

Definitions of the humorous in Chris Rock and Russell Peters fan blogs: A discussion of the problem of incongruity

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Abstract

There is an old and unsolved problem in the philosophy of humour that examines the conditions under which some incongruities are deemed funny and some are not. Often described as ‘the problem of incongruity’, it can be seen to encompass, in part, the questions of how comedy tastes are developed, how a comedy audience is formed, and how and to what extent humorousness is agreed upon by an audience. Using on-line fan and ‘journalistic’ commentary and blogs on the comedians Russell Peters and Chris Rock, this article seeks an answer to the problem of incongruity. It investigates the styles through which fans construct descriptions of funniness, and acceptable, unacceptable or offensive joking. By analysing examples, and by using Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the ‘habitus’, a theoretical model is proposed that suggests that types of incongruity that are deemed funny usually ‘stretch’ but do not ‘break’ habitus boundaries, beliefs and constitutive discourse. This process is not just an experiential moment during the comedy performance but an active discursive task both before and after the performance. The argument is offered as a theoretical attempt to answer the problem of incongruity that is elaborated through examples of commentary, rather than as a comprehensive and representative analysis of these fan groups and their discussions, which would be the task of a much larger study.

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu, comedy, habitus, humour, incongruity theories, problem of incongruity, Russell Peters, Chris Rock.

Introduction

The problem of incongruity is encountered whenever an instance of humour, or a joke, fails when it was intended to create laughter. This is a problem that has interested philosophers of humour for centuries but it is generally accepted that it has not been resolved, and Parkin argues that ‘it may prove impossible in the long term to resolve’ (1997: 144). The problem

of incongruity can be described as the observation that although all jokes are constructed with the use of incongruity, not all jokes are funny in all situations and not all incongruities are humorous. An answer to the problem of incongruity would seek to understand how an incongruity comes to be seen as humorous over any other reading. The social impact of understanding incongruity would not be insignificant, allowing for a far more robust intellectual schema for the evaluation of failed or offensive humour, and the 'type' of symbolic harm it can do. Such concerns are of central importance in multicultural democracies, especially those with a tradition of satire. Although philosophers have struggled with this problem, it could be seen as one that is specifically *sociological*, and an answer to it dependant on some understanding of how audiences (which includes fans) receive the meanings of comedy.

This article will present an answer to the problem of incongruity through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus. It will then examine instances of fan and 'journalistic' expression on web blogs to highlight how the habitus emerges in positive and negative comments on the comedians Chris Rock and Russell Peters. Two extracts from blogs that discuss Chris Rock and Russell Peters can be used immediately to highlight some of the issues discussed later in the article:

Chris Rock. He's got everything a comedian should have. He's got a voice, he's scarily intelligent and articulate in a way that you don't see coming. (Elliott, 2010)

Peters has created a strong, consistently funny routine that pokes fun at everyone. No culture is safe... By making fun of everyone, Russell Peters is able to incorporate his philosophy that the world is shrinking, cultures are merging, and we're all going to end up, not white, black, brown, or yellow, but beige. This thought-provoking style of comedy makes Peters an entertainer worth watching! (Archie, 2006)

The first extract is clearly a positive comment on Chris Rock, who has a voice and is intelligent for this fan. This viewer does not, as some do, see Rock as sexist, misogynistic or reliant on negative racial stereotypes. The second extract on Russell Peters is equally positive. His ethnic comedy expresses opinions on many groups in Canadian and other societies, none of which are offensive. Yet this is not the case for other individuals or groups, who express very different attitudes towards his comedy. In this article the construction of incongruity will be explained to show how audience members and fans come to view such comedy as intelligent, unexpected, thought provoking and most of all, funny. It examines the relationship that develops between the habitus of the audience and the material offered by the comedians and why different relationships develop for social actors who do not find the material funny. These issues are addressed later in the article.

Before that it is necessary to detail previous attempts at solving the problem of incongruity. There are ways of explaining humorous incongruity that have encouraged erroneous understandings.

The history of the problem of incongruity

A number of philosophers and humour studies scholars have addressed the problem of incongruity, with some seeing its existence as a reason for an outright dismissal of incongruity theories of humour as inadequate explanatory frameworks. Alexander Bain does exactly this in *Emotions and the Will*, where he posits that many incongruities do *anything but* provoke laughter (1865: 247-8 cited in Billig, 2005: 96). Bain was not an incongruity theorist,¹ and sought to recover Thomas Hobbes's ideas on superiority for a theory of humour as degradation. Although Bain was correct that not all incongruities are funny, the general consensus in humour studies has not shifted from the idea that incongruity, in some form, structures the comic.

