

ARTICLES

“LAUGHING MATTERS”: THE COMEDIAN AS SOCIAL OBSERVER, TEACHER, AND CONDUIT OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE*

Much of the sociological curriculum often represents society as tragedy. This article explores the incorporation of a society as comedy component in introductory courses at two institutions using the sociological insight and social critique of comedians. A general discussion of parallels between the comedic eye and the sociological imagination is followed by specific steps for locating, selecting and incorporating comedic clips into various courses. Through comparisons between experimental and control groups, as well as student questionnaires, we found that the use of comedians to model sociological perspectives increased student ability to apply course concepts, decreased student anxiety when tackling new concepts, and engaged a broader number of students during class discussion. We conclude with discussion of challenges specific to these methods—language use and controversial comedians—as well as the broader need to learn from figures who have been historically successful at engaging the public on issues of social importance.

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Indeed, an argument could be made that the social scientist who does not perceive this comic dimension of social reality is going to miss essential features of it. . . . These remarks, needless to say, are not meant to denigrate the serious study of society but simply to suggest that such study itself will profit greatly from those insights that one can obtain only while laughing. (Peter Berger 1963:165)

Many of our courses within the sociological curriculum, such as “Contemporary Social Problems” or “Domestic Violence in America,” often represent *society as tragedy* (Johnson 2005). Our texts, lectures and discussions routinely present social life and social data through measurements of ine-

quality, crime and other quantifications of injustice (Zijderveld 1995). Indeed, it is not surprising to us when a student eventually asks, “why is sociology so negative?”

In reaction to what many students interpret as the “doom and gloom” of sociology, and to pique students’ interest in the complexities of mundane, everyday social life, we have successfully incorporated a *society as comedy* component into our introductory course. More specifically, we use the sociological insight and social critique of the comedic eye, through the work of individuals such as George Carlin and Jon Stewart, to model the sociological perspective. This article explores the success of these pedagogical methods based on comparisons between experimental and control groups at two universities. A general discussion of parallels between the comedic eye and the sociological perspective is followed by specific steps for locating, selecting and incorporating comedic clips into various courses to explore such issues as race, inequality, class and gender relations. We conclude

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with discussion of challenges specific to these methods. As teachers interested in pedagogy as a form of public sociology, we also lay bare the need for teaching sociologists to learn from figures who have been historically successful at engaging the public on issues of social importance—comedians. For as Peter Berger has noted, to teach *society as comedy* does not “denigrate the serious study of society,” rather it “suggest[s] that such study itself will profit greatly from those insights that one can obtain only while laughing” (cited in Davis 1993:5).

THE PEDAGOGICAL AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF HUMOR

Over the last few decades sociologists have increasingly made efforts to incorporate both humor and popular culture into sociology courses. The teaching literature includes significant discussion of the pedagogical utility of such pop cultural items as music (Ahlkvist 1999; Armstrong 1993; Martinez 1995, 1994; Walczak and Reuter 1994), film (Burton 1988; DeFronzo 1982; Hannon and Marullo 1988; Leblanc 1998; Pescosolido 1990; Prendergrast 1986; Tipton and Tiemann 1993), television (Cantor 1991; Douglas and Olson 1995; Olson and Douglas 1997; Scanlan and Feinburg 2000; Snow 1983) and comics (Hall and Lucal 1999; Snyder 1997). In a similar fashion, teaching sociologists have turned to the use of humor in the classroom as an innovative way to engage students and improve learning outcomes (Hynes 1989; Schacht and Stewart 1990). These efforts have proven to be especially effective in helping students to recognize and apply the sociological perspective outside of the classroom. Yet, the use of these tools has not been limited to sociology—similar approaches have been taken by educators in fields such as literature, psychology, composition and nursing (Berk 2000; Kaplan and Pascoe 1977; Kirman 1993; Reeves 1996). The use of humor as a pedagogical tool has been linked specifically to memory, creative thought, reten-

tion, comprehension and anxiety in “dreaded courses” (Gorham and Christopel 1990; Hellman, 2006; Kaplan and Pascoe 1977; Kher, Molstad and Donahue 1999; Southam and Schwartz 2004; War-nock 1989).

While the pedagogical utility of popular culture, including some facets of humor, has been examined, few sociologists have analyzed the specific commonalities of the comedic eye and the sociological perspective. In fact, within the underdeveloped area of sociology of humor, the majority of sociological research (outside of the classroom) has focused on the social functions of humor to ease tension, decrease social distance, challenge authority, or discredit another individual (Botkin and Dorenson 1985; Koller 1988; Yoles and Clair 1995). As David Alan Fine points out, the sociological community as a whole has been reluctant to embrace the comedic eye within its classrooms and its journals (cited in Davis 1993). In other words, while humor is sometimes used as a tool in teaching or in social situations, there has been *little to no emphasis on the process by which the comedic eye functions and the ways in which this perspective relates to sociological objectives, nor has there been significant discussion of how these parallels can be pedagogically useful*.

Among the few sociologists to engage in a comparative analysis of the comedic eye and the sociological perspective has been Murray S. Davis. His book, *What's So Funny? The Comic Conception of Culture and Society* (1993) provides us with one of the few comprehensive examinations of the relationship between the comedic perspective and the sociological perspective. Davis does not simply argue that we should take comedy seriously (and that we should incorporate more humor into sociology), he draws important parallels between the comedic eye and the sociological perspective. He argues that comedians, like sociologists, (1) take the contemporary and ever-changing world as their subject matter, (2) deconstruct, unmask, and debunk status quo

social expectations, organizations, rules and people, (3) reorder and reverse the audience's perspective, (4) compare social ideas to reality, (5) play off typically expected patterns, (6) compare and contrast groups, (7) challenge hypocrisy, (8) examine the presentation of self in everyday life, and (9) point out the fluidity of social life. Comedians, Davis points out, break open our frames by disordering what has been ordered by human constructions and social expectations.

