No Laughter Among Thieves: Authenticity and Norm Enforcement in Stand-Up Comedy

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Abstract: Why may observers label an individual's questionable act as a discreditable norm transgression, while they may ignore or excuse similar behaviors by others? To explain such inconsistency, I explore the case of joke theft through participant-observation data on stand-up comics in Los Angeles. Informal, community-based systems govern property rights covering jokes. Most cases that could constitute joke theft are ambiguous, because of the possibility of parallel thought. I find that insiders' accusations are loosely coupled to similarity. Instead, enforcement more reflects how much insiders regard an individual as authentic to the community. Observers account of a possible transgressor's backstage behaviors and technical expertise to discern if a transgression occurred. Comics with a track record of anti-social behavior, external reward orientation, and lackluster on-stage craft are vulnerable to accusations for even borderline acts, because these qualities conform with shared pattern of a transgressor. Vulnerability increases when a comic has commercial success despite low peer esteem. Authenticity protects comics because it is constitutive of community-specific status, which yields halo effects, and encourages social centrality and relationships predicated upon respect. This study of joke theft accusation patterns illustrates how norms function as frames rather than rules and how authenticity shapes their enforcement.

Sociological theory situates social norms as fundamental pre-conditions for collective action and order because they constitute shared expectations for how one ought to act in a given situation and to sanction deviations from it (e.g. Coleman 1990; Durkheim 1982; Gibbs 1965; Hechter and Opp 2001a). Some work has illustrated how norms can substitute for laws in regulating behavior within certain communities, because participants see norms' flexibility, relative ease, and grounding in localized practice and culture as optimal for such settings (e.g. Ellickson 1991; Fauchart and von Hippel 2008; Oliar and Sprigman 2008; Ostrom 1990; E. Posner 2000). Nonetheless, scholars recognize that punishment of violations is not exact and can be prone to inconsistency. Their research tends to situate this a consequence of weaknesses or obstacles in the sanctioning process—such as costliness, a lack of interdependent social relationships, poor information flow, or weak incentives to compel enforcement (Coleman 1990; Di Stefano, King, and Verona 2015; Fauchart and von Hippel 2008; Horne 2009).

However, scholars have devoted little attention to how the ambiguity of the social norm itself and the situations it covers shape sanctioning outcomes and may contribute to their possible inconsistency. There is some acknowledgement that the content and standards of norms are often imprecise and characteristically ambiguous (e.g. Hechter and Opp 2001b; Jasso and Opp 1997; R. Posner 2007). But empirical investigation into how social actors negotiate these constraints and their effect upon the identification and punishment of norm violations is very limited. Nonetheless, how people determine which acts constitute norm transgressions given uncertain standards and thus assign blameworthiness have obvious implications upon enforcement outcomes and may shape the sanctioning process.

Drawing from fifty months of ethnographic research, I investigate the enforcement of ambiguous norms through the study of joke theft in stand-up comedy. It is the unauthorized copying of another performer's material where one makes an implicit or overt false claim over

authorship, and it is governed by comics through an informal norms-based system of peer enforcement (see Oliar and Sprigman 2008). While there is a high frequency of routines that exhibit enough surface similarity to constitute conceivable joke thefts, peer accusations of such misconduct are remarkably few; sanctions for it are even rarer. I attribute this imbalance to how insiders process possible violations, regard possible transgressors, and socially produce wrongdoing. I find that the enforcement of this social norm is loosely coupled to how much one's routine appears to resemble another's work. Rather, it more heavily depends upon a potential transgressor's recognized membership in the community. Specifically, peer enforcement depends upon a comic's recognized *authenticity*—which is evinced through one's prior pro-social behaviors, commitment to the community, craft expertise, and resemblance to the "comics' comic" ideal—to compensate for uncertainty in the social norm's standards and the acts that it states to cover. It proves to be especially consequential, because insiders receive authenticity as a signal of one's possible motivations and likelihood to commit maleficence, either deliberately or tacitly. As it also informs a comics' localized status and *relational goodwill*, which entails the scope of one respect-based social ties with fellow members, authenticity further shapes how enforcers interpret one's uncertain but questionable action and the costliness of sanctioning. In a sense, joke theft reflects perceptions of the joker more than of the joke itself. Likewise, I theorize that violations of ambiguous social norms can reflect the transgressor's membership than the alleged transgressive act.

