

## HUMOR IN A GROUP OF HAWAIIAN ADOLESCENTS

Louise Bernstein  
Department of Anthropology  
University of California  
Berkeley, California

This paper explores the correlation between role relationships and humor patterns in a group of twenty-two Hawaiian adolescents who were designated by school administrators to be disciplinary problems and assigned to a Special Motivations Class (S.M.C.). The students were observed in two institutional settings: first in the S.M.C. at an intermediate school; later in a summer continuation program at a local Y.M.C.A. The shift in setting from the S.M.C. to the Y.M.C.A. brought about concomitant changes in the role relationships of the children, and these changes were reflected in their joking behavior. My hypothesis is that ambiguous role situations are indicated by joking relationships, and that different types of humor reflect different types of role relationships.

Ethnographic Observation in the S.M.C.

From February to May, 1969, I was an assistant teacher for the Special Motivations Class at Manapua Intermediate School.<sup>1</sup> The goal of the program was to modify the behavior of students identified as disciplinary problems. The teachers particularly wanted to discourage "paint sniffing", where the children obtained a "high" by putting paint soaked rags into their mouths and inhaling the fumes. Children assigned to the S.M.C. were considered by the teachers to be disruptive in school, and eleven of the twenty-two had police records. The S.M.C. was considered by the school administration to be the children's last chance to remain in school. If they failed to conform, they faced certain expulsion during the next school year.

As a teacher assistant, I was not assigned to one particular teacher, but instead attended several classes with the students. Rather than standing at the front of the room, I sat with the children during class, tutored them individually, and accompanied them on weekly field trips. Outside of school I spent a great deal of time talking with the students, and much of my data on their opinions of the S.M.C., of the school, and of the teachers is drawn from these conversations.

The children, twelve girls and ten boys, ranged in age from twelve to eighteen, but most were fifteen and sixteen years old. They were all part Hawaiian and lived in a homestead area called Pali, where housing was substandard and often overcrowded. Many of the children had only one parent, and alcoholism was common among

the parents. Before the S.M.C. was formed, these particular children fought with one another, but once they were in the S.M.C., they ceased to fight among themselves and united against other groups of children in the school.

Much of the children's behavior in the S.M.C. bears out Simmel's (1955:91-93) contention that, when a group of individuals band together and are faced with a common enemy, the larger conflict augments intragroup unity while it aggravates intragroup conflicts. After formation of the S.M.C., intragroup conflicts were expressed largely through humor. This phenomenon was also noted by Radcliffe-Brown (1952), who stated that joking relationships were often maintained between individuals who banded together when threatened by an outside power.

Each child in the S.M.C. occupied either a superordinate or a subordinate status. I have designated them as leaders and non-leaders respectively. By leaders I mean those who can influence the group to action, who can ridicule and not be ridiculed in return. Six of the girls in the group were leaders, while the remaining class members were non-leaders. There was a small group of boys who were treated as equals by the superordinate girls, but the boys did not actively participate in the more flamboyant humor styles described below.

The children exhibited a high degree of hostility toward the school because they viewed it as unrewarding and irrelevant to their lives. They expressed feelings of shame and anger about their membership in the Special Motivations Class, since at Manapua the word "special" was a euphemism for mentally retarded (or, as the children called it, "the dumb-dumb class"). Although these children were not viewed as retarded by the school administration (there was another "special" class for mentally retarded children), the stigma of being in the Special Motivations Class had an effect on their behavior at school.

In addition, many incidents indicated that the children felt their Hawaiianness was a stigma. They made numerous derogatory remarks about their homestead area and the Hawaiian people. Nevertheless, they reacted defensively if a non-Hawaiian made a remark that could be construed as anti-Hawaiian.

The children's behavior in class bears out Goffman's theory that stigmatized people take pains to prevent their stigma from being obtrusive when they are interacting with "normal" people. The awareness that one of his own attributes is a defilement often causes the stigmatized person to feel a high degree of shame (Goffman 1963:7). Therefore, in interactions with "normal" people the stigmatized person may be self-conscious and calculating about the impression he is making.

The joking relationships formed by the students were similar to what Radcliffe-Brown calls symmetrical and asymmetrical joking

relationships (1952:90). In the former, which exists between individuals who are of equal status, both parties are free to tease one another. In the latter, found between two individuals of unequal status, the individual who is the target of ridicule may not tease his tormentor in return.

The two joking modes discussed below, banter and irony,<sup>2</sup> are common in symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships respectively. Tom Burns (1953) notes that the use of both irony and banter enables people to cope with role disparity. When two roles overlap and an individual wishes to keep the status concomitant with each, he can do so by entering into a joking relationship. This is similar to Radcliffe-Brown's theory about the co-presence of conjunctive and disjunctive components in many relationships (*ibid.*). He sees the joking relationship as a medium for uniting the conjunctive and disjunctive elements in family relations. Radcliffe-Brown hypothesizes that joking partnerships, which are characterized by behavior which communicates both hostility and friendship, prevent serious conflict through the constant repetition of playful hostility. He sees banter as the expression of social disjunction which maintains social conjunction.

#### One-to-One Interactions

This section deals with one-to-one interactions within the group. There was no need for a separate audience, since the humor was whole and contained within the dyad.

##### 1. Intragroup humor

Intragroup humor tended to be a statement or metaphor about the relative statuses of the students. Certain humor modes used by a leader were rarely employed by a non-leader, but if a non-leader did try to imitate leader-specific types of humor, he was either ignored or told to be quiet.

Joking behavior between two or more leaders was a symbolic statement of their relationship in the context of their friendship. Certain signals were used to tell one another that what was being verbalized was not to be taken literally. In general, the tone was arch and the exchange was in the form of banter. For specific situations other signals were needed, such as when leaders employed the type of ridicule and sarcasm that could be highly insulting if it was not known to be a joke. In these cases, the children usually transformed their facial expressions into exaggerated masks of indignation and repugnance. Their voices became sneering, brash and loud. Through these exaggerations the pair made it obvious that they were only playing. One such exchange went as follows:

- A: Give me some French fries.  
 B: No, you stupid ass.  
 A: Shut your ass, you fucker.

