

# Preconscious and Humor in the Adolescent Process

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## Abstract

The Tunisian revolution in 2011 helped to free the speech and unleash languages. Thus we witnessed a humorous explosion affecting all areas of life: political, economic, sports, religious and social. The teenagers seem to be the most concerned by this creative expression serving their psychological and social development. In this research, we proposed to identify the role of humor in the adolescent process through the study of the functioning of the preconscious, the narcissism, the individuation process and the socialization. What information could it provide about the quality of the adolescent's psychic life and its possible flaws. Would the lack of humor or the reluctance to produce it be evidence of adolescent fragility and an impossibility to manage the drive emergencies enclosing them in a rigid and impenetrable operation? We have therefore drawn inspiration from Rod, A Martin's Humorous Response Questionnaire, in order to categorize humor in adolescents aged 13 to 15 years. Then, we explored their psychic dynamics through the TAT projective test. This work allowed us to determine the quality of the preconscious and the psychic characteristics inherent in each group of humor. Thus the type of humor used by the adolescent, in his cultural context, takes on the value of a psychopathological sign informing about his psychic health.

**Keywords:** Adolescence, Humour, Preconscious, Narcissism, Individuation, Socialization, Identity.

## INTRODUCTION

When living near a volcano for several years and its apparent calm is broken, no one can imagine the magnitude of the earthquake or the damage it can cause. Tunisia woke up on January 14, 2011 to the hope of a better, "more dignified" life. Dignity seemed to be the claim of an entire nation revealing by this movement, the narcissistic wound of an entire oppressed population that have survived, as best as possible, the unfair politic at the level of which aggressiveness and the code of silence were the watchword.

The systematic social and political repression of the impulse to live to express itself and manifest its existence has encouraged the corruption and despotism of the regime of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. No law seemed to match that of silence inflicted on the entire Tunisian population. It is true that in the time of Ben Ali, Tunisia had not experienced political murders like those orchestrated after the

revolution; but wouldn't encouraging and pushing for "brain migration" also be a crime? Abort a person's ambition by condemning him to live in a loop of repetition, trapping him in his anxieties and forbidding him to get out of it; wouldn't it be murder?

The humorous explosion

This was the climate in which the country was ruled for 23 years; a travesty of suffering and social misery, a camouflage of an unemployment rate that has become more and more important over the years, a masquerade highlighting a significant percentage of graduates but hiding well from admitting the increasing number each year of their migration abroad. It is in these circumstances and following the great media coverage of the self-immolation of a vegetable merchant in front of the municipality following a legal experienced as unjust, that the flame of the revolution was ignited. The country was then plunged into a war scenario for which it was never prepared. A

deployment of snipers on rooftops, fires in police stations and government institutions, assaults and acts of vandalism. No one was safe and entrenched in their homes, many Tunisians heard the sounds of gunfire and lived the terror of insecurity, the anguish of death. In response to all this anxiety, we have experienced on social networks an explosion of humor playing with this traumatic experience, the nascent politics and the social.

George Orwell attested that the joke was a form of small revolution, revolution on language, on the meaning of things, on ancestral gains, on laws... Humor, according to him, destroys the dignity of the powerful who hide in the depths of their seats; political seats or head offices. It is a question of replacing those who are in power and who are no longer able to follow the new wave, the new movement.

The mediatized humor that had long been limited to the sporting sphere constituting the only derivative tolerated by the despotic regime of Ben Ali, broke its chains and proclaimed itself a spokesman for the suffering of an entire nation. The liberated humor then went preferentially or even exclusively towards a single victim: Ben Ali and incidentally his wife and the Trabelsi family. They served to express a sense of revenge, to verbalize a freedom long suppressed and to convey implicit criticism. Tunisians have seen the establishment of a "gallows humor"; humor that settles following an oppressive and tyrannical regime. It would serve to maintain the sense of dignity and self-esteem of an entire population with a common enemy that serves to strengthen their internal cohesion.

