

The reflexive mobility of humorous incidents

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Abstract

Humorous accidents and incidents are often sites of meaningful discovery in field-based social sciences, and in this paper I explore what I call the ‘reflexive mobility’ of such moments. Rather than focusing on the interpretive quest for multiple meanings imbedded in such events, I examine how events are remembered against very different personal associations that change through time and space. The paper explores the importance of recognizing the impact of mobility on our ongoing reflexive analyses of social encounters, thereby suggesting an alternative framing for the social study of humour that has tended to focus primarily on its ‘role’ or function in different cultural and social contexts. It also provides an extension to the way we might consider ourselves to be ‘reflexive’ fieldworkers, allowing for movement and the passage of time to re-inform analyses made of events past. With illustrations from my first field research in the Scottish Hebrides in the 1980s, this paper is a thought piece about humour, laughter, and the place of mobility within reflexive interpretive quests for meaning.

Keywords: Mobility, Memory, Humour, Laughter, Reflexivity, Scotland

In this paper, I consider how personal and sometimes ‘humorous’ accidents and emotion-laden events generate lasting memories that through the passage of time and space come to be recognised as productive sites of changing ‘knowledge’. These events are often swept aside in the serious business of ethnographic production, even in this age when at least some level of reflexivity is *de rigueur*. They tend to be labelled anecdotal and distracting, and are generally consigned to the basket of tricks we pull out for coffee-table conversation or to liven up lectures by enlisting funny stories from ‘the field’. Things that make us laugh out loud are, of course, not always meant to be funny, nor are they at all separable from ‘more serious aspects of social life’. Not only is humour often context and person-specific, but it attaches and detaches itself from events and interactions as time passes. If research is a process, then so too is humour, and one location of examining such a process is in the

reflecting body/mind of the social researcher who moves in and out of fields and experiences. Even if the writing of fieldnotes and texts freezes the process on the page, the memories of the field continue for a long time and are retold and refigured through the teller's maturing understandings.

Most sociological and anthropological research that has considered humour 'seriously' has been curiously static and unreflexive (cf. Billig 2005, Mulkay 1988, Carty and Musharbash 2008). It has lingered productively on how humour, joking and laughter fulfils various 'roles' in particular social situations. Powell and Paton's edited volume, *Humour in Society: resistance and control*, does what the title suggests in focusing on the many uses of humour for social control, tension management, etc in different cultural contexts (1988). Gouin's more recent research outlines four different types of usage (2004). These demonstrate how 1) humour acts to preserve inequalities of power, how 2) humour may be seen psychoanalytically as providing a release, or 3) as a socially functioning control, eg diffusing anxiety in awkward situations, or 4) how humour functions to fill the gap between what is expected and what happens (ibid: 25-26). These are all useful categories that most examples can fit within, but in classifying humour in this way, and in focusing exclusively on 'role' and structure, we are limited to a functional gaze on the moment, rather than on a processual search for meaning as moments move in and out of humour. Billig (2001) emphasizes the integral role of humour in 'the social order' more generally with particular emphasis on relationships between embarrassment, empathy and humour. The work *does* consider the movement of consciousness through time in a section called, 'Laughing about it Later' (ibid: 35). However, laughing at oneself about something that's excruciatingly embarrassing, but only 'later' after the initial horror has passed, is only part of what is possible if one is truly

reflexive through the passage of time. Yes, we might at one moment in time laugh because of a sensed disruption in the social order (thereby reifying a notion of normality in a particular social order at a particular time), but to be truly reflexive in the longer term is to allow for oneself to acknowledge the many layers of experience and alternative social worlds we work and live in when we think or remember about the meaning of that episode of laughter.

For this discussion, in order to briefly illustrate the potential that a mobile reflexivity has in ethnographic research, we have to challenge some common assumptions about the limits of reflexive research in anthropology. One such assumption is that to be reflexive is to recognize the way in which observations and experiences are selectively filtered into our consciousness through relatively static renderings of 'who we are'. For example, one might point out how one's ethnicity, gender, political persuasion or education might affect one's experience *in the field* and therefore one's ethnographic gaze. This is of course a very important component of reflexive scholarship, but it is a misnomer to assume that these qualities of 'self' are fixed in terms of their import or relevance. It is also an oversimplification to assume that the various 'fields' and 'not fields' we encounter in our social lives should be considered separately from one another with regard to our reflexive positioning. A more accurate and holistic rendering of reflexivity is one that fully appreciates how we experience our daily lives with frequent reference to recent and distant memories of places, people, conversations and activities remembered first hand or borrowed from others. Events don't just 'happen', but they 'become' through our memories and others'. Our published texts often fool us into believing in the fixity and timelessness of an ethnographic present, but even this fixity is challenged by acknowledgements we may

make in the next edition or the next text that reposition the tales we tell ourselves and our many audiences about our remembered experiences.