Though we believe Davis' argument is sound and provides fecund areas for further analysis, there have not been concerted efforts to formally integrate these links into the sociology classroom. We find this gap ironic given the range of values, norms and attitudes that can be unpacked through an examination of humor (Mintz 1985). Comedians often encourage their audience to recognize and wonder at the mundane aspects of everyday social life, including human interaction, social rules and stereotypes. Furthermore, many comedians have succeeded where most academics (including sociologists) have not—they have captured the social conscience of the American public, and in the process, gotten Americans to think about important social issues, such as race and politics. Comedy in American culture has been an important form of social commentary, as it has both endorsed and challenged dominant social cultural norms (Mintz 1985).

From Richard Pryor's influence on white America's views of race to Jon Stewart's more recent success at engaging the younger generation in political commentary, comedians continue to play an important role as voices of dissent, change and conscience in American society. For example, known by many to be one of the first "true" publicly recognized comedians, Lenny Bruce attacked pervasive social norms of the 1950s, including sexism and anti-Semitism. At the time, his acts were considered by authorities to be so blatantly offensive that he was arrested on several occasions for obscenity, and he was later banned

from performing in several cities in the United States. Viewed by today's standards, though, his act contained words that are commonly used by many contemporary comedians. Bruce's social critiques not only had an impact on American popular culture, but there are parallels to be drawn between his aims and those of the sociologist. In *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, Ronald Collins (2002) describes Bruce as:

a comic sage . . . a scholar of sleaze . . . who revealed the gap between the real and the official . . . unmasked the masked man . . . delighted in exploring why certain words were forbidden—he challenged "community standards" by questioning whether the community *actually* held to these standards (pp. 20-1).

Particularly in regards to speech, Bruce believed that "social conventions" of language "sheltered the lies," while "vulgarity, by contrast, outed them" by serving up "life in its raw and raunchy form" (Collins 2002:21). Ultimately, Collins states, Bruce attacked the "should" world with vivid reports from the "is" world (2002:21). These efforts were effective in encouraging mainstream Americans to re-examine themselves and the ways in which they subserviently bought into social conventions.

Following in the legacy of Bruce, a number of television programs, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *Real Time with Bill Maher* and *The Colbert Report*—all hosted by comedians—have also made a concerted effort to challenge society's most prevalent social and political sensibilities while at the same time reaching a wide audience. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, in particular, has received significant attention for its impact on the political awareness of its viewers, the majority of whom are males between the ages of 18 and 34 (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Baym, 2005; Fox, Koloen, and Sahin, 2007; McKain, 2005). The show, which has approximately 1.4 million viewers each night (Goetz 2005), has helped to demonstrate that fans of comedy do not simply tune in to be entertained. For example, in 2004 the

University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey found that the viewers of late-night comedy programs, especially *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, were "more likely to know the issue positions and backgrounds of presidential candidates than people who do not watch late-night comedy." Julia Fox (2007) found that *The Daily Show* featured as much substantive information concerning the 2004 Presidential election as its "real" news counterparts on "ABC Evening News," "CBS Evening News" and "NBC Nightly News." Furthermore, Fox points out that "when people are in a positive mood, they're taking in more information" (cited in Hurwitz 2006). The show has clearly connected with audiences, as they seek to be entertained and to gain insight into the political arena. In fact, at a time in 2004 when audiences were on information overload from the media coverage of the Presidential Election, *The Daily Show* received more male viewers in the 18 to 34 bracket than the evening news broadcasts and politically-oriented shows such as *Nightline*, *Hannity & Colmes* and *Meet the Press* (Learmonth 2005).

Given the demonstrated utility of pop cultural items and humor for learning outcomes, the relevant parallels between the comedic eye and the objectives of the sociologist, and the important social function that comedy has served—from a political and entertainment perspective—we moved forward in our project with the following hypothesis: as instructors we could incorporate footage and writings of comedians as useful pedagogical tools to advance and reinforce a number of the core objectives in an introductory class. We speculated that the use of the social observations and analysis of comedians would provide a familiar and engaging avenue to introduce students to the wonder of the sociological perspective from some of the most fundamental concepts of an introductory course (exploring everyday social interactions or learning to name and describe social life) to more sophisticated skills (looking at social life as an outsider or employing conflict

theory to analyze inequality in social life). By unpacking the "schtick" of the comedian and evaluating his or her sociological perspective, we could at the same time unpack a range of sociological issues. This approach, we believe, might help breathe life into the sociological classroom. Because the college-level introductory course is for most college students' their first encounter with sociology as an academic discipline, the door through which they enter can either constrict further exploration, or reveal in creative ways a complex world of interesting questions and inquiry available to everyone—even the non-major. This innovative approach, we hoped, would beat back what C. Wright Mills (1959:217) has described as sociology's "turgid, polysyllabic prose"—a dry, mechanical and technocratic approach to investigating the social world.