Michael Billig, in *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005), explains how Bain was involved in an intellectual exchange over the nature of humour with Herbert Spencer. In a reply to Bain, Spencer offers an early attempt at solving the problem of incongruity. He argues that 'Laughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small - only when there is what we may call a *descending* incongruity' (1864: 116 in Billig, 2005: 99; original emphasis). Spencer attempts to resolve the problem of incongruity in a not uncommon way that does appear to explain, at first glance, something of what is happening in successful humour.

Although it is a neat idea, a close examination shows that Spencer does not solve the problem of incongruity and that his solution is fraught with tautology. Spencer may seem to provide an adequate account of what is happening inside a humorous incongruity but he really only reiterates, as an explanation of the comic, the movement from a serious proposition or the starting point of humour, to a comic proposition or the end point of humour. In this explanation, the 'great' is equal to the serious, grand or important, and the 'small' is equal to the unserious, common and insignificant. What is *not* explained by Spencer is how the comic is defined, and how the elements of an incongruity come to be seen as incongruous in the first place. It is also a rule that does not explain all instances of humour. To offer some elaboration on what is missed by Spencer we can use an example. To descend from a position of high social status, unexpectedly and without warning, to a position of low social status, is a descending incongruity. We can imagine that this occurrence would not be funny to some. Conversely, to rise quickly and unexpectedly, from a position of low to high social status, could be seen as comical or worthy of amusement in some situations. In the latter, humour is not governed by consciousness being 'unawares transferred from great things to small' (Spencer, 1864: 116 in Billig, 2005: 99) but by the

reverse. A greater understanding of the relationship between the elements of incongruity is needed to explain the generation of humour.

Jerry Palmer attempts to pin down the humorous in a way not dissimilar to that of Spencer. Palmer describes, accurately, the similarity between the semantic structure of humour and that of metaphor. He investigates what makes an incongruity humorous rather than metaphorical, seeking the defining characteristics of each. The answer he arrives at is that 'we know that what we see ... is funny in so far as it is simultaneously plausible and implausible, but more implausible than plausible' (1987: 56). Humour is different to metaphor, for Palmer, because metaphor will have greater plausibility than implausibility.

This is an attempt that is broadly sociological because implausibility is related to ideology and to the social meanings and connotations created by language use (Palmer, 1987: 81). Despite it being an explanation rooted in the social, it suffers from the same tautological problem that Spencer could not overcome, as the implausible acts as a replacement for the unserious or comic, and the plausible acts as a replacement for the serious and unfunny. Moreover, the description also fails to account for what can be described as 'true' humour or humour that simply rearticulates stereotypes that are believed by an audience. Here the audience does not see any implausibility. Equally, it does not account for the highly implausible nature of some metaphor, which does not relate coherently to the object or event it is meant to describe.

A final example of an effort to answer the problem of incongruity is drawn from the work of Arthur Koestler. For Koestler, 'bisociation' acts as a key idea on how creativity happens. He argues in *Acts of Creation* (1964) that humour, artistic creation and scientific discovery have a fundamental similarity, in that they all combine elements that exist on different planes. This, in essence, describes the act of creation as the act of creating incongruities, but represents the problem of incongruity, because not all of these acts will create laughter. Koestler attempts to define the difference through an application of the superiority theory. Humorous bisociation, for Koestler, is different to scientific discovery or artistic creation because it will develop a 'touch of the aggressive' (Koestler 1964).

Unfortunately, this is also an explanation that cannot properly describe the different receptions of incongruity. This is because a good deal of humour is not aggressive, and it is not difficult to identify the dialectical, aggressive or competitive nature of much art and science. Koestler is criticised elsewhere for this reason (Parkin 1997: 144–6). Having examined alternative accounts, I will now present my understanding of the nature of comic incongruity via some ideas from Pierre Bourdieu.

Becoming a comedy fan through the habitus

Some social scientific studies of humour attempt to overcome the problem of incongruity, and the more convincing accounts lean toward a discussion of social structure. Simon Critchley offers an example that is quite helpful: 'in order for the incongruity of the joke to be seen as such, there has to be a congruence between joke structure and social structure' (2002: 4). Social structure is not defined in detail by Critchley, and we probably could imagine examples where there is not an exact congruence between our impression of social structure and that which we find funny. That said, it would seem that what we do find funny needs to be socially relevant or socially situated at some level. Umberto Eco makes an almost identical point: 'The comic ... seems bound to its time, society, cultural anthropology' (1986: 269). Eco describes the content of humour and does not detail a sophisticated interplay between content and social structure in comic incongruity. Returning to Critchley, he explains how 'humour is local and a sense of humour is usually highly context-specific' (2002: 67). Although this does seem to ring true at some level, there are also jokes that are extra-local. There are jokes, for example, that can be enjoyed at the regional, national or international level. Despite this, both Critchley and Eco leave us with an impression that a description of social context is needed to develop an understanding of the funniness of incongruities.

