# 'Fun in Games': employing insights from Goffman's Sociology to an understanding of humour.

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## Abstract

Given its title, and its author's reputation, one might expect that Erving Goffman's essay 'Fun in Games' would have made a significant contribution to the Sociology of Humour. The essay is, however, rarely cited in this field. Certainly, it is not directly an examination of humour. It does, though, offer an array of concepts and insights that can be used to illuminate and understand social encounters in which humour is significant. As well as 'encounter' itself, concepts offered by Goffman include frame, relevance, and engrossment. An application of these concepts to two examples of stand-up comedy is enlightening.

**Key Words:** Fun in Games, Sociology, Goffman, Comedy

As every psychotic and comic ought to know, any accurately improper move can poke through the thin sleeve of immediate reality (Goffman 1961b p. 72).

## Introduction

Humour is a 'phenomenon that is truly social and solidly entangled in culture' commented Zijderveld in his review essay on sociolgical theory (1995 p. 341).  Kuipers, in her review of the sociology of humour, went further, remarking that 'humorous utterances are socially and culturally shaped, and often quite particular to a specific time and place' (Kuipers 2008 p. 361).  Goffman's essay 'Fun in Games' exhibits his interest on social encounters, specific to a time and place, as worthy of sociological analysis. How can a focus on encounters provide insights into humour? We will first consider how Goffman's approach fits with other sociologists' views of humour. Then, consistent with Goffman's strong emphasis on empirical research (Strong 1983; Verhoeven 1993), we will apply his approach to two instances of stand-up comedy where the encounter between comic and audience becomes fraught.

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## Sociology in the study of humour

Douglas defines humour as 'a play on form that affords us an opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity' (1975 p. 96). The suggestion that an 'accepted pattern has no necessity' sits well with sociology's constructionist default mode (see Harris 2008) and its core relativist argument that things can be otherwise. Humour uses incongruity to produce laughter but light-heartedness is not all that is involved in humour. As Oring emphasises, 'play is not the opposite of seriousness' (2008 p. 189), something put more optimistically by Orwell when he famously said, 'every joke is a tiny revolution' (1945). Given at least the possibility of a broader role for humour, it is perhaps surprising that sociologists have not paid more attention to it.

Such neglect was noted by Zijderveld in his 1983 review of the literature. However, as Giselinde Kuipers (2008) review of the field shows, more recently this neglect has been somewhat rectified and there is now a significant body of work constituting a 'sociology of humour', not to mention complementary work from anthropologists and folklorists (Oring 2008). Various concepts frequently used in both empirical studies and theoretical discussions of humour can be derived from Goffman's work. This is perhaps not surprising given Goffman's fecundity in formulating concepts (see Scheff 2006; Smith 2006), but what may surprise is that there is little reference in this literature to Goffman's early essay 'Fun in Games', even though an essay so titled hinted at relevance to a sociological approach to humour.

## Goffman in the sociology of humour

 There is not sufficient space here for an exhaustive description of where Goffman sits in relation to humour and sociology, but three key points can be made. The first is to note that along with the seriousness and at times difficult nature of Goffman's writing, his writing is well known for its moments of levity and humour, just as he himself was infamous as a 'profane jester' and 'droll wit' (Delaney 2013). His work can sometimes make us smile or laugh. Dawe (1973) called him a 'sociological jester', and others have similarly noted the 'cutting' side of the tricksterism present in his humour. For example, Fine and Martin (1995), while appreciative of Goffman, note that his humour relies on sarcasm, satire and irony, which tend to have a negative tone. Scheff also notes this, and based upon his own and Lofland's personal acquaintance with Goffman, ventures an interesting hypothesis connecting masculinity with Goffman's 'personal style' (2006 p. 6-13) when he played the prankster, joker or con-man (Jacobsen 2010 p. 12).

