Sociology of Laughter and Humor
Daniel Uwanamodo

Sociologists have sporadically touched upon the concepts of humor and laughter for multiple decades. Researchers from across the globe have used philosophical, psychological and linguistic conceptions of humor and laughter to discuss and explain different social occurrences such as immigrant assimilation, group interaction and dynamics, and even the creation and delineation of localized cultures (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Shifman and Katz 2005). According to scholar Anton Zijderveld, humor derives from institutions and interactions (Zijderveld 1983). Per the words of another professor Iddo Tavory, jokes can be “ways for people to construct a shared history and a solidarity that is based on shared experiences and symbols” (Tavory 2014: 278). All of these different research methods, though they utilize humor and laughter in slightly different ways, point towards a single truth: no one should argue that humor and laughter are non-sociological.

What humor and laughter do in regards to sociology is most readily observed in a group setting. My personal contention is that laughter has strong sociological ramifications because its presence, or lack thereof, provides insights into the nature of people's relationships with other people and institutions. Other sociologists concur. Tavory writes that “jokes are always tailored to specific social experiences,” Shifman and Katz speak about the use of humor to assimilate immigrants into a culture, and Fine and De Soucey talk extensively about how joking is a group-building mechanism (Tavory 2014: 2; Shifman and Katz 2005; Fine and De Soucey 2005). If laughter is the response to jokes, as one would naturally think, then someone's laughter could hypothetically be used as a marker of group alignment.

Yet a problem arises in that particular understanding of laughter. Even though Zijderveld defines laughter as “the language of humor” and suggests that the presence of laughter establishes something as being
humorous, he does so with a caveat (Zijderveld 1995: 5). Humor and laughter, despite seeming inseparable, do not have such a deterministic relationship. When Zijderveld writes, “there is humor without laughter and laughter without humor,” he highlights that laughter is just a physical action, and that the presence of humor does not guarantee the presence of laughter (Zijderveld 1983: 26). The idea that laughter and humor are not inextricably linked is critical in shaping my understanding of laughter, and is the backbone of one of this paper’s central ideas.

In this paper, I look to answer the question, “Why do people laugh in situations they don’t find funny?” Do they have a motive behind it, or is there some other reason that people cannot explain themselves? In order to come up with a credible answer, I will first frame laughter in a sociological context and discuss the question using my frame. Afterward, I will use the writings of sociologists Emile Durkheim and Erving Goffman to appraise my question and give a wide breadth of sociological answers.

In order to conduct the first task sufficiently, I will augment the established terminology of Zijderveld, Tavory, and others, and separate laughter into two types: real laughter, which I define as “what an individual does as a result of perceiving something as humorous,” and fake laughter, which is “laughter that happens despite an individual not perceiving something as humorous.” This distinction both sufficiently addresses Zijderveld’s point that humor and laughter can exist without the other and provides me with a new way of asking the sociological question this essay seeks to solve: “Why do people fake laugh?”

Before I start, I reiterate that real laughter serves a key social function. The presence of real laughter speaks to one’s sense of humor, which reveals information about that person’s affiliations or experiences. Restated, I am proposing that the presence of laughter can be used to indicate a person’s familiarity with a group, set of beliefs, or institution.

Consider the following: there are different types of humor, and accordingly, different cultures to which types of humor belong. Modern sociologists concur with this idea. Tavory writes, “humor can be located
on a spectrum of its reach,” and “other [jokes] would only be understood by those in the know” (Tavory 2014: 278). The phrase “getting a joke” encapsulates this idea. It suggests that there is a distinction between an in group, a group of people who recognize a joke’s humor, and an out group, a group of people who do not. Getting a joke—that is to say, having the mindset to perceive what one sees or hears at any given moment as funny—indicates where one is in relation to that joke’s host culture, per Gary Fine (Fine and De Soucey 2005). The real laughter which comes as a result of a collection of people finding a type of humor funny—which, in turn, delineates a group—is an indicator of familiarity with the aforementioned culture and membership within said group.

