

“Ha ha ha, very funny”:

An Ethnographic Study of Conversational Humor among College Students

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Humor is the great thing, the saving thing. (Mark Twain)

Defining and analyzing humor is a pastime of humorless people. (Robert Benchley)

In this paper we take up the topic of conversational humor by analyzing instances of teasing, joking, irony and banter in everyday settings in which these integral forms of talk play a part. This paper comes from an ethnographic project that was part of a class in language and culture, taught at a Catholic liberal arts college in a midsized city in Montana. In this exploration of conversational humor among college students – as they interacted for the most part in small groups of friends and acquaintances – we focus on interpretive and functional aspects of conversational humor. Through examining instances of conversational humor, we establish the careful collaboration among participants that maintaining a play frame entails. We also show that participants’ collaboration in seemingly superficial episodes of conversational humor accomplishes a host of relational tasks.

In the following sections we draw upon areas of an immense and complex body of scholarship on conversational humor. Then, after explaining our method of gathering and analyzing data, we elaborate three themes we found upon examining more than 140 recorded instances of conversational humor.

The quotations given above – attributed respectively to quintessential American humorists Mark Twain and Robert Benchley – together encapsulate the project of which this paper is a part. On one hand, it turns out that defining and analyzing humor indeed has the potential to (and did), at times, “take the fun out of it.” On the other hand, engaging this everyday human activity brings into sharp

relief what is, after all, at the heart of conversational humor: that when it comes to moments, interactions, and relationships, humor indeed is the great thing, the saving thing.

Literature Review

Scholarship focusing on humor is conducted across all social science and humanistic fields of inquiry from philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, linguistic, discursive, and communication perspectives. Perhaps because humor is ubiquitous in everyday social life and central to human relationships and the human experience, the body of literature on humor is both immense and complex. Though immense, the body of scholarship on conversational humor has not yielded agreement on the meaning of the term (see also Coates, 2007). Definitions of the term range from a focus on specific speech acts such as jokes, witticisms and puns (see Norrick, 1984; Phillips-Anderson, 2007) to broader conceptions of the term to include manifestations of humor in discourse activities such as conversational storytelling (see Crawford, 2003).

In making sense of the complex literature on conversational humor, we deem as important two considerations. First, because it emerges from the flow of everyday interaction, the question of what humor *accomplishes* for interlocutors – that is, what its functions are – becomes central. Second, much scholarship on humor finds it useful to investigate the “play frame” (Coates, 2007) as the context in which humor occurs. This underscores the importance of framing and interpretation in the study of conversational humor. Accordingly, following a discussion of types of conversational humor, we review scholarship on context and interpretation, and finally we will discuss the social functions of conversational humor.

Types of conversational humor

Because its types and categories tend to overlap and merge together and are subject to infinite expansion, conversational humor defies taxonomy (Dyrel, 2009). It is, however, useful to go over prominent types in which conversational humor is manifest toward getting a sense of the phenomenon.

The most useful distinction is that between jokes and conversational humor. Fundamentally, while the telling of formal jokes is relatively rare in and disrupts the flow of everyday conversation (Norrick, 1993), conversational humor rises from the flow of social interaction and is sprinkled throughout everyday conversation (Coates, 2007). There are very few instances of joke-telling in the corpus of instances examined in this paper. Therefore, we focus here on types and categories of conversational humor, making use of Marta Dynel's (2009) apt review.

Types of conversational humor range from the smallest particles such as lexical units (Dynel, 2009, p. 1287; see also Alexander, 1997), to contextualization cues (Gumperz & Gumperz, 1982) such as prosody, laughter, gesture and facial expressions. Types of conversational humor larger than lexical units and cues include the "witticism" which has been advanced as an iconic form of conversational humor (see Norrick, 1984; Dynel, 2009), assume a variety of communicative forms (see Chiaro, 1992) and serve a number of communicative purposes (Dynel, 2009). Iconic figures in humor research, stylistic figures such as simile, metaphor, paradox, irony and satire also emerge in and are relevant to interaction (see Dynel, 2009). Additional types of conversational humor which rely on non-present contexts are uses of formal phrases from non-present contexts and registers (Attardo, 1994).

The following three types of conversational humor – retort, tease and banter – typically or inherently occur over multiple conversational turns and commonly feature use of types of conversational humor outlined above. These three types thus merit particular focus.

First, because it relies on a prior utterance to which it responds, the retort (see Norrick, 1993) is a prime example of conversational humor occurring over multiple turns. By its very nature, the retort is the second pair-part of an adjacency pair (Schegloff, 2002; see also Sacks et al., 1974), that is, a two-turn sequence in which the first pair-part occasions the second. Of particular interest is the principle that execution of a retort, as the second pair-part, reflexively constructs the prior utterance as the first pair-part which occasioned it. Unlike the question which is semantically and pragmatically built to occasion

an answer, the statement preceding the retort is not inherently constructed to occasion it. Retorts might be subversive (see Holmes and Marra, 2002) and might commonly utilize other types of conversational humor such as the pun or allusion.

Second, teasing is a well-researched type of conversational humor (see Drew, 1987; Norrick, 1993) in which the pragmatic meaning “is not to be treated as truth-oriented and which invariably carries humorous force to be appreciated by both interlocutors” (Dynel, 2009, p. 1293). Teasing thus requires at least minimal participation on the part of the object, or butt, in order to come off. In fact, one might construct the object’s interpretation of the intention of the “teaser” – whether speaking (primarily) in jest or not – as the difference between the tease and the putdown (see, in part, Dynel, 2009). Thus willingness on the part of interlocutors treat a teasing utterance *as* a tease is required for the “tease” to be constituted as such by interlocutors (see Drew, 1987). Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) identify three kinds of teasing: making fun of a present other, making fun of a non-present other, and making fun oneself. Each of these three types might occur over multiple turns.

