

## Joking a part

(This paper appeared in the Journal '*Body and Society*', Volume 5. Number 4. pp. 47-52 (1999).

Tom Shakespeare (Department of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds).

The paper 'Joking with disability' seems to me to be an example of some of the worst aspects of academia: erudition which has become pretentious, reflexivity which is self-indulgent, theorisation to the point of inaccessibility. This response will develop an alternative approach to the subject of humour and disability, and try to imagine what a grounded and politicised sociological account could involve.

Two prefatory points might be appropriate. First, my resistance is not motivated by the sense of humour failure characteristic of some political correctness. Attempts to proscribe or censor the issues we make jokes about, or make academic papers about, seem manifestly unhelpful. However, I confess to feeling uncomfortable about two, presumably able-bodied, academics analysing what is at stake for disabled people in the realm of the comical, when the vast majority of disabled people lack the power or the space or the distance to enjoy these sorts of conversations.

Second, my personal relationship to disability-as-joke is informed by a lifetime of experiencing humour at my expense, centring on my unconventional physique: I have restricted growth, a very visible impairment, with many connections to comedy and

circus in our culture. But I have also played a public role, within the disability community, as a stand-up comedian (perhaps an unfortunate label in this context), drawing on the sub-culture of politicised disabled people. Humour, as I want to argue, has played a dual role for me, as it does for many other disabled people. This discussion draws on these experiences in constructing an account of the complex relationships between disability and comedy.

### **Figures of fun**

First, the obvious. People with visible impairments are among the key comic stereotypes of western culture, and the use of physical difference as a humorous device suffuses both professional and everyday performance. After all, Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* itself opens with a disability joke: the blind man asks the cripple "How are you getting along?" to which the cripple replies "As you see".

Of course, while dwarfs and stutterers and epileptics and blind people and people with cerebral palsy and people with learning difficulties are core to these forms of joking, anyone who is physically out of the ordinary – non-disabled people who are fat or short or spotty or spectacled or slow – are also subject to this normalising verbal barrage.

It is in this sense that the authors miss the mark when they suggest that

"Although jokes about disabled people are part of our subculture, laughing directly at them is strongly proscribed."

There is an ambiguity about cultural responses to impairment, which both revels in the shared joke about the outsider, but also feels embarrassed about the violence which it perpetrates. Disability jokes flourish at the margins of civilised society: among children in the playground most obviously, where words such as 'spakker' and 'cripple' and 'Thalidomide' are relished as much as words like 'poof' and 'bender' and 'queer'. Disability jokes will also emerge when social sanctioning is temporarily suspended – for example, when people are drunk together and encounter a physically different other.

Most people with visible impairments will therefore have experienced people laughing directly at them: usually children or drunken men, but not always. And within performances on stage or film, there is a particular relish of the disabled figure of fun, a shared enjoyment of the peculiar pleasure of laughing at the abnormal. Many classic cartoons – Elmer Fudd and Mr Magoo, Dopey and the other six dwarfs – centre on physical difference or mental incapacity. Much of the repertoire of traditional comedy focuses on flawed performance or deformed physique, from Quasimodo jokes onwards. Such gags perhaps even became more prominent in the 1980s, as political correctness eroded the acceptability of sexist and racist humour.

There is a tension, in the history of disability and comedy, between open amusement at the predicament of the physically different, and a civilising process which would banish such voyeurism and prejudice. And this history not only dates back well before the Rabelaisian humour of the Middle Ages, the Court dwarfs of Velasquez' *Las Meninas*, and the Freak Show of the nineteenth century, but also continues into the present day.

Such humour depends, of course, on a shared knowledge and rapport, and on the presence of the disabled person as outsider. The comic stereotype of the disabled fool or clown is part of a pattern of cultural representation which always maintains physically different people as other, as alien, as the object of curiosity or hostility or pity, rather than as part of the group. "We" are always laughing at "them" or "him/her" or even "it". There is a continuity, then, between disability humour and racist or xenophobic humour: our differences are suppressed, and their difference is exaggerated, in order to be humiliated.

