



# Clowns and explosions: Drawings as reflections of children's humor

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**ABSTRACT:** Using and understanding humor is important for every child. Humor enhances well-being and helps children cope with different situations they face in social interaction. However, children's humor is not widely researched. In this study, we investigate the humor of Finnish children and evaluate, whether there are gender differences in their individual use of humor. The research design of this study is inspired by Roger Piret (1941). His aim was to understand the development and features of children's humor by asking them to draw pictures, which would make others laugh. The data of this study is collected during year 2013 in Finnish primary schools. The data consist of 143 drawings made by 72 boys and 71 girls aged 6 to 8 years. The drawings are analyzed through qualitative content analysis using Piret's categories of children's humorous pictures as a framework. The main data were supported by children's individual narrations based on their drawings and the observations of the researchers. The results of this study indicate that Piret's research model could still be a valid and child-centered method for contemporary humor research. The study highlights the differences in the humor between boys and girls. For boys humor is about surprising and entertaining others and their drawings are full of action, imaginary characters and aggressive elements. In girls' drawings humor seems to aim at delighting others and the connection to real life experiences is apparent. However, both genders seem to appreciate and understand each other's humorous drawings. The results of this study serve as an example of the versatile possibilities of children's individual drawings and gives both the educators and researchers perspectives to the complexity of the individual sense of humor.

**Keywords:** Roger Piret, children, humor, humorous drawings, gender differences

## Introduction

Children use humor for many purposes: to make friends, to show good feelings, to develop cognitive and linguistic competencies, and to cope with the various issues of growing up. In addition, humor may protect children in stressful situations by enabling them to see the situation from an alternative perspective (Martin, 1998; 2007). Therefore, humor may diminish anxiety, fear, frustration, and discomfort in children's lives (Berk, 2002).

Humor has a positive impact on learning by improving the learning outcomes and the relationships between children and educators. Even though humor is widely investigated in educational settings, only little research has been done on children's individual differences in humor between children in an educational setting (Anttila, 2008; Bryant & Zillmann, 1989; Martin, 2007; Özdogru & McMorris, 2013). Roger Piret (1941) is an early exception as his central idea was to discover what children's humor is like by asking them to create drawings that make others laugh. In this study we wanted to follow Piret's footsteps.

Humor is an important part of social skills and it is vital to enhance children's situational awareness. The perception of humor is a subjective matter, and individual differences in the sense of humor can influence the way in which people respond and are affected by humor. Not all people appreciate the same kind of humor and the user of humor will never be able to fully assess how the humor is perceived. Therefore, using and understanding humor might be a challenge (Özdogru & McMorris, 2013).

Even in this transgender age of changing attitudes and understanding of genres, there are stereotypical perceptions of children's humor. These conceptions, like boys and girls having different sense of humor, are partly based on every day assumptions, not research-based knowledge. These stereotypical conceptions are not beneficial to neither boys nor girls. (Lahelma, 2004.) Therefore, it is necessary to develop and test applicable instruments which will demonstrate children's unique ways of using and understanding humor. In prior studies on children's pictorial humor and gender differences the results are contradictory: In Loizou's (2006) study, there were no gender differences in humor, but other researches (Brown, 1993; Dowling, 2014; Pitri, 2011) highlighted the divergence in their humor.

In this study, we investigate humorous drawings of Finnish children. Drawing is considered as a common activity through which children can articulate what they know, express their feelings and concretize their linguistic and mental representations. Moreover, drawings are a form of visual communication and can be used to explore children's learning and developmental skills. (Loizou & Kyriakou, 2016.) According to Pitri (2011) almost all

children produce funny drawings which include characters and events from their daily life. The main humorous features in children's drawings are usually absurd, incongruous, playful, blunders and naughty details from their experiences and environment. According to Loizou (2006) children are capable of recognizing and appreciating visual humor and children's responses to visual humor can provide us explanations why children consider something funny. Yet, the area of children's pictorial humor is not extensively investigated. In our study, we aim to find out what kind of humorous drawings Finnish children create and are there gender differences in these drawings. The instruction for these drawings and the framework of analysis is inspired by Roger Piret (1941).

## **Humor and child development**

### **The concept of humor**

"Humor involves the communication of multiple, incongruous meanings that are amusing in some manner" (Dunbar, Banas, Rodrigues, Liu, & Abra, 2012 p. 117; see also, Martin, 2007). It is also widely regarded as a response to a certain kind of stimulus and it will often produce laughter or smiles. However, individuals laugh for a variety of reasons, not all of which result from humor (Smuts, 2016). There are a lot of humorous elements and activities in children's everyday lives. Children play with language logics, violate customary rules and combine ideas, concepts or situations that cannot normally be combined (Neuss, 2006).

The concept of humor can be viewed through a number of theories. The theories vary depending on the perspective from which one approaches the concept. Some theories focus on resolving why something is funny, what we find humorous, what feelings are necessary for something to be funny and what the meaning of humor is in human life (Smuts, 2016).

Superiority theories are the oldest theories of humor and their aim is to find the reason behind using humor (Martin, 1998, 2007). Superiority theories deal with power relations between people and the feeling of superiority (Smuts, 2016). Superiority theories date back to the time of Aristotle who defined the difference between tragedy and comedy as follows: "Tragedy strives to present people as being better than they really are whereas comedy as being worse" (Martin 1998, p. 29). Similar feelings of superiority can be found in the disparagement of another person in everyday situations as when watching a comedy (Martin, 1998).

Relief theories are based on Freud's interpretation of life situations where a person's experience arises from negative emotions such as fear, sadness, or anger. They are concentrating on the outcomes of humor in everyday life. By detecting the incongruous elements in a situation the person is able to ignore the negative perspectives and, instead, experience amusement. This results in relief: the person releases the energy that was reserved to cope with the negative situation (Martin, 1998).

Incongruity theories are considered as the basic theories of humor and concentrate on the source of humor. They focus on ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance, and inappropriateness (Smuts, 2016). In order for something to be humorous, there must be an incongruity between ideas, concepts or situations, which are brought together in an unexpected manner (Martin 2007; Ruch 2001; Weiss et al. 2014). The main point of the theories is not the incongruity in itself, but its realization and resolution. (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002.) The level of the incongruity connected to the developmental level of children determines whether they consider something humorous or not (Loizou et al., 2011).

