Upbringing, Formative Experience, and Their Effect in Improv Comedy Performance at UIUC
Brian Melamed

EVOKE
About the Ethnographer
I am a senior in the Anthropology and Molecular & Cellular Biology program. My participation in Anthropology led me to this class and to ethnographical study; my original focus was to be on medical anthropology, biomolecular anthropology and genetic diffusion among groups of people. However, I am still unsure of where my degrees will ultimately take me.

This inquiry page was originally going to be on the topic of language in the Interfraternity Council Charter, as seen in the Question section of the page, but my focus quickly switched to a topic I found (and I thought other readers would find) more interesting; improv comedy groups on campus. Because I am a member of DeBono (the long-form improv troupe at UIUC), I felt that I could use an insider perspective to more clearly explain aspects of this ethnography, as well as more easily direct topics of questioning in my interviews with improv comedians. While this introduces an obvious bias, the interviewees have been mostly allowed to speak for themselves through the inclusion of the interview transcripts on this inquiry page, as well as being able to view the author's ethnographic notes.

EXPLORE
Question
What questions is your inquiry contingent upon?
How does the upbringing and formative experience of comedy inform the aspirations and motivations of improv comedians on campus?

To what extent do similar past experiences in comedy affect interpersonal relationships in improv comedy groups on campus?

What does the Interfraternity Council Charter tell us about perceptions of fraternities and their organizing board members?

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Plan
How will you go about answering your inquiry?
I plan to answer the question of language use and comedy preference through interviews with members from DeBono and Spicy Clamato, two improv groups who have regular performances in the Illini Union. My first informant is a member of Spicy Clamato who joined his junior year after a developing stand-up and filmwriting career on the west coast. The second informant is a UIUC alumnus and former member of DeBono who has gone on to perform improv comedy professionally in Chicago. My third informant is a
senior female and current member of DeBono, who gives an insight into the female perspective on improv. Through these interviews, I hope to determine how upbringing and early development of comedy informs one's preference in comedy and motivation for joining comedy and being interested in the pursuit of comedy in their post-undergraduate life. I would also examine how language is used onstage and offstage.

Through these interviews, I also look to expound on how the purposes of campus improv groups differ, and how the experiences and hopes of their individual members shape the future of the group.

Through these methods I will hopefully create an inquiry that is both interesting and informative in respect to a topic that is not as often looked upon in EOTU projects.

**OBSERVE**

*What observations, or findings are you encountering in your research?*

Participant observation at a social gathering

The idea of my participant observation of a post-show gathering of members of Spicy Clamato and DeBono had sprung from other social gatherings I had been to, where I saw members of these groups converse in an interplay of both normal topics of conversation (weather, schoolwork, etc.) and improv techniques. Oftentimes as a member of a two or three-person conversational circle at a party, I would often be drawn in to spontaneous "one-upping" contests, where the first thing said would have to be topped by a more outrageous statement, eventually snowballing into the realm of the absolutely absurd, and then broken up by laughter.

At this post-show gathering, I had to be sure not to scribble any notes down while in the view of other people, as this would likely elicit stares from others. My opinion of why I had to keep relatively discreet was that not only do members of comedy groups act like any other group when they are being watched or recorded, but they may try to "polish up" their conversations in order to appear funnier, or in some cases, purposely more morose and quiet. I made it a point to stay out of conversations I was not engaged in by someone else.

I first saw this phenomenon of "one-upmanship" between two male members of DeBono and one male member of Spicy Clamato. They had engaged in a game where you would relate the most disgusting story you had ever heard, with embellishments and fabrications being encouraged and sometimes necessary to win. Details of many of the stories focused more on ironic and happenstance gross-outs than on things like violence and accidents. The story that eventually broke up the game (and implicitly announced the winner) was a story (which the winner told me later was mostly pieces of other stories weaved together with fake details) where a friend of his, as a child, was dared to jump into a sewer ditch and landed inside of a rotting cow carcass.