This can be built on, and an answer to the problem of incongruity sought through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus. It is argued that the construction of what is comical occurs in a special relationship to the habitus, and that the comical will have effects on the habitus in differentiation to other forms of incongruity. This process has a preformative aspect. The articulation of the relationship between the habitus and comic incongruity will often be mediated. It will be implicitly discussed by fans and will form a part of the process of becoming and maintaining fandom. Thus at a later point in the article some comments on the construction and 'nature' of fandom are used to support the theoretical ideas on habitus and humour presented.

The habitus is a concept from Bourdieu's body of work that describes the interaction between the social environment, the social actor and the body of the social actor. The habitus is created through social integration but it is individual to the actor. It sees the actor immersed in the social as it is engrained on the body. The habitus can be described as '*dispositions* which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes that are "regular" without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any "rule"' (Thompson in Bourdieu, 1991: 12; original emphasis). Bourdieu also describes the habitus as 'a structured and structuring structure' (1998: 171), as the background structure that social actors have, develop and use to inform their perception of social life.

It is clear from the description offered by Bourdieu and Thompson that, first, the habitus has a structure, and second, as 'a structuring structure' it is a structure that can be changed and might, in some instances, be disturbed, perturbed or come in to conflict with structures that do not align with it. This second malleable or affective potential has to exist for the habitus to be able to be *structuring* in the first place, for it to interact and incorporate the social world. The habitus has to be able to change and to be changed, to an extent, for it to be adaptable as a structuring agent, and for agency to exist. This is a point that may not be elaborated significantly in Bourdieu's discussions.

It is this potential, I propose, that incongruity (and humorous incongruity) will affect. The perception of incongruities will present the possibility for (re)-structuring to take place, through changed understandings, and altered perceptions, new structures can develop that are informed by the combination presented in the incongruity. This is a process that can be seen to have the potential to rupture old or existing social structures that preexist in the habitus.

The habitus is also, for Bourdieu, something that moves slowly, and can be seen to resist, at times, the forces that will emanate from a field. This inertia is developed by the habitus because of the existence of embodied properties. It is proposed by Bourdieu that embodied dispositions are quite difficult to change once they are in place and that they can lag behind the forces of the field (1998: 110). The pedestrian nature of the habitus is a key observation for evaluating the impact of incongruity. This is because it is precisely this inertia that the perception of incongruity is constructed through or against – as the social background.

The idea can be expanded. It is possible to suggest that humour is created and perceived in and through the habitus, which to link to the ideas of Critchley and Eco, is a site of social situatedness, can be local and will always be connected to and be 'fixed' by social structure.² The habitus is a useful concept because it offers a way of explaining both the social and historical situatedness of humour and will allow for an inclusion of a description of structure alongside situatedness. There are many humorous incongruities and jokes can provoke laughter for very different reasons as audiences and settings change. This is the relationship of the habitus to the content and structure of the joke. These ideas will be elaborated on through the examples that follow. At this stage it is possible to propose an allegorical rule and argue that humorous incongruity will *push away from the habitus before returning to it*, and that non-humorous incongruities will create different types of separation in the habitus. Perceived humour is a type of incongruity that does not create a threat to the existence of the habitus. This idea emerges in comments by others in humour studies. For example, in *A Theory of the Comic* (1903) Guthrie argues 'amusement ensues in a disharmonious situation only if we are simultaneously assured that everything is "all right"' (Keith-Spiegel 1972: 8). Humorous incongruity develops an affinity or complementary relationship to the habitus boundary through its confirmation of that boundary. With this, we have a concept in the

habitus that can describe the reception of humour by an audience which *includes* a consideration of many structuring factors. Humour preference would be described through the conscious and unconscious, through agency and structure, and through time and space, which all have a constitutive appearance in the habitus.

Fan dispositions and taste

These ideas can be clarified in a discussion of fan dispositions and taste. It seems obvious that an actor or audience group can align themselves with the material produced by a comedian, and that this will see them identify as fans of the comedian. This may not involve enjoying every joke but it will involve an appreciation of the broad incongruities created by the comedian that structure the performance. The presentation of these incongruities will occur not just inside of jokes, but also in the wider presentational style of the comedian. Bourdieu is clear that taste is constructed through the knowledge and dispositions that are formed using, and constructed as a part of, the habitus. Entertainment products are evaluated by social actors in this way, as Bourdieu explains:

Choosing according to one's taste is a matter of identifying goods that are objectively attuned to one's position and which 'go together' because they are situated in roughly equivalent positions in their respective spaces, be they films or plays, cartoons or novels, clothes or furniture; this choice is assisted by institutions. (1998: 232)

These comments certainly apply to comedy, and fans and audiences can identify comedy goods that are relevant to them as a form of cultural capital.

