**“She finds people like you hilarious!”: Why do we[[1]](#footnote-0) laugh at people with dwarfism?**

***Abstract***

For centuries, people with dwarfism have been sought after for humorous entertainment purposes. Even today, dwarfs are employed within various forms of lowbrow entertainment that is unique to them. This begs the question, why do we laugh at people with dwarfism? Using superiority and inferiority theories this paper aims to demonstrate why we laugh at dwarfs by exploring both historical and present forms of dwarf entertainment. Laughing at dwarfs, I argue, is a form of disablism that permits dwarfism to be deemed inferior within society due to their non-normative embodiment. Lastly, the paper demonstrates some of the social implications this sort of humour has upon how people with dwarfism are perceived and subsequently treated within society. The paper calls for a more ethical consideration of the humour used in relation to dwarfism with the entertainment industry.

**Keywords:** dwarfism, superiority theory, incongruity theory, disablism, social implications.

***Introduction***

When it comes down to it, depending on the type of dwarfism a person has, it is nothing more than a genetic or hormonal difference. Achondroplasia, the most common form of dwarfism, is the result of a difference in the FGFR3 gene that is responsible for preventing too much cartilage being turned into bone, resulting in a person having shorter limbs (Horton et al.). Yet, somehow, this genetic difference makes people with dwarfism, including myself, a figure of fun in western society. Western society is influenced by the social norms, beliefs and traditions that originated in European society, and which are also evident in former colonies, such as Australia and the United States. “How we view people who are different has less to do with what they are physiologically than with who they are culturally” (Bogdan, 10). The title of this paper is taken from an encounter I had whilst out shopping. A woman, with her young daughter, approached me and told me that her daughter found people like me [dwarfs] hilarious. This is because as Shakespeare points outs, “dwarfism is a very visible impairment, with many connections to comedy and the circus in our culture” (48). My body was read as funny because of the dwarf entertainers[[2]](#footnote-1) they had been exposed to within the media.

There is growing research that explores how people with dwarfism have been represented both historically and within the present day. The Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies has recently published a special issue on representations of dwarfism from the biblical times to dwarfs in 1930s cinema. Many of these papers demonstrate how dwarfism has been constructed as humorous. Furthermore, Adelson (*The lives of dwarfs*) provides a rich history to the lives of people with dwarfism, documenting their prominence within the entertainment industry, where they have been represented as mythical beings, freaks and figures of fun. This is evident in films such as *Tod Browning’s Freaks* (1932), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Time Bandits* (1981), *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (1971) Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005)*, Willow* (1988), *and Austin Powers* (1999, 2002). It is important to unpack why people with dwarfism are considered figures of fun in order to understand the social implications and how they can be challenged. Why do we laugh at people with dwarfism? What is so funny about an impairment that results in profound short stature? This requires a critical examination of the representations of dwarfism using superiority and incongruity theories of humour.

In society, tallness is revered and is often taken as a sign of superiority. Superiority theory is associated with the emotive (feeling superior to those of short stature). For example, Osensky points out that “in society we tend to think positively of tallness, but often openly express disrespect towards people who are small” (3). In relation to normalcy, the small body is deemed undesirable. The further from the norm a person deviates the more undesirable they become. Dasen (253) points out that “dwarfism is over three standard deviations below the mean height of the population”. Superiority theory reinforces norms, in case that ‘*bigger is better*’. Of course, this is a general assumption, which mostly applies to western society. However, other identities can impact how a person is received within society. For example, whilst taller men are favoured by women, taller women are not always revered by men. Yet, they are still more likely to earn more than a shorter woman for the same occupation (Osensky). Furthermore, a tall black man may be perceived as threatening, especially if he is well built, which has shown leads to more stop and searches by police (Hester and Grey).

Moving on from the superiority theory, people with dwarfism create an incongruous encounter within society, due to the rarity of their impairment[[3]](#footnote-2). Incongruity theory is associated with the cognitive aspects of humour (the incongruous encounter they provoke). Lintott argues that humour is often a combination of both theories. Whilst we can expect people to be surprised when they see someone with dwarfism, it is how they react which is of most importance.

