

Joking cultures: Humor themes as social regulation in group life

GARY ALAN FINE and MICHAELA DE SOUCEY

Abstract

Every interacting social group develops, over time, a joking culture: a set of humorous references that are known to members of the group to which members can refer and that serve as the basis of further interaction. Joking, thus, has a historical, retrospective, and reflexive character. We argue that group joking is embedded, interactive, and referential, and these features give it power within the group context. Elements of the joking culture serve to smooth group interaction, share affiliation, separate the group from outsiders, and secure the compliance of group members through social control. To demonstrate these processes we rely upon two detailed ethnographic examples of continuing joking: one from mushroom collectors and the second from professional meteorologists.

Keywords: Culture; small groups; joking; ethnography; social regulation; sociology.

What does joking do?

Put more concretely, what does a *joking culture* do for a group? As groups¹ form, they develop known humorous themes that are returned to repeatedly throughout group interaction. As group members interact they create an idioculture or “small group culture” (Fine 1979). Culture is embedded within groups (Dundes 1977), just as meaning grows out of interaction (Blumer 1969). By idioculture we refer to:

[...] a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer that serve as the basis of further

interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences, and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members. (Fine 1987: 125)

Groups create what linguists have subsequently termed “communities of practice,” referring to the linguistic styles and cultural traditions of group interaction (Wenger 1998; Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999).

A salient part of this culture—found in almost every group—is a set of repeated humorous and joking references (Holmes and Marra 2002b). Over time this comic discourse comes to characterize the group to its members and can subsequently be used to identify the group. The joking becomes *historicized*. Sarcastic remarks, gaffes, prank, or jokes are capable of being referred back to by group members. They have what Erving Goffman (1981: 46) describes as a “referential afterlife” and can provoke fond or upsetting reflection, even after group activities have terminated.

As Pierre Bourdieu remarks, the joke is:

[...] the art of making fun without raising anger, by means of ritual mockery or insults which are neutralized by their very excess and which, presupposing a great familiarity, both in the knowledge they use and the freedom with which they use it, are in fact tokens of attention of affection, ways of building up while seeming to run down, of accepting while seeming to condemn—although they may also be used to test out those who show signs of stand-offishness. (Bourdieu 1984: 183)

Joking is reflexive in that it creates comfort in group life and serves to maintain group relationships by building commonalities.

Given the extensive research on humor, it is surprising that there have been relatively few studies that detail the joking culture of a group—that is, the *continued use of jocular themes* by group members (Roy 1959–1960; Linstead 1985; Rossel 1981; Seckman and Couch 1989). To be sure, numerous studies address joking *in* groups. However, most of these studies treat their examples as discrete instances, rather than as events that are meaningful in light of both past and future interaction. The joking history of groups has been downplayed. The examples are not seen as being linked together and linked to the group from which they emanate. Groups develop a joking repertoire of shared knowledge and common history (Kalcik 1975: 9). Joking as discourse is embedded, interactive, and referential.

First, joking is *embedded*; it occurs within the context of an on-going relationship. As a general rule, joking does not occur between strangers.

While jocular pleasantries may be directed to strangers, for a joking culture to be established an on-going relationship is necessary. To joke requires individuals who are aware of and are considerate of each others' identity. The joker must know the target (and the audience), and the target and audience must know the joker. This relationship gives the joker the *right* to joke. However, it does more; it gives the joker the authority to *get away* with the joke. It provides the potential for role distancing, so that the joker, by virtue of the trust established by the embedded relationship, achieves considerable role distance (Fine 1984). This allows the speaker to say things that he or she "doesn't really mean," separating him or herself from the implication of the jocular remark as a "true" belief (Sacks 1978), denying it implicitly and as a matter of course. When, as Emerson (1969) points out, the *serious import* of humor is at stake, the speaker can justify the remark by relying upon the group's assumption of good fellowship. In most instances a loose coupling is assumed between the joking self and the "real self"—a courtesy disengagement based on pre-established relations. Because remarks are "only in fun," disrespect of others can be written off without accusations or apologies. Joking has the potential to mean more than what is directly said or done.