There is evidence that class groups structure and have structured their comic tastes in relation to cultural capital. Kuipers (2006) shows how comic taste is tied to cultural capital in the Netherlands, and building on this significantly with an account open to the postmodern complexity of class relations, Claessens and Dhoest (2010) explain patterns of comedy viewing in relation to cultural capital in Belgium. This is structured via low-brow, middle-brow and high-brow comic forms. Friedman (2009, 2011) has also shown how British comedy has become more relevant as a form of bourgeois cultural capital since the 1980s. It is therefore evident that comedy taste is constructed in relation to social and cultural capital. These explanations can be added to with a discussion of the habitus as a structuring structure that could be affected by the perception of incongruity. This would add comment on how, or if, a taste in comedy is constructed differently, as a process, to the construction of a taste in a more serious pursuit or entertainment form. In addition it emphasizes that comedy may involve a different system of evaluation because it is not serious.

We can look further at the construction of the habitus to find answers to some of these problems. Bourdieu explains that,

[t]he habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classifications (*principium divisionis*) of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted. (1998: 170; original emphasis)

The process of differentiation and appreciation described here can be read as a description of processes of separation and categorisation, or the creation of typologies of taste. Elsewhere I have shown how humour often aids the linguistic process of categorisation or stereotype through its semantic effect, as a rhetorical device that can hide the ambivalence, ambiguity and uncertainty of 'serious' discourse (Weaver, 2011b). Comedy will always be evaluated in the habitus and it will be actively classified and evaluated in relation to, and as a form of, cultural capital. This however, is not enough to explain how the generation of comedy fandom occurs in itself because of the important reason that comedy is prone to agitate in ways that other forms of entertainment have to work much harder to do. One only has to examine the different connotations provoked by the phrases 'offensive comedy' and 'offensive drama' to be certain of that.

Comedy or satire will often attempt to attack and overturn serious beliefs or positions, and this is often the purpose of it. It has been shown that, historically, ridicule is one of the dominant tropes in humour (Billig, 2005), and this forms the basis of the evaluation of humour in superiority theory. If entertainment products are evaluated by the subject in the habitus in relation to capital, it is likely that comedy will be evaluated vis-à-vis its likelihood to attack or ridicule what is held as constitutive in the habitus, or through its ability to aid the habitus via the ridicule of positions or forms of capital that are not constitutive and thus outside of its boundaries.

In a discussion of fan loyalty and ritual behaviour, Neale argues that 'Attitudinal loyalty or psychological commitment is conceptually similar to trust' (2010: 908). If this is the case, being a fan of anything requires us to understand and trust the effect on the self of viewing the performance. This may be especially important in relation to comedy fandom, and describes the hesitation we might have when first viewing an unknown comedian. We may not wish to view comedy that actively harms our sense of self (a self that is always formed through the habitus), and it is in the habitus that concepts of trust are developed and enacted. In the case of comedy, trust will involve understanding the likely effect of the incongruities generated on the constitutive structures of the habitus. We have seen that there are fundamental structures in the habitus, or structures that are described by Bourdieu as embodied dispositions. Humours of the body have certainly been popular forms throughout history and across societies. The philosopher Henri Bergson (1911) described

the humorous as the body appearing mechanical, as the mechanical encrusted on the living. Humour is able to attack embodied structure, through the humour of mannerisms, dispositions and repetitions, and this is one form that might generate offence, but there are also extra-bodily structures that are equally engrained in the habitus and equally likely to appear in humour that can create discomfort for social actors.

At this point it is useful to signal reference to the Russian linguist Dorflès, who describes the creation of semantic alienation in humour (1968: 104 in Atardo, 1994: 176). Dorflès explains the ““alienation,” “detachment” or “defamiliarisation”” (*ibid*) that humour is capable of creating for the subject. This process describes how humour has the potential to change the relationship between a sign and a referent, and in the case of humour that impacts on identity in the habitus, concepts of self and identity can be pulled from each other through the incongruity of the joke and realigned. In the joke that is laughed at, this process only goes so far, and the incongruity returns to the habitus. In the joke that is not funny this is not the case, and the incongruity passes through its boundaries.