I also noticed that certain members of the groups who did not know each other very well
tended to speak to each other about the same as they did to familiar friends intergroup. This is a recent change in the intergroup dynamics; about four or five years ago, groups would rarely intermingle. However, certain individuals who were in both groups (or had strong friendships in both groups) made it a point to actively host events that brought comedy groups together.

Today, relations between groups are much friendlier, and the more that members in different groups become friends, the easier it is to directly insult them at parties. A female DeBono member openly commented on a male Spicy Clamato member that his vest looked like it had been cut directly from a matinee movie theater seat. Jokes starring a person's mother in undignified situations also crop up between people, but in all of the events like this I have observed, I have never seen a fight break out because of insults to another person.

I found it quite interesting to spend some time observing one of these events after I had psychologically "removed" myself from participating in conversations where I could launch into a one-up game or something of that sort. With an almost completely homogenous group of UIUC comedy improvisers, it was also interesting to note how much more forthright and absurd the participants could be when, as Kevin Barrett, a party participant, told me:

"...there's no one who doesn't think you're joking, and there's no one to get offended or weirded out by you, no matter how balls-out horrible you can get...Even if you give a really bad joke here, you can always brush it off, because everyone's testing new material and stuff to other comedians...it's quickly forgiven."

3rd interview

My third interview was with Rachel Blume, a senior in English who is a longtime member of DeBono, the long-form improvisational comedy group on campus. Having performed with Rachel in comedy in a few groups over my four years as a student, I felt that it was easy to conduct the interview, but the "rules of engagement" and the separation of roles between interviewer and informant made the interview less candid than I expected; Rachel seemed to speak in a more deliberate manner than when we speak normally. Though I knew much of what she was saying through the context of familiarity with improv, she made clear to elucidate topics in improv that non-improv audiences would understand. Because of our rapport with one another, Rachel would still take pauses from the interview to change her tone of voice or make a gesture. Her 'acting' during the interview was the most prominent of all three of my interviews, and it is likely because the two of us have been performing comedy for such a long time that we often joke around more than we actually converse.

Rachel was born into a middle-class family outside Chicago, where she placed hard emphasis on her family's involvement in her comedic development: "We watched SNL when I was little; my parents didn't censor me from watching anything, (sarcastically) and because I wasn't stupid, I was able to put on a filter and
know what words were okay to use when and where, and I was able to watch funny things."
While Rachel spoke well of her parents, she would sometimes give short jabs at her parents ("My dad's pretty funny, he's an asshole, but he's pretty funny"), which could indicate a tenuous relationship with her parents that informed her motivation for comedy. She was also free to explore her own limits on what was funny on television and in public discourse in school.

Rachel's first involvement in comedy happened during her freshman year, when she got involved in Like Disco...But Not Really, a short-form troupe that does not have try-outs for members and has become, in recent years, a feeder group for Spicy Clamato and DeBono. Because I knew Rachel from this group as well as from DeBono, I was aware of her propensity to sometimes judge others too quickly, which I would likely not have picked up during the course of the interview. Her grouping of the people she met in LDBNR into 'weird' and 'funny' likely informed the kind of comedy she continued to pursue and they type of comedian she interacted better with onstage. LDBNR became a "low-pressure environment to figure out what improv was and if it was something I wanted to do and to pursue".

Another thing that my experience in improv comedy has made me realize is that it is a fairly male-dominated environment, and that females can find it intimidating to enter a group where everyone else is male and predominantly male perspectives on comedy and discourse are performed. Rachel told me she got around this by tossing aside notions that "only girls who might be lesbians are good at improv" (which she heard from a female improv professional during classes at Second City), and getting more comfortable with being louder and more prominent during scenework. Knowing Becky, I have found that her work in DeBono has been characterized with her as a very vocal troupe member and someone who has found a comfortable role in the group. She also is not shy about being explicit and knowing when and how to "one-up" other members in the group onstage and during practice.