Second, despite this humorous element to Goffman's style, he never systematically studied humour. Zijderveld's review of the sociology of humour and laughter, published the year

after Goffman's death in 1982, lists only *Asylums* (Goffman 1961a) in the annotated bibliography. Zijderveld's comment about this is, 'The relevance of joking and humour in general for the maintenance of the inmates' self identity ('identity joking') is discussed on p. 112.' (1983 p. 88-89). This hardly constitutes a sustained focus by Goffman on humour. Similarly, Kuipers' recent review of the field references only *Frame Analysis* (Goffman 1974), simply noting that it is common to juxtapose the humorous and serious realms and 'the notion of "framing" [is useful] to describe this process of shifting from one type of interactional logic to another' (2008 p. 374). *Frame Analysis* is both Goffman's magnum opus, and a notoriously difficult work (Ditton 1976; Sharrock 1976; Scheff 2006), so we may need to be sceptical when we see the concept of 'frame' applied to humorous topics. Often it is used in a fairly simplistic manner, which may be useful enough, but certainly does not pick up on all the nuances or indeed problems in the conceptual machinery of *Frame Analysis* (Paolucci and Richardson 2006; Lytra 2007; Jerolmack 2009; Haugh 2011). There are other scholars who use concepts from Goffman in the study of humour but without citing the *Fun in Games* essay (Fine 1987; Flaherty 1990; Smith 1996; Fine and de Soucey 2005).

Third, the most recent sociological work on humour that seems the most engaged with Goffman is Michael Billig's *Laughter and Ridicule*, but even this offers a very narrow and specific use of Goffman. Billig ventures a very ambitious and broad ranging 'critique of humour', in the process noting Goffman's 'genius' as his 'ability to notice the little details of life that we daily take for granted', mobilising these details to answer the big sociological question of 'How does social life continue?' (p. 217). Specifically, Billig picks up Goffman's realisation that embarrassment is a frequent feature of social life, and magnifies this into the key dynamic that is supposedly behind all humour. He rejects any notion that humour is positive, instead arguing that it is effectively always a form of ridicule, as such fulfilling a necessary social function in that it contributes to both the socialisation of children and to keeping adults in line with societal expectations. Billig suggests that Goffman did see embarrassment as a frequent feature of the structuring of social life, but he failed to coalesce this realisation into any key theoretical point for either sociology as a broader enterprise or for the study of humour in specific. Specifically, Billig claims that Goffman suffers from a 'nice-guy' view of embarrassment: first, he suggests that sympathy is a customary reaction when we observe the embarrassment of others, and secondly, he claimed that actors often collaborate to save the face of someone who is embarrassed (Billig 2005 p. 225-226). For Billig this is an overly optimistic view of human helpfulness and fellow-feeling. Billig avoids such optimism and hence builds his ambitious theory that through ridicule, humour has a universal function in ensuring social discipline, this being why sociologists need a social critique of humour built upon rejecting the 'naïve' assumption that humour mostly has a positive role in society.

A few commentators are appreciative of Billig's ambitious work (e.g. see Smith 2007; Weaver 2007), but the majority of reviewers suggest his theory that humour is essentially

connected to ridicule is far too general and speculative: whereas it is theoretically interesting it needs to be bolstered by empirical research (see Bell 2005; Davies 2007; Palmer 2008). Davies points out that there is a great deal more to the social function of humour than Billig realizes (Davies 2007). Consequently, it would be a brave researcher who would look to Billig and his partial appreciation of Goffman for a sufficient framework for the sociological study of humour. Moreover, there is more to Goffman's emphasis on embarrassment that is relevant to humour, and in many ways these can be found in a formative shape in the 'Fun in Games' essay, to which we now turn.

## Fun in Games

'Fun in games' is a very long essay (55 pages), half of the book *Encounters: two studies in the sociology of interaction*. Given the length of the essay, we do not offer a detailed explication but rather we aim to identify some key points and show their utility for sociological approaches to humour. Before doing so, we need to note that, having introduced his terms, Goffman muddies the clarity a little by then saying that his discussion will employ three overlapping terms: focussed gathering, encounter and situated activity system. Hereafter we choose to use 'encounter', both because it is shorter and because it is the title he gives to the book, thus suggesting some preference in his own thinking. (In this section, page numbers in brackets, prefixed with FiG refer, to the 'Fun in Games' essay.)