We can use Tyler Perry’s Madea comedy film franchise as an example of humor creating or indicating the boundaries of groups. Much of the humor of the Madea films comes from unique situations and characters that only a small group of people relate to. One of the reasons for this is that the cast is mainly African American and the target audience too is African American. Humor localized to members of different ethnic groups, or ethnic humor, is defined by Shifman and Katz as “humor directed at racial and nationality groups, denigrating alleged attributes of those groups” (Shifman and Katz 2005: 834). From this interpretation, much of the humor of the Madea films comes from exaggerations of attributes of African Americans. Fortunately, these caricatures are not as derogatory as they seem. Shifman and Katz also state that ethnic humor may function as a way to communicate positive ideals to members within the group and build solidarity, rather than mock and trivialize the group (Shifman and Katz 2005). The real laughter resulting from these films’ jokes indicates that those who laughed share some commonality in their sense of humor, as real laughter presupposes that the people get those jokes. This commonality forms a group whose defining characteristic is people who find Madea funny. Though not everyone finds Madea humorous, that is not sufficient to establish Madea as not being humorous. Since other people have been shown to enjoy this style of comedy, we know that
there is a set of people with a certain mindset that consider it humorous. And both sets of people—those who think these jokes are amusing and those who do not—are groups.

I have established that real laughter indicates familiarity with cultures, which frames one half of laughter in a social context. With this framing in mind, I will now discuss the question of “Why do people fake laugh?” with my own opinions.

**Personal Perspective on Fake Laughter**

A couple of justifications for fake laughter immediately come to mind. In the context of interacting with others, there are noticeable benefits to laughing when the other expects you to laugh and comparatively few detriments.

Group settings are prime examples of where fake laughter shines. When executed believably, fake laughter can be indistinguishable from real laughter, and both forms of laughter can suggest things about an individual, true or otherwise.

An example where fake laughter may be useful is at an obscure networking event—perhaps in a certain industry like computer science—where many people in the room may be unfamiliar to each other. This is a place where an experienced fake laugh can prosper. Say the fake laugh, a college-aged male, approaches a table where his fellow networkers, both men and women, are talking to a CEO or executive who is entertaining the table and telling jokes. It is absolutely critical that the fake laugh give the impression that he is just like the other networkers. If the CEO tells a computer science-related innuendo or joke, it is paramount for him to follow suit with his colleagues and laugh if they do. This suggests to his colleagues that he understands the same concepts as them—that they all had a similar mindset in approaching the joke that resulted in recognition of this intelligent, esoteric humor. This in turn suggests to the executive that he is no less qualified in that area than his colleagues. The only thing that would suggest that something was wrong or that he were an outsider
would be if he remained quiet when the others laughed, or if he laughed when the others were silent.

The reasoning behind this method is explained best by Gary Fine in his two articles on group culture and joking. In the first, he writes: “idioculture,” or small group culture, “consists of a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction” (Fine 1979: 734). In the second, he writes: “As groups form, they develop humorous themes that are returned to repeatedly throughout group interaction” (Fine and De Soucey 2005: 1). Humorous themes within computer science, as they are within all of their respective fields, are only perceptible if one has a corresponding type of knowledge. The knowledge is employed as the basis upon which the joke is built. The joke tests whether or not the networkers are familiar with the group—in this case, the computer science community. If real laughter is a way to prove allegiance to the group, as suggested, then fake laughter, which is physically indistinguishable from real laughter when perfected, is a flawless substitute. Through fake laughter, the woman can convince others that she belongs to a group that she might not truly belong to. She has superficially aligned herself with a group: she appears to be involved but all she did was enter the event and laugh at the right time. While the argument can be made that upon closer inspection she runs the risk of being discovered as a fraud, there also exists instances where she goes undetected and assimilates smoothly. That this instance can occur is enough to substantiate fake laughter as a potential strategy and superficial alignment as an achievable and desirable state.