Second, joking is *interactive*; it is part of on-going interaction, and demands a response from other group members. Joking is temporally immediate, and calls for audience involvement; the absence of a response becomes a judgment on the teller and/or the remark (Sacks 1974; Norrick 1993). It is not that people must always joke in face-to-face situations, since telephone joking or chatroom joking certainly occurs, but it strains the term to imagine joking by letter, although jocular remarks can be made in such communication.

However, co-presence is not sufficient for joking. It is interactive, and participation is required for it to succeed. In other words, joking involves a call-response sequence, or a dialogue, a point emphasized by conversation analysts (Norrick 1993). In this sense, joking remarks build on each other. Joking that does not generate a continued humorous response—a slide into jocularly—is not a successful episode. This contrasts joking with much serious communication in which participants have an option of responding. In serious talk, a pause or gap is often attributed to the co-interactants, and not, as is frequently the case in joking, to the speaker.

Finally, joking is *referential*. Joking presumes that the parties involved share references—their idioculture—by which they make sense of the

implicit meanings of this jocular interaction. Put another way, it is not just that the parties know each other, but they share a history and an identity and can understand joking references. Humorous interaction is a metaphorical construction that contains dense layers of meaning, much of which is locally constituted—humor usually means more than what it says (Mulkey 1988). The decoding of the humorous metaphor is a decoding of the meaning structure of the social system in which it is embedded (Douglas 1968). Joking is tied to common understandings, linked to the history of the relationship.

These concepts—that joking is embedded, interactive, and referential—serve as the grounding for understanding joking cultures. Together they suggest that the location of a joking culture is a recognizable group of at least two individuals who are aware of each other's co-presence and social identity. They are responsive to each other and see their relationship as on-going and consequential. In the course of interaction they have developed shared understandings or have borrowed them from the social habitus that both share (Bourdieu 1984).

As noted, there has been little explicit examination of joking cultures. To explore the origins and usage of a joking culture, we draw upon two examples from the first author's ethnographic research: the first describing a joking theme among mushroom collectors and the second, joking among professional meteorologists.

The first example derives from a four year study of mushroom collectors and the organization to which they belonged. In the course of research with amateur mycologists, Fine became interested in how people conceptualized environmental ethics, bringing cultural templates to the reading of nature. He examined the group culture of members of the Minnesota Mycological Society (Fine 1998), an organization with some two dozen core members, a group that often went on forays together as well as held weekly meetings in the spring and fall. It was the repeated interaction of individuals, their shared talk and culture, and their behavioral routines that provided an opening to examine the development of environmental discourse.

The second example is taken from an eighteen-month ethnographic study of professional weather forecasters. Between January 2001 and June 2002, Fine observed at the Chicago office of the National Weather Service, an office with approximately two dozen workers. He examined the idioculture of this group as members conduct scientific analysis within a bureaucratic context. Weather forecasters are given the

responsibility and the authority to predict—or *forecast*—the future. His concern is how this authority is shaped by the reality that they are operating within the National Weather Service, a large government bureaucracy. How are the demands of science—of meteorology—modified and structured within an organization that requires routine and immediate output, and how is this tension reflected in the group culture of the organization?

1. The production of joking cultures

Five elements together affect the creation and continuation of themes within joking cultures: the item needs to be known, usable, functional, appropriate in light of the group's status hierarchy, and triggered by some collectively experienced event (Fine 1979).

By being known, we refer to the fact that the references that constitute the joking sequence are *known* by at least some members of the group. This pool of background information, or latent culture (Becker and Geer 1960), constitutes the information from which jokers draw. Although jokes emerge from the dynamics of group interaction, prior knowledge and past experiences affect the form that this humor takes and how it is interpreted by group members in contrast to outsiders (Alberts 2000). Joking is creative production, involving the combination of previously familiar elements into a novel form (Hebb 1974). As a result, jokes diffuse from one group to another as individuals share membership in groups simultaneously or sequentially. A child who changes schools brings the culture of one school to another. As is often the case with sexual joking, members may pretend more sophistication than they have (Sacks 1974; Sanford and Eder 1985), but there must be a joker who claims the knowledge on which joking relies.