From the beginning Goffman is very careful to delineate his topic. He says, 'instead of dividing face-to-face interaction into the eventful and the routine, I propose a different division – into *unfocused interaction* and *focused interaction*.' (FiG p. 7). The former consists of those interactions where people are in one another's presence, but where there is no sustained activity being accomplished (eg. two strangers check up on each other's general manner). The latter occurs 'when people effectively agree to sustain for a time a single focus of cognitive and visual attention' (FiG p. 7) (eg. a board game). This single focus is not total as people engaged in focused interaction may simultaneously engage in unfocused interaction, though not in their capacity as participants in the focused activity.

Next, Goffman discusses the 'current tendency to identify focused gatherings too easily with social groups' (FiG p. 8). While this discussion is still in the preface to the larger essay, it is very important, for it reflects Goffman's concern with the social organisation and systemic requirements of both small groups and encounters. If people come together in an encounter that is to last for a time, then participants will have to submit to rules of recruitment, limits to overt hostility, and some division of labour. This reflects Goffman's general view that being with others does not come easily, can involve conflict and deception, and hence requires a lot of psychic labour (see Raffel 2002). Given that these requirements are also found in social groups, why bother to distinguish between them? Goffman argues

that because small groups, once they are formed, will develop more or less stable features, they can minimise the key problems  facing encounters, including embarassment, maintenance of poise, staying on topic, speaker transition, and spatial position.  That is, social groups make interaction with others structured and therefore less prone to trouble.

Then he makes a point with important implications for humour: 'Furthermore, a crucial attribute of focused gatherings – the participant's maintenance of *continuous engrossment* in the official focus of activity – is not a property of social groups in general, for most groups, unlike encounters, continue to exist apart from the occasions when members are physically together. … [Also] there are many gatherings – for example, a set of strangers playing poker in a casino – where an extremely full array of interaction processes occurs with only the slightest development of a sense of group' (FiG p. 10-11, emphasis added).  The implication is that before we focus sociological study on how humour functions in small or large social groups, we might consider humour as a form of play that is a relatively bounded entity in itself, that is, a focussed interaction with emergent properties distinct from small group dynamics.   A key question then becomes how engrossment is set up and maintained:

> … the notion of taking a game too seriously or not seriously enough does not quite fit our notions of the contrast between recreational 'unserious' activity and workaday 'serious' activity.  The issue apparently is not whether the activity belongs to the recreational sphere or the work sphere, but whether external pulls upon one's interest can be selectively held in check so that one can become absorbed in the *encounter as a world in itself*.  The problem of too-serious or not-serious-enough arises in gaming encounters not because a game is involved but because an encounter is involved (FiG p. 62-63, emphasis added).

It is clear that Goffman is not interested in the functions of humour or its mechanisms per se, rather he is trying to understand the structure of what in his later work he called the 'Interaction Order' (1983).  As he puts it early on when he discusses 'play and seriousness', 'Because serious activity need not justify itself in terms of the fun it provides, we have neglected to develop an analytical view of fun and an appreciation of the light that fun throws on interaction in general' (p. 17).  Despite Goffman's self-decribed neglect of this aspect, we will argue that many humorous situations can be seen as encounters where roles and mutual expectations are employed and modified to build a situation of engrossment and that this is particularly true of the formal encounters of stand-up comedy and the two examples we will provide as illustration.

As noted, Goffman is not writing specifically about humour, but it is clear that humour can occur in both unfocused and focused interaction.  In the former, it is likely to be brief laughter approximating what he elsewhere calls 'response cries' (1978), as when we laugh as a passerby on a pavement when another passerby mirrors our avoidance actions and then collides with us.  Probably more frequently, instances of humour constitute what

Goffman calls an 'official focus of activity', where by 'official' he does not mean formal or institutionalised, but the defined or understood activity at hand.  The paradigm case here might be utterances like 'have you heard the one about …' that set up a joke telling encounter.  Unlike utterances that occur within small groups, these do not often have a prior history or a projected future that helps grant them relative stability and predictability. So, while any instance of an attempt to make humour can qualify as 'focused interaction' it will be prone to the sustained intimate coordination of action, and will particularly face the problem of sustaining engrossment in the activity.  Moreover, the simple presence of people together can have considerable complexity: persons present to each other need not be engaged in any encounter (an unfocused gathering); persons present to each other can be partaking in different encounters (a multi-focused gathering); and persons ostensibly engaged in one encounter can simultaneously sustain a subordinated one (FiG p. 18). (And as we will illustrate, persons ostensibly engaged in a focussed encounter of comedian and audience can allow the intrusion of factors from outside that frame.)