Uneven Enforcement and Ambiguous Norms

Why might two similar actions be punished as a norm violation in one case and excused or ignored in another? To address this potential variance in enforcement, scholars typically pinpoint factors that compel or constrain the sanctioning process. Research within rational choice theory has emphasized that the possible costs of sanctioning transgressors—such as risks of retaliation or the loss of social relationships—compel such decisions and their eventual outcomes (e.g. Axelrod 1986;

Di Stefano et al. 2015; Heckathorn 1990; Horne 2009). Coleman (1990; see also Horne 2007) attributes possible lapses to the weakness of "meta-norms" that encourage and reward sanctioning behavior. Alternately, it may depend upon whether and how much certain factors instigate enforcers' drives for retribution (Di Stefano et al. 2015; Frank 1988). Another approach focuses upon aspects of the social production of a violation, such as the selective targeting of reputed and prominent firms as strategies to maximize the effects of shaming efforts (Bartley and Child 2014) or the presence of publicity that propels a transgression into becoming "common knowledge" (Adut 2005).

But this prior research provides an incomplete explanation for why and when such variance in enforcement manifests. It generally starts with the presumption that a recognizable transgression is present. This ignores potential influences introduced when possible enforcers interpret whether an observed act constitutes a norm violation. Because norms' can be open to conditionality and the underlying standards and content can be imprecise (Hechter and Opp 2001b; Jasso and Opp 1997; R. Posner 2007), the process through which individuals navigate these obstacles can profoundly influence enforcement and produce such apparent unevenness. Therefore, shifting focus to the prior stages where enforcers identify violations may enable more a robust explanation.

One approach stresses that norm enforcers process and evaluate possible transgressions through interpersonal negotiation. Scholars, particularly in the law economics tradition, have developed this through studies of social worlds—such as ranching (Ellickson 1991), gourmet cuisine (Fauchart and Von Hippel 2008), diamond trading (Bernstein 1992), and stand-up comedy (Oliar and Sprigman 2008)—where social norms substitute for formal law due to their relative ease, flexibility, and low cost. Employing norms as informal rules that stipulate consensually constructed ideals of wrongdoing, relevant parties engage in processes of negotiation to arrive at whether a questionable act constitutes a violation through determining how much it corresponds this standard (e.g. Ellickson 1991; Oliar and Sprigman 2008). Participants consult contextual and situational

factors to determine if the transgression is worthy of punishment and of what type. This work illustrates how social norms—more so than formal laws—can have a profound capacity for enabling order and collective action in tightly knit communities. Nonetheless, this research misses important conditions of the norm enforcement process *in situ*. Though conceptualizing social norms as informal proxies for law, these studies assume that violations entail actions that are directly relevant to the stated norm, rather than the conceivable alternative where they encompass or articulate a wider suite of tangential discreditable behaviors.

These issues can be partially ameliorated by conceptualizing social norms in practice as frames rather than rules. Fine (2001: see also Goffman 1974) theorizes that they provide participants within certain templates to interpret situations and a range of appropriate behaviors. Thus, they are generalizations that individuals enact to negotiate the ambiguity of specific scenarios. When ascertaining whether an act constitutes a violation that is worthy of sanction, participants look to whether it disrupts the flow of group interactions and certain contextual factors suggest a disregard the community's values (see also Deland 2013). Thus, they do not frame all questionable acts as transgressions. Beyond providing more robust understanding of how individuals negotiate the ambiguity typical within enforcement, it also introduces the premise that social norms constitute frames that encompass and articulate wider range of behavior than what it states on the surface (see also Faulkner 2011).

Nonetheless, this still leaves open which contextual cues that possible enforcers typically tend to prioritize or use to "fill in the blanks" when reconciling generalized frames with specific situations. While this negotiation unfolds within unique interactional settings, this approach does not fully account for how this may be patterned across cases. May audiences tend to weigh certain behaviors or qualities more heavily when determining if one did violate a given norm?