"A" was then allowed to grab some French fries, after a short tussle.

Within this play context one child could call another a "black ass" or a "nigger" (considered one of the grossest of insults) without much danger of an adverse reaction.

When two leaders broke the sexual taboos set up by the group members, one signaled that it was humor by changing her body posture and voice. The instigator would bend her knees slightly and stick out her rear end. Her hands would be limp and loose wristed. Walking in this stance she resembled a duck. Her voice ranged from that of a drunk to that of a young child, depending on the actor, but giving the impression that she was not in full control of herself and therefore could not be held responsible for her actions. A typical skit would run like this:

A (in the duck stance and drunk voice): I love you too much, I love you too much, I love you too much.

A would then wrap both her arms around B's neck. The latter was thus thrown off balance or weighed to the ground as A kissed her cheeks with loud smacking sounds. B invariably pretended to be strangled and exaggeratedly helpless and confused.

One leader often provided entertainment for another by putting on an impromptu skit or burlesque. This usually entailed a change in costume.

Leader A had taken a scarf and tied it around her eyes. She assumed the duck stance and (while peeking) pretended to play blindman's bluff. In reality she was chasing leader B. When A caught B, she loudly kissed her. A then perched on a high stool and tied a scarf in her own hair. She sat in an extremely dainty, ladylike posture and pretended to brush the scarf as if it were hair. With a quick movement she feigned brushing her pubic hair and just as quickly (pretending that there had been no change) she went on to brush the scarf. All of this was performed with icy dignity. A then jumped off the stool and, holding the scarf like a harem veil, she sidled sexily over to B, nudging the latter with her shoulder and raising her eyebrows suggestively. B took all of this with great humor but played the straight man.

The idea conveyed by this sort of humor was that the players were friends and equals. However, Gallimore and Howard (1968) found in their study of Nanakuli adolescents that the relationship

between Hawaiian girl friends was often far from being warm and close. The girls were constantly competing for boys and for group popularity. In the S.M.C., where a group of superordinate girls were placed in a class together, they formed a clique. When they felt threatened by the teachers and by the other students, the girls strengthened the unity of the clique (conjunction), which also heightened their competition and hostility (disjunction). The formation of symmetrical joking relationships enabled them to cope with this ambiguous situation. The stereotypical ways in which the children constantly related to one another (such as with voice and posture changes) created social distance between them by limiting the sharing of information and by stabilizing behavior. Repeated playful hostility minimized real hostility, thereby enabling the children to maintain a "friendly" relationship while keeping a degree of separation and distance between them.

Such conflicts are seen by Murphy (1965) as a social concomitant for social distance. He states that members of one's different role sets often have conflicting expectations. To avoid conflict, one must insulate one's roles by withholding knowledge of one's planned course of action and opinions. This limitation of communication or social distance affords the actor some privacy and flexibility, which in turn makes his multiple roles viable.

According to Murphy, social distance techniques often entail "constancy of demeanor" (*ibid.*, 369), that is, any continually repeated type of behavior in specific situations will mask the actor's feelings by limiting the amount of information he divulges, while keeping the social relationship intact. Thus, social distance appears to make possible the combining of the conjunctive and disjunctive elements in a relationship.

Social distance through stereotypical behavior plays an important part in ambivalent and ambiguous situations in which an individual must maintain a certain amount of flexibility. By constantly repeating a certain type of behavior in similar circumstances, communication of information is controlled and social distance maintained. This can be seen in the markedly stereotyped behavior employed by the children in many of their interactions.

Leader to non-leader humor usually took the form of ridicule and sarcasm. The signals were different from those used between leaders in that the voice of the attacker (leader) ranged from coldly factual to bitingly mocking (depending on the situation and the personal relationship between the two interactors), and there was no change of posture. The leader was communicating the idea that there was something wrong with the subordinate, and occasionally this something was spelled out (e.g., ugliness, stupidity, asininity). The following exchange took place on a field trip:

About a mile from home the group lost its way.  
They parked the car, and one of the girls went to  
find directions. While waiting for her return, a

teacher sat on the curb and a non-leader began to brush the teacher's hair. One of the leaders yelled, "At a time like this you're brushing her hair! We lost on the other side of island and you're combing her hair!" The leader then raised her eyes imploringly to the sky as if to ask God for strength.

This sort of humor helped to keep subordinates in their places.

Leader to non-leader joking relationships were asymmetrical and were characterized by irony. The superordinate children maintained joking relationships with the subordinate for several reasons. For one, all of the group members had to have some degree of solidarity or else they could not work together as a group against their common enemy (the school authorities). Also, many of the children were related to each other or were neighbors. An openly hostile relationship between two children would have had repercussions outside of the school setting. Their joking relationships enabled them to cope with this rather ambivalent situation. Once again, stereotyped behavior and playful hostility provided social distance.

Leaders may have used fewer voice and posture changes with non-leaders because they felt less constrained to state symbolically that the hostility was all in fun. In leader to non-leader exchanges, the risk of causing insult was not as dangerous to a leader's popularity as it would have been in leader to leader exchanges.

Among the non-leaders there was a definite pecking order, whereas the leaders formed a unified clique based on their equality. Consequently two non-leader interactants often exhibited a great deal of tension as they vied for position. When the joking behavior was between two non-leader friends, it was similar in tone to leader-leader banter, i.e., it showed their equality. The following incident illustrates the difference between the interaction of two non-leader equals and the interactions of one of them with someone of lower status:

Non-leaders A and B (male friends) both wanted to sit in the front seat of the car. In the mock battle which ensued, each called the other obscene names. Their laughter seemed genuine. The winner (B) was later pressured into giving up his seat to C (a female of very low status). For about twenty minutes B ridiculed C by calling her "black ass" and "nigger." he asked her such questions as "How do you even get a comb through your hair?" "Is it made out of wires?" B also taunted C by disparaging her home. All this was obviously very painful to C. However, both children laughed at every jibe. The laughter seemed strained.