Second, jokes must be perceived as being *usable* within the group (Hall 1974). They need to fit within the moral boundaries that the group has set for itself. Many jokes deal with tendentious topics—filled with sex, aggression, and ethnic insult (Fry 1963; Davies 1990). Each group needs an explicit or implicit negotiation of what is proper joking content (Mechling and Mechling 1985). Even if individuals know sacred or taboo information, this may not be judged an appropriate topic for humorous interaction (Emerson 1969). Joking must be responsive to group norms.

The third feature that contributes to a joking culture is that the communication is linked to group regulation; it is *functional* for the group: it serves to smooth interaction, to build cohesion, to create norms of action, or to set boundaries in contrast to those who are defined as external to the group. For joking to continue—that is, to become part of the historicized, referential culture of the group—it must fit with the goals and needs of some or all members of the group. Successful joking is a response to shared concerns; the jocular themes are those themes of group content that members feel they need to confront. Admittedly, the definition of what constitutes problem solving can be broad, as entertainment or solidarity can be constituted as a need of group life. We do not suggest that every jocular remark serves the functional requirements of group life, but that those that last—those that become recognized themes—are likely to address issues that group members are also confronting on a serious basis.

Fourth, the joking culture must be *appropriate* in light of the status system of the group. Ongoing joking differentiates group members, organizes status, and creates a *social cartography* of group life. For cohesion to remain strong, status must be established at the same time it is veiled (Holmes 2000). Status talk, while real, should be not serious, particularly given the absence of formal positions in most informal groups. Informal groups typically operate as a circle of equals (Kuiper 1997). This assumption, while important in terms of the emotional tenor of group life, ignores the need for differentiation (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Groups inevitably develop systems of repute by which individuals are distinguished from each other and are ranked on a set of relevant dimensions. Joking cements these distinctions by creating distinct social groups (Wiseman 2002). It also demonstrates boundary construction in talk and interaction (Coates 2003). As Seckman and Couch (1989: 327) note in their examination of life on a factory floor, jocularly as “a significant form of social action [is] routinely used by people with robust relationships to affirm and modify social relationships.” Sometimes what is joking to one party can be offensive to another. Joking can be purposefully or unintentionally insulting to individuals or groups. “Just joking” is not always enough to disassociate intentions from affronts.

Many ethnographers have noted that joking and teasing is important in this social ordering. As William Foote Whyte (1955) noted in his examination of the ordering of street corner groups on Boston’s North End, and as Muzafer Sherif and his colleagues (Sherif and Sherif 1953: 252)

noted with regard to preadolescent campers, high status members have the right to joke at the expenses of others. Fine (1987) discovered the same phenomenon in his examination of Little League baseball teams, particularly with regard to nicknames. Nicknames, like teases, with their jocular intent, link individuals to social positions (Morgan et al. 1979), and as the nicknames become sedimented they become historically appropriate, made as real as a given name. The proposed assignment of a nickname is a claim which can be accepted, challenged, or ignored. Further, nicknames are subject to negotiation and alteration. One Little League baseball player, whose nickname was the sarcastic “Maniac” one year, acquired more flattering nickname “Main Eye” the following season as his skill and his status improved. Both involved transformations of his last name.

The final element that produces a joking culture is a *triggering event*. While the range of potential joking themes is endless, some mechanism is necessary to account for which elements actually enter the group’s jocular repertoire. Some bit of interaction — locally situated and unpredictable — provides a spark — a precipitating incident (Smelser 1963) that creates future humorous interaction. Joking is responsive to on-going action, but those joking themes that continue over time, that become part of the joking culture, are those that, while triggered, fit the status structure, organizational needs, and cohesive identity of the group. Together these interactional elements provide the basis by which the extensive humor that is found in any group gets narrowed to those joking traditions that recur, are referred to, and that are recognized as characteristic of the group. *Recurrence, reference, and recognition* constitute the characteristics of a group culture.

2. Regulating group interaction through joking

The creation of a joking culture serves as a strategy by which group members organize themselves and regulate their relationships by establishing a desire for cohesion and affiliation (Attardo 1994: 322–325). In creating the group as an arena in which individuals wish to invest time, a joking culture cements members to the group, even in the face of the costs involved in social solidarity. Informal groups without a publicly acknowledged power system or explicit set of rules need mechanisms to regulate the behaviors of members. One of the most effective of these, in part

because of its subtlety, is humor, creating a “joking consensus” (Mechling and Mechling 1985) and providing members in good stead with a “license to joke” (Handelman and Kapferer 1972)—an acknowledgment of group influence. When joking references continue over time, they are given a power more consequential than those jokes that emerge spontaneously and then vanish in the mists of interaction because. Lasting jokes enter group memory. The solidification of group culture gives it a power that passing jokes lack.

