

Jokes & Humour

Proem

This entry introduces the sociological significance of jokes and humour for qualitative research. Specifically it explores two distinctive aspects of humour. First, humour as methodology. Second, the place of jokes in modernity is treated as an object of sociological inquiry in its own right. Finally, the entry brings these two themes together to explore how the ways and means of ‘getting the joke’ provides researchers with a tool of knowing the social and appreciation of how humour manifests a distinct type of human sociability. However, because humour is ‘unserious’, a ‘humorous methodology’ is often treated as marginal from the sociological mainstream. Throughout this entry we explore how the place and significance of jokes in modern life lies in what their ‘un-seriousness’ tells us about the society in which we live.

Humour as method

Getting a joke constitutes a form of *knowing*. As such, sociologists of various research backgrounds have called for the use of humour in social science research (e.g. Cormack et. al., 2017; Watson, 2015). They identify the manner with which humour becomes a facet of the ‘sociological imagination’. The uses of humour in social science research registers the relationship between ‘self and society’ by locating the tensions with which individuals find themselves in their roles and actions.

Sociological inquiry is often involved in a form of ‘debunking’ (Berger, 1963) which explores the discrepancies between official accounts and unofficial realities. To present social realities as comical is to approach the serious business of ‘debunking’ through a trivialising mechanism. To view social life humorously becomes a way to *know* (or ‘get’) the conditions of seriousness in which social life must be lived. When Peter Berger (1963:73) writes of how

pacifist groups punish deviant members with a special method of ostracism, his ironic tone brings to light the discrepancies of pacifist ideals and practice: “while permitted to continue to work and live in the community, not a single person will speak to him ever. It is hard to imagine a more cruel punishment. But such are the wonders of pacifism.” Or when Goffman (1961:341) highlights the similarities between psychiatrists and prostitutes, this incongruous juxtaposition is employed for two purposes. First to tell you something about how certain social roles require ‘dramatic realisation’, the emphasising of certain actions and the calling attention to them as constitutive of their role. And second to burst the bubble of legitimation which goes along with power relations: the claims to precedence which psychiatrists command, but which prostitutes were denied, is incongruous given both ‘do’ the same thing – performing ‘expertise’ for the sake of the client (Cormack et. al., 2017:390-391).

The methodological tool of humour for social scientists is a ‘perspective by incongruity’ (Watson, 2015). Pacifists become sadists; psychiatrists become prostitutes. Incongruity is a methodological tool for its interpretive potential and analytical scope: to view a pacifist as a sadist serves the purpose of demonstrating not so much hypocrisies within pacifist practice but rather the logic of pacifist practice itself. If a pacifist is defined by their non-violence, their conduct is set in motion in a certain way which precludes and occludes certain options which others groups and identities have at their disposal. Between the pacifist world-view and the practical realities they encounter, their ostracism practices become socially meaningful and a worthy object of sociological knowledge. The practical methodological take home is: locating the ‘joke’ in the social structure becomes the way to identify the tensions and contradictions which social groups seek to resolve or work within.

Modernity & Jokes

Humour is a *methodological tool*. But humour is also a way to appreciate an ontology of the social. When it comes to humour in modern societies, studying jokes and joking cultures reveals the distinctive ontology of modern sociability. Peter Berger's *Redeeming Laughter* (2014) formalizes the relation between modernity and a distinctive 'modern sense of humour':

Modernity *pluralizes* the world. It throws together people with different values and worldviews; it undermines taken-for-granted traditions; [...] This brings about a multiplicity of incongruences – and it is the perception of incongruence that is at the core of comic experience. Sociologists have used the phrase 'role distance' to describe the detached, reflective attitude of modern individuals toward their actions in society. [...] The same distance may well be the basis of a specifically modern sense of humour. (Berger, 2014:188, original emphasis)

In modernity, having a 'sense of humour' helps you navigate a world in which no one is, properly speaking, 'at home'. Modernity is not *for* a particular group of people but a world where we are all, to varying degrees, 'unlike together'. In modernity, humour manifests itself at an *intra*-personal level: having a 'good sense of humour' is an individual obligation and accomplishment on par with other moral and cognitive qualities in persons, so much so that its absence is treated as either a source of moral contempt or psychological pathology.