An interesting contrast between leader to leader and non-leader to non-leader exchanges was that, in the former, the message of friendship was masked in ridicule, while in the latter the ridicule was masked in laughter. Both messages came through despite their screens.

Sexual joking was also indicative of the relative status of an individual. A non-leader typically addressed his sexual jokes to an authority figure rather than to another class member. The leaders, however, usually addressed their sexual remarks to each other. The following incident illustrates the difference in the two forms of banter:

At lunch one day, two leaders were remarking to each other that pineapple sticks were rather ideal in shape to put inside of their pukas (holes). The teacher overheard but pretended not to understand what the leaders meant. Whereupon, one of the non-leaders said to her, "You ought to know, you've done it enough--three kids, three tries." (The other children expressed their embarrassment concerning this innuendo.)

Certain modes of humor common to both leaders and non-leaders did not usually indicate vertical relationships. Word play was of this type, as was the sniffing ploy. A sniffing ploy was any trick employed by the children to enable them to "secretly" sniff paint. In one such play a child yelled, "Hey you, come back with my watch!" He then ran out the door after the "thief." Of course there was no stolen watch, but the child who had gotten out of the room without the teacher's permission went to the lavatory for a refill of paint.

All the students humorously exaggerated their fears and pain through jocular griping. It was part of their code of conduct that one should maintain a cool, tough face. If something frightening or painful transpired, the children suppressed their "weaker" emotions and laughed instead, thus maintaining face. To participate in this sort of jocular humor, one had to overcome one's fears and be detached. The following incident took place on a field trip:

Two leaders were sniffing paint in the back of the car and yelling obscenities out the window. They made obscene remarks to some men who turned out to be plainclothes policemen. When the police threatened to arrest the girls (sniffing is a misdemeanor), one of the two children wept and yelled uncontrollably while the other kept cool. The first girl's behavior embarrassed the other children and the Hawaiian police officer, who said, "Hawaiians aren't supposed to act that way." The girl is now of very low status. The children who used to laugh at her jokes now ignore her or tell her to "shut up."

If the girl had taken a jocular attitude instead of showing her fear, she would have acted out her own and the group's invincibility, thereby saving face. Instead, her conduct threatened the face of the group. More importantly, because she was a leader, not only did she shame herself, but, as the group's representative, she shamed the others as well.

## 2. Child-teacher

Although some qualitative differences did exist, the standard way of relating to authority figures varied only slightly between leaders and non-leaders. For the most part, the teacher<sup>4</sup> was baited, ridiculed, and made the brunt of many jokes. However, non-leaders were more dependent on the teachers for affirmation, and they knew that they could safely say things to a teacher that would be unacceptable to another class member. A rather telling example of non-leader to authority joking behavior went as follows:

The teacher and a group of the children (non-leaders) got lost in downtown Honolulu. The girls were giving the teacher incorrect directions and teasing her about her terrible driving. The teacher pretended to cry and asked them to stop teasing her. Whereupon one of the girls said, "It's good to be able to pick on someone sometimes."

The authority was often the only person that the very low-status child could relate to as if the teacher's status was lower than her own.

Joking relationships with authority figures were generally highly asymmetrical. The students kept social distance between themselves and the teacher by constantly barraging her with humorous ridicule in the form of irony. The children assumed that a teacher would never attack them by pointing to their stigma as "special" children, whereas another Hawaiian would know exactly where they were most vulnerable.

Sardonic humor was another form of interchange between a child and an authority. The following are examples of typical themes: (1) Alcoholism. One child, when asked if anyone in her family drank, said (with a sad smile), "Does my family drink? All they do is suck-em-up. Alcoholic family." On another occasion a girl told me never to invite a Hawaiian to my wedding because all Hawaiians do is drink and fight. These condemnations of alcoholism are very telling in light of the fact that the most common humor voice is that of feigned drunkenness. (2) Glue sniffing. When I mentioned something about the future to one child, he told me that he did not have to worry about the future: "Sniffers croak young, you know." While trying to take a girl's paint rag from her, I was told to go away and "let me live my last moments in peace." (3) Self-worth. One child was told by a VISTA volunteer that one does not need to



graduate from high school to join VISTA. The girl queried, "Even if you're dumb?" (i.e., like me). This form of humor allowed the child to express her hurt without losing face.

The acceptance of humor from an authority figure was independent of the child's status. It depended on how well the two knew each other (this entailed finding areas of shared perceptions and experiences). When a child first met a teacher, most attempts at humor on the authority's part were received with blank stares. The children did not even recognize it as humor. A teacher jokingly told one girl that he would punch her eye (this is a common jesting threat used among the children). The inappropriateness of this threat was so vast that the girl could not believe he had said it. Instead, she attributed the remark to the boy sitting next to him and acted accordingly, i.e., she laughed in his face and ridiculed him, since he was of lower status than she. After the children came to know an authority figure well, they accepted humor from him. But at the beginning of the authority-child relationship the authority was an object of humor and, like any alien, was not expected to reply or understand.

It would seem that as the teacher and the child became more "friendly" their joking relationship became more symmetrical. Perhaps the proximity to friendship made the teacher less of a threatening outside power.

The co-presence of conjunction and disjunction can be seen in the children's relationship with the teacher. It was evident that the students did feel hostility toward the teacher; however, an ongoing relationship between the pupils and the teacher had to be maintained despite the hostility, for the S.M.C. children and their teachers were together five days a week. The teacher also had a great deal of power over the children; she could suspend them from school and give them failing grades. Despite this hostility there was some degree of S.M.C. class spirit and, at certain times, the teacher was called "our teacher."

Because of this ambiguity the students maintained social distance between themselves and their teacher through joking relationships. The humor masked their feelings and gave the children flexibility. They could be the teacher's friend and her tormentor at the same time.

Relating to the other teachers in the school was quite a different story. The context became that of "school," which meant added hostility on the children's part. These outside teachers were almost always objects of ridicule. A typical example of this went as follows:

An S.M.C. student was passing a teacher in the hall. The girl took the duck stance, rear end prominently forward (she was walking backward).

As she approached she made grunting noises and shook her rear end at the indignant teacher.