A third type of conversational humor occurring over multiple turns in social interaction is banter. Unlike teasing which might occur in just one speaking turn or over multiple turns, banter by definition consists of a longer exchange to which multiple parties in interaction contribute (Dynel, 2009). Banter might be competitive or even disputatious, but it is usually supportive and collaborative. Dynel (2009) identifies joint fantasizing, in which participants collaborate with one another in building a hypothetical sequence, as a conspicuous category of banter (see also Kotthoff, 2007).

Context and interpretation: The “play frame”

Each of the types of conversational humor outlined above commonly occurs in the flow of social interaction, in which humor is ubiquitous. However the latter three of the types outlined above – retort, teasing and banter – not only occur *in* the give-and-take of conversation but rely particularly *on* it. As outlined above, as a second pair-part the retort both requires a first pair-part to which it responds and

also constitutes the prior utterance as a relevant antecedent (e.g. a tease). Accordingly, though distinguishable as types of conversational humor, these three types also might be combined in the following manner: Banter consists of a chain of teases and retorts. Thus these three types of conversational humor highlight the central role of context, in which participants interpret prior talk as humorous. A prominent, useful construct for examining how participants interpret talk as humorous is the “play frame.”

The concept of “frame” was applied prominently to conversational humor by Bateson (1953), who argued that actions are framed as serious or playful. Following Bateson, Goffman (1974) also utilized “frame” – or “framework of understanding” – in outlining participants’ actions as responsive to their definition of a given situation. Goffman (1974, p. 10) said, “I assume that definitions of the situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them.” Following Bateson, Goffman (1974, pp. 43-44) identified, as the central concept in analyzing frames, the “key”: “the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else.” Goffman discusses “keying,” an activity wherein participants in a given activity acknowledge that a systematic alteration of the frame has occurred through cues (or “contextualization cues” [see Gumperz & Gumperz, 1982]) to mark the boundaries of the frame, such as mutually understood humorous terms or phrases, nonverbal behaviors (e.g. exaggerated prosody), laughter, and even stylistic devices such as code-switching (Siegel, 1995). Through keying, a participant in a frame “performs a crucial role in determining what we think is going on” (Goffman, 1974, p. 45).

The “frame” concept is important in contemporary scholarship on conversational humor. As outlined above, examining humor in a “play frame” (see Coates, 2007) suggests that keying and sustaining a play frame is a joint, interactive construction involving the participants (Hay & Holmes,

1997). Substantial research has been conducted on how the play frame is invoked; scholars have focused on responses such as agreement, parody and especially laughter (see Hay & Holmes, 1997; Coates, 2007), all of which highlights that humor in conversation is a joint, interactional construction. Once a play frame is invoked and recognized, participants might join in and continue with the play frame, or break the frame in favor of invoking something different.

The trajectory that interaction might take based on responses to it relates to the range of responses available to recipients of a humorous statement (who may or may not be the object, or “butt,” of the interaction). Because conversational humor exists in the gap between what is said and what is meant (Bernicot, J., Laval, V. & Chaminaud, S., 2007; Coates, 2007), participants might respond to conversational humor in the following ways: what is said, what is meant, or a mixed or an ambiguous response (see Kotthoff, 2003). In examining teasing interaction, Drew (1987) found that the object (“butt”) of a tease responds to teases on a continuum from extreme serious (taking offense and breaking the play frame) to extreme non-serious (going along with the tease, discussed as “banter” above). Drew also found that the object of a tease commonly responded seriously but in a way that sustained the frame – that is, a “po-faced” response. Drew also found that most teasing episodes featured a number of types of responses on the part of objects, and that they commonly pursued, often through laughter (a constitutive indicator of the play frame), a certain response. Kotthoff (2003) and others (e.g. Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997) found that participants in a play frame in informal conversation commonly respond to teasing by going along with the tease, which extends the tease into an extended exchange.

Social functions of humor: A reflexive turn

Conversation among friends – which as stated above constitutes most of the cases of humor observed in this study – is replete with conversational humor and peppered with “banter” or extended humorous exchanges. The ability to engage in humorous interaction – that is, make others laugh and

engage in witty banter with others – is a highly-valued conversational skill (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997). Accordingly, conversational humor fulfills a wide variety of functions in social settings and relationships. Here we discuss prominent functions of conversational humor found in research. We then discuss in particular findings related to use of humor in ethnographic research.

Hay (2000) constructed, from prior research, a taxonomy of functions of conversational humor. She identified general functions as solidarity and power, in addition to what she calls psychological functions such as coping. In Hay's framework, attempts at humor constitute an attempt to express solidarity with others while also constructing a position of respect and status within the group in which humor occurs. Solidarity is closely related to identity display as a common function of conversational humor. This function relates to the immense body of work on negotiation (e.g. Hall, 1993; Haugh, 2010), positioning (e.g. Davies & Harré, 1990), and footing (e.g. Goffman, 1983) in relation to social and discursive identities. According to Boxer & Cortés-Conde (1997), display of identity is one of the most important functions of conversational humor. These two functions are brought together by Hay (2000, p. 716), who posits that while

solidarity and power may on first consideration appear to be opposites, each entails the other. This is particularly true in the case of humor. Whenever you attempt humor and it succeeds, your status within the group is positively affected. You have amused the audience and so illustrated that you share with them a common idea of what is funny. This serves to create or maintain solidarity. Some instances of humor will have this general function and no other, beyond the creation of a positive self-identity.

Thus when it comes to conversational humor, we might consider expressing and building solidarity, on one hand, and expressing and displaying power, on the other, as two sides of the same coin (see also Holmes & Marra, 2002, on subversive humor; Yu, 2013, on "face").

A wide variety of research on conversational humor, from a wide variety of perspectives, has been conducted *in situ*, that is, with the focus of capturing conversational humor as it is used by participants in conversation in everyday settings. Much of this research has taken place in institutional settings, such as in the workplace (e.g. Holmes & Marra, 2002; Holmes, 2006) and specifically in meetings (Kushner, 1990; Rogerson-Revell, 2007).