THE COMEDIC EYE AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

One of the reasons that comedians have garnered little attention from sociology is the assumption that humor and rationality are mutually exclusive. To us, however, those who hold this belief fail to recognize the poignant ways in which the comedic eye shares common soil with the sociological perspective. From the comedian's choice of subjects to his or her methods of deconstructing social life, there are clear sociological parallels. Comedic attempts at irony and satire, though, do not simply function to challenge commonly held social ideals and expectations by unveiling power (Dwyer 1991) or by serving a "watchdog function" (Koller 1988:216); they often explore issues such as power and authority in ways that are much more accessible to the public than academic sociology.

In our own classroom, for example, we have effectively used articles from the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, to encourage students to critically explore their own youth culture from a sociological perspective. A recent online article entitled "MySpace Outage Leaves Millions Friend-

less,” (2007) which explored the hypothetical social implications of three days without the social networking Web service MySpace, allowed our students to analyze the ways in which such sites structure and shape youth interaction. The article reports that a “massive system failure” has caused MySpace to crash, leaving 150 million people “friendless.” Quotes from informants in the article include, “I vaguely remember trying to make friends pre-MySpace. . .”; “without an ‘About Me’ section, I’ve lost all sense of self”; “I lost 6,456 of my best friends in an instant,” and “I’ve just been wandering in and out of my cubicle in a daze, not knowing what to say and who to talk to.” Because the temporary “replacement sites” are more austere, the article states, “friendship capability and popularity” will be “nearly impossible to predetermine.” In this case, satire became a vehicle for engaging students in analysis of the norms, structure and habits that exist in the MySpace world. This particular article helped our students raise important questions about the relationship between technology and society: How has social interaction and youth culture been shaped by sites like MySpace? What might happen if the MySpace “universe” of networking suddenly came to a halt? How might humans deal with having to communicate “the old fashioned way”?

Social Inquiry

Comedy and satire certainly share “unveiling,” “questioning,” and “debunking” tendencies with the sociological perspective. However, the comedian’s methods of observing and deconstructing social life also have clear parallels to sociology. At their core, these methods of social observation are qualitative forms of social inquiry. As “outsider sociologists” (outside of academic sociology), or contemporary anthropologists (Koziski 1984) who look at society from the inside (as a participant-observer), their methods of collecting “material” at times border on autoethnography. They give informant accounts of their

own experiences of everyday social life, from the mundane details of “trying to make a living” to current trends pertaining to important sociological issues such as, sex, race and gender. As Davis (1995) states, humor is a form of perception that takes in realities in a different manner. We believe that it is this social inquiry that makes the comedian a relevant conduit for teaching the sociological perspective. In other words, *we are not encouraging students to laugh at social problems, such as poverty*. Rather, we want students to examine the method and perspective from which the comedians we have chosen look at the world, to explore its relation to the sociological perspectives, and then to determine why they are laughing.

The Audience-Comedian Interaction

The context of the comedic interaction, itself, is also pregnant with elements of sociological applications. In fact, the audience-comedian interaction is one of the few arenas in which the topics of race, class, gender and religion can be openly explored. For example, both Richard Pryor’s ability to speak to a white audience in the 1960s about racial issues and Margaret Cho’s discussions of her own bi-sexuality in her stand-up shows demonstrate that the comedic arena is a space of free inquiry where no subject is taboo and the rules of political correctness can be temporarily suspended. Few other social interactions include coverage of such a range of sociological issues in such a short period of time—and fewer involve people actually purchasing a ticket to listen to the discussion (that is, except for an introduction to sociology course). While the audience willingly suspends its own boundaries on acceptable topics of public discussion, the comedian might articulate thoughts, beliefs and ideas that perhaps lurk in the back of audience members’ minds, but are subject to social constraint in most other contexts. Comedians also have license to poke fun at the norms and behavior of people and groups within the audience itself. Often the comedian calls out or chal-

lenges the audiences' behavior or ideals while physically present to them. The comedian or satirist, then, is uniquely situated: he or she has the ear of a willing audience—a scenario most educators themselves would relish.

Classroom discussion of the sociological relevance of these perspectives, methods and interactions certainly was a part of this project as we aimed to use comedians as a vehicle to teach specific sociological concepts. However, we also felt that no examination of the links between the comedian and the sociologist would be complete without student consideration of larger scale sociological issues that link humor and society. Among the broader questions we posed in class were: Is comedy simply entertainment? If not, what are other social functions of comedy and satire? Can humor be an effective form of social commentary? How rational can the comedian be? How do the things people laugh at inform us about culture? Is the audience's reaction to comedic material important? While some might view these issues as "a laughing matter," our consideration of such questions is not simply academic. These are doors that can lead to further fruitful sociological exploration—for students, for sociologists and for any individual struggling to make sense of social life. They certainly are doors that allow us to explore both theoretical and applied issues of social inquiry, culture, politics, and social change.

For the sake of this article, these are also pedagogically important questions that have implications for disciplinary boundaries in our curriculum and classrooms. In the sections that follow, we discuss the logistics of transforming the "doom and gloom" curriculum approach into a more self-reflective sociology that does not take itself too seriously. Again, this does not mean we laugh at social problems. Rather, it means we face the realization that academic sociology is not the final word on society (Berger 1963). If we choose to learn from the comedian how to laugh at society and sociology, and to explore *why* we are laughing, we stand to

gain important insights about cultural norms and ironies. More importantly, we can gain insight into reaching a broader public—in the classroom and beyond. To help others adopt such an approach we cover research design, clip location and selection, logistics of incorporation, evaluation, challenges and precautions and a general discussion in the remaining sections of this paper.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND COURSE LOGISTICS

In this project the experimental and control groups were exposed to the same readings, lectures, assessment methods (including rubrics), instructor, films and active learning exercises. Within the experimental courses, though, we decreased the amount of time spent on some films and lecture examples to provide additional time for comedic clips and the activities surrounding them. These comedic clips and corresponding discussion and activities relevant to the clips were the only pedagogical difference between the control and experimental groups. During each experimental class session, we incorporated at least one comedic clip, which ranged in time from one minute and thirty seconds to over six minutes. Clips were used to launch either a group discussion or an active learning exercise. This will be detailed further in the sections that follow.