For the most part, though, such hostility had to be kept at least partially masked since the teachers had disciplinary powers over the children.

### Individual-to-Group Interactions

This section addresses the relationship of leaders, non-leaders, and S.M.C. teachers to the group as a whole.

#### 1. Intragroup

In intragroup humor, when a leader directed her jokes to the entire group, she often signaled it by using the duck posture and/or the drunk voice. In a tense situation it was up to the leader to provide comic relief. She usually performed a skit to burlesque the angry (or hurt) parties or did a caricature of herself. For example:

One day after some of the children had been stung by Portuguese men-of-war, we went to a Red Cross station. Although the children were in great pain, they made an effort to hold back their tears. A leader (who had not been stung) jumped out of the truck, assumed the duck posture, and yelled, "Oh, my okoli (ass)" (repeated three times) and presented her buttocks to the doctor. Another leader (who had been stung on the arm) exaggerated her fear of the medicine to the point of ridiculousness. The group was able to laugh at the two leaders and forget about their own pain for a while.

Leaders also provided entertainment on long car trips or during boring classes. They gave running commentaries on the scenery and even allowed themselves to be ridiculed by the group. Humor for entertainment usually called for audience participation. The other children showed their appreciation by yelling, "That's a good one," or "Very funny." For example:

A leader described a nearby sewage plant as follows:

Leader: Do-do water goes in there. They put some sand in it and it comes out here. That's all do-do water there, so if you go swimming in it you swim in do-do water.

Audience: Go swim in it, Joe!

Leader: No, you! Some of you is out there in the do-do water. Every time that you

make do-do part of you is there.  
I go swim in it and I'll think  
you you.

and

Leader: It would be a shame if I drowned.  
I'm so young and beautiful, aren't  
I, guys?

Audience: NO!

Leader: You're jealous, cause I'm pretty.  
. . . I'm conceited, yeah, me!

Later we passed a ruined shack and another  
leader said, "That's my house, guys. I live  
there."

This type of humor was a reinterpretation of the group's experiences, seeking to entertain and reassure the group members. It also strengthened group cohesion by changing an individual experience into a collective one. To understand the ironic humor of some of the jokes, one had to understand the social structure of the group. For instance, one day a leader threw her arms around a non-leader's neck and loudly declared her love for him. All the other children found this extremely funny. Her declaration of love for the non-leader was ridiculous in light of his low status.

A non-leader's relationship with the group was usually defensive, i.e., when attacked he saved face by laughing and joking. Non-leaders occasionally acted out their own subordination, exaggerated and in skit form. The tone of voice and posture were supplicant and whiney.

Someone brought a can of beer from home. A non-leader knelt on the back seat of the truck and began to beg and whine loudly for a sip. She pounded on the windows and kicked the dashboard in exaggerated frustration, repeating, "Give me some, please, give me some. I want some." This went on until she got what she wanted.

By dramatizing her own low status in relation to the group, the non-leader endeavored to obligate the others to have pity on her and to be nurturing.

A few non-leaders tried to imitate the leaders. One child (a non-leader) acted the same sort of skit that a leader had given the day before in a similar situation. The leader's humor was appreciated by the group, whereas the non-leader's performance was greeted by icy silence and blank stares. The child was assuming a role that was not within her rights to assume.

Leaders entered into symmetrical joking relationship with the entire group in which the leader and the group bantered back and forth. A non-leader, however, could only enter into a joking relationship with the whole group by acting out his role as the receiving end of ridicule. Thus, the symmetrical and asymmetrical joking relationships were kept intact whether it was a leader or a non-leader who was relating to the group as a whole.

## 2. Child-teacher

When the group interacted with a teacher in the class context, the humor relationship was that of ridiculer (class) to ridiculed (teacher). The children seemed to enjoy making the teacher the brunt of their jokes, confusing her and pushing her to the breaking point. The students separated the class into "us" (the group) and "them" (the teachers). This division was emphasized by the fact that while baiting a teacher the children frequently glanced at each other and smiled. Joking behavior was also used by the children to show the authority and each other that they were not "selling out" by demonstrating their loyalty to the group while performing the actions demanded by the teacher.

Receiving humor from an authority could be rather touchy unless the type of humor was self-ridicule or a self-caricature on the part of a teacher. Sometimes the authority's humor did not go over, especially when a teacher's joke was interpreted as an antagonistic remark. For example, on a field trip as the class passed an ancient Hawaiian mask, the teacher said jokingly, "There's your picture, Doug." The entire group expressed outrage.

## 3. Child-others

A feeling of ambivalence pervaded the children's relationship to the school. As mentioned before, the class bore the stigma of the word "special." The S.M.C. students were constantly on the defensive, and consequently they got into fights or "beefs" in school. However, evidence of some school spirit could be seen when children were talking about interschool events (including interschool "beefs"). The following incident illustrates the extent of their ambivalence:

While the S.M.C. was touring the capitol building, they saw another class from the same school. The S.M.C. children were very excited and proud that the other class was from their school. They kept repeating, "That's Manapua, they're from Manapua." But as we came closer to the second class, the S.M.C. put on their haughty tough masks and mockingly asked the other children, "What school are you from?" "Where did you say you were from?"

Other "regular" school children who passed by the S.M.C. homeroom were open game. That is, they were often involuntarily included in the leaders' skits. One such co-opting went as follows:

Two leaders had stuffed their pants with old clothes. Pretending to be pregnant, they left the room (grunting and moaning all the while) and randomly began to grab and kiss boys in the hall.

Intraschool humor was humor about barriers because the Hawaiians felt they were different from the other children. To make up for this, they took pride in their physical strength and constantly asserted that they were tough. As several of the boys bragged, "We Hawaiians hit first, think later." The visual signs of their ethnic identification which were stigmatized, such as clothing and language differences, were often used as symbols of defiance. In this ambivalent situation the S.M.C. students maintained an asymmetrical relationship with the outside children. The joking relationship which they maintained with the rest of the school children expressed both their desire to establish contact with the other children and their feelings of separation from them.<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusion

When an exchange took place between leaders and/or non-leaders, the context was that of the group. The content of this humor was concerned with the social hierarchy and shared cultural (or sub-cultural) assumptions, e.g., what was funny and what was not, what defined stupidity, which emotions were publicly taboo, etc. The type of humor employed (banter or irony) and the balance of the joking relationship (symmetrical or asymmetrical) indicated the social status of ego and alter.