Perhaps there is a more fundamental process here. Is there a denial of our own vulnerability, or incompetence, or frailty, and a projection of these features onto this other? If impairment and illness challenge our sense of selves, and remind us of our mortality, perhaps this is threatening or difficult to deal with, and necessitates exclusion and ridicule. Extreme physical difference is disturbing to our expectations of order and normality and convention, and as Mary Douglas reminds us, anomaly demands a response, whether this is violence or veneration, expulsion or sanctification.

### **Interactional management**

So much for the broader social and cultural context of disability as comedy, which is nevertheless essential for the understanding of the micro-interactions between disabled people and the non-disabled world. We are, after all, socialised into certain assumptions about difference, and we access the world through language which embodies power and prejudice. How

does humour enter the repertoire of disabled people in everyday interaction?

Here the story of Laura is relevant, and the authors' analysis is generally helpful. Yet I would offer a slightly different emphasis. In the presence of disabled people, most non-disabled people feel a certain tension. Because of the widespread segregation of disabled people, many non-disabled people may not have come into contact with disabled people, and may be both ignorant of what is expected, and anxious about saying the right thing. Perhaps the pertinent analogy is with Basil Fawlty, on the occasion when a group of Germans visited his hotel.

This level of anxiety and tension is fundamentally undermining of successful interaction: in Goffman's terms, the stigma is discrediting. It is a strain for both parties, and prevents communication progressing or rapport developing. Disabled people, if they are to enter the everyday world of social engagement, must develop skills of interactional management in order to put the other at their ease. Central to this is an acknowledgement of the visible difference or abnormality. For the disabled person, who has lived with difference perhaps for their whole lives, the abnormality is invisible anyway. But for the stranger, it is absolutely overwhelming. Therefore, the disabled person must find a way of acknowledging the difference, showing that it is not important, and that the interaction can now progress.

Making a joke is the fundamental strategy, in our society, of compensating for tension or anxiety. By laughing at our own failure, we absolve the audience of the unbearable weight of empathy which they feel obligated to carry. It is not that they wish to laugh, and we are giving them permission to do so. It is that

they want to cry, and we are saying there is no need, for we are not crying, so why should they be? By laughing at ourselves, we establish a rapport which enables communication to overcome stigma. Rather than being the 'Other', about whom jokes are made, the disabled person establishes themselves as part of the group, and their impairment enters that stock of topics which are permissible for humorous interaction between friends.

### **Alternative comedy?**

So far, we have considered the ways in which the dominant group laughs at the disabled outsider, and the way that the disabled person becomes a member of the social mainstream by laughing at themselves. But there is also an important level of disability humour, where it is disabled people who form the group, and laughing about disability contributes to shared identity amongst members of this sub-culture.

The first dimension of this is characteristic of any minority group, and centres on shared meanings and the spontaneous comedy of particular encounters. The world of impairment and illness is replete with such opportunities, and many disabled people have developed a particularly dark form of humour. Just as gay people use words like 'faggot' and 'dyke' and 'poof' in situations where there is an understanding about the irony with which formerly hostile terms are deployed, so disabled people, in certain contexts, will use words like 'cripple' and 'blind bastard' (or 'BB'). Because of their dangerous resonance, such words have the relish of taboo and the reclamation of identity.

But having impairments also creates events of rich comic potential. The paraplegic man in the rehabilitation ward who, after

a long period of constipation, evacuates his bowels all over the floor, calls out in triumph “It’s the Horse of the Year Show!”, and his peers laugh at the joke, but not at his predicament. The drunk amputee makes a crack about being “legless”, and the pun is funny without any need for pity at his condition. Again, jokes between disabled people about the limitations and unpredictabilities of impairment achieve much of their comic power because they are so shocking to non-disabled people, who can imagine nothing less funny than extreme physical difference. Reversal of expectation is always richly comedic, and there is no greater reversal than treating what is commonly represented as a tragedy as if it is a farce.