I draw on both past and present examples of dwarfs in lowbrow entertainment, including the circus and being hired out for celebratory events, to examine how they are culturally constructed as humorous. Lowbrow entertainment is a form of exploitive entertainment (Backstrom), which is criticised and contested by many people with dwarfism and their associations, including Little People of America (USA) and the Restricted Growth Association (UK). In this paper, I argue that the cultural construction of people with dwarfism as humorous is a form of disablism, as they are deemed inferior due to their non-normative body size. The term disablism was coined to describe all forms of “discriminatory, oppressive or abusive behaviour arising from the [unjustified] belief that disabled people are inferior to others'' (Scully, 26). In particular, these disablist representations often result in mockery as the dwarf entertainer is laughed *at* but not *with*. In the last part, I explore the social implications these representations have on people with dwarfism in society.

***What’s so funny?***

There is a common belief that disability and humour are incompatible as the terms create a contradiction between ‘sadness’ and ‘silliness’ (Bolt, *Cultural disability studies in education*). Laughing at disabled people can at first seem cruel as they are often culturally constructed as tragic and pitiful. According to Noonan (54), “jokes about disabled people are often seen as mean spirited and denigrating, they flaunt a callous insensitivity to human tragedy and suffering”. Yet, western society has been laughing at certain disabled people for centuries, as evident in European courts, where dwarfs and people with cognitive impairments were employed as court jesters. However, it is important to note that disability is not a homogeneous group and that some disabled people are more acceptable to laugh at than others.

Coogan and Mallett suggest that it is important for disability studies to engage with humour studies in order to provide a more complete understanding of the relationship between the two subjects. There is a wealth of research that explores the relationship between disability and humour, most prominently in the special issues of disability and humour, within the Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies and Disability Studies Quarterly. However, Coogan and Mallett (247) argue that ‘critical theories of the representation of disability that unproblematically position non-disabled laughter at disability as the product, the symptom, and the cause of negative and discriminatory attitudes, fall short when the attempt to deal with the complexities of humour’. As evident in some of the work of these special issues, humour is not necessarily directed towards disabled people, but rather exposes socio-cultural attitudes towards disability. Thus, it is important to examine humour and disability, and not assume that all humour is bad or that all impairments are deemed humorous. To do this, it is important to explore both disability and disabling humour.

There are two forms of humour related to disability: disability humour and disabling humour. Disabling humour is criticised for promoting disablism within society as the purpose is to mock disabled people (Reid, Hammond-Stoughton and Smith). According to Barnes (*Disabling Comedy and Anti-Discrimination Legislation*), disablist humour helps to perpetuate pre-conceived attitudes towards, assumptions about, and expectations of disabled people in the minds of non-disabled people, thus reinforcing the foundations on which discrimination rests. Disabling jokes can manifest in different ways. They not only involve one liners from a stand-up comedian or a situational joke within a film or television show, but can also include the actual disabled person being the joke through performance. This is evident in freak shows, as well as present day lowbrow entertainment, such as hiring out a dwarf for a celebratory event. Hammond-Stoughton and Smith argue that disabling humour reinforces stereotypes and negative representations of disability, including the use of derogatory language. Disability humour on the other hand challenges cultural assumptions towards disabled people. Depending on whether we are laughing with someone or laughing at them can determine their social standing.

Even in the present day, people with dwarfism continue to be a source of humour, in ways that would be off limits to other disabled people. For example, Kennedy points out that whilst there exists ‘dwarf tossing’ you would never have ‘wheelchair tossing’. This can be attributed to how different impairments are perceived within wider society. Firstly, you are either born with dwarfism or not. You cannot become a person with dwarfism, however, other impairments are not off limits. Noonan (61) argues that one of the reasons it is difficult to laugh at disability is because “people are ultimately laughing at themselves and their own inevitable fate of old age and disability”.

