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# A Dress of Dissent: normalisation and socialisation, comedy and the outsider

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## Abstract

This study sought to explore normalisation and the process of socialisation in child development through the lens of comedy and the concept of being an outsider. Through a critical realist lens (Archer, 2003; Bhaskar, 2016), I have used a qualitative, retrospective analytic autoethnographic (Anderson, 2006). This generated exploratory knowledge of normalisation, socialisation, comedy, and the outsider. I used myself as the participant and analysed my data using experiential, inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). I found that one's identity must be empowered within a given social environment, which for myself resulted in a discrete counter-normative identity of challenging 'social boundaries'. This deviancy is similar to court jesters and comedians who choose what they present on stage.

Keywords: comedy, socialisation, normalisation, child development, outsider, boundaries, barriers, belonging

I have been considering the importance of normalisation and socialisation in child development and how the world of comedy seems to play a role in shaping these processes. A crucial consideration is about how people who do not fit into societal norms might be perceived as 'wrong' and how this relates to being an outsider. I wanted to explore my own role in these phenomena and how they connect to identity and the concept of deviancy within societal norms and comedy. This study has the socio-historical and cultural context of the UK in the 1990s and I identify the relationships between the phenomena during that era.

## 1. Background

Comedy begins at a young age within the process of normalisation. Normalisation is the process in which people encounter and adapt to societal norms (Davis, 1995). Paul McGhee's (1971) developmental theory of comedy focuses on the stages children go through as they learn to understand and appreciate humour. His theory suggests a link between these stages and a child's overall cognitive development. The four stages are: 1) finding humour in incongruous actions toward objects between 18 months and two years; 2) the misuse or misnaming of objects and people between two and three years; 3) developing an understanding of jokes with simple puns, riddles, and wordplay between three and five years old; and 4) for children five years old and over, understand the humour that relies on social situations, sarcasm, and irony. This last phase also entails jokes that require mental processing. With this in mind, it is clear that there is a process of the construction of normality related to comedy. Through this process, it could be assumed that anything against the congruent is not normal. As a two-year-old child learns that a sock does not belong on their ear, they understand that this is incongruent and not appropriate.

Therefore, the process of socialisation results in what is perceived as 'normal'. The process of socialisation is a multifaceted and interactive communication process that encompasses individual development and personal influences, involving the reception and interpretation of social messages (Pescaru, 2018). Even considering what Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) concluded helps shape our understanding of how this happens. While not directly addressing children's humour, Freud (1960) provides some

interesting concepts that can be linked to how their uninhibited nature leads to unconscious humour. Freud believed humour derived from logical absurdity (Minsky, 1980/2014), which positions children's lack of a social filter differently from those adults develop. Children often readily express these 'unconscious desires' in ways that break social norms (Freud, 1960). For Freud, this is closer to 'the comic' whereby the person enacts a misdemeanour (Neale, 1981). Thus, this can manifest in their humour. They might find bodily functions funny, which adults might consider rude, or they could laugh at situations most would not find humorous. Children's lack of inhibitions allows them to bypass social propriety, making their humour seem nonsensical or unexpected to adults (Freud, 1960).

As children grow and are educated into 'society', it is possible that they learn what is considered 'proper' humour. This can stifle their natural uninhibited humour and lead them towards more socially acceptable jokes (i.e., wit-work, Freud, 1960; Wollheim, 1971). Wit-work is the condensing of ideas or a play on words, allowing us to express something hidden or taboo in a socially acceptable way. Interestingly, Freud positioned laughter as a battle between the forces of civilisation and the conscious mind's restrictive demands (Ragland, 1976), suggesting the potential for breaching acceptability (Freud, 1960). However, the clash between children's developing internalisation of societal rules and their natural instincts can sometimes lead to unintentional humour. In any case, we learn what is socially normal by others' reactions to laughter and what they find funny. Social learning theory, championed by Albert Bandura (1977), suggests we learn through observation and social interaction. Humour plays a vital role in this process. Children (and adults) observe how others use humour to navigate social situations, connect with others, and build relationships (Bergson, 1980). This observation helps them develop their sense of humour as a social tool, allowing them to learn and adapt to different social settings.