It is for this reason that Goffman spends some time outlining rules of relevance and irrelevance. He starts with the assumption that any social 'encounter exhibits sanctioned orderliness arising from obligations fulfilled and expectations realized, and that therein lies its structure', but crucially, that 'order pertains largely to what shall be attended and disattended' (FiG p. 11). He gives the playing of a board game like draughts or chess as an example. A board game can be played with pieces that in reality are bottle tops on lino squares, gold figurines on marble or even uniformed people on flagstones (today we might add pixels on a screen). Their physical attributes are irrelevant, and not attended to. The rules of irrelevance extend further and apply to the participants of the game as much as the equipment. So the board game 'may constitute orderly interaction that is officially independent of sex, age, language, socio-economic status…' (FiG p. 28). So far, Goffman's analysis is compelling. If I sit down to a game of chess, whether it be with an intimate friend or a stranger, I expect the outcome to be determined entirely by the relative skill levels of my opponent and myself. If my opponent were wealthier than me, or physically stronger, I would not pay any regard to that and indeed, if it were suggested those characteristics be taken into account, the rules of the game would be violated and I would not play, as the engrossment I seek from games would be diminished if not destroyed.

For Goffman the players of a board game sit within a membrane that screens off from the players properties that are irrelevant, including the features, properties and characteristics of each other.  However, encounters of this kind are not to be treated as hermetically sealed containers.  He goes on to argue that while it is possible to imagine an encounter where almost all externally based matters are treated as officially irrelevant, 'in actual fact, externally realized matters are given some official place and weight in most encounters, figuring as avowed elements in the situation … as when … in the classic phrase of England's gentry, 'Anyone for tennis?' did not quite mean *anyone*; it is not recorded that a servant has

ever been allowed to define himself as an *anyone*' (FiG p. 28). Thus, the walls of a membrane by which participants in an encounter cut themselves off from external matters are not fully solid, but are more like a sieve. Additionally, Goffman is careful to note that the irrelevancy of the physical attributes of a game is not absolute: 'The game-relevant meanings of the various pieces of the game equipment are in themselves a useful disguise, for behind these meanings the sentimental, material, and esthetic value of the pieces can steal into the interaction, infusing it with tones of meaning that have nothing to do with the logic of the game' (FiG p. 66). This point will become important below when considering the examples of stand-up comedy.

The long essay finishes with a very short conclusion, nonetheless packed with insight. Fun is not trivial, in fact in focused gatherings 'the most serious thing to consider is the fun in them' (FiG p. 72). How is it that people sustain an enclosing, coherent and engrossing reality? This is particularly fraught because any game depends on others for the production of engrossment, but simultaneously those others can be a threat to the enclosure: they may stop abiding by the rules of relevance and provide destructive distractions. The last few sentences are worth quoting in full:

> To be at ease in a situation is to be properly subject to these rules, entranced by the meanings they generate and stabilize; to be ill at ease means that one is ungrasped by immediate reality and that one loosens the grasp that others have of it. To be awkward or unkempt, to talk or move wrongly, is to be a dangerous giant, a destroyer of worlds. As every psychotic and comic ought to know, any accurately improper move can poke through the thin sleeve of immediate reality (FiG p. 72).

We now apply these insights of Goffman to two examples of stand-up comedy. These encounters illustrate instability and a failure of engrossment as a result of improper moves.

### Heckler-comedian interaction: two examples

The first example is transcribed from a movie (Stern, 2010) about the American comedian Joan Rivers, and shows her being heckled by an adult male in the middle of a stand-up performance. Prior to this Rivers has been successful in generating frequent laughter:

> Joan Rivers: Oh, I hate children, ugh ugh ugh. The only child I think I would have liked ever is Helen Keller, because she didn't talk. And it's just (facial expression showing someone who can't talk) [audience laughter]
>
> Heckler: that isn't very funny [loud voice]
>
> JR: Yes it is, and if you don't, then leave
>
> H: That isn't funny if you have a deaf son

JR: I happen to have a deaf mother.