An institutional setting worth particular mention is the function of humor in correctional institutions. For instance, Nielsen (2011) found that corrections officers used humor to manage their relationships with other staff and prisoners including maintaining group boundaries, to establish a collective understanding of the officers' job, and to build group identity among officers. In a similar study conducted by Schmidt (2013), conversational humor was found to serve purposes such as negotiating conflict between work and home, to initiate new employees, and to reinforce group boundaries and occupational identities. In addition, Schmidt found that corrections officers utilized humor to mediate and temper aggressive impulses and to express individual and group aesthetics that existed alongside tight institutional controls. The studies – and *in situ* studies of conversational humor generally – are useful in that they capture the complexity and nuance of the everyday use of humor.

Much of the research on conversational humor, and in particular research conducted *in situ*, highlights its paradoxical nature: Humor is at once “bonding and biting” (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997), that is, it is at the same time hostile and friendly (Seifert, 2013; see also Basso, 1979). Conversational humor is simultaneously aggressive and playful (Feinberg, 1978). According to Bourdieu (1984, p. 83), conversational humor 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.

Conversational humor is paradoxical, then, *by design*. That is, social beings make use of conversational humor in order to make their way in a complex order of relationships, identities and boundaries. Humor is a potent instrument with which one finds his or her way among others in society.

Related to the essential paradox of conversational humor is that conversational humor stands in a *reflexive* relationship with its myriad functions. For instance, through humor participants in social scenes certainly build group solidarity, but insofar as identity is a continuous achievement (see Wieder & Pratt, 1990; Moerman, 1993; Hansen, 2005) participants in social scenes also *display* and even *achieve* solidarity through conversational humor. That is, through humor one both displays and performs an intimate footing with others. Conversational humor is thus part of the foundation on which the construction of identities, relationships, and the social order in which these persist are built.

Methods

One way to understand social life is to study people "as they go about their everyday lives" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 1) in order to understand what everyday activities mean to them (see Geertz, 2001). Often considered a subset of ethnography, the ethnography of communication is concerned principally with "the use of language in the conduct of social life" (Philipsen & Coudu, 2005). The purpose of ethnography of communication is both descriptive and theoretical (Philipsen & Coudu, 2005). This paper comes from a class ethnography project engaged in as part of a Communication course taught in Spring 2012 at a small, liberal arts college in Montana. A total of 11 student ethnographers were trained in how to write fieldnotes and were instructed to collect instances of "joking behavior" (which we later called "conversational humor") by their peers in everyday settings. The student ethnographers collected a corpus of 143 instances of conversational humor which were then examined for the purpose of this study.

Thus our unit of analysis in this study is the “instance” of conversational humor, that is, an inscription of the scene, the participants and what participants said and did in as much detail as possible. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995, p. 8) clarify the term “inscription” as opposed to “description” in writing fieldnotes, in which inscribing “is not so much a matter of passively copying down ‘facts’ about ‘what happened’” but “involves active processes of interpretation and sense-making.” Thus use of the term “inscribe” in reference to fieldnotes recognizes that the writer is an active participant in the scene, but more than that, is the very *instrument* through which conversation is extracted from the flow of talk in everyday activities. This view of fieldnotes is parallel to, and perhaps a microcosm of, the view of ethnography generally in which the ethnographer *himself or herself* is the research instrument (Katz & Csordas, 2003). Thus because “being there” (Boxer & Cortès-Conde, 1997) is a fundamental part of “getting it” – whether or not one is an ethnographer – ethnography is an apt research perspective for studying conversational humor in everyday talk.

The perspective outlined above influenced gathering, writing up and presenting data in three ways. First, student ethnographers were encouraged to inscribe instances of conversational humor in which they were active participants, and avoid inscribing those they merely observed or overheard. We oriented to this as an ethical matter (related to obtaining informed consent) as much a methodological matter. Second, student ethnographers were encouraged to inscribe instances with considerable interactional as well as interpretive detail; we were interested in knowing in as much detail as possible what things meant to the participants involved. And third, student ethnographers were encouraged to write themselves into the fieldnotes wherever germane to the details of the event. For the sake of clarity, in fieldnote extracts (called “cases”) in the section that follows we remain true to first-person accounts but also give the ethnographer/participant a letter designation (in parentheses), to which we refer in analyzing the extract. Letter designations are given for each instance, but these designations do not track actual people across instances; rather, they are relevant only for that particular instance.

Findings: Themes in Conversational Humor

Three themes emerged as prominent from inductive analysis of the 143 instances of conversational humor gathered by the students. These themes are prominent both on account of the number of instances fitting under them and also based on the opportunity for advancing scholarship in conversational humor provided therein. As outlined above, because types of conversational humor defy taxonomy (Dynel, 2009), rather than attempting to fit a restrictive coding scheme to the cases we grouped the cases by theme. In this section we discuss these three themes, pointing where appropriate to how each theme advances, in some way, scholarship on conversational humor.

Banter (in Three Forms)

As outlined above, banter – that is, is an advanced form of conversational humor based on the opportunity banter provides for participants to collaborate with one another and display acumen (Dynel, 2009). In banter participants not only create a play frame (see Coates, 2007) in which they open up space for others to join in, but banter is also marked by conspicuous and continued contributions from multiple participants, perhaps over a period of several turns. Participants in exchanges featuring conversational humor might respond on a continuum from offense to going along (see Drew, 1987; also Kotthoff, 2003). We found that participants commonly engaged in banter, that is, they collaborated in extending, developing and sometimes escalating the play frame. Thus in developing this “banter” theme we first examine a few cases in which participants do not extend the play frame. We then examine cases in which banter occurs and show different types of banter.

In Case 1 below, the object of teasing does not extend the play frame.