Our experimental sample included a large introductory course in a theater style lecture hall at a large state public university ($n=223$) and a small introductory course at a small residential Catholic university ($n=51$). The control groups were made up entirely of students from the large state public university ($n=200$). While the course instructor, content, text and readings were constant between the control and experimental groups, the teaching assistants varied from section to section. However, these teaching assistants only lectured once during the semester and did not offer breakout groups. Teaching assistants were not used at the smaller liberal arts institution.

Locating Clips

Before moving to discussion of the evaluation methods, we will review the methods of integrating “society as comedy” components into an introductory sociology course. From the beginning we had no intentions of completely redesigning our course in order to test our theory. Part of the utility of using comedians, we believe, is the relevance they already share with the current course content. Seamless integration was part of our hypothesis. Instead, we started by compiling a list of all of the major themes and topics that we typically cover in an introductory course and then went about locating potential comedic material (visual footage or written) that was relevant to these. As avid fans of stand-up comedy and comedy history, we already possessed a range of DVDs, books, sound files and Web material. However, because we typically used short clips in class we found it was not necessary to purchase DVDs for use, particularly because our monetary resources were limited. The internet contains a range of accessible fair use resources that can be used to locate all of the necessary materials one would need to incorporate short clips into the classroom. We drew from a number of Web sites that provide comedy archives, excerpts from videos, transcripts of stand-up comedy routines, and even discussions of the roles of comedians throughout history. A sample of these Web sites can be found in Table 1. Most are easily navigable and allow users to search the sites for content. The sites that provided us with a good start, yielding the most material belonged to Comedy Central, ClipBlast and *The Onion*.

Locating comedic materials for a class requires the same skills instructors already use to search for journal articles, books and audio-visual material for courses through database or online search engines. Here we will use examples from Table 1 to briefly review several easy methods for locating video clips on the internet. Comedy Central, the channel that produces *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, hosts a Web site (see Table 1) that

allows users to easily search their entire site for videos clips from past episodes. The format is the same as most search engines, such as Google or Yahoo. After logging on to the Comedy Central Web site, simply type a topic, theme or comedian into the search box and click “go.” A search for the term “race,” for example, will return over 400 video clips. If your classroom is internet-ready, you can simply stream the clip from the Web site during class.

Comedy Central’s Web site also allows users to narrow a search to a specific show. In our case, once we log on to the Web site, we often click on “The Daily Show” or “The Colbert Report” tabs on the left side of the screen to narrow our search to one of these specific shows. For example, if you wanted to locate a Jon Stewart segment on white collar crime, simply log on to the Comedy Central Web site and click on “The Daily Show.” Next, type “white collar crime” into the video search box and click “go.” Clips matching that search term will then be displayed.

If users have seen a segment on television and want to find it as an online clip, they can either search the show’s Web site or find clips archived by month on related sites, such as <http://www.Colbertnation.com>. However, the ability to access the Comedy Central channel or these shows via cable television is not a requirement; aside from thousands of brief clips, the channel’s Web site allows users to watch full episodes of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* directly online. The advantage of searching for individual clips, of course, is their length. Most are two to four minutes long, which allows instructors to decide on the relevance in a short period of time. We would like to point out, though, that even though it is a more time-consuming method of finding clips, we have found some of our most effective clips by simply browsing these sights without specific themes or topics in mind.

More general methods of searching include the use of Google’s video option and the ubiquitous hub of youth culture, You-

Table 1. Example Resource List for Locating and Using Comedians to Teach Sociological Concepts

Most of the works listed here do not exclusively cover just one topic. In addition, some of the sample material below may include slang and/or profanity. Instructors should preview clips before viewing in a classroom to determine what content relates to course material, what discussion questions/activities would be appropriate, and if censorship is prudent.