As far as Rachel's future goes, her plans seemed more tentative than those of Kevin or Jim. Some of her discouragement of pursuing comedy as a post-collegiate career stem from her disapproval with the way her training is going in her last year at DeBono. She felt that leadership could be changed around and that practices could be led more professionally to improve performances. Despite qualms Rachel may have with logistics or other members, she notes that she is very close with all of the other performers, and that spending time with one another offstage and away from practice is also important in developing rapport onstage.

Overall, Rachel's interview seemed to echo a lot of sentiments I saw with my other interviews, though her ultimate plans with improv may be different. She enjoys making others laugh, it helps keep her "sane", and has made her a "confident performer".

Files:
rachelinterview.doc (Tue 12/05/2006 12:41)

2nd interview
My second interview went more smoothly than the first, and I felt that I could get more information from the participant in the same period of time by focusing my questions more. My interviewee, Jim Belvedere (I let the participants choose their own pseudonyms, and he seemed to have that one for me before I could finish). Jim is a UIUC alumnus and former member of DeBono, and a current member of the Chicago music-based improv troupe The Rhythm Method.

What I first noticed about the interview with him was the disconnect between how I had seen Jim on stage in the past and how he presented himself to me during the interview. While I had never performed with Jim on stage, I had seen shows with him performing, and he appeared much more extroverted and confident. During the interview, he was still as articulate as he would be performing, but he seemed to speak more slowly and with more deliberation. I started by asking Jim about how he originally got into performing and eventually to doing comedy. Like Kevin's interview earlier, Jim had also been drawn to performance after not getting accepted to a sports team; he also had family influences.

“I just started auditioning for things after I didn't make the basketball team freshman year, I decided not to do sports and I just focused on serious plays and musicals, and my mom's also... a choir director and uh, she plays piano, so my family's very musical, so I did a lot of serious stuff growing up.”

Another connection I noticed with earlier interviews was the way Jim spoke more expressively sitting for the interview despite knowing that it would only be audio taped. At one point, the lights at the Courtyard Cafe went down for another show, and Jim characteristically made an immediately recognizable, “What's going on?” hand motion. It seems that improv performers walk a fine line between performance and real life, knowing what situations require what degree of acting. Another comparison I found was the way in which both interviewees spoke of performing comedy with an air of wonderment; though Jim is already performing comedy at a semi-professional level in Chicago (he has finished his sequence of classes at the ImprovOlympic, the birthplace of long-form improvisational comedy), he still speaks with excitement and uncertainty for the future:

“As far as being in it for the long haul, I'm going to do it till it stops being fun. Because right now, I'm 23, I've got a college education, I live in one of the best cities in the world, and I have a job that puts more than enough food and nice clothes on my back, and it's flexible. So as long as all these things are interlocking, interweaving (clasps hands together), with one another, and there's no clash, I want to do improv in Chicago for as long as I can.”

We also discussed the improv scene at the University, and the number of groups that come and go at the campus. While he hasn't done work with any of the other groups on campus, he did see a sense of friendship between groups. In his mind, the close friendships that were formed by the members of DeBono while he was performing lent itself to enjoying improv more and pursuing it after college. Members of DeBono have
been pursuing post-college improv since its inception (one of the original founders, John Coutrie, works as a patent attorney in Chicago while moonlighting as an improv performer), but this year, Jim and four of his group contemporaries will be living together and performing at the ImprovOlympic.

I felt that the interview went a lot smoother than my last one, and I also found that being familiar with the content of the interviewees' answers as a part of the ingroup made it easier to direct my questioning rather than veering toward the general. I hope I can get my questions focused more as I progress.

1st interview

My interview, focusing on both the question of “How did you end up at the U of I?” as well as beginning the research on my inquiry topic, on Kevin Barrett, a senior in English who was a member of an improv comedy group on campus, as well as a transfer student from two California schools. Because of his story as a transfer student and his prominence in the comedy scene on campus, I felt he would be a good choice to begin my inquiry.

