HUMOR AND SOCIOLOGY

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Friendship
Suburban Warfare:
Sociological Perspective!
Vehicles to be Applauded
“He’s really a humorist...But he’s trying to give humor more respectability on university campuses.”

Talk about this idea in relation to what scholars say are the social functions of humor.
1. Meaning Making
2. Hierarchy Building
3. Cohesion Building
4. Tension Relief

Are these ideas the same for universities as they are for other institutions (business, church, military)? Does it depend on what part of the university you are thinking of?
Humor as a Social System

- Giselinde Kuipers has pointed out that Humor not only ‘breaks the ice’ between strangers, but unites people in different hierarchical positions.

- It creates a sense of shared ‘conspiracy’ in the context of illicit activities like gossiping or joking about superiors.

- The flip side of this inclusive function is exclusion. Those who do not join in the laughter, because they do not get the joke, or even worse, because the joke targets them, will feel left out, shamed, or ridiculed.
Humor as a Social System (Continued)

• “Joking relationships…manifest a consciousness of group identity or solidarity.” (Mahadev Apte)

• Joking promotes communities over hierarchy and reveals ambiguities in the fabric of society. Jokes are anti-rites that subvert the normative social order, the order usually validated and maintained by religious and civic ritual. (Mary Douglas)

• “One never laughs alone—laughter is always the laughter of a particular social group.” (David Viktoroff)
The Theory of Social Control

• Some theorists suggest that in close-knit communities, humor is a social corrective, linked with embarrassment. They argue that ridicule is not a “detachable negative,” but instead lies at the heart of humor.

• This goes back to the beliefs of Henri Bergson, who called humor a “social corrective…intended to humiliate.” Bergson did not believe in group-created humor. Instead of interaction, he defined humor as one-sided: those who laugh and those who are laughed at.
From an opposite viewpoint, has come a set of “Humane Humor Rules.”

1. Do not target an attribute that cannot be changed.

2. Target yourself, i.e. use self-deprecating humor.

3. Target your own ethnic group or gender, but no other ethnic group or gender.

4. Never target the victim.

5. Always target a strength so that it empowers rather than humiliates the target.

TALK ABOUT THESE “RULES” WITH EXAMPLES OR COUNTER-CLAIMS.
The “Dyadic Tradition” = A Built-In Humor Community

Elliott Oring coined this term to refer to joking relationships among couples, siblings, or close friends. Incidents are largely humorous and involve insult, abuse, or references to shared experiences.

For example, in the photo to the right, if only one of us had been driving to Heber, this roadside stand selling “RUSTIC FURNITURE” would not have seemed humorous. But together we found it funny enough to stop for photographs, even if not to make a purchase.
Here our grandsons are laughing simply from the surprise of “overlooking” Chicago from the Willis Tower. Explain these characteristics of this particular incident of “Dyadic Humor.”

- Surprise
- A new viewpoint
- A sharing among family members
- Incongruity
- Understatement
- Spur-of-the-moment word play
Comedy Teams Are Another Kind of Built-in, or “Dyadic,” Humor Community

- Almost one tenth of the 500 performers in *Who’s Who in Comedy* are part of a team.

- Teams are more recognized and more memorable than are individuals.

- Through interacting, team members can revitalize old gags.

- Good “chemistry” enhances creativity and enjoyment.

- Differing appearances, personalities and voices provide for contrast and for the efficient creation of stock characters.

- Audiences enjoy surprise and anticipation because the teams do new material but in a familiar style.

**NAME SOME 😊 TEAMS.**
The People of the Joke

- The Scots became “the people of the joke” about the same time as did the Jews.
- Scottish jokes were about tricky Scotsmen who were covetous, argumentative, and obsessed with keeping the Sabbath.
- Scots told the jokes about themselves, hence the self-mocking tone.
British scholar, Christie Davies explains that what the Jews and the Scots have in common is a sense of double identity.

They are both grounded in their religious tradition, and love to argue for the sake of argument.

He believes that "From this arose the Jewish and Scottish pre-eminence in physics, philosophy and economics and in jokes that no other small nation can match"
American folklorist Elliott Oring has studied the jokes made about Jewish women. He says that the Jewish American Princess is portrayed as “spoiled, self-centered, materialistic, excessively concerned about her appearance, and indifferent to sex and the needs of her family.”

In contrast, the Jewish American Mother is portrayed as overly solicitous of her children. She is always concerned with their feeding and their health. She suffers for them and enjoys her martyr role. Her biggest pleasure in life is the attention and appreciation of her children.

Is there an irony that Philip Roth gets both praised and condemned by Jewish groups?
Oring also points to the long history of community centered joking.

• “The Brothers Grimm included comic tales in their famous collection of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Children’s and Household Tales).”

• “Jokes and anecdotes comprised approximately a third of the tale type in Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson’s index *The Types of the Folktale*."

• “Since the early 1960s, folklorists have been documenting, analyzing, and interpreting the jokes and joke cycles that have come to dominate oral expression in contemporary society.”
Alan Dundes observed how joke cycles reveal community values.

For example, he said that “Dead Baby Jokes” showed a hostility and resentment against babies that resulted in contraception and abortions from the 1960s to the 1980s, when the joke cycle ended. Helen Keller jokes reflected fears about new laws protecting the rights of disabled children and adults. They disappeared after the new laws were successfully implemented.

Christie Davies showed that such jokes (listed in the next slide) are not told about our adversaries, but are told about groups that are peripheral to the mainstream in terms of geography, ethnicity, or economics.
Can you think of jokes that fit into one or more of these categories?