The embodied or engrained dispositions involved in the creation of these effects, which are mediated through humour, are by definition more denotive or fixed – they are more essential to the subject. These would also be structures that can be connected through Bourdieu’s concept of bodily hexis to the generation of emotion. The internal or psychological element of the habitus is outlined by Bourdieu as ‘necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions’ (1991: 170). As explained previously, comic incongruity is something that moves faster than the structuring structures of the habitus. There is always an instant generation of sign-slippage (or redefinition) in successful humorous incongruity that the entropy of the habitus cannot match. This is because of the necessity of the existence of some permanence in these ‘structuring structures’, which allows for the generation of structure. This observation also helps to explain how differences in comedic tastes exist inside of social classes, as the habitus has an important experiential component, and allows for individual perspectives to, of course, be included in the development of the self.

Chris Rock and Russell Peters fan blogs

What follows is a brief description of the method used to collect examples of fan blogs that are used to illustrate the theory of habitus and incongruity that has been outlined. The article employs textual analysis to do this. The media search-engine Lexis-Nexis was used to search web blogs internationally for commentary on the comedians Chris Rock and Russell Peters. These comedians were selected because both have a recognised fan base but have also been associated with controversy over the content of their material. The issue of controversy is relevant because it would potentially allow for the collection of a greater variety or range of responses to the comedians, which offers clearer elaborations of the theory presented. Chris Rock is an African-American comedian known for his brash and

often vulgar discussions of race, racism and gender in the US context, and is internationally popular and recognised as a comedian and actor. Russell Peters is an Anglo-Indian Canadian who is less well known but does have an international audience and a strong fan base among North American ethnic groups, especially East and South Asian Americans, as well as native East and South Asians.

The name of each comedian together with the word 'fan' was used as search terms, which provided by far enough material for the scope of this study (being to find examples that test and/or illustrate the theoretical ideas proposed), and so other terms were not employed. Far more documents were found that mentioned Chris Rock (279 documents) than Russell Peters (29 documents). On sorting the documents it became clear that many were not relevant. This was because some of the documents did not discuss the comedians directly, and only mentioned them in passing. In other non-relevant examples there are only discussions of the comedians and their shows in limited detail. Similarly, some of the documents did not comment on the content of the material produced by the comedians, and others did not offer strong positive or negative comments on the comedians and so are difficult to analyse in relation to habitus beliefs because they do not express any.

The uneven results produced by the search perhaps reflects the different levels of international popularity the two comedians have achieved, with Chris Rock being by far the most well known and commercially successful of the two. This method of data collection was not unproblematic because there exists the risk that some of the commentators are promoters of the comedians. If this is the case, it is difficult to assess or avoid, but it does offer insight because promoters will use a certain fan rhetoric to align the comedians with the audience or fan groups and this will involve articulating to the habitus. All of the extracts quoted are from fans or audience members, except where negative examples are used to show a contrast.

Fan commentary on Russell Peters

This section evaluates five extracts from blogs that discuss Russell Peters, each of which offers an understanding of humorous incongruity.

The first extract is a positive description that illustrates how, despite being a non-serious discursive realm, humour is often evaluated in relation to how true it appears. This form of truth is constructed in the habitus:

Giving everyone a voice. The success of comedians George Lopez and Russell Peters represents this lesson. Their material gives the Latino and Pan-Indian markets a voice of pride. But their representation of these diverse voices actually shows the common humanity we all share. (Williams, 2011)

The comedy of Russell Peter, for this fan, produces an ethnic voice, or a voice for the group. This is significant because a group representative must produce discourse that is true for that group, in order for representation to take place. To be able to do this, the representative must not destroy the habitus of group members but must actively reinforce it. On the other hand, Peters is a comedian and so deals with incongruity. For the incongruities he offers to appear true and not threaten the habitus, Peters has to use a certain type of humour that affirms but does not break habitus boundaries for the receptive audience. This type is elaborated on further below.

The second extract is a description of the anticipation that develops in a local area before a Russell Peters show and is written by a 'digital journalist', Gilbril Korma:

British Columbians are already anxiously waiting, with intense excitement, the arrival of the international star whose parents were born in India but emigrated to Toronto... The family later moved to Brampton, the third largest city in the Greater Toronto area, with a huge visible minority population. The city of Surrey, where Russell will be appearing ... is in many ways similar to Brampton, with a visible minority population (largely South Asian) of over 180, 000, roughly 46.1 percent of the population. A huge turn-out therefore awaits him. This is already evident on Facebook where his fans have been posting messages of pure excitement and joy. (2010)

