

Research Incentive Fund Report

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From July 7 through July 12, 2014, I attended the 26th annual conference of the International Society for Humor Research at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. 100 conference attendees filled the ancient halls of the University, founded in 1636.



At the meeting I presented a paper, chaired a panel, and took an active part in the meeting of the Executive Board.

My paper was “Jokes Do Not Exist,” a conceptual piece that argued that serious studies of jokes cannot confine themselves to cases that are amusing or pleasant. I used as a case study a story from the Otago goldfields in 19th-century New Zealand, where some individuals played a public practical joke that involved fabricating the body of a missing Chinese man by using the carcass of a sheep. Although the story will repel many readers

today as being both tasteless and racist, it was generally received well at the time (although some commentators admitted the joke was “a rough one”). Incredibly, the story was made into a musical comedy in 1958 and has been repeated several times more recently in tourist literature as an example of the colorful history of the region.

Drawing on sociological approaches to joke performance, I argue that jokes are never inherently funny, but that amusement occurs only in the minds of audiences. However, the claim that certain jokes are inherently funny or unfunny is an important recurring theme in the arguments that regularly arise in the reception of humor.

As I hoped, the paper generated a lot of discussion, and I was invited to submit it for publication in the ISHS journal, *Humor*. This I intend to do after completing further research. I am grateful to InULA’s support which helped make this conference trip possible.