H: [uninterpretable interjection]

JR: Oh you stupid ass! (audience roars) Let me tell you what comedy is about.

H: You don't have to tell me that

JR: Oh please! You are so stupid! Comedy is to make everybody laugh at everything, and deal with things, you idiot! My mother is deaf you stupid son of a bitch [audience cheers and claps] … Don't tell me. And just in case you can hear me in the hallway, I lived for nine years with a man with one leg, okay you asshole, and we're going to talk about what it's like to have a man with one leg who lost it in World War Two, and never went back to get it, … coz that's fucking literary [laughter] So don't you tell me what's funny. Comedy is to make us laugh. … 9/11 If we didn't laugh where the hell would we all be? Think about that. [clapping] Where the hell would we all be?

We can consider this an encounter or 'focused interaction', where the definition of the situation is, in short, 'stand-up comedy' and where the specific means to do that is essentially transgressing norms. Joan Rivers' first statement, 'Oh, I hate children, ugh ugh ugh', challenges the norm that everyone loves children, especially women. Then she immediately moves to challenge another norm, this time regarding laughing about disability – the only child she would have liked is Helen Keller, because she couldn't talk. In response to this an adult male voice can be heard to say 'that isn't very funny', breaking the comedic monologue by effectively suggesting that the joke does not meet the definition of the situation, that is, it is not funny. Moreover, this can be heard as a serious complaint that the comedian has 'gone too far'. Joan Rivers hears the interruption and tries to restore the definition of the situation – 'Yes it is [funny]' - offering no comment on the complaint but inviting the heckler to leave. The heckler does not leave but elaborates his complaint with 'That isn't funny if you have a deaf son'. Note here how external matters are being inserted through the membrane of the encounter. Previously in River's performance whether something was funny or not is indicated by the presence or absence of laughter, but the heckling is a non-laughing response to the joke. Once Rivers responds to this in a serious manner, we get a serious elaboration of why the heckler does not find it funny. For the father of a deaf son, she has gone too far in joking about deafness.

In effect the heckler is disputing the tacitly accepted rules of relevance for the game of stand-up comedy. In Rivers' case these might be very broad indeed – an 'anything goes' comic license. This provides the grounds for engrossment, but simultaneously brings the real risk of audience disagreement, which is precisely what the heckler indicates. In the face of this Rivers seriously defends her ability to joke about such matters because of her own personal experience: the joke may not be funny to someone with a deaf relative, but in fact

the joke teller – Joan Rivers – has a deaf mother, so a negative reaction to the joke based on personal experience is not immutable but may be idiosyncratic. The reply to this is not clear, but the next turn by Rivers is very interesting: 'Oh you stupid ass! (audience roars) Let me tell you what comedy is about.' It has both an open insult, which gains an immediate audience cheer, and then a real change to the definition of the situation: now we break the comedy routine by explaining why we are gathered here listening to comedy, something equivalent to providing meta-rules of relevance. The heckler remains staunch in his upset position, saying 'You don't have to tell me that', which only draws from Rivers a lengthy and forceful explication of 'what comedy is about' including some direct abuse of the heckler: 'you are so stupid'; 'you idiot'; 'you stupid son of a bitch'. After she has finished this with a reference to 9 /11, she seamlessly moves into a joke (not transcribed) about finding Osama bin Laden.

It is worth noting here that Rivers' resort to a detailed account in handling the heckler is quite unusual. The standard professional advice given to comedians is that hecklers must be shut down as quickly as possible (see Carr & Greeves 2007), and in practice the usual way to do this is via some put-down so that the heckler backs off. In this we see that stand-up comedy is precisely *not* an intimate exchange of dialogue between comedian and audience, despite their being a co-dependence between the two and an appearance of intimacy (Brodie 2008). Ultimately the comedian has the microphone and must take charge of the production of engrossing laughter. This is consistent with Goffman's emphasis that engrossing encounters depend upon careful focusing mechanisms, effectively tacit rules of relevance. To use Goffman's analogy of the board game, Rivers wants to treat the joke content – disability – like the pieces on the checkers board. It is their functionality that matters, not their physical attributes. If this comedic equivalent of a rule of relevance can be put in place then the focused interaction can proceed. In effect Rivers has ongoing 'comic license' to further the audience's engrossment with whatever joke material she puts in front of them. Simultaneously, this quells any audience hostility because they become entrained in the mirthful interaction. In this case, the heckler's interruption draws an unusual rupture in the engrossment, for Rivers responds to it by switching to serious discourse. She offers her practitioner's theory of why we have stand-up comedy; that we need to laugh otherwise we would be overwhelmed by misery and pointlessness. With this detour to provide the grounds for her rules of comedic relevance, Rivers is able to maintain her comic role. She has successfully dealt with the heckler's claim that her joke content is inappropriately improper.