The process of group regulation through a joking culture includes the following effects: 1) *smoothing* interaction, creating an interactional focus, 2) *sharing* a collective identity through cohesion, 3) *separating* the group from others by drawing boundaries, and 4) *securing* appropriate action by means of informal social control.

Smoothing

Conversations can have rough patches, leading to socialization through embarrassment, made tolerable by its ostensibly jocular character (Billig 2001). Individuals can misunderstand each other, disagree, or otherwise make social errors and gaffes that undercut the assumption and desire for civility, and lead to faltering conversations and missed commonalities. As Goffman (1959) has persuasively argued, a social system needs to be organized to permit interaction to proceed without public disharmony. Impression management has as its fundamental goal for action sets to be ordered without identity damage to the parties and disruption to the flow of conversation. The structure of conversation often generates pressures for interpersonal agreement in the face of potential obstacles or discord (Fuchs 2001: 327).

In their interactions, people hope to uphold presumed bonds of solidarity and desires for continuity made public by the performance of coordinated lines of action (Blumer 1969). As Heritage (1984: 265) remarks: “there is a ‘bias’ intrinsic to many aspects of the organization of talk which is generally favorable to the maintenance of bonds of solidarity between actors which promotes the avoidance of conflict.” Without this assumption, revealed in tacit strategies to “get along,” interactions might be more fragile than they prove to be. If we only examine people’s private attitudes, we might assume that social relations would be disrupted with considerable frequency.

That this rarely occurs provides the space for appreciating the power of joking culture. Joking is essential in the desire for social lubrication in that its message is—whenever discord looms—that “this is not serious,” “this does not mean what it appears to mean on the surface,” and that “we have been through this before and have remained friends.” Joking constitutes an established frame that rescues interactions from friction. It smooths relationships and causes the flow of discourse within the group to become more widely agreeable and acceptable. Real disagreement can be shunted to unseriousness, either as an immediate salve (Pache 1992; Yedes 1996) or to create the conditions in which a dispute will be treated as resolvable (Bradney 1957; Sykes 1966; Swanson 1978). Jokes both direct attention away from potential discord and make the case that, because we can laugh together, there is no *essential* discord present, producing a stable social order, given an appropriate context (Fox 1990).

Sharing

A joking culture extends beyond the attempt to protect interactants from embarrassment, shielding their interaction from disruption. For stability, groups need social cohesion, a recognition of mutual affinity and caring. How can such a claim be institutionalized? One way is to make the claim—through a tradition of joking—that within group limits understandings are on-going and embraced. Limits exist as to what group members can “get away with”—the usable culture—often referring to the legitimacy of explicit references to race, intimacy, bodily fluids, or sexual orientation. Members are expected to know these limits and to abide by them, a central feature of socialization.

Groups create traditions that connect members, insisting that they participate in the doings of the group in order to be a valued member. It is the ongoing character of the interaction, not merely the shared amusement, that ties people together. A rapport emerges from the sharing of jokes and stories, often begun by triggering events (Norrick 1993). Posen (1974) points to the important role of traditional pranks at summer camp in creating a shared spirit. Similar on-going joking practices are evident in taverns, dormitories, small businesses, and factories (LeMasters 1973; Leary 1977; Vinton 1989; Linstead 1985). Participation in repeated joking practices reveals the mechanism for creating and maintaining powerful social bonds.