Navigating modernity through jokes and joking reveals how this intra-personal obligation - to develop a 'sense of humour' - meets social inter-actions and relations. Kuipers' *Good Humour, Bad Taste* (2015) consists of a survey of Dutch humour and, in part, constitutes an ethnography of the Netherlands through jokes told. For Kuipers, joking is not a simple matter of identifying what people find funny in a particular cultural context. More important is

how the practice of telling jokes relies upon a remarkably dexterous intelligence in how to be with and among others. Kuipers demonstrates that joke telling in Dutch society requires not necessarily knowing what particular content resonates with Dutch persons as opposed to French persons. It is the styling of jokes that is demonstrably more important. The sense of sociability which surrounds joking partners requires an ability not to *know* what is and is not permissible but instead to use jokes to *register* the boundary between where funniness meets transgression. Joking and humour is 'in the telling'. Notice how in this logic the joke is doing the social work of registering how an individual finds common connection with others where the line between good taste and bad taste is not an explicit boundary. Joking demonstrates an aspect of the ordering of social relations in modernity: joking is a collaborative effort to find the boundaries within ourselves and amongst others in a society where social connections are more fragmented and pluralised.

Joking becomes a way to register not our connections to other people, but the nature of the connection and perceptions we have of other people. In this regard jokes are political. Indeed, Weaver (2011) has claimed that joking is the thorn within modernity's political project of order-building. Modernity institutes a world with a clear demarcation of boundaries. However, such order-building has a side effect: ambivalence. The problem of ambivalence is the unease and threat to order which is evoked once two opposing ideas, principles or values overlap. For Weaver, the mobilisation of humour amongst certain groups and peoples registers the impossibilities of ordering building. The uses of humour amongst marginalised groups is a case in point. In the history of black performance in American society we see a form of resistance humour and reverse racist discourse being deployed *through* white-stereotypes of black persons. Minstrelsy - the performance of blackness as seen from the perspective of the white person - was used by early Vaudeville performers, such as Bert Williams and Ernest Hogan, to register ambivalences and exploit them through the incongruities of humour. As such

minstrelsy and stereotyping became, strangely, a way to gain legitimacy in the racist, order-building discourse of segregated America *and* a means to subvert such racisms by exploiting the semantic ambiguity which humour rests on.

Techniques of togetherness in modern societies: secrets and jokes

Let's put these two methodologies together. Jokes are both a means to *know the social* and reveal the distinctive form(s) of sociability modernity puts in place. When Georg Simmel wrote 'The sociology of secrecy and of secret societies' (1906) he had something similar mind. Degrees of secrecy are at work in all forms of social relationships, but the 'secret' in modernity registers the way a plurality worlds collide, repel and oscillate among one another. Jokes, I suggest, do similar work because jokes and secrecy manifest human 'togetherness' in similar ways. "Secrecy", writes Simmel (1906:462), "secures, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the obvious world, and the latter is most strenuously affected by the former." For even if the existence of a secret is not known, or even suspected between persons, the concealment of a secret comes to determine and modify the relationship between the parties involved. Jokes share this structural form: a shared joke suggests the possibility of a 'second world' which owes its existence to the shared and mutual dependency of one person to another. Jokes secure this 'second world' in way that comes to influence and inform the 'first world' between persons and groups. A shared joke modifies and characterises the sociability of those involved.

Two examples help illustrate this colonisation of our primary reality by the 'second world' of the joke. The first illustrates the everyday sociability of togetherness of jokes and their relation to modern social conditions. The second illustrates jokes' ability to register and underline the darker underside of modernity.

If modernity is the bringing together of a plurality of lifeworld's, jokes significance in the life of subcultural groups is to be expected. Schiermer's (2014) ethnographic portrait of hipster culture from Scandinavia and beyond is one case in point. Hipsters are known for their use of irony both as a means of social exchange (hipsters say ironic things to each other) and as a mode of cultural expression (hipster dress and style, for instance, is often ironic). Irony is at once a means of social cohesion within hipster culture *and* a symbol of the 'Hipster', as a distinct cultural figure, which orientates their relation to modern social conditions.

As to the former, Schiermer notes that irony has been unduly neglected by sociologists for its *social qualities*. Irony is often viewed as a way to keep a distance from others and the world. But this fails to see the sociability irony, as an aesthetic form, relies on:

Irony is first and foremost a way of being together; a powerful but hazardous tool used in concrete interaction. The successful understanding of an ironic remark creates instant social bonds, whereas mistaken irony creates embarrassing and awkward situations. (Schiermer, 2014:171)

The aesthetic form of irony - to know what and how *to be* ironic - mirrors and comes to secure the social form of the ironist: to 'get irony' is a signal of social membership. But where the irony becomes more than a distinct way of being together is that the features and qualities of irony itself reflect and realises aspects of hipster identity which other joke forms could not achieve.

