

“OH, I’D DO *ALL* THE SEX JOKES”: STAND-UP COMICS AND THE
NEGOTIATION OF HUMOR, GENDER,
AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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“OH, I’D DO *ALL* THE SEX JOKES”: STAND-UP COMICS AND THE
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ABSTRACT

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Gender inequality is deeply embedded within the traditional and normative practices of joke-telling, yet rarely has research addressed the experiences, identities, and perceptions of the individuals responsible for creating and performing stand-up comedy. Using data collected from 20 in-depth interviews with men and women stand-up comics, I situate my research within West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “doing gender” and Deutsch’s (2007) “undoing gender” frameworks to empirically examine if, how, and why stand-up comedians use humor to construct and perform gender identities in ways that either perpetuate or mitigate gender disparities. Stand-up comedy is a situation that, on its face, lacks distinct sex categorization. Yet, my examination of men and women stand-up comics indicates various ways in which comics use humor to “do gender.” The comics internalized the attitudes and behaviors expected of their respective sex categories, and most aligned their actions with such expectations to avoid censure (West and Zimmerman 1987). But, some comics seemed to engage in “undoing gender” by using comedy as a

tool to transgress traditional gender expectations and destabilize normative power relations (Deutsch 2007). The findings of this research illustrate the ways humor can be used to both perpetuate and challenge traditional gender arrangements. In addition, it has implications for studies at the intersection of gender, humor, and inequality, and it provides further utility of the “doing” and “undoing gender” frameworks in relation to how men and women stand-up comedians make meaning of their own experiences living and performing comedy.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Humor is most certainly a source of entertainment, but it is also one of the most complicated facets of social life. A joke that was once considered funny may lose its punch line as cultural shifts render old humor obsolete (Farb 1981). Because it is impossible to separate humor from the value systems from which it is derived, it is important to consider the powerful social functions it serves. Greenbaum (1999:43) explains, “Stand-up comedy is an inherently rhetorical discourse; it strives not only to entertain, but to persuade, and stand-up comics can only be successful in their craft when they can convince an audience to look at the world through their comic vision.” Humor is a mechanism for social interaction, and it is often used to discharge tensions and reduce conflicts in serious or uncomfortable situations (Crawford 2003; Farb 1981). It can also be used as an “unmasking tactic” to draw attention to social disparities by exposing contradictions and flaws in institutionalized systems of privilege and power (Farb 1981).

The stand-up comedians who create and perform humor are essentially witty purveyors of the norms, traditions, and attitudes of a given culture, but they are also privileged with the flexibility to speak and behave in ways that oftentimes conflict with

such norms and expectations (Mintz 1985). By poking fun at the commonly held beliefs, assumptions, and absurdities rooted in everyday life, and simultaneously positioning themselves behind a shield of “it was only a joke,” stand-up comedians are uniquely positioned to challenge and potentially disrupt the traditional gender order (Crawford 2003). But, previous research suggests that men are more likely than women to tell jokes, and they are also more likely than women to incorporate sexual and aggressive themes into their humor (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006).

These studies reveal the gender inequality deeply embedded in traditional and normative practices of humor. Though these findings may seem to suggest an impasse of sorts for thinking of humor as a mechanism for reducing gender inequality, Deutsch (2007) argued it is important not to dismiss the incremental, yet transformative potential of everyday interactions. Building on this premise, what follows is an empirical examination of the subjective experiences of stand-up comedians. Using data collected from 20 in-depth interviews with men and women stand-up comics, I situate my research within West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “doing gender” and Deutsch’s (2007) “undoing gender” frameworks to empirically examine if, how, and why stand-up comedians use humor to construct and perform gender identities in ways that either perpetuate or mitigate gender disparities.

More specifically, I intend to answer the following research questions: How and why do men and women comedians differ in their experiences with the influences of normative expectations of gender as they relate to comedy and humor? How and why do men and women stand-up comedians use humor to perpetuate gender inequality? How do stand-up comedians utilize humor as a mechanism for challenging and reducing gender

inequality? Stand-up comedy, on its face, lacks distinct sex categorization. Yet, my examination of men and women stand-up comics indicates various ways in which comics use humor to “do gender.” The comics internalized the attitudes and behaviors expected of their respective sex categories, and most aligned their actions with such expectations to avoid censure (West and Zimmerman 1987). But, some comics seemed to engage in “undoing gender” by using comedy as an apparatus to transgress traditional gender expectations and destabilize normative power relations (Deutsch 2007). The findings of this research illustrate the ways humor can be used to both perpetuate and challenge traditional gender arrangements. In addition, it has implications for studies at the intersection of gender, humor, and inequality, and it provides further utility of the “doing” and “undoing gender” frameworks in relation to how men and women stand-up comedians make meaning of their own experiences living and performing comedy.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Little research exists that explores the connection between humor and gender inequality. Less research specifically addresses the experiences and perceptions of those individuals who create and perform humor. Even so, previous research provides a basic framework from which the intersection of gender and humor may be explored. Previous literature discusses several themes relating to studies of humor: humor as social influence, gender differences in the use of humor, humor as a tool for policing gender and bolstering homosocial bonds, women caught in the “double bind” of humor, humor as a coping mechanism, humor as a tool for voicing marginality, and women redefining funny. Though most of these themes fall under the umbrella of humor as a mechanism for social influence, and overlap with one another, they represent unique trends in humor. For that reason, I begin first with a review of literature more generally related to humor as social influence, and I follow it with a discussion of each of the more specific thematic trends in humor.

Humor as Social Influence

Kane, Suls, and Tedeschi (1977) argued that humor could draw attention to issues of social significance in ways other techniques of communication could not. Specifically, humor can be a tool used to both perpetuate and challenge stereotypes (Davis 1995;

Kane, Suls, and Tedeschi 1977). For example, in his review of the state of humor as a field of study, Davis (1995) noted that comedic portrayals in mass media often hide behind façades of social progress, but in reality they oftentimes maintain or perpetuate the status quo. Ford and Ferguson (2004) somewhat challenged the connection Davis drew between humor and the persistence of the status quo, and they argued that exposure to, for example, disparaging humor, did not necessarily result in the creation or reinforcement of stereotypes or attitudes of prejudice. Instead, they argued that for individuals who already possess attitudes of “high prejudice,” exposure to disparaging humor results in the individuals’ increased tolerance for acts of discrimination. Their findings suggest that exposure to disparaging humor does not necessarily create stereotypes, but may instead magnify the prejudicial assumptions to which some individuals already adhere (Ford and Ferguson 2004).

Ford and Ferguson (2004), and Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) argued that an individual’s laughter in response to a joke signals his or her agreement with the point of view conveyed by the comic. In addition, when an individual perceives a joke with prejudicial undertones as funny, he or she is more likely to dismiss the prejudice and accept it merely as a benign attempt at entertainment (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Ryan and Kanjorski 1998). Conversely, if the recipient fails to accept the joke as funny, he or she is more likely to deem it offensive and label it as maliciously prejudicial (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Ryan and Kanjorski 1998). This illustrates the subjectivity nested within multiple interpretations of humor. Humor, then, is a unique tool that can be used to convey prejudicial assumptions under the protective guise of harmless jest. The joke-teller is provided a safety net, because if challenged, he or she can essentially withdraw

the joke and claim he or she was not being serious (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Kane, Suls, and Tedeschi 1977).

Gender Differences in the Use of Humor

Both men and women engage in humor and utilize it for various purposes, such as to cope with stressful or uncomfortable situations, but previous research indicates considerable gender differences in men and women's uses of humor. Specifically, Decker and Rotondo (2001), and Robinson and Smith-Lovin (2001) found that men engage in humor far more frequently than do women. Robinson and Smith-Lovin studied humor in task-oriented group discussions, and though they found that men engaged in humor more frequently than women, they also found that women were more likely to engage in humor when men are not present, because they are less likely to be interrupted. They concluded that humor is associated with high status, and thus men participate in humor more frequently than their lower status counterparts (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). In their study of 1,000 business school graduates, Decker and Rotondo (2001) echoed Robinson and Smith-Lovin's finding that men engage in humor more frequently than women, but also found that women managers were more likely than men managers to experience positive responses from subordinates when they used non-offensive or non-sexual humor in the workplace. Also, they found that women were more likely to be perceived negatively when they deployed sexual or insult-related humor than were their male counterparts (Decker and Rotondo 2001).

Humor as a Mechanism for Policing Gender and Bolstering Homosocial Bonds

Though the previously discussed research indicates gender differences in the use of humor, additional research indicates humor can be more specifically deployed as a tool

for policing gender and bolstering homosocial bonds among men (Bemiller and Schneider 2010; Lyman 1987; Quinn 2000). In her qualitative study of the relationships between humor and sexual harassment in the workplace, Quinn (2000) utilized in-depth interviews with 21 women and 18 men, and situated her study within a symbolic interactionist framework in which knowledge and identities are socially constructed through daily interactions. She found that in the workplace, men typically engaged in sexist joking, or what they termed “chain yanking,” as a way to strengthen homosocial bonds among men, while at the same time emphasizing their dominant social position in relation to women co-workers. Humor is socially constructed, and thus existing power relations dictate what is defined as funny (Lyman 1987; Quinn 2000). By packaging their derogatory language as laugh-worthy jokes, men utilize their dominant position within the gender hierarchy to perpetuate their patriarchal ideology (Bemiller and Schneider 2010). Because women occupy a lower position within the gender hierarchy, they are at greater risk of failing if they attempt to wield humor as a tool for stifling sexist joking in the workplace (Quinn 2000). This risk exists because men have socially constructed a definition of funny that positions women’s expressions of humor toward the periphery.