Separating

It has often been alleged that one is “truly” a member of a group when one is able to joke easily with other members and able to understand and share the jokes that these others tell. We have all entered a group (perhaps future in-laws, a new workplace, or an unfamiliar school) and had the awkward or embarrassing task of figuring out what is considered humorous and why. At first, jocular interaction is strained and often explanation is required; the newcomer is outside the group’s boundaries, but in time joins. Natural laughter is difficult to fake, especially if one first waits for others to respond. A novice can easily miss the “invitation” to laughter (Sacks 1974); a boundary of understanding exists that must be crossed for group membership (Holmes and Fillary 2000). The joking is not innovative, but is part of the humor tradition of the group. If not, it would be as easy for an outsider to understand the humor as any insider. That this is not the case suggests that humor is embedded within the group’s identity. Through its privileged meanings such joking constitutes boundary-work, separating insiders and outsiders (Runcie 1974; Wennerstrom 2000). A group’s joking practices also comforts a newcomer, showing him or her that the insiders enjoy each other and that group membership is enticing and valuable. Of course, boundary work also has an underside as when individuals (as in high school cliques) are excluded through cruel or impenetrable joking.

To constitute a meaningful group, every on-going constellation of persons must separate themselves from outsiders (Francis 1994; Pogrebin and Poole 1988), providing identity by distinguishing them through interactional politics (Ducharme 1994; Holmes and Marra 2002a). Jocular remarks, by virtue of their situated quality within group structure, are often not humorous to those who have not experienced the episodes on which the joking culture is built. As Robert Freed Bales (1970: 153–154) emphasizes, “Most small groups develop a subculture that is protective for their members, and is allergic, in some respects, to the culture as a whole. . . . [The members] draw a boundary around themselves and resist intrusion.” To be sure, the extent to which a group serves a boundary-maintenance function depends on the group goals, the services to members, its relation to outsider cultures, and the nature of the intruder. Boundaries can have varying permeability and can be patrolled with greater or lesser force.

Securing

Through joking, groups constrain the behaviors of members, maintaining behavioral regularities as constituting the moral order. This limit on behavior involves social control, necessary in any social organization. However, any system that restrains the freedom of individuals imposes a social cost, potentially intensifying the desire to exit the group, even while recognizing that unity has benefits for cohesion as well. Effective social units attempt to enforce social control in ways that do not appear oppressive; the best control is that which individuals perceive as beneficial in its own terms. A strong joking culture constitutes one of the more effective techniques of social control (Holdaway 1985; Garrett 1961). Individuals may be tested by joking, insuring that they know the normative expectations of the group (White 1975; Haas 1972), or the joking may be responsive to a perceived violation of those expectations. This response can either be mild and evanescent or consequential, as when a deviant receives a teasing “reputation” for a major or repeated infraction. That this communication occurs within a “play frame” (Bateson 1972; Fry 1963) means that a confrontation is unlikely. The control is imposed without seeming to be imposed — although at times it can be countered by joking (Tannen 1984: 134).

The target, the member who has violated group expectations, is reprimanded, but because the frame is a joking one, there is formally no criticism; the reputation remains formally unsmudged: this is, after all, only “joking.” In those circumstances in which control is met with laughter, the message that the behavior being referenced is inappropriate, and, hence, “humorous,” becomes clear. By being repeated, the joking has the force of settled case law within this micro-society. To avoid the continuation of such mocking, the target either must end the inappropriate behavior, or must present alternative standards through joking. As Donald Roy (1959–1960; Handelman 1976) memorably demonstrates in his depiction of “Banana Time,” each participant in a joking sequence may have a distinctive “part” to play in the maintenance of group standards. Roy’s industrial workers created times during the day (e.g., ritually and comically sharing a banana) at which they joked to alleviate the monotony of their labor.

Having established the conditions for a joking culture’s establishment and the roles that it serves within group life, we turn to two examples from the first author’s ethnographic research, what we label the “Purple Clitocybe Incident” and “Odie the Imperiled Fish.”

The Purple Clitocybe Incident

The Minnesota Mycological Society, like many leisure organizations, has a rich joking tradition; meetings and forays are filled with laughter and with references to previous jokes. One set of jokes consists of the memory of the tricks or pranks that members played on each other, bolstering a collective identity. This club has a large number of younger males (mostly in their 30s—Jay, Brian, Dave, Mark, and Jerry) and older women (in their 50s and 60s—Leah, Beth, Molly, Helen, and Meg). A friendly sexualized joking banter developed between the two groups:

Jerry jokes with Leah: “Want to see my stinkhorn?” On another occasion Molly jokes with Jay: “You look too pretty to go out into the woods.” Leah adds: “He looks like a *Playgirl* centerfold.” Later Jerry jokes with Molly about playing strip poker. This reaches its pinnacle in a memorable occasion—quickly entering into the club lore—when Dave sticks a zucchini in his pants. “The zucchini incident” was referred to on several occasions during the next few years, and demonstrated to new or peripheral members the pleasures of club forays. (Field notes)

A second incident—also tied to the teasing relationship between the younger men and older women—involves a trick that Jerry and Dave played on Beth and Molly at a foray. Beth and Molly were identifying mushrooms, and Jerry and Dave asked two new members to deliver a white *Clitocybe* whose cap they had painted with purple food coloring.² Others (particularly the males) were sworn to secrecy. Not suspecting, Beth and Molly fruitlessly attempted to identify the mushroom for about a half hour, as everyone stood around watching, making “helpful” suggestions as to which genus it might belong. Eventually Jerry and Dave “noticed” that the mushroom looked “strange.” As it dawned on Beth and Molly that they were victims, Jerry and Dave admitted their joke (Field note). The Purple *Clitocybe* incident, fully recorded on slides shown at club events, justified holding the foray at the same location annually because of how much “fun” was had. This episode was referred to for years—in stories to new members and through collaborative narration:

A few weeks later Howard tells the club about the incident: “We had a really peculiar specimen [laughter]. It looked like a purple *Clitocybe*. I wish I had a tape recorder so I could have gotten them arguing about it. This is an award [giving Beth and Molly a gift] from Leah. It’s a purple *Clitocybe* award.”

Beth: "It was actually blue."

Howard: "Dave was trying to keep his blue stained hands in his pocket. Then he came out and made up another, and the wheels began to turn slowly."

Molly: "We almost killed him." (Field notes)

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Brian shows slides of Dave painting the purple *Clitocybe*, commenting: "Would you buy a used microscope from this man?" When Brian shows a slide of Beth and Molly looking at the mushroom, he notes: "The plot thickens. It's to their credit that they didn't put any label on it. It fooled them for a while."

Molly says: "It was fun." (Field notes)

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The following year Dave joked that he didn't have the nerve to bring the food color to the national foray he attended. Jerry jokes about putting food coloring in his reagents (chemical) kit "to make purple *Clitocybes*." (Field notes)

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I ask Wilson his most memorable foray. He tells me: "The one at Camp Sallie a couple of years ago, when Dave got food dyes and colored I think it's a *Clitocybe* to fool Beth with identifying it. It stays in my mind as an enjoyable joke. We did have exceptional mushroom collecting that year too." (Field notes)

Whenever an usually colored mushroom is brought in (such as peach-colored morels or an orange *Pluteus*), reference is made to their being magically transformed by food color. This talk creates shared experience at the same time that it describes it. By validating through humor that members of club can share times—personally and vicariously—these joking narratives provided the basis for the belief that their leisure is not a solitary pursuit, but is social. Pranks, structured as creating discomfort that becomes a comforting recognition of collective interest, provide the basis for a set of stories that produce cohesion among group members and differentiate insiders from those outside of group boundaries.

The Case of the Imperiled Fish

The second example has features similar to the first in that it also involves joking between men and women. This joking occurred in the Chicago office of the National Weather Service, one of the long-standing offices of the weather agency, in operation for well over a century. The Chicago office is an office with, in the words of a forecaster, "a strong sense of tradition. Our get-togethers tend to be one big, long story-swapping event. . . . This office has deep roots" (Field notes).

Two of the female employees, Joan and Heather, keep small fish in little aquariums on their desks. Several male forecasters, notably Randy, Don, and Stan (and at least five others), tease these women that they will “do something” to the fish. The joking typically involves these male meteorologists performing scientific experimentation on the fish, Odie, of Joan, the office’s administrative assistant. In this instance the age difference between male and female isn’t as significant, although the male forecasters have higher status than the women, and the main male joker is younger than his primary target. Joan gives as good as she gets, although the men are the instigators of the joking, suggesting cultural norms of appropriateness in triggering a joking episode. Although the joking is not as overtly sexualized, given that this is a professional and government office, one can hear echoes of male domination of females in the joking culture, despite the fact that all participants enjoy the fun—fun that lasted during the entirety of my observations:

