Yue, 2004), further demonstrating the Eastern conceptualization of creativity as deeply embedded within social relationships.

Cultural psychologists have attributed these cultural differences to differences in cultural norms and cognitive styles (Hofstede, 2001; Morris & Leung, 2010; Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005). Below we discuss four fundamental dimensions—Collectivism-Individualism, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Regulatory Focus—that can shed light on cultural differences in creativity.

**Collectivism-Individualism.** Western and Eastern cultures differ on the individualism-collectivism dimension (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In essence, individualism is a worldview that centers on the self, whereas collectivism is a worldview that centers on the social (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). In Western cultures, an individualistic norm prevails and encourages uniqueness and independence; in Eastern cultures, collectivism dominates and emphasizes tradition and interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Western cultures reward accomplishments that make individuals stand out, such as creative discoveries and individual talents. In contrast, Eastern cultures prefer to embed individuals within a larger group and discourage group members from standing out. For example, Easterners tend to associate creativity with characteristics that carry negative social
connotations, including “rebellious”, “arrogant”, and “opinionated” (Chan & Chan, 1999). In one study, Nouri and colleagues (2008) randomly assigned Israelis and Singaporeans to complete an idea generation task, either alone or as part of a dyad. In the alone condition, creative performance was comparable between the two cultural groups. In the dyadic condition, however, Israeli participants generated significantly more novel ideas, whereas Singaporean participants elaborated more on the usefulness of their ideas. This cultural difference was likely because the presence of a peer activated the individualistic norm predominant in Israeli culture (which favors novelty) but activated the collectivistic norm predominant in Singaporean culture (which favors usefulness) (Erez & Nouri, 2010).

**Power distance.** Western cultures tend to be lower on power distance, or “the extent to which inequality among persons in different positions of formal power is viewed as a natural (and even desirable) aspect of the social order” (Brockner et al., 2001, p. 302; Hofstede, 1980). Low power distance is indicative of the value of equality, which can empower low-power individuals to express their original ideas and deviate from the status quo (Erez & Nouri, 2010). Individuals in low power-distance Western cultures tend to favor improvisation, and unconventional methods (Elyon & Au, 1999), which are conducive to creativity. In contrast, Eastern cultures high on power distance socialize individuals to follow the extant norms and conform to a hierarchy where “everyone has a place.” Low-power individuals in high power-distance cultures face greater risk in violating norms for two reasons. First, low-power individuals in these cultures have a narrower range of acceptable behaviors (Galinsky, 2016). This means they are more prone to norm violation if they are not vigilant and careful. Second, when they step outside of that narrow range of acceptable behaviors, they face harsher sanctions.
As a result, individuals in such Eastern cultures may be less likely to challenge conventional thinking and more likely to prioritize the appropriateness of ideas.

**Uncertainty avoidance.** Eastern cultures are higher on the dimension of uncertainty avoidance, or “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 161). Research has found that on average, cultures low on uncertainty avoidance exhibit a higher level of corporate risk-taking (Li, Griffin, Yue, & Zhao, 2013). Low uncertainty-avoidance Western cultures tend to be more risk-taking and more comfortable with unstructured situations and changing environments (Hofstede, 2001). In contrast, high uncertainty-avoidance Eastern cultures are more inclined to rely on plans, laws, and regulations that enforce existing ideas. Therefore, it is not surprising that Easterners are more apt to avoid novel ideas and instead prioritize ideas high on appropriateness and usefulness.

**Regulatory focus.** People in different cultures differ in their regulatory focus, which refers to an individual’s strategic orientation in how to regulate his or her behavior in pursuit of desired outcomes (Higgins, 1998). *Promotion focus* regulates one’s cognition and behavior to attain positive outcomes, whereas *prevention focus* does so to avoid negative outcomes (Higgins, 1998). Promotion-focused individuals are generally more risk-taking and open to change (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Hamstra, Bolderdijk & Veldstra, 2011; Liberman, Idson, Camacho & Higgens, 1999), whereas prevention-focused individuals are more vigilant and stability-oriented (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Liberman et al., 1999).