Lyman’s (1987) observations of, and interviews with, the men of a college fraternity and the women of a college sorority similarly address the notion of joking as display of gender dominance. He used Freud’s theoretical framework that emphasizes the connection between humor and hostility, and he concluded, “jokes are not just stories, they are a theater of domination in everyday life, and the success or failure of a joke marks the boundary within which power and aggression may be used in a relationship” (Lyman 1987:170). Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) also utilized Freud’s theoretical approach

to humor, and they reiterated Lyman's position that there is a link between appreciation of sexist jokes and hostile attitudes and behaviors. Ryan and Kanjorski surveyed 172 men and 227 women to find out if there was an association between enjoyment of sexist humor and aggressive attitudes and behaviors. They found that men who reported greater enjoyment of sexist humor also reported a higher likelihood that they would participate in behaviors such as forcing sex on their partners and using psychological, physical, or sexual aggression (Ryan and Kanjorski 1998). Interestingly, even women reported use of sexist humor.

The "Double Bind" of Humor

It is evident that some women participate in humor they consider sexist (Ryan and Kanjorski 1998), but doing so may be women's responses to their own attempts to adhere to a definition of funny constructed by those in positions of power (Lyman 1987; Quinn 2000; Watt 2007). This results in a "double bind" in which women who challenge sexist jokes are ridiculed, but women who ignore them or participate in them end up participating in their own subordination (Bemiller and Schneider 2010; Lyman 1987; Quinn 2000; Watt 2007). For example, the women employees Quinn (2000) interviewed commonly reported that they made every effort not to take their men coworkers' sexist jokes personally. Quinn acknowledged this defensive tactic could be used as a tool for resistance, but she argued that its passive nature also results in women contributing to their own oppression. Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) seemed to hint at this double bind identified by Quinn, as they found that though women were more likely than men to deem sexist jokes offensive, they were just as likely to report they would retell them. The women recognized the hostility in the sexist jokes, but their inclination to retell the jokes

reflects their subordinate position within a hierarchical system that privileges the social construction of humor as dictated by the dominant ideologies of men (Quinn 2000).

The double bind was also evident in Bemiller and Schneider's (2010) findings from their content analysis of 153 online jokes they identified to be sexist. Using "doing gender" as their theoretical framework, Bemiller and Schneider argued that sexist joking is a way in which men utilize language as a means of gender performance as well as a tool that ensures the subordination of women. They concluded that because sexist jokes are presented under the guise of benign entertainment, women who encounter such jokes must make the decision to either challenge the sexism or excuse it by laughing. As Quinn (2000) argued, leaving the joke unchallenged results in the women contributing to their own subordination.

The double bind was also experienced by many of the sorority members studied by Lyman (1987) following a sexist prank imposed upon them by members of a neighboring fraternity. The women reported they felt violated by the men's prank, but they were quick to label the men's behavior as boyish, which served to diminish the offensive nature of the pranks and preserve the social relationship between the sorority and fraternity members. Like the women who reported they would retell sexist jokes (Ryan and Kanjorski 1998), and the women who brushed off sexist joking in the workplace (Quinn 2000), the sorority members participated in their own subordination by ignoring the severity of the men's hostile prank (Lyman 1987).

Humor as a Coping Mechanism

Individuals most vulnerable to power imbalances, such as those who experience the double bind, are forced to find ways to cope with the anxieties associated with their

subordination. Previous research indicates humor can be a powerful tool for coping with stressful situations and interactions (Downe 1999; Henman 2001; Holmes and Schnurr 2005; Sanders 2004). For example, in her qualitative study on Vietnam prisoners of war (POWs), Henman (2001) found that many of the men she interviewed identified humor as the primary way they coped with the brutality, isolation, and stress they endured during imprisonment. Engaging in and appreciating humor afforded the men a small sense of control and comfort in conditions that were otherwise dire and unpredictable (Henman 2001).

Similarly, Downe (1999) found humor was an important mechanism used by Costa Rican women sex workers to cope with the violence, discrimination, and political objectification they experienced daily within their community. Using participant observation, open-ended interviews, and 12 focus groups, she honed in on the everyday experiences of 53 sex workers. Sanders's (2004) ethnographic research on British sex workers similarly found humor to be a mechanism with which women coped with their marginalization and harsh working conditions. She used Hochschild's concept of "emotion work" to explain how the women used humor to "turn a disgusting situation into something more bearable" (Sanders 2004:282). As with the Vietnam POWs, British and Costa Rican sex workers used humor to discharge some of the stress and anxiety associated with their abuse and lack of power (Downe 1999; Henman 2001; Sanders 2004). Additional research suggests that individuals in far less extreme conditions also use humor as a mechanism for coping with uncomfortable, anxious, or stressful situations (Henman 2001).

The levels of stress and anxiety experienced by most employees are presumably much less pronounced than of those experienced by POWs or sex workers, but some employees still use humor as a tool for coping with challenging or stressful situations (Henman 2001; Watts 2007). For example, previous research has found that women in industries such as Information Technology (Holmes and Schnurr 2005), civil engineering, and construction (Watts 2007) commonly use humor as a mechanism for coping with workplaces numerically dominated by men. In the qualitative portion of their research, Holmes and Schnurr (2005) explored how two women used humor as an interactional tool to both bond with and manage men workers in the information technology industry. They found that Ginette, a factory team manager, commonly utilized the same “patterns of insult and jocular abuse” (138) used by the men she managed as a way to fit in to a traditionally masculine environment. Conversely, Jill, a director in a small information technology company, deployed humor that emphasized (and often exaggerated) her role as an office “mother,” or as technologically incompetent. The authors argued that Jill used this style of humor as a coping mechanism for maintaining a “feminine” managerial style in a predominantly “masculine” workplace. They further concluded that such humor “subtly challenges the widespread assumption that leadership behavior is masculine behavior” (Holmes and Schnurr 2005:142); however, this argument is problematic. It fails to acknowledge that perhaps Jill’s style of humor results in her merely reinforcing gender stereotypes and positioning herself as the target for sexist denigration (Merrill 1988).

Voicing Marginality

Humor can be used as a mechanism for coping with the stresses and anxieties associated with negotiating power imbalances, but some individuals overtly use humor to draw attention to and challenge their lack of power. For those who occupy social positions within society's periphery, humor can be an important mechanism for making their voices heard and calling attention to their marginalization. For example, women comedians occupy a marginal position within a comedic and cultural hierarchy constructed and dominated by men (Gilbert 1997). In her essay that critiqued the comedy of Phyllis Diller and Roseanne Barr, Gilbert argued women voiced their marginality by drawing attention to and challenging the very power structures that oppress them. Specifically, Gilbert argued, "When Diller mocks her many facelifts or Barr insists on her right to be overweight, cultural taboos are broken" (328). For Gilbert, women comedians such as Diller and Barr use self-deprecation not as a tool for perpetuating the status quo, but as a tool for engaging their audience in an exercise in the critique of the very power structures that shape both laughter and their everyday lives. British and Costa Rican sex workers also deployed similar styles of self-mockery to call attention to the absurd feminine stereotypes of appearance and performance to which they were expected to adhere (Downe 1999; Sanders 2004). However, a major weakness of Gilbert's (1997) argument is that she makes unsubstantiated assumptions about how audience members perceive stand-up comedy. This is very similar to the argument made by Holmes and Schnurr (2005) in which they argued that Jill's exaggeratedly "feminine" style of managing men workers overtly challenged the traditional assumption that management must be done in a stereotypically masculine way. Both Gilbert and Holmes and Schnurr

assumed that an audience perceived the women's jokes as challenges to deeply embedded gender stereotypes; however, the women may have instead positioned themselves as the targets for the perpetuation of gender inequality (Merrill 1988).

Their Fair Share: Women Redefining Funny

Merrill (1988) recognized the double bind commonly experienced by women, as she argued that traditional expectations of humor call for women to agree with, and subsequently laugh at, the very humor that degrades them. She also contended that women who refused to laugh at jokes that positioned women as the targets for degradation were actively rejecting the shared assumptions that serve as prerequisites for jokes to be considered funny. It is this process that is misinterpreted as women lacking a sense of humor (Case and Lippard 2009; Merrill 1988). To combat such misinterpretations, Merrill stressed the importance of recognizing and encouraging what she called "feminist humor."

Merrill (1988) defined feminist humor as both humor that is directed specifically at women, and humor that is rooted in the idea that the experiences of a diverse variety of women should be embraced. She argued that by utilizing this style of humor, women can strategically confront gender inequality by situating oppression as the subject of critical jabs rather than accepting themselves as the subjects of sexist ridicule. Merrill further explained that feminist comedy challenges the traditional hierarchy of power in which men are both dominant and privileged.

Using a content analysis of over 1,900 jokes (derived from internet searches, joke

books, television, and other sources) they defined as ‘women’s’ or ‘feminist humor,’¹ Case and Lippard (2009) similarly highlighted the subversive potential of feminist humor, but they also found that most of the jokes relied on heavily gendered stereotypes. For example, they found that approximately 62 percent of the jokes in their sample painted men as ‘useless,’ ‘stupid,’ ‘hypersexual,’ and ‘disgusting,’ which aligns with stereotypical assumptions of men. Many of the jokes in Case and Lippard’s sample may have been used in attempt to challenge patriarchy, but very few of them actually went beyond emphasizing gender stereotypes and differences to present substantive critiques of the traditional gender order.

As indicated by the approximately 62 percent of the jokes in Case and Lippard’s (2009) sample that labeled men in stereotypical ways, a major weakness of this study may be in the authors’ loose definition of “feminist humor,” though other definitions have been challenged as well. Gilbert (1997) identified a weakness in Merrill’s definition of “feminist comedy.” Merrill (1988) argued women can gain footing toward greater gender equality by embracing feminist humor instead of the traditional “masculinist humor” that adheres to and perpetuates patriarchal power structures. But, Gilbert argued that Merrill’s definition situated all women comedians as “feminist,” and failed to acknowledge the possibility that men could both perform and consume humor that challenges gender stereotypes and traditional power relations. Similarly, Case and Lippard ignored jokes by men that challenged gender stereotypes and patriarchy. Even

¹ Case and Lippard (2009:241) define such jokes as those “that are critical of men, patriarchy, and assumptions of male supremacy[,]” and as “those representing a response to male supremacist stereotypes and ideologies that ridicule, those that express hostility toward men, and those that assert female superiority over men.”

so, both Case and Lippard and Merrill's notions of feminist humor emphasized the importance of women using their uniquely marginalized status to influence and participate in humor that challenges their own subordination.

