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THE JOKING RELATIONSHIP IN AN URBAN VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION

by Cristy Stevens

The Mainstreet club is a small voluntary association located in a small Midwestern city. It is a formally-chartered corporation and part of a large international federation of clubs designed to provide economic and social services to the communities in which they are located.¹ It is characterized by membership criteria and a stated purpose of service to community. The Mainstreet club presently lists twenty-four active members, a small size in comparison with other similar service clubs in the city where it is located. In the course of my research, I became aware of a rather formalized pattern of joking and banter within the club. It appeared to be something more than the normal teasing and gibing characteristic of clubs of this type. This paper attempts to establish the parameters of this relationship and to determine whether it can be defined as a joking relationship in the social anthropological sense of the term.

The term "joking relationship" was defined by Radcliffe-Brown in a paper written in 1940. He stated that it was:

a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease and make fun of the other, who, in turn is required to take no offense. (p. 195)

He further defined the relationship as either symmetrical or asymmetrical. A symmetrical relationship is one in which both persons tease or make fun of each other, while an asymmetrical relationship is one in which one person jokes at the expense of another who does not retaliate. He is required to accept the gibes and banter good-naturedly. In addition, the joking relationship was defined as a combination of friendliness and antagonism. In any other context such behavior would almost certainly lead to hostilities, but in the joking context, it is not meant seriously and should not lead to open conflict. It is simply a relationship of permitted or "privileged disrespect". It is a relationship with established parameters which carry strong negative sanctions for those who venture beyond them.

Radcliffe-Brown and others who have dealt with this relationship have traditionally defined it within kinship settings. In this context "privileged disrespect" is one of two methods of avoiding existing or potential hostilities that could prove disruptive within affinal or consanguineal

kin relationships. These relationships are especially important in simple societies where kinship units constitute the primary arena for economic, social, and political activities. The other means of avoiding overt conflict in the kinship context is through strict patterns of avoidance which do not signify hostility but demonstrate extreme respect through limitation of direct personal contact. In this way, Radcliffe-Brown defines the joking relationship as one means of providing an outlet for hostilities and avoiding conflict.

In a later paper, first published in 1949, Radcliffe-Brown stated that the concepts of friendship and alliance were crucial, but not well-defined, and form a generalized category of social behavior. The joking relationship is one form of this broad behavior category since the parties involved in this pattern almost always consider themselves (and are considered by others) to be friends. Since the publication of Radcliffe-Brown's papers, the concepts of friendship and alliance have been studied in terms of networks and in terms of political processes. Although these have provided useful analytical tools in both kin- and non-kin-based contexts, they need not be elaborated here.

Turning to the Mainstreet club, it is necessary to note that the club is organized into three decision-making and administrative groups. These are the club officers, the Board of Directors, and committees. These groups are designed to be autonomous and independent of one another. Instead, however, there is considerable overlapping and cross-cutting of personnel and duties, so that most members are involved in more than one of these groups simultaneously. This is a consequence of the small size of the club and creates a unique decision-making process characterized by consensus. These formally-organized decision-making groups are, in addition, crosscut by smaller informal sub-groups. I have defined these sub-groups as cliques following the criteria established by Jeremy Boissevain in a book entitled, Friends of Friends. He defines a clique as:

a coalition whose members associate regularly with each other on the basis of affection and common interest and possess a marked sense of common identity.

(1973:174)

He further states that they are usually characterized by little or no internal specialization and that they are not goal-oriented. In this way they are distinguished from other goal-oriented sub-groups such as factions and coalitions. In other words, they are simply clusters of individuals who are not only linked to each other, but have a common identity recognized by members and non-members alike. The cliques of the Mainstreet club can be identified in two basic ways.

The first is on the basis of seating proximity during the weekly club meetings and the second is on the basis of a joking behavior.

The club is organized spatially around tables that are arranged in a "U". Members of the cliques normally maintain distinct seating patterns in various places around the "U" from week to week. This is the most obvious distinguishing factor to an outside observer.

There are two cliques within the Mainstreet club and both are comparatively small. One of them contains three "core" members who are related through affinal and occupational ties. This clique is by far the most distinctly bounded group in the club. The second clique is really a pairing of two club members with whom a number of other members are associated and incorporated from time to time. Although technically a pair, I have defined it as a "clique" on the basis of its similarities in form and function to the first. The paired individuals represent "core" members and the other occasionally-associated members can be described as "secondary" members, or potential members depending upon the context.² At any rate, these cliques are recognized as distinct entities by both members and non-members within the club. They are not goal-oriented, but do at times represent polarities between which the remaining club members are aligned. Both cliques maintain their kin, occupational, and affective ties beyond the boundaries of the club. There have even been some cases in which new members were recruited into the club because of outside relationships with individuals in one or another of these cliques.