Secondly, People with dwarfism are just seen as small, as opposed to a person with an impairment which is often deemed tragic, pitiful and painful. Morreall (*Humor, Philosophy and Education*) points out that we do not always laugh when feeling superior. For example, people often feel superior to disabled people when they pity them, but this emotion does not provoke a humorous reaction. Furthermore, Aristotle argued that pain must be absent for incongruity theory to work (Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*). Pain is an undesirable trait, which often elicits sympathy from others. If something arouses sympathy or pity then it is impossible to laugh at (Morreall, *Humour and the Conduct of Politics*). For example, Tiny Tim is a disabled character who is used to evoke pity, whereas the seven dwarfs are used to encourage laughter. Both are used as what Mitchell and Snyder term as a ‘narrative prosthesis’, but for different reasons. Tiny Tim’s impairment is made obvious, especially by the use of an actual critch and is deemed life limiting, in order to provoke sympathy. However, the disabling aspects of dwarfism are not apparent in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Thus, by playing down the disabling aspect of dwarfism makes them permissible to laugh at and prominent figures in places where other disabled people are not, such as the circus. In places such as the circus, people were encouraged to mock performers such as dwarfs, but pity was always absent (Bogdan). The freak show was often a sideshow of the circus and where many people with dwarfism were paraded as ‘freaks’.

***Hilarious history***

For centuries, people with dwarfism have been sought after for entertainment purposes, not due to any particular talents, but rather for their appearance. The cultural construction of dwarfism as humorous is evident in various historical forms of entertainment, including as medieval jesters, clowns in the circus and exhibits within sideshows, dime museums and the Victorian freak shows. Yet, societies have not always laughed at dwarfs. Slorach argues that disablism has not always existed. In ancient Egypt people with dwarfism as revered members of society. In ancient Egypt, dwarfs were associated with the sacred and were even offered high ranking roles within Egyptian courts (Adelson, *The Lives of Dwarfs*). Whilst their rarity would have still provoked an incongruous encounter, they were not deemed figures of fun, which can be attributed to their association with the sacred, which would construct them as superior. Bes, the Egyptian God of Childbirth, is probably the most well-known God with dwarfism. It is important to consider this representation as it shows how perceptions and attitudes are culturally constructed. Albrecht argues that humour is socially created and thus it can be argued that people with dwarfism are only perceived as humorous due to culturally constructed perceptions about them. In ancient Greece, the ideal body was revered, which reinforced the idea that the non-normative body was inferior as it was not considered beautiful. A dwarf’s stature and often disproportionate body size differs significantly from the ideal body rendering it undesirable and inferior.

Plato and Aristotle were the first observers of superiority theory (Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*). It is no surprise then that some of the earliest recordings of ridicule towards people with dwarfism are situated in ancient Greece. Depoy and French-Gilson point out that attitudes towards disability are very much reflective of Ancient Greece. The philosopher Aristotle viewed dwarfs as inferior beings, as their body size was associated with being intellectually inferior (Dasen). In regards to superiority theory, humour is derived from the expense of others through the exploitation of human flaws. Aristotle claimed that in comedies people are normally depicted as “worse than the average and a comic is a subspecies of the ugly” (Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 43). When comic figures are depicted as ugly or deformed, then the audience can feel superior to them. Superiority theory is always associated with laughing at someone in order to show how they are inferior in comparison to the rest of the cohort. When superiority theory was first observed it was during a time when the powerful wished to keep society in order. For example, the lower classes were not permitted to laugh at their superiors (Billig, *Humour and Hatred*). It was only acceptable to laugh at those who were deemed inferior and thus deserving of mockery. Superiority theory in relation to disability can be considered a form of disablist humour. Superiority theory can aid in understanding ethical implications of humour (Lintott). However, also the presence of something unusual can also provoke humour.

