“Joke’s on You!”: Stand-up Comedy Performance and the Management of Hecklers

*****ABSTRACT*****

Stand-up comedy performance provides a space for audiences to experience collective effervescence. The biggest challenge to that effervescence is the heckler, and the ways in which comedians deal with hecklers underscore cultural understandings of what is or is not funny. I explore stand-up comedy shows on various levels to understand different forms of heckling and strategies for managing disruption through Michael Reay’s work on the social origins of humor and Jeffrey Alexander’s cultural pragmatics model. After explicating these theoretical models in relation to stand-up comedy, examples from live performances in Philadelphia and Boston, as well as selections from televised comedy performances, are used to examine heckling incidents and identify the advantages and risks involved in each type of response.

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................................... 2

Introduction........................................................................................................................................................ 3

Chapter 1: Understanding Humor through a Sociological Lens.................................................................8

Chapter 2: Stand-up Performance within the Cultural Pragmatics Model ................. 13

Chapter 3: Management of Hecklers and the Effervescence of Comedy Shows…30

Conclusion..........................................................................................................................................................42

Appendix A: Methodology and Choices for Methods .................................................................44

Appendix B: Interview Guide ..................................................................................................................50

References .....................................................................................................................................................51
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**Introduction**

The performance of what is known as stand-up comedy – defined simply, if reductively, as the presentation of an intentionally comedic performance by a lone performer on a stage in front of an audience – is an important part of today’s entertainment and media world. Clubs dedicated to stand-up comedy alone exist in cities and towns throughout the United States and the rest of the world. Many stand-up comedians have achieved prominence on a worldwide stage and star in their own television sitcoms, write for other shows, and are invited to make appearances on programs dedicated to the performance format. A number of stand-up comedians, such as Jon Stewart and Bill Maher, have channeled their fame into careers as political satirists and commentators who often blur the line between comedy and current-affairs journalism. Numerous regional stand-up comedy scenes around the country serve as pipelines for people to achieve fame as writers, actors, and producers for popular television shows and movies. Needless to say, stand-up comedy has made its mark as a form of performance in American culture.

The prominent role of stand-up comedy makes the relative lack of scholarship about it, at least compared to other performance styles like music, surprising. This negligence may have to do with the lack of recognition that stand-up comedy receives as a traditional “art form”. Still, scholars in all fields of social science have dedicated study to many forms that still struggle to be accepted as art, such as alternative rock and hip-
hop music\(^1\); in this thesis, I hope to contribute to a small but growing body of academic literature about comedy, with focus on the stand-up form.

I have several aims for the project undertaken here. Among them, I will identify humor as a product of processes that are inherently social and try to understand stand-up comedy as subscribing to a certain script of performance. In conceiving of stand-up comedy as a unique art form with a performance form that differs from other types of performance in sociologically significant ways, I will utilize the cultural pragmatics model articulated by Jeff Alexander in “Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy,” (Alexander 2004: 529) to understand stand-up comedy as a particular kind of scripted performance – one that is codified through rituals and symbols that combine to constitute the meaning of a performance and exist within a certain kind of interaction between comedian and audience.

In order to apply cultural pragmatics to stand-up comedy, I draw extensively from real-world examples of comedians and what happens in stand-up performances. Some of these examples come from the televised stand-up specials of famous comedians, and my empirical research is derived through analysis of these media presentations of famous comedians alongside an ethnographic evaluation of the Philadelphia stand-up comedy scene. The ethnographic component comprises of field study at comedy shows and

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\(^1\) Although the scholarship about alternative rock and hip-hop music crosses disciplinary boundaries, examples in sociology are becoming increasingly prevalent. Two recent publications include Ryan Moore’s *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis* (for alternative rock) and Jennifer Lena’s “Voyeurism and Resistance in Rap Music Videos,” (for hip-hop music).
interviews with comedians based in Philadelphia and Boston, compiled over the course of several months during my senior year at Haverford College and the previous summer spent at comedy shows and interacting with comedians in the Boston area.²

I have chosen stand-up comedy as my subject of analysis for a number of reasons. I mentioned before that there exists a relative lack of study on comedy compared to other fields that figure into cultural discourse. Such a drought of literature signifies a need to be met in the analysis of popular culture. I see comedy as being significant because of how prominently it figures into our cultural landscape. Stand-up comedy has historical roots dating back to the vaudeville tradition in post-Civil War United States cities, but the employment of comedy in performative modes goes back at least as far as the Ancient Greeks and the great comedies of that era. This far-reaching history informs the current spread of stand-up comedians, as well as the comedy programming and live shows that many people take seeming refuge in to get away from the difficulties of their lives. It is no stretch to say that comedy is institutionalized in our society, and while it wears many masks, it satisfies our need to laugh in a world that sometimes needs to be laughed at. Something that figures so strongly into culture should be subject to analysis, for its importance to so many people is not happenstance.

Still, the relationship between sociological analysis and stand-up comedy performance is not one-way. It is not terribly difficult to apply theoretical frameworks to any type of collective cultural act and justify it as conceptually interesting. The major

² For more on my research methods and methodological choices please refer to my methodological appendix.
reason why examining stand-up comedy through a sociological lens is interesting to me is because of what it can teach us about society as a whole. My use of cultural pragmatics highlights what I think is the crucial aspect of stand-up comedy that makes its performance different from other performing-art styles, which is the directness of the audience-performer interaction. The presence of hecklers in many stand-up comedy crowds, as well as the need for a comedian to be able to manage disruption, is the clearest indication of how this dynamic in stand-up comedy differs from that in other types of performance; thus, my examination of heckling in stand-up comedy will be at the center of my case-based inquiry. As I will elaborate later, heckling and the comedian’s mediation of the situation illuminates the real function of entertainment in society – to provide a place for people to feel like part of a collectivity and experience what Emile Durkheim (1995) terms “collective effervescence”.

In order to arrive at that point, however, we must start from a much smaller, more micro-analytical level. The first chapter of this thesis will talk about the social roots of humor that stand-up comedians employ in performance. I describe humor as the result of momentary contradictions in social meaning systems, rooting my discussion in the work of Michael Reay and elaborating on how stand-up comedians manipulate and employ such contradiction to desired effect in their routines. This provides a basis of comedy for the second chapter, in which I employ the cultural pragmatics framework to talk about stand-up comedy as social performance and a collective ritual. I go through the framework and the six elements of social performance outlined in Alexander’s paper while fitting them to stand-up comedy. The third chapter discusses hecklers in comedy
shows, drawing from the previous chapters (primarily from the second chapter) in a
discussion of what type of heckling arises and how comedians handle it. This chapter also
draws from the ten interviews I conducted among Boston- and Philadelphia-based
comedians. The last chapter concludes and summarizes my thesis while suggesting
directions for further research.
Chapter 1: Understanding Humor through a Sociological Lens

To understand how comedians utilize comedic performance and just how stand-up comedy differs from other performance forms, we must first understand the interactional origins of humor. As this project approaches comedy from a sociological lens, it is important to understand humor as arising from something within social interactions. Performance of comedy entails the utilization of humor within a performative and controlled setting, and as a result the comedian must know how to convey the micro-interactional aspects of humor to his audience. The ways by which comedians do this are elaborated on in the next section, but understanding humor within this context must precede understanding comedy.

In explaining humor, I draw upon numerous sources. Philosophers and other humanities-based scholars have already conducted influential scholarship on humor, but it is only recently that sociologists have tried to understand it. My perspectives borrow largely from one particular sociologist of humor, Michael Reay.