The next example shows however that comedians are not always successful in establishing and maintaining shared rules of relevance/irrelevance.

After the end of the *Seinfeld* sitcom series, Michael Richards who had played Kramer, returned to performing standup comedy. One night in 2006 performing at West

Hollywood's The Laugh Factory, a large group of African Americans arrived late, talked during the performance, and then heckled Richards with 'you're not funny' interruptions. Unfortunately for Richards his response to this heckling was recorded on a cellphone video and subsequently went 'viral'. The quality of the sound on the video is poor, but the key features are able to be transcribed (source for the following is 'Michael Richards Spews Racial Hate…'). Pacing animatedly about the stage, Richards speaks and is responded to as follows (where italics indicate voices from the audience):

Richards: Shuddup! 50 years ago they'd have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass

[small amount of laughter, clapping]

You can talk, you can talk, you can talk! You're brave now mother-fucker.

➔ Throw his ass out. He's a nigger. He's a nigger! He's a nigger.
*Oh my God*   (woman's voice, clearly audible)

A nigger. Look there's a nigger.

Oooh! Ooh!

Alright you see. This shocks you, it shocks you … to see what's buried beneath your stupid mother fuckers.

➔ *that was uncalled for*  (man's voice, clearly audible)
What was uncalled for? It's uncalled for for you to interrupt my ass you cheap motherfucker

You guys have been talkin' and talkin' and talkin'

I don't know, I don't know, I don't know

What's the matter? Is it too much for you to handle?

They're going to arrest me for calling a black man a nigger?

(man in crowd talks for some time; unclear; we see a silhouette of a man leaving)

Wait a minute, where's he going?

➔ *that was uncalled for you fucking cracker-ass mother-fucker*
Cracker-ass? You calling me cracker-ass, nigger?

(unclear response)

*Fucking white boy*

Oh, you're threatening me?

*We'll see what's up*

Oh, it's a big threat.  That's how you get back at the man

➜ *that was real uncalled for*
Wait a minute. He's not going is he?

*You're not funny, that's why you're a reject, never had no shows, never had no movies.  Seinfeld, that's it*

Oh, I guess you got me there.  You're absolutely right. I'm just a washup. Gotta stand on the stage.

That's it, we've had it (from people leaving)

➜ *That's unfucking called for.  That ain't necessary*
Well you interrupted me pal.  That's what happens when you interrupt the white man, don't you know

➜ *Uncalled for. That was uncalled for*
You see?  You see. There's still those words, those words, those words.


This dialogue takes just over two minutes and the interaction ends here with Richards ceasing to talk and leaving the stage, at which point another man gets on stage saying 'sorry about that'.

This incident became widely known and shortly thereafter Richards went on a live television feed on the David Letterman Late Show and publicly apologised for his actions.  He stressed that he was not a racist and said he was 'deeply, deeply sorry' for what he had done.  His explanation for calling the African Americans 'niggers' was that his act involved spontaneity and free association, and he was trying to 'jujitsu' the heckling, but 'it didn't work out' (see Richards' apology clip).