As evidenced by the aforementioned literature discussed in this section, previous research indicates humor may be used as a tool for social influence, and it can serve to both challenge and reinforce the status quo (Davis 1995; Ford and Ferguson 2004; Kane, Suls, and Tedeschi 1977; Ryan and Kanjorski 1998), but research seems to indicate considerable gender differences in the ways men and women use humor (Decker and Rotondo 2001; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Humor can also act as a form of patriarchal domination in which gender boundaries are policed, homosocial bonds are reinforced, and aggression is encouraged (Bemiller and Schneider 2010; Lyman 1987; Quinn 2000; Ryan and Kanjorski 1998). This often results in women being caught in a "double bind," in which they face the difficult decision of either challenging sexist jokes, or being complicit in their own subordination by laughing at them (Bemiller and Schneider 2010; Lyman 1987; Quinn 2000; Ryan and Kanjorski 1998; Watt 2007). But, humor can help individuals cope with stressful and uncomfortable situations (Downe 1999; Henman 2001; Holmes and Schnurr 2005; Sanders 2004; Watts 2007), or help draw attention to their marginal social positions. This can result in women redefining what is considered funny (Case and Lippard 2009; Downe 1999; Gilbert 1997; Holmes and Schnurr 2005; Merrill 1988; Sanders 2004).

Research Gap

Though primarily intended as entertainment, comedy often trivializes serious issues in the process (Hartz and Hunt 1991). As a side effect, comedy, and popular

culture more broadly, are often disregarded as avenues not worthy of academic inquiry (Farb 1981; Hartz and Hunt 1991; Kane et. al 1977). Protected under the guise of entertainment, humor can be used to surreptitiously challenge or reinforce inequality. Thus, it is imperative we examine the very processes that produce these results. Extending previous research, I focus on the experiences of those individuals responsible for creating, performing, and living comedy. Humor does not create itself, so to understand how and why it is used to either reinforce the status quo or to challenge it, it is useful to explore how men and women stand-up comedians make meaning of their own experiences with humor. Bemiller and Schneider (2010) used the theory of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) to inform their analysis of online jokes; however, this theory, along with Deutsch’s (2007) “undoing gender” have not yet been used in research that integrates issues of gender and humor. I seek to fill this gap, and I also seek to contribute to a scant body of research regarding stand-up comedians’ experiences with issues of gender and inequality.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender" framework is a classic, heavily influenced by early symbolic interactionist approaches such as that of Erving Goffman; yet, it has drawn considerable critique from contemporary scholars for various reasons. West and Zimmerman argued that gender is not an attribute intrinsically fixed within an individual, nor is it the result of socialization that ends early on in childhood. Instead, gender is a perpetual string of interactional and institutionalized achievements. Individuals tailor how they display themselves as men or women based on the situation and institutional confines. Thus, West and Zimmerman used the phrase "doing gender" to indicate this is a perpetual process rather than a fixed status. As Butler ([1990] 2006:34) contended, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." In other words, gender does not exist independent of the processes required to produce it. In addition, West and Zimmerman (1987) pointed out that when individuals "do gender," they do so knowing they are accountable for either fulfilling or failing to fulfill the expectations others have of them as men or women.

This notion of "doing gender" begins with the assumption that sex, sex category, and gender are three independent classifications. *Sex* is the classification of one as male

or female according to a set of biological attributes determined by social consensus (West and Zimmerman 1987). Complicating this form of classification is the fact that genitalia *or* chromosomal typing may be relied upon to make a determination of sex; it is very possible the classification could differ depending on which criterion is used. West and Zimmerman further explained, “one’s sex category presumes one’s sex and stands as proxy for it in many situations” (127). In other words, one is presumed male or female in one’s daily life, even as one’s biological attributes remain concealed. *Gender*, according to West and Zimmerman, is an “activity” that involves manipulating one’s conduct in reaction to, and within the confines of, the expectations associated with one’s placement within a sex category. West and Zimmerman argued that the conflation of sex, sex category, and gender is the foundation for the culturally accepted understanding of gender as predisposed based on biological sex, which encourages the legitimization and perpetuation of inequality among men and women.

In addition to their critique of the conflation of sex, sex category, and gender, West and Zimmerman (1987) also took issue with the conceptualization of gender as a *role*, as they argued that such a conceptualization depicted gender as a result rather than as a process. They applauded Goffman’s recognition of the performance aspect of gender, but they criticized his notion of “gender as a display” because he argued such performances were optional and intermittent. Instead, West and Zimmerman argued that as long as the classifications of sex, sex category, and gender continue to be conflated, the process of “doing gender” is neither optional nor intermittent. This idea of gender as a process seems to echo De Beauvoir’s ([1949] 2011:3) remark that differentiates the categorization of “female” and “woman”: “So not every female human being is

necessarily a woman; she must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity.” Like De Beauvoir, West and Zimmerman sought to sever the conventional yet arbitrary tie between sex category and gender. Their rejection of biological determinism drew upon Rubin’s ([1975] 2004) work that similarly critiqued the essentialism at the root of the gender binary, and that situated women’s subordination within historical, psychological, anthropological, and sociological contexts.

Rubin ([1975] 2004) contended that women’s oppression and subordination are not essential characteristics of human existence, but rather are products of specific types of social and organizational relationships. As similarly reflected in West and Zimmerman’s (1987) conceptualization of gender, Rubin argued that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed as part of the “sex/gender system.” This system is “the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (Rubin [1975] 2004:771). By this, she means that biological females become oppressed women through social processes; their subordination is not predestined by, and cannot be attributed to, biology or genetics. For example, as both Rubin and West and Zimmerman noted, women have historically shouldered the bulk of domestic duties such cooking and cleaning, but this is not because they are born with innate characteristics that make them better at these tasks than men. Rubin addressed the psychoanalytic and anthropological roots of our traditional understandings of gender, and she applauded Freud and Lévi-Strauss for considering the domesticity of women in their discussions of gender arrangements; however, she argued that we must uncover and analyze the very processes by which women *become* domesticated. These processes, which are largely absent in

psychoanalytical and anthropological examinations of gender, are the keys to understanding women's oppression—not nature (Rubin [1975] 2004).

Butler ([1990] 2006) reaffirmed many of these ideas, but she also extended Rubin's discussion of oppression. Specifically, she warned against the reification of "women" as an objective and naturally distinguishable identity. This notion aligns with West and Zimmerman's discussion; however, Butler further highlighted the implications of such reification. She noted that much of feminist theory has relied on an assumption that there exists a universal experience of domination by all those who can be classified under the category of "woman." Though Butler recognized that the reliance on such a universal classification can be useful for gaining political traction, she contended that the assumption of universality is problematic because it ignores history and allows other mechanisms of power to go unacknowledged. West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender" framework similarly recognized the lack of a monolithic representation of either "men" or "women."

The crux, yet often overlooked element of West and Zimmerman's "doing gender" framework, is rooted in the notion of accountability. They argue that particular behaviors, attitudes, and gender displays are considered to be appropriate for males and females in particular circumstances. Men and women are cognizant of this, as they have come to internalize these expectations, and thus they behave with the knowledge that such behaviors and displays will be judged as either congruent or incongruent with what is expected of their sex category. For example, in certain circumstances, a man may be expected to hold a door open for a woman. Regardless of whether he behaves in a way that aligns with this expectation (opening the door for the woman) or not, he and

everyone around him has internalized that expectation and can thus judge his actions as being either congruent or incongruent with the socially agreed-upon expectations of him as a man. Butler's ([1990] 2006) own treatise took the accountability component of gender even further. Regarding the expectation that categorizations of sex, gender, and sexuality align, Butler explained:

The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist"—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender. "Follow" in this context is a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality. Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of "gender identities" fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain (24).

This excerpt ties in with the notion of accountability within West and Zimmerman's framework, and both reveal how expectations of gender and sex category coherence operate at both the interactional and institutional levels. Coinciding with Butler's discussion, West and Zimmerman (1987:146) noted, "If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals—not the institutional arrangements—may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions)." Thus, as Butler pointed out, individuals who do not abide by traditional gender expectations are perceived to be "developmental failures."

Critiques of West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender" theoretical standpoint included Kitzinger's (2009) contention that missing from the framework was the methodological component necessary for empirically studying gender as ongoing social

processes. Others, such as Connell (2009) and Vidal-Ortiz (2009) criticized the absence of a sufficient discussion of transsexual identities. However, one of the most prominent critiques of West and Zimmerman's work was that it failed to account for the ways in which individuals *do* strategically resist traditional gender scripts and in turn disrupt assumptions of congruence between gender and sex category (Deutsch 2007; Messerschmidt 2009; Risman 2009; Vidal-Ortiz 2009). Though West and Zimmerman sought to change how we think about gender, they seemed skeptical of the potential for timely disruptions in the traditional gender order. Conversely, Deutsch (2007) offered a more flexible consideration of the doing gender framework that focused more explicitly on instances of resistance and disruption to the traditional gender arrangements.

Deutsch argued that the traditional gender order has not yet been dismantled, but to be entirely dismissive of incremental changes that have narrowed gender divisions would serve to undermine the transformative potential everyday interactions have on reducing gender inequality. Thus, Deutsch argued "doing gender" should be used to describe interactions in which men and women adhere to normative expectations of gender that reproduce inequality, and "undoing gender" should be used in relation to interactions that mitigate them. Risman (2009) sided with Deutsch, as she argued that the "doing gender" concept has come to be misused as a stand-in for describing any behaviors in which men and women participate. By using the concept in this way, many researchers have stripped the concept of its critical feminist origins (Risman 2009). As Risman (84) further argued, "Why categorize innovative behavior as new kinds of gender, new femininities and masculinities, rather than notice that the old gender norms are losing their currency?" As many of the critiques of the original doing gender

framework have pointed out, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which the traditional gender order is both maintained and disrupted through interaction (Deutsch 2007; Messerschmidt 2009; Risman 2009; Vidal-Ortiz 2009). Much of the literature I discussed in Chapter I seems to provide evidence for humor as both a mechanism for perpetuating inequality and as a mechanism for incrementally reducing it. Thus, I situate my own analysis of the experiences of men and women stand-up comedians within the “doing gender” and “undoing gender” frameworks.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

To conduct this research, I utilized qualitative research methods to explore the social processes involved in the ways men and women stand-up comedians make meaning of their own experiences. Such methods provide insight into the social worlds of research participants, and they are useful for gaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and circumstances integral to the construction of those social worlds (Snape and Spencer 2003). I could not have adequately accessed the detailed experiences of these comics using quantitative methods such as surveys, because such methods would have obscured the context from which responses emerged. With qualitative methods, I was able to situate the identities of comics in terms of the processes required to create them, rather than as static fixtures that lacked contextual footings (Snape and Spencer 2003).