Reay understands humor as arising from incongruity in “values, motives…meanings…identities…and scopes or logical levels,” [text omitted by S.R. due to irrelevance] (Reay 2011: 1); essentially, if social structures and norms provide a framework by which society and its members are supposed to act and function congruously, humor is one way in which people can bridge gaps when interactions do not go as the social order expects. Says Reay in his entry on humor for the Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology:
“From infancy onwards humans learn that incongruities can potentially be “laughed off” with the approval of friendly others, implicitly treating them as unserious, inconsequential, or the fault of someone or something else. The resulting positive experiences of relief and group solidarity can then operate even when people are alone, and lead them to actively seek out humor as a source of entertainment. The positive feelings produced by laughter can also be deliberately exploited during interactions that invoke the humorous mode for strategic purposes, for example in joking and teasing,” (Reay 2011: 1)

Reay posits humor as a sought-after experience, and he elaborates on these concepts in his essay “Economists’ Laughter and the Social Nature of Humor,” particularly how humor and laughter (one of the body’s many responses to contradiction) come about during discussion of what are ostensibly serious topics (Reay 2009: 5). The framework of humor articulated by Reay provides a useful explanation for why humor can arise from situations that are not immediately funny situations. For instance, the common experience of sex education for many children is a source of humor among them. Although there is nothing inherently funny about sexual intercourse or female and male anatomy, children often treat such subjects as humorous (to the chagrin of many junior-high health teachers). Instead of questioning the intentions of children or simply labeling such humor as the result of a child’s immaturity, we may perhaps better understand their laughter as part of something contradictory for them. As many children may not be used to hearing about sex or talking frankly with adults about their anatomy, perhaps their humor is better understood as a reaction to something that it has not made sense to talk about. Add that most children undergo sex education at a time when they are dealing with the emotional instability and radical bodily changes associated with puberty, and one can better understand the use of humor by children to alleviate a potentially
uncomfortable situation. Instead of trying to question why there is such a dissonance between the taboos of sex and the frankness with which these teachers talk about it, questions that do not yield clear answers, children may utilize humor to conveniently make uncomfortability approachable and easily dismissible.

Understanding this approach is something that informs the use of humor by stand-up comedians, since they essentially manufacture contradictions every time they perform. Comedy is best understood as the performance of humor, and if humor arises from contradiction, then stand-up comedians must have a very cognizant understanding of how to subvert an audience’s expectations during performances. Ultimately, this can be made problematic, since established comedians sometimes have followers who will expect them to tell certain jokes over and over again, but for the majority of performances comedians will have to manufacture situations in which their jokes can exploit a contradiction.

Such an understanding of humor helps us comprehend why people laugh at such a variety of stand-up comedians, but it is not the whole picture. If we look purely at humor as arising from incongruity, we overlook the intentionality of stand-up comedy’s audience. In other words, people go to stand-up comedy shows not just to see something that they do not expect – if one goes to a stand-up comedy show, the expectation is to laugh. Often, there is no contradiction inherent in this choice. So, this definition of humor as arising from contradiction to social norms (and comedy as involving the employment of such contradiction to be mended by laughter) must thus be understood with the aforesaid micro-level approach.
Humor can be understood from another angle that is still micro-level in its orientation and helps paint the whole picture of the social origins for humor. The collective response of laughter is extremely important to understanding the power of comedy for audiences. In the previous quote, Reay asserts that laughing something off can mediate a contradiction from the social order and also provide a pleasurable feeling for those involved (Reay 2011: 1). He is certainly not the first scholar to highlight the pleasurable effects of laughter for people, and he actually points to a discourse that spans decades and disciplinary boundaries. In Henri Bergson’s “Laughter”, a philosophical reflection on what constitutes humor, he constitutes laughter as being the act through which humans may react to incongruity without having to permanently solve it. Laughter becomes the mediating force for perceived inconsistencies with no simple answer or correction, but the pleasure of laughter drives people to seek out those inconsistencies (see Bergson 1900: Chapter 3). For Bergson, seeking out the experiences to laugh is part of the human condition.

Outside of the humanities, other scholars have attempted to make a direct connection between laughter and an elevated physical mood. Freud introduces “the mechanism of pleasure” to try and give a causal link between humor and its relation to the unconsciousness; for Freud, jokes are like dreams in that they give people a platform to express sentiments deemed inappropriate or subversive, and laughter helps allow the tension around the transgression to be dispersed (see Freud 2002 [1905]: Part B, sections IV-V). More corporeally, medical studies have linked laughter to the release of endorphins and bodily tension to provide emotional release that has medically positive
benefits. While such studies should not be held up as fact just because they are part of popular discourse (since medically-grounded knowledge cannot be viewed by theorists as objectively true), they can still be understood as caveats of the same argument – laughter, as a physical reaction, provides the emotional and physical release that people look for when seeking out a comedic experience. As I state in greater depth in the next chapter, comedy shows provide what can be characterized as a “collectively effervescent” experience for those participating, and this effervescence is fostered in large part through the collective activity of laughing.

So, the micro-level understanding of humor must incorporate these two parts: the incongruity from contradiction and the physical response of laughter to assuage the situation and brush aside incongruity. Since this understanding exists at the micro-interactional level, what happens in the bigger context of a stand-up comedy show should not be interpreted solely as the presentation of incongruence. People who attend stand-up comedy shows will not react to all incongruence by laughing – for instance, it is unexpected for a man to get on stage and fire a gun into the audience, but that hardly counts as humor for most people. Instead, there are another set of complex interactions that subsume the micro-interactional aspects of humor within the context of the stand-up show. It is as this stage that we move on to discuss the cultural pragmatics model and how stand-up comedy looks within it.

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3 Studies on this topic are published and cited often throughout public health websites and magazines, and they link laughter to many different physical benefits. One such recent study conducted by University of Maryland researchers linked laughter to improved cardiovascular function. See the references section for citation to this article.
Chapter 2: Stand-up Performance within the cultural pragmatics model

Cultural pragmatics, a model conceived of by Jeff Alexander, views social phenomena as performances. Says Alexander in his work defining the cultural pragmatics model, six elements of social performance must be combined in order to achieve fusion and make a performance successful (Alexander 2004: 527). Alexander is concerned with the divide between structuralist theories and pragmatist ones, as well as both theoretical schools’ tendency to treat meaning as tangential to the “real” topics of inquiry – power and materiality. He tries to bridge that gap with this model, which will shed further light on how meaning is informed by broader influences within the context of social performances (Alexander 2004).

I believe that Alexander’s system was the best for this project, since his view of social phenomena as performances is useful for understanding a performance style like stand-up comedy in its totality; to utilize that framework helps me frame stand-up comedy as a social ritual capable of being influenced by broader society. Unlike the art worlds or dramaturgical approaches to performance, both of which figure strongly into much of the discourse about performance in the social sciences (see Becker 1982: 35, 42-44 and Goffman 1959), cultural pragmatics breaks down performance in a way that
makes the performance and its content subjects of analysis instead of just a byproduct of mechanisms surrounding it.⁴

The cultural pragmatics model revolves around the six elements of social performance. They are: systems of collective representation, the actors, an audience, the means of symbolic production, mise-en-scène, and social power (Alexander 2004: 531-2). Essentially, Alexander asserts that rituals must have these six elements fused together and working in concert with one another in order for the rituals to have resonance and effervescence. Writes Alexander:

“Rituals are episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication’s symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another’s intentions. It is because of this shared understanding of intention and content, and in the intrinsic validity of the interaction, that rituals have their effect and affect,” (Alexander 2004: 527).