In looking at the transcript we can see just how rapidly the tone of focused interaction can change.  Richards' first utterance actually draws audience laughter, whooping and clapping, even if the joke content seems to be a reference to lynching.  Unfortunately for Richards he then escalates this line of attack with 'Throw his ass out.  He's a nigger.  He's a nigger.  He's a nigger!', three times using the highly charged 'nigger' word.  To this there is an immediately noticeable change in the audience, exemplified by an audible female voice

saying 'Oh my God'. Richards does not take this cue to backoff, instead he presses on again repeating the 'nigger' word, adding 'mother fuckers' to the mix. It is at this stage that we get the first audible response from a person whom we can reasonably assume is one of the targeted 'African American' hecklers/interruptees. It is a short and unadorned, 'that was uncalled for'. In its design and placement this is publicly hearable as a complaint. It is at this point that Richards has available the 'preferred' response to a complaint – an apology. He does not take this option, instead he presses on. Ultimately after four repetitions of the 'that was uncalled for' complaint with no apology forthcoming from Richards, and with many of the audience leaving, he walks off the stage.

What we would like to suggest is that the same dynamics are operating here as in the Rivers example. That is, following Goffman, the focus provided by game encounters is undergirded by the possibility of losing the game and the risk of non-cooperation by other players, but these threats are minimised by rules of relevance and irrelevance. In the face of a complaint about joke content, Rivers is able to restore order and return to the focused encounter with its ongoing engrossing laughter, whereas Richards' strategy only sees him digging a deeper hole for himself, from which he cannot emerge. 'Nigger' can be taken from the wider world and passed through the membrane into the joking encounter, only by maintaining powerful transformation rules (see Lee, 2009, for a fascinating account of the use of the word 'nigga' in rap battles). For example, disclaimers and hedges might be employed before venturing to use the word, or in saying the word the hand gesture of quoting could be made. The indication that Richards has failed to sustain the encounter is provided by the serious wording of the complaint and by its repetition (with upgrading via swearing) every time it does not gain the proper and preferred apology from Richards. This perfectly mirrors Goffman's suggestion that 'to talk or move wrongly, is to be a dangerous giant, a destroyer of worlds' (FiG p. 72). This destruction perhaps could have been avoided if Richards had offered an apology at the first 'that was uncalled for' complaint, but instead he falls into a self-fuelling spiral of rage (see Scheff 2006). He transforms from comic to psychotic in the space of two minutes; he starts out getting a laugh response, but then has his audience in such a rupture that in the end he must leave the stage.[i]


## Comedy, engrossment and embarrassment

Reading any Goffman essay of 55 pages may produce a mixture of pleasure and mild annoyance. It is not always easy to disentangle the concepts in the 'perpetual concept-branching [and] the eternal tangent' (Ditton, 1976) and so to be clear about the utility of his insights, although the latter do always seem to be lurking. At risk of over-simplification, we do believe that there is a key phrase to be taken from Fun in Games and readily applied within the sociology of humour. It is 'accurately improper', placed within the very last sentence of his essay: 'As every psychotic and comic ought to know, any accurately improper move can poke through the thin sleeve of immediate reality' (FiG p. 72). This will

certainly not be a revelation to humour scholars, nevertheless we believe that the way Goffman opens up the dynamism and situatedness of this principle bears attention.

With careful scrutiny this dynamism can be found earlier in the essay, firstly in an application to sporting games, then more broadly. In a sporting contest between two teams, if those teams are drawn from the same social grouping it 'may produce a conflict that falls flat' (FiG p. 64). That is, the move does not get near to being 'improper', hence fails to generate engrossment because there is insufficient at stake in the encounter. Alternatively, 'two teams drawn from groupings openly opposed to each other may provide incidents during which so much externally based hostility flows into the mutual activity of the sporting encounter as to burst the membrane surrounding it, leading to riots, fights, and other signs of a breakdown in order' (FiG p. 64). Mention of too much mutual hostility leading to riots and conflict seems a good summary of the Michael Richards racist rant episode.

Extrapolating from sporting games to comedy is in fact consistent with Goffman's broader point: 'it may be, however, that the same can be said about any major externally based experience common to members of an audience' (FiG p. 65). The idea of something being 'accurately improper' refers to how we can be drawn emotionally into situations we know are unreal. Skillful humour production (especially stand-up comedy) summons up emotional connections in the audience, and does so by relying on impropriety and incongruity. If it does not, there is nothing notable happening and little emotion to be felt. So, the comedian, whether lay or professional, must take some risk, must introduce something edgy and likely to offend, and they must also carefully place such elements within a whole performance. Joan Rivers plays on the edge of this risk, but when she teeters too far is able to restore the order in the encounter. On the other hand, a performance does not want to be so realistic that no distance from reality is created. This is Michael Richards' problem: his attempt to shut down heckling and interruption is not taken as a joke about racial hostility, it becomes racial hostility itself. This does not resolve emotional tensions, but merely repeats them. As Goffman argues, 'what has been called 'symbolic distance' must be assured. A membrane must be maintained that will control the flow of externally relevant sentiments into the interaction' (FiG p. 65). Therein lays the skill of successful stand-up comedy: to draw the audience in via connections to the broader world, but to move in and out of that world, thus emphasising that it is serious fun in games. Just how this Goffmanian insight might be applicable more broadly to humour seems worthy of further investigation.