Joan tells me the story of her fish (she has had several over the years, one of which was given to her for National Secretaries Day). She says humorously, “They [the forecasters] would threaten my fish. I would have to get out my bat and my stick. . . . We laugh and joke and have a lot of fun.” (Field notes)

* * *

Randy and Don are joking with Joan about Heather’s fish. Randy jokes that her fish doesn’t look well, and that they should attach electrodes to the fish’s tank and give him electrical shocks. Joan jokes that Heather will hit them if they hurt her fish. (Field notes)

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Randy and Stan joke with Joan for almost an hour, threatening to send the fish into space on a rocket ship, burying the fish, and stapling a banner onto the fish’s tail. Joan comments: “You guys are putting a lot of thought into it.” Randy retorts, “We’re scientists.” Joan’s final comment is, “It’s a good thing that we all get along.” (Field notes)

* * *

Randy announces laughingly to me, “We had a fish incident. A bad one.” Randy and Don were working the midnight shift together, and they wired a bunch of batteries together, so that it looked like a bomb. They put the package on Heather’s fish tank, leaving a “ransom note,” reading that they would kill the fish if they didn’t receive \$1,000. He tells me that wanted to see the reaction of Heather and Joan. Joan says that she was thinking of bringing in Monopoly money for them. Stan joked, “I heard a loud scream.” Randy adds, “It just looked so much like a bomb.” (Field notes)

* * *

As the men talk about sending the fish into space, there is a lot of talk about “scientific experimentation.” Randy comments to Joan: “We’re doing this all in the name of science. We’re interested in Odie’s comfort. We need to bring him back to show you the value of science. . . . We need to choose the proper rocket that gives him enough room. We need to choose the proper thrust. We’re checking the parameters. . . . It can only bring publicity to the agency [the National Weather Service].” Joan comments sarcastically, “You haven’t convinced me.” (Field notes)

This joking sequence is an elaborate cultural creation to which all parties devote considerable energy, and which they perceive as enlivening their workday, much as do Donald Roy’s workers when they perform “Banana Time.” The themes of science and gender intersect on these occasions. The question of whether these forecasters are “truly” scientists is a continuing issue, evident in other joking themes as well as in serious discourse. The elaborate plans for the destruction of the fish exemplifies how the group members wish to see themselves, how the forecasters express their higher status in the office. In this sense these small creatures serve much the same role as the fungal specimens to which the mushroomers refer.

3. Articulating joking culture

These two episodes indicate that much joking within group life builds on itself over time. It is retrospective and self-referential. Group members participate knowing what has come before and enjoy sharing the “fun.” Joking, like trust, with which it is linked (Fine and Holyfield 1996), is embedded in the social relations in the group. Although much humor research has operated on the assumption that joking sequences are novel and independent, this is not the case. The idea that joking is “spontaneous,” in contrast to “canned jokes” is both true and false. There may be no script, but the joking schema are part of the cognitive organization of the group (Zerubavel 1997). In their community of practice, participants make claims to shared emotion, enacted through their speech acts.

The first instance of joking culture attempts to negotiate expertise and risk within the context of gendered work. A primary question of the mushroom collector is: “What is this?” (Second only to the related question: “Can I eat this?”). This is a group in which misidentification potentially has fatal consequences. The origins of the prank began in a “test,”

much like those often used for occupational socialization (Vaught and Smith 1980; Haas 1972). That the joke's targets did not fully pass the test leaves the incident open for continued replaying, reminding participants of the uncertainties and dangers of error. While the purple Clitocybe was constructed artificially, the implicit assumption is that nature contains sufficient variability as to make certitude problematic. Indeed, it was readily apparent that however confident individuals felt of their identifications, some edge of doubt routinely remained (thus, the advice to eat only a small amount of a newly identified mushroom and leave a piece available in the case of a toxic reaction).³

Within the roles and rules that the joking culture sets, this theme addresses the tension between securing social control and sharing cohesive culture. Those given the responsibility of identification must be warned of the dangers of the task. This joking frame achieves this, while simultaneously reminding everyone that they are a group of caring concern.

The second case provides, along with the creation of grounds of cohesion, an instance in which the boundary of the group is being negotiated, while at the same time interaction is being smoothed by joking. This joking ostensibly erases status as it reinforces it. That forecasters can joke with a secretary and a meteorological technician "on equal terms," suggests that salary and expertise are secondary. However, the direction of the joking establishes who can originate joking, as it is at the expense of those with lower occupational status.