Furthermore, societies utilize rituals to manifest a sort of collective feeling of unity within those rituals. The rituals can be thought of as the means by which ostensibly disconnected people within a society are connected and made to feel part of that society.

The field known as “cultural sociology” (not to be confused with “sociology of culture”) – of which Alexander is a central theorist – encompasses a growing body of literature which addresses various aspects of cultural discourse (including the arts) as part

⁴ There are other approaches in the sociology of arts that also fail to address performance in a sociologically meaningful way, and instead only consider the mechanisms surrounding its production. For a critique of the most prominent approach, the production/consumption paradigm typified by sociologists like Richard Petersen, see “Music as Social Performance,” (McCormick 2006).
of these collective rituals. The roots of this theory can be traced back to foundational sociologist Emile Durkheim and his articulation of the sacred-profane dichotomy in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. According to Durkheim, ostensibly disconnected and differentiated societies experience cohesion around rituals and experiences that appeal to phenomenological desires to bind people together. Such rituals and beliefs, and symbols that inform them, can be characterized as “sacred” while the routine activities of humans outside of these activities (for instance, work) are characterized as “profane” (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 36). Within the realm of sacred activities and symbols, people within a society are bound to one another by participation in rituals that make them feel part of a collectivity. In a successful ritual, those partaking experience what is known as “collective effervescence”, or a collective energy that allows for the suspension of rationality and the trappings of profane aspects of life in favor of a sacred, phenomenological binding of individuals (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 424). Durkheim was grounding his assertions in examination of religion, which he believed to be the most fundamental aspect of social life, but understanding other aspects of culture through the Durkheimian lens is useful for interpreting the role of seemingly nonrational cultural pursuits in society. Several of Alexander’s students and colleagues in the cultural sociology group have utilized the Durkheimian model in a similar way to explain the sacred/profane dichotomy’s relevance to the arts. Steve Sherwood’s article “Seeker of the Sacred” offers a theoretical innovation to previous trends in the sociology of arts, framing artistic pursuits within that dichotomy and characterizing artists as seeking out the sacred aspects of society and trying to depict the sacred in her works (Sherwood 2006: 84). Such
a view of the arts puts the consumption and production of arts within the realm of the sacred by highlighting the phenomenological aspects of creativity, which further allows the art itself to be subject to a sociological analysis. Cultural pragmatics essentially draws from this interpretation of Durkheim so that the artist is not stripped of agency nor her creations made unworthy of sociological analysis.

Alexander’s interpretation of Durkheim informs a new direction in the scholarship for sociology of arts and performance. The best example of such previous scholarship comes from Lisa McCormick, when she utilizes Alexander’s explanation of the six elements of social performance to articulate a performance perspective for the sociology of music (McCormick 2006: 123). This is a conscious move away from the production/consumption paradigm that had dominated the sociology of music (and, in large part, the sociology of arts) since its primary origins in neo-Marxist scholars like Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin.

While stand-up comedy is not held up in the same artistic vein as classical music (there is, for instance, no stand-up comedy program at Julliard), McCormick’s utilization of cultural pragmatics in the performance perspective offers a lot of insight into how stand-up comedy interactions can be best understood. The following section will go through the elements of social performance and explain what relevance they have within the stand-up comedy performance.

*Element 1: Systems of Collective Representation*
Systems of collective representation (the first of the elements of social performance) are best defined as the broad moral and emotional background from which actors derive meaning in a social performance. They inform the actor’s behavior and, through the process of the act, can be adjusted for the actor to constitute meaning. These systems can be derived from something as abstract as a set of symbols or as specific as a text-based script (Alexander 2004: 530). Alexander also distinguishes between background and foreground symbols:

“One part of this symbolic reference provides the deep background of collective representations for social performance; another part composes the foreground, the scripts that are the immediate referent for action. The latter can be understood as constituting the performance’s immediate referential text,” (Alexander 2004: 530).

This distinction is a crucial one to make, since it allows us to understand how the disparate symbols from which stand-up comedians draw can influence the performance in varying shades.

In stand-up comedy performance, the most obvious example of text comes from the comedians’ scripted routines. Although some comedians utilize improvisational technique in their routines to the point that some of the routine is actually made up on the spot (the most prominent example being Robin Williams, who was also trained at Julliard in drama and acting), a sweeping majority of them draw from material they write beforehand. Whether they craft the jokes meticulously on paper and plan every word and bit of emphasis or they go through a series of flashpoints and try to internalize the jokes they want to use, a comedian’s scripting of his “set” is crucial to how it is mediated and differentiates itself from other styles of performance. Although comedians need not
adhere to traditional forms of setup-punchline in their delivery of material (as will be elaborated later on in the chapter), they script their performances around jokes and thus involve themselves in the act of performance before they step on stage. The definition of script need not be so literal, however, and varying shades of performance “scriptedness” can be incorporated within the broader notion of a script. For instance, some comedians will only think about flashpoints for the jokes and perform their routines around the topics inspiring the jokes. While this does not involve a lot being written out beforehand or any real written things, it is still subsumed under “script” because it is a referent for the routine.

Of course, the comedian’s material does not appear out of a total creative vacuum. Every bit of what they perform and how they perform it is influenced by a series of background symbols constituted in the world around them and the historical legacy of stand-up comedy that informs their work. McCormick discusses myths in the musical world, including romantic legacies and artistic archetypes such as the “uncompromising artist in the face of unsympathetic critics or political opposition” and “the temperamental artiste,” (McCormick 2006: 124-5). Similarly, stand-up comedians draw from a similar legacy of performers to influence their work. Comedians are generally not regarded by the public in the same vein of genius as other, more formally-recognized performers like classical musicians or thespians, but comedians and many comedy fans hold older comedians in such a light as to understand them as geniuses. One such comedian is Lenny Bruce, who was most famous during the immediate post-World War II. He garnered as much fame for his wit and wry observations about society as he did infamy
for vulgarity and taboo-breaking that kept him in jail at the height of his fame. He is considered by many to be a godfather for stand-up comedy, and his legacy (encapsulated in a series of biographies, television specials, and an Academy Award-nominated biopic) has solidified the myth of his chaotic genius and uncompromising artistry. Within the Lenny Bruce myth is also a history of drug abuse, and this has been incorporated and reinscribed as a big part of chaotic artistry for his legacy. Comedians who explored and courted controversy by attacking taboos on race while battling drug problems publicly have cultivated a similar legend, with Richard Pryor and George Carlin being prominent examples in the immediate wake of Bruce’s death. Two of the most recent examples of such conflicted geniuses with substance abuse issues, Bill Hicks and Mitch Hedberg, met early demises in connection to their abuse issues. These performers all seemingly fit into a myth about genius that transcends the stand-up form while simultaneously reaffirming stand-up comedy’s status as a form capable of producing artistically important figures. Hicks’s and Hedberg’s early deaths seem to confirm the persistence of such myths, as they remain enduringly popular among comedians and audiences.