Finally, all of the above can be related to the issue of the importance of embarrassment in social life, and Billig's claim that humour is essentially a form of ridicule. Michael Schudson published an early (1984) essay on Goffman and embarrassment, which Billig does not cite, but which we think makes available a different realisation about humour and

embarrassment.  In short, it is the carefully achieved instances of engrossment that enable us to put the possibility of embarrassment (and ridicule) aside.  Schudson makes this point via a careful reading of Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), but his comments are remarkably reflective of the argument in 'Fun in Games':

> A game operates by different rules from everyday life. In particular, games typically have *formal* rules self-consciously taught and learned, where ordinary life has rules or norms that are often assimilated without being directly taught. The game is more nearly an *intentional* or *planned* community than an ordinary community, and it is taken to be an exceptional setting by its participants, a release from normality (Schudson 1984 p. 639, original emphasis).

The key qualifier here is 'more nearly' an intentional community, and this is perfectly consistent with Goffman's discussion in 'Fun in Games'.  As we noted above, Goffman makes a careful qualification about 'transformation rules' and games not being perfectly sealed hermetic containers.   The illustrations we have given of the interplay between comedians and audience show this well: we see the intentional aspect of what games enable, that is, the engrossment of mass laughter. But we also see how precarious it can be, because at any moment an interruption in the frame can occur.  Interestingly, Schudson argues that Goffman tended to neglect situations like games, where people were most at ease. Instead he focussed on situations where everyday persons' 'face' was at-risk, and hence embarrassment an ever-present possibility.   But, in Schudson's discussion he strangely does not cite, or seem aware of, the 'Fun in Games' essay, in which Goffman makes exactly these points, showing that alongside 'face-dominant' situations, there are others where risk is not so important, or it is differentially distributed.  The potency of these 'at-ease' situations and the emotions they enable may help explain why comedians have been compared to shamans, and why success in standup comedy is described as addictive (Carr and Greeves 2007; Limon 2000).  In effect, when we are 'at home or in the depth of a game of chess or in the midst of a political rally or madly in love, [or in the middle of engrossing comedy] the possibility of embarrassment is diminished' (Schudson 1984 p. 646). Goffman makes very little connection with embarrassment in 'Fun in Games', but that is not to stop subsequent readers making the connection.

## Conclusion

The insight we take from 'Fun in Games' is that in the sociological study of humour we could usefully work with at least two keywords starting with 'e': embarrassment and engrossment. We should attend to the intricacies of how engrossment is practically accomplished in social encounters, whilst keeping an eye out for those times when it fails and embarrassment, complaint, and hostility are quickly ushered in. The intensity of the social encounter between comedian and audience (especially a heckling audience) can provide a useful illustration of relevance and frame, as well as violations thereof.

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[i] In an interesting article which resonates very well with Fun in Games, albeit while only mentioning Goffman once, Podilchak (1992) distinguishes between 'fun, funny, and fun of humour'. He notes that 'People reflect their moral evaluations of the other's humor action and simultaneously reject the other's potential reframing and interpretation' (p. 389), an observation that is applicable to our analysis of both the Rivers and Richards examples. and with an appreciation of Goffman more generally.  He comments that when 'fun humor breaks, the participants return to an internalized phenomenological frame … People come down to hierarchical reality, a unitary reality held together by social power and internalized social role taking equivalences' (1992 p.383).  Interestingly, it is the man who has heckled Richards who is claiming 'social power', in this case claiming the position of one who has been racially abused in a society that strongly sanctions such behaviour, in theory and law if not always in practice.