Case 1: Cards

I (A) am sitting in my friend’s dorm room playing cards with her over lunch. Keeping score requires counting totals from the cards laid down, which appears to be difficult for both of us for some reason. At one point, my friend (B) turns over a two but adds three to the total. I say, “Okay, now I know you are a

business major and counting is hard, but I'm a math major and I'm good at this. Thirteen plus 2 is fifteen." She gives me a dirty look and says, "Ha ha ha, very funny." I wink at her and we both laugh. (DC1)

In "Cards" (Case 1), A initiates a play frame by teasing B after she miscounts of the total. In response, rather than extending the play frame B, using irony, calls attention to the teasing quality of A's remark. Certainly B might have extended the frame in a number of ways, such as returning a teasing insult to A. A retort (see Norrick, 1993) of this kind is illustrated in Case 2 below, in which the object of a tease responds initially inside of the play frame.

Case 2: Kardashians

A, B, and C are watching Keeping Up with the Kardashians on E! Network. This week, Kim is complaining about her divorce from Kris Humphries. A likes the Kardashians and is sympathizing with Kim, telling B and C that Kris is being far too difficult in this divorce. Amused, B responds by saying, "Oh Kim called you to let you know that?" A responds "No, she texted me, duh." To this C intervenes and tells A that she needs to get a grip. "Just because she has a reality show does not mean that she is talking directly to you, A." B snorts and says "A wishes." This causes A to go off in a huff, appearing offended. B and C start laughing and call to A "come on, Jesus don't get all upset, hey look its back on!" A runs back into the room and sits down and they all laugh and continue to watch the show. (AC10)

Thus unlike "Cards" (Case 1), in "Kardashians" (Case 2) the object of the tease responds from inside of the play frame, at least initially. In addition to extending the play frame, this retort also insults B by calling attention, hypothetically but perhaps not playfully, to the fact that B should have known that Kim Kardashian would text A. Notably, this only makes sense inside of the play frame initiated by B. The frame then unravels with C's comment, either with a break in the frame altogether or with the institution of a new frame – depending on how A and B interpret her remark. In either case, B extends C's comment (or the frame) with, "A wishes" which occasions A to leave the room, apparently offended.

The case examined below is similar to the two given above in this respect: Proper banter does not so much develop. This case, however, is integral because it illustrates the extent to which initiation of a play frame constitutes an invitation to engage it, that is, to extend and develop it into banter.

Case 3: Airplanes

So I (N; a male) am just walking by the computers in Guadalupe Hall and see my friend D, a female, who is printing some papers for a class. I stop and start talking. D notices that she printed a page that she didn't need and said, "Here. It's your present," handing me (N) the piece of unwanted paper. I (N) reply,

“Okay ... I think I’ll make an airplane out of it.” As I start folding the paper, D says, “Can we pretend that airplanes in the night sky are like shooting stars?” D then pauses. I give her a confused look. She continues, “Cuz I could really use a wish right now.” D laughs. I then let out a few chuckles because it has taken me (N) a while to figure out what she (D) is doing – I finally recognize these as lyrics to the B.o.B. song “Airplanes.” I ask, “You could use a wish?” D answers, “Yeah I wish I had a works cited page for this paper” She laughs. (NK14)

In this case, a play frame is initiated with D handing N a piece of paper and stating that it is N’s present. N engages the play frame in his response, that he’ll make an airplane out of it. In response, D makes a comment about airplanes that N does not immediately recognize as a lyric from the popular song, “Airplanes.” In examining this case, we argue that D’s pause, following her statement of the lyric, constitutes a space, an invitation from D to N to extend the play frame perhaps by saying the next lyric of the song. When N doesn’t respond in this way, D continues the song lyric herself. It is at this moment that N recognizes the song lyric. His “chuckle” displays appreciation of D’s wit. In asking if she could use a wish, N also hearably invites D to extend the frame, though in a different way (since he whiffed on the song lyric). N breaks the frame but in a clever manner, by bringing the conversation back to the paper she is printing. This case illustrates, and quite smartly, opening up spaces for, and inviting others to engage in, banter, although N missed the first opportunity and D didn’t take the second.

In the cases that follow, banter does occur, that is, the participants initiate, extend and build upon a play frame. We discuss three types of speech in which this occurs: conversation (also illustrated in “Airplanes,” above), fantasy, and spectacle.

Conversation. Banter occurs commonly in the flow of everyday conversation. “Airplanes” (Case 3) examined above illustrates this nicely, at least as far as initiation of a play frame in ongoing conversation to which others might then contribute. Case 4, below, nicely illustrates this aspect of banter as, unlike in “Airplanes,” the play frame is extended by other participants.

Case 4: Floor

A, B, C and D are staying together during the Search Retreat. [“Search” is a co-curricular activity weekend activity during one weekend of the academic year for each graduating class, sponsored by Campus Ministries.] Most of their time has been spent sitting on the hard wooden floor of the cabin, and now they begin to get ready for bed – also on the floor. They set their sleeping bags down on the

floor. A says, "Wow, I'm going to sleep really well tonight." The tone and the circumstances of this statement show that it is A means the opposite of what she says, because it is a very hard floor and everyone already is presumably tired of sitting on it. To this B replies, "Oh I know, we truly are blessed to have such a comfortable living space." The tone in B's voice also connotes she means the opposite. C joins in the conversation, as she lies down on her sleeping bag and exclaims, "Ahh ... heaven!!" The others laugh. D states that she cannot wait to get back to her bed on Sunday. (AC3)

In "Floor" (Case 4), the play frame initiated by A is extended by both B and C, who not only extended the frame but did so utilizing the same device (irony) that A utilized in initiating the frame. A's remark about how well she will sleep is interpreted by the others as ironic, and B's and C's respective comments follow suit. D breaks the play frame by voicing the message the others were implying through irony.

Notably, in "Floor" (Case 4) as well as in "Airplanes" (Case 3), banter seems to be facilitated by the lack of an object, or "butt," of the conversational humor. The paradoxical feature of conversational humor, that it is used simultaneously for "bonding and biting" (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997), does not apply as clearly where there is no object, or butt. With the "bite" gone, conversational is potentially more clearly a bonding activity. In such contexts, where extending and building upon the play frame does not occur at anyone's expense, might banter be most apt to occur.