Moreover, comedians understand their own material within the creative legacy of those that influence them. This legacy includes the subjects they address in their performances. Comedians situate themselves in a context that is contemporary by drawing from what goes on in the world around them. They address topics in their performance relevant to them and, often, their audiences. Commentary on current events in politics, sports, entertainment, or other spheres of public interest frequently appear in stand-up comedians’ routines. If those comedians do not want to take the route of
addressing current events, they can address topics relevant to their own lives, and indeed a lot of stand-up involves a certain amount of story-telling. Tales of sexual conquest (or failed conquest attempts), racial discrimination, and daily interactions with strangers frequent comedians’ material. This method of performance is thus situated in social experiences and cannot be separated from its influences within the broader social order that the comedian belongs to. Although stand-up comedians are never limited to just one set of themes, they may sometimes be typified by the topics they address. Comedians like Bill Maher, for instance, have cultivated reputations as “political comedians”, or those for whom stand-up comedy is a podium to voice opinions about ongoing events catalogued in the media (typically, but not exclusively, related to politics). Still, the popularity of such comics illustrates just how far-reaching systems of collective representation can be; these are comics who draw from happenings publicized in popular media to frame their jokes, and the most famous among those comedians can continue to influence later generations of comedians who continue to expose the humor in politics. Thus, systems of collective representation that comedians draw upon are not just particularistic) or expansive – they can be both, and typically are in the most engaging of comedians.

Element 2: Actors

I have already talked about actors briefly in this chapter, but this element of social performance must be elaborated further. McCormick writes, “In theater and in social life, actors are the people who encode the meanings and put patterned representations of the script into practice, which demands competence in the requisite skills,” (McCormick
For stand-up comedy, the major actor is the stand-up comedian, for he is the one who acts upon meaning and puts the symbolic representation into its physical representation as the “act”. While this traditional understanding is sometimes complicated by the existence of stand-up duos and the occasional inclusion of audience members in routines (will be talked about more in the discussion of audience and the section on hecklers), the traditional understanding of the lone comedian remains in the popular consciousness. As it is the actor’s job to present the symbolic representations in a way that appears authentic and real, the stand-up comedian must embody the material that he presents in a way that does not draw attention to the constructedness of the ritual. This is extremely difficult for stand-up comedians, since their performances are quiet enough for disruptions to draw people’s attention and thus very susceptible to the whole ritual they take part in being labeled as constructed. Comedy is not typically guided by customs regarding strict courtesy on part of audiences; in most adaptations of Shakespeare dramas, for instance, many would frown upon an audience member getting up and booping the actors for perceived incompetence. However, when comedians forget a part of their routines in a way that is obvious to audience members or deliver jokes that are not perceived of as funny, they run the risk of having an audience boo them off stage or walk out. Comedians typically regarded as the most talented must know how to manage audiences and “win them over” with the strength of their wit and personality.

Element 3: The Audience
Given the sometimes-fragile nature of the actor-audience interaction, the audiences are more pivotal to the stand-up comedy performance than they might be in another social performance. Audiences need to be able to receive and process what is known as the process of “cultural extension” into a “psychological identification, such that the members of the audience project themselves into the characters they see onstage,” (Alexander 2004: 531). Put simply, if reductively, the audience must be able to identify with the performers they see for the ritual to be successful. The audience for stand-up comedy shows can vary quite a bit, and this variance can also account for whether or not the performance is successful. For instance, the audience at an open mic-night (best described as a weekday night where aspiring and professional comedians sign up for a performing slot determined by the hosting club or organization and are given a small window of time to perform) can oftentimes be rowdy because most open-mics lack cover charges and thus the audience is typically not as dedicated to comedy or select comedians as a paying crowd. Many comedians complain about doing open mic slots because their audiences are typically restless (composed mainly of drunkards passing through the bars where they’re hosted, the bar’s regular patrons, and comedians waiting to perform) but acknowledge them as crucial to understanding how to deal with the worst audiences. On the other hand, the audience at a stand-up showcase (a bill consisting of several pre-selected comedians performing their scripted routines for longer time slots) typically pays a cover fee to attend and be entertained. Moreover, if a particular comedian builds a fanbase, their fans will come to shows to see those comedians and may even wait to hear retellings of specific jokes.
Of course, these audiences are not homogenous, and there are occasions when people looking to intentionally spoil the show will come to the very shows that the comedian’s strongest followers also attend. These individuals, as well as others who disrupt comedy shows, are referred to as “hecklers”, and while most comedians acknowledge that the majority of audiences are respectful, the encounters with hecklers still happen with some frequency. Hecklers’ motivations are presumably diverse – some want to annoy the comedian to draw attention to themselves, some don’t address the comedian outright but talk with a friend loud enough to distract the comedian (typically oblivious to their offenses), and some are simply drunk and belligerent. Whatever their reason, they can derail comedy shows to the point of revealing the seeming fragility or artificiality of comedy shows; comedians who allow themselves to be dominated by the heckler fall victim to the comedy performance being exposed as artificial or inauthentic because with the comedian’s competence goes the show’s competence. Comedians typically must employ quick thinking to deal with hecklers, and their “requisite skills” often include strategies for embarrassing a heckler while making themselves look witty in the process. For instance, many comedians will insult male hecklers under the premise that they have had sex with the heckler’s mother or sister – by getting the audience to laugh with them rather than at them, the comedian has reclaimed the performance’s momentum. These methods are elaborated on in the next chapter, which deals with heckling more specifically.

Element 4: Means of Symbolic Production
All of the aforementioned elements, however, would be a diffuse gathering of people and images if not for the means of symbolic production necessary the comedy performance. Alexander defines this element as including “objects that can serve as iconic representations to help them dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals that they are trying to represent,” (Alexander 2004: 532). Comedians typically do not use props on stage, and although there are several notable examples of comedians dating back to the beginning of stand-up that utilized puppets and musical instruments in their routines, they can be considered as prop comics, which is separate from traditional stand-up (Stebbins 1990: 4-5). Still, comedians treat what few physical objects that are on stage during their performance (typically just a water bottle, the microphone and microphone stand, and a stool or chair) as representing other objects in the context of their routines. For instance, in one routine, Dave Chappelle used a stool to imitate an elderly person’s walker. This act involved the treatment of the stool as an immediate prop to provide a literal link to what the comedian was trying to talk about. In another part of this same routine, Chappelle picked up and slammed down the microphone stand to signify the finality of his orgasms; this use of props is more symbolic, since it was only used for visual emphasis to his statement (Miller 1998).

Included within these material provisions is a space for the performance to happen (Alexander 2004: 532). While stand-up comedy has moved out of its traditional home of comedy clubs into other types of performance spaces like rock concert halls and music festivals (see Wenzel 2008), the idea of a physical space for comedy performance still remains an accepted necessity. Most of these venues have the comedian standing on
a stage and facing an audience that is seated at tables or in rows. Comedy performances are thus pretty common in both clubs (typically with tables) and auditoriums (rows). Occasionally, comedians who are more physically active on stage utilize a circle theater-type environment (a prominent example is the performance Dane Cook did at Madison Square Garden), but such occurrences are rare enough to not typify the type of performance.

**Element 5: mise-en-scène**

The fifth element, mise-en-scène, is identified as the process by which “social actors engage in dramatic social action, entering into and projecting the ensemble of physical and verbal gestures that constitutes performance,” (Alexander 2004: 532). While this may seem to refer to only the execution of the performance, the concept of mise-en-scène involves the performance’s execution within a specific social and historical context and in a way that accommodates the need for relevance to that context. Since the ritual is attempting to fuse together diffuse elements, this execution must be done in a way that resonates with the other five elements. For comedians, the roads that this can take are numerous since stylistic differences render comedians as individual performers. Still, as many comedians see themselves within a stylistic legacy, they attempt to find an original voice by incorporating various mannerisms of their favorite comedians while they perform. Of course, since everyone’s influences are different, the implementation of the performance is different for everyone. Ultimately, there is no one text to which the
A comedian can subscribe, which means that there is no single way in which mise-en-scène is executed.