The polarities represented by these two cliques are evident in the "Devil's Advocate" role assumed by the larger clique (the three-member clique) and in a pattern of joking which exists between these two groups. It is the second major factor (in addition to the seating arrangements) which distinguishes these cliques from each other and from the other members of the club. Although joking and bantering are not unusual phenomena within the context of the club meetings, disrespectful teasing and sarcastic allusions are more frequent characteristics of these two cliques than of the individuals-at-large in the club. The vast majority of the jokes and gibes are initiated by members in the larger clique at the expense of the smaller clique and/or its associate members. Reprisals are rare on the part of the object-clique, and this indicates an asymmetrical joking relationship. The forms of the joking are usually verbal, although other behaviors have been observed, such as one past instance of an impromptu "mock" wrestling match between two individuals representing the two cliques. It is significant that the larger clique always takes the initiative and can be considered the aggressor, while the members

of the smaller clique rarely, if ever, initiate gibes or bantering. Instead, they are in a retaliatory position. They normally do not retaliate, but when they do, it is usually in one of two ways. The first is in the form of redirecting the specific allusions or comments to other club members. The second and most often used retaliatory form is a simple retort. Retaliation is really the exception rather than the rule, however, again indicating an asymmetrical joking relationship.

The joking behavior between these two cliques appears to have two distinct but related functions within the club. The first is a direct result of small size and is that of providing an outlet for hostilities. The importance of club solidarity as a factor in the continuing viability of the club cannot be overlooked. Disruptions and conflicts could have more disastrous results for this small club than for larger clubs. Through joking and bantering, club members can vent the hostilities that inevitably arise from personality conflicts which create disruptions that might prove disastrous for the club. In this sense, the joking is an integrative device that provides an outlet for the inevitable personal differences arising from the bonding of many unique individuals who must get along with one another. When the club operates smoothly, the stated purposes of the club as well as the vested social, economic, and political interests of its members can be achieved.

The second function of this joking behavior is also integrative in nature: it provides a mechanism for promoting familiarity and friendliness between club members. It operates on the assumption that joking and teasing are "privileged" disrespect and used between parties that consider themselves to be friends and thus in a special or "privileged" relationship with one another. This is important in as much as only "friends" can indulge in relationships of this type. When an individual is the object of good-humored banter, he is, in effect, being recognized as a part of the group.³

This integrative function is also illustrated by a related phenomenon--gossip. Max Gluckman (1963) has defined the integrative functions of gossip and scandal and suggests that gossip acts to establish the boundaries of a group since only recognized members can participate in it. It effectively separates "insiders" from "outsiders" since outsiders have no frame of reference for participation. He also outlined several rules which define the limits of gossip, and thus prevent it from becoming an unduly exploitative mechanism for social control. The joking relationship appears to operate in this way in this small club. Thus, it can be viewed as part of the broad category represented by alliance and friendship.

A final characteristic of the joking behavior in the

Mainstreet club can be seen in the limits imposed on it by the club members. In other words, one must not take this behavior to the extreme. This happened occasionally during my residence in the club and the situation was always met with an uncomfortable and embarrassed silence, recognized by everyone present. It is resolved only through changing the subject entirely or by placing the comments, remarks, or allusions within a more humorous and less harmful context. It is in this area that the polarity formed by the two cliques appears and the resulting threat of a rift or schism in the club is avoided or at least diverted. This is done through negative sanctions, such as silent disapproval and exclusion from the gossip and joking relationships within the club. The guilty member(s) are only too aware of the problem and it is up to them to seek a solution, usually through putting the statements in a less harmful context by "laughing them off" or changing the subject. Thus, this pattern is bounded and any overstepping of the established boundaries is frowned upon and negatively sanctioned.

In conclusion, it appears that the observable patterns of bantering and joking in the Mainstreet club can be classified as an asymmetrical joking relationship as defined by Radcliffe-Brown. Although the club is not a kinship unit, there is a strong incentive for group unity which guarantees the club's continued viability. Overt conflict between members of the two polar cliques could result in irreparable damage to the club and possibly cause its failure. This would not be advantageous for the individual members who have vested social, economic, and political interests in the club's continuing existence. Not only are hostilities vented through the relationship, but friendship lines are also reinforced and the combination of antagonism and friendliness is evident. Although teasing and bantering are a part of any group, the Mainstreet club contains a formalized pattern of joking. Thus, the joking relationship as a social form found primarily in kinship contexts is also found within a voluntary association in complex culture. As such, it offers additional information for the cross-cultural study of this formalized pattern of behavior.

FOOTNOTES

¹This paper is the result of research conducted during the time from January, 1974, to March, 1975. All proper names have been changed according to standard anthropological practice.

²For additional discussions on this aspect of clique structures, see other works by Jeremy Boissevain and J. A. Barnes, who have dealt extensively with the concepts of groups vs. non-groups.

³An example of this occurred after I had been associated with the club for about six months. I became involved as an "object" in this pattern on several different occasions. It was at that time that I felt that I had been completely accepted in the group and regarded as a formal part of the club.

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