Research has shown that Westerners tend to be more promotion-focused and Easterners tend to be more prevention-focused (Lee et al., 2000). These cultural differences in regulatory focus are likely related to cultural differences in cognitive styles. Compared to prevention-focused individuals, promotion-focused individuals are more likely to identify commonalities or
abstract relationships among seemingly disparate entities, and thus more likely to integrate existing ideas to synthesize novel ones (Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2007). In addition, promotion-focused individuals are apt to engage in more exploratory processing, which is also conducive to novel ideation (Friedman & Förster, 2001). For example, when generating hypotheses about ambiguous stimuli, promotion-focused individuals listed more hypotheses about the stimuli’s identity, whereas prevention-focused individuals listed only a few hypotheses to vigilantly minimize the possibility of listing erroneous ones (Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001).

**Cultural differences in innovation.** As highlighted above, Western cultures tend to favor the novelty dimension of creativity, whereas Eastern cultures tend to favor the usefulness or appropriateness dimension of creativity. This differential emphasis on novelty versus usefulness is also well observed in the innovation literature. Innovation is typically defined as the successful implementation of creative ideas (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010). By definition, innovations are deemed high on the dimension of usefulness (or appropriateness). However, innovations can differ in their novelty levels, thus the distinction between radical innovation versus incremental innovation. A radical innovation (or breakthrough innovation) is one that is so novel that it disrupts routines by introducing a substantively different product, procedure, or service (Schumpeter, 1934). In contrast, an incremental innovation is one that builds upon a substantively similar, existing product, procedure, or service. For example, the invention of the digital camera was a radical innovation, as such a device had never existed before, but a camera upgrade from 10 megapixel to 20 megapixel would merely be an incremental innovation. As in the case of camera, a radical innovation often catalyzes a whole system of incremental innovations (Sternberg, Kaufman, & Pretz, 2001).
Due to the aforementioned cultural differences, radical innovations tend to be more common in the West, whereas incremental innovations tend to be more common in the East (Morris & Leung, 2010). For example, the camera was a radical innovation produced by Westerners, but it was mostly incrementally refined by the Japanese (e.g., sensor upgrade, weight reduction). A multitude of incremental innovations—as opposed to radical innovations—spurred the rise of Japan as a technologic powerhouse in the late 20th century. In fact, research has revealed that the average time for newer versions of product to take off is much faster in Japan than in any other country, partly due to its emphasis on incremental but constant improvement (Chandrasekaran & Tellis, 2008). This cultural difference in preference for radical versus incremental innovation is also reflected in Western versus Eastern human resource cultures. A wealth of evidence suggests that radical innovations often emerge from interdisciplinary collaborations (Blackwell, Wilson, Street, Boulton, & Knell, 2009; Perry-Smith, 2006), which are ubiquitous in the West. In contrast, Japanese organizations are known for their norm of lifetime employment (or “shushin koyo” in Japanese), which may be more conducive to incremental innovations that require long-term knowledge.

The novelty-versus-usefulness contrast is also reflected in how Western and Eastern organizations allocate resources in face of the classic tradeoff between radical “exploration” and incremental “exploitation” (March, 1991). According to cross-cultural inventor surveys (Nagaoka & Walsh, 2009), the research and development (R&D) for cultivating “seeds” is significantly more common in the U.S. than in Japan (24% vs 8% of R&D), whereas the R&D for enhancing existing businesses of a firm is significantly more prevalent in Japan than in the U.S. (66% vs. 48% of R&D). Relatedly, inventions in the U.S. are significantly more often serendipitous by-products of an R&D project than in Japan (11% vs. 3.4%; Nagaoka & Walsh,
As a well-known example, when a British research lab failed to find the hypothesized cardiovascular effects of Sildenafil, the researchers swiftly adapted and patented a surprising side-effect into a remedy for impotence under the name of Viagra (Terrett, Bell, Brown, & Ellis, 1996).

The findings reviewed above establish key cultural differences in creativity: The West prioritizes novelty, radical innovations, and exploration, whereas the East prioritizes appropriateness, incremental innovations, and exploitation of existing practices and product.