By forming joking relationships, the S.M.C. students were able to cope with socially ambiguous situations. The highly stylized and stereotyped behavior (voice and posture changes) prevalent in these joking interactions limited the flow of information between ego and alter, thus placing social distance between the two interactants. In this way, the ambiguous elements could exist simultaneously.

That there was a positive correlation between asymmetrical exchange and the degree of hostility was borne out by the fact that as hostility was reduced between a teacher and a child their joking relationship changed from asymmetrical to symmetrical. However, for the most part, the patterns of joking relationships in the S.M.C. were stable and static. In the following section, dealing with the Y.M.C.A. program, these patterns were dynamic.

Ethnographic Observation at the Y.M.C.A.

From June through July, 1969, I observed twenty of the twenty-two S.M.C. students as they participated in a voluntary program sponsored by the Y.M.C.A. The other eleven children (ages 12-19) attending the Y program were from middle class families (nine Caucasians and two Filipinos).<sup>6</sup> The staff privately called all the non-Hawaiian children "Haoles" (a Hawaiian word usually used to designate Caucasians) or "the others." Twelve of the fourteen teachers were Caucasians, and two were part Hawaiian. The Hawaiian children did not actively distinguish the different ethnicities of the non-Hawaiian students or of the teachers.

The Y program was structured along the lines of a school. In the morning from 8 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. there were two 45-minute classes, and from 9:45 a.m. to 11:45 a.m. both children and staff attended encounter groups. At noon lunch was provided by the Y.

I observed several major differences between the Y program and the public school program. For one, instead of the grading system employed by the public schools, money was used at the Y as an incentive to encourage the children to attend class (the pay schedule was fifty cents for attending each class and one dollar for participating in the encounter groups). A second difference was that at the Y the children were allowed to choose their own classes.

The goals of the two programs also differed. The stated goal of the S.M.C. was to modify the children's behavior along certain lines; the Y staff, on the other hand, hoped that by forming relationships with the children they would provide an atmosphere conducive to behavioral change. To this end, the Y staff tried to minimize status differences between themselves and the children, e.g., teachers and pupils were on a first-name basis and many teachers and children went barefoot and otherwise dressed casually.

1. Hawaiian-Hawaiian interactions.

The symmetrical joking relationships so common in the S.M.C. between the Hawaiian students continued throughout the six weeks of the Y.M.C.A. program. However, asymmetrical joking relationships gradually decreased.

One aspect of the joking relationship especially prevalent at the Y was the use of humor as comic relief to deflect attention from a fellow student. When a student was in an embarrassing position (usually when singled out by the teacher), his friends joked loudly, thereby shifting the focus of attention away from the first child. An example of such a maneuver took place in an encounter group:

A Hawaiian girl said that she wished she had never been born. As a teacher began to question

her reasons for making such a statement, the girl became embarrassed and tried to get out of the situation by saying that she was hungry and wanted to go out and buy some food. This ploy did not succeed and the cross-examination continued. Suddenly the girl's friends began a patter of humorous answers to the teacher's questions, causing everyone in the group to laugh. The tone of the discussion was no longer serious, and the teacher had to give up her questioning.

The new popularity of comic relief had at least two causes. For one, because the student to teacher ratio was smaller at the Y, the children were singled out quite often. Second, at Manapua the children had had an extremely hostile asymmetrical joking relationship with their teachers, and when singled out they protected themselves by verbally ridiculing them. At the Y, however, the children had a new non-hostile relationship with the teachers. It would have been out of place to attack them for singling out a student. Instead the children used comic relief as a diversionary tactic.

Certain aspects of intragroup humor did change during the six weeks of the Y program. In the first weeks of class, most of the Hawaiian-Hawaiian humor was either incomprehensible to the non-Hawaiians<sup>7</sup> or derisive of the Y program. Derision communicated to the other group members that the actor was loyal to the group. The Hawaiians demonstrated their feelings of separation by being elaborately inattentive during class and strolling in and out of the classroom. If any one of the Hawaiians took too active an interest in class work, he was ridiculed and teased by his friends and in this way was reminded of his group identity.

The use of derisive jokes and the exclusive Hawaiian-Hawaiian form of humor declined by the third and fourth weeks. By the fourth and fifth weeks, friendship with a non-Hawaiian was acceptable to the group.

## 2. Hawaiian-Haole Interactions

During the first week of class the Hawaiians avoided interaction with the Haole children whenever possible by staying outside of the Y building until class began and sitting far away from the other students. There were many reasons for this avoidance behavior. As mentioned earlier, the Hawaiians felt stigmatized and shamefully different from the middle class children with whom they attended public school. They (the Hawaiians) did not know how the students at the Y would react to them. This uncertainty was reflected in the degree of social distance that they placed between themselves and the others.

In the second week, the Haoles served as the butt of asymmetrical joking relationships and, as such, bore the brunt of many of the Hawaiian's jokes. Near the end of the week, however, exchanges of flirtatious remarks between the two groups reflected the change from an asymmetrical to a symmetrical joking pattern. One of these flirtations transpired at lunch when a Hawaiian girl who was sitting near a Haole boy called over to the boy, "Hey, if I come hear your band play, will you wave to me from the stage?" The boy replied, "I'll even dedicate a song to you. What's your name?"

Some rather shy friendships were forming by the third week, usually across sexual lines. For instance, Hawaiian and Haole boys and girls often chose to do their class assignments together. As the two worked on the assignment, they would entertain each other with visual jokes (e.g., making funny faces and humorous drawings). To share this type of visual humor they did not have to have a thorough understanding of each other's cultural codes and perceptions. This, then, was a convenient mode through which the children could begin symmetrical joking relationships.