Sociological Concept	Specific Sources	An Example of Sociological Applications
Deviance	<i>White Collar Crime Does Pay</i> – The Daily Show [†] <i>Bad Language</i> – Lewis Black [‡]	<i>White Collar Crime Does Pay</i> – an examination of the Supreme Court’s meager punishment given for corporate crime.
Race	<i>Crossing the Line: Multiracial Comedians*</i> <i>Bigger and Black</i> - Chris Rock [*] <i>Sick & Tired</i> - Wanda Sykes [*] <i>Live on the Sunset Strip</i> - Richard Pryor [*] <i>For What It’s Worth</i> by Dave Chappelle [*] <i>With Biting Humor Pryor Explored Race in America</i> [†] <i>Comedy and Race in America</i> [†]	<i>Crossing the Line</i> – examines how multiracial comedians address and deconstruct issues of race, ethnicity, gender and place.
Gender/Sexuality	<i>The Beginning</i> - Ellen DeGeneres [*] <i>Here and Now</i> - Ellen DeGeneres [*] <i>Revolution</i> - Margaret Cho [*] <i>Tongue Untied</i> - Wanda Sykes [*] <i>Sick & Tired</i> - Wanda Sykes [*] <i>Dress to Kill</i> - Eddie Izzard [*]	Eddie Izzard – like Flip Wilson before him, often performs in make-up and women’s clothing. Examines the social construction of clothing and gender.
Social Problems	<i>The White Album</i> - Lewis Black [‡] <i>The End of the Universe</i> - Lewis Black [‡] <i>Rules of Engagement</i> - Lewis Black [‡] <i>When You Ride Alone You Ride w/ Bin Laden</i> - Bill Maher [‡] <i>Black on Broadway</i> - Lewis Black [*] <i>Victory Begins at Home</i> - Bill Maher [*] <i>Be More Cynical</i> - Bill Maher [*] <i>You are All Diseased</i> - George Carlin [*] <i>Jammin’ in New York</i> - George Carlin [*] <i>Back in Town</i> - George Carlin [*] <i>Doin’ It Again</i> - George Carlin [*]	<i>Rules of Engagement</i> – Black examines greed, Homeland security and the War in Iraq.

Table 1 (cont'd.).

Knowledge Construction	Conventional Wisdom – The Daily Show ² Wikilobbying – The Colbert Report ²		<i>Wikilobbying</i> – Stephen Colbert explores Wikipedia as an emerging authority.
Consumer Culture	The End of the Universe – Lewis Black [✦] Advertising Lullaby – George Carlin [✦]		<i>End of The Universe</i> – Black examines if having a Starbucks across the street from another Starbucks is really social progress.
Conflict Theory/Inequality	<i>The Owners of this Country</i> – George Carlin [✦] <i>Golf courses for the Homeless</i> – George Carlin [✦]		<i>Owners of this Country</i> – A conflict theory view of elites and their power.
Media	<i>Media Blitz</i> – The Daily Show [✦]		Jon Stewart examines the role of the media in branding the War in Iraq.
Books	<i>Brain Droppings</i> by George Carlin [✦] <i>Napalm and Silly Putty</i> by George Carlin [✦] <i>When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops</i> by George Carlin [✦] <i>I'm Telling You for the Last Time</i> by Jerry Seinfeld [*] <i>Shameless</i> by Louis C.K. [*]		
Web sites	http://www.cracked.com http://www.collegehumor.com http://www.theonion.com http://www.gorillamask.net http://www.i-mockery.com http://www.comedycentral.com/motherload http://www.funnyordie.com http://http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/resources/fair_use_and_teaching/ http://http://www.umuc.edu/library/copy.shtml		
Key	★ Soundfile on NPR.org ✦ DVD ⌘ CD/Audio ⌘ Book ✧ online streaming video		

Tube. To search for video from Google's main Web page simply type in the topic or comedian you desire, then instead of selecting "search," click the "more" link at the top and scroll down to select the "video" option. This will narrow your search to videos only. This method searches all video files, including those found on YouTube. A more time efficient method for amassing a collection of clips on different topics is to encourage students to find and bring their own clips to class—once they have been cleared for viewing by the instructor. This not only helps share the responsibility for locating clips, it encourages students to locate the sociological perspective outside of the classroom.

Of course, instructors should familiarize themselves with recent "Fair Use" law. U.S. Code, Section 110.1 and 110.2 of Title 17, (updated as the Technology, Education, and Copyright Harmonization Act of 2002), which allows educators to display copyrighted works and even to store them for short periods of time. For more information on these laws visit the copyright Web sites listed in Table 1.

Clip Selection

Once we located potential clips, we considered the following criteria as we narrowed down our choices: (1) To what major theme(s) does the clip relate and (2) What specific concepts or theories can the clip help to illuminate? We also turned to Davis' ideas by looking for comedic clips that (3) debunk status quo social expectations, organizations, rules and people, (4) reorder and reverse the audience's perspective, (5) compare social ideas to reality, (6) play off typically expected patterns, (7) compare and contrast groups, (8) challenge hypocrisy, (9) examine the presentation of self in everyday life, and (10) point out the fluidity of social life. We made special efforts to not immediately omit clips that demonstrated stereotypical thinking, since these could be used to illustrate and deconstruct relevant sociological concepts as well as the individual worldview of the comedian. Ultimately,

we were successful in finding clips that addressed all major chapter topics covered in our chosen introductory text. In fact, we initially doubted that we would find a comedian who had addressed "social research," yet we eventually located an excellent clip of Jon Stewart (*The Daily Show*) covering "conventional wisdom" and how we arrive at knowledge—which offered us a poignant segue into discussion about social science methods.

Incorporating Clips into Class to Generate Discussion and Active Learning

Rather than beginning every class with a clip, we played them either in the middle of the class session or toward the end of class. This gave students a break from lecture and created a nice transition into active learning and discussion. Leaving the clip until the very end of class, we discovered, would not provide enough time to debrief and generate adequate discussion, which is absolutely necessary. The classrooms at each of our institutions included large retractable screens, DVD players and internet access. For smaller classes, though, a television screen would be adequate. If internet access is not a possibility, students could certainly be directed to locate online clips outside of class and be ready to discuss the clips during class time.