With regards to stand-up comedy, the contingency involved with mise-en-scène is encapsulated by examining stand-up comedians in different historical contexts. One may consider, for instance, the varying social relevance of Lenny Bruce in the 1960s and Zach Galifinakis in the present age. Stebbins highlights the prominence of comedians during Bruce’s time whose main presentation format was extended monologue with humorous commentary about the state of political or moral affairs in the United States, and Bruce is perhaps the most famous example of such a comedian (Stebbins 1990). His comedy, which was actively engaged in confronting taboos on censorship and the moral questions of the day, had incredible relevance to an audience grappling with the conservatism of the post-World War II era and the then-nascent Civil Rights movement; for people living in a society that dealt increasingly frankly with philosophical questions about the nature of human equality and the upheaval of the previous social order (upheaval that spanned every aspect of society, from the polity to the technological sphere), Bruce’s comedy was resonant with their concerns even as he mocked them. Galifinakis, on the other hand, garnered most of his stand-up fame during the turn of the 21st century, a different time of social and technological upheaval. Galifinakis’s trademark stand-up style involves him playing ambient-style piano lines intended to be parody of moving adult-alternative piano while delivering broken-up, punchy jokes while he plays. His humor appeals to an audience that was looking for a style of comedy away from the history of night-club comedy preceding him, and although musical comedy was an important part of the
foundational stand-up comedy, his use of the piano consciously subverts the stereotypes of lounge comedians while parodying them (see Wenzel 2008). The difference between Bruce’s and Galifinakis’s respective socio-cultural contexts relates strongly to the styles of comedy they employ, and speaks to variations in their respective mise-en-scène orientations. I call them different orientations and not different mise-en-scènes because they both, as stand-up comedians, still work within the broader context of stand-up comedy that cannot be completely discounted because of socio-cultural or socio-historical differences.

**Element 6: Social Power**

Social power, the last of the elements, speaks to how the performance is affected by “The distribution of power in society – the nature of its political, economic, and status hierarchies, and the relations among its elites” (Alexander 2004: 532). Stand-up comedy performance is as influenced by these dynamics as any other type of ritual, and the specifics of these dynamics change for each comedy performance. For instance, a televised comedy special is subject to social power distributions that leave a lot of power over presentation in the hands of the broadcasting company. It is not uncommon for these companies to cut out entire segments of comedy specials to fit them within a specific time frame, or even to censor enormous parts of a bit because of profanity or references to illegal activity. In a localized stand-up showcase, however, social power is much more immediate – not only do patrons attend within the setting of a particular club or event
controlled by specific supporting figures (club/bar owners, comedian promoters, etc.) but the comedian has significantly more control over what is being presented to his audience.

Ultimately, the levers of social power are contingent upon a lot of factors. Alexander begs a number of rhetorical questions that must be answered to understand such contingencies (Alexander 2004: 532-33). With regards to the audience, my main site of analysis, the levers of power are shaped considerably by a number of outside factors. For instance, I already mentioned that comedians must employ a number of strategies to deal with hecklers, and the effectiveness of shutting down a heckler or stopping a disturbance reflects the tenuous social power that a comedian can hold over his audience while performing. However, such interpersonal power is determined and mediated by the bigger dynamics of social power that frame the comedian’s routines. Although there is no higher board of stand-up comedians deeming what is and is not funny, there certainly people with a great deal of cultural and social currency that can influence the opinions of others. For instance, the most famous and well-respected comedians’ routines can also be determinants for the acceptable boundaries of humor. Their choices can make or break those who are influenced by them, even in the most subtle of ways. Journalists can do this too, and do it on a much more localized level; at times, in a regional scene, the best-regarded comedians are those who get the most press. Hence, comedy performances are susceptible to even the slightest change in social power completely preventing the refusion needed for the performance to be considered valid and authentic.

In addition, figures in the polity and law enforcement officials have power over distribution and censorship that they have had since the beginnings of comedy. I
previously mentioned that Lenny Bruce found himself in jail a lot because he confronted taboos and topics that were forbidden from being addressed. Such censorship reflects dynamics of social power even though politicians and law enforcement do not really have sway over what people consider funny and unfunny. One could argue that censorship inhibits people from the cognitive understanding of subversive material as funny, but given the social origins of humor addressed in the last chapter (and that Bruce was enduringly popular even in his lifetime), such an explanation does not address how powerful such material is despite formal authority’s attempts to cease its distribution.\footnote{The assertion that political and legal sanctions galvanizes people considered to be subversive is nothing new, and has figured into scholarship about performing groups quite strongly. For a recent example, see the first chapter of \textit{Sells like Teen Spirit} and its explication of the punk rock subculture (Moore 2010: 7-10).}

Having just addressed the various facets of the cultural pragmatics model and its relevance to stand-up comedy, I now move to address the topic of hecklers in more depth. The totality of performance articulated through cultural pragmatics lays out the groundwork for which the true analytical function of examining hecklers and comedians’ responses becomes apparent.
Chapter 3: Management of Hecklers and the Effervescence of Comedy Shows

A comedian’s prowess is typically measured (for comedians and audiences alike) by his ability to keep the audience engaged and laughing at his jokes. In this sense, he is like other types of performers who must deal with the intimacy of certain informal settings – if the audience is engaged, then he must be considered a good performer. However, there are times when the audience is the perceived problem and performers cannot control what they do. In an ethnographic study of folk-music performers in Chicago, Clinton Sanders says the “Performers also acknowledged that there were occasional audiences that even the most accomplished musician or the most skilled entertainer could not engage,” (Sanders 1974: 274). Included within these audiences is, at times, a heckler, and it is at this juncture that comedy and folk music diverge. The mediation of this disruption for many of Sanders’s respondents, to walk off stage or “redirect the focus of his musical communication to play for himself” (Sanders 1974: 277), does not function well in comedy, and the comedian must instead engage with disruptions in a way that reaffirms the audience’s faith in him. Comedians respond to hecklers in a variety of ways, but they are aimed at making the social performance of comedy successful and keeping the audience with them in order to do so. In responding to hecklers, they can default on a number of techniques that keeps the audience with them (either by respectfully asking a heckler to stop, or by insulting them in a way that turns the heckler's disruption on them). The response of a comedian to a heckler says something important about our cultural understanding of what is funny, and the comedian's ability to deal with a heckler successfully reaffirms the audience's faith in him.
while showing that the successful comedy performance (where the comedian does not lose the audience member) is still a collectively effervescent experience for those participating.