The fourth and fifth weeks saw an increase in friendly interactions between individuals in the two groups. Several Hawaiian-Haole symmetrical joking relationships (characterized by teasing and banter) were formed.

Hawaiian-Haole cross-sexual relationships had more sexual overtones during the fifth week. Lunch, which was the social hour, became the time for flirtations, and a large clique of Hawaiian-Haole couples usually sat together on one side of the lunchroom. A Hawaiian girl would occasionally sit on a male Haole's lap and hug him (the girls assumed the drunk-child voice on these occasions). Hawaiian boys would sit next to Haole girls and hug them. One reason for this intensification of Haole-Hawaiian relationships was that each group had become more familiar with the other's codes. The Hawaiians felt assured that the Haoles would not only be able to understand their humor signals but would also understand that these were not serious and would not reject them. By this time all the children had had many experiences together at the Y, so they had certain topics about which they could joke.

Also in the fifth week, Hawaiian students began to use comic relief to help their Haole friends during class. For instance, in a science class a teacher was questioning a Haole boy about an assignment. The boy, having forgotten to do the lesson, was obviously embarrassed. His Hawaiian friends began a barrage of humorous answers to the teacher's questions, thus shifting the focus of attention away from their friend. By six weeks all the students seemed to be relatively at ease with each other and both visual and verbal humor were present. The two groups made no effort to avoid each other, but there seemed to be fewer interactions between Haoles and Hawaiians.



In summary, conjunctive and disjunctive elements were present in the Hawaiian-Haole relationship.<sup>8</sup> Through the formation of joking relationships, the students were able to maintain friendly relations with the Haoles while keeping a degree of separation and flexibility.

### 3. Hawaiian-Staff Interactions

At the outset of the Y program, the Hawaiian students employed avoidance behavior with the teachers. While they had to attend classes in order to get paid, and thus were in constant contact with the teachers, they minimized this contact by refusing to answer questions or to do assignments. Also, during the first week, the Hawaiian students ridiculed the class assignments aloud among themselves and, when singled out, they became embarrassed and tried to hide their embarrassment in laughter.

Although the Hawaiians still refused to respond in certain situations, in the second week they did begin to address some comments to the staff members. These comments, while derisive, were not personal attacks against the teachers but were aimed instead at the Y program in general (e.g., "This whole thing is junk"). Humor was also employed when a student was unsure of the teacher's opinion on a particular subject. The student would change the tenor of his remarks depending on what the staff member said. An example of this change of posture took place during lunch:

Hawaiian (with exaggerated distaste): This shit  
looks like Pali [homestead area]  
cooking.  
Staff member: I like Pali cooking!  
Hawaiian (making a face): Oh yeah? Rice and  
eggs?  
Staff member: Sure, I love rice and eggs.  
Hawaiian: Yeah! And isn't it great with  
sardines!

Thus, in an ambiguous situation the student used humor to achieve a degree of flexibility. He did not lose face by changing his opinion because he could claim that he was only joking in the first place. In this way, he sounded out the other person's position before he took a stance himself.

At this point the children were unsure of their relationship to the teachers. Their uncertainty stemmed from the fact that the Y teachers did not act like prototype authority figures; they did not make overt value judgments about the children's behavior, nor did they try to discipline the students. The children could either treat the teachers as authority figures (i.e., ridicule them) or they could respond to their gestures of friendship and form symmetrical joking relationships. Because of this ambiguity, the students employed humor during the second week to discover what

the teachers thought of them, although they abstained from forming actual joking relationships.

By the third week, many of the Hawaiian children had established friendly ties with certain staff members. However, because their old code had not yet changed to allow for these new friendships, gestures of friendship made by Hawaiians to staff members were greeted by a barrage of teasing from the other Hawaiian children. One reason for the children's ambivalence toward these staff-Hawaiian friendships was that they were unsure of how these new relationships would affect the group's solidarity.

A staff member offered to share her hamburger with a Hawaiian girl (sharing is an act of friendship among Hawaiian children). The Hawaiian took more than half the sandwich and then proceeded to demand the lettuce and pickles and finally some gum from the teacher.

In this way, the girl could accept the offer of friendship from the staff member and still show the other students that she was not selling out to the teacher but only using her. The humor created social distance between the girl and the teacher, so that the former could take an ambiguous stand about her feelings for the latter.

During this same time, some of the boys began to throw small things at the women teachers and pretended to make sexual advances. But the boys were not yet ready for sexual jokes from the teachers. In an encounter group, a teacher discovered the chance resemblance of some lines she drew to female breasts. The woman found this accident terribly funny, but the Hawaiian boys in the class were so embarrassed by the innuendo that they left the room en masse.

In the third week, visual humor was the most common Hawaiian-to-staff joking mode. Visual jokes included such things as funny drawings, peace signs, and humorous facial and postural contortions.

By the beginning of the fourth week, most of the Hawaiian students seemed interested in doing their class assignments, although they still seemed ambivalent about how to relate to the staff. Most gestures of friendship on the Hawaiians' part were accompanied by symbolic statements of hostility. That is, after making a gesture of friendship that was not masked in humor (and therefore lacking in social distance), the children would revert to an asymmetrical joking relationship which once again put social distance between themselves and the teachers. One child even overcame his embarrassment about his illiteracy and allowed a teacher to write for him during a poetry class. He did make a token symbolic statement of his group membership by loudly teasing the teacher. Only then, having shown that he had not given up his group identity, did he proceed to dictate his poem to the teacher.

Humorous sexual aggression became more prevalent during the fourth week, and also more physical. The Hawaiian girls made advances toward male teachers, but only after having assumed the drunk-child voice. By changing their identity, the girls limited the information passed on to the observer. One idea which was communicated was that it was not the child who was acting, but someone else (usually someone who could not be held accountable for her actions). This gave the girls the freedom to sit on the male teachers' laps, climb between their legs, and generally act seductively. The Hawaiian boys, on the other hand, rarely used stylizations when making sexual advances toward a female teacher.<sup>9</sup> One reason for this difference in degree of stereotyped behavior was that, for the girls, there was much more role ambiguity in these situations than there was for the boys, since it was part of the boys' masculine role to make sexual advances toward a female. The fact that the object of a boy's advances was a teacher and not one of his peers was much less of a role change than for the girls when they were sexually aggressive toward male teachers, since ordinarily girls were expected to take a more passive role.