But the jubilation and the group illusion quickly disillusioned giving way to a race for power put back on the agenda. After killing the father, the horde of brothers began to kill each other, breaking by this same movement this force that once brought them together. Tunisia then experienced a fragmentation of its political sphere and we saw the birth of a hundred political parties engaging in a race to the death for power.

This fragmentation served, in large part, the Islamist party "Enahdha" which already had a historical base and a political infrastructure since the regime of Habib Bourguiba. The strength of this party lay mainly in a common experience that is that of a group long persecuted

and marginalized. The rise of this current mixing between religion and politics clashes with a progressive group that refuses this alliance.

New conflicts are emerging and although speech has been liberated, the return of the repressed bringing to the surface of primary anxieties has pushed towards the need to reorganize this chaos. Tunisia then experienced two main movements: one creating and pushing towards the secundarization of impulses and the other partitioning itself in a religious indoctrination testifying to an impossibility to think. It is for this reason that the expansion of humor in all social networks, Facebook, radio and television sets has met on the other side of the mirror a mystical craze pushing towards radicalization. Indeed, Tunisia has experienced a very large wave of migration of young people to Syria, allying itself with terrorist organizations such as "Daesh" and fighting for causes that are not really theirs. Social and economic misery being the breeding ground for this psychic fragility, they threw themselves into the arms of a cause that seemed to give meaning to their lives. The search for identity and social recognition seemed to be part of their essential demands.

#### Teenagers and humor

The teenagers were all designated preys because they themselves already suffer from a blurred identity and identification. Long neglected and unsupervised, they experienced the desertification of cultural centers that offered them no supervision and did not meet the needs of these young people. Left to their own devices and forced to face their anxieties, some of them have developed a kind of resilience mechanism that allows them to cope with trauma: humor, a way to avoid being won over by the feeling of depression.

It is in this context that we became interested in the role of humor in the adolescent process. This transformation of the adolescents' fears into words required the establishment of a work of link between representation and affect allowing the transformation of the representation of things into representation of words. Mickael Benyamin (2013) insisted on the fundamental role played by the preconscious because it is designated as the structure responsible for the psychization of the excitations that came from the unconscious. It is also the guarantor when its functioning is not hindered, of the installation of

a pleasure to think during the adolescence. Otherwise, it causes decompensations both somatically and psychically.

Moreover, if we dwell on the research carried out around the world (the works of: Pasquali. 1990, Grimm and Pefley. 1990, Buckwalter, Gerdner, Stolley, Kudart and Ridgewayet. 1995, Provine. 2003, Bourque 2004...) on humor, we often find it attached to physical and mental health. It seems to play a key role in the health and de-dramatization of patients' disease. It strengthens the immune system by hormonal means and decreases the feeling of pain.

Other researchers (Ziv.1976, Civikly and Zajderman. 1993, Clouse, Spurgeon and Morreal. 1997, Cooper. 2002...) were interested in the contribution of this humorous constituent in the field of schooling and were able to demonstrate its importance in improving learning and memory as well as reducing anxiety and harmonizing social relations.

The work of Camilo Ortiz (2000) has demonstrated that humor makes it possible to set up a healthy identification with the therapist and is then an effective therapeutic tool in the face of mental disorders. According to some authors, it is a means of resilience in the face of trauma. It allows us to laugh at the gates of the unknown, what terrorizes us and what makes us suffer.

Sigmund Freud has already pointed out since 1905, humor does not systematically generate laughter. It manifests itself in several forms: comic, sarcasm, irony, black, puns or witty words. And it is in the face of this diversity of forms that we wondered about a possible link between humor and personality. Are we all capable of producing humor? Do we all have the same humor?

Various researchers have focused on the study of humor such as Sigmund Freud (1905) with the word of mind, Ziv Avner (1976) studying the relationship between humor and learning, Henri Bergson (1900) with his research on the mechanics of laughter, Martin A. Rod (2007) with the development of the integrative approach in the psychology of humor and Daniel Sibony (2010) with his work on the sense of humor. The heterogeneity of approaches studying the humorous process has allowed us to identify different types of humor and these are used differently from one person to another depending on his personality, his fragilities, his

experience, his first infantile relationships. Avron (2005) insists on the revealing aspect of humor. It lifts the veil on affects and sensations.