While this extract could be written by a promoter it is in no way clear that it is. This journalist is clearly a fan and so the extract is relevant to the article. It is evident that a number of similarities are presented between the habitus of Russell Peters and that of the audience in the Toronto area. This can be described as a form of pre-performance aligning that would happen in some form in discussions before most comedy performances. The audience are assured of the habitus similarities between themselves and the comedian. In this case there are no explicit appeals to cultural capital and so markers of status are not explicitly evident. This is principally because class groups or capital-producing objects are not demarcated in the description. Geographic and demographic markers are used though, to indicate groups, and so this is a more direct appeal to habitus, to belonging, locality, and security, rather than to class structure as such. What can be read as happening in this extract is an alignment with the habitus of the audience through the markers of geography, ethnicity and locality, as they are assured that the comedy (read comic incongruities) of Russell Peters sit well with their comic taste. Russell Peters shares the same background and so shares some of the same habitus boundaries. His comedy will not break those boundaries; it will affirm them and return to the audience's own concepts of geography, ethnicity and locality.

The third extract is different in that it provides an example of a personal explanation of a fan enjoying the comedy of Russell Peters.

Indo-Canadian Peters might be the funniest man working the international comedy circuit today... Peters' deft analysis of all cultures enables him to bring the house down in front of audiences of any color. In an age when comedians make a healthy living by polarizing people, Peters is a breath of fresh air. I've witnessed him win over every audience he's performed for... This Indian guy turned an initially skeptical (and 90% black) audience into diehard fans in five minutes flat with a routine focused almost exclusively on the regional and cultural linguistics of the word Nigger. In front of an Asian audience, Peters would have dissected the cultural differences between Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos and Vietnamese. In front of an African audience, he would have riffed on the humorous pronunciation of the 'l' in peoples' names (it's the clicking sound, by the way). And in front of a white audience, he would have discussed parenting. The guy's a true chameleon, with a nuanced understanding of people on a cultural level that transcends race. (Powers, 2007)

The writer of this journalistic blog evidently sees cultural understanding as something that should be encouraged. The blogger describes Peters as possibly the 'funniest guy on the planet'. This is because his comedy does not 'make a healthy living by polarizing people' but because it discusses some of the nuances of cultural understanding. This is a serious statement in many ways, and Peters is funny because of the serious task that much of his comedy performs for this blogger. These are all negotiations that have to take place in the habitus. Evaluations of other cultures, a belief in multiculturalism or the understanding of other cultures are all habitus beliefs that are constructed through experience, social capital and cultural capital. The habitus of this writer is one where understanding cultures and their nuances are important activities. Peters will, through his comedy, not disrupt, destroy or undermine this belief for the fan as some comics might. Again, Peters' comedy is evaluated for its truth value - it is comedy that will enlighten and perhaps more importantly, play with the nuances and particularities of cultural difference. These are the aspects of culture that would have to be ignored by more polarising comedy, and connected to this, it is also the material that could be used to construct prejudice. Simultaneously, for this writer, this is the material that needs to be understood if cultural understanding is to increase. It is the closeness of potential prejudice and cultural knowledge that signifies the stretching of the habitus in this instance, as other comedians would fail if they attempted similar work, which might grate with the habitus of this fan.

Much of Peters' material could receive readings that are not as favourable as those presented. Some of his comedy could be viewed as offensive, or at least reliant on race stereotypes, even if he goes some way to attempt an unpacking of those stereotypes. The

next extract presents some of those stereotypes and attempts an explanation of why they do not become offensive:

His jokes move from culture and race observations such as Indians being proud of being the cheapest race in the world (Chinese are a close second according to him) to his thoughts on body hair on men. While he pokes fun at his own and other cultures it is never in a mean-spirited way and I think that is why it works. (Prince, 2009)

Stereotypes of groups in relation to money, those of thriftiness and fecklessness, are frequently the subject of ethnic, race, and racist humour. They have no sustainable truth value as dichotomous stereotypes that fail to describe the complexity of social reality, yet they have a recurring presence in humour, can act as a part of the rhetoric of humour (Weaver, 2011b), and can also impact on the identity formation of members of many groups. In this example the pernicious element of stereotyping is not recognised and Peters is described as never being 'mean-spirited'. While the stereotypes presented may not cause tension in all readings, they would at least have the potential to disrupt habitus boundaries. Here it is Peters' convivial character that prevents the rupture of habitus boundaries and the perception that what he is doing has an aggressive element to it.