**Cultural Differences in Humor**

Along with the perception that Easterners are less creative than Westerners, there is also a common perception that Easterners are less humorous than Westerners (Jiang, Yue, & Lu, 2011; Liao, 2001). Surveys on American and Chinese students have found that both groups think that Americans are funnier than Chinese (Jiang et al., 2011). Complementing this finding, Canadians have been found to behave more humorously than their Chinese counterparts (Chen & Martin, 2007). As Judge Wu wittily put, “whereas Westerners are seriously humorous, Chinese people are humorously serious” (as quoted in Kao, 1974, p. xviii).

Compared to the burgeoning literature on cross-cultural differences in creativity, relatively little research has investigated cultural differences in humor. However, given that humor—just like creativity—involves appropriate violations of norms which vary systematically across cultures, we propose that cultural differences in humor will mirror those differences in creativity. Consider two famous incidents (as cited in Yue, Jiang, Lu, & Hiranandani, 2016):

On December 14, 2008, an Iraqi journalist chucked his shoe at U.S. President George W. Bush at a press conference. Bush brushed off the incident with humor, “if you want the facts, it’s a size 10 shoe that he threw” (BBC, 2008). In a similar fashion, on February 2, 2009, a German student threw a shoe at Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, during his speech at Cambridge University. In response, Premier Wen stated solemnly, “this despicable
behavior cannot stand in the way of friendship between China and the U.K.” (Telegraph, 2009).

Two similar incidents, two very different reactions. These disparate reactions illuminated profound cultural differences in humor. Westerners tend to view humor as a highly positive personality trait that distinguishes oneself from a group (Yue et al., 2016). As in the case of Bush, humorous individuals are admired as charismatic and creative (Rudowicz & Hui, 1997). In contrast, humor is generally ranked low among elements of the ideal East Asian personality (Yue, 2010).

Below we discuss how the two cultural dimensions that matter for creativity—Collectivism-Individualism and Power Distance—can also shed light on cultural differences in humor.

**Collectivism-Individualism.** As in the case of creativity, cultural differences in collectivism-individualism can help to explain this different prioritization of humor. Eastern cultures high on collectivism emphasize conformity to the group, formality, and appropriateness—as demonstrated by the stern response of Premier Wen. Thus, Easterners tend to hold a more negative attitude towards humor and view jokers as “nails that stick up”. In Chinese, there is a phrase “hua zhong qu chong” that literally lambastes individuals who try to stand out by means of humor. In one study, Chen and colleagues (1992) found that Canadian children viewed humor as an attribute of “sociability-leadership”, but Chinese children regarded humor as indicative of “aggression-disruption”. In another study, Jiang et al. (2011) revealed that Chinese college students appreciated humor as much as their American counterparts in explicit self-report, but associated humor with unpleasant adjectives and seriousness with pleasant adjectives in Implicit Association Test (IAT). As another telling example that highlights the role
of collectivism-individualism, a multinational analysis of TV ads found that the number of key individuals in humorous ads was higher in collectivistic cultures (Korea and Thailand) than in individualistic cultures (Germany and the U.S.; Alden, Hoyer, & Lee, 1993). When Easterners do use humor, they tend to use it for group bonding. People in individualistic cultures are more likely to use self-enhancing humor, whereas people in collectivistic cultures are more likely to use self-deprecating humor (Chen & Martin, 2007).

**Power distance.** Cultural differences in power distance may also help to explain cultural differences in humor. As discussed earlier, low-power individuals in high power-distance cultures face both a narrower range of acceptable behaviors and greater punishment when they step outside of that acceptable range (Galinsky, 2016). As a result, attempting to be funny carries much greater risk in high power-distance cultures. Confucianism—the dominant philosophy in East Asia that underlies its high power-distance culture—asserts that the stability of society is based on five *unequal* relationships between individuals: ruler/subject, father/son, older brother/younger brother, husband/wife, and older friend/younger friend (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). In other words, social formality and proper decorum are critical (Yao, 2000). As pointed out by Kao (1046/1974), “Confucianism, with its precept of the moral person of junzi, has molded the serious thoughts and habits of the Chinese gentle man for all time” (p. 3).