Specifically, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with men and women comedians to gain insight into how each comedian made meaning of his or her experiences (Esterberg 2002; Ritchie 2003). This method allowed me to adjust my questions when necessary, and to ask follow-up questions when needed. This flexibility was critical, as it allowed me tailor each interview to fit the unique experiences of each individual comic (Snape and Spencer 2003). In the event a particular question (and its

follow-up counterparts) failed to resonate with a participant, I moved on to the next question rather than belabor a topic that had little or no relevance to a respondent. Another advantage of using in-depth interviews was that I was able to ask unscripted follow-up questions when necessary. These follow-up questions elicited a breadth of information that likely would never have been revealed in responses collected by alternative methods. The follow-up questions often led the participants to recall and discuss layers of experiences that had not surfaced when I asked the standard questions gleaned directly from my interview guide. In turn, I was able to gain access to both a response and the context from which it emerged (Ritchie 2003). I was also able to clarify any questions or restate them if they were misunderstood. This would have been far less feasible had I utilized quantitative or survey methods.

Sampling and Recruitment

My sample consisted of 20 adults who identified as either amateur or professional stand-up comedians. By using qualitative methods, my aim was not to select a sample that could be statistically generalizable. Rather, I purposively selected individuals who aligned with the criteria of my study (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam 2003). Only stand-up comics were included in my sampling frame; however, many of the comics I interviewed also participated in various other forms of comedic performance such as acting or improvisation (improv). I limited my sample to stand-up comics, because generally they are solely responsible for writing and performing their own jokes. Many of the comics I interviewed pointed to clear distinctions between the experiences associated with stand-up comedy and other forms of performance such as acting or improv. I was informed that the main differences emerged from the individual nature of stand-up comedy, as opposed

to the collaborative nature of acting or improv. My goal was to understand how *individuals* use comedy to construct and make meaning of their identities, so it was imperative that I confine my sampling frame to individual stand-up comedians.

I recruited respondents using snowball sampling and e-mail correspondence. Snowball sampling is useful when attempting to access individuals who possess certain shared characteristics (Esterberg 2002; Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam 2003). As insiders, they were well-equipped with the knowledge and social connections necessary to locate others who possessed similar characteristics (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). My sample included adult comics residing in the South Central United States. Of the 20 comics I interviewed, 9 were women, and 11 were men. They ranged in age from early 20s to mid-60s, with an average age of 29 years. Fifteen of the comics were white, three were black, and two were Hispanic. Though all respondents resided in the South Central U.S. at the time they were interviewed, many were born (or had lived) in various places across the country. Three of the respondents were born outside the U.S. My only criteria for participation was that respondents were over the age of 18, identified as either amateur or professional stand-up comics, and were active in the comedy scene at the time of the interview.

Initially, I gained access to my sample by an informant who told me about various comedy venues and events, and who introduced me to some of the comics. I attended various stand-up comedy shows, and I identified myself as a researcher to each stand-up comedian I met. My presence at comedy shows may have been perceived as somewhat of a novelty to several of the comics, as a few of them made reference to, and joked about my presence during their routines. Most of the comics I spoke with were excited to be the subjects of academic research, while others seemed slightly tepid about my presence and

research objective. On a few occasions, I felt like an interloper; though, this was a rarity. After meeting some of the comics and seeing them perform, I contacted them by email, described my research, and asked if they would agree to participate. In other instances, I utilized snowball sampling, and relied on the referrals given to me by the comics I interviewed. I also perused advertisements for scheduled comedy shows, and I recruited comics from the line-ups listed on the fliers. This “opportunistic” approach to sampling afforded me the flexibility to make contact with and interview participants when unforeseen opportunities arose (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam 2003). While a random sample of comics would have been useful, a complete listing of stand-up comics (along with contact information) does not currently exist. Also, the purpose of qualitative research is not to elicit a sample that can be statistically representative of the general population, but rather is to reflect the processes and experiences of one particular group (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam 2003). In addition, the use of referrals seemed to help me establish credibility among the comics I recruited, and this credibility likely contributed to my response rate. Of the 24 participants I contacted to participate, 20 of them were interviewed. I did not receive responses from the other 4 I attempted to recruit.

Interview Guide

All interviews followed an interview guide (see Appendix) that consisted of open-ended questions. I used the findings of previous research as well as the “doing” and “undoing gender” theoretical frameworks to inform the questions I included in the interview guide. The first block of questions in the interview guide focused on background and demographic information. These questions were relatively straightforward, non-threatening, and were designed to stimulate comfortable

conversation and ease the participants in to the interview process (Arthur and Nazroo 2003). Included in this section of the interview guide were questions such as, “How long have you been performing as a stand-up comedian?” and “What is your favorite part about performing stand-up? Why?”

The next cluster of questions included in the interview guide focused on participants’ styles of humor and performance. This section included questions that asked comics to describe their particular styles of comedy, to identify their comedic influences, and to describe how their on-stage and off-stage personas differed. The purpose of this section of questions was to move the comics beyond describing general background information and toward reflecting upon their complex identities and experiences as comics. This gradual migration from general to more specific questions was important, as it helped me to establish rapport and create a non-threatening conversational atmosphere that encouraged respondents to share personal, and at times, sensitive details with me (Arthur and Nazroo 2003).

The next block of questions in the interview guide related to the use of controversial topics in jokes. For example, I asked participants what they thought about the use of jokes that addressed sexuality, race, religion, and violence. I asked if they included these types of jokes in their routines, and I also asked if they considered any topics to be “off-limits,” or essentially too taboo or contentious to joke about. I designed the final section of my interview guide to explicitly target the intersection of gender and humor. I asked why they thought there are more men stand-up comics than women, how men and women differed in the way they perform comedy, and how they as comics are perceived differently by either men or women audience members. Regarding the end of

an interview, Arthur and Nazroo (2003:113) noted, “it is important to wind the interview or group discussion down, partly to end on a positive note but also to ensure that participants have time to move away from any feelings, such as distress, frustration or anger that the discussion may have generated.” I designed my interview guide to do just this, as I used my concluding questions to bring the conversation full-circle and signal closure. For example, I asked, “What advice would you give to other comedians just getting their start in stand-up?” This question gave participants the opportunity to move away from the more personal and pointed questions and to contribute their advice and expertise in a generalized and relaxed way. The interview guide was designed to promote uniformity in the questions that were asked of each respondent, but as alluded to previously, it was used as an outline rather than as a script.

I conducted interviews between November 2012 and May 2013. With the exception of one interview that was conducted in a respondent’s home, and one at a respondent’s office, each interview was conducted in a public place such as a coffee shop, café, or restaurant to provide a safe, yet semi-private place in which participants could comfortably share their experiences. Interviews ranged from 23 to 105 minutes, with the average interview lasting 62 minutes. I sought and received approval from the Texas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct research using human subjects. In addition, I obtained written and informed consent before I began each interview. I recorded each interview using a digital recording device, and I transcribed each of them verbatim using word processing software. To maintain respondent confidentiality, I omitted identifiable details from all transcripts, and I assigned pseudonyms to each respondent. Some of the comics encouraged me to use their real

names; however, I explained to them that I would use pseudonyms in an effort to preserve both their confidentiality, and the confidentiality of comics they might mention or make reference to during the course of their interviews. Though I did not offer material incentives in exchange for the interviews, on occasion, I provided nominal gestures of gratitude in the form of coffee and small food items.

Analysis

I analyzed and coded the interview transcripts line-by-line using an open-coding technique (Esterberg 2002). In the first round of analysis, I sought to identify all possible patterns and themes. Often unexpected, these themes began to emerge during the interviews; however, I took a reflexive approach and refined them at various stages of analysis to help ensure they represented the comics' experiences rather than my own categorical assumptions (Altheide 1987). I noted these patterns in the margins of the transcripts next to the lines in which they occurred. In this initial stage of analysis, I was careful to ensure that the themes and categories I identified "remain[ed] close to the data" (Ritchie, Spencer, and O'Connor 2003:243) so as not to divorce them from the contexts from which they were derived (Silverman 2011). In other words, I developed categories and labels based on the comics' own words, which helped prevent me from making premature theoretical assumptions that would obscure how the comics made meaning of their own experiences.

Next, I utilized focused coding and re-examined each transcript line-by-line and noted instances that aligned with my previously identified themes (Esterberg 2002). During this stage of analysis, I collapsed the number of categories I had originally identified by sub-categorizing many of them within more broadly-defined, abstract, and

theoretical categories that aligned with my research questions and objectives (Ritchie, Spencer, and O'Connor 2003). This method aligns with the ethnographic content analysis (ECA) technique for document analysis that encourages the researcher to take a reflexive role, focus on the “communication of meaning,” and move back and forth between theory, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. With ECA, “[t]he aim is to be systematic and analytic, but not rigid” (Altheide 1987:68).

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

Humor is a powerful tool used in social interaction, and those who use it often deploy it in gendered ways (Crawford 2003). Though previous research has provided a basic framework for explorations at the intersection of gender and humor, it has not examined how stand-up comics make meaning of their own experiences. The men and women stand-up comics I interviewed shared many of the same comedic influences, expressed a near universal desire for audience approval, and told me the secret to success on the stand-up comedy circuit is to write and perform as much as possible. Even so, most of the ways in which they differed tended to fall along gender lines.