Although these sexual interactions were symbolic statements about relationships, they were not indicative of vertical relationships (i.e., relative status). They were, instead, an acting out of male-female roles. It is not surprising, therefore, that sexual humor became prevalent during a period when the Hawaiians were unsure of their own status. They could use this mask of sexuality to avoid showing their feelings for the staff members.

By the end of the fourth week, not only did it become socially acceptable to be a staff member's friend, but demonstrations of such friendship became common. Hawaiians shared food with teachers and the girls entrusted their purses to staff members (girls previously let only their close friends hold their purses). With this new feeling of friendship there appeared a new mode of humor. It consisted of play and banter between a teacher and a Hawaiian (often for an audience). One such incident took place in the Y.M.C.A. restaurant where other customers were present:

Two females (a teacher and a Hawaiian) both loudly claimed to be the wife of a male staff member. In mock battle over him, the two females spoke in exaggeratedly brash and shrewish shouts. They chased each other and their "husband" around the cafeteria.

It took a great deal of mutual trust to risk putting on an impromptu skit for such a large audience. Each of the three had to act from the presupposition that the other two would not embarrass him in some way.

In a second example of this new play mode, a Hawaiian girl placed a thermometer in her mouth, upside down. Assuming the drunk-child stance and voice, she approached a group of teachers.

With mock seriousness the staff members commented on her high fever. The girl was entertaining the teachers by including them in her play. Both child and teacher seemed to feel sure that the other would recognize the humor signals (i.e., serious and drunk voices, etc.) and play along. The Hawaiians were now ready to affirm the teachers' equal status. They did this by entering into symmetrical joking relationships with the staff members.

On the first day of the fifth week, there was a slight setback in student-staff relations. One of the teachers decided that he would no longer allow paint sniffing during his class. His relationship with the Hawaiian children deteriorated rapidly. The humor used in his class also changed. Several of the students began to yell, run around the room, and tease the teacher. The teacher's joking relationship with the Hawaiians went from a symmetrical relationship to an asymmetrical one because he had exerted authority over them and stigmatized their behavior.

None of the other staff members made overt judgments about glue sniffing, and in their classes student-staff relationships continued to develop along the lines of friendship, characterized by symmetrical joking relationships. By this week (the fifth) both staff and children could banter with each other.

An interesting sidelight was the fact that paint sniffing affected the children differently in the two settings. In the S.M.C., the students were either quite nasty or semi-comatose when intoxicated. At the Y, the children became lovably "drunk" and in this condition they often approached the staff and asked to be cuddled.

By the sixth week, the children would enter a room just to talk casually with a staff member (previously children had pretended that they had met the teacher accidentally). While a child still used humor to cover up his embarrassment, fewer events were considered embarrassing as the weeks passed.<sup>10</sup>

Joking during classes declined seemingly because of a new interest in the subject matter. Undoubtedly, the Hawaiians' knowledge that they could participate in class discussions without their language and their lack of education being social stigmas enabled them to let down their masks. They no longer needed the social distance provided by the joking relationship. The expressions of hostility and ambivalence toward the teachers were greatly reduced in these last weeks.

The children demonstrated their affection for the teachers in many ways. Some cried when they had to leave the program; others invited several of the teachers to visit them at home. This type of behavior was almost unheard of--previously the children were too ashamed to invite non-Hawaiians to Pali. A rather conclusive sign of the children's affection for the Y staff was the following: when the children were given a choice between having the last day

of class off (they would have been paid anyway) or going to class, the children voted to have class.

#### 4. Summary

At the beginning of the Y.M.C.A. program the Hawaiian children, uncertain whether the other students would accept or reject them, avoided interacting with the non-Hawaiians. Most of the humor prevalent at this time served to strengthen the solidarity of the group.

The Hawaiian students tried to discover, through humor, if they could trust the good will of the other children. By using sexual and visual humor (neither of which dramatized relative status differences), the children communicated their own willingness to accept the Haoles. At the same time, they retained enough social distance and flexibility so that if they were rejected they could pretend that their own overtures of friendship were only a joke.

By the fourth week, the Hawaiian children, now reasonably sure of their status, formed heterosexual symmetrical joking relationships with the Haoles. Due to the relative stability of male and female roles, heterosexual relationships were "safer" than homosexual ones. The highly stereotyped behavior that these roles entailed allowed maximum social distance and flexibility to the interactors.

Because the Y staff did not act like public school teachers, the Hawaiians did not have a stereotyped formula for dealing with them. Consequently, in early Hawaiian-staff interactions, the children tried to discover how the staff felt about certain issues. The children seemed unsure about accepting the staff's gestures of friendship. To deal with this ambivalent situation, they formed asymmetrical joking relationships with the staff members.

In the fourth week the children began to communicate their acceptance of the staff through the use of humor. Once again, as in Hawaiian-Haole student relationships, sexual humor became prevalent at a time when there was a shift from asymmetrical to symmetrical joking relationships. By the end of the fourth week, most Hawaiian-staff joking relationships were symmetrical.

In the last weeks of the program, the children were able to relate to the staff members without the social distance provided by the joking relationship. As the children began to trust the teachers, they became more certain of their own status in relation to the teachers, and feelings of stigma and of hostility were minimized. When the social situations became less ambiguous, there was less need for joking relationships.

Conclusions

With the change in context from the S.M.C. to the Y.M.C.A. there were shifts in intragroup and intergroup relationships. These shifts were evidenced by changes in the Hawaiian children's humorous interactions and in the concomitant changes in affect reflected in these joking patterns. When the children went from the S.M.C. to the Y.M.C.A., they were confronted with several differences in role and in authority structure. The following section discusses four major differences between the two educational settings and the effects of these variants on the children's joking patterns.