To command respect and ensure that they will be taken seriously, Eastern leaders tend to refrain from cracking jokes with their subordinates. At the same time, Eastern subordinates are less inclined to display humor in front of their leaders for fear of offending them. In contrast, in low power-distance Western cultures, the skilled use of humor signals confidence and competence, which in turn can enhance status (Bitterly et al., 2017). In a survey on nearly 100 Western CEOs, humor was ranked above honesty and loyalty as their strongest personality asset.
(Center for Creative Leadership, 2014). In another study on Westerners (Decker, 1987), supervisors who were rated as more humorous by their subordinates were also rated as more intelligent and effective. In the aforementioned study on TV ads, Alden and colleagues (1993) also found that the relationships between the characters in humorous ads were more unequal in high power-distance cultures than in low power-distance cultures.

**Section 3: The Effects of Cross-Cultural Experiences on Creativity and Humor**

This chapter’s final section examines how cross-cultural experiences shape individuals’ creativity and humor. Recent research has identified cross-cultural experiences as an important driver of creativity. Although research has not explored how cross-cultural experiences affect individuals’ humor, we offer some initial hypotheses in light of the aforementioned commonalities between creativity and humor.

**The Effects of Cross-Cultural Experiences on Creativity**

Due to the rise of globalization, cross-cultural experiences such as working abroad and intercultural dating are increasingly common. Across experimental, longitudinal, and panel studies, one well-established empirical finding is that cross-cultural experiences can increase individuals’ creativity (Godart, Maddux, Shipilov, & Galinsky, 2015; Hellmanzik, 2013; Lu, Hafenbrack, et al., 2017; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009). For instance, a panel study of the world’s top fashion houses found that the foreign work experiences of fashion directors positively predicted the creativity of their firms’ fashion lines (Godart et al., 2015). In another study, Lu and colleagues (2017) found that close intercultural romantic relationships and friendships are conducive to individuals’ creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship. As further evidence, studies have found that bicultural individuals who have integrated both cultures into their identity tend to exhibit better creative performance (Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2008;
Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012). This is because such biculturals can simultaneously activate both social identities and integrate the cognitive schemas of both cultures (Cheng et al., 2008).

Cross-cultural experiences can enhance creativity by shaping both the content and the processes of creative cognition (Leung, Maddux, Chiu, & Galinsky, 2008; Lu, Hafenbrack, et al., 2017). In terms of the content of creative cognition, cross-cultural experiences afford opportunities for individuals to learn about diverse ideas from different cultures. Importantly, these ideas tend to be highly unusual and substantively different from the ideas that individuals acquire within their home countries (Ritter et al., 2012). The more cross-cultural experiences someone has, the more diverse “dots” he or she will have to synthesize novel and useful insights (Maddux, Adam, & Galinsky, 2010). For example, after visiting Japan many times and studying Japanese Zen Buddhism intensely, Steve Jobs was able to apply the “simplicity” philosophy of Zen Buddhism into Apple’s design mantra, fueling Apple’s success (Isaacson, 2011).

Regarding the processes of creative cognition, cross-cultural experiences can increase cognitive flexibility (Lu, Quoidbach, et al., 2017; Tadmor et al., 2012). Cross-cultural experiences push individuals outside their realm of normal cognitive patterns (i.e., associative context), leading them to think more flexibly and creatively (Ritter et al., 2012). When people are immersed in their home culture, their creativity tends to be constrained by its conventions and routines. By contrast, when individuals are exposed to a foreign culture, they are prompted to scrutinize the different underlying assumptions and schemas in both cultures. For instance, an amusing commercial captures the miscommunication between a British guest and a Chinese host due to their cultural differences (HSBC “Eels” Ad): The Brit keeps finishing all the food on his plate because British culture views leaving food on one’s plate as a disapproval of the meal. But
each time the Brit empties his plate, the Chinese host keeps refilling it with bigger portions to satisfy the guest, because in Chinese culture, leaving food on one’s plate is a signal of gratitude that one has been well fed (Seligman, 1999). Cross-cultural experiences enable individuals to recognize that different cultural scripts underlie the same surface behavior and, as a result, to approach future situations with greater cognitive flexibility (Lu, Hafenbrack, et al., 2017; Tadmor et al., 2012). Indeed, research has found that individuals with more extensive cross-cultural experiences tend to be more receptive to ideas that originated from foreign cultures (Leung & Chiu, 2010).