For a long time, ‘remembering’ has been described as a constructive, dynamic process that is related to established interests (Bartlett 1961:312). Memory is a responsive process that develops as one moves through a variety of different social spaces. Certeau observes, “(just like) those birds that lay their eggs only in other species’ nests, memory produces in a place that does not belong to it... it is outside of itself, it moves things about.” (ibid: 86-87). But to say that memory just moves the egg or ‘thing’ from one place to another doesn’t do justice to the transformative processes of time and the generational process of growing knowledge through social experience – the egg should no longer be imbued with the same meaning when it is moved. I wish to demonstrate how stories may move in and out of humour through this productive process of remembering through a range of places and times. I can only demonstrate this accurately with my own life experience that has moved across a number of continents and social landscapes. The personal and sometimes humorous stories I have to tell have travelled through these various places with me, productively escaping (through reflexive memory) the social boundaries and relationships that produced them.

A Gift in Scotland

I spent three years in the mid-1980s on a little island in the Inner Hebrides of Scotland called Siall¹, and my observations of ‘incomers’ and ‘islanders’ formed the basis for my doctoral thesis. I lived for much of my time in a farmer’s cottage on the north end of the island, just half a mile away from my nearest neighbours who were long-established incomers on the island, originally from the north of England. They had a

nine-year-old daughter, Hazel, who adopted me like a big sister and visited me daily. When the time came to travel down to Oxford for an extended period of library research, I knew my little companion would miss me, so I made her a special present. I formed a tiny little black and white sheep out of 'fimo' clay that hardens in the oven, and I put it on a silver chain that I had had since I was a girl. Hazel was overjoyed with the gift and ran home immediately to show her mum and dad and the two tenant men who boarded at her house the 'bonnie wee sheep'. Several weeks later I returned to Siall and when Hazel came to visit, I immediately noticed that wasn't wearing the necklace. So I asked her where it was, and she replied, "Em... it's not here". "Did you break it?" I asked. "No.." "Did you lose it?" I suggested gently. "No..." "Well where might it be?" I asked. She hesitated for a few seconds, obviously wondering what I'd think, but then her face lit up with an enormous proud smile as she exclaimed: "I took it to the gift shop and it got sold!!"

When she first said this I was shocked and dismayed. I thought of the time put into the making of the sheep, and the loss of my little silver necklace. I also worried that this might mean that I was overestimating the attachment between us. But then the corners of my mouth turned up as I thought of the English tourists in our tiny island gift shop in the village, buying a 'local Scottish Island product' made by an American anthropologist for the opportunistic daughter of English incomers. I almost guffawed. I have told this basic story for the past 20 years in many different places and times. It's a very funny story when told anywhere but on the island where it all happened because the listener is shocked and then amused to find a meaningful gift suddenly transformed into a commodity – the story *can* fit an incongruity theory of humour here. I first told the story to Edwin Ardener, my supervisor at Oxford, in the plush surrounds of his rooms in St. John's college. He exploded with laughter and he

immediately told me about an experience he had many years before with the Bakweri of the Camaroons. The Bakweri chief he often visited had a daughter who had a pet rat in a cage that she liked to play with. Edwin was intrigued by the unexpected evidence of pet-keeping, but then one day the cage was empty. He asked the girl, ‘Where is your little rat?’ And she replied, ‘I ate it!’ Edwin and I both laughed out loud. We didn’t need to explain the obvious parallels to find them funny, but here it’s useful to draw them out a bit. In both cases, the actions of a little girl in the ‘field’ shocked the fieldworker who had ethnocentrically assumed shared conventions of gift-giving or pet-keeping. We laughed because we recognized the errors so easily made by so-called ‘interpreters of culture’. However, in my case I also felt that my reaction dug much deeper than the intellectual one because my feelings were entangled in a close friendship that I had developed over the year. Edwin’s recollections seemed more clinical – he was merely observing and laughing at behavioural incongruity while I was very much a participant in a social interaction where an expression of affection was scorned.

A few weeks later, back on Siall, I told the story to a close islander friend, and she started to laugh at the thought of the gift shop sale, but then commented with a bit of anger on local knowledge about Hazel’s alcoholic parents who spent most of their surplus earnings on whisky. She told me that the girl’s mother had gone to the shop to get Hazel a box of chocolate for her birthday and decided to get a bottle of Bells whisky instead, ‘so they could *all* celebrate her birthday – just think how that poor child *feels!*’ She added that this wouldn’t be allowed on the mainland where social services would take the girl into care. Suddenly I needed to rethink the meaning of the sold gift. Little Hazel was just following her parents’ example.