By being authoritarian and by repeatedly disciplining the children, the S.M.C. staff constantly dramatized the status differences between themselves and the students.<sup>11</sup> At the Y, where teachers tried to engender feelings of equality, symbols of relative status differences were consciously minimized.

The children reacted to the high degree of status differentiation in the S.M.C. by forming asymmetrical joking relationships with the S.M.C. teachers, thereby enacting their own high status in relation to the teachers. The Hawaiians' reaction to the Y staff members was much less defensive. With the feeling of acceptance at the Y came a reduction in the amount of hostility that the children expressed toward the teachers. This reduction was reflected in the predominantly friendly tone of the Hawaiian-staff humor and joking relationships.

A second difference between the Y and the S.M.C. was that the S.M.C. authority structure was so overt that it provided a visible enemy against which the children could organize. The students minimized their own intragroup hostilities and presented a solid front against the outside power. A second factor contributing to the tightening of the group was that the S.M.C. teachers set out, quite openly, to change the children's behavior. In the face of the pressure to conform to the teachers' values, the children strongly asserted their own. A third factor causing the children to unify was the fact that they were treated as a group and not as individuals. (For example, all of the children had to follow the same routine.)

At the Y, there was neither the strict authority structure nor the pressure to conform to any one pattern. The Y staff treated the children as individuals and formed relationships with them on this basis. This tendency toward personalization was reflected by the fact that each child was allowed to choose his own classes.

The Hawaiian intragroup structure was distinctly different in the two educational settings. In the S.M.C., the group was a stratified, bounded unit, able to withstand and foil the outside pressures to conform. Therefore, a great deal of humor was aimed not only at strengthening group cohesion but also at dramatizing

the children's separation (disjunction) from the teachers. At the Y, the children began as a tight group, but, as the weeks passed, the group structure loosened and the children broke up into several small cliques composed of both Haoles and Hawaiians. The humor modes commonly used to strengthen group identity were dropped (e.g., derision of outsiders, in-group jokes). Also dropped were modes that were used to avoid conforming to the authorities' standards of good conduct.

Another difference between the S.M.C. and the Y was that, in the former, the Hawaiian children were separated from the other Manapua students and given a stigmatizing label. These factors which compounded their feeling of stigma caused the Hawaiians a great deal of status ambiguity. Added to this uncertainty was the feeling that they were unacceptable to the teachers and the other students. The Hawaiian children continually tried to prove that they were better, not worse, than the other pupils by defying the school authorities and by treating many of the other Manapua students with disdain.<sup>12</sup>

At the Y, the Hawaiians were not made to feel separate or shamefully different from the other children, both because the student body in the Y program was made up of children of various ethnic groups and backgrounds, and also because the Y program was set up as a job with hourly wages. This gave the children a non-stigmatized reason for attending and greatly reduced the degree of role ambiguity.<sup>13</sup>

The Hawaiian students did not need to dramatize the status differences between themselves and the non-Hawaiians because the Y staff and the Haole students tried to alleviate their feelings of inequality by deemphasizing status differences. There was also less of a need for social distance (for flexibility), and the Hawaiians were able to let down their joking masks in the last weeks of class, at which time the frequency of humorous interaction was reduced. The fact that the Hawaiian children were not physically separated from the other students, therefore able to interact with the Haoles to form friendships, had the effect of weakening the Hawaiians' intragroup cohesion. As the Hawaiian group relaxed to include non-Hawaiians, the humor modes employed by the group members also became more inclusive.

A final difference between the two educational settings is that of ambience. As mentioned previously, the Hawaiian children expressed a great deal of hostility toward school in general.<sup>14</sup> This hostility pervaded the children's humor when they were in the school. The Y.M.C.A., on the other hand, was attended voluntarily and was considered by the children to be a place to have fun. It is not surprising, then, that disjunctive feelings were pervasive in the Hawaiians' humorous exchanges in the S.M.C., while at the Y conjunction was the prevailing tone.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The names of the special class, of the school, and of the home-stead area have been changed.

<sup>2</sup>For the uses of this paper, irony is considered to be an outward expression of friendliness (conjunction) which masks a covert intimation of hostility (disjunction) (Burns 1953:256-257).

<sup>3</sup>Paint cans were brought to school and hidden in easily accessible places, usually in the lavatories.

<sup>4</sup>S.M.C. teachers were not specially trained to work with "special" children.

<sup>5</sup>Many S.M.C.'s had friends in other classes. But for the most part, the special class expressed hostility toward the other more successful children. When the Hawaiian children got into fights, they said it was "S.M.C. fighting the Japanese" or "S.M.C. fighting the ninth grade," etc.

<sup>6</sup>For the remainder of this paper, the S.M.C. children will be referred to as "the group," "the children," and "the Hawaiians." The eleven non-Hawaiian children will be called "the Haoles" or "the other" children, except when otherwise designated. The Y program was voluntary for all of the students.

<sup>7</sup>These jokes usually contained so much slang, Hawaiian, and obscure in-group references that they were difficult for a non-Hawaiian to decipher.

<sup>8</sup>Examples of conjunctive elements are sexual attraction, desire for friendship, wish to reduce hostility, curiosity. Disjunctive feelings stemmed from awareness of stigma and hostilities due to anti-Haole prejudices.

<sup>9</sup>Occasionally, an exaggeratedly self-confident stance was taken by the males.

<sup>10</sup>The fact that the children felt less embarrassment during this time is evidence that they felt out of face (Goffman 1967) less often. For the most part, the teachers did not invalidate the images of self that they (the children) had claimed for themselves. The fear of being shamed no longer motivated the children to maintain social distance.

<sup>11</sup>Other, more visible signs symbolic of this status difference were the differences of dress and language between the two groups and the fact that the teachers could call the students by their first names, whereas the students had to address the teachers more formally (e.g., Mr. or Miss X).



<sup>12</sup>As several S.M.C. students said, "We're a special privileged class."

<sup>13</sup>During the first weeks of class the children continually stressed that they were in the program only for the money. Later, however, the monetary aspect was no longer mentioned.

<sup>14</sup>The fact that the school was occasionally called "Manapua Prison" suggests that the children felt that school attendance was a punishment.

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