Some consider humor as a form of play, because humor involves a disinterested stance, certain kinds of humor involve aggression and insults, and because some forms of play activities result in humorous amusement. Humor and play resemble each other, since both require taking a disinterested attitude towards what might otherwise be seen as serious. In a sense seeing humor as play unites all the humor theories together (Smuts, 2016).

### **The development of humor**

We all know that even the youngest children laugh, smile and enjoy humor. Children's sense of humor develops in stages: they often start by manipulating concrete objects and move to play with language and concepts. McGhee (1984, 2002) describes the development and appreciation of humor as moving through four stages: 1) incongruous actions toward objects; 2) incongruous labelling of objects and events; 3) conceptual incongruity, and 4) humor in multiple meanings.

Children start consciously using humor during the second year of their life (McGhee 2002). At this age, humor often appears in using inappropriate elements as a part of the play. Children may, for example, use a hat or a banana as a phone. The next stage is related to the development of language as children find the incongruous labelling of objects and events as amusing. They may, for example, call their own name while asking a friend to play. The third stage is dramatically different, since humor evolves from conceptual thinking. At this stage children understand that objects and events have different features and by changing one specific feature, they can create humor. The humor can appear, for example, in describing one body part as extra-large or saying that they ate a car for dinner.

By the age of five children's interest in verbal humor begins. It is called pre-riddle, a transition stage: children imitate telling riddles or jokes as they have heard them been told without first understanding them. It emerges with a crucial discovery: a word has two quite different meanings that can be used to fool people (McGhee 1984, 2002).

Children appreciate many kinds of humor: they like incongruous actions and objects, and use nonsense words. They also like clowning, verbal, or behavioral teasing, riddling, joking, or playing jokes, and self-disparagement (Loizou et al., 2011). According to Franzini (2004) children at the age of six to eight prefer slapstick humor, clowning, exaggeration, word play, and socially unacceptable topics such as toilet humor. As Dowling (2014) concludes: the major types of early humor are clowning, teasing, performing incongruous or fantasy actions in the presence of others, and describing impossible events.

Eleni Loizou has studied children's humor from various perspectives and with multiple methods. According to Loizou, Kyriakide and Hadjicharalambous (2011) children demonstrate an ability to integrate humor into their stories by the age of six. The source of humor in children's drawings is in the incongruence of violating rules and in the use of different humorous symbols. By the age of six or seven, children are also capable of telling simple jokes and true riddles, but they may not be able to explain why the joke or riddle is funny. Children are able to explain the humor in their words or actions at about the age of 10. By the age of 12, jokes will be the most popular type of humor, when children are able to explain jokes with complex word play and cognitive incongruities (Bergen 1998, 2006, 2009).

There are some gender differences in humor: girls usually prefer things like tickling other people, and boys are amused by the misfortunes of others and aggressive humor (Dowling, 2014). Also girls like aggressive humor, but according to Fox, Dean, and Lyford (2013), boys' aggressive humor is more acceptable among those who behave aggressively and their aggressive humor is associated with lower anxiety and higher self-perceived social competence. Girls' aggressive humor is associated with higher depression and lower global self-worth. This is closely connected to a so-called 'Boy Code': a boy must be tough, independent, and not show his emotions (with the exception of anger) (Pollack, 1998).

Some expressions of children's humor can be challenging and tiresome to parents and teachers. Breaking rules causes incongruity and is therefore an essential element of some children's humor. Furthermore, breaking rules implies an opportunity to enjoy one's power. The initial signs of this can already be detected in the humor of children aged just one or two. The urge is explained through the Empowerment theory: the children know about rules and adults' insistence on obeying them, and therefore find breaking them ir-

resistible and delightful (Loizou, 2005; Lucca & Pacheco 2001; Socha & Kelly, 1994). Subsequently, this kind of humor has been interpreted as an important social competence especially among boys when they are constructing their masculinity and social status in the group (Huuki, Manninen, & Sunnaria, 2010).

## Roger Piret road mapping humor in drawings

Early studies on children's humor in the 1900s have a theoretical background in philosophy, centred on laughter and comedy. Roger Piret (1941) studied the development of the sense of children's humor. He criticized the prior theories of humor based on moral theories and psychology and thought that the best way to analyse all human humor would be by starting to investigate the humor of the youngest children and find ways to recognize individual differences in their humor. Piret used children's drawings as a tool to collect data from children, since drawing is a natural way to express thoughts and feelings for young children.

Children's drawings can be a valuable source of information for both researchers and teachers. In "Reserches Genetiques sur le Comique" (1941) Piret described the circumstances of the data collection carefully: He instructed the children to make drawings that would make others laugh. He was very precise about the arrangements and made sure that the children would not copy the details of the drawings from each other. After their drawings were ready, each child was interviewed and they described the humorous features of their drawings. The children in Piret's data were 3 – 8 years old and the data consisted of 220 drawings with 342 recognized features of humor. It is noteworthy, that the data collected may also be interpreted as a combination of children's humor and the recipients sense of humor, since in Piret's study children draw a picture that would make others laugh.

Piret (1941) created categories based on his analyses of these drawings. In the first phase he formed two categories based on the appearance of the humor: *seemingly humorous drawings* and *drawings with humorous features, but mostly other features like happy events*. In the second phase he divided the seemingly humorous drawings into categories of *comic features* and *comic situations and behavior*. The comic features were then divided into three different subcategories: *size distorted* (e.g. huge nose, hat, or shoes ), *combinations* like combining an animal with a human being (e.g., a duck with a hat or a girl with rabbit ears) and *clowns, funny clothes, and masks*. The comic situations and behavior relates to *unnatural situations and absurd behavior* (e.g., a man riding a butterfly or standing on a roof with the sun in his hand) or different kinds of *accidents and practical jokes* (e.g., stepping in a bucket or a child ringing a doorbell and running away).