I identified four main themes. First, men expressed a desire to deliver jokes that made people think differently about particular topics or ideas; however, they often hesitantly resorted to the use of “dirty” jokes that could elicit quick and easy laughs. Second, women experienced unique challenges associated with the use of “dirty” jokes. Though far fewer women reported that they regularly used sexual themes in their comedy, this was not necessary due to their lack of interest in doing so. Third, stand-up comedy provides women with the opportunity to confidently voice their opinions in ways they might not feel comfortable doing in their everyday lives. Finally, stand-up comedy provides men with a safe space in which they can negotiate their insecurities and express

their emotions with little risk of violating gender expectations. These findings illustrate the ways humor can be used to both perpetuate and challenge traditional gender arrangements.

Accountability and Constraint

The comfort of a “dirty” joke. For most men comedians I interviewed, there seemed to be a disconnect between the types of jokes they aspired to write and perform, and the jokes they tended to deploy as a regular part of their stand-up routines. Most comics I talked with expressed a desire to write and deliver jokes that encouraged people to look at various aspects of life differently. When I asked them to describe their styles of stand-up, many explained that their styles were works in progress. Even so, when I asked them who their comedic influences were, most detailed their admiration for comics who provide substantial social commentary and who point out the absurdities in everyday life. They described their humor as strongly narrative, observational, or focused on storytelling, and emphasized the importance of writing clear and concise jokes that could engage the audience and make them think. When I asked them if comedy provided a function beyond just entertainment, all of them agreed that it did, especially for the professional mainstream comics; however, most were doubtful about their own potential to provide substantial social critiques at this point in their stand-up careers.

Men respondents explained that they sought to write “good” jokes rather than overly rely on “dirty” jokes about penises, masturbation, pornography, and sexual acts, because such jokes are “easy,” “lazy,” and “cliché.” For example, when asked what advice he would give to other comics, Eddie, who had been performing stand-up for approximately nine years, advised:

Well, I think one of the tendencies when you first start out you are just so desperate for a laugh and you just do anything for it. So a lot of the stuff you're doing is rape jokes and poop jokes and shit jokes and sex jokes. And uh, so my advice would be like just don't... just as hard as it is, just try and let go of that need to write what you think the audience is going to laugh at and just write.

Though Eddie did not mention it explicitly in our conversation, most comics I interviewed (both men and women) noted that the audience at a stand-up comedy show is usually composed primarily of men. Specifically, for smaller shows such as open mics,² the audience is almost entirely made up of other comics slated to perform that night. As there are disproportionately more men comics performing in the amateur circuits, this results in far more men than women in the audience for such shows. As a consequence, most men comics explained that though they did not specifically set out to tailor their jokes to men, they attempted to use jokes they anticipated would resonate with the majority of their audience members. It just so happened that in most cases, men comprised this majority.

In various ways, most men I interviewed depicted “dirty” jokes as lacking substance, merit, and artful creativity, as the quotation from Eddie alludes. But, they also told me that those were the types of topics that could almost always get a quick laugh from the audience if the comics were backed into a corner or needed an easy way out of a failed joke. For example, though Eddie advised new comics to stay away from the “desperate” jokes, when I asked him about the potential for humor to be used for purposes other than simply entertainment, he explained:

² Open mics (short for microphone) are informal, often free comedy events held at bars or restaurants, where each comic who signs up (depending on how many slots of time are available) is given approximately three to five minutes to perform their sets. Most of the comics attend multiple open mics per week, and they consider them crucial for honing their comedic skills.

Uh, I think when I first started I kind of had that idea, like ah I'm gonna be one of those comics that, you know, makes people think and like has social impact. Um, I don't know. I think about that a lot and I hear people talking about it, but at this point it's so damn hard to make people laugh that I'm like, I don't know. If it's-- I don't really do fart jokes or poop jokes anymore, but if you're dying laughing at my poop joke and the thing about the Reagan administration and how it fucked society is not working... Dude, poop. I'll do poop. Fuck Reagan, we're not-- we'll do that. That's what it's all about, uh, so yeah. I don't think-- but I think it does, it does affect uh I mean it has to. The best comedy does I think. Makes social change.

It is clear from Eddie's response that he desires to use humor as a tool for social influence and write and tell jokes with substance, but he is constrained by what he thinks the audience expects from him. He explicitly states that he doesn't "really do fart jokes or poop jokes anymore," but he then went on to admit that he will if his other material fails. Marcus, a comic who had been performing for approximately a year and a half, had similar things to say regarding his humor: "I end up kinda resorting to base humor sometimes, that I don't try to do too much, but it's just so easy [laugh]." When I asked him what he considered to be "base," he told me about two different jokes of his, one of which was about a pedophile, and the other was an explicit joke in which a woman was a passive subject of a sexual act.

Similarly, when I asked Ben, a comic who had been doing stand-up for just over a year and a half, to tell me how joke topics might differ between men and women comics, he explained:

Well, in terms of topics you can't-- at least on the open mic circuit, penises are hilarious. I think it's a very easy out. Like, you can always relate it to something sexual and get a laugh at the end, and I've done it plenty of times before on stuff that I can't figure out a way outta this, oh just make some cheap penis joke and people will like it.

It was apparent that, for the most part, the men I interviewed did not favor using jokes about penises, pedophilia, sexual acts, or excrement. Quite on the contrary, they expressed genuine interest in writing and delivering substantive jokes that had the potential to make their audience members think differently about particular topics or ideas. However, they admittedly had few qualms about adjusting their routines according to what they thought the audience would respond to if their primary comedic arsenals had failed them in some way. This seems to provide evidence for “doing gender,” as these comics actively participate in constructing their identities as men by molding their behaviors and jokes according to what is expected of and considered appropriate for their sex category (West and Zimmerman 1987). This appears to reflect literature about the capacity for humor to be used to police gender (Bemiller and Schneider 2010; Lyman 1987; Quinn 2000). Lyman (1987) and Quinn (2000) argued that existing power relations dictate what is considered funny, and this was evident in my discussions with both men and women comics. Like the men in the workplace who used sexist jokes as a way to strengthen their bonds with one another and separate themselves from women coworkers, it seems that men comics utilize dirty jokes as a tool for bonding with other men comics as well as with the large ratio of men in the audience.

Language, as Bemiller and Schneider (2010) found, can be a powerful tool used to construct and articulate one’s gender, especially when it is used to generate sexist jokes. I by no means intend to argue that “dirty” jokes, such as those described by the men I interviewed, are necessarily always sexist; however, it seems they can serve similar functions in terms of helping men “do gender” and construct their gendered identities as comics. For example, in their content analysis of jokes derived from internet searches,

joke books, television, and other sources, Case and Lippard (2009) found that the majority of the jokes (62 percent) relied heavily on stereotypes about men, and depicted them as useless, stupid, hypersexual, and disgusting. The hesitant reliance on “dirty” jokes by most men I interviewed bolsters these gender stereotypes and contributes to the construction of a distinctly gendered identity assumed to be compatible with the comics’ sex category. As West and Zimmerman (1987) noted, certain behaviors, attitudes, and gender displays are considered appropriate for males in particular circumstances, and in turn, they internalize those expectations and behave with the understanding that their actions will be perceived and sanctioned according to how well they conform to the socially agreed-upon expectations of them as men. By performing “dirty” jokes in accordance with what they think is expected of them as men, these comics “do gender.” They perpetuate the idea that these are natural and legitimate characteristics and behaviors for males, and they also reinforce the very gender order that constrains their comedy in the first place.

Of the women I interviewed, most told me they avoided “dirty” jokes like the ones described by the men. However, unlike most of the men I interviewed, the women did not seem compelled to resort to the use of “dirty” jokes if their other material did not generate the desired audience responses. For example, Maya, a comic who had been performing stand-up for nearly five years, told me she likes to make jokes about “grown people topics” and refuses to do jokes about sex. But, regarding what she thought the audience wanted to hear, she told me, “They love poop jokes, and I’m like, for real? I do *not* do poop jokes.” It is much easier for women to fend off an audience’s apparent desire

for “dirty” jokes, because doing so is not likely to be judged as incongruent with the socially agreed-upon expectations of them as women.

Women and sex jokes. Men comics seemed to be constrained by the audience’s expectations of them as men, which resulted in many hesitantly relying on “dirty” jokes they considered to lack substance and creative merit. Most men I interviewed told me that their “dirty” jokes tended to lean toward sexually explicit topics related to sexual acts, pornography, pedophilia, and masturbation. While men respondents seemed to experience pressure to deploy these “easy” jokes in their routines, especially when they needed a quick or safe laugh, a majority of the comics I interviewed told me that women encounter considerable challenges when they attempt to use sexual themes in their sets.

Most of the women who said they regularly used sexual themes in their routines encountered opposition in various forms, whether it was from club owners, bookers, audience members, or other comics. Conversely, a few of the women comics who did not use sexual themes in their routines did so purposefully; however, most admitted that they wished they had the freedom to perform material that utilized sexual content. Even the men comics I interviewed pointed to clear distinctions between how men and women are perceived when it comes to performing sex jokes. For example, when I asked Teddy, a comic who had been performing stand-up for approximately two years, if it seemed “weird” when females did “raunchy” or “dirty” jokes, he replied, “Yeah, off the bat, they’re supposed to censor themselves a little bit more. Guys don’t have to. They’re just raw.” Most of the other men respondents reflected similar sentiments, whether their own, or in terms of audience perceptions. They told me that audiences tend to be taken by surprise, and made to feel somewhat uncomfortable by women comics who joke

explicitly about sex acts, masturbation, or other related topics. Alex, who had been doing stand-up for approximately seven years, and who described her own style of comedy as “real and raw,” detailed the challenges she encounters when she tries to use sexually explicit humor:

I talk about things real bluntly, especially ‘cause I can come out looking like a pretty girl, and they expect me—a lot of people expect me to come out and go “Dating is hard,” like, “Fuck you, you’re pretty, no, how is life hard for you?” And I talk a lot about sleeping with a lot of people, ‘cause I mean, I can [laugh]. So I don’t play that card. Dating *is* hard, but I don’t talk about that. The standard jokes that you hear in comedy clubs: fat jokes, racist jokes, gay jokes, Mexican jokes, dating... I don’t wanna be like that... One of the comments that I got in [city] was that I’m beating people over the head with my sexuality. It was too much for them, and um, so I needed to simmer it down. And I needed to start off nice and ease them in.