#### Categorization of humor

Many researchers have tried the arduous exercise of categorizing humor. They then divided humor into language analysis as Patrick Charaudeau (1972) did. For the latter, humor would be divided into two: humor through enunciative play and humor through semantic play. In the first type it is a question of the relationship between enunciator and listener. The author emphasizes this gap between what is said, what is thought and the context accompanying the enunciation. In the second type it is a question of the polysemy of words and games that can be set up as a result of this. Other researchers such as Rod.A Martin (2007), Vladimir Jankelevitch (1978) and Pierre Schoentjes (2001) have striven to classify humor according to the purpose of their program: comic humor used to make people laugh, ironic or mocking humor used to laugh at the other and to mock him, self-deprecating humor manifested through self-laughter, the exposure of oneself as being laughable, the black humor that does not even make you smile but that often disturbs because of its too distressing component. But definitions often intersect and get lost in structural paradoxes. None of the previous categorizations seemed to satisfactorily answer our questioning about the fragilities that humor can hide or, in our view, half-heartedly reveal the predominant use of a particular type of humor.

Rod A. Martin (2007) succeeds in establishing a model categorizing humor into two broad categories: adapted humor and inappropriate humor. The first big type consists of self-improving humor and affiliative humor that are presented as positively correlated with openness and extroversion, emotional stability and good narcissistic foundations.

The second major type of humor, inappropriate, is divided into aggressive humor and self-deprecating humor. The aggressive component seems to be one of the commonalities between these two subtypes; in the first, it would be directed outwards and in the second it would be oriented towards oneself. These two categories are positively correlated with anxiety and depression and negatively correlated with

emotional stability and being perceived as pleasant by others. Aggressive humor is related to the passage to the aggressive act and hostility towards others.

However, the existence of the group of adolescents who have difficulty accessing humour should not be overlooked. These are the most fragile because imprisoned in a tower of silence, they can not externalize the too full of excitement that invades them.

We propose within this research to explore the link between the different types of humor or non-humor emitted by adolescents and the quality of the work of the preconscious in the narcissistic, objectal and social spheres. Would there be differences in the psychic functioning of the adolescent according to the quality of his humor (adapted or not adapted)? And if there is a difference, how would it manifest itself and what would be its meaning?

### Methodology:

General assumption:

The use of humor in the adolescent process testifies to the establishment of a preconscious activity used for the secundarization of impulses thus guaranteeing a function of internal para-excitation.

On the other hand, the difficulty of accessing the humorous sphere testifies to the adolescent, an inability to think things, the existence of an destructive anxiety and the failure to implement preconscious work.

Sample:

Tunis Governorate		Sousse Governorate		Monastir Governorate	
Superior El Omrane College		El Kaala El Kebira College		Sahline College	
Students <sup>8th</sup> year	Students <sup>9th</sup> year	Students <sup>8th</sup> year	Students <sup>9th</sup> year	Students <sup>8th</sup> year	Students <sup>9th</sup> year
29	31	30	29	30	31

Methodological tools:

The psychological examination of our subjects will be done on two parts: the first being the passing of a questionnaire used to identify the type of humor predominant in each subject and therefore to obtain a categorization of our

sample according to the different types of humor. The second being the passing of the projective test: the TAT.

The questionnaire we used is inspired by Rod A. Martin's HRQ (Humorous response questionnaire) questionnaire established in 2003. These are scenarios that give free rein to spontaneous responses from adolescents to different types of everyday situations.

The method adopted throughout this research will be a clinical, quantitative and qualitative method that aims at a better knowledge of this humorous process within the adolescent phase.

### Results:

The results of the questionnaire made it possible to distinguish at the level of this sample 5 groups composed of the four types already set up by Martin, to which we will add a fifth category and which is that of the predominantly non-humorous answers that we will call Type 0.