I contend that enforcers place greater emphasis upon the attributes of the possible violator than the questionable act, because they prove more salient and less ambiguous. Especially within the realm of moral judgment, individuals very often process observed behaviors through associative and pattern-based (Type-I) thinking, and social norms and other like cultural frameworks shape these heuristics and provide means to articulate these intuitive responses (Haidt 2012; Lizardo et al. 2016; Vaisey 2009; see also Bicchieri 2006). A social actor's qualities may provide more proximate matter to complete these patterns, which could become integrated into a norm's practical definition. Scholars offer possible suggestions which evidence may prove especially compelling. Enforcers might use status or reputation as a way cut through situational murkiness. For example, McDonnell and King (2018) observe that high status and positive reputations can produce halo effects, as these attributes may speak to a social actor's virtue or competence and, thus, mitigate blameworthiness. However, high status may also occasion suspicion about one's motivations (e.g. Hahl and Zuckerman 2014). Furthermore, one's degree of recognized membership within a group or network may signal one's motivations or abilities (e.g. Granovetter 1985; Uzzi 1997; Zuckerman et al. 2003). Such personal attributes or the observable behaviors that substantiate them may satisfy the patterns that underlie the interpretative aspects of norm enforcement. Furthermore, their influence may persist since they present relevant conditions for sanctioning outcomes. As such, I propose that a possible transgressor's perceived authenticity, given the range of qualities it encompasses and represents, proves especially consequential in the enforcement of social norms when ambiguity is elevated due to their imprecise standards or the murkiness of the acts that they govern.

Authenticity

Sociological theory generally defines authenticity according to the degree to which an audience agrees with a social actor's claims of what or who one is (e.g. Carroll and Swaminathan 2000; Hahl 2016; Peterson 1997; Turner 1976). It is the socially constructed quality that encapsulates the distinction between "real" and "fake" or "genuine" and "bullshit," which becomes evident through certain manners and rituals of social performance and presentation (Fine 2004; Grazian 2005; Wherry 2008). In one sense, it reflects the impression of one's fit with a certain recognized type (Carroll and Wheaton 2009). Audiences and producers agree that goods or producers common to a certain category should exhibit a suite of characteristics, orientations, or aptitudes. But what differentiates authenticity from simple categorical membership is its moral dimension, wherein deviations from a claimed identity significantly degrades an individual or good's perceived value and implicitly or explicitly entails an impression of deception or fraud. This typically encompasses one's prioritization of intrinsic motivations and commitment to tradition over external rewards (Hahl 2016; Johnston and Baumann 2007; Lena and Peterson 2007).

How might authenticity shape the enforcement process and outcomes of ambiguous norms or uncertain behaviors? One answer is that it may confirm or dissuade general suspicions of certain social actors. For instance, experiments by Hahl and Zuckerman (2014) find that social actors denigrated high-status individuals who exhibited strong extrinsic motivations or expressed superiority over lesser counterparts, since these behaviors confirmed negative assumptions about the inauthenticity of those with high status (e.g. Lamont 2000; Ridgeway and Correll 2006). Conversely, subjects celebrated those whose actions projected the impression being pro-social and courteous. These findings suggest that audiences tend to be more generous to those whom they deem authentic but reserve harsher treatment to presumably inauthentic individuals, which Kim and Zuckerman (2017) further confirm in patterns of support for moral entrepreneurs. Therefore, this implies that

audiences are generally more likely to interpret the questionable actions by those whom they deem inauthentic as norm violations.

However, the influence of authenticity upon judgment may assume additional intensity and alternate forms within the confines of communities. It can constitute a crucial quality that demarks membership and establishes group boundaries. Within communities where opposition between in- and out-groups strongly characterize collective identity, norms of membership can assume the added dimension of signaling one's loyalty (Philips, Turco, and Zuckerman 2012). In addition, the threat external reward systems contribute to greater sensitivity to authenticity (Hahl 2016). Under these conditions, it can especially influence how peers specifically receive one's actions and works. This suggests that peer enforcers within communities with strong boundaries are more willing to punish those whom they deem as non-members and are more sensitive to signals of inauthenticity when determining whether one's questionable act is a norm violation. Furthermore, the behaviors and qualities that most profoundly shape such judgments are those that seem to demonstrate loyalty and commitment to the community.