Incongruity theory was developed as a reaction to superiority theory (Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*). According to incongruity theory, what makes something funny is “because there is something odd, abnormal or something out of place, which provokes laughter” (Morreall, *Humour and the Conduct of Politics*, 68). Whilst disabled people were popular exhibits within the freak shows, it is important to point out that not all disabled people were considered ‘freaks’. Those considered freaks were those with impairments that resulted in their bodies exceeding the norm in appearance, as opposed to those with functional limitations. ‘The purpose of the freak show was to expose those whose body deviated from the norm in a way that their physical traits dominated the entire person on exhibit’ (Garland-Thomson, *Freakery*, 61). Their only reason for being on display was to allow the audience to stare at their bodily difference, which provoked an incongruous encounter and allowed them to feel superior. Garland-Thomson (*Staring*, 161) suggests that, “perhaps the most spectacular form of visual novelty that can prompt stares is breaches of common human scale and shape”. Dwarfs and other freak show performers challenged people’s perception of the human body.

In the circus, dwarfs often played, and continue to play, the role of clowns, which are well known comedic performers. “Clowning provides a general conceptualisation of dwarfism in the British circus tradition” (Carmeli, 130). An obvious trait of clowns is their garish makeup and colourful costumes, which challenge the boundaries of human appearance. Therefore, who is better to play a clown, than a dwarf whose body size also does this. A popular dwarf clown was Wee Pea who often performed with several clowns of average stature (Carmeli). Carmeli (136) argues that the comic effect of Wee Pea came from his interaction with the others. This interaction would always draw attention to his size, which created the comic effect. For example, in one performance he is dressed as a Policeman and is running after the other clowns, who are dressed as criminals (Carmeli). This provides an incongroups encounter as a Policeman is not expected to be of small stature, which leads to a humorous situation when he is seen chasing the average sized clowns.

In the 17th century dwarfs were kept as pets by European royalty (Dasen). The ability to keep a dwarf as a pet demonstrates their inferiority within Victorian society. Although it is claimed that dwarfs kept by royals had a better life than others did (Woolf, *The Wonders*), it resulted in a lack of power and agency on their behalf. Their destiny was constructed and controlled through disablist attitudes of those with power. Their reduced social standing in society is also reflected within the dwarf’s performance:

‘…The pie was placed before the fifteen year old queen, Henrietta Maria. Suddenly a child’s hand popped through the crust and a fresh-faced dwarf emerged (thankfully, the pie was cold, not hot)…The dwarf wore a miniature suit of armour and marched up and down the banqueting table waving a flag. He then returned to the queen and gave a low, theatrical bow…And he was the Queen’s to keep’ (Woolf, *The Wonders*, 20).

Like the circus were part of performances that centred on the comic effect of their stature. Popping out of a pie, not only emphasises the person’s short stature, but also creates an incongruous encounter. The scene pushes the boundaries of societal norms and exaggerates the unexpected encounter. His attire and actions create an incongruous encounter, as it would not be permissible for someone of such small stature to join the military and acquire such nobility. According to Kruse (*Social Spaces of Little People*), people with dwarfism often played roles that were a parody of the association between tall stature and social status. This exaggerates the comedic effect of just having a small person present through exacerbating an incongruous situation by playing on their lack of social status.

One of the most famous performers of the freak show was Charles Stratton. Stratton was given the stage name ‘General Tom Thumb’, which automatically creates an incongruous encounter, whereby his title suggests that he is a high-ranking military official, whilst his name denotes his small stature. However, (Woolf: 189) points out how “Tom Thumb was described by Punch magazine as a joke of nature. He was laughed at as he was deemed unthreatening and unfitting”. Being deemed ‘unthreatening’ permits others to laugh at him without fear of any repercussions and demonstrate their superiority.

Stratton later married Lavinia Bump. Lavinia, although also a performer in the freak show, was never as famous as Charles and was constructed as more delicate and petite. Tyrrell (180) argues that “there is a clear difference in the way dwarfs are depicted based on their gender”. According to Roslyn in European courts female dwarfs were treated like human dolls as opposed to figures of fun. This may explain why there are more male dwarf entertainers and characters, such as the Seven Dwarfs, the Oompa Loompas and Mini-me, who are all male. Added to this, a quick look at low brow entertainment venues shows that most of their dwarf entertainers are also male. It was once pointed out to me by an actress with dwarfism, who like Peter Dinklage refuses any role which stereotypes her dwarfism, that most dwarfs who partake in low brow entertainment are male. There may be many reasons for this, which this paper does not have the room to explore, but Lavinia demonstrates that perfectly proportioned female dwarfs may be constructed differently due to their femininity.