I had known Kevin since his transfer to school at the beginning of last year, which made the interview somewhat comfortable. Since I hadn't known him very long, I could still ask for information on his arrival to the school without feeling like I was merely paying lip service to the purpose of the interview, as I hadn't heard his story before. I also found that having the interview in a public place increased my confidence in asking questions of the interviewee; because both he and I agreed to this place, it was neutral ground on which to conduct the interview, and there was a feeling of being invisible amongst other individuals.

What I noticed as I started my questioning was the immediate sense of separation of roles from before we entered the cafe and after we started the interview. As people who could talk freely to each other (seemingly as equals), we became quiet as we sat down for the interview. My subject became quieter as he watched me fiddle with the digital voice recorder and cut out most of his “chit-chat” mode of speaking unless I asked him a leading question on something we were both familiar with.

As a recap to Kevin's (admittedly interesting) story of how he arrived to the U of I: Kevin was a student at a prominent suburban Chicago high school, and since he had known since early high school that he wanted to go to school in California and pursue writing for film and television, he applied to USC's prestigious screenwriting program. However, he didn't get in (he suspects because of a paperwork loophole that discriminates based on ability to pay for the school), and attended Chapman College, a small liberal arts school outside the Los Angeles area. He hated it, and after a year, transferred to Santa Monica Community College, which was much closer to the USC campus. It was there that he began to attend USC courses and meeting students and professors in the USC Screenwriting program. Moonlighting as a bona-fide student, he got into sketch and improv comedy groups on campus and developed connections and bonds with the types
of people he had originally wanted to attend college for. He applied to UCLA junior year and was accepted, but did not fit the residency requirement, and because he was short on finances, applied to both UIC and UIUC. He tells me that U of I was his “last option” for school, but the fact that he found an established comedy community on campus made the transition easier for him (“The small community of comedy people, and people like that who have that sense of humor, are maybe 2% of the kids on campus, and they're the people who helped me get back into comedy”). Kevin will be graduating a semester early with a degree in English and moving to the Los Angeles area to hopefully launch his writing career.

Because I was familiar with the interviewee and his particular taste in comedy, I was able to launch rather early into questions on comedy method and the relationships between improv comedy groups on campus. I also found that his upbringing (notably his parents and grandfather) were pivotally important in how he developed his sense of humor and how he cultivated it in his formative years as a junior high and high school student. I noticed that when he spoke of his childhood and his insecurities as a person growing up, he became noticeably fidgety and began to communicate more with his body movements and hands. He also expressed a little nervousness when I asked him where comedic pursuits would take him in the future. He explained that, because his parents supported him, he felt that he would be letting them down if he didn't succeed after his undergraduate career, but he was clear in his response that he doesn't “want to do what normal people do after school”.

From Kevin, I found out that there was a certain purpose and hierarchy to improv groups on campus. Spicy Clamato (a short-form group of which Kevin is a member) is “professional and unprofessional at the same time” because they take themselves seriously, but for the most part do not see themselves heading off into comedy as a career after school is over. He attributed this partly to the fact that “improv alone doesn't put food on the table”, and that many of the members of Spicy Clamato had professional (read: non-comedy) careers in mind when they joined the group. To Kevin, DeBono (the long-form improv group on campus) was more pointed towards professional improv troupes and was akin to an incubation chamber for people wanting to break into major metropolitan improv circles (notably the ImprovOlympic and Second City troupes in Chicago). This mostly qualified opinions I had of some of the groups on campus, that in addition to their styles of improv games, they also had different attitudes about performance. Kevin himself is a fan of both styles, and told me he tried out for DeBono when he first arrived on campus, but didn't pass the auditions.

Questions that I could have raised but didn't in the interest of time and Kevin's schedule included:

-Do you think that members of these groups have shared taste in comedy, or have to in order to interact in a good scene together?
-Did your ethnicity and cultural upbringing work towards or against your choice and development of a sense of humor and what you consider funny?
-Can comedy and improvisational method be purely taught, or are there simply “haves”
and “have nots”?