Type 0: Non-humor

Type 1: Self-enhancing humor

Type 2: Affiliative humor

Type 3: Aggressive humor

Type 4: Self-depreciating humor

This table allows you to visualize the results we have obtained:

	Type of humor				
	Type 0	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4
Number of students	62	5	6	112	2

These data make it possible to distinguish 5 groups within our adolescent population. Out of a total of 180 subjects, we identified 5 subjects whose humor is predominantly self-improving, 6 whose humor is predominantly affiliative, 112 whose humor is predominantly aggressive, 2 whose humor is predominantly self-derisory and 62 subjects who have difficulty producing humorous responses.

1. Analysis of psychic processes at TAT according to the type of humor

2. The quality of the Preconscious through the TAT

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 0
Série C	1	1	1	1	1
Série B	2	2	3	4	4
Série A	3	3	2	2	2
Série E	4	4	4	3	3

	Self-enhancing	Affiliative	Aggressive	Self-depreciating	Non-humor
Series Order	C > B > A > E	C > B > A > E	C > A > B > E	C > A > E > B	C > A > E > B
Internal thinking	+	+	+/- (Acting out)	-	-
Link between representations and affects	+	+/- (High emotional expressivity / group effect)	+/- (High emotional expressivity / aggressivity)	-	- (High emotional control)
Screen function	+	+	-	+	-
Associative abilities	fluid thinking / Pleasure of thinkig	+/- Little bit disorganized	- (Infiltration by primary processes)	- (Infiltration by primary processes)	- (Infiltration by primary processes)
Subjectivity	Being constructed	Slightly instable	Instable Identity and sexual identification	Instable Identity and sexual identification	Instable Identity and sexual identification
Positive parental images	Good internalization	Good internalization	Bad internalization	Bad internalization	Bad internalization
Social sphere	+	+	Hesitation between isolation and social interaction	- Social phobia	-
Hypothesis validation	Hyp n°1 ✓		Hyp n°2 ✓	Hyp n°3 ✓	Hyp n°4 ✓

**Discussion:**

Jean Pierre Kamieniak (2005) assures that humor, in adolescents, serves to "build relationships, and, from this point of view, the funny story would constitute this good put at the service of the link that the adolescent community will hasten to circulate, in a movement of creation always renewed". He also adds in another sense that the absence of humorous production in adolescents should be interpreted as a psychopathological sign of psychic suffering.

The hypothesis we are trying to verify is that the use of humor in the adolescent process testifies to the establishment of a preconscious activity

used for the secundarization of impulses thus guaranteeing an internal para-excitation. On the other hand, the difficulty of accessing the humorous sphere testifies to the adolescent, an inability to think things, the existence of an destructive anxiety and the failure to implement preconscious work.

The results collected at the questionnaire level made it possible to identify five humorous categories in adolescence: self-improving humor, affiliative humor, aggressive humor, self-deprecating humor and lack of humor. We have noticed, in fact, that a fairly large number of teenagers have difficulty producing humor or actually enjoying it. The distinction of these

different types of humor has led us to set up operational hypotheses that serve as a common thread in our research work.

The use of adapted humor, whether self-improving or affiliative, would testify to a preconscious activity of good quality. This would be manifested by the presence at the level of the discourse of good associative capacities staging a narrative richness, parental imagos "good enough" guaranteeing a good support, protecting the adolescent Self from the impulsive shaking and supporting its narcissistic foundations and a good integration of the social sphere favoring a flexible and diffuse identification supported by a good recognition and a fluid expression of emotions.

The use of inappropriate, aggressive humor would testify to a preconscious activity, certainly present but quite fragile. This would manifest itself in the presence at the level of discourse of limited associative capacities marked by excessive control of speech or a tendency to restrain speech. Psychic functioning is operative tendency that can slide towards the passage to the act and the parental imagos invested in majority negatively do not seem to ensure a para-exciting support for the subject undermining his narcissistic foundations. The emotional and social sphere would be invested in contrasting ways.

The use of inappropriate, self-deprecating humor joins aggressive humor in all respects except for the emotional and social sphere that is rarely invested within this group.