In order to understand just how comedians handle the disruption that is a heckler, it is important to categorize disruptions according to the severity with which they occur. Heckling is a diffuse term that is used differently by each individual, but the majority of my respondents and I use the term to encompass any type of distraction that comes from the audience during a stand-up routine (as is mentioned in my description of hecklers in chapter three). Thus, the term encompasses different levels of intentionality on part of the disruptors. In Table 1, I account for the severity of these disruptions while I use Table 2 to display the intensity of the responses hecklers incur from the comedian (as well as the advantages and risks each response has). They universally fall into one of three categories: direct-passive, indirect/interruptive, and direct-confrontational. These three categories are differentiated within by level of intentionality and level of severity, as well as by the type of response that can be employed and the risk associated with that response. In this section, I will go through these three types of disruptions and describe the ways in which they undermine the comedy performance, as well as how comedians mediate these disruptions with varying degrees of success. I draw from the cultural pragmatics model in this section as well since different disruptions can affect different elements of social performance and their ability to re-fuse, as well as affect the same elements differently.
**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Heckling</th>
<th>Associated Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct-Confrontational</td>
<td>Feigned Enthusiasm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insult Directed at Comedian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect/Interruptive</td>
<td>Talking with someone at table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having a phone conversation in audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct-Passive</td>
<td>Aiming comment at comedian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telling story from audience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of response to heckling</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Risks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aiming Joke at Heckler</td>
<td>Gives comedian room to showcase situation management; shows quick thinking; keeps audience on same page as comedian</td>
<td>Jokes may fall flat, make comedian look timid; jokes may be too aggressive or strange,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressively Asking Heckler to Stop</td>
<td>Gets heckler’s attention; shows that comedian is serious</td>
<td>Seems like comedian lost control; breaks from script; puts audience on edge or makes them lose respect for comedian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politely Asking Heckler to Stop</td>
<td>Posits comedian as sincere; gives comedian &quot;moral high ground&quot;</td>
<td>Heckler may feel embarrassed; comedian may look weak or unprepared; breaks scripted routine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring Heckler</td>
<td>Allows comedian to maintain momentum and stick to scripted routine</td>
<td>Problem may get worse and agitate audience if not addressed immediately</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Direct-passive**

One way in which heckling can take form is through an interruption from an audience member who feels like they are contributing something to the show’s dynamic
when they speak. This is termed a direct-passive disruption, because while the audience member is interrupting the comedian directly and intentionally, they do not believe that they are doing anything wrong and have no intention of causing the comedian or audience any grief. Their main problem is that they do not know the exact parameters of how the stand-up performance is (according to comedians) supposed to go, and thus violate the ability of the comedian to perform. Of all disruptions, these are the least threatening because the offenders do not intentionally undermine the sincerity of the performance necessary for it to go on – they simply misinterpret the rules.

Such a disruption takes on numerous forms, but they typically involve a response to a comedian’s joke. Says one of my respondents on the subject: “Usually [a heckler is] somebody who is having a lot of fun, has a playful outburst, and doesn’t realize how distracting that can be to the comic,” Such an outburst can include saying something like “That happened to a friend of mine!” after a comedian tells a humorous story, or shouting “Tell some more jokes about (insert topic)!“ after a funny joke about that respective topic. Most of my respondents complained about the occasional bachelorette party that arrived (sometimes accidentally) at their shows and drunkenly tried to egg on the comedians. Such parties fit into this type of disruption, since they misinterpret the rules enough to think that the situation is more about them than the comedian, the rest of the audience, or the performance as a whole.

When looked at within the cultural pragmatics model, any unmediated disruption will result in the audience and actor elements to not be re-fused. The direct-non-confrontational disruption will also compromise the systems of collective representation
because the heckler’s lack of understanding that he is not supposed to interrupt suggests that he is not on the same page as the rest of the audience or the comedian.

Typically, the response of the comedian to this situation is to simply tell the audience member to be quiet. This should be done at one of the first of those interruptions and in as polite of a manner as possible, since handling a heckler whose lone crime is ignorance of the rules in an aggressive manner can be detrimental to the performance. Says the previously-cited respondent: “My first technique is to try and address it playfully. You don’t want to alienate the audience by saying something like ‘shut the fuck up!’ because if that person thinks they’re having fun, they’re no longer having fun,” A playful address, in this case, could include a soft joke that is not maliciously addressed at that person.

The aggressive handling of a direct-passive disruption risks alienating the comedian from both the heckler and the rest of the audience. If he alienates the heckler alone, the heckler’s non-confrontational disruptiveness can be galvanized into confrontational disruptiveness. If the rest of the audience finds this response to be heavy-handed and unfairly demeaning, they may see the comedian in a light that causes them discomfort or discontent throughout the rest of the show. This may negatively influence how much the audience laughs at the comedian’s jokes or propel other audience members to try and emulate the heckler. If the comedian’s aggressive response utilizes a joke directed at the audience member, then some audience members may even be more likely to try and heckle since they are led to believe that they really are contributing to the show. Even if the audience enjoys this, however, this will enrage most comedians and
cause the actor element to not be re-fused if the comedian lacks the necessary control over the audience. Thus, the problem must be addressed as early on as possible and handled delicately. If said heckler persists after the first warning, however, then the comedian has license to react more aggressively. Says famous comedian Louis C.K. in an interview for the documentary *I Am Comic* about hecklers:

“If they were heckling and thought it would be funny, and when they find out I’m serious about it, they go- 90% of the time they stop, but if they ignore me or blow me off (puts up middle finger), or flip me the bird and keep talking and make fun of me, I go crazy [laughs]. I get really upset… I just laid into this woman and said ‘You are a bad person. You have a bad, mean heart. And I know you don’t think so, you think you’re having fun, but I really want you to think about what this is like for me…’” (Brady 2010).

Although the statement can be interpreted to encompass other, confrontational types of heckling, C.K. still addresses what can be done to mediate a heckler situation when the disruptions continue after the first warning. In saying “If they…thought it would be funny” he addresses the desire of hecklers to be funny and contribute to the show; “90% of the time they stop” because they realize that what they are doing is wrong after the comedian shows them his sincerity in trying to perform, which shows that these hecklers are not intending to be offensive (Brady 2010). The recollection about attacking the woman who ignored him shows what a comedian can do to mediate repeated offenses, regardless of whether or not they increase in severity. C.K.’s framing of this issue in terms of morality (by saying this person is an awful person) perhaps implies intentionality on the part of the heckler when more severe interruptions occur, and such a
framing illuminates the phenomenological aspects of the stand-up performance that will be elaborated on in this chapter.

Indirect/Interruptive

Comedians sometimes have to deal with conversations that happen among audience members that disrupt the flow of the show because they distract the comedian and/or other members of the audience. I categorize this as an indirect/interruptive disruption since the people talking are generally oblivious to the commotion they are causing and are not directing their disruption at the comedian, although it does interrupt their flow and the audience’s attention.

Such a disruption must also be handled without aggression at first, because not everyone may hear that disruption. If the comedian sees a pair talking close to the front and starts hurling jokes or verbal abuse at them, a sizeable portion of the audience may not understand why the comedian is yelling. However, if there is table chatter or a cell-phone conversation and it affects the surrounding audience members, the comedian can address the difficulty politely at first and then increasingly aggressively if the disruption persists. One of my respondents mentioned an instance when somebody was having a conversation and was so engrossed in it that he did not notice that the comedian (the respondent) had actually moved off stage and delivered jokes to him. The comedian spent the next few minutes telling jokes while looking at the offender, and managed to keep the audience laughing while signaling to the disruptor that his actions would have consequences.
It should be said here that the most famous comedians have a bit more leeway than local scene comedians when it comes to dealing with hecklers, because their reputation is cemented enough that they can get away with things others could not. In one instance, Zach Galifianakis pulled a heckler whose crime was talking too much on stage at one of his shows and sat her down next to him while having a conversation with her. He asked the heckler what her name was, and after she told her name, looked through his on-stage notes (something he is allowed to have given his professional stature, but would look bad and could backfire when done by novice comedian) for jokes involving her name. To pull the heckler on stage is an extremely risky move that brings the heckler to center stage while setting her up for further ridicule. It is something that can only be attempted by those whose comedic reputations precede them. The performance’s setting, an auditorium with a clearly elevated stage, also allowed for such a move to be possible, since the stage created aesthetic distance between the performer and the audience. To pull an audience member on stage in this instance meant that the performer still had control over what went on. In the venues where most comedians start out, such as bars or comedy clubs, the stages are usually much less pronounced and thus that relative lack of separation can work against a comedian if they were to attempt the same things that Galifianakis did.