The final extract is a negative comment and sees a fan of Garry Shandling explain his disappointment at Shandling being replaced by Russell Peters at two shows. The lack of perceived humour in Peters' comedy is described:

... now we have to settle with Russell Peters and his stupid jokes about how different cultures are, in fact, different. Actually, don't settle. Go see something funnier, or stay home and watch The Larry Sanders Show, instead. (Semley, 2010)

This extract echoes much of the content of other extracts that Peters discusses a number of other cultures, and that he describes some of the differences and nuances of those cultures, but it does so with a completely different emphasis. The habitus of this writer comes into play as the comedy is judged not to be funny. In this habitus, the humour does not make a comment on multicultural societies, or discuss race, ethnicity and culture in an intelligent form, rather it simply states the obvious. The obvious cannot stretch the boundaries of the habitus because it is not incongruous. While there may also be other motives for the writer's dislike of Peters, the comment that the jokes are obvious and so unfunny is enough to render the example relevant here.

Fan commentary on Chris Rock

This section will examine five comments on Chris Rock to explain how the habitus also emerges in account of the humorousness of the material. The first extract on Chris Rock asserts the truth of his comedy:

Here today, gone today, Chris Rock joked while hosting the MTV Video Music Awards in 1997, back when Spice Girls and Fiona Apple were the hottest ladies around. An exaggeration yes, but not that far off and even more true today. (Helligar, 2010)

Although the comic trope of exaggeration is acknowledged in this extract, the truth of the joke is also asserted, and so we see a paradoxical assertion of the true and comic meaning of the joke. Of course, the joke forms an adaption of the phrase 'here today, gone tomorrow', which highlights passing fads, in order to show the disposable nature of popular music. This is an extract in which views on popular music are formed in the habitus, certainly in relation to cultural capital, and the joke, while exaggerating or stretching these views, does nothing to overturn them.

The second extract forms an ambivalent evaluation of a film featuring Chris Rock called *Good Hair*. The film attempts a light-hearted and comic discussion of the hair of black women and the blogger describes her mixed feelings at seeing the film and the debates that could follow.

As a black woman, I'm worried... I want to see the film, but I'm not sure I'm ready to put my hair on trial. And I certainly don't want it to be portrayed as a joke... When Oprah has to periodically make a statement about her hair and explain if it's "real" or not, I shudder. When people criticize President Obama's daughters because they are running around in braids, I get a little enraged. I feel this indignation because black hair has been ruled a problem to be dealt with and the most acceptable solution is usually to straighten it so that it resembles nonblack hair. This phenomenon can be attributed to many things within the black community and outside of it, but it generally goes back to a poor view of black people... Just like black skin is not the idealized version of beauty, black hair is not viewed as the most ideal hair. (Bass, 2010)

This extract demonstrates the emergence of one element of the habitus of the speaker, around issues of the body, race and racism. This black woman is aware of how humour can impact on identity. The semantic alienation of humour appears as a potential to her if ridicule of the hair of black women is presented. This is a possible effect of the film. The use of negative descriptions of black hair and physicality are, in wider society, a regular component of the embodied racism aimed at black people globally (Weaver, 2010, 2011a).

The writer is worried and fearful of the comic enterprise, and this is a movie that probably could not be made 'seriously' because of the potential for the articulation of racism, and the construction of embarrassment or alienation of the audience that might result. The habitus is engrained on the body, in the form of bodily dispositions. Hair styles also form a way of displaying and coding the habitus, and can reflect cultural capital. It seems that the potential problem with this movie, for this blogger, is that it could represent an attack or generate attacks. The semantic alienation of humour could disturb the serious beliefs that she wishes to hold on race, ethnicity and hairstyles, thus disrupting the habitus.

Next I discuss one negative and one positive response to Chris Rock and his performance in the play *The Motherf**ker With the Hat*, which is a comic production.

There's just nothing like it! It's a show that makes people cry and literally rock with laughter. I was looking around at people grabbing their stomachs and rocking with laughter. It also makes you question your morals, your everything! Chris Rock is saying things and you're like, 'Okay, that's horrific and I get it at the same time'. Some stuff he says the end you're just like, 'I can't believe I'm kind of agreeing with you'. (Del Signore, 2011)

The key point in this extract is the comment on morals. The viewing of Chris Rock for this audience member leads to a stretching of the habitus because the incongruities presented lead to new perspectives being offered on sensitive, 'moral' subjects. The stretching of the habitus is also enacted as the subject agrees with Rock but is reflexively positioned at a distance from that agreement. The next extract offers a very different description of the same play, and is a lot less positive:

... you might want to spend the night with the trannies over at Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, a toned-down version of the 1994 movie. It's now touted as the family-friendly gay musical. Broadway is also seeing a new play starring Chris Rock titled *The Motherf**ker With the Hat*. Have no doubt that these productions will be nominated for Tony Awards. Such is the state of today's cesspool of popular culture. (Bozell, 2011)