Fantasizing. Identified by Dynel (2009) as a conspicuous form of banter, fantasizing is similar to, and perhaps a subtype of, conversational banter. The difference here is that the play frame initiated is an unrealistic, fantastic and certainly hypothetical situation. Once initiated, other participants might become collaborators in producing the fantasy. Here we present three cases in which fantasizing occurs. In the first of these, Case 5, two students are studying together.

Case 5: Circus

I (A) am sitting in my dorm room studying with one of my roommates (B). She looks at me and says with a serious face, "Can we just quit school? I am so sick of studying and doing all of this extra work that is pointless for the class." I give her a kind of funny look and she continues on, saying, "We can join the circus! I don't know exactly what we could do in the circus, but I think it would be fun!" I start to laugh and she continues on, "I could take some testosterone and grow a beard! I could be the bearded lady!" We both laugh. (MJ9)

This case is useful in illustrating ambiguity in the initiation of conversational humor. One could argue that B's first statement, "Can we just quit school?" is nonliteral and, at least a candidate initiation

of a play frame. A's response – and her inscription itself of the instance – is ambiguous as to whether or not she interpreted this as initiating a play frame. It is clear, however, that the comment about the circus initiates a play frame, to which B responds by laughing. Similarly to “Airplanes” (Case 3), the initiation at the very least opens a structural slot in which B might extend the frame; moreover, it is possible that the “circus” comment also pursues collaboration with the fantasy. Thus “Circus” (Case 5) is hardly a case of “banter” in the formal sense because only B, and not A, contributes to this fantasy. However, based on the inscription it is apparent that A participates in the humor and even encourages B to continue by laughing. In this case, then, B – with apparent encouragement from A – builds upon her own fantasy. The shared laughter at the end of the inscription suggests that A and B interpreted this moment similarly.

In the next two cases, multiple participants collaborate on the fantasy. These cases illustrate not only extension of the play frame by contributing to the fantasy, but it is also apparent that participants escalate features of the fantasy.

Case 6: Bomb

I (C) am sitting with A, and B, both female, before class. A tells B that there is a girl who is a senior this year who is getting married before her senior prom, as in this Friday. B turns to me and tells me the same story; we all agree that this is absolutely crazy. I (C) look at A and tell her that B believes I will be engaged by next year, which I find to be completely crazy. B looks at me and says that it is true: I will be engaged by next year. And then B states in a firm voice, “If I am not in your wedding there will be consequences.” As I am about to ask what the consequences will be, she tells that me that she will make a bomb, which she learned a little bit about in her General Chemistry class, and bomb my wedding. I look at her with shock, and B then says, “I will make a protective covering around myself. That way the bomb won't hurt me.” A looks at both B and me (C) and says, “Well if that's the case, don't invite me to your wedding! I don't want to blow up!” B looks at A and says, “It's okay A, you can be in the protective covering with me!” We all look at each other and start laughing. (MJ7)

Here participants begin by talking about a non-present person to be married before her senior prom, which all participants agree is “crazy.” C then shifts attention to herself by telling one participant that the other believes she will be engaged the next year. B (perhaps to C's surprise; perhaps not) agrees with A. B then plausibly initiates a play frame by foreshadowing “consequences” if she is not in C's wedding. While it is unclear if this warning was interpreted as in jest – thus initiating a play frame –

it is certainly plausible that it was. The fantasy begins with B naming a consequence, namely that she will build a bomb and set it off at the wedding, and is built upon with the protective covering. A extends the play frame, and to some extent the fantasy, by stating that she does not want to attend the wedding because she does not want to blow up. By adding A to the hypothetical protective covering, B further extends the fantasy.

In “Bomb” (Case 6) just as in “Circus” (Case 5), the fantasy is built primarily if not solely by one person. In this case, it is possible that banter was muted because critical discussion of a non-present person who was to be married preceded and occasioned initiation of the play frame, with C subsequently taking the place of the non-present person as a potential object of evaluation. Cases 7 and 8 below illustrates co-constructed fantasies.

Case 7: Zit

Sitting in my dorm room with two of my roommates, we are talking about our St. Patrick’s Day weekend. A says that she and another friend drove to Butte and took part in the activities there. However, before they entered the festivities they decided to eat. A had a juicy burger that ran down her face. The next day she felt an “underground” zit on her chin. B looks at her and laughs then says that she had a run in with a zit issue, one that was happening on her forehead. B looks at A and says, “If we were super heroes we could use our zits as our weapons. All we would have to do point or face in the direction that we want to shoot the goo towards.” A looks at B with a weird look – her eyebrows are raised and her face was scrunched in awkward look. After a pause (she seems to be thinking about it more), A pushes her chin in the air and say “Pew!” (This sound is the sound her zit makes as it shoots out imaginary goo.) They keep moving their faces in different ways to make sure they can shoot at different angles. B then realizes that she has another zit on her upper lip. She pushed her tongue up and pushes out her upper lip in the same motion that she was doing with her chin. (MJ4)

In “Zit” (Case 7), participants are discussing what is perhaps a non-serious topic but in a serious way, as A recounts the story of how she came to have a zit on her chin. B appears to identify with A – a way of mitigating any face-threat felt by A on account of having a zit – by recounting or at least referring to a story about a zit of her own. A initiates the play frame by fantasizing about the two of them as superheroes who use their zits to subdue enemies. B displays appreciation of the fantasy and also appears to escalate it, by enacting hypothetically the fantasy imagined by A. It is apparent that both participants extended the frame by similarly enacting the fantasy. This enactment is consequential in

that fantasizing invites participants to perform a character in order to extend the play frame. Moreover, it is clear that some fantasies would require a participant to take on a character in order to take part.

Case 8 below, while lacking details of the fantasy itself, also illustrates a co-constructed fantasy.