Overall, I think the interview I had with Kevin definitely supported some of the assumptions I had about groups, but also changed my opinion about the ways in which one can enjoy comedy and get involved in it. I think that the focus for future interviews should be on more structure and asking more categorical questions to future interviewees. In this way I can hopefully get more information specific to my inquiry topic and end up with a better finished product.

**DISCUSS**

**Discuss your inquiry, taking care to separate speculation from fact or data**

Upon beginning the inquiry I originally had the intention on attempting to find explicit connections between the University and improv comedy groups on campus. I felt a little hindered by these initial questions I posed, however, because improv groups on campus do not operate as part of the University as far as administration goes, and that the subculture of improv comedy on campus is somewhat limited; both Spicy Clamato and DeBono often have small audiences of regularly-attending students. I also found that the most interesting part of the interviews I conducted was mainly the way in which these individuals grew up and formed their comedic preferences, which affected their motivations for entering comedy and performance mediums as they grew up. Because it was hard to me to make explicit connections between the University and improv comedians, I shifted my focus to motivations of individuals and the language they used to describe their preferences and their interactions within the troupes.

I found that one of the formative experiences that all my interviewees had was a drive to act or perform at a young age, whether through mediums like theater or through simple "class clown" behavior. While family backgrounds differed (some seemed to have stronger familial ties than others; I believe that my parents' divorce influenced my need to perform and act out, though I couldn't find any comparisons in the interviews I did), the parents of the interviewees were all accepting or noncommittal to the actions of their children, and this, along with the approval of their peers, could have led to the positive reinforcement of comedy.

Secondly, each of the interviewees continued their comedy and began to take it seriously once they entered college. While the extent to which the individuals found ways to express their comedic preferences and actually become successful at it (Kevin, my first interview, opened for several famous stand-up comics in the Los Angeles area), the decision to become seriously involved in comedy came when the individuals met like-minded people who had similar tastes in comedy and in performing comedy, and through involvement with comedic media, further increased their motivation for performing. Also, while their future aspirations for comedy were different, all three of the interviewees did not list financial or popular success as one of their goals in comedy as a career. They did not see the pursuit of comedy as something that would even necessarily yield financial success, but their drive to perform seems to transcend their beliefs in what they can or will accomplish after college.
As far as continuing fieldwork, I would like to discuss improv with more comedians in the professional improv sphere (ImprovOlympic and Second City in Chicago), and with veterans of the improv scene to determine if motivations and development were the same for people who had been involved in improv for years, and if their attitudes about performing changed during their time in actually performing improv "as a job", and whether these attitude changes were positive or negative. I would also have liked to discuss comedy and perceptions of comedy in the audiences of improv comedy groups, as I saw there was a small portion of audience members who returned almost every week; it would be interesting to analyze how audience members viewed performances, and if these audience members themselves had early involvement with comedy and had comedic motivations or aspirations.

**REFLECT**

**Link**

Connect with other resources and materials.


**Implications**

Could your findings have broader implications beyond this inquiry?

As far as extending the scope of my findings to other topics, it is likely that shared development and shared passions, despite differences in class, gender, etc., affect motivations for many different aspirations that groups of people on campus have. An instillment of environmental stewardship in UIUC students at a young age may lead all of these people to gravitate to similar activities and to join similar organizations, and may ultimately affect their career goals. I found that the interview format was the best way to determine how people were raised and how their preferences and motivations developed; it is difficult to determine longitudinal development in an individual through other methods.

As to the sphere of improv comedy or comedy in general, personal interviews or focus groups of improv groups can be used to help determine how the individuals of the groups first developed and continue to develop their comedy preferences and performance, and how the group members interact with one another.

**OTHER**

A space for other notes, findings, comments, etc.

This is my actual final proposal; I couldn't delete the last one. My biggest aspiration is
that this page will be seen by other individuals who are thinking about going into improv comedy, either in college or post-graduate training and have yet to make a choice.

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