Laughter is an action that suggests something about a person’s mind. When people laugh at my jokes, I take that to mean that we have similar senses of humor in some area. From that information, I infer the presence of a group. The group is defined around humor, and it closes and opens based on whether people understand jokes taken from that humor.

But as other sociologists have proven, this is not a perfect system.
Laughter and humor can occur independently of each other, and in this disconnect lies the problem. The only way I can tell if someone understands my joke is by their laughter. There could be people in my groups who do not understand my humor at all, and they could have superficially aligned themselves with my groups through fake laughter. If I were someone who gave special privileges to members of these groups, such as free handouts, attention, or favors, then fake laughers in the group would benefit from these privileges. I would have few ways to question their loyalty, as I have no insight into their minds. This, to me, is a justification for fake laughter. People recognize that there are benefits to being part of certain cultures, and in pursuit of these benefits, do things to suggest alignment with said cultures.

Preface to Durkheimian and Goffmanian Interpretations of Fake Laughter

Before I begin to discuss each sociologist’s perspective separately, some time must be taken to outline the structure of the information that will follow. I also believe that the Durkheimian interpretation and the Goffmanian interpretation resemble each other slightly, yet differ wildly from mine.

Both Durkheim and Goffman speak at length about social interactions—both individual-to-individual interactions and individual-to-group interactions. They arrive at essentially the same conclusion: that people feel compelled to keep up appearances in some capacity, but do so in different ways. In The Rules of Sociological Method, Durkheim writes extensively about the forces that shape interactions, which he calls “social facts” (Durkheim 2013). To him, these are supraindividual forces, or forces that exist independently of individuals, above all individuals, yet still constrain all individuals equally (Durkheim 2013). In other words, his interpretation suggests that at the top of every society there exists laws whose powers can be felt by everyone: a top-down explanation for why people feel pressured to fall in line.
Since I classified Durkheim’s explanation of people’s propensity to conform as a top-down one, the logical classification for the Goffmanian explanation would have to be a bottom-up one. Goffman’s explanation of social interactions is highly individualistic and personalized. Instead of suggesting that there are intangible forces acting on everyone simultaneously, he suggests that each individual interaction is a performance in itself (Goffman 1959). Within these performances, there are designated performers and audience members, and there are actions each could perform that are within or outside established sets of acceptable actions (Goffman 1959). For Goffman, there are a series of mini rules and norms for each performance that the performers and audience members learn and internalize. They are pervasive like social facts, but nuanced and highly dependent on every aspect of the situation, aspects like the presenter’s appearance, mannerisms, and setting (Goffman 1959). This consisted of individual interactions aggregating to compose a general standard, whereas Durkheim spoke about general rules influencing individual conduct.

To go into the Durkheim analysis, I will mainly focus on The Rules of Sociological Method. I will use this book to expound on the concept of social facts and link this with both types of laughter. I will finish by briefly incorporating The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. There are topics on religion and religious communities which I will embroider onto this discussion of laughter and humor.

To perform the Goffman analysis, I will utilize The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life to apply his dramaturgical perspective on social interactions to humor-based interactions and devote heavy attention to the duties he assigns to the audience of the presenters—the people who would be performing either the real or fake laughter.

**Durkheimian Interpretation of Fake Laughter**

As I defined it, fake laughter is when people (or an individual) perform the isolated physical action of laughter in a situation where they do not perceive humor. If laughter usually comes when humor is per-
ceived, as per Anton Zijderveld, then fake laughter is definitely a strange phenomenon (Zijderveld 1995). What other reason would people have to laugh other than at something they find humorous?