The first part of this excerpt illustrates Alex’s own understanding of how she is judged by the audience when she takes the stage. Most of the comics I spoke with reflected a similar awareness of how women are perceived on stage. They told me that women comics are judged more harshly on their appearance than men. As Vince told me, women are placed “under a microscope,” and must contend more with their physical appearance, such as their body type, their hair, or their clothing. In addition, both men and women noted that the very presence of a woman on stage tends to cause audience members to pay more close attention, simply because they are used to seeing man after man take the stage. Sylvie explained, “Maybe there are some [audience members] that probably aren’t interested in seeing women on [stage] or have preconceived notions more than they would for a man.” Similarly, Alex understands that there are particular behaviors she is expected to deploy, simply because those behaviors are socially acceptable for and congruent with her as a “pretty girl.” This was the case with most of the women comics I interviewed. They reported an acute awareness that audience members expected them to

present themselves in ways that aligned with gender stereotypes. The men comics echoed this observation, as is evident from Teddy's comment that women comics are expected to "censor themselves a little bit more."

Alex was well-aware that she used sexual humor more than most other women comics, as she made reference to that multiple times during our conversation. By utilizing sexual humor, and "beating people over the head with [her] sexuality," Alex was acting in opposition to what was considered appropriate for her as a woman. The hypersexual identity she had constructed for herself on stage was essentially a "developmental failure," because this particular gender presentation was incompatible with what was expected of her as a female (Butler [1990] 2006). Alex failed to "do gender appropriately" (West and Zimmerman 1987:146) and thus her gender was policed and essentially rebuked by an individual who advised her to "simmer it down." In other words, she was instructed to adjust her behavior in a way that would make it socially palatable for her sex category.

The gendered challenges, and the pressure to "do gender" appropriately, that women comics face when they attempt to incorporate sexual jokes into their routines may help explain why women are less likely than men to use sexual and aggressive themes in their humor (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006). Women have a more difficult time successfully executing sexual jokes, because such jokes are more likely to make audience members uncomfortable when women dispense them. Women are not expected to present themselves in ways that would cast them as overtly sexual, outspoken, or aggressive, and they are more likely than men to be perceived negatively when they use sexual humor (Decker and Rotondo 2011). Robinson and Smith-Lovin (2001), for example, find that

women managers receive more positive responses from their subordinates when they use non-offensive or non-sexual humor in the workplace. When women comics “do gender” and refrain from telling sexually explicit jokes, the comfort level of their audiences remain in equilibrium; however, the moment they transgress traditional gender expectations, the fates of their jokes are much more nebulous. Women are held accountable for adhering to behaviors deemed appropriate for them as women, and thus, they encounter anxiety and opposition from others when they rattle the traditional gender order.

Alex understands that women who openly and enthusiastically talk or joke about sex often make others uncomfortable, but she provides evidence of “undoing gender” when she strategically does it anyway. Though she admits she has found ways to “ease them in,” she has not allowed gender expectations to govern the topics she uses in her stand-up routines. One of the major criticisms of West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “doing gender” framework was that it did not properly account for the various ways individuals disrupt assumptions of congruence between gender and sex category by strategically resisting traditional gender scripts (Deutsch 2007; Messerschmidt 2009; Risman 2009; Vidal-Ortiz 2009). Women comics who include sexual jokes in their sets, despite what is traditionally expected of them, illustrate an incremental, yet reasonably significant disruption to traditional gender arrangements. These “innovative behaviors” seem to provide evidence for the “undoing gender,” as the continued exercise of such actions may, over time, render former gender expectations obsolete (Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009:84).

In addition to the challenges faced by comics who regularly used sexual humor in their routines, I was also introduced to an entirely different set of challenges faced by women comics who do not regularly joke about sex, but who have strong ambitions to do so. Most of the women respondents understood they could not wield sexually explicit jokes as easily, or in the same way, that their men comic counterparts could. They knew that, as women, their relationship with sex-themed humor was much more complex. For example, I asked Abby, a comic who had been doing stand-up for four years, if she would do anything differently as a comic if she were a man. Her immediate response was that she would not do anything differently; however, midway through her comment, she suddenly reconsidered:

Probably not. Um, I pretty much say the fuck I feel like. Anything I feel comfortable saying on stage I would say as a man, I don't think that there's anything I'm holding back on. Well, [reconsiders] yeah, maybe I'd talk about sex more. I stay away from talking about sex, because people already show up and creep creep, you know, and people already show up and say weird inappropriate things to me and if I'm talking about sex I'm not asking for it, but that's how someone who's weird and creepy and who's going to show up at a coffee shop two weeks in a row is going to think, so I mean, yeah, I'd probably talk about sex more if I was a man 'cause a girl is not going to come up and be like "Hey, so uh, are you serious about that?"

Though sex jokes were not a regular part of her repertoire, Abby's comment illustrates that that is not due to a lack of interest in using sexual content. Rather, she actively participates in "doing gender," as she refrains from telling jokes about sex for fear that men may mistake them for invitations to engage in the very sexual acts she jokes about. From her experience, sexual jokes are received differently depending on the gender of the comic who dispenses them. Abby avoids the use of sex jokes in order to help ensure her own safety. Earlier in our conversation, she explained that a suspicious man had twice showed up to a venue where she regularly performed and asked other comics when she

would be there. As a woman who would like to use sex jokes, she experienced constraints that men comics did not. Thus, she made the choice to avoid the use of sex jokes altogether.

Olivia, a comic who had been performing stand-up for just less than a year, provides further evidence for “doing gender,” as she also reported an avoidance of sex jokes. She explained, “All women have to stay away from most sex jokes. You can’t be crude.” When I asked if that would be different if she were a man, she quickly replied, “Oh, I’d do *all* the sex jokes.” It seems the women comics had internalized the styles of humor that were considered acceptable for them as women, and jokes about sex by no means fell within the confines of those expectations. Mack, a comic who had been performing stand-up for two and a half years noted, “Women can’t pull off some of the jokes that men do, because the stigma that you *are* a woman already has to be addressed. You have to say what *kind* of woman you are. And, it’s either a whore or a weird cat lady.” This statement indicates humor is considered more acceptable when used by men than when used by women (Decker and Rotondo 2001; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Mack’s comment reflects the deeply embedded notion that sexuality is an acceptable topic of discussion for men, but not for women. Moreover, a woman who violates this expectation is considered a deviant worthy of sanctions. As Rubin ([1975] 2004) pointed out, women’s oppression is not an essential characteristic of human existence, but is instead a product of particular types of social and organizational relationships. In terms of comedy, women experience constraint when it comes to deploying sexual humor not because they have less of a natural drive to do so, but because they are accountable to a “sex/gender system” in which particular attitudes and

behaviors are judged either acceptable or unacceptable for them as women (Rubin [1975] 2004:771; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Finding Their Voices

Women comics speaking up. Individuals who occupy marginal positions in society often use humor to draw attention to their marginalization (Downe 1999; Gilbert 1997; Sanders 2004). My findings support such research, as most women comics I interviewed conveyed to me that performing stand-up comedy provided them with a sense of power they did not experience in their everyday lives. In various ways, whether in their pasts, or in their current day-to-day interactions, these women practiced constraint when it came to voicing their opinions or behaving in ways that may position them as the center of attention. For most women, performing stand-up comedy was a way to present themselves in ways that challenged the gender stereotypes that saturate their social worlds, even if they themselves do not necessarily buy into them. For example, when I asked Nance, a comic who had been performing stand-up for 12 years, why there are more men than women performing stand-up comedy, she explained, “Women are taught you shouldn’t be the one standing up and being strong and drawing attention to yourself, and that’s what comedy is all about... you go out there very night and just open yourself up. And it all comes out. And it’s all you.” Thus, on stage, most women comics described a freedom to express themselves in ways they were less comfortable pursuing in their off-stage lives. When I asked Olivia to describe her favorite aspects of performing stand-up, she confided that she has a difficult time offering her opinions in social situations:

I can really work out any major problems that are going on inside my head on stage... You can’t talk about some things at dinner, but you can talk about things on stage... and do things that are super heavy and make them funny. I think I give more to the audience when I’m performing than when—I will actively avoid

expressing how I feel about most issues in most situations, because I've kind of been trained a little bit.

Throughout my conversation with Olivia, it was clear she had very strong opinions, so I was surprised when she confessed her avoidance of expressing them outside her stand-up performances. Outside of performing comedy, expressing her opinions was not a socially acceptable activity for her to partake in as a woman. She anticipated that her opinions would not be well-received in various social situations, so to her, it was an exercise in futility to even attempt to make her sentiments known. Stand-up comedy seemed to provide her with a unique space to say some of the things she did not feel comfortable saying elsewhere.

Unlike Olivia, Alex had no problem making her opinions known. She told me she regularly makes people feel uncomfortable, simply because both in her personal and professional lives, she is not afraid to say the things others tend to be more timid to say. But, as I asked her questions about her childhood, it became clear that the confident, outspoken, and ostensibly fearless woman who sat across from me had not always expressed herself in such unfettered ways. I asked her if she had thought of herself as funny when she was a child; she explained there was not a lot of laughter in her childhood, and her recollection of a past relationship illustrated how she took more of a passive role when she was younger:

I dated a pastor's son as a kid. He was the funny one. So, we'd travel around and I'd sit dutifully in the second row while he preached and so it was never... my role was to never take attention away from him. So if I ever tried to crack a joke, it just wasn't anything... and so definitely not 'til college and probably not until the latter part of college, is when I really started to kind of discover who I was and I think just in the last few years I understand my own voice more than I ever did... It's therapeutic, it's a release. So it's kind of a way to say what's on your mind and, for better or worse, because you can say what's on your mind and... the validation of getting laughter or applause...