Consider:

Case 8: Ringtone

I (C) am eating lunch with two friends, A and B, in the cafeteria, both are females. B looks at me and says, "Did you know that A's phone went off in class today?" B sings the first few words of A's ringtone which was heard by the entire class. I laugh, turn to A and ask, "What happened after?" A chimes in and says, "I got up, threw my desk and just started dancing (to the music of her ringtone)." B adds, "Yeah and then the professor started dancing with her...." A and B continue to go back and forth, adding to the story and laughing after each of the contributions. When they seemed to be done with their fabrication of what happened after A's phone went off in class I ask, "So what really happened?" (NK1)

In "Ringtone" (Case 8), conversational humor is initiated with fantasizing; this is different from prior examples which appear to escalate toward fantasy after a play frame is initiated. This comes about following C's follow-up question – "What happened after?" – to the announcement that A's telephone went off during class. While A is not directly the object of humor, such as the butt of a tease, it is quite possible that B brought up the incident to embarrass A or at least to discuss an embarrassing circumstance in which A was the object of others' evaluation. Accordingly, A's response about what happened – which initiates a play frame by creating a vibrant hypothetical scene – is hearable as a device to deflect attention away from A's mistake and possible embarrassment in class. The fantasy in "Ringtone," however, is co-constructed by both A and B across several turns according to the inscription.

Spectacle. A third type of banter that occurs in the conversational humor instances gathered by the ethnography team is spectacle. Perhaps owing to linguistic perspectives which lead to focusing on language and verbal communication, there does not appear to be much scholarship on spectacle as a type of conversational humor. There were a few instances of conversational humor inscribed by student ethnographers that could not be processed in any way except to say that participants found the scene humorous based on its "spectacle" quality. While in some ways a deficient descriptive term, "spectacle" does serve to capture the visual quality of these scenes. We consider these instances a species of

banter based on their collaborative nature, in which participants work together to extend and escalate the play frame. Consider Cases 9 and 10.

Case 9: Ceremony

Before our first game of softball weekend, some of the players who have been drinking want to have a ceremonial entrance. One of our teammates, A, brings four pigeons that he has captured and has placed into a Bud Lite container. Right when we get to the field for our first game A, carrying the box of pigeons, is stopped by a police officer who is checking for alcohol because it is not allowed on the field. We explain that there is no beer in the box, but rather pigeons. Everyone on the team laughs as A tries to explain the captured and poorly-treated pigeons. M, a teammate who is pretty drunk, asks the officer, "Are you mad?" The comment strikes the team as humorous because whether or not the cop is mad makes no difference. The innocence apparent in M's voice makes it more humorous, especially because the cop is serious. We finally get onto the field. Following a brief time warming up, then A gives a long, semi-inspirational but mostly ridiculous, speech. We then circle up as a team and the opposing team joins in also. A opens the box and releases all four pigeons one at a time. Before he lets the last one go he says a few words of not so much wisdom and then dramatically releases the final bird. Everyone laughs and cheers, and then we begin our game. (CG6)

"Ceremony" (Case 9) inscribes a scene in which a number of events transpire which are monumentally humorous to the participants. First M's and then A's behavior open up space for others to collaborate in extending the play frame. We would argue that A's ability to enact a protracted parody of an opening ceremony (in which pigeons of course take the place of doves) depends in large measure on the willingness of other participants to operate within the play frame. One might say that together the players on both teams made a "spectacle" of themselves.

Case 10 below, which also inscribes a protracted spectacle, is consequential because it is by its nature collaborative and considerably escalated.

Case 10: Piñata

There is a birthday party for A at my house in which a piñata is hung in the garage. When the piñata is revealed to A she is given a choice of hitting implements. The guests cheer at her choice of a shovel as over a ski pole and baseball bat. The cute, smiling face of the butterfly-shaped piñata was easily visible. The horrible dismemberment of the innocent butterfly with a shovel wielded by a small blindfolded girl is, for some reason, hysterical. Once the piñata is cracked and candy is spilled out onto the floor, attention shifts to candy snatching. Once everyone has candy, attention returns to the still-hanging piñata with the butterfly's face still intact. Party guests B, C, and D (B and C are intoxicated; D is not) take turns punching and kicking the piñata but fail to bring it down. B walks over to the far edge of the garage, reaches under a table and pulls out a chainsaw. After pausing for approval from other guests, cheers erupt and B pulls the cord. It takes a while to turn over, but the roar is deafening in the garage and the crowd cheers and laughs as D attacks the butterfly with a tool far too powerful for the job; cardboard bits fly as smoke and 2-stroke engine smell fills the air. (JA9, JA10)

The escalation in this scene is apparent, beginning arguably with A having chosen a shovel rather than a ski pole or baseball bat with which to attack the piñata. The spectacle continued following A's dismantling of the piñata, as three guests continue to try to mutilate it. The spectacle reaches a crescendo for the participants, according to the inscription, when D attacks it with a chainsaw. Collaboration is apparent not only in the different number of people who participated in a given moment (A, B, C and D) but also in the collaborative *nature* of the event: For as long as it lasts, the play frame is tenuous and could dissipate at any time. That D waits for others' approval before starting the chainsaw instantiates continued collaboration among all participants in extending the frame.

Conspicuously absent from instances gathered by student ethnographers is the iconic species of banter in which participants trade barbs, or insults, back and forth. We see an attempt at constructing repartee in "Airplanes" (Case 3), examined above. Rather, banter in instances analyzed here appeared to feature collaborative (e.g. joint fantasizing) rather than competitive forms.

Shared Knowledge

Like all communication – but perhaps to a greater degree, or with greater nuance – conversational humor relies on shared knowledge. Knowledge in its instrumental sense – cultural competence required to use humor correctly (that is, without violating norms) and effectively (that is, being able to elicit laughter) is outside of the scope of this paper. Rather, we approached knowledge in its topical sense, as shared knowledge of matters, issues and phenomena, including shared experiences and other information located "outside" of the immediate surroundings which might be indexed by participants. There are also instances in which material utilized by participants "emerged" from inside of the event in which conversational humor occurs, including material emerging from within the play frame itself. We label this "emergent" knowledge to highlight this key feature: This is knowledge that emerges as part of the immediate context in which the conversational humor occurs and even from the play frame itself.