The history of comedy is equally fascinating and helpful in understanding the phenomena under investigation. Comedy has transitioned from jesters' reflection to social development, by becoming a method of group formation – this innately creates an outsider (e.g., Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Lynch, 2010). Court jesters in medieval times functioned primarily as entertainers, offering amusement through humour, wit, and

often physical comedy. Their jokes rarely challenged the status quo and mainly served the entertainment of the nobility. Over time, jesters began to incorporate social commentary into their routines (Hyers, 1968). They used humour to poke fun at societal norms, criticise authority figures (often in a veiled way to avoid punishment), and expose social injustices. Nowadays, comedy can be used as a social tool to challenge social norms; comedians can be perceived as ‘marginalised’ (Chattoo, 2019; Mintz, 1985), whereby their actions are seen as just for comedy and not shameful or too deviant.

Two important theories of humour are the Benign Violation Theory (McGraw et al., 2012) and the incongruity theory (deriving from thoughts from Aristotle, Rhetoric (III, 2). Other thinkers include Kant (1951) and Bergson (1980). Benign Violation Theory (McGraw et al., 2012) positions humour as violating something, but it must be benign to the audience of the humour. Incongruity theory matches this by identifying that we laugh at something incongruent with our expectations. These theories will be applied within this study as ways to understand the potential humour present. Nonetheless, real lives might not be reducible to mere humour, so I have positioned aspects as anti-humour. This refers to the play on the joke and as such is second-order humour (Nachman, 1982; Lewis, 1986). Those employing anti-humour may seek a reaction that is funnier to the third party, not so much the direct audience.

This study sought to explore normalisation and the process of socialisation in child development through the lens of comedy and the concept of being an outsider (i.e., not a part of the in-group). I explored the following research questions:

1. What relations are there between socialisation, normalisation, and the ‘outsider’?
2. How does comedy or the wider theatre impact this process?
3. What factors might be key influences?

## 1.1. Positionality

I am a white, able-bodied, late-thirties British researcher with short brown hair. I was born, raised, and educated in the UK. I come from a working-class family. My route to academia was through reflecting on life and the construction of the world that

resulted in training and socially mobilising to a position within a university. My profession used to be centred on theatre; specifically, I taught, produced, and performed improv comedy. These are important factors relevant to the context of the story. In the late 1990s, I was in a secondary school in a town in the south of England in the UK. As a child, I remember looking in a book called *Crap Towns* (Jordison & Kieran, 2003), this town ranked 9<sup>th</sup> place. During my childhood, the town managed to get out of that ranking by building a large shopping centre. The district in which my family lived was within a rougher area of the town – but, as can be expected, this district was subdivided to make us feel we were in the better area of the district. To set the context further, during living there, the garden wall was once smashed in, the foster children next door threw cigarette butts into our garden, and there was a firework fired down the alleyway nearby (and I was by the alleyway). By all means, compared to numerous other people, my experiences are not perceptively worse.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Type of Inquiry

I have used a qualitative, retrospective autoethnographic method to generate exploratory knowledge of normalisation, socialisation, comedy, and the outsider. As such, I used Anderson's (2006) approach to analytic autoethnography with critical realist philosophy (Archer, 2003; Bhaskar, 2016).

Anderson (2006) proposed five features of analytic autoethnography: (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity in social and self-analysis, (3) active visibility of the researcher, (4) involvement of informants beyond the researcher, and (5) demonstrable commitment to theoretical analysis.

The critical realists' perspective matches autoethnography in a number of ways, especially upon employing Anderson's (2006) analytic method. Critical realism can be explained by three philosophical assumptions: ontological realism; epistemological relativism; and judgmental rationalism (Bhaskar, 2009, 2016). First, by assuming ontological realism, through this lens, the belief is that the external reality is independent of our knowledge of such reality. It is therefore believed that reality is

stratified into the empirical domain of our perceptions and experiences of it, the actual domain of events and activities that may not be observable but can be experienced, and causal structures that have observed empirical patterns (Gerrits & Verweij, 2013; Danermark et al., 2019, ch. 4). Second, epistemological relativism means that the asserted knowledge of reality is limited by our education, life contexts and positionalities, and other residual factors (Lawson, 2003). Third, judgmental rationalism, as Isaksen (2016) explains, is about our competing claims regarding any knowledge that should be resolved through their explanatory power of the phenomena or rational adjudication.