From Alex's description, it seems that she held a subordinate role in her childhood relationship. She understood that she was expected to adhere to a particular set of rules deemed acceptable for her as the young girlfriend of a pastor's son, but she also understood that the pastor's son had access to an entirely different set of rules. The image of Alex sitting "dutifully" as her boyfriend preached provides an excellent example of the expectations of gender, and the resulting power imbalance, deeply entrenched within traditional social arrangements. As a young woman, it was not socially acceptable for her to draw attention to herself in a way that would take away from her boyfriend's position as the dominant figure in the relationship. It was not that Alex lacked a sense of humor or a desire to make jokes, but rather, her attempts at making jokes were not well-received or even allowed.

For most of the women I spoke with, not only did stand-up comedy provide them with a safe space within which they could make their ideas known to an audience full of people, but it also gave them a greater sense of confidence that spilled over into their everyday lives. By standing up on stage, becoming the center of attention, and broadcasting themselves uninterruptedly to a room full of people, women comics actively challenge the very "sex/gender system" that is consistently used to explain why women occupy a subordinate position within the gender hierarchy (Rubin [1975] 2004). There is nothing in their genetics or their biology that mandates silence. Women comics, to varying degrees, "undo gender" by destabilizing the notion that women are inherently consigned to a state of passivity, simply because they are women.

Voicing vulnerabilities. The comics I interviewed were aware that the general public has the naïve assumption that all stand-up comics exude overtly gregarious

personalities, an over-abundance of self-confidence, and a general sense of impenetrable fearlessness in their day-to-day lives. With few exceptions, the men I interviewed debunked this as merely a myth that by no means accurately reflects reality. This was also the case with a few of the women comics, but it was far more prevalent with the men. Most men I spoke with explained that contrary to popular belief, many men comics are introverted, socially awkward, insecure, quiet, and rather inconspicuous off-stage. In interviews, many used these very adjectives to describe how their own off-stage personas differed from the personas they performed for audiences night after night. Most men (and a few of the women) spoke of stand-up comedy as a form of therapy. It provided them with creative, social, personal, and in some cases, intellectual validation. Throughout the interviews, some of them conveyed general feelings of unhappiness, boredom, dissatisfaction, or frustration with their day-to-day lives, and they explained that performing stand-up comedy provided them with a creative outlet and a way to focus and productively express themselves. Andrew confessed, “Basically, the things I have trouble admitting to myself that I do are the things that eventually will come out. Like my little stupid insecurities. As I have conflicts with insecurities I talk about them on stage.” This was a common theme among the men comics. Most told me that performing stand-up gives them the opportunity to work out feelings of anger, sadness, depression, or anxiety that they experience in their personal and professional lives.

Teddy explained that he began performing as a way to get his feelings out and deal with health problems and the loss of a family member. Initially, he said he tried to express himself through poetry, but he quickly learned that that was not “manly enough,” so he decided to give stand-up comedy a try. It is possible that Teddy internalized the

assumption that a male who participates in poetry is one who is failing to act in accordance with the socially agreed-upon expectations of him as a man (West and Zimmerman 1987). Stand-up comedy provides men with a safe space in which they are afforded the opportunity to express their emotions and insecurities free from the judgment and constraints cast upon them as men expected to perpetually exude self-confidence and stoicism. For example, Frankie, a comic who had been performing for approximately a year and half, told me his childhood was “broken and depressing.” In addition, he described himself as an introverted guy somewhat socially isolated from others when he’s off-stage. During the interview, he explained that he has not been very successful in maintaining close personal relationships in his everyday life. He confided that stand-up comedy gives him a sense of focus and a way to deal with the strange expectations associated with his own existence:

Just the premise of being a person like a human in a body in the world. That’s ridiculous. Everyday, I wake up and I’m like, “I can’t believe I have to go be a person.” Like, I can’t believe that every single day, that’s really what... at least that’s the sentiment I try to express on stage... People accept the fact that they get up, get in a car, and go to work. They accept the givens. It’s ridiculous.

Multiple times in our conversation, he expressed frustration with the social expectations placed on people. He explained that he thought people often get married and start families because they either lack “real” goals, or they are too scared to pursue their own interests. As illustrated by the comment above, Frankie is critical of people who seem to surrender to the societal expectations and pressures to conform to a quest for the “American Dream.” It bothers him that they, in his opinion, go about their daily lives without sufficiently questioning why those expectations exist in the first place. In

addition, when I asked him what role stand-up comedy played in his everyday life, he continued:

It really gives my mind something focus on when the rest of my life is really shitty... in the sense that you have to go to work, right, and you have to do all these things that you don't want to do so that you can eat and survive, and there are all these other issues that people deal with, you know, just relationships that may or may not be working out or even exist and all that. At least that's something that I can-- People need hope in their life is what it is, and I guess that gives me some focus, something to chase after.

From his statement, it seems Frankie is unsatisfied with his personal and professional life.

He has little interest in the job that allows him to sustain himself financially, but that leaves him feeling bored and intellectually unfulfilled. As a self-described introvert with few close friends, it is quite possible that Frankie has limited opportunities to vent his frustrations and negotiate his emotions outside the confines of the comedic stage.

Similarly, men who express their emotions are often sanctioned for failing to reflect the attitudes and behaviors considered appropriate for them as men. Thus, even if Frankie does have a close friend or two, he still may not feel comfortable working through his emotions through purely conversational methods. Frankie is able to use stand-up comedy as a unique space in which he can deal with the emotions and frustrations of his everyday life in a creative, productive, and fulfilling way. The fact that he doing so in a dominant way—on a stage, as the center of attention, speaking his mind—means that the risk Frankie will be judged for behaving in opposition to gender expectations is considerably reduced.

Mack was another comic who seemed to use stand-up comedy as a tool for dealing with his emotions, frustrations, and insecurities. I asked him to explain why he started performing stand-up comedy, and he told me it was because he had “lost faith in

everything.” When I asked what he meant by that, he told me he felt like everyone in his life had lied to him. He was enrolled in college, but quickly grew frustrated with what he perceived to be senseless assignments that distracted him from his true interests and that attempted to steer him away from his intended creative focus. I asked Mack if, growing up, he had a sense that he was funny. He responded that when he was younger, he felt he had to make people laugh to make up for his own insecurities. He remarked, “I figured if people were laughing at something I was controlling, then it was better than them laughing at me for being fat and white.” Most men comics emphasized how performing stand-up gave them a sense of control. Their emphasis on this aspect of comedy seems to indicate they lack that sense of control in their day-to-day lives. This certainly seemed to be the case for Mack, as he confided that he still battles the insecurities he has faced since childhood. Before giving stand-up comedy a try, he was incredibly unhappy, depressed, and had a difficult time pulling himself out of bed each day. When I asked if humor played a role beyond just entertainment, he explained that for him, it is “the opposite of crying.” He continued:

My problem is I don't know how to be honest with myself... I'm too fucking insecure and honest, but not completely honest enough to build relationships... I'm insecure as shit... I don't even know who the fuck I am... The things I'm really insecure about, they're not that funny. I've tried to make them funny, but—like my body. I got a fucking skin rash and stretch marks. It's ridiculous. I'm probably gonna die alone, like way early... This shit [comedy] helps you get over it in a way.

In a very short amount of time, Mack rattled off a list of vulnerabilities that, had I not revealed his name, one might assume, based on gender stereotypes, they belonged to a woman. He is insecure about his body, and he fears he might remain single for the rest of his life. His identity is in flux, and his statements make it clear that he is by no means

comfortable with that. Research indicates that humor can provide a joke-teller with a “safety net” of sorts. Comics have the luxury of taking risks and conveying ideas they may not ordinarily feel comfortable conveying in other circumstances, and if they are at any point called to account for their words, they can easily shield themselves with the defense that they were merely joking (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Kane, Suls, and Tedeschi 1977). Stand-up comedy provides men such as Mack and Frankie a unique space in which they subtly “undo gender” by expressing emotions and navigating frustrations without drawing judgment or sanction for failing to align with the behaviors socially expected of them as men. In line with research on the use of humor by Vietnam prisoners of war (Henman 2001), my findings seem to indicate that men comics engage in humor partially as a way to maintain a sense of control and comfort in their otherwise tenuous and restless lives.

As West and Zimmerman (1987:138) noted, “Many situations are not clearly sex categorized to begin with, nor is what transpires within them obviously gender relevant. Yet any social encounter can be pressed into service in the interests of doing gender.” Stand-up comedy is a situation that, on its face, lacks distinct sex categorization. Yet, my examination of men and women stand-up comics indicates various ways in which comics use humor to “do gender.” The comics internalized the attitudes and behaviors expected of their respective sex categories, and most aligned their actions with such expectations to avoid censure (West and Zimmerman 1987). But, some comics seemed to engage in “undoing gender” by using comedy as a tool to transgress traditional gender expectations and destabilize normative power relations (Deutsch 2007). Though men expressed strong desires to deliver thought-provoking jokes, they often hesitantly resorted to the use of

“dirty” jokes when their initial material failed. Women seemed no less interested in telling sexual jokes than men; however, their efforts were met with considerable opposition. Most avoided such jokes altogether, while others strategically used them anyway. For women, it seems stand-up comedy provides them with the opportunity to voice their opinions in ways they might not do in their everyday lives. For men, stand-up seems to provide them with a safe space to negotiate insecurities and express emotions with little risk of violating gender expectations. These findings illustrate the ways humor can be used to both perpetuate and challenge traditional gender arrangements.