***Carry on laughing***

The association between dwarfism and mockery still continues and has rarely been challenged. As Backstrom (683) suggests “The disability rights movement was able to transform institutional access, legal rights, and terminology for some groups, but it fell short of eliminating the freak discourse that surrounds certain extreme bodies.” Whilst the freak shows began to disappear during the turn of the 20th century, John Woolf argues that they “never really diminished but instead metamorphosed into different forms of entertainment that are still with us today” (11). Contemporary representations of dwarfs are rooted in specific historical contexts (Kruse, *Social Spaces of Little People*). Dwarfs are prominent in forms of lowbrow entertainment that are unique to them, including midget bowling, dwarf tossing and midget wrestling. It is important to look at where these forms of derogatory dwarf entertainment take place.

Dwarf tossing and midget wrestling both take place in spaces where typically men demonstrate their superiority through strength, something not associated with the small body. Dwarf tossing is both a demonstration of superiority and incongruity. Seeing someone toss a person, as opposed to a ball, provokes an incongruous encounter, inciting humour. According to Hobbes, humans are competitive and restless in their desire for power, which results in the superiority theory which posits that we laugh to demonstrate our enjoyment of feeling superior (Morreall, *Humor, Philosophy and Education*).An average sized man tossing a dwarf, who is usually male, demonstrates superiority over him. However, tossing a female dwarf may seem ungentlemanlike. Women are supposedly protected by men, whereas men often fight against each other to gain domination.

People do not feel threatened by the presence of a dwarf entertainer and thus can take pleasure at laughing at them in ways they would not at someone who is above average stature. Of course, people with gigantism were also popular exhibits within the freak shows, as those with a body size that exceeds the norm create an incongruous encounter, but someone of average stature would have no control over someone with gigantism, including the ability to pick them up and throw them across a room. The superiority of the spectator can explain the humour related to the controversial sport known as ‘Midget wrestling’. Wrestlers are constructed as large, muscular, mostly male performers who due to their appearance are deemed threatening. Ring names such as ‘Andre the Giant’, ‘Giant Haystacks’ and ‘Big Daddy’ all help to emphasise the large physique of many professional wrestlers. Their powerful physique is further emphasised by their actions, such as the ability to be hit with a metal chair. A midget [sic] wrestler, such as Lord Littlebrook, on the other hand can be laughed at as they create an incongruous encounter as they are unthreatening. Morreall (*Humour and the Conduct of Politics*) points out that prehistoric tribes used laughter to indicate to others that something they had seen was not a potential threat. Furthermore, the way midget wrestling is choreographed does not demonstrate any particular strengths, but rather is dependent on comical scenes. In one situation, whilst two average size wrestlers fight, a midget wrestler runs into the ring dressed as a miniature version of one the average sized wrestlers and bites the other on the rear end. This is a childish action that would not be tolerated if performed by one of the average sized wrestlers. A non-threatening midget wrestler can get away with this action whilst provoking laughter from the audience. In early cinema dwarfs often played diminutive mimics of average sized characters (Adelson, *The changing lives...*). Mimicking suggests that dwarfs have limited personality traits. The midget wrestler provides the comic fodder that would not be expected from his average sized counterpart.

Another form of control, that is associated with dwarfism and entertainment is the ability to hire them out for celebratory events, such as Stag dos (known as Bachelor parties in the USA) and weddings:

“We hired a dwarf to run around the tables to the Benny Hill music[[4]](#footnote-3) because I thought people wouldn't expect that." (Murphy).

It is not enough to just laugh at something that is out of place, but also at the situation. At a wedding, guests may expect to see children running around the tables, however, an adult who is the same height as most children performing the same action creates an incongruous encounter which provokes humour. Bolt (174) uses the term *“disablist infantilization”* to denote how disabled people are sometimes treated like children. He is laughed at for behaving like a child, which is demeaning and renders him inferior to the rest of the cohort. Superiority theory implies that there is pleasure from feelings of control and laughter is derived from the amusement at a person’s non-normative body, which is undesirable within society (Wyer and Collins). This indicates that humour in relation to dwarfism is a form of disablism.