Once clips were located and selected to match up with course content, the most important task was the development of discussion questions and active learning exercises to engage students with each clip and its content. In most cases we began discussion by simply asking students if they found the comedian's routine humorous, and if so, why? We also posed the reverse question: if it is not funny, why not? This discussion ultimately led to the fundamental analysis of *how the clip demonstrated sociological thinking*. Typically, we also asked students how each clip was relevant to the week's topic, and we followed up their discussion with some combination of the following probing questions to encourage them to push their analysis: What elements of eve-

ryday life do they analyze? What is the purpose of the comedian's discussion—what relevant sociological points does s/he make? In the viewed clip is the comedian an "outsider sociologist"? What does the clip unveil about social life? Does the comedian make efforts to name and describe social life, or to debunk the status quo view of social life? How does the comedian attempt to get the audience to see with "new eyes"? Does s/he reorder or reverse the audience's perspective? Does s/he compare cultural ideals to reality, or play off typically expected patterns? Does s/he compare and contrast groups? To which theoretical perspectives do the comedian's observations relate? Are her/his observations valid, and sociologically, how do we know? Do her/his observations challenge or play into stereotypes? Do they make efforts to examine presentations of self in everyday life? Are these observations valid, and how could we know using sociological methods discussed in class?

For example, we have successfully used the work of George Carlin to develop questions and discussion that highlight conflict theory in our introductory course. During our coverage of economic stratification, we show a segment of George Carlin's sketch titled, "Golf Courses for the Homeless" (1992). In this segment he explores the social problem of homelessness and the American ideology of NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard). Carlin proposes what initially seems to some students to be a preposterous idea: building low cost housing for the homeless on golf courses across America. Golf, he argues, is a sport practiced predominately on good land, in nice neighborhoods, "primarily by white well to do business men who get together to do deals to carve this country up a little bit finer" (Carlin 1992). He goes on to explain that there are over 17,000 golf courses in America averaging over one-hundred and fifty acres each.

After showing the clip we ask students the following questions: How do Carlin's ideas parallel conflict theory? What does the clip

say about the use of space and land in America, as well as whom we value? What is the relationship between social class and the use of space and land in America? We also ask students to continue their inquiry outside of class by exploring some of the following questions: How much do Americans spend on recreational sports versus subsistence aid for the homeless? And how does socio-economic class level shape choices of sport participation? Although we generate some discussion of whether or not students agree with Carlin, we utilize this clip to meet our primary objective of illustrating conflict theory and its basic tenets. Coupled with other Carlin clips, such as "The Owners of this Country" (Carlin 2005), we have found few materials, academic or otherwise, which so poignantly and concisely communicate conflict theory to our students.

In our experience, then, the captivation and interest inherent in the comedian-audience interaction can easily be exploited not only to illustrate sociological concepts, but also to generate quality student discussion on sociological issues and engage students in further inquiry outside the classroom. Unlike many of our texts and journals, students are already watching these comedians during their leisure time outside of class, a point that was made numerous times by our students during the formal evaluation of these methods. Yoking this interest and familiarity, however, does not simply result in "entertainment"; rather, this method serves the pedagogical function of creating a less intimidating and more active environment where students become interested in openly discussing issues such as race, class, gender and sexuality. Often, as we discuss below, students will even assist in finding relevant comedic clips, making the process of locating clips even easier. Integration of these methods does not require a complete course re-design, nor does it even require that faculty be able to construct humorous anecdotes themselves. With the recommended Web sites, the standard equipment available to many class-

rooms, and an appreciation for the complexity of the comedic “eye,” a variety of sociological courses can benefit from utilizing these methods.

EVALUATION OF TECHNIQUES

Our evaluation of this project included the following measures: (1) a comparison of exam, paper and final scores between control and experimental groups; (2) student questionnaires administered to the experimental group that included objective and open-ended questions about the project; (3) a comparison of student evaluations of the instructor; (4) a comparison of withdrawal rates between control and experimental groups; and (5) completion rates of online discussion questions. Because our students have a number of institutional assessments and questionnaires throughout the semester, we decided not to utilize a pre-test.

Compared to the control groups, the experimental groups had higher exam scores (79.61 percent vs. 73.04 percent) and final grade scores (79.18 percent vs. 74.05 percent), lower rates of withdrawal (6.3 percent vs. 10.2 percent), and higher completion of online discussion questions.¹ Scores for papers that were assigned in the course, which required that students conduct a content analysis of advertisements, were unaffected by the project. Instructor evaluations, which averaged 4.5 out of 5, remained unchanged. Students’ perceptions of the utility of the method for their learning were overwhelmingly positive. Table 2 shows high student ratings of these methods for “illustrating sociological concepts,” “applying a critical sociological perspective to everyday life,” “complement readings and class discussions” and “effective teaching/learning tool.” Our students reported that the use of comedians helped them feel more relaxed about tackling new concepts, helped to keep their attention, and made it easier to engage in class discussion. As one student stated to us in our evaluations, “this is society through the backdoor. That is

why it works in class . . . it’s almost a sneaky way of getting us to do school work!!”

Perhaps the most poignant evidence of our success was the frequency with which students would, without our provocation, bring in their own clips of comedians addressing sociological issues, and then articulate the connections between the clip and class concepts in front of the rest of the class. This demonstrated that students were embracing the sociological perspective by incorporating sociological practice—“seeing sociologically”—into their everyday lives. One of our students articulated this idea even more appropriately: “This is recreational sociology . . . where you find sociology even in leisure activities.”