As the main result of his study, Piret (1941) suggested, that the feeling of the comic arises from the perception of a contrast, an incongruity, a deviation from physical, intellectual or social standards or the conditions, which create a playful attitude or a complex situation.

## Data and methodology

The research questions of this study are:

1. *What kind of things and situations do children draw when they are asked to draw a picture that would make others laugh?*
2. *What are the elements, which differentiate boys' and girls' humorous drawings?*

## Setting and procedure

The data were collected from Finnish primary school children in the first and second grade during spring semester year 2013 and the children were between the ages of 6 and 8. The data consist of 143 drawings and their narrations, which were made by 71 boys and 72 girls (in total  $n=143$ ). The preliminary analysis and an overall description of this data are presented in a Finnish journal "Kielikukko" in 2015. In this current study we have concluded more thorough analysis with different examples.

In Piret's (1941) study the children were drawing and being interviewed individually and without any contact to other children. In our study we allowed the children to sit with each other and communicate as usually done during their lessons. This was due to the fact that humor arouses from social interaction (Martin, 2007) and because we wanted to test if Piret's instruction could be implemented in everyday lessons.

The data collection bases on Piret's (1941) instruction: "Draw a picture that makes others laugh". The original instruction was supplemented by asking the children to narrate of the humorous features of their drawings: "Tell us what the drawing is about". These instructions were used in all classes and the children were not guided in other ways. If the children asked for more detailed instructions, they were told that they could "draw anything that makes others laugh". The children were allowed to use any drawing implements or techniques they wished and the drawings could contain one or more images. Most children were able to write their narratives but the researchers wrote verbatim the narratives of those who could not write. During the data collection, the children were allowed to draw during one school lesson (45 min). At the end of the lesson, most children presented their drawings, with the boys being a little more eager to do so than the girls.

## Data analysis

The study represents qualitative research and the analysis was conducted via traditions of content analysis (i.e., a step by step analysis, the categories being revised during the analysis) (Mayring, 2000). Qualitative content analysis is an empirical, methodological, controlled analysis of various kinds of communication, following the rules of content analysis and forming step by step models. (Krippendorff, 1969). Qualitative content analysis does not require exact quantification (Mayring, 2000). However, in this study the results are also examined from the perspective quantification.

The qualitative content analysis of children's drawings was supported by their narratives and researchers observations. The starting point of the content analysis was Piret's (1941) categories of children's humorous drawings. The aim of the first phase was to place each drawing in one of Piret's categories. Most of the drawings contained features of several categories, but the most dominant feature was chosen and the drawing was placed in a category based on this feature. This analysis was supported by quantitative data. The second phase of the analysis meant analysis based on the overall theoretical framework and examining the data even more detailed. The aim was to find similarities and differences in the drawings. One of the perspectives in this analysis was to investigate whether there were differences between the drawings of boys and girls. Children's narrations of their drawings were crucial elements of analysis and the analysis is based on them. In results every drawing is supported by this narration. This improves the reliability of the study.

Both phases of analysis involved the researchers first working individually. After completing the individual classifications, the researchers compared them. There was 95 % interrater agreement between the researchers. This means that the researchers disagreed in seven cases concerning Piret's classification. These drawings were discussed and placed in the most appropriate category. The disagreements mainly revolved around drawings that could have been placed in more than one category.

## Results

### Drawings analysed by Piret's categorization

The analyses of the data shows, that Piret's (1941) categories of children humor are applicable to contemporary humor research. All the drawings could be placed in one of Piret's main categories: *seemingly humorous drawings* and *drawings with humorous features, but mostly other features like happy events*. Most of the drawings cohered to the category of seemingly humorous drawings (f=133). To the category of drawings with only *some*



*humorous features* applied only 10 drawings. These 10 drawings mainly illustrated happy real-life situations like being with friends or bouncing on a trampoline. In the category of seemingly humorous drawings more than half of the children produced a *comic feature* (f=75) and nearly half produced a *comic situation or behavior* (f=58) in their drawings. There were no significant differences in the number of boys' and girls' drawings in the categories of comic features and comic situations and behavior.

In the category of comic features (Table 1) *clowns, funny clothes and masks* is the most popular category. The children like to draw *funny and absurd characters, funny faces and clowns*: over half of the boys' drawings describe funny or abstract characters as girls, in turn, draw traditional clowns and funny faces. It is remarkable that in either of the categories there is no drawings of the other sex. This is the most significant difference between boys and girls.

The most popular classification under the category of *comic situations and behavior* (Table 2) is the category of *unnatural situations and absurd behavior*. Children depict in their drawings characters eating excrement and breaking wind. The most significant difference in the category of comic situations and behavior between boys and girls is that boys add guns and other violent elements in their drawings and describe jokes in real-life situations (see also Aerila, Laes & Laes, 2015).

Table 1 Drawings illustrating comic features

	Boys	Girls	All
<b>COMIC FEATURES</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>75</b>
<i>Size Distorted</i>	2	2	4
<i>Combinations</i>	7	9	16
An animal and a human being	2	3	5
An object and a human being	2	3	5
An animal and a machine	1	0	1
Natural elements and inappropriate elements	3	0	3
Excrement and human features	0	3	
<i>Funny clothes, clowns, masks</i>	<b>28</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>55</b>
Funny or absurd characters	19	0	19
Imaginary animals and soft toys	5	0	5
Body parts or objects	4	3	7
Traditional clowns	0	13	13
Funny faces	0	11	11
Fictive creatures with unordinary features	0	3	3

Table 2 Drawings illustrating comic situations and behavior

	Boys	Girls	All
<b>COMIC SITUATIONS AND BEHAVIOUR</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>58</b>
<i>Unnatural situations and absurd behavior</i>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>32</b>
Eating excrement and breaking wind	5	6	11
Violent elements and guns	9	0	9
Absurd elements	2	0	2
Different situations	0	10	10
<i>Accidents and practical jokes</i>	<b>18</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>26</b>
Incompatible and opposing elements	3	0	3
Explosions	2	0	2
Accidents in everyday life	4	4	8
Jokes real-life situations	9	0	9
Collusions	0	3	3
Scaring others	0	1	1

It seems that children like to draw characters, which include transfer and substitution of certain features. Also Bariaud's (1989) and McGhee's (1984, 2002) studies indicate that children often use this kind of humor. According to them children prefer four types of pictorial humor: transfer or substitution of features, distortion of sizes (exaggeration), anomalous behavior, and situation and mishaps and pranks.