Finally, the difficulty of access to the humorous sphere testifies to a poor and dysfunctional preconscious that can manifest itself by the presence at the level of the discourse of bad associative capacities marked by a choppy and unstructured discourse. Parental imagos would be perceived as threatening and failing in their function of supporting disturbing the identification and identity process and the emotional and social sphere would be disturbed.

The results allowed us to highlight the psychic dynamics in common specific to each comedy group. Indeed, we have tried to bring together the different defense mechanisms developed at the level of the TAT in order to compare the type of humor used and the adolescent psychic functioning related to it. Thus, the type of humor used would be, as mentioned by Jean Pierre

Kamieniak (2005), a psychopathological sign testifying to the mental health of the adolescent subject.

The different specificities of the group of teenagers using self-improving humor allow us to learn about the quality of the preconscious of these subjects. Mickael Benyamin revisits the first Freudian topic and attests to the importance of the preconscious process in the management and psychic organization of the adolescent. It would be the guarantor of the reversibility of the repressed ensuring the link between affects and representations. Its censoring activity acts as a screen between unconscious and conscious preventing the appearance of affects or representations unpleasant to consciousness. The preconscious helps in the work of psychizing adolescent impulses dressing them in language. Humor would be a part of this language manifested in metaphorical form and which is articulated in the field of preconscious as Jean Pierre Kamieniak assures .

The preconscious desexualizes part of the libido in adolescence and dedicates it to the activity of thought. The pleasure of thinking added to the permeability of the preconscious makes the associations more fluid and the play with the words more accessible. The more vulnerable the adolescent's preconscious, the more vulnerable his self is and vice versa. The preconscious is an agent of subjectivation like humor that facilitates the entry into relationship with oneself and with the other allowing the adolescent to seek this strand of difference, to seize it and to redraw the contours of his identity. Daniel Sibony theorizes in this sense that: "Laughter gives self-recognition; we recognize ourselves narcissistically; we agree after the conflict, we reconcile by bypassing the emotion. Failing to defeat the other or to agree with it, we can already laugh at it; and failing to agree with oneself, one makes fun of oneself. So we are better with ourselves and with the other. Laughter, even mocking, involves a reconciliation, sometimes very diverted, with the world, including with oneself . Man seeks in himself and with himself to resolve oppositions in an absurd way, always remembering his inability to resolve them. Humor alleviates the rigidity and theatrical drama of life. This subjectivity originating originates in the personal and infantile history of the subject.

Pierre Marty (1992) insists on the quality of parental support during childhood in the establishment of a rich and provided preconscious. Rosine Debray (1996) links, in this sense, the preconscious of the baby to that of the parents. It is thanks to the detoxifying and containing function of the maternal preconscious that the preconscious of his child will develop serenely. This same maternal preconscious is conditioned by the containing and para-excitatory action of the father. In adolescence, the historization of the past can begin and mentalization takes place structuring the psychic apparatus traumatized by the break-in of puberty. Thus the detachment of parental imagos can be done in a serene way and the objective reinvestment takes place in a detoxified framework.

To conclude, we will say that as Jean Pierre Kamieniak (2005) points out, there is no humor in adolescence because it would be more akin to a character acquired at the end of the work of adolescence but we could speak of adolescent humor. A humor in the wild in a way subject to the impulsive excitement that he tries to tame. This humor draws on aggression and adolescent violence in order to create a bond with her, in order to ensure the feeling of continuity threatened by the pubertal break-in. Daniel Sibony (2010) brings humor closer to the game of the reel that we launch and catch up. This game of fort-da described by Freud reassures the child about the return of the mother and helps him to endure his absence by ensuring the permanence of the object. The coil launched here is not the mother but oneself; "We play to get started, to get lost, to find each other, jubilant at this rate of loss and reunion." . This progression-regression game, ensured by preconscious permeability, gives the adolescent a feeling of permanence of himself facing the feeling of strangeness.

This daytime reverie put into words participates in the secundarization of impulses and develops a pleasure to think and play with one's thoughts and the thoughts of the other. The other we desire, the other we possess, the other that escapes us, the other that threatens us, the other sometimes targeted, instrumentalized, sometimes elevated to the rank of all-powerful executioner.