Following we examine instances of these levels of shared knowledge and show that conversational humor is not only dependent on shared knowledge but celebrates it as well.

“Outside” knowledge. Conversational humor indeed is dependent upon shared knowledge, both technical (how to do humor) and topical (what to do humor about). The world shared by participants serves as a repertoire of material that they might index in initiating and extending a play frame.

“Airplanes” (Case 3), examined above, is a suitable example of shared “outside” knowledge in that a lyric from the song “Airplane” was indexed to initiate conversational humor. Because references to popular culture were quite common among instances of conversational humor, we illustrate “outside” knowledge using popular culture references. Consider Case 11 examined below.

Case 11: Urine

There are four of us eating lunch in the cafeteria, two males and two females. H, a male, steals a bite of B’s food (B is a female). B looks at H with a glare and says, “Was that necessary?” H immediately comments back, exclaiming intensely: “Is it necessary for me to drink my own urine? No! But it’s sterile and I like the taste.” I (N) laugh because I recognize the movie quote right away. K, the other female, has a confused look on her face and says, “I don’t get it.” H and I (N) tell her (K) that it is a quote from the movie Dodgeball and try to explain it to her. K says, “Oh, I don’t think it’s that funny.” (NK13)

In this instance, H responds to B’s (perhaps playful) reprimand, after H had stolen a bite of food, with a line from the popular movie, Dodgeball. Not only is this retort nonliteral but it is also nonsensical – that is, unless it is recognized as a line from the film. N laughs in appreciation because he “gets it,” that is, he connects it to the film. K doesn’t “get it” because she does not. Accordingly, this moment could very well serve to bring B and N closer together, but it is less likely to serve this function without shared knowledge required to “get the joke.”

While the popular culture reference in “Urine” (Case 11) fell flat for some participants because they did not connect the remark to its referent, in Case 12 (below) the reference is understood by the participants. Consider:

Case 12: Egg

A, who is male, and B, who is female, are friends. They are sitting in A’s room. A is doing homework while B is watching television. A grabs a Whoppers Robin Egg, and says, “I just want to suck on it.” B

whispers, "That's what she said." A does not hear B and asks what she said. B then repeats it so A can hear her. A gives B a surprised look and says, "I can't believe you just said that!" B then gives A an innocent look and they both laugh. (AK4)

In this instance, B quotes an oft-used phrase from the American television show, *The Office*. On the show itself this phrase is usually used in inappropriate moments, and its use is a sort of sign of the social incompetence of the Michael Scott character. It is notable that this reference to utilized in a very similar way in "Egg" (Case 12), and is oriented to in just this way by A. One might argue that the popularity of the phrase, "That's what she said" transcends the television show from which it emanated, such that people do not need direct access to the cultural product to appreciate it. Use of this sort of reference, which would be inappropriate in other groups, is plausibly a way for the participants to celebrate their relationship as close enough to withstand inappropriate humor.

Shared knowledge consists of more than popular culture references. We found that participants were clever in their indexing of shared knowledge. A particularly clever example of use of shared knowledge in conversational humor is examined in Case 14 (below).

Case 13: French

While sitting in a coffee shop with a friend (B) sometime in the afternoon, we overhear as a customer (A) says to the barista, "I just got back from France and that is not the way a real cappuccino is made." I (C) laugh to myself because my mother is fluent in French and lived there for many years, and she has for years told me that Europeans don't drink milk-based coffee drinks in the afternoon. Turning toward me, A berates me for being rude. I apologize to her and explain that I did not mean to laugh at her expense but my mother, who is knowledgeable in French culture, has made fun of me for years for ordering cappuccino in the afternoon. Thus while her comment to the barista may have been correct, it still was a typical American mistake, which a French person would correct. Appearing to not appreciate my explanation, A storms off. After A leaves our table, B turns to me and says the only French phrase he knows: "Je suis excité pour reprendre ton mere," which roughly translates as, "I am sexually excited to meet your mother." (DC10)

In "French" (Case 13), a chance, awkward encounter with a stranger, in which C's playful interaction goes unappreciated by A, provides the context in which the participants' shared knowledge of French becomes material for B's extraordinarily humorous comment. C's report that this is the only phrase in French that B knows makes the comment both more and less remarkable. As illustrated in "French" (Case 13) as well as in "Airplanes" (Case 3), the instances where participants make use of shared

knowledge of subject matter in initiating and extending play frames represent highly creative and effective humor. In addition to the French language, B draws upon the prior conversation between A and C in initiating a play frame. This shared knowledge emerged in the conversation just prior.

Following discuss “emergent knowledge” in more detail.

“Emergent” knowledge. Shared knowledge is not only available as a static repertoire from which participants might draw to initiate and extend the play frame, but might emerge from the context in which the play frame occurs, and from the play frame itself. Consider instances in which participants make use of “emergent” knowledge, examined in Case 14 and Case 15 below.

Case 14: Chi Chi

In class the professor has us play a game called “The Name Game.” This is where you write down a name and location on a piece of paper and then that name and location is given to someone else. The other person then has to introduce himself or herself as that person. I (A) write down Chi Chi Lopez from Las Vegas for my person, and intend to poke fun at the person who draws that name. After I do this, the professor mixes up the rules, saying that the name we have written is the name we must use in introducing ourselves, and then we must tell him three people in the class we have met. I am one of the last to go; everyone else mentioned me as a person they met. As I am about to list the people I have met the professor takes one long look at me and says, “So, you must be Chi Chi.” I turn bright red, laugh, and introduce myself as Chi Chi Lopez, from Las Vegas. (AC6)

In “Chi Chi” (Case 14) the professor addresses A by the name she had fabricated for the purpose of the assignment. The knowledge required to appreciate the professor’s remark as playful emerged in the immediate context in which the remark occurred. Furthermore, this comment could be continued by participants at a future time and in other comments, thus becoming an “inside joke” shared not only by those present on this occasion but potentially others as well. Similarly, in Case 15 below a participant draws on emergent shared knowledge to make a humorous remark.