The Hypothesized Effects of Cross-Cultural Experiences on Humor

Although there is at present no existing empirical research on this topic, we hypothesize that cross-cultural experiences will similarly have a positive effect on a person’s sense of humor. This hypothesis comes from the well-established finding that cross-cultural experiences increase cognitive flexibility, which is also necessary for humor. Moreover, since humor involves appropriate violations of norms, cross-cultural experiences should help attune people to cultural differences in norms and what would constitute an appropriate norm violation. Thus, we propose that cross-cultural experiences will facilitate humor comprehension, humor usage, and humor creation.

The old adage “Humor doesn’t travel” captures the idea that humor comprehension is difficult for cultural outsiders. As a simple example, an English beginner would not be able to understand why “Reading while sunbathing makes you well-red” is a funny pun. Similarly, a person would not be able to appreciate our opening “Yes, Oui Sí Ja” joke if he or she did not comprehend the phonetic English equivalents of the four words (Yes, we see ya). Through cultural learning—or the acquisition of new information and understanding about the
assumptions, beliefs, customs, norms, values, or language of another culture (Adam, Obodaru, Lu, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2018; Lu, Hafenbrack, et al., 2017; Maddux et al., 2010)—individuals can expand their repertoire of humor elements and better relate when others tell a joke.

In terms of humor usage, because humor involves appropriate violations of norms, one needs to be familiar with cultural norms to know when it is appropriate to use which kind of humor with whom. For example, in China, it is common to tell a friend or a family member that he or she has become fatter (and thus happier and healthier) after a relaxing vacation because it is considered humorously intimate and caring (“xin kuan ti pan”). However, this behavior might be offensive to many Westerners.

In terms of humor creation, individuals who have absorbed more dots, as it were, from other cultures will be more likely to create humor by connecting those dots. For example, after a dinner toast, a well-traveled polyglot might make a joke about the sound “chin-chin”, which means “cheers” in French and Italian, “kiss” in Chinese, and “penis” in Japanese.

Taken together, there is a strong rationale to hypothesize that cross-cultural experiences can elevate individuals’ humor comprehension, humor usage, and humor creation. In other words, humor should travel as long as the individuals themselves are well traveled. This hypothesis awaits future investigation.

**Conclusion**

In the present chapter, we have deconstructed creativity and humor from a cultural perspective. In Section 1, we revealed several key commonalities between creativity and humor: (a) both involve appropriate violations of norms; as a result, both are risky since whether something is appropriately creative or humorous is in the eyes of the beholder, and (b) both require cognitive flexibility.
In Section 2, we then reviewed how creativity and humor systematically differ between the East and the West. To demystify the common perception that Easterners are less creative and less humorous than Westerners, we analyzed how cultural differences in collectivism-individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and regulatory focus can translate into cultural differences in creativity and humor. Furthermore, in light of the commonalities between creativity and humor, we explored how cultural differences in creativity often mirror cultural differences in humor.

In Section 3, we examined how cross-cultural experiences (e.g., studying abroad, intercultural social relationships) can enhance individuals’ creativity and humor. We first summarized recent research on how cross-cultural experiences cultivate creativity by shaping both the content and the processes of creative cognition. In light of the commonalities between creativity and humor, we then formulated testable hypotheses that cross-cultural experiences can also promote humor comprehension, humor usage, and humor creation.

By capturing the close links between creativity and humor, we have demonstrated how cultural differences can produce marked differences in both creativity and humor between the East and the West. Whether it is the land of the dragon or the land of the bald eagle, Aha truly meets Haha across the globe.
References


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