I believe that this method allows for a greater understanding of the phenomenon of interest as an initial investigation. The study brings to the fore the query of our use and the necessity for norms through comedy and theatre, and an understanding of child development. The method allows for an inquiry about the concept of norms as a crucial component of development and seems to make available academic curiosity. In the study, I seek to identify cultural events and mechanisms that are key to understanding child development, comedy, and norms through the lens of someone who seemingly purposefully positioned themselves on the edge as an outsider.

## 2.2. Ethical considerations

This study presents unusual ethical issues as it is auto-ethnographic and was not planned in advance. The study involves reflecting critically on my past experiences as its only participant. As a result, it was not necessary to obtain ethical approval since it pertains only to my own life. The confidentiality standards are different for this study compared to those using human subjects who are not the researcher. Consequently, the predominant ethical consideration was relational regarding how to report others within the story. To the available extent, I abstract anyone within the story to not make them identifiable (Ellis, 2007).

## 2.3. Data Collection

The data was gathered through oral history, which is an accepted methodological approach for autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). The complexity of the



topic would be difficult to obtain an understanding of from children, albeit not impossible. This study sought to initiate an exploration of the phenomena. I compiled a number of relevant personal stories through critical reflection (Rier, 2000). I began by listing my stories and creating notes about them. I further broke the stories down into their narrative components, critical reflection, and outlining their socio-historical and cultural context. Thereafter, I chose one of the stories that exemplified the phenomena well.

In addition, I sought to better understand the case example of my story and to overcome the issues of perception and memory. I triangulated my story with a family member, who was only utilised in the study as a useful source and tool to stimulate my memory, fill in any gaps in memory, gather new information about me, and validate the personal data gathered.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

To analyse my data, I used experiential, inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach was used to explore the experiences and perceptions of the phenomena, alongside the contextually situated, yet actual events of my life. Additionally, the data analysis focused on my perspectives (prospective or recalled from then, and now) and my behaviours throughout the story (as per experiential, reflexive thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke, 2022). I generated initial codes after a thorough, detailed revisit and reading of my story. I avoided making assumptions about what the data meant in the early stages of coding by using memos (Nowell et al., 2017). Eventually, I grouped similar or overlapping codes (step 2) and collated all relevant data into themes (step 3). I reviewed and refined these into themes and sub-themes (steps 4 and 5). My academic curiosity about the topic led me to interesting inquiries through the process that supported the analytic process.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. The reward from my theatrical desires

Upon reading the first part of the story, there are a few key apparent facts that materialise. I knew what I wanted at a young age and have a memory of this. This seemingly was reinforced when the opportunity arose. It is noteworthy that I chose to gain attention and enjoyed obtaining strong reactions, which is crucial for the whole story. I suggest that my early experience of engaging in comedy and theatre only acted to entice me to gain more opportunities.

In my childhood, I grew to enjoy the reaction of performing comedy and theatre, where I was not subjected to ridicule, but I could *play* the ‘marginalised’ action or person. We learn social norms through socialisation, which sets the parameters for our interactions. One way this seems to occur is through humour. For those not in a position of power, humour and laughter express the boundaries of the given social group. As such, Piaget’s (1936) stages of development assert adolescents form their identities such as within social groups. McGhee’s (1971) developmental comedy stages would indicate at this age, adolescents engage in more complex humour. This use of comedy to process what is socially acceptable means that the norms depicted are within the social environment, and learned through social context (i.e., Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, 1977). One can get laughed at and gain knowledge of what not to do, say or be. This is the socialisation process through the superiority of those not doing or being that marginalised action or person surviving (extending from Mintz, 1985). Yet, it seems possible to present the marginalised actions or people as benign violations that separate the performer from the incidents (research question 1).