Although this approach (e.g. Hahl and Zuckerman 2014) conceptualizes authenticity as distinctive of status, it might prove constitutive of localized status within community settings. While prior work how constructions of authenticity allows certain products gain the symbolic value to become associated with high status (e.g. Fine 2004; Frake 2017; Johnston and Baumann 2007), there is respectively less focus toward how it shapes status orders among individuals within group contexts. Thornton (1996) does provide one example through the case of the British rave scene, where members who participants deem authentic—as evinced through their knowledge of obscure electronic music and fashion—attract more opportunities for performances, access to exclusive clubs, and greater social centrality. However, such high status is community-specific. If this manifests as a feature of a given community, it may prove especially consequential to explaining how

it may shape peer norm enforcement. Specifically, this may occasion status-based effects that inform the interpretation of possible transgressions and the costliness of sanctioning, especially regarding manners that are only relevant to fellow community members.

Based on my ethnographic data on joke theft, I propose that peers, when interpreting whether to frame a questionable action as a norm violation, consider an individual's recognized authenticity to "fill in the blanks." It proves to be a seductive heuristic, as it involves morally laden presumptions about one's aptitudes and motivations drawn from specific prior observed behaviors. Further, authenticity's influence is more tangible as a partial determinant of one's social position within a localized setting—which especially manifests through the social relationships and centrality that is a function of it.

Empirical Case: Joke Theft and Stand-Up Comics

Joke theft is the unauthorized use of another's material where a performer implicitly or explicitly makes a false claim over authorship (Oliar and Sprigman 2008; Stebbins 1992). While it typically covers premises, it can be extended in some cases to cover punchlines, phrasing styles, or physical act-outs. Community members define and enforce informal intellectual property rights surrounding stand-up comedy routines through a norms-based system, because jokes cannot be effectively protected by such formal legal interventions as copyright or patents. For instance, Oliar and Sprigman (2008) illustrate in their investigation of joke theft how regular shifts in the wording of material performed on stage, the high transaction costs of lawsuits concerning infringement, and difficulty surrounding the documentation of cases contributed to the use of this informal regime over copyright, which proves insufficient because it protects fixed expressions and not ideas. Furthermore, the industry's decentralized structure relegated most monitoring and enforcement efforts to interested third parties. Accused joke thieves could receive informal sanctions ranging from reputational damage, social ostracism, loss of bookings, or even physical violence.

The concept of joke theft is a contemporary development. Up through the mid-twentieth century, comics—who derived their livelihoods on touring circuits—freely performed jokes that originated from other authors or were stock standards without penalty (see Oliar and Sprigman 2008). However, starting in the 1960s, a suite of changes emerged that contributed to comics' greater emphasis upon the exclusive ownership of material and the sensitivity to joke theft. Comics shifted away from a primarily touring model and relied more upon television appearances and long-play comedy albums. The transition to mass media necessitated original material, established more concrete proof of authorship, and enabled easier monitoring of originality. In the 1970s, the birth of comedy clubs—centralized venues where comics performed and developed—initiated greater contact and direct competition. Comics now appeared on expanded bills that regularly encompassed over a dozen acts appearing in succession. Representatives from television and film went to comedy clubs to scout new talent. Performing others' jokes, especially of those peers at the club, could signal a lack of ability or, more glaringly, take opportunities away from the original author. As the proximity among club comics occasioned the formation of tightly knit and bounded communities of support and shared interest (Knoedelseder 2009), policing joke theft intensified as a collective effort to maintain fair play. Cribbing another's material conveyed one's untrustworthiness, excessive selfishness, and disrespect, which are all criteria to exclude an individual from comics' peer networks.

Shifting definitions and standards concerning a stand-up comic's craft also advanced the concept of joke theft. During the era when the form almost exclusively operated within touring circuits, it was all in the delivery. As most comics shared a standard repertoire of jokes that fit a schtick, assessments of quality primarily reflected one's expertise as a performer—such as one's timing, physicality, quick wit, and technique. With the turn toward original material in stand-up comedy during the 1960s and 1970s, audiences—especially one's peers—devoted more profound

attention toward one's ability as a writer or "jokesmith." Comics began to associate prowess as a performer and writer as components of a coherent "comedic voice" that lends the impression of a distinctive identity and perspective. This emphasis upon voice—especially among insider audiences—promotes an ideal of the "artist-craftsman" (Becker 1982:273-8) within stand-up comedy. Stealing jokes is absolutely counter to this, as it signifies a lack of comedic voice.