I already answered this question with my own suppositions. I proposed that laughter was a measure of integration with a group, and implied that fake laughter was the easy, go-to move for those with duplicitous intentions. To me, there would be no other reason to fake laugh other than to deceive others about what your allegiances are and possibly derive benefits from places you have no business deriving benefits from. Durkheim, however, would disagree on both the intentions behind the fake laughter and the nature of the person performing fake laughing.

In “Rules for the Observation of Social Facts,” the second chapter of The Rules of Sociological Method, Durkheim proposes that the objects of observation for any society should be social facts (Durkheim 2013). He writes, “the first and most basic rule is to consider social facts as things” (Durkheim 2013; 60). The moment we accept that social facts are things is the moment we acknowledge that they have perceptible effects on the way that people act. The key to providing a Durkheimian understanding of why people fake laugh lies here. Potential fake laughers might not perceive the humor, but per Durkheim, they still feel compelled to join others and laugh if that is what others are doing. In fact, one could argue that potential fake laughers feel so strongly compelled to join others and laugh because they do not perceive the humor like everyone else does.

To prove the existence and compelling force of social facts, Durkheim uses a hypothetical which explains the effects of breaking a norm established by a social fact. He contends that social facts are most visible when their norms are violated—not when they are followed. In chapter one, he writes: “If I do not conform to ordinary conventions, if in my mode of dress I pay no heed to what is customary, the laughter I provoke, the social distance at which I am kept, produce…the same results as any real penalty. Even if in the end they are overcome, they make their constraining power sufficiently felt in the resistance that they afford”
(Durkheim 2013; 51-52). By writing this, Durkheim is suggesting that there are norms that communities put in place, both intentionally and inadvertently, that seek to dictate the actions of members of that group. While there exists room for expression and movement within these constraints, blatant refusal to conform results in increased attention in a mild situation and ostracism in the worst cases.

Take the example of clothes he used. Communities living in hot, humid climates would likely tailor their clothes to be light so that they could stay as cool as possible. Within that intent, all kinds of short clothes might be fine. Tank tops, swim trunks, T-shirts, shorts, and open-toed shoes would be inconspicuous. However, if one were to break this implicit convention by wearing a winter coat and boots in public, she would draw attention to herself. Her presence alone becomes salient. The intrinsic desire in many people to avoid that kind of attention or ostracism is why social facts are so often followed. To Durkheim, those things that people do to avoid having attention given to them is what should be observed in any society (Durkheim 2013). That is a social fact.

To a community, a sense of humor could be one such shared norm created by a social fact. As I suggested before with the Madea example, specific communities find specific ideas humorous—just like how certain communities dress certain ways (Shifman and Katz 2005). To not share that sense of humor, to not participate in the social ritual of laughing when other members of the community perceive humor, would be tantamount to defying a social norm and breaking a social fact. And, as Durkheim proposed, although breaking social facts is possible, the resistance that arises is often enough to discourage people from doing so (Durkheim 2013).

So if humor is a norm, and the social fact that accompanies humor is the presence of laughter, then the reason why people laugh when they do not perceive humor becomes easier to understand. Rather than having a malicious intent like I suggested, it is entirely possible that people could be encouraged to laugh simply due to fear of attracting unwanted
attention or because they fear ostracism from the rest of the community.

An alternate way to use Durkheim’s work to contextualize laughter is to juxtapose his definition of religion, which establishes and clearly draws the boundaries of a group, with my definition of laughter, which puts said boundaries of a group on display, and Fine’s writing on idio-cultures. Taken from The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, we have Durkheim’s definition of religion as: “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim 2008; 44). To interpret this definition: every religion is organized around things that are sacred and profane. Those who share the same ideas on what are sacred and profane are part of a “Church,” which is just a moral community. My interpretation of laughter is one that is quite similar. Rather than being organized around things that are “sacred and profane,” laughter organizes itself around things that are humorous or not humorous. Similarly to religion, those who share the same ideas on what is comical are part of a community as well. If these communities and theories are as similar as I am suggesting, then a bilateral relationship between Durkheim and my ideas should be possible. Similarly to how I applied Durkheim’s to mine, I should have no problem doing the reverse.