Although the average sized spectator feels superior because of their height in comparison to the dwarf’s, it is their control over the situation and over the dwarf’s body that also creates a humorous situation. He has been hired out to make people laugh, but not in a way that a usual comedian would. Lintott argues that in regards to superiority theory, there is no room for laughing with the object of humour otherwise you cannot feel superior. A dwarf is not there to tell their own jokes, which would cause people to laugh *with* them, but rather they *are* the joke.

All guests are permitted to laugh at him, which further constructs him as an outcast. Meyer (314) argues that humour is a “social phenomenon”. Laughing together provides a form of comradery, which aids in reinforcing disablist beliefs. It is likely that he has been hired out from one of the numerous agencies that hire dwarfs out, including ‘Cheeky events’ and ‘Rent a midget’:

You can hire a dwarf for the day for any kind of party or occasion you like, including both stag dos and hen dos [bachelor and bachelorette parties]. Our little people are flexible and ready to have fun with you whatever the party is, they don’t care what the occasion, they just love to party! Dwarf hire for a stag do still remains the most popular because crazy stags just love to push the boundaries. All the best things come in…small packages and this little person is overflowing with fun and a wicked sense of humour…Our dwarfs for hire are for any kind of party or occasion, they’ll be up for some fun no matter what the party is (Celebrate Just Right).

It is important to remember that this is a disabled person being hired out as a commodity to add some entertainment value to a particular event. It is their impairment, as indicated by the phase ‘All the best things come in…small packages’ that is the source of entertainment and humour. Haberer (10) points out that people with dwarfism are often “depicted based on the novelty factor of their stature rather than any other personal attributes”. Usual talents, such as singing or dancing are not part of the show, just the dwarf body. The advert implies that the dwarf is willing to do anything, which assumes power to the person hiring them out. This lack of power is also indicated by the ownership of the dwarfs, such as the company claiming that they are ‘our little people’. Superiority theory claims that people “derive pleasure from feelings of mastery or control” (Wyer and Collins, 665). This control is allowed through how the dwarfs supposedly give their consent through being constructed as people who ‘just love to party’, who are ‘overflowing with fun’ and have a ‘wicked sense of humour’. All of these identities indicate that people with dwarfism are naturally entertaining and humorous due to their impairment, making them apt for the job. Whereas in reality it is the entertainment company that has constructed these false identities in order to control them.

These identities place people with dwarfism in an inferior position in society, as they are open to mockery. Wyer and Collins argue that being able to laugh at the non-normative body is due to a lack of censorship. Consent for others to laugh at the inferior body is provided by the dwarf entertainer who allows themselves to be the object of ridicule. The profession of the dwarf entertainer is defended as they are constructed as happy and seem to relish in their performance. If someone is happy in their occupation then it seems unfair to deny them the opportunity, especially when many occupations are restricted to disabled people. Although, those who endure the social repercussions of the performance are not considered. Billig (*Laughter and Ridicule*) points out that Hobbes’s analysis of superiority theory makes us question the ethics of laughter. This includes possible social implications regarding how the larger cohort are perceived and treated.

***Just a joke?***

A joke is considered permissible within society as it is not intended to be taken seriously and thus should have no social consequences. However, humour can shape and reinforce harmful stereotypes about a group of people (Billig, *Humour and Hatred*). In the case of dwarfism, constant media representations ensure that it is perceived as humorous and subsequently people with the impairment are seen as subordinate to others. Adelson (*The Changing Lives of Archetypal Curiosities,* 10) points out, “because most members of the general public do not know any dwarfs personally, their impressions are formed by what they see in popular culture”. This has unwanted implications for people with dwarfism in society, who have limited agency over their bodies and have to tolerate being treated in the same manner as dwarf entertainers. Kruse (*Narrating intersections of gender and dwarfism*) argues that the perception of dwarfism being associated with entertainment contributes to the ongoing frustration that people with dwarfism experience in relation to their own identity, as it obscures the myriad of other identities that they possess.