The disability movement has built an alternative philosophy around this insight: whereas professionals and the general public regard impairment as unacceptable, as unbearable, as something to be avoided at all costs, disabled people have discovered and proved that impairment is not the end of the world; that it does not undermine subjectivity or possibility; and they have demonstrated this by developing an alternative comic language around the body. Impairment is not unspeakable or unacceptable, but quotidian and banal.

Whereas thus far disability humour has been considered in terms of the everyday interactions of disabled people, and sometimes disabled and non-disabled people, there is also a second, self-consciously performed dimension to disability humour, within the context of the disability arts cabaret. Here, disabled people come together on the basis of a shared political ideology, and the assertion of a positive identity. Humour here

plays the role of underlining common values, and exposing the social relations which constitute disablement as oppression.

In the disability cabaret, the jokes are about social workers (*what do they have in common with computers? You have to punch information into both of them*); and occupational therapists (*how many does it take to change a light bulb? One to take out the old one, another to explain that you are not entitled to a new one*); and the Tube (*what do London Transport and Jesus Christ have in common? They both make cripples walk*). Whether or not these particular examples are funny beyond the confines of the disability community is not important: what is significant is the changed social relations of humour which they connote. Comedy is used to identify the barriers which create difficulty for disabled people, and to challenge the cultural values and taboos which dominate everyday interaction. By revealing the underlying relations of power and oppression, jokes like this give disabled people permission to be angry and redirect frustration from impaired bodies, to the contexts which construct impairment as a problem.

### **Performing disability**

In humour, therefore, the changing social roles of disabled people become clear. Looking at the broader social and cultural meanings of disability as comedy, it is possible to understand that disabled people can now move from the passive endurance of scorn, to the strategic exploitation of wit, to the political deployment of satire. Of course, these are not just chronologically consecutive stages, but simultaneous and alternative options.

Performing a joke, rather than being one, is another form of reversal. For example, there was this man with a speech impediment who went into a bar. “Cd I hef a d-drinkk?”, he asks. “Yeds, cerdunly sir”, says the barman. “Are you tegging the pitz oud of mey?”, asks the customer. “No, dsir,” says the barman, “I alwedz t-t-t-tog like dis”. The man with the speech impediment gets his drink and sits down, and another person enters the bar. “Can I have a glass of whiskey, my good man?” asks the new customer, in a very posh accent. “Yes, of course, sir. Bells or Haig?” replies the barman in similar tones. Hearing this, afterwards the disabled man comes back to the bar. “Ah hearrd yuuu!” he says, angrily, “yu *werrr* t-t-t-tekking the pitz out of me!”. “No, I wasn’t t-t-tekking the pitz out of *you*,” says the barman, “I was t-tekking the pitz out of *him*.”

Context, interpretation and meaning are important, because this sort of humour treads a dangerous line between challenging and reinforcing stereotype. The same sorts of jokes may be told by a gay comic, to a predominantly gay audience, and by Bernard Manning, to a predominantly straight audience. There is no simple answer as to which jokes are offensive, and which jokes are liberatory, because it depends on nuance and intention. A disabled mainstream “stand-up”, like the Australian Steady Eddie, is a case in point. When he makes jokes about ‘spastics’, himself having cerebral palsy, are people laughing with him, or at him, to use the classic distinction? When post-structuralists tell us the author is dead, they mean something different from the comedian ‘dying’ on stage, but perhaps the joke-teller is dead in that way, too.

So maybe there are some jokes which can only be told in private, which belong in the ghetto, not on the stage. The radical disability comedian makes jokes about disabling encounters and environments, not disabled people. In moving from being laughed at, to laughing at themselves, to laughing at their situations and at non-disabled people, people with impairments are performing disability in new ways, which challenge the prejudice within our culture, and demand the acceptance of disability as an acceptable and respectable dimension of social diversity. After all, perhaps the real joke is not disability, but the human condition itself.