#### 3.1.1. My Story: the context

I had been interested in acting and theatre since I was 5 years of age with little contact with actually doing theatre at that age. I think the highlight of engaging in actual theatre was a line I had in a Christmas show about the game mastermind that got a good laugh. This may have been one reason I wanted to engage with comedy, or I might have already

found this desire. The earliest memory I have of comedy in my childhood is laughing so hard I started to cry. I do not recall the joke.

### 3.2. Discrete counter-normative identity

Humour calls into question the audience's beliefs and challenges norms (Lee, 2019). Humour that presents incongruously with social norms, such as a boy in the 90s dressed in clothes that would not be socially permissible, is an act of transgression (research question 1). I position this as the anti-humorous 'joke' of the incident at the boundary of what is acceptable, or on the edge of what is socially forbidden (Graefer, 2016).

The intention of my actions as a child could have been the elicitation of anti-humour or for the shock of a male presenting child to dress in clothes of the binary opposite gender. As such, my story indicates the Benign Violation Theory (McGraw et al., 2012); I thrived on the reaction to my violation of the norm, which was funny and shocking for others yet remained benign. The incident suggests that of an anti-rite whereby the 'joke' leads to a re-examination of societal beliefs (Douglas, 1968). My actions subverted the old norm through this form of liminality (Turner, 1979). One could suggest this functioned much like the court jester or negative exemplar (Mintz, 1985).

The court jester's role in society was not only to make the monarch laugh but also for the monarch to laugh at themselves (Hyers, 1968). This was not unique to the UK, as Tongan chiefs had clowns that provided an alternative view of humanity for amusement (Hereniko, 1994). When positioning the social norms as a historical necessity, laughter at the counter-normative incident would lead to social disruption (akin to how Hyers, 1968, identifies the court jester or fool). Similarly, for an equilibrium of not being taken too seriously in the incident (as per my story below), there cannot be an oppressive, absolute necessity for the social norm to stand – nor an immovable power to the norm (similar to Hyers, 1968). In this way, the fool can play; even if it is just to present the counter-normative as an image to challenge the norm safely (research question 2). By all means, this treatment positions the idea or ideal of society as hierarchically higher and undermined by the act of counter-normativity (research question 1).

Of interest is that it is said, “children's humor typifies violation of physical norms, whereas adult humor typically pushes the boundaries of social norms” (Goel & Dolan, 2007). In the incident, I position that the social norms were physically violated through the presentation of (the) dress (research question 1 and 3).

### 3.2.1. My Story: the incident

In year 7, the school put on a fancy dress day with a prize for the best costume. I had a plan for my costume. I had gone home to relay the event the school was putting on and asked to wear my mum's red dress. My plan for the costume did not surprise my mum, but it was flabbergasting for my brother. At that time, I think Baywatch (1989 – 2001) was popular, and I recall a poster of Barb Wire (1996). I went as Pamela Anderson, who would have been on many teenage boys' walls at the time – not mine as the hormones had not kicked in at that point. I wore an unfortunately tight red dress with some kind of stuffing to enhance my bosom. I was not a skinny child, so there was a bump on the belly, which made dear Pam look a tad pregnant. I wore high heels and make-up. I put my hair in pigtails – no blonde wig. I am unsure if people knew I was Pamela Anderson without the hair matching, but it worked well for me.

When at school, I gained a lot of attention. I did not usually get this kind of attention, as I would keep myself to myself. The peculiar relationship for my childhood regarding this story is that it was not me putting on a show, I was not performing as such. I just did it. I had an aura of making people laugh or entertaining them without performing. Similar to many other occurrences in my life, I did this because I enjoyed doing it and perhaps wanted to let others enjoy it too.

I won the prize. Was I the only person there as the opposite binary gender? No. Was I the one who did it in great seriousness? Yes. I feel that the comedy of this event was not to play the ‘scene’ that is the event of this story as slapstick, but more like hiring drama directors to shoot a detective story that is an absurd comedy. They had to film it seriously (this in the 90s would have been called ‘playing it straight’). The film reference here is *The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad!* with Leslie Nielsen. Returning to the story, those others dressing in clothing designed for ‘females’ did it as a caricature.