Contemporary stand-up comics and sympathetic insiders do not extend respect to those who engage in joke theft, as it both betrays community members and indicates a lack of aptitude on-stage. This is especially consequential, because most stand-up comics orient their participation, either primarily or partially, toward garnering inclusion and respect from their peers. Their most fundamental and tangible form of social organization is their community and the networks enmeshed within it (Jefferies 2017; [author] [year]). Membership and social centrality depend upon peer respect. Even though comics typically strive for commercial renown, Jefferies (2017:126) observes that "earning respect within the comedy communities they belong to is more important than appearing on the cover of *People* magazine." Esteem and comradery are intrinsically precious in a field where monetary compensation is typically paltry and subject to superstar inequality (see Rosen 1981). Most comics earn trivial incomes from their performances. The few who achieve stardom tend earn a middle-class standard of living, at best, despite such symbolically impressive and rare achievements as solo television specials.[1] Comics in my study equated incomes of performers at this level with public school teachers or experienced bartenders. Superstars earn many orders of magnitude more. As commercial success can be fleeting and serendipitous, comics perceive respect as durable and more permanent.

[1] On one occasion, I observed a comic remark to a group of fellow comics about his sense of accomplishment for being able to live off his earnings from stand-up comedy. Despite having two major television performances in that year, he earned $11,000, which still greatly impressed the comics in the conversation (fieldnotes 2/28/2012).

However, respect is also an important instrumental resource because it signifies one's expertise and encourages social centrality. While stand-up comedy previously exhibited career ladders anchored in individual clubs during the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Knoedelseder 2009; Stebbins 1992), it is currently more based around networks of permanent or temporary venues and cliques of comics. Through earning the esteem of other community members by being an exemplary on-stage and backstage performer, comics could better attract and maintain social ties based upon esteem. This affords one a preference in securing greater visibility within the industry, bookings for shows, inclusion in fellow comics' projects in the entertainment industry, and credits. Earning respect of peers strongly enables one's career development. Therefore, through to its negative relationship with peer respect, joke theft connotes a stigma (i.e. Goffman 1963) that brings significant social penalties.

Data and Methods

The findings in this article primarily come from ethnographic data that I collected through 50 months of participant-observation study of stand-up comics in Los Angeles, California. I conducted most my research between February 2010 and April 2015, but I maintained face-to-face and Internet contact with individuals from my study after this window. While my initial ethnographic work was mostly observational for the first 6 weeks, I started performing stand-up comedy and continued to do so over these fifty months.

Doing stand-up comedy as a component of my research granted me two advantages. First, it allowed me to gain familiarity with the processes that field participants undergo, which offered me a useful frame of reference to understand and interpret their social actions. Adopting the perspective of an "observant participant" provided me with advantages that enriched my understanding of this context through allowing me to embody many of its core processes and experiences (Mears 2012). This approach acquainted me with crucial tacit knowledge concerning many of the technical and social aspects of this craft and occupation. Performing on-stage involves esoteric skills and

challenges that are not accessible to the detached observer. Understanding backstage processes—such as earning show bookings, entering established networks, gaining the trust of peers, and earning invitations to social or occupational rituals—is contingent upon experience and knowledge of local scripts. Second, it eased my access into this otherwise insular community by building rapport with members. As an active and evolving participant, I could go further than open-mic nights, comedy clubs, independently produced shows, and talent showcases and expand into informal gatherings, parties, impromptu writing sessions, car rides between venues, and other settings. I conducted fieldwork typically three nights per week. This reflected a slower pace than most aspiring comics who hustle every night to perform or network. However, I still gained familiarity with the fieldsite and its requisite processes and social dynamics.

I interpreted my data, constructed theories, and oriented my ethnographic approach through abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Abduction involves a continual dialogue between my discoveries in the field and relevant existing literatures. I entered the field with the initial intention to engage theories concerning restricted fields of cultural production (e.g. Bourdieu 1993) and labor market tournaments in the arts (e.g. Menger 2014). However, my early participation in stand-up comedy allowed me to become aware of the intense sensitivity of many field participants to even the suggestion of joke theft. I was previously familiar with highly publicized controversies surrounding plagiarism, but I was ignorant