Gender inequality is deeply embedded within the traditional and normative practices of joke-telling, yet rarely has research addressed the experiences, identities, and perceptions of the individuals responsible for creating and performing stand-up comedy. I sought to understand if, how, and why stand-up comedians used humor to construct and perform gender identities in ways that either perpetuate or mitigate gender disparities. This examination of men and women stand-up comics has implications for studies at the intersection of gender, humor, and inequality, and it provides further utility of the “doing” and “undoing gender” frameworks in relation to how men and women stand-up comedians make meaning of their own experiences living and performing comedy.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Using West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender" and Deutsch's (2007) "undoing gender" frameworks, I sought to empirically examine if, how, and why stand-up comedians use humor to construct and perform gender identities in ways that perpetuate or mitigate gender disparities. Though there is nothing inherently gendered about stand-up comedy, my examination of men and women stand-up comics indicates various ways in which comics use humor to "do gender." The comics internalized the attitudes and behaviors expected of their respective sex categories, and most aligned their actions with such expectations to avoid censure (West and Zimmerman 1987). Men expressed strong desires to deliver thought-provoking jokes, but they often hesitantly resorted to the use of "dirty" jokes when their initial material failed. Women seemed no less interested in telling sexual jokes than men, but their efforts were met with considerable opposition. Most avoided such jokes altogether, while others strategically used them anyway. These comics seemed to engage in "undoing gender" by using comedy as a tool to transgress traditional gender expectations and destabilize normative power relations (Deutsch 2007). Also, it seems for women, stand-up comedy affords an opportunity to voice their opinions in ways they might not do in their everyday lives. For

men, it seems to provide them with a safe space to negotiate insecurities and express emotions with little risk of attracting criticism for gender infractions.

Research has established that humor may be used as a tool for social influence, and it can serve to both challenge and reinforce the status quo (Davis 1995; Ford and Ferguson 2004; Kane, Suls, and Tedeschi 1977; Ryan and Kanjorski 1998). Yet, little research exists that specifically addresses the experiences and perceptions of those individuals responsible for dispensing humor. Similarly, research that has examined gender differences in the use or appreciation of humor has often done so by focusing on spontaneous workplace interactions (Bemiller and Schneider 2010; Decker and Rotondo 2001; Downe 1999; Holmes and Schnurr 2005; Quinn 2000; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001; Sanders 2004; Watts 2007). At the core of this analysis are the experiences of individuals who intentionally and systematically deploy humor night after night. Unlike previous research, I specifically explored the social processes involved in the ways men and women stand-up comedians make meaning of their own experiences. In turn, I gained an understanding of how their unique experiences, perspectives, and circumstances intersect with expectations of gender to influence how they interact with and shape their social worlds (Snape and Spencer 2003).

This examination of men and women stand-up comics has implications for studies at the intersection of gender, culture, and inequality. As my findings regarding men and women comics suggest, the gendered norms, traditions, and attitudes are woven into the fabric of our culture. Thus, this research provides insight into how humor can act as a catalyst, helping to afford individuals the flexibility to speak and behave in ways that challenge the norms and expectations that perpetuate inequality (Mintz 1985). In

addition, my findings contribute to a growing body of literature focused on understanding how gender disparities, in various capacities, are reproduced at both the interactional and institutional levels.

Gender is a perpetual string of interactional and institutionalized achievements, and individuals understand they are expected to behave in ways deemed appropriate for their respective sex category. Thus, they tailor their actions accordingly, knowing they will be held accountable for the degree to which they fulfill (or fail to fulfill) a socially agreed-upon set of gender expectations for a particular situation (West and Zimmerman 1987). My findings indicate that men and women comics perform humor in gendered ways. The comics internalized the attitudes and behaviors expected of their respective sex categories, and most aligned their actions with such expectations to avoid censure (West and Zimmerman 1987). This analysis provides further utility of the “doing” and “undoing gender” frameworks by illuminating how men and women stand-up comedians contend with gender expectations, and how they make meaning of their own experiences living and performing comedy. One of the most prominent critiques of the “doing gender” framework was that it did not account for instances in which individuals *do* strategically resist traditional gender scripts and successfully disrupt assumptions of congruence between gender and sex category (Deutsch 2007; Messerschmidt 2009; Risman 2009; Vidal-Ortiz 2009). The findings of this study contribute evidence for such disruptions, as some comics seemed to engage in “undoing gender” by strategically acting in opposition to the expectations considered appropriate for their sex category (Deutsch 2007).

In-depth interviews make it possible to gain insight into how individuals make meaning of their own unique experiences and circumstances (Esterberg 2002; Ritchie

2003; Snape and Spencer 2003). This was a major strength of this study. With qualitative methods, I was able to situate and examine the identities of comics in relation to the processes required to create them. Quantitative methods are limited in this regard. The flexibility unique to the qualitative in-depth interview process was an additional strength, as it allowed me tailor each interview to fit the unique experiences of each individual comic (Snape and Spencer 2003). My exclusive focus on individual stand-up comics provided me with the opportunity to study a small and unique segment of the population responsible for both writing and performing their own jokes. This helped me maintain a focus on each individual, rather than muddy my analysis with the various dynamics associated with cooperative performances. Finally, by including both men and women in my sample, I was able to compare how experiences performing stand-up comedy varied along gender lines.

One limitation of this study relates to its small sample size. Had I included a larger number of respondents, it is possible additional themes may have emerged regarding the processes comics engage in to make meaning of their own experiences. Related to this limitation, my sample consisted of mostly white comics. A more racially and ethnically diverse sample of comics would have been useful for taking an intersectional approach to examinations at the intersection of gender, race, humor, and inequality. A few of the comics alluded to differences in the experiences among comics along racial lines. A thorough examination of these experiences is necessary.

The gender of the interviewer may influence how respondents answer particular questions about gender-related topics (Arendell 1997; Kane and Macaulay 1993). As Arendell (1997:341) found in her study of divorced fathers, “the relationships which

evolve during the research process are influenced by the identities and histories of those involved, including those of gender.” It is possible that my position as a woman interviewing stand-up comics influenced the information they disclosed to me about their perspectives and experiences. Also, assumptions of heterosexuality were also clearly embedded within comics’ appraisals of me as the researcher. For example, when I initiated contact via email with one respondent and subsequently scheduled an interview, he responded, “Also are you hot? That will determine how well I dress.” After an interview, another comic told me his first thought when I contacted him was that I was doing so for dating purposes. However, he admitted that thought quickly dissipated after reading my professional email in its entirety. Like Arendell (1997), I made every effort to deflect comments such as these so as not to alter the course of my data collection. My goal was to understand how comics made meaning of their own experiences and perspectives; I would have interrupted this process had I confronted the participants (Arendell 1997). It is possible some of the men provided me with answers they thought I, as a (presumed heterosexual) woman, would want to hear, but neither of these men (nor any of the other participants) gave me any indication that their answers were influenced by their assumptions of me to the extent that would soil the data garnered from these interactions.

My study only utilized in-depth interviews, but one avenue for future research could be the inclusion of the comics’ stand-up performances as data. By analyzing data collected using non-participant observation of performances *and* respondents’ perceptions of how they experience the various aspects of stand-up comedy, a more holistic representation of the relationship between gender and humor may be established.

Future research should also examine how race and sexual orientation intersect with gender, humor, and inequality. It is likely that both factors play a significant role in how comics make meaning of their own experiences. Finally, it would be useful to elicit data based on the experiences and perspectives of comedy fans³. Doing so may provide unique insight into how various attempts at humor are perceived by viewers or audience members. A comparison between their perspectives and those of stand-up comics may provide an additional layer of insight into how humor both maintains and mitigates various forms of inequality.

Most of the comedians in this study had goals to hone their comedic skills and dispense thought-provoking jokes, yet they experienced significant constraints from expectations to conform to conventional standards of gender. These comics act as witty purveyors of the norms, traditions, and attitudes of our culture, but they are also uniquely positioned to speak and behave in ways that oftentimes conflict with such norms and expectations (Mintz 1985). Though the comics clearly engaged in “doing gender” by acting in ways that perpetuate gender stereotypes, some seemed to engage in “undoing gender” by using comedy as a tool to challenge traditional gender expectations and chip away at normative power relations (Deutsch 2007). Humor, then, serves a much more powerful function than acting merely as entertainment. It provides a unique apparatus for addressing and reducing gender disparities through the strategic provocation of laughter.

³ Thank you, Dr. Joseph Rumbo, for this particular suggestion.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background/Demographic Questions

1. How long have you been performing as a stand-up comedian?
2. How did you get started? Why?
3. Growing up, did people think you were funny? Did you think of yourself as funny?
4. Growing up, who was the funniest person you knew? What made that person so funny?
5. What about your life, your experiences, or your childhood do you think contributed to your sense of humor? Why?
6. What role does humor play in your everyday life (outside of performing), whether with family, friends, co-workers?
7. What is your favorite part about performing stand-up? Why?
8. Do you see humor as just a way to entertain people, or is it something more?
9. Does stand-up comedy serve purposes beyond just making people laugh?

Style of Humor and Performance

1. How would you describe your style of comedy?
2. How does your style of comedy differ from some of the other comedians you've encountered doing stand-up?
3. Who are your comedic influences? Why?
4. What challenges have you encountered as a stand-up comedian? Do you think others have had similar experiences?
5. How much of your self do you offer to your audience when you perform?
6. Are there things about yourself (details) that you tend to conceal? Either on stage or off? Why?
7. How does your on-stage persona relate/differ to your off-stage persona? Why?
8. What sorts of topics do you tend to use in your comedy? For example, do you talk a lot about your family? Dating? Politics? Social issues?
9. How does the audience respond to these topics? Are there some that go over better with certain types of crowds? Are there certain topics or issues you try to avoid? Why?

Toeing the Line

1. I'm sure you're familiar with all of the hype over Daniel Tosh's rape joke [explain/summarize]. What are your thoughts on that?
2. Why do you think some people find jokes like that funny while others don't?
3. What about jokes related to hot topics such as race, sexuality, religion, and violence? How do you toe the line when telling jokes that could rub some people the wrong way?
4. How do you react when someone gets offended at something you've joked about?
5. Do you think some people are less inclined to take a joke than others?

Men, Women, and Humor

1. Why does there seem to be more men than women in stand-up?
2. Do you think the audience views men and women differently?
3. How do men/women stand-up comedians differ? Do they tend to have different comedic styles? Do they joke about different topics?
4. Why is it that some people say/think that women aren't funny?
 - o Or that they can't take a joke?
5. Do men/women react differently to your comedy? Or to you as a comedian? Why do you think that is?
6. How would your stand-up or career be different if you were the opposite sex (gender)?
7. If you weren't a comedian, what would you be/do?
8. What advice would you give to other comedians who are just getting their start in stand-up?
9. What advice would you give specifically to other [men/women] stand-up comedians?

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