Even though boys' and girls' drawings contain mainly similar kind of humor, the researchers recognized some differences between boys' and girls'.

### **Things and situations children draw when they are asked to draw a picture that makes others laugh**

#### ***Boys' drawings aim at surprise, incongruence and actions***

Boys' drawings are full of details. These details are the source of incongruity and humor. An example of boys' humorous drawings is the drawing "The Giant Cow" (Figure 1). It is

an absurd and rather violent picture of real life elements combined with different absurd details: a person makes noises like a cow; the cow is defecating a baby while simultaneously breaking wind and thinking of knives, grenades and other objects of violence. The drawer described his drawing: *There is a giant cow that has eaten the grandfather. Someone is sending a hand grenade to a suet ball hanging in the cow's stomach.*

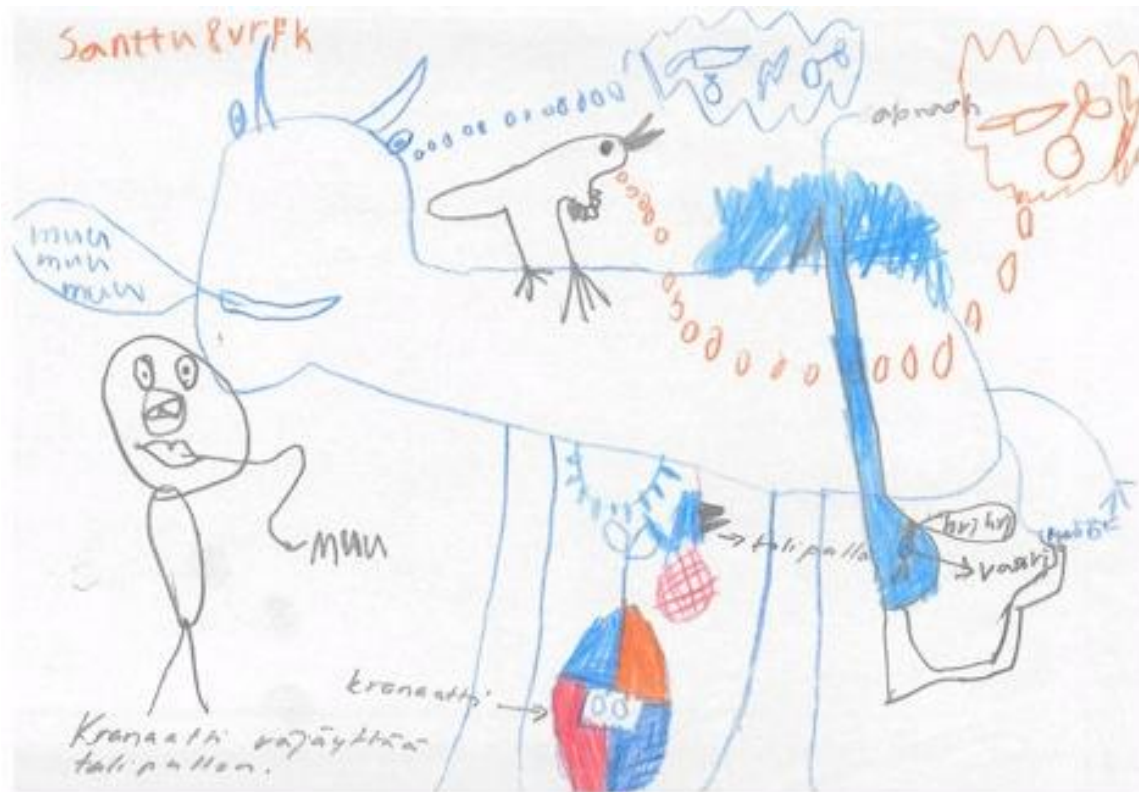


Figure 1 The Giant Cow (8 years old boy)

The drawing in Figure 2 depicts a clown called “The Monkey Clown”. It is not a typical clown and has many surprising features: *it has tusks, claws and its tongue hangs outside its mouth*. The only feature maybe referring to a clown is the colouring, and the ears might be referring to a monkey. Both monkeys and clowns are funny and this might be the reason the boy wanted to draw them together. It is noteworthy that many of the details of the drawing signify aggression. Part of the incongruence of the drawing could be defined as disclosure humor, where an identity is disclosed as having different characteristics from those originally supposed by the observer (Apter & Desselles, 2012).



Figure 2 The Monkey Clown (8 years old boy)

These absurd features can be seen as an example of distortion humor, where ordinary characters are given imaginary characteristics leading to absurdity. Caricatures are examples of distortion humor. The essential parts of the distortion humor is that humor occurs when an observer perceives the same identity as having two incompatible elements and the observer is in a playful state of mind and something is made fun of (Apter & Desselles, 2012).

Boys have a tendency to add violent elements like guns, hand grenades, or explosions to their drawings (see also Aerila et al., 2015). According to this boy, his drawing (Figure 3) is funny because *there is a chase where a police car explodes, a crazy old man shouts "Eso (=energy drink) is a good drink" and a fairy helps a pedestrian.*

