

Research Incentive Fund Report

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From July 2 through 6, 2013, I attended the 25th annual meeting of the International Society for Humor Research in Williamsburg, Virginia. At the meeting I presented a paper, chaired a panel, and took an active part in the meeting of the Executive Board. The panel I chaired and also presented on had the intriguing title of "From Super Successful, to Failed, and Incomprehensible Humor." The other panelists were Liisi Laineste, senior researcher at the Center of Cultural History and Folklore in Tartu, Estonia, presented "Failed Humor on the Internet," Nancy Bell, Department of English at Washington State University, presented "Responses to Incomprehensible Humor," and Hilal Ergul, PhD student in linguistics at Texas A&M University – Commerce, presented "Responses to Failed Humor in Mixed Gender Interaction."

My paper was "Pulling up Piccadilly: The Best Practical Joke of All Time." It discussed an audacious practical joke in which pranksters impersonated workmen and literally excavated a busy thoroughfare in the heart of London. This joke apparently happened in 1911, but soon thereafter it crossed the Atlantic, being attributed to a famous American prankster in late 1920s New York. Today, the same joke has become a widespread international legend, supposedly being played by college students in cities from Reykjavik to Wellington. In the paper, I explore the recurring themes of social class and its connection to work and play. I suggest that jokes become apocryphal, like this one, when they touch on salient recurring issues and conflicted feelings. The moral is, we must care before we can laugh.

This paper is based on research that is still in early stages, but which I plan to extend and submit for publication.