Direct-confrontational

The most severe of these disruptions comes when the heckler intends to discredit the comedian and expose him for being unskilled, unfunny, corny, or anything else that takes away from his ability to guide the stand-up comedy performance. I term such
disruptions direct-confrontational, and while they are the most disruptive to the refusion of elements necessary for a successful social performance, they are also the most potentially lucrative disruptions for comedians to mediate. There are many motivations for someone to heckle, but they do not particularly matter here; what is important is that these hecklers have a motive of some kind and set out to derail the show. While my respondents collectively agreed that these disruptions are the rarest kinds, they require competence in being able to deal with them. Ultimately, these disruptions are the most important in keeping the audience’s faith in the comedian, since they put the comedian to the greatest test.

I subsume this disruption within two sub-categories. The first of these is the obvious joke or insult aimed at the comedian. Such a disruption will disrupt the flow of the show for both the audience and the comedian, since the audience will have heard the heckler and expect the comedian to respond while the comedian will be wondering whether or not he is supposed to respond. The other of these sub-categories is sarcastic praise given to the comedian. This is perhaps a much less obvious insult, but is still equally venomous for those who can perceive it. For instance, if a joke falls flat, a heckler may give an exaggerated laugh after a few seconds with no laughter. I witnessed such heckling most often at open mic nights in bars, since the audience at such nights is typically a lot rowdier and may have stumbled onto the show by accident. This type of insult reflects negatively on not only the comedian but also the audience who may be laughing at those jokes; the heckler insults the intelligence of the rest of the audience, and he undermines the sincerity needed for the performance to have effervescence for the
audience. Moreover, this type of heckling can be written off as being not offensive since it often does not involve words – instead, the venom in such heckling comes from the intent that comes through in the tone of the heckler’s voice. In more prestigious clubs where hecklers get thrown out by bouncers or management, sarcastically praising the comedian can be a way of subverting the rules with little to no risk of sanction.

In all direct-confrontational disruptions, like the others, the most important thing to do is nip the problem in the bud as quickly and confidently as possible. Such a disruption can arise out of thin air, but it can also balloon out of a previous situation where a less disruptive heckling had occurred. At one open mic I attended, the host (who cracks jokes between comedians’ sets and brings the next comedian on stage) had not addressed a table of drunk gentlemen having a loud conversation among themselves with any type of plea to stop or even a joke aimed in their direction (despite it incurring audible shushes and verbal condemnation from other audience members). Later in the show, when other comedians came on stage and made fun of one of the gentlemen at the table for his clothes and demeanor, the heckling became more direct. Later, when I asked a respondent who had performed about that show, he said that it was a situation that the host should have taken care of immediately before it spiraled out of control.

Some stock jokes about sex can usually be employed and toyed with for the purposes of retorting to a heckler, as I mentioned in the last chapter. These tend to be the most effective with hecklers who aim insults at the comedian, since they resonate with the majority of audiences’ senses of humor. To deviate from that path can be risky. One respondent recounted a tale in which he responded to a heckler with a joke about her
mother dying, and that did not go over well with his audience. Such a failure to manage the situation exposes the underlying consensus that a comedy audience may have about their relative senses of humor or what is funny and what falls flat. For this audience, a joke about sex may have been more successful than a joke about a dead relative.

Ultimately, the heckler can bring out the best and worst in the comedian, but it is up to the comedian to manage the situation appropriately. A stronger disruption will yield, typically, a stronger response, but most of it is contextual to each and every comedy show. Still, there are some instances that underscore the desire for collective effervescence but also do not combat the disruptions effectively. The most infamous recent instance of heckling was 2006, when Seinfeld actor Michael Richards leveled racial epithets at a group of rowdy and drunk hecklers (who happened to be black) in an attempt to mediate the heckling during a show at Los Angeles’s Laugh Factory comedy club. He later claimed that he was frustrated at the hecklers and only used the terms to be shocking and thus override their disruption, but the incident angered many in the audience and unleashed a media fiasco in which he was compelled to apologize on Late Show with David Letterman and to Reverend Jesse Jackson. This response to heckling was deplored as unacceptable, and showed limitations for how comedians can deal with hecklers. For someone of his professional stature, even Richards could not get away with saying anything. This is but the most noteworthy of instances in which a comedian loses control of an audience by aiming aggression at the heckler through what the comedian perceives as jokes. The incident reflects that an audience will need to find the comedian’s response funny (and not offensive) in order for the experience to be effervescent.
Ultimately, it can be said that the heckler brings out the best and worst in comedians, as well as audiences. For the Richards incident to go unheeded is to fail to understand what gets a comedian upset, as well as how he can and cannot respond in order to facilitated everybody’s good time.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have discussed the appearance of stand-up comedy and the effervescent function of stand-up comedy performance by addressing the micro-sociological origins of humor, the social performance of stand-up comedy, and the ways in which comedians mediate the disruptions of hecklers. Since the refusion of the six elements of social performance is contingent upon the performance running smoothly, hecklers provide comedians with a challenge in maintaining the coherence of all elements; the ways in which comedians deal with hecklers tests the parameters of our comfort, and displays the effervescence that the comedy performance is capable of producing for its audiences. The most important thing that I want people reading this thesis is that between the ideas that Reay states about contradiction, Alexander’s cultural pragmatics model, and my own analysis of heckling and comedy shows’ effervescence, we can understand stand-up comedy as being affected at every level of its conception and execution by the society in which its performers and audiences interact. What we consider funny or unfunny and acceptable or unacceptable is intimately tied into the social and cultural contexts and forces in which the performance occurs. Comedians, like any other artist or performer, are tied to these forces in ways that affect how they perform and how their performances resonate with their audiences.

I stated in the introduction that stand-up comedy research and theorizing should have a greater foothold in sociological literature than it already has. It would thus be presumptuous of me to not suggest directions for further research, as if I had tied up all loose ends with this thesis. I considered several directions throughout the process of
researching for this project, and while I abandoned most of them, I still think they are valid avenues for sociologists to pursue. A lot of these directions have to do with the type of humor being employed by stand-up comedians, which can vary greatly depending on the specific socio-cultural contexts in which a comedian works. Ultimately, the arguments for further research can take on more micro- or meso-level analyses.

Stebbins set one of these directions that I did not pursue in motion with the premise of his study, and that was of the influence of language on stand-up comedy. In his discussion of stand-up comedy in Canada, he cited ethnographic and popular evidence of stand-up comedians from both the Anglophone- and Francophone-Canadian populations (Stebbins 1990). While my argument is aimed at making a larger statement about the role of comedy to its audiences, arguments can be made about how jokes made by members of a certain national or linguistic group are unique to that particular group in ways that bind members to one. Comedians from every corner of the globe have put their own unique spins on the form; it should logically follow, then, that there is something culturally significant about that comedy for the respective group. Future research can take this empirical direction, and although researchers may then run the risk of contextualizing sociological analysis too much within individual nations, having a nation-based lens should still be an important part of the literature on comedy.

Another important factor that Stebbins addresses is the occupational life of stand-up comedians, and the significance that amateurism and professionalism had for comedians and comedy generally (Stebbins 1990: 124). I touch upon this structure when I talk about the composition of open-mic nights and the ways in which comedians are
brought up through ranks to eventually make money as hosts for different clubs, as well as how that can be a launching pad for careers, but that discussion does not contribute too much to my work except as framing for the types of stand-up comedy shows that exist. I think that any exploration of the ways in which stand-up comedians consider what they do an occupation is important for future research.