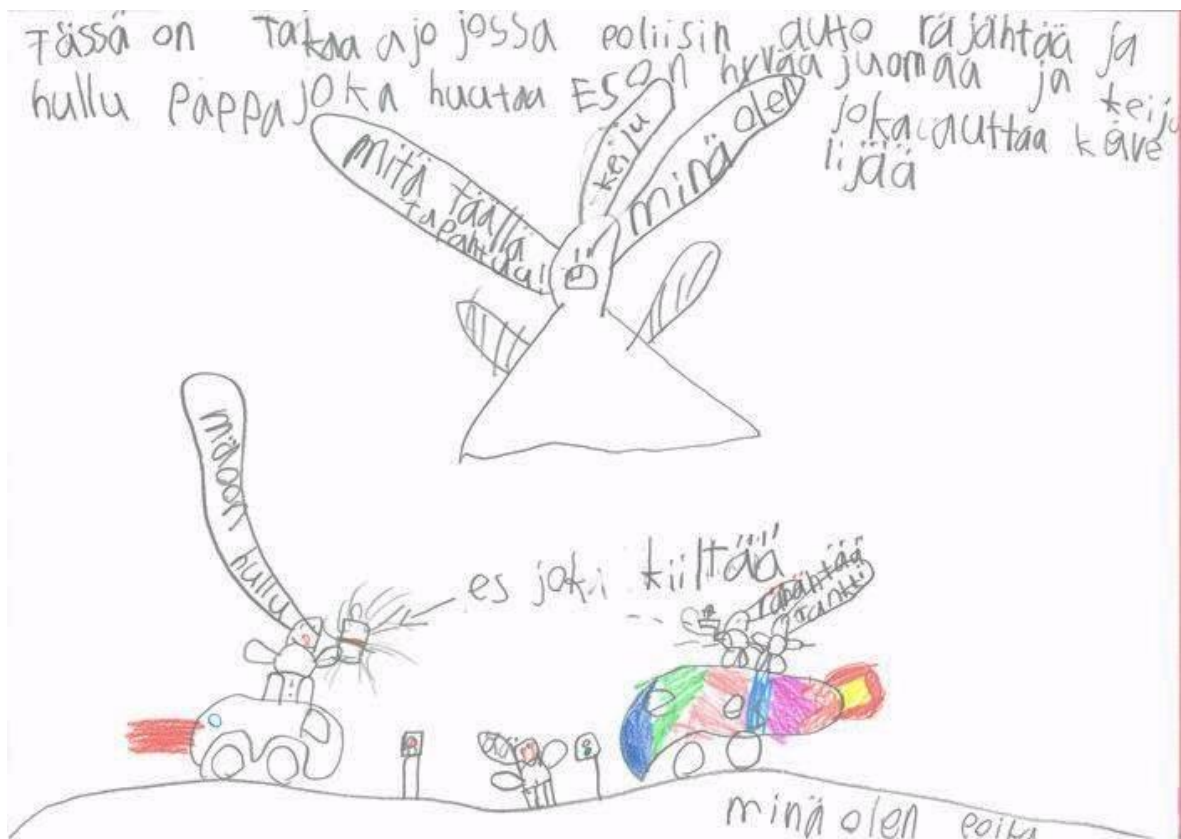


Figure 3 A chase (7 years old boy)

Boys' drawings represent more activity. This notion is based on the finding that only boys' drawings contain cartoon-like, series of pictures. The next figure (Figure 4) is a collection of different events and different characters. Part of the drawing illustrate traditional toilet humor: In the upper left corner there is a girl who visits the toilet. To highlight the humor in the situation, the drawer has added text to illustrate the tones made in toilet. Part of the drawings describe various types of explosions and weapons: *a fart bomb*, *an exploded human* and *an armed incident*. The picture also contains more static funny characters: *a crazy pig*, *a spider*, *a flying cow* and *a bugger*.



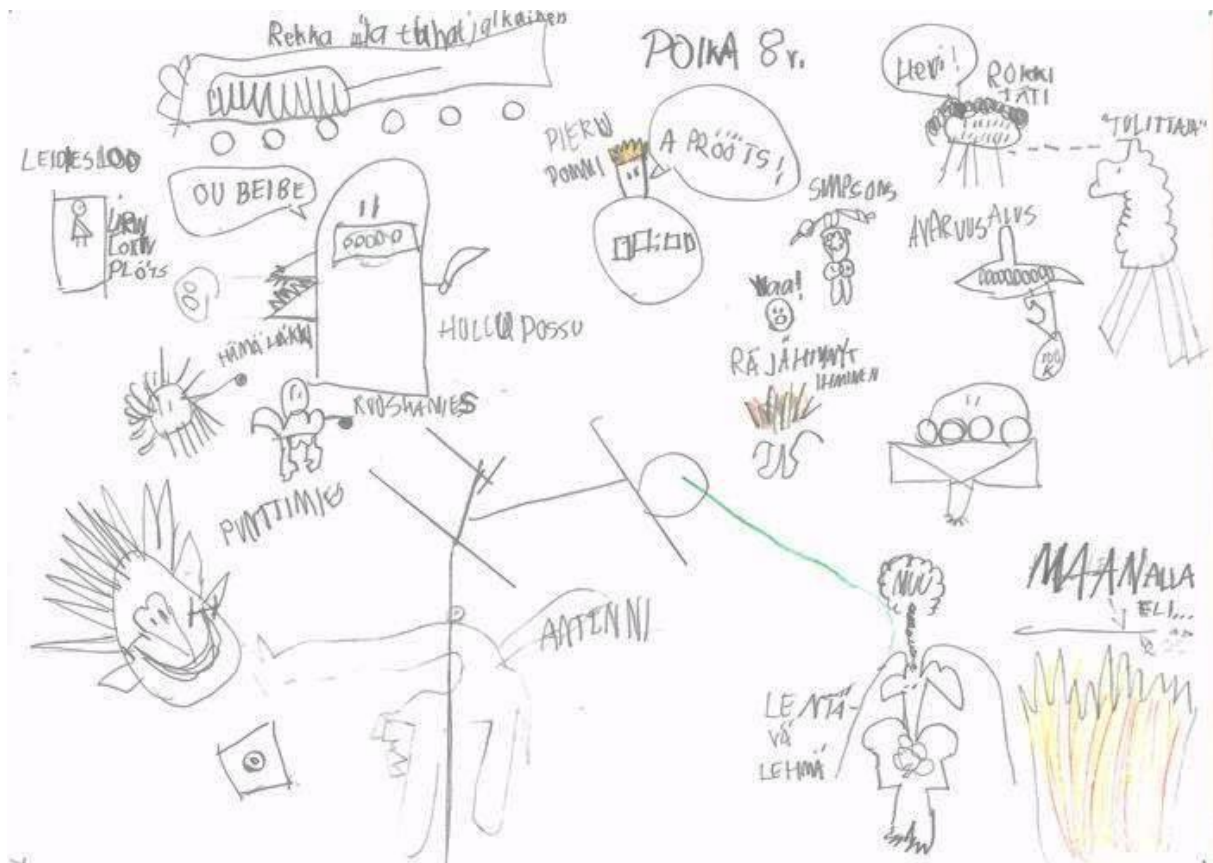


Figure 4 Collection of funny creatures and incidents (8 year old boy)