CHALLENGES AND PRECAUTIONS

Because many students are used to a more traditionally formal or “serious” classroom, the incorporation of material they associate with a non-academic environment—especially comedy—can create several challenges. Most immediate is the possibility that students will assume that they need not take the material seriously given the format through which it is presented. We navigated this challenge by sociologically contextualizing the comedic segments before and after showing them to our students. Prior to viewing each segment during class we had already spent time exploring some of the concepts that would be addressed by each comedian. This provided students with a new and more sociological framework for viewing the segment. We also provided students with questions to consider as they watched the segment, which again would ground their thought process within a sociological context. At the end of each segment we pushed students to assess the links between the comedic view and the sociological material from the course. This was typically done through questions that engaged students with sociological concepts, social statistics or course readings. The comedic material was always used as a tool to engage

¹ $p < .01$.

Table 2. Summary of Student Responses to Questionnaires on Use of Comedians* (n=274)

Did the perspectives of humorists and comedians used in class help to illustrate sociological concepts?	Yes	96.7 %
	No	0.0 %
	Neutral	3.3 %
Did the comedic insight help you apply a critical sociological perspective to everyday life?	Yes	87.3 %
	No	2.0 %
	Neutral	10.7 %
Did the use of comedy complement or distract from course readings and class discussion?	Complement	92.61%
	Distract	.09%
	Neutral	7.3%
In your opinion, is the use of comedic analysis an effective teaching and learning tool?	Yes	96.4%
	No	0.0%
	Neutral	3.6%

Examples of Student Comments on Open-Ended Section of Questionnaire: Taught Sociology in Different Way

- “Helped illustrate concepts that were first difficult to understand.”
- “I’m a visual learner, so I remember it better...it made dry reading more understandable.”
- “If there was something I did not understand or that I thought I understood the comedian would often give another perspective on the concept.”
- “The use of Carlin, Lewis Black and Jon Stewart helped to illustrate many of the concepts, especially conflict theory.”
- “It put the concepts in a forum where you can see how it works in real life, rather than reading definitions and numbers.”
- “I think the films helped me to better grasp an understanding of different concepts and ideas. Every clip helped!”

Engaged Audience

- “Humor makes learning more enjoyable.”
- “Comedy is memorable. It is easier to remember a joke than a definition.”
- “It made us more attentive and motivated to learn.”
- “It helped relate the theories...and made the course less depressing from a content point of view.”
- “A great way to keep the class attention in a 1 hour and 15 minute class!”
- “It is a medium that opens us to relax and naturally listen.”

Facilitated Discussion

- “Good way to break the ice for topics that are uncomfortable.”
- “It got the discussion rolling and broke the ice.”
- “We are more willing to speak up in class.”

Demonstrates Sociology All Around Us/Pulls Covers Off of What We Consider Normal:

- “Comedians point out things we don’t notice.”
- “They [Comedians] take simpl[e] circumstances that everybody takes for granted and highlight the characteristics that identify them as a more complex issue.
- “A lot of things we saw made me think of how I see it in my life everyday. I always came out of class with something to talk about with my friends.”

*We modeled our questionnaire after the work done by Scanlan and Feinburg in *The Cartoon Society* (2000).

Downloaded from <http://tso.sagepub.com> at UNIVERSITY COLORADO on January 6, 2010

students with formal course material. That is, we made efforts to focus on the relationship between the comedic content and the course material, rather than allowing the discussion to focus on the comedians' biographical celebrity histories.

For example, after showing the Jon Stewart segment on "conventional wisdom," we had our students examine data on the sources that American voters use to make decisions on presidential candidates. Likewise, after viewing George Carlin's segment on "Golf Courses for the Homeless," we examined some of the statistics behind Carlin's claims, as well as some of the geographic inequities of land ownership and land use. In our experience, the segments functioned to engage students with the course material; we did not find that the use of comedians encouraged students to take the course lightly. In fact, we observed an increase in attendance, range of participation during class, and completion of online discussions.

Second, comedians often address controversial issues, a tendency that could detract from students' concentration on the concepts to be learned. And, while sociology typically embraces the examination of such issues as an important part of the educational process, the comedic presentation relies on a more edgy and raw method of presentation as a way of engaging the audience. Indeed, as stated earlier, the comedian is the rare cultural figure who has permission to explore such issues as race, gender and politics in a public arena. It is possible that students could misinterpret these examinations (Scanlan and Feinburg 2000), react emotionally, or worse, assume that by "giving a comedian the floor" the professor is endorsing that particular comedian's point of view. While some might view the controversy within a comedic routine as risky territory, classroom examination of raw comedic discussion of controversial issues, especially stereotypes, can be an excellent method to unpack social norms and question their accuracy (Davidson 1987). We certainly found pedagogical utility in the ex-

amination of the comedian's discussion of the taboo—their willingness to discuss what often goes unexamined or unsaid due to social constrictions. However, by addressing the controversial, the comedian does not simply provide us with an opportunity to challenge stereotypes and traditional ideas; the comedic presentation itself can actually help to defuse classroom discussions that can often become combative. Humor can defuse antagonism and encourage a less charged environment. We found this to be the case, as evidenced from student feedback that comedians created a more relaxed environment: "it was a good way to break the ice for topics that are uncomfortable."

Finally, some comedians who possess a cogent sociological perspective often use language which some students might find offensive. While there is enough useful material to omit segments containing "foul" language, we chose to incorporate some of these segments as a way to get students to explore socially constructed definitions of deviance, especially the shared meanings attached to language. Rather than shock value, "foul" language can be used for a teachable moment where students can examine why certain words may offend them, while others do not. We used some of these segments to challenge our students to examine whether they are focusing on the language itself or the overall message of the comedian. In one exercise we prefaced the segment by presenting several potentially offensive terms in foreign languages—mostly languages that none of the students spoke—to help students understand that the power of offensive language depends on their own interpreted meaning of the words. We also had students explore terms that have emerged as slang over the last 100 years, and words that once were considered slang, but have become normalized in popular culture. Rather than simply creating a firestorm of controversy, we believe that the use of comedic language can provide significant pedagogical opportunities to critically examine the relativity of language.