If laughter is the ritual that people perform to establish superficial alignment—to suggest integration with a humor-based community—then the faking of religious rituals should imply integration with religious communities. For this metaphor, laughter is analogous to religious rituals, fake laughers are analogous to fake ritualizers, and the perception of humor is analogous to adherence to the particular religion. I can apply this idea to my religious experiences with no issue. For a large part of my life, I was not Christian. However, I attended Sunday church services, sang and worshipped, and tithed as I was told. None of my family elders questioned whether or not I was Christian. The contents of my mind, which held the truth about my lack of religious faith, were unknown to my elders and my
actions were enough to suggest that I was integrated within the Christian community, so much so that no one bothered to confirm whether or not I was. Similarly, whether one really perceives humor is something you can never know for certain, but the actions of laughing establish superficial alignment with a humor community, suggesting the perception of humor.

To conclude, the Durkheimian lens does two explicit things to contribute to the discussion about fake laughter. It provides a different answer for “why do people fake laugh,” and reifies humor and laughter as invariably sociological. First, from The Rules of Sociological Method, the Durkheimian lens contextualizes the definition of a social fact in the areas of humor and laughter (Durkheim 2013). This framing allows us to believe that people, rather than being malicious, might just feel compelled to laugh because of the overpowering, constraining effects of social facts. The second thing it does originates from an interpretation of The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. By showing that religious communities as defined by Durkheim are similar to humor-based communities, we can look at laughter and humor as deeply sociological concepts that can give us insight into the nature of people and societies in much the same way that religion can.

**Goffmanian Interpretation of Fake Laughter**

The two reasons I have proposed as solutions to the question of why people fake laugh do not even begin to cover the entire range of human thought. My personal reason ascribed malicious intent to the fake laughers; I saw them as duplicitous and looking for a way to capitalize upon the fortune or favor of others. The Durkheimian reasoning painted fake laughers more charitably. In that framing, they seemed more helpless and docile than my interpretation, as it ascribed their behavior to the near irresistible compulsive power of social facts (Durkheim 2013). But there are still more reasons why people laugh at things they do not find risible. There are individuals that laugh because they believe it is their place to laugh when a joke is told, regardless of whether they perceive humor or
not. This point of view, compared to the preceding two, paints the position of the fake laughter as a respectable one and the action of fake laughter as respectable and kind.

The idea that there are actions that are designated for certain positions is one that originates from Erving Goffman and is developed in Goffman's 1959 book, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. This book’s main theory, known as dramaturgy, categorizes individuals as either performers or audiences depending on the specific situations they are in at a given time (Goffman 1959; 17-18). Per Goffman, performers put on performances, which are “all the activit[ies] of an individual which [occur] during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers,” and performers’ audiences observe the performance and respond in their own unique ways (Goffman 1959; 22). Goffman also takes care to define a specific type of performance, a front, which is “that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general or fixed fashion… for those who observe the performance” (Goffman 1959; 22). This ideology involving performers, audiences, and fronts is the third way I will contextualize the concepts of humor and laughter. Through understanding the dramaturgy of humor and laughter, the question of “why do people fake laugh” can be answered in a different way still. Furthermore, like in the Durkheimian example, a proper framing of laughter and humor in this sense will help establish them as sociological concepts.

Goffman has manifold ideas regarding dramaturgical performances that can be applied to the context of humor and laughter. Each of them buttress the others and frame the specific interaction, starting from when a joke is told and leading all the way up to laughter, as a performance.