Here it is obvious that Chris Rock is not viewed as humorous or morally acceptable. In this extract there is not the questioning of morality provoked through humour that we see in the Del Signore quote. How does this extract fit the theoretical model? The habitus is not returned to in this example, the writer may not have seen the play, but the title no doubt is enough, coupled with Rock's reputation and the appearance of 'trannies' on Broadway in '*Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*', to pass straight by habitus (or moral) boundaries. It is clear that the incongruity created by what a Broadway play should be entitled in a correct moral universe, and the name *The Motherf**ker With the Hat*, is not one that this writer finds

humorous and symbolises a trend in society that grates with his habitus - described through the 'cesspool of popular culture'. This is a clear evaluation of the material in relation to cultural capital but it is also one that cannot provoke laughter because the correct relationship with the habitus does not materialise.

The final extract on Chris Rock discusses how abortion jokes are dealt with by a number of comedians. Discussing abortion in humour is a topic that is at times seen as problematic because, obviously, it can be seen to trivialise what is for many a morally serious and highly emotive issue. Therefore, this is a topic on which moral views are frequently constructed in the habitus, and so it is not difficult to see that jokes about the topic could create semantic alienation if they were not received as funny. There would exist a disconnection from habitus beliefs as the constructed image of the joke moves past those beliefs to suggest other opinions on the morality of abortion. The extract compares a number of recent jokes on abortion:

I suppose it has always been that some comedians rely on breaking taboos to get a laugh. And so we see abortion humor on the rise - and getting darker all the time. It started with a Chris Rock bit in 2005, which I actually thought was good, despite the raunchiness, because it contained truth. Then came not-so-funny Sarah Silverman in 2007 and *The Family Guy* ... in 2009. But all abortion humor has value, according to pro-abort Sarah Seltzer at RH Reality Check, because it takes the negative, untouchable edge off it... (Stanek, 2010)

The quote describes Chris Rock more favourably than the other comedians and this is because his material contains a certain amount of 'truth'. Again, it may seem odd that comedy is evaluated in this way, as it is a distinctly unserious domain of language that does not necessarily require truth criteria in order to generate meaning. Humour is, despite this, capable of reinforcing truth as a form of rhetoric (Weaver, 2011b), and this is represented in this extract as the comedy develops meaning for the viewer. Comedy that is not truthful for the actor and covers emotive topics may put pressure on habitus beliefs - it will stretch rather than reinforce those beliefs. In this example the Chris Rock joke returns to the habitus because it contains some truthfulness.

Conclusion

Attempts to solve the problem of incongruity in humour studies examine the conditions under which some incongruities are seen as funny and some not, or attempt to explain how incongruities differ from one another. The developed attempts by Herbert Spencer, Jerry Palmer and Arthur Koester are all ambitious but contain a number of shortcomings, the most significant of which is the tendency to be tautological. This article proposes that an answer to the problem of incongruity can be found in Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus.

The habitus is described by Bourdieu as a structuring structure, a framework that is both ingrained on the body as dispositions and slow to react or subject to inertia. It is argued that humour can represent a form of ridicule and semantic alienation that can move much faster than the habitus because of its ability to set up systems of connotation through sign-slippage, which are contained inside humorous incongruity. The construction of comic fandom takes account of this process and audience groups will require humour that uses incongruities that bend but do not break habitus boundaries. This is the rhetoric at the heart of humour, as the habitus is manipulated but not destroyed by what we find risible. The argument presented could be tested much further. This article offers a theoretical discussion of the problem of incongruity that is illustrated through examples of commentary on Russell Peters and Chris Rock but a further comprehensive and representative analysis of these fan groups and their discussions would add significantly to this outline of an attempt at solving the problem of incongruity.

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Notes

¹ To explain some terminology for readers new to or from outside of humour studies, it is widely accepted that three types of theory have dominated humour studies historically. These are: 1) superiority theories – the idea that humour conveys a sense of superiority over the butt of the joke; 2) incongruity theories – the idea that humour is structured or created through the creation and observation of an incongruity; and 3) relief theories – the idea that humour and laughter provide a sense of psychological relief or tension for the receptive audience.

² Koestler, although using the superiority theory to explain the problem of incongruity, offers a similar explanation elsewhere. He explains that 'the receptivity for various kinds of comic stimulus thus varies according to the audience's intellectual habitus, its dominant trends of association' (1949: 29). This is a usage of habitus that develops before Bourdieusian theory and is drawn from the Latin meaning of habitus as that of a habit or a condition. This is certainly a similar explanation. Gundelach (2000) also uses the 'habitus' as a way of describing joking relationships that exist between Scandinavian countries. As an example aware of Bourdieu, the theoretical explanation in this account is not well developed vis-à-vis Bourdieusian theory.