In another drawing a boy trains for boxing by hitting a punch bag (Figure 5). To his surprise, the punch bag can express that it does not like being hit. The punch bag decides then to hit back. The drawer describes this drawing: *At first the punch bag is sleeping. Then he wakes up, because the boy hits it and it hurts. The punch bag complains. The boy gets frightened. The punch bag starts to rotate and the boy gets hit on his nose and flies to the roof.* The story is about disparaging and humiliating another person, which is typical to superiority theory (Martin 1998).

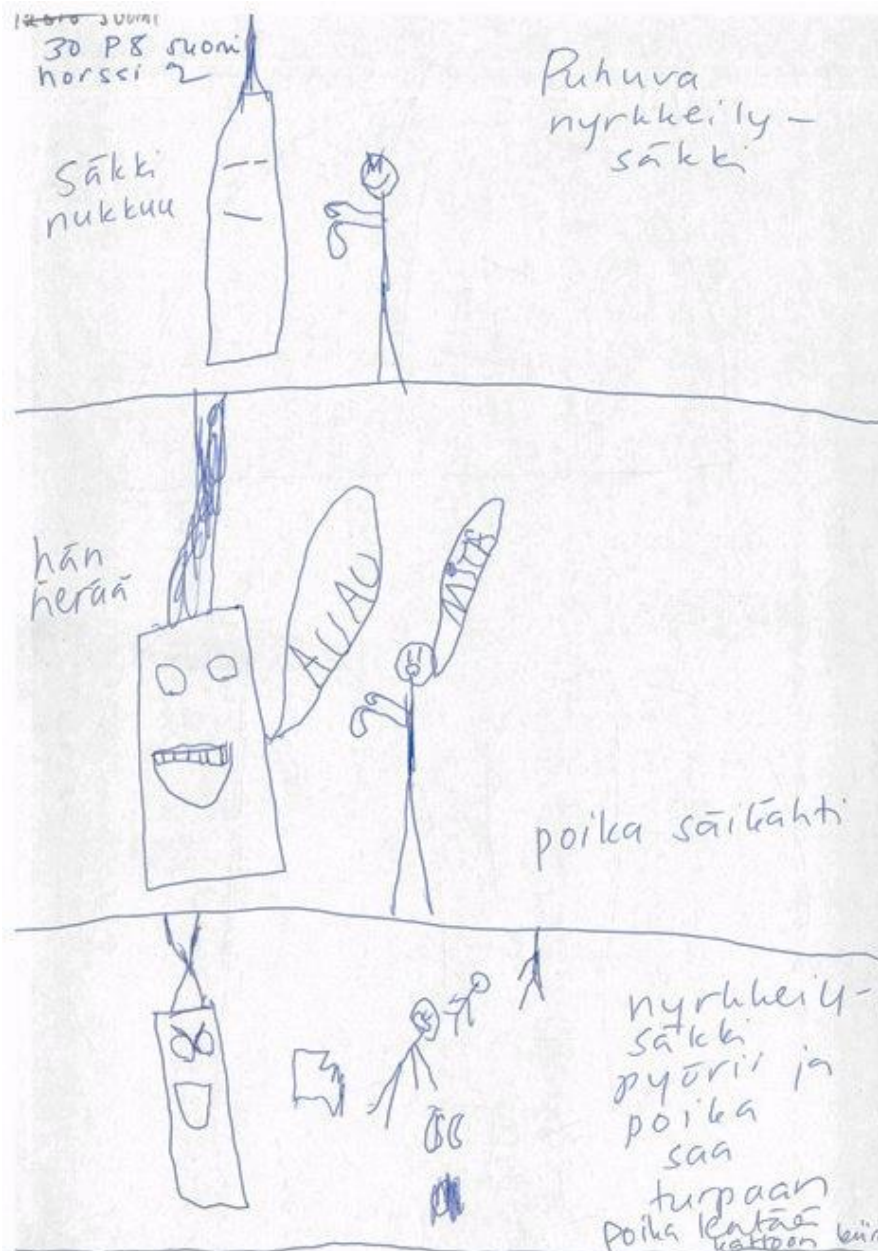


Figure 5 The boy and the punch bag (8 year old boy)

### ***Girls like to delight and concentrate on traditional objects***

In girls' drawings the connection to real life is important and many drawings concentrate on highlighting different happy events in their everyday lives. The most popular features in girls' drawings are traditional clowns or funny, smiling faces. (See also Aerila et al., 2015.) The following drawing (Figure 6) depicts *a funny clown*.



Figure 6 The clown (8 year old girl)

Girls' drawings meet the expectations of our ideas of clowns and have hardly any incongruity to the traditional clowns. The situations and behavior girls describe are mostly funny and makes one laugh. However, the level of incongruence is lower in girls' drawings. This girl describes her drawing: *The name of this character is Rolle and it has run into the three. It is not human, but a marvellous girl creature* (Figure 7).



Figure 7 The marvellous creature (8 year old girl)

The following drawings express some incongruity: The first drawing (Figure 8) is an image of the character Sponge Bob, but he has dirty teeth: *This is Sponge Bob. He has very dirty teeth, but he is thinking: "I have clean teeth."* The other character present is thinking "No, you don't".