In this setting the question of what constitutes science is salient. These forecasters have only B. S. degrees in meteorology; they are not scientists with graduate degrees. Further, these men do not do "research," itself a defining character of science, particularly in their estimation. The play that they are conducting "research" on the fish establishes a claim for scientific authority, even though all parties recognize that because of the jocular frame, such a claim can not be taken seriously. Thus, they negotiate their boundary—their separation—from "real scientists." At times these men fantasize that they have established the imaginary "National Center for Plasmological Research," and occasionally wear white lab coats (personally purchased as a costume) over sport shirts and slacks. In this they attempt to claim a boundary spanning position, while recognizing the power and reality of that boundary.

That this involves men and women, higher and lower status workers, suggests its power for smoothing relations. Such joking—and similar joking is found in other well-functioning work places—allows status to

be established within the context of ostensibly equal status relations. Workers can demand obedience without insult and without calling on authority. That this theme involves an attack on female belongings (a form of what Bourdieu calls “symbolic violence”) legitimates male dominance in other domains, even while it erases it. At the same time, it provides an opportunity for women to fantasize jokingly about their forcible resistance to male privilege. By working these themes into a joking culture that mirrors cultural norms of interaction, the status-based work relations of the office can be maintained.

4. Joking as regulation

In each of these instances—and many others—a joking culture regulates group life, shaping and organizing interaction, softening what might otherwise be harsh and divisive relations.⁴ Joking themes permit the smoothing of conversation, sharing traditions in the name of cohesion, separating the group from others, and securing the conformity of members. Each instance reveals cultural elements that are known, usable, functional, appropriate, and triggered through interactional circumstances.

Through repeated and routine joking group members can achieve implicit (and sometimes socially costly) group ends because joking does what it does not claim to do. By being just fun, jokes serve, in a latent fashion, as much more than fun. Joking culture, present throughout group life, comes to exemplify group life for members and make this life desirable. These narratives and discursive routines are what individuals often later recall about their groups. That they are “senseless” within group behavior makes their sense all the more powerful. The joker cannot be called on the implication of his or her remarks, because ostensibly there are no implications. This distancing coupled with embracement makes joking powerful as an interactional tool in group life.

Humor does not simply exist isolated from other interaction. A group’s joking culture is often retrospective, grounded on those experiences that participants have shared or of which they are aware through various demonstrations of their joking culture. While many scholars have analyzed humor in group life, relatively few have focused on the strands that tie joking incidents together. This remains a significant goal for further analysis: ethnographies that treat the continuation of humor as consequential.

It is not only that we joke *in* social settings, but that our joking is *from* social settings. We not only think socially, but we joke socially and reflexively. Donald Roy's example of "Banana Time," pointing to the mundane and on-going rituals of joking interaction, is crucial in this regard. Many of our shared comic moments are "banana times."

Northwestern University

Notes

Correspondence address: g-fine@northwestern.edu

1. In defining the small group, I follow Bales (1950: 33). A small group is "any number of persons engaged in interaction with each other . . . in which each member receives some impression or perception of each other member distinct enough so that he can . . . give some reaction to each of the others as an individual person."
2. It was a common practice at forays for mushroomers to bring in objects for "identification" that had some resemblance to mushrooms and which they "collected" in the woods, such as a doorknob, plastic hedgehog, or a Styrofoam mushroom.
3. That this mushroom was not masquerading as a potentially edible mushroom eliminated some of the threat from the prank. Whatever it was, it was not going to be consumed. There is always the danger of joking being taken "too far," leading to a rupture in the group (Roy 1959–1960). If the joking led to a poisoning, the group could have disintegrated *because* of the joking.
4. This may imply that joking is a cure-all for all that ails a group. Such is not the case. Jokes cannot handle all disruptions. Some issues must be confronted directly, not implicitly through humor. Joking is a call for consensus. However, not every invitation to joking is responded to favorably. Jokes may "fall flat." The invitation is rejected. Jokes represent an invitation, not a solution, even if, because of the positive valence within the group, invitations may be accepted more often than not.

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