The question becomes, *what are hipsters ironic about?* And, *what does irony's intentionality tell us about the distinctive nature of hipster identity?* Hipster irony circulates around what Schiermer (2014:171) calls 'failed objects'. Hipster dress has an element of self-consciousness about it which not only marks 'the hipster' out from others. Hipster dress is

‘different’ in a way that is ‘ironic’ because what they wear comes to be read by others as intelligible and meaningful only if, on some level, there is a shared assumption that what is being worn is being worn ‘for a joke’ (‘ironically’). Examples include: men dressed as ‘old seaman (‘skippers’); ‘a beard ...in their wife-beaters and with their tattoos’, or a ‘paedophile moustache’ (examples in Schiermer, 2014:172f). These forms of dress become ironic because they are ‘failed objects’: they were once meaningful objects in the past but have since become ‘matter out of place’ in a way which provides a commentary upon aspects of ‘successful objects’ in the present. Now ‘ironic’ forms of attire were once intensely popular but have since been resigned to the doldrums of kitsch and bad taste. But they are kitsch and bad taste *because* they’re meta-fashion. Ironic dress is addressed to the modernity of fashion. Fashion is never *in fashion*. As such “irony is not a necessity forced upon the hipster...but is nourished and sparked by the inauthenticity of the object.” (Schiermer, 2014:173)

As a methodology, exploring the ‘second world’ of the joke informs our insights about the primary social world of modernity as a distinctive way of ‘being together’: the ‘joke’ of ironic fashion tells us something about the primary world of fashion we’re all involved in. With this in mind, our second example demonstrates how the ‘second world’ of the joke tells us something quite distinctive about the nature of modernity as the bringing together of difference, and our (in)abilities to live with each other.

Holocaust survivor Primo Levi writes of his initial experience of Auschwitz as that of undergoing a joke:

They make us enter an enormous empty room that is poorly heated. We have a terrible thirst. The weak gurgle of the water in the radiators makes us ferocious; we have had nothing to drink for four days. But there is also a tap – and above it a card which

says that it is forbidden to drink as the water is dirty. Nonsense.
It seems obvious that the card is a joke, ‘they’ know that we are dying of thirst and they put us in a room, and there is a tap... I drink and I incite my companions to do likewise, but I have to spit it out, the water is tepid and sweetish, with the smell of a swamp. (Levi, quoted in Phillips, 2002:32, emphasis added)

As with Weaver (2010), Levi’s evocation ‘this must a joke!’ becomes the thorn in modernity’s ‘politicization of life’: if you exterminate an entire group for their mere existence, then exterminator and exterminated must have no common ground in any respect. But, as Phillips (2002:32) says of Levi’s passage: “He is in search of an explanation for something unbearable, and the idea he comes up with is that the card itself must be a joke...” The joke becomes a way to understand how a situation which denies a common humanity may, in some way, still refer to such a common humanity. The form of the joke is able to afford such a line of reasoning. Levi’s reasoning is: The Nazi’s *know* we’re dying of thirst and no one would deny those dying of thirst from water. But because the Nazi’s deny us anything in common with them means they have put the sign up *as a joke* to make us, imprisoned Jews, *think* the water is bad. Therefore: it must be fine to drink. That the sign is in fact *true* means the Nazi’s were protecting us, but that we did drink the water still makes *the joke on us*. In a situation of radically denied common humanity, “that there are jokes and jokers in the world makes this experience, at least initially, intelligible to him.” (Phillips, 2002:33)

Intelligibility arises from that ‘second world’ between jokes and jokers which, whether there is or is not a joke, comes to determine the primary world of persons. The modes of *knowing* the joke – to know there is one, how to ‘get it’ and who it is ‘on’ - bares on an insight Simmel has about secrecy and knowledge in relation to human sociability: all forms of association rely upon, to some degree, knowledge of others but what is distinctive about

humans is that “[n]o other knowable object modifies its conduct from consideration of its being understood or misunderstood.” (Simmel, 1906:445) Levi’s ‘This must be joke’ works upon a similar logic. The joke is a way of retracing the lines of knowledge involved in our relationship to others. Attempts to ‘get the joke’ relies upon reconstructing where ways of knowing and understanding meet attempts to deny knowing and understanding each other.

Coda

Jokes and humour are an important tool to *do* qualitative social research. Equally jokes themselves tell us distinctive aspects *about* the social life we examine. As qualitative researchers, often our tools of knowing – methods – become themselves means of grasping a distinctive way of being. Jokes are an *epistemological* tool to know what counts as ‘being together’ in social situations as much as they are insights into a distinct *ontology* of human togetherness.

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