Hence why my retrospective belief about the intention at the time is that I was not seeking laughs, but to push the social boundaries of others.

### 3.3. The empowering social environment: the importance of familial acceptance and identity promotion

The quality of being on the edge of what is deemed socially acceptable might have been an inherent, unstated personal quality of who I was as a child. Otherwise stated, this is a counter-normative identity. One would need to assume that this could only occur through parenting that permits the child to be oneself and offers identity growth rather than restrictions. The allowance to enact this role (Turner, 1956) supported the progression of it to be a role identity for me (Gordon, 1976). In order to be oneself safely means not breaking the benign or the equilibrium of society (research question 3).

Thus, familial guidance to be oneself safely occurred (as per this section of the story). The parameters of what is considered an equilibrium external to a child in a red dress shifted to encompass the challenge to the norm. This marginalised action was against the superiority of the majority (or the norm-fitting people) in society. Mintz (1985) identifies comedians as marginalised, which implies this action is in-fitting with comedy. However, challenging these norms and taking on the role of a deviant social agent required empowerment and the ability to act in a way that challenged these norms effectively (research question 3).

This empowerment renders those marginalised in life incapable and those who play the deviant as theatre or comedy successful. My story illustrates how theatre and comedy as a role identity alongside the role of deviancy or counter-normativity might be played upon much the same as a comedian performing their set (research question 2). Comedians are outsiders, but not all the time (Double, 2013). I was an outsider, but I did not desire attention from enacting this role all the time: I opted in. Consequently, the social context where I was empowered to be myself promoted the role identities in which I found value and self-congruency (Stets & Burke, 2000) (research question 3).

### 3.3.1. My Story: the aftermath

I never had the intention of abiding by other people's rules without it making sense to me. One could suggest the perceptions of an open-minded parenting approach enabled freedom to be me which meant that I was not oppressed in my sense of humour or sense of self. This story exemplifies this very well. I have been and maybe still am a person who will be free to do whatever holds value, including for the result of what is deemed funny to me. Sometimes, as I now term it, these incidences were about pushing people's social boundaries.

It is worth noting that I dressed to shock at other times, one of which was a college dare to wear something ridiculous – but that was nothing compared to this. However, I had to be careful due to where I lived. I think it is important to understand the context of being beaten up for what you do. I might have managed to avoid it a few times, but the college commute was into the town centre as a 17-year-old via a bus. I was not some silly small 11-year-old. I think safety was a good option for this occasion – I covered it all up for my commute. Admittedly, at 17, I was warned by my family against going in dressed in the fashion dared. Child naivety about the potential threat of being Pamela Anderson was definitely present. My desire to accomplish what was outlandish, and I must have known that at the time, far outweighed the potential risk in my view then.

## 4. Future Directions

The progression of this area of research might follow the trajectory of querying identity formation and the political-historical social landscape. There are several factors that I could only allude to in this study that seem to matter, such as the micro influential factors (i.e., family) and the macro influences, for instance, gender politics in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. In addition, the relationship between socialisation and comedy, and normalisation and comedy are interesting topics that might be furthered in a similar way to this study. For example, who decides what is benign? How are children shaped to understand if an incident or joke is too scary, or too pitiful? Lastly, the marginalised include disabled people, of which disabled comedians exist and might be a source of greater understanding regarding this phenomenon.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has identified that locating one's identity must be accomplished through the support and empowerment of those within the social environment. Albeit this study is one self-reflected experience and may not be generalisable, I believe it has value. I found three themes, which were 'The reward from my theatrical desires,' 'Discrete counter-normative identity,' and 'The empowering social environment: the importance of familial acceptance and identity promotion'. My discrete counter-normative identity was validated through liberty, which I found could be opted into when the 'social boundaries' could or should be challenged. I reflect on this as a deviancy like court jesters of yesteryear and I have related this to comedians as outsiders who choose what they present on stage.

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