So many years have passed and Hazel is grown up and has moved away from the island. I've only visited a few times since the 80s, but on one visit I learned with some horror that one of the two tenants who lived at her house throughout her childhood has been accused and convicted of paedophile offences that took place during most of Hazel's youth, including the time I lived on the island as her neighbour. My heart weeps for Hazel and I think often about what I could have done if I'd known this at the time. And yet the humour in the telling of the tale of the sheep necklace is still there, even as it is underpinned now by this sad new understanding. I can still laugh pretty loudly when I tell it in introductory lectures on Maussian social reciprocity gone awry, or on the distinction between a gift and a commodity.

What this tale suggests about humour and laughter is that they emerge and disappear around and beyond events. Humour might associate itself with particular unexpected moments, but its meaning is always embedded in subtle and shifting social relationships. Recalling events past in the light of shifted social contexts, experiences and meanings will affect one's understanding. The next example also takes us back to the Isle of Siall in the mid-1980s and demonstrates the potential transitory nature of humour.

Cat in the Bin

One quiet chilly day in winter, when hardly any visitors were on the island and when the days were very short and the nights in the pub very long, I remember heading outside to take out the rubbish. As I approached the big dustbin I could hear a terrible screeching noise coming from inside! I peeked under the lid very cautiously and there at the bottom was a very disturbed hissing wild cat. I quickly popped the cover back on and ran in to call a friend in the village who told me that by an amazing

coincidence, the RSPCA man, known locally as ‘Cruelty’, was visiting the island for a couple days. Sure enough, later that day Cruelty drove out to visit me. I watched him come down the road in his uniform. He stopped and looked in the bin and then met me by the front door. I said, “Thanks *so* much for coming out here. I don’t know where it came from or how it got in there, but I’d be so grateful for your help”. Cruelty went over to look again and said, “I’m afraid this cat has got to be put down,” before he took out his gun, opened the lid, took careful aim and shot the cat and then buried him up the hill. “Thanks so much for your help!” I called out after him as he departed.

The next day in the village, several friends told me about how Cruelty had come in for a few drinks the night before and reported to the barman and several locals at the bar how he had had a very strange experience that day – he told them there was an American lady staying in Benmore who had *put her sick cat in the bin*, and that when he saw it was very sick and when he told her that the cat had to be killed *she didn’t even look upset!* We all roared with laughter, confirming the ridiculousness of the scenario. Then my friends in the village told me that they had ‘put him right’ and had told him they knew me well and that I never owned a cat. I remember how I felt at the time to hear this story, and it made me laugh and feel a warm rush of communal belonging – here I was living for only a couple of years as an incomer amongst far more established incomers and islanders, and in the central island shrine that is the bar of the Siall Hotel, my honour as a moral citizen of the island, and my position of belonging in the community was publicly defended. The object of ridicule and the source of laughter shifted from the shocking *possibility* of my being a crazy American cat killer to the obvious local naivete of the visiting and not very popular RSPCA man. For our purposes, the story reveals how understandings of local belonging and

identity may be exposed through laughter at any given ethnographic moment. However, while laughter is always very telling, it needn't remain intrinsically fixed to meanings generated from the reporting of a particular story at a particular time. The tale of 'The Cat in the Bin' might be totally forgotten now on the island, only living on in my own fading memory and notes. Or maybe it survives on the island at my expense rather than at Cruelty's now that I have forfeited my local status and have long lived far away? Perhaps right now, across the globe, a child of someone I knew on the island twenty years ago is mis-remembering a story told once upon a time over dinner and saying to a friend: "Mum told me 'bout an American lady who lived here for a while and actually shot her old cat in her bin." And instead of laughing the friend grimaces and says, "that's cruel"!

A Last Laugh

Laughter 'becomes', humour 'arrives', laughter 'fades', humour defers to other feelings. Events associated with humour and laughter are reassessed by a host of different witnesses and participants in light of social changes that take place *in situ* as well as in light of changes in a single person's recollections and understandings that come about through growing maturity, experience and personal reflection.

Bataille (1997:305) suggests that laughter allows for one to revel in the moment, and empowers the individual at that moment, and maybe this is often true, but a sociology or anthropology of humour must move beyond the moment so that it can gaze back at it with new sensitivities that emerge out of the new experiences that our futures provide us with. This recognition allows us to move beyond descriptive studies of efficacy, function, role, and structure to encompass the sort of reflexivity that enriches the tales that we tell through a lifetime. It demands a different philosophical

engagement with fields as places set in time, with ethnographies as printed texts. Humour, like reflexivity, like ‘the field’, and like ‘memory’, should be considered more as a journey than a destination. As the ethnographer engages continually in an extended dialogic relationship with her maturing and mobile self that moves with her in and out of different social spaces, she can stop and laugh at a funny moment and understand it more clearly as just one part of what is bound to be an ongoing process of reflection.

Notes:

- 1 The Isle of Siall was home to a small intimate community of approximately 150 full-time residents. Note that I’ve changed the name of places and people to preserve anonymity, and note too that I’ve drawn on this particular ‘gift’ example to illustrate a slightly different, if related, point about memory and reflection in another publication (see Kohn in press).

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