CONCLUSION

From the availability of stand-up comedy on internet sites such as YouTube, to the commercial success of cable television shows, such as *The Colbert Report*, comedic material has become more ubiquitous. At the same time, comedians have re-emerged as public figures and social critics who often challenge traditional social norms and practices. The college-age generation show an avid familiarity with a range of comedians, comedic material is immediately available to them (especially through the internet), and college audiences appreciate that comedians speak in an accessible manner to issues that are relevant to their lives. All of these factors make the integration of the comedic sociological perspective into a range of courses relatively hassle-free. The available resources, particularly on the internet, allow instructors to easily integrate the comedic viewpoint without major changes to a course. An archive of material can be quickly amassed, especially since students are eager to find and bring to class sociological comedy clips they have found on their own.

While students are typically eager for these types of sociological explorations, we recognize that some instructors could initially look upon these methods with some skepticism. We would like to point out that incorporating the work of comedians into the sociological classroom does not mean that our courses become less rigorous. For decades, teachers of sociology have been utilizing the sociological perspective of musicians, artists, novelists, movie writers, and other “extra-mural” sociologists. Like these other figures, comedians are a gateway to talking with our students about the sociological perspective; we are not seeking to replace Comte with Carlin, or Marx with Maher. Furthermore, we believe that a willingness to call upon the work of figures such as Richard Pryor or Lenny Bruce demonstrates a healthy disciplinary self-reflexivity, especially a recognition of two important realities. First, understanding

society is not the birthright of sociologists. And second, our discipline has a lot to learn from individuals who have been much more successful than we have at engaging a public audience on issues of social importance. At a time when sociology is reaching for a more immediate connection to the public, it seems prudent that we be open to new ways of engaging the public imagination, especially those of students, as we seek to generate interest in the sociological perspective. This does not mean that we take our selves, or our discipline, less seriously, but it does mean that we begin to take other social observers outside of academic sociology more seriously.

Arguments for new ways of engaging the public imagination have been made previously, most notably by Michael Burawoy (2004) and Charles Lemert (2005). We believe Burawoy’s (2004) poignant comments about public sociology could just as well apply to many comedians: “they are read,” or in this case heard, “beyond the academy, and they become the vehicle of public discourse about the nature of U.S. society—the nature of its values, the gap between its promise and reality, its malaise, its tendencies” (p. 7). Moreover, Burawoy (2004) makes the argument that “There are multiple public sociologies,” and “multiple ways of accessing them” (p. 7). For example, the works of Pryor, Carlin, Stewart and others have functioned as a form of public sociology whose creation, propagation and contemplation of the material take place far outside the realms of traditional academic sociology; yet, we believe the message itself is often more accessible, engaging and effective in encouraging the broader public to consider issues of sociological importance.

Likewise, Charles Lemert (2005) has argued that in everyday life many practical sociologists—who function outside the realms of formal sociological inquiry—possess a “sociological competence” that allows them to “stare straight in the face of social things” and imagine larger social forces by being open to realities in front of them. As Lemert states, this competence

begins "in the local and concrete" (p. 14). We believe that with their own sociological competence comedians bring to light "social things" from daily life that are worth laughing at, talking about and observing. The many comedic "bits," "schticks," "pieces" or "sketches" that we have used in our courses bear these markings. From the ubiquitous comedic introductory line "you ever notice" to the now famous tag line that Jerry Seinfeld has made famous, "what is the deal with..." many comedians are engaging the public imagination and generating important dialogue on social issues in a way that corresponds with discussion of public sociology taking place in various realms within academic sociology. Without using the specific terms "public sociology" or "sociological competence," the late George Carlin actually articulated his understanding of his role as one form of public sociology: "Part of what my impulse is with things I've said or done, I think it is an attempt to demystify these things, to take them out of the realm of the forbidden and the disgusting and the off-base, and to at least bring them into the discussion" (Payne, 2008).

We have discovered that in the classroom, laughter is often a reaction to something that resonates with students. And where there is resonance, there is usually some sense of meaning and reverberation. This tendency within comedic thought, we believe, is the most valuable reason for taking the comedic viewpoint seriously in the sociological classroom. The sociological outlook of comedians reverberates with college students by turning such dry and abstract terms as "anomie," "alienation" or "hegemony" into tangible, living and engaging concepts. Comedians provide a sociological venue through which to explore a range of relevant course concepts, such as social observation, social norms, mundane life experiences, and even controversial social issues. Indeed, while many comedians address social problems, they do so in a manner that circumvents the doom and gloom that often mires the sociological

classroom as much as it does the six o'clock news. And though instructors of sociology may not generate the same laughter as a stand-up comedian, as social observers who unmask social life we certainly share some common ground with the "comedic eye." If many sociologists are not comedians, many comedians are sociologists. In this project we not only came to recognize that we share many of the same vulnerabilities and challenges as comedians—we are often up in front of a crowd with little else but a microphone, observations on social life, and an aim to interest the audience in aspects of everyday social interaction—but also that there is much to be learned about social life by exploring what we laugh at and why.

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