Case 15: Warm Bodied

We are in class discussing abusive relationships and how pregnancies can provoke violence in relationships already prone to violence. Then we get off topic and begin discussing pregnancies in general. A mentions that in her high school a bunch of girls had babies over the summer, which would mean that they would have become pregnant around winter. She then says, “I don’t know what that means.” I (C) say, “Sometimes we need to be warm bodied.” A gives me (C) an odd look and laughs. Later in the class we are talking about prison, discussing males raping males in prison. At one point B says, “Sometimes they need warm bodies.” Everyone laughs. (CG5)

In “Warm Bodied” (Case 15), B indexes and reformulates a humorous remark made earlier in the session by C, another participant. The “warm bodied” comment was first used playfully by C as a way to explain the occurrence of conception during the winter months. B’s reformulation of the comment was used playfully as a way to explain the troubling phenomenon of male rape in a prison setting. Notably, B’s comment would not work nearly as well if others had not heard C’s prior comment. Thus does B smartly index and put to additional use shared knowledge that had emerged earlier in this setting.

Conversational Humor as Doing Relational Work

In line with a large body of scholarship on the functions of conversational humor, here we highlight instances in which participants appear to be working out ways of relating to one another through conversational humor. Thus as stated prior, conversational humor serve as a means of identifying, displaying, testing, altering, and celebrating relational roles. Consider Case 16 (examined below) involving a seemingly playful exchange about closing a window.

Case 16: Window

A and B are studying in the honor’s room. After a few hours, A closes his books and says, “I’m going to go to bed now.” B looks up and says, “Okay, have a good night.” A reminds B to close the window and turn the lights off when she leaves. B replies in a sarcastic tone, “Oh, I’ll make sure the window is left open.” A says matter-of-factly, “Okay, but the room will be cold tomorrow.” B ignores A’s comment, and A chuckles and then finishes packing up his stuff and then leaves the room. (AK5)

There are some things going on in this seemingly innocuous exchange that are not apparent without some background information. First, the honor’s room is not available to all students. Only students in the honor’s program have direct access to the room. It turns out that A is in the honor’s program while B is not. In light of this background, it is plausible to hear in this apparently playful exchange an undercurrent of such relational phenomena as differences between A and B in status and privilege, A presuming authority over B when it comes to the room, B’s resentment of this, and so forth. Naturally status and difference are not the only relational undercurrents plausibly worked out through conversational humor. Consider Case 17 (examined below) in which conversational humor is an apparent medium through which relational expectations are managed.

Case 17: Dinner

A, B, and C are sitting in a dorm room shared by B and C. We are getting ready to eat Chinese food and watch the NCAA men's basketball tournament on television. A (a female) gets up from her seat and asks B (a male) and me (C; also male) if we would rather have a bowl or plate for our meal. A goes into the kitchen and grabs bowls for dinner and then asks if we want anything to drink with our food. B and I (C) look at each other and laugh. I say, "Mom, we can get our own stuff." A looks at me and gives me a face that includes a raised eyebrow and states, "But dear, I want to get things for you. I am your mother, that's what I do." After this we all laugh and continue to eat and watch basketball. (MJ2)

Just as in "Window," in "Dinner" (Case 17) an undercurrent of relational and perhaps also gender politics is hearable. Although a guest in B's and C's room, A goes about seeing to their needs as they prepare to eat. C creatively calls attention to this by employing the nonliteral category "mom" to describe A's doting behavior. As to the function of this play-frame initiation, the following are plausible: (a) C is calling attention to the presumptuousness of A, who as a guest is serving them; (b) C is observing that A's behavior is overbearing or controlling; (c) C is calling attention to A's implicit one-down position in this moment as a servant and seeks to release her from this. Lacking more detail it is impossible to say what is going on, but it is clear that the category "mom" calls attention not only to a relational status (i.e. this puts B and C in the position of "children", which may be particularly odd because A is younger than C), but also in some way indexes gender. Notably, A extends the play frame by taking upon herself the category of "mother" in her response to C.

Discussion

The instances of conversational humor point to a number of items that might be subjected to further analysis. We point to some of those issues here. First, this study is limited in the same way that ethnographic research generally is limited: It is a snapshot of conversational humor from a partial perspective (in this case multiple, partial perspectives) playing on a narrow field of social interaction. We found that student ethnographers tended to observe and write about similar types of exchanges. For instance, fieldnotes by a particular student ethnographer might feature group fantasizing, or popular culture references, or spectacle. It is possible that student ethnographers over time became accustomed to a particular type of observation and "selected out" for analysis moments of that type. In

this case, participants in group ethnographic projects would be wise to take steps to insure that their observations capture a variety of different types of moments, interactions and scenes. It is also possible, however, that respective styles of conversational humor among peer groups were at play. If this were the case, we would recommend that research track contributions by particular people in order to find out to what extent style comes into play. We also recommend that future research examine the role of intellect in building upon the play frame through banter, group fantasizing and other means.

In addition, we recommend that future research on conversational humor pay particular attention to practices in which participants open up space for others to extend and even escalate the play frame. Insofar as conversational humor brings people together, carving out space in the flow of social life for others to be clever, humorous, witty, seems fundamental to maintaining connections to others (see Hay, 2000). In fact, while we examine some cases in which managing relationships seems particularly relevant (“Window” and “Dinner,” above), we submit that in each of the instances examined here, participants are constructing and reconstructing their tie to others.

We are reminded of an extraordinary but perhaps lesser-known study of humorous portraits of Anglos by Western Apache, in which ethnologist Keith Basso (1979, chapter 5) reports a keen analogy of the role of conversational humor in the development and maintenance of relationships. According to the Western Apache, a relationship is like a piece of leather. When it is new, it is stiff and tears easily. Over time and with work, a relationship softens and stretches, and becomes strong and less likely to tear. Conversational humor, then, is a primary means of working, testing and stretching a relationship. It is in this manner, perhaps that humor is, as Twain put it, the great thing, the saving thing.

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