I will start with the following quote from the first chapter: “An audience is able to orient itself in a situation by accepting performed cues on faith” (Goffman 1959; 58). What this quote means is that a performer does not always just let the audience react randomly. Throughout the duration
of a performance, the performer and the audience are working together towards one goal: the uninterrupted presentation of the particular performance. To this end, there are specific things that a performer does in order to assist the audience in executing certain actions, and the result that the performer expects from his audience is full compliance in executing that action. Fine and De Soucey concur fully with the Goffmanian interpretation: “joking is temporally immediate, and calls for audience involvement; the absence of a response becomes a judgement on the teller and/or the remark” (Fine and De Soucey: 3). This dance between performer and audience is particularly visible in stand-up comedy. A comedian will subtly notify her audience when she has told a joke: after telling the punch line to the joke, the comedian may pause for a bit. She may immediately change expressions upon completion and crack a goofy smile. In some cases, she herself might laugh to indicate that, at least to her, humor is present. To the trained audience, all of these things are signals that the comedian, the performer, just finished saying something she perceived as funny. So the only logical response is to laugh. Now the audience may have arrived at that conclusion in absence of the performer’s cues, perceived the humor on their own, and laughed. This is fine. But if not, the cues represent the implicit agreement between the performer and audience; the cues are the comedian saying, “This is the moment I expect you to laugh.”

If this is the case, then once more, perhaps fake laughter is not as malicious as I made it seem. If the performer’s only expectation was the laughter of the audience, then fake laughter is just a form of pure, respectful compliance. The perception of humor is a sufficient condition, as laughter is sure to follow, but it is not necessary. Laughter, regardless of the reason, is what is needed to placate the performer.

This is one of many ways to contextualize humor and laughter in a dramaturgical sense. We can consider another area by taking a second quote from The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life: “When the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorpo-
rate and exemplify the… values of the society” (Goffman 1959: 35). This is exactly the type of mindset I was referring to when I gave the examples of inside jokes and the humor of the Madea franchise. Moreover, it echoes Tavory almost verbatim when he says “humor tells us us something about social life” and most likely inspires Gary Fine’s work on idiocultures (Tavory 2014: 277; Fine 1979). Group-specific inside jokes are not just examples of the values of the group. They are direct products of the values of the group (Tavory 2014; Fine and De Soucey 2005). Inside jokes would not exist if there were no group, no separation which constructs an inside and an outside. By stating the above quote, Goffman characterizes interactions as performances. Because humor fits squarely within the requirements to be considered performances, we can transitively conclude that humor is an interaction that can be analyzed sociologically. From this quote, we can look at joke-telling as a type of performance as well: the one telling the joke plays the role of the performer and audience are those listening to the jokes as they’re told.

The final concept related to fake laughter that can be analyzed perfectly by the Goffmanian lens is superficial alignment, which I briefly talked about earlier. While I declared it to be a viable strategy, I also qualified it by saying that upon further inspection, one’s ruse might unravel. Goffman has a perfect explanation as to why a particular situation comes at a higher risk than another. I mentioned that Goffman has a special category of performance called a front, wherein three aspects of the performer—the performer’s appearance, manner, and setting—are always already established before the performance (Goffman 1959). By reexamining the fake laugher, who is also an audience member, as a person who is simultaneously executing a front, we can analyze the potential shortcomings of the superficial alignment strategy.

Goffman writes that “when an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it” (Goffman 1959: 27). This means that every fake laugher who wants to align themselves with a group needs to consider the groups’ preferenc-
es on appearances, mannerisms, and setting to maximize the chance of successful alignment. As we know, groups and institutions create unique idiocultures, which construct norms on acceptable appearance, mannerisms, and setting in the group environment (Fine 1979). The risk that comes for those seeking to superficially align themselves derives from lack of adherence to these standards.

Consider again the example of the computer science networking individual I gave before. If all of his fellow networkers were dressed in business professional and he wore casual clothes, the same process would occur. Or in another example, if a middle-aged man joined a table populated by children far below his age who had developed their own idioculture, his fake laughter at their esoteric humor, regardless of how realistic it sounded, would not be enough to convince the children that he is an established member of the group (Fine and De Soucey 2005). He would not be able to superficially align himself; he would be exposed because he, an older man, did not fit into the established specifications of the front.