Philippe Gutton (2008) states that the body and the imagination stick to puberty and that words

are put into action and vice versa. Adolescent sublimation would be the inscription of this pubertal novelty in the interstices of the infantile impossible. It constitutes this trajectory of affects that the adolescent takes on the way from primary to secondary school; "what I live erotically today revives me in my origin ... The proximity of the original genital experience is creative insofar as it involves sufficient self-generation consisting of possible associative elaboration .

#### Conclusion:

The Tunisian revolutionary context was a trauma that struck hard at the doors of a sleepy adolescence. Pushing the limits, destroying landmarks and undermining the psychic organization of adolescents. These actors-spectators reacted differently depending on the specific dynamics of each. But the revelation was to witness an explosion of humor there we expected more sadness and collapse. This massive use of the humorous sphere divided teenagers into two groups: those who produced and/or shared humor and those who closed and walled themselves in a kind of morbid inexpressiveness.

Those who gave free rein to their imagination and enjoyed sharing their creations and others who sported a rigid, aggressive and impenetrable functioning. We then asked ourselves the question about the functioning that underpinned the various humorous manifestations and we wondered about the diagnostic value of humor in adolescent functioning.

The literature has provided us with interesting information about the involvement of preconscious functioning in the secundarization of impulses and in establishing the link between representations of things and representations of words. It would help with mentalization and allow the teenager to enjoy playing with words and images and exchange them for the purpose of socialization.

We then hypothesized that the use of humor in the adolescent period would testify to the establishment of a preconscious activity serving the secundarization of impulses and guaranteeing an internal para-excitation. On the other hand, the difficulty of accessing the humorous sphere in the adolescent would witness an inability to think things, the existence

of an destructive anxiety and the failure to implement preconscious work.

The concept of humor seemed elusive, multifaceted, elusive and therefore difficult to objectify. Indeed, humor depends on the personality, the experience, the situation, the current predisposition, the audience to which it is addressed... so many variables that pushed us to look for a model of humor that can account for the variability of humor according to situations and people.

We then turned our attention to rod's humorous model, A Martin, which divides humor into two main categories: adapted humor and inappropriate humor. Adapted humor would be divided into two subtypes: self-improving humor, which represents intrapsychic, benevolent and non-invasive humor and affiliative humor that feeds in the context of group processes, is mainly comic and joking. Inappropriate humor, on the other hand, is divided into two subgroups: aggressive humor which includes mockery, irony, sarcasm and aggressive comedy and self-derisory humor which is marked by a narcissistic failure of the subject who always puts himself in an inferior position compared to others.

The results of our research allowed us to identify a psychic functioning specific to each type of humor. Our study allowed us to link the different types of humor with a particular psychic functioning through preconscious work.

Our results are generalizable by the large number of adolescents in our sample (180) and their geographical representativeness (North-East and Centre-East) thus have a preventive component of psychological disorders in adolescence allowing us to establish identifications at the end of the latency of fragile functions and to devote the necessary interest to them in order to avoid possible decompensations, to be able to distinguish between a crazy laugh and a crazy laugh, a shared pleasure and a loneliness in suffering.

Our research has certain limitations that, when controlled, could enrich our work and perhaps bring new elements to it. The first limit is at the level of the injunction of humor to the questionnaire. Although this did not significantly influence the number of non-responses per item and the nature of the humor

is voluntary, we still wonder about the effect of the injunction and whether there is any effect?

The second limitation of our research work is the reduced number of protocols to be analyzed at the level of self-improving and self-deprecating humor groups. But this is due to the vagaries of the field and the loss of the sample because some teenagers who passed the questionnaires were enrolled in the 9th year of basic education and when we came back to pick them up next year, they had already gone to high school.

The third limitation of our research is precisely the collegial and academic setting in which the questionnaires were taken and the TAT protocols put in place. This probably influenced their responses preventing them from having access to a more liberated, spontaneous verbal expression.

These limits that we have presented open the door to so many questions and avenues of research to explore.

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