- Challenger Jokes
- Dumb Blonde Jokes
- Elephant Jokes
- Helen Keller Jokes
- Jewish American Mother Jokes
- Jewish American Princess Jokes
- Light Bulb Jokes
- Polish Jokes
- Promiscuous Jokes
- Sick Jokes
- Stupid Jokes
- Tall Tales
- Urban Legends
Promiscuous Joking

• A. J. M. Sykes says that obscene joking is more acceptable between the sexes when the jokers are not in danger of a real sexual relationship as with old men and very young women, or old women and much younger men.

• Going along with this, Elliott Oring said that when there is a possibility of a sexual relationship, joking is marked by modesty and restraint.

• Oring gives an example from a study of the dynamics of joking at an upstate New York diner during the period of 12:45 to 2:00 A.M. Bars in the area closed at 1:00 A.M. and waitresses got off work at 1:30. This resulted in a “bar rush” with men hoping to pick up waitresses.
Promiscuous Joking  (continued)

• The jokes provided a way for customers to test the availability of waitresses without risking a personal rejection.

• Similarly, waitresses could encourage someone they were interested in or discourage others without having to entertain or reject explicit sexual overtures.

• Thus joking in the social context of the bar rush was a coded communication about intimacy and sexual availability.
Disaster Jokes: e.g. Challenger Jokes vs. 9-11 Jokes

• The Challenger explosion in January of 1986 happened before the Internet was in common use and so the jokes spread slowly and were at first localized. But within a few weeks, jokes appeared on three different college campuses that focused on the acronym NASA (e.g. Need Another Seven Astronauts), on Bud Light (e.g. they found the flight recorder and all that was on it was, “No, Bud Light”) and on Christa McAuliff’s last words (“What’s this button for?”).

• Elliott Oring said that the jokes signaled a move towards closure; meaning a willingness to bring the tragedy back to private discourse. After the 9-11 disaster, it would have been possible for jokes to spread on the Internet, but for several days no one made jokes because of the horror. And when jokes did begin to appear, they were focused not directly on the victims, but instead were making fun of people’s reactions and what they first thought when they heard about it.
Oring says that “Keying” refers to the words, actions, and props that identify a joke as a “performance.” This “keying” is a “portable” way of establishing an instant humor community.

Parties and roasts are automatically “keyed” for joking, but introductory language can also serve as a warm-up “key” for the audience, for example:

- stereotypical actors and locales (“Guy goes into a bar…”);
- a pervasive present tense (“asks the bartender for a martini…”);
- formulaic introductions (“Have you heard the one about…”);
- appeals to tradition (“Here’s an old chestnut…”);
- and disclaimers (“My husband is the joke teller in the family, but…”)
Celebratory Humor

• When our Ph.D. student, Lisa Arter, passed her Ph.D. defense, she donned this wonderful shirt with the Dr. Seuss message, “Trust Me: I’m a Doctor.”

• Can you give some other examples of celebratory humor or practical jokes?
Other Special Event Humor

Almost as much money is spent on Halloween as on Christmas. Is it play or humor? Or is it impossible to separate the two?

- Tell us about wedding humor.
- How about funerals?
- Birthday celebrations?
- Celebrity (or retirement) roasts?
- April Fools Day?
- Where else?
Is Santa Claus one great international joke that adults play on children around the world? What features make it “communal”? 
Humor Specialized to Certain Groups

- John Morreall tells a story about a California police officer, Adelle Roberts, who was called by neighbors on a domestic violence case. When she got out of her squad car, she heard yelling and sounds of things hitting against the inside walls of the house.
- Then a portable TV set came crashing through the front window.
- She knocked very loudly and a voice inside asked, “Who is it?”
- “TV repair” Adelle responded, and the husband and wife caught onto the humor and came to the door smiling.

- Are police officers or quarreling spouses going to identify most with this joke? Are both groups treated with respect? Did you enjoy it?
An Irony about Humor Communities and Politics

• Christie Davies says that it is difficult to make stupidity jokes about a democratic leader who has a popular mandate because it would imply that the people rather than the system were stupid since they elected the politician. This means that Western democracies do not have as much joking about stupid leaders as in totalitarian countries.

• There is, however, joking about leaders who were not elected in the usual way and so therefore lost legitimacy. These include Sir Alec Douglas-Home (British Prime Minister 1963-4), President Gerald Ford, Vice-President Dan Quayle, President George “Dubya” Bush, and Arizona’s Governor Evan Mecham.
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

• Penelope Eckert says that “the use of variation does not simply reflect, but constructs, social categories and social meaning.”

• Elliott Oring has said that “Play is not the opposite of seriousness.” Instead, he says that the “the comic in ritual” differs from the kind of humor that serves the purpose of comic relief.

FROM YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE, TELL US WHAT YOU HAVE OBSERVED ABOUT THE CREATION OF HUMOR IN RELATION TO “PLAY.”
In conclusion, let’s brainstorm on how computers are changing our ideas of humor communities?
Conclusion:

YOU KNOW YOU WON AN ARGUMENT...
WHEN THE OTHER PERSON Responds WITH "WHATEVER"
Humor and Sociology Web Sites:

*STEPHEN COLBERT: “THE COLBERT REPORT”:
http://www.colbertnation.com/home

*BILL MAHER:
http://www.hbo.com/billmaher/video/

*JON STEWART: “THE DAILY SHOW”:
http://www.thedailyshow.com/