What we learn from applying superficial alignment, which is what I believe is the objective of fake laughter, to Goffman’s writings is that superficial alignment and fake laughter are merely a form of front. This conclusion, similar to the conclusion I reached when I applied superficial alignment to the Durkheimian interpretation, reifies laughter and humor as sociological concepts. Additionally, the Goffmanian interpretation gives us a different resolution still to the question of “Why do people fake laugh,” similar to how the Durkheimian interpretation does. Dramaturgical theory attributes the decision to fake laugh to the implicit agreement between the audience and performer that prioritizes the smooth procession of the performance over anything else. Rather than seek to take advantage of the performer, or be constrained by ubiquitous social facts, fake laughers act in the interest of the performer and maintenance of his performance.
Conclusion and Thoughts

Humor and laughter are incontrovertibly sociological concepts. Some sociologists have used these concepts as a means to examine group dynamics (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Fine 1979; Tavory 2014; Zijderveld 1995; Zijderveld 1983), some utilize humor and laughter to interpret race and ethnicity (Pérez 2013; Shifman and Katz 2005), and others still have managed to tie humor and laughter to the biological disciplines of medicine and health (Tavory 2014; Cain 2012). Moreover, if these modern sociologists are not convincing enough, a Durkheimian analysis and a Goffmanian analysis both identify laughter as a key force in dictating the outcomes of myriad interactions. From a Durkheimian point of view, the expectation of laughter can constrain all of us equally, as a social fact does. From a Goffmanian point of view, laughter can be one of the mutual goals between performers and audiences, which keeps interactions going. To Durkheim and Goffman, humor and laughter operate smoothly under the classification of social phenomena.

But not every person laughs every time they perceive humor, and not every person perceives humor every time they laugh. Although humor and laughter are frequently associated with the other, as Zijderveld supplies, the two can appear independent of the other (Zijderveld 1983). This consideration gave birth to the question, “Why do people fake laugh?” and different sociologists provided unique interpretations to this question. My conclusion, a synthesis of personal anecdotes, ascribed deceitful motives to people who laughed when they did not perceive humor and painted fake laughter as diabolical. The solution derived from Durkheim added a corollary: perhaps fake laughers are helpless conformists to nearly inescapable social facts (Durkheim 2013). The answer derived from Goffman added the consideration that some fake laughers may be doing a respectable service to the performer, precipitated by the implicit conventions binding audience members and performers.

These three explanations depict fake laughers as either abhorrent, powerless, or beneficent. Although these three explanations likely cover a
wide range of one’s possible motives for laughing when he does not perceive humor, this still does not encompass the entire range of possibilities. Some people may laugh without thinking. Others may enjoy laughing in general and do not need humor. Some might not have the intention of capitalizing on opportunities that they did not rightfully deserve by being part of a group. Because this is not a question that has been asked heavily in the sociological sphere, there are not many original studies conducted and no generally accepted answers. Moreover, there are no interpretations of Durkheimian or Goffmanian theory that specifically look to answer the question of fake laughter.

But perhaps there should be.

As a rule, humans will never be able to invade other human minds and understand their motivations for doing what they do. The only information people can interpret is actions. However, actions taken alone have no emotional part to them. Actions can be detached and unrevealing. Certain actions carry the connotation of ideas, like tears for despair, kisses and hugs for love, and laughter for humor, but any action can exist independent of the ideas with which it is commonly associated. Every action one takes in the presence of others will affect how others perceive him. Some actions have emotional force behind them. Others do not. Nevertheless, all are equally sociological.

Because we can never know one’s true intentions, we should take the next best step and understand the possible consequences of their actions. We might never truly know why someone laughs at something unamusing, but if we consider multiple deeper sociological theories explaining why they might, we can prepare ourselves for any situation that may come as a result of us assuming their laughter is real.
References


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