The social repercussions are unknown to other members of the public, as their exposure to dwarfism will be related to stories or films where the dwarf character is usually the figure of fun, reinforcing the acceptability to laugh at them. “For those subjected to it, superiority theory is not pleasant” (Meyer, 314). It can often result in disability discrimination. For example, German Lawyer Silke Schoenfleisch-Backofen, who has dwarfism, successfully sued a witness after he started laughing and singing ‘Heigh Ho’ at her in court (Reuters). ‘Heigh Ho’ is of course a popular song from Disney’s 1937 animated film, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Watson (145) suggests that “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs teaches the audience that people with dwarfism are funny looking and childlike and that it is okay to laugh at them”. She created an incongruous encounter, as her presence as a respectable and intelligent lawyer, challenged the man’s perception of dwarfism, which was clearly influenced by media presentations of dwarfism. This interaction resonates with Billig (*Humour and hatred*) who suggests that there are social reasons why humour may be enjoyed by one group and not another. Other people in society who deem dwarfs no more than a joke can easily ignore the implications of these representations, however for people with dwarfism they undermine their social standing in society.

One way to counteract the social repercussions, is to expose people to them using disability humour. Tanyalee Davis, is a Canadian comedienne, who uses disability humour to demonstrate how other people perceive and interact with her as a person with dwarfism. For example, one sketch informs the audience of how parents allow children to mock her dwarfism. In the sketch she recalls how a young boy shouted, ‘Daddy, look it is one of Santa’s helpers! His father starts laughing and pointing, which she finds upsetting. In response, Tanyalee tells the child that in fact, she is one of Santa’s helpers and that if he is a good boy Santa will bring him all sorts of very expensive gifts, including a Playstation. This joke exposes how problematic representations of dwarfism not only influence how children perceive her, but provokes disablism. However, the joke encourages the audience to laugh at the father’s ignorance and not Tanyalee’s stature.

***Conclusion***

Superiority and incongruity theory are beneficial to understanding why we laugh at dwarfs. The conception of dwarfs as unthreatening and not pitiful allows them to be constructed as figures of fun. Laughing at dwarfs is influenced by disablist beliefs that construct the non-normative body as inferior in society, which relates to superiority theory. Tallness is revered and thus humour is used to indicate a dwarf’s inferiority including through attitudes in society. An example of a dwarf’s inferiority is expressed through control, such as when a dwarf is depicted as a pet or someone who can be hired out, as they are unthreatening. However, as shown other disabled people are also deemed inferior and unthreatening within society, but are not conceived in the same humorous ways as dwarfs. The ability to laugh at dwarfs can be explained by incongruity theory. The rarity of dwarfism provokes an incongruous encounter, however, it is the perceived lack of pain and subsequent pity that allows incongruity theory to be applied to dwarfs, but not so much to other disabled people.

Why we laugh at people with dwarfism in society is directly influenced by the acceptability of being able to laugh at dwarfs in the entertainment industry. No boundary exists between the behaviour encouraged towards dwarf entertainers and that which is experienced by people with dwarfism in society. Dwarfism should not be exempt from humour, but a more ethical approach to how people with dwarfism are used in the entertainment industry is required. The notion of superiority, which constructs the target of humour, the dwarf, as inferior challenges disability equality. Whilst a minority of dwarfs continue to construct dwarfism as humorous and allow themselves to be ridiculed then the average sized person will always have an excuse to deem the rest of us as sub-human. This demonstrates that disablism manifests in different forms, including towards those whose identity as a disabled person is not always obvious. If true disability equality is to be achieved then it is important that dwarfism is not culturally constructed in a humorous way that deems them inferior.

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1. ‘we’ refers to the media and general population within western society. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. In this paper I use the term ‘dwarf entertainers’ to refer to people with dwarfism who use their dwarfism as a form of entertainment as opposed to any usual talents such as singing or acting. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. According to Horton et al there are less than 250,000 people with Achondroplasia, the most common form of dwarfism worldwide. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. The Benny Hill theme tune is also the well known circus theme tune, known as Yakety Sax. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)