Appendix A: Methodology and Choices for Methods

The biggest challenge for this thesis was to engage in research that addressed stand-up comedy from all fronts, since I started writing and researching in a way that made the focus of my thesis subject to change. I thus took on a variety of directions and combine methods in order to support the assertions I ended up making. These mixed
methods included interviews with comedians, field study in Philadelphia comedy clubs, analysis of interviews and performances with and by comedians of national renown, and what can be termed “autoethnography” of my experiences in Boston.

I will begin by addressing this Boston experience. My initial interest in stand-up comedy as a topic of sociological analysis began the summer before my senior year, when I spent a month-and-a-half as an intern with the Boston-area comedy theater ImprovBoston (located, oddly enough, in nearby Cambridge). This theater is primarily dedicated to long-form, improvised comedy conducted by a group of performers (see Stebbins 1990 for a more complete explanation of this form of comedy), but still features showcases for stand-up comedians in the area and has a certain amount of renown for the stand-up comedians that perform there. ImprovBoston is part of a larger network of clubs within the Boston area, and the comedians that coalesce around this local scene frequently visited the club during working hours to discuss ideas for shows. The desire to pursue comedy as a thesis topic came about through interactions with local comedians and was concurrent with an interest in starting to perform stand-up comedy. I thus engaged with the Boston scene for this month-and-a-half as both an observer and a participant. Although the only notes about what I experienced in Boston-area comedy spaces were conducted in relation to a stand-up workshop I attended at ImprovBoston, I felt like I needed to utilize this experience somehow since it informed so many of my beliefs about stand-up comedy. Thus, I have tried to encapsulate my experiences in Boston within the realm of what is known as “autoethnography”.
Autoethnography is a concept articulated by a growing number of social scientists as ethnography that draws from personal experience. The development of the concept is grounded in large methodological questions regarding the authenticity of data studied and the benefits of narrative approaches. Says one scholar who has written about autoethnography among psychologists:

“The defining feature of autoethnography is that it entails the scientist or practitioner performing narrative analysis pertaining to himself or herself as intimately related to a particular phenomenon. Autoethnography entails writing about oneself as a researcher-practitioner, but it is not the same as autobiography in the literary sense...It is a specific form of critical enquiry that is embedded in theory and practice (i.e., practice as a researcher and/or career development practitioner).” (McIlveen 2008: 3).

The assertion made in the above quote resonates, albeit implicitly, with my use of a past experience for academic inquiry. The autoethnography approach is grounded in a deeper mediation of data than just autobiographical narrative of an experience – instead, the practitioner’s experience becomes the subject of his analysis. Such a style of ethnography is rooted, like many other qualitative research methods for social scientists, in a set of methodological orientations that see the world in a relativist, non-objective lens; whether the researchers advocating this method are radical constructionists or closer to the ideological “center”, their view of experience is one that posits the individual worldview within the broader goal of constructing a whole picture.

Although autoethnography involves a privileging of personal experience that is not widely accepted in sociology, such acceptance is not without precedent.
Ellis and Bochner examine the benefits of autoethnography for sociological research and say that this method of research can be beneficial in giving papers an immediacy and relatability that can only enhance its analytical validity (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 743-44). Since this project had such personal roots, I found it only appropriate to adopt such methods for my project. I do not think that this paper reads like a traditional autoethnography, however, since my personal experiences did not frame the structure of the paper; rather, they informed the perspectives that I adopted going into this project. The conclusions that came from conversations with Boston comedians and observations of their performances are not always spelled out at such, but they were nonetheless important to what I did in this project.

Still, I felt that the use of my previous experience could not be stand-alone data. Limited both by my lack of fieldnotes and the confines of experiencing one lone stand-up scene, I was compelled to do study during the year as well. I took inspiration from David Grazian’s *Blue Chicago* and Clinton Sanders’s “Psyching Out the Crowd”, noting that they started their investigations of blues and folk-music venues, respectively, by playing for open jam sessions and gigs at the venues where their particular respondents congregated (see Grazian 2003 and Sanders 1974: 265). Thus, to get as full a picture of the stand-up world as I could, and given my previous interest in examining regional stand-up comedy scenes for the project, I embarked on a field study of one specific Philadelphia stand-up open mic night. Helium Comedy Club, located on Sansom Street in the Center City
neighborhood, carries a reputation as the most prestigious arena for stand-up comedy in the city and stands out as one of its few stand-up-exclusive spaces. I began attending the weekly open mics at Helium (which happens on Tuesday nights, as most stand-up venues will have these nights on weekdays and reserve the weekends for featured showcases or touring comedians) and went for the majority of the first semester, attempting to do participant observation by getting on the open mic’s roster and subsequently ingratiating myself with comedians. The sign-ups for the open mics worked like this: the hopeful participant would sign up two hours in advance, a club employee would make a random selection among names in the sign-up (with about 4 spots reserved for featured comedians on the list), and those who make the cut for the open spots get 3 minute sets. The odds that one would get selected on any given week were low enough that attempting participant observation would have been difficult, so I dropped that idea fairly quickly. Still, the open mics served as great places to network with comedians, and I was able to meet enough people who were willing to sit down and talk with me.

From there, I compiled ten interviews with various comedians who worked or had worked in the Philadelphia and/or Boston scenes (see Appendix B for my interview guide). Due to scheduling difficulties and relocations for some of these comedians due to jobs, only three of these interviews were conducted face-to-face. For the rest (with the exception of one survey interview with a respondent who was otherwise immobilized from a surgery), I conducted skype or phone
interviews. My respondents were reflective of the scenes in which they worked, in that they were in the age range of mid-20s to early-30s. Three are based in Boston while the rest are based in Philadelphia (with the exception of one of my phone interviews, a comedian who worked in Philadelphia before moving to Chicago because of a job transfer), and all except one is male. All of them except one have jobs outside of comedy, but all get paid to perform stand-up. This perhaps seems like a homogenous picture of the stand-up scene, and while it does not reflect the demographic reality of stand-up comedy, it does reflect the general bifurcated nature of stand-up as a ground for identity construction; while there are outliers among the black/white, male/female, gay/straight paradigms, the exceptions seem to reinforce this seemingly polarized nature.

Lastly, I drew from televised and filmed broadcasts of stand-up comedy performances and interviews with comedians. Since many comedians see themselves within a creative legacy and are influenced by comedians famous enough to get televised specials, I thought it was important to account for those who have become famous and continue to influence the form. Of course, the possibility of interviewing the most influential and famous stand-up comedians is all but nonexistent, so looking at these media representations of stand-up comedians (however prone they are to the whims of the media that pedals their images) is an important part of the mixed methodology I appropriated for this project.
Appendix B: Interview Guide

1) When did you realize you wanted to be a standup comedian?

2) Tell me about your first stand-up gig?

3) Who is the most influential comedian of our time?

4) Do other comedians influence the way you perform? Write?

5) How often do you write material?

6) What materials do you use to write?

7) What inspires your material?

8) Do you think about your audience when you write?

9) Do you see comedy as an occupation?

10) Do audience members frequently disrupt performances?

11) How do you deal with hecklers?
12) What other types of distractions may arise during a comedy show?

13) How would you say that comedy shows differ from other types of shows (rock concerts, etc.)?

References


Stebbins, Robert A. 1990. *The Laugh-Makers: Stand-up Comedy as Art, Business,*