Figure 8 Sponge Bob having dirty teeth (7 year old girl)

The second example (Figure 9) of girls' use of incongruence is "The Pencil City" where an ordinary family is represented as pencils. The drawer describes her drawing, saying: *This is a pencil city, where everybody is a pencil. In the picture, there are Lumi, grandfather, Nuusku, Leni, grandmother, Lili, daddy and mom.*

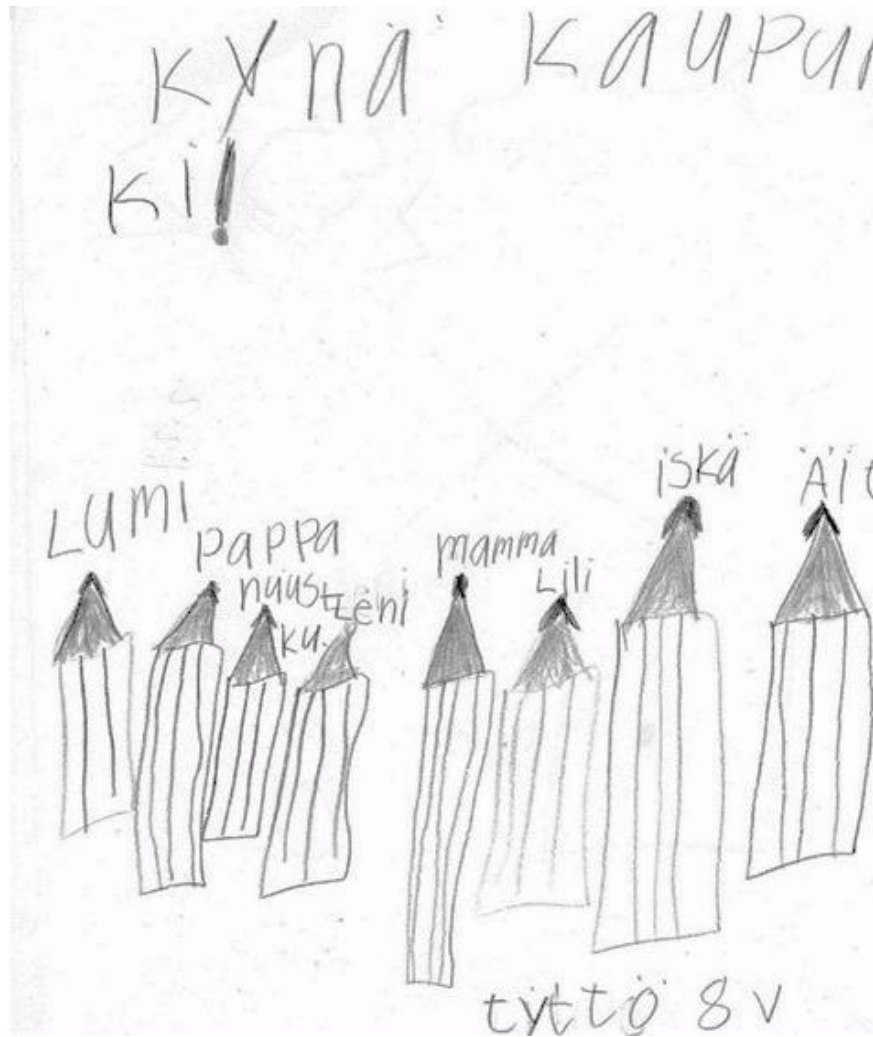


Figure 9 The Pencil City (8 year old girl)

Most of the drawings made by girls are drawn carefully. Girls have a tendency to value the colours and the aesthetic appeal of the drawing more important than its humor. The details in the girls' drawings are due to the aesthetics and accuracy, not the humor. In many cases, the humor in the drawings is the starting point of the picture. They have come upon an idea of a clown or a character of a cartoon and they describe that character by drawing it as well as possible. In many cases, the humorous element is not innovative, but something already known to be funny. In Dowling's study on children's sense of humor, the funniest character according to children was Sponge Bob (Dowling, 2014). Sponge Bob is the only character in this study originated from a cartoon.



### ***Elements differentiating boys and girls humorous drawings***

Boys' drawings tend to describe more maladaptive humor, in which the humor bases on aggression, disparaging and putting others down (aggressive and self-defeating humor). The girls' drawings represent adaptive humor, which aims at reducing criticism and complimenting others (affiliate and self-enhancing humor) (Özdogru & McMorris, 2013). It seems, that girls like to bring delight and make others happy, while boys like to entertain and surprise others. This is perhaps highlighted in the number of aggressive drawings: most boys draw an explosion, a weapon, or someone being hit, whereas the girls' works depict none of these elements (see also Aerila et al., 2015).

Boys' drawings are more individual with several humorous details, and they more often depict scenarios that could not happen in real life. It seems that boys concentrate in their drawings on a simple idea like a cow, and then develop it and add details. In addition, girls work on more ready-made ideas and concentrate on one humorous central idea. If a girl comes up with the idea of a clown, she draws a clown and tries to make the picture as aesthetically pleasing and accurate as possible.

Both boys and girls portray real-life situations as humorous. For girls the humorous real-life situations mean bringing joy to others and laughing together (see relief theories Martin 1998), but for boys the humorous situations more often involve laughing at others or laughing at somebody's misfortune (the superiority theories Martin 1998). The following drawings highlight this difference. A boy's drawing (Figure 10; see also Aerila et al., 2015) depicts a bird laughing at a man whose ice cream it has defecated. The boy describes the picture saying: *The bird poops on ice cream. The man gets angry and the bird is laughing.* In contrast, a girl (Figure 11) has drawn different things she can do to delight others: *Laughing, making faces, goofing around, and joking are funny.*



Figure 10 Boy's drawing of a bird pooping on a man's ice cream (8 year old girl)



Figure 11 Girl's drawing describing things bringing happiness to others (8 year old girl)

## Conclusion and discussion

This study is a sample of humorous drawings implemented by Finnish children. It seems that Finnish children consider the same, universal things, situations, and actions to be humorous as children of that age in other countries in comparison to earlier studies (Bariaud, 1989; Dowling, 2014; Loizou, 2006, 2011, 2016; Pitri, 2011). They like toilet humor, clowning, exaggeration, and slapstick humor, such as a bird pooping on someone's head. These subjects relate to Loizou's (2005, 2006) studies which explain children's humor through the theories of Absurd and Empowerment. The Theory of the Absurd involves drawings with humorous gestures, incongruous actions as well as incongruous appearance and the Empowerment theory is apparent in drawings in which children purposefully or unintentionally describe violating adults' expectations and rules or create violence. For explicit humorous symbols such as clowns, jokes and being funny Loizou (2005) has created a specific category. All these categories are present in our study.

In our study, all the children produce a drawing and explain the humorous features in the drawing. All the drawings contain personal details and none of the drawings were exactly the same. Also in Loizou's (2006) study, all the children were able to appreciate and explain humor. In addition, most children recognized the humorous details in the pictures made by others. Furthermore, in our study children seemed to enjoy drawing and verbally explaining them. This made the whole experiment a very positive experience to everybody.

While observing children's behavior, we noticed that children drew humorous pictures filled with excitement in a positive and joyful atmosphere. Prior studies (Anttila, 2008) indicate, that humor brings playfulness and joy in a variety of situations in education and humor can create a common understanding as well as transform contradictory and ambiguous situations into positive ones. We also felt that for some children drawing is almost like playing: they were drawing their pictures and simultaneously explaining what was happening in the picture. In Piret's (1941) study children worked individually in order to prevent the children from copying each other's ideas. In our study, however, due to practical reasons, we did not isolate the children and they made the drawings sitting close to each other. This made the drawing a collaborative act: The children presented their drawings to each other and in some sense, drawing lessons resembled playing. We believe, that just by letting the children draw these pictures makes them happier and feeling better. Piret's research design seems to offer a child-centered, and therefore feasible method for the research on children.

The drawings of this study highlight some differences in girls' and boys' humor. These differences might be due to social experiences of boys' and girls' (Brown, 1993). Girls concentrate on drawing pictures that would delight others and boys draw pictures full of action and details. Girls' pictures depict everyday life and contain traditional humor whereas the boys describe more absurd combinations. The most popular theme appearing in boys' drawings is funny and abstract characters whereas in girls' drawings it is the traditional clowns. These results closely resemble to Pitri's (2011) study. In her study the children were asked to draw a funny picture and explain, what was funny in it. Girls' funny drawings were mostly inspired by real-life but most boys' funny drawings had imaginary themes. According to Pitri (2011) the gender differences of children's drawings accord in some degree with the gender differences of humorous visual art.

It seems that boys are more eager to explain and present their drawings. This is perhaps due to differences in drawings: girls draw more stable pictures of people or situations and boys draw more pictures full of detail and action. The data collection and the analysis of the drawings indicate that girls and boys approach the drawing assignment differently: The girls seem to choose a funny object or a character and concentrate on drawing it as aesthetically as possible. The boys, on the other hand, focus on drawing events and develop the drawing while creating it. For boys the information contained in the drawing is more important than the aesthetics. This is one of the sources of differences between girls and boys.

Based on our free observations during the data collection it appeared that girls and boys enjoyed each other's drawings and found them funny. This is also in accordance to previous studies (Loizou, 2006; Pitri, 2011) which indicate that there is no gender differences in explaining humorous pictures and appreciating humor in the pictures, but the process of creating own drawings produce gender differences. Piret's (1941) research model which was used in this study, differs from Loizou and Kyriakios's (2016) as well as Pitri's (2011) studies in the sense that children were asked to make a drawings that would make others laugh. This instruction emphasizes the recipient, which may affect the results of this study. Some previous studies (Chapman, Filipenko & McTavish 2007) have shown that children can make very stereotypical choices when thinking of their friends. This may affect the results of the research and would require further research. Would the result be different if, for example, boys were asked to draw a picture for girls? However, it is safe to say that drawings made in accordance to Piret's instruction supported with additional verbal explanations, presenting the drawings and having discussions give the educators and researchers versatile information on children's humor. However, the mere drawing is not enough.

Drawings made in accordance to our application of Piret's (1941) research design could perhaps be used in an educational setting among children as a forum where children and educators can learn from each other's humor: Children could present their drawings to other children and adults, they could interpret them together, and discuss on different perspectives to humor. It might be good to know that some people find someone exploding or having a bad luck as humorous whereas others find being nice to each other and doing things together as humorous. Humorous drawings enable the educators to introduce the concept of humor in educational settings, to utilize humor to create a more positive atmosphere and to nurture the pupils' evolving sociality.

It seems that our way of using Piret's research design is an effective way of providing children an opportunity to express themselves. From the educator's point of view, children's humorous drawings may enable the educator to empathize with children's humor or they might provide the educator an opportunity to understand the differences in children's humor, whether between genres or individuals. In our previous studies, we have concluded that children's drawings and other arts-based activities visualize children's thoughts and ideas and their wider use make the learning situations more child-centered and help children better understand themselves and others (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015). In Pitri's (2011) study children expressed in their drawings social and cultural issues which highlight their understanding of diversity and the stereotypes of society. This was also the case in this study. More research and discussion is needed on how to deal with children's racist, offensive or violent humor. Is it appropriate to laugh at someone's accident, or is it appropriate to describe obese people as ridiculous and laughable? The drawings act as a tool to introduce these thoughts visible and give us the opportunity to address the stereotypical perceptions of children from the children's own mindset. This could be the value of the humorous drawings.

## Limitations of the study

The data collection raised some questions on factors, which might have influenced the data, and should be considered when drawing conclusions about children's perceptions of what is funny to others. The classroom teachers were present during the data collection and this might have influenced the results. In addition, the children were sitting close to each other and were allowed to talk to each other. This means that they could copy each other's ideas, but on the other hand, humor comes out of communication and being able to communicate freely might have helped some children to produce more genuine ideas.

The analysis and interpretations of drawings were conducted by adult researchers and sometimes children's culture can be challenging for adults. The researchers recognized

some details referring to children's entertainment (e.g., blaster gun, Sponge Bob, etc.), but they may have assessed other aspects incorrectly. However, every interpretation was based on children's own verbal descriptions of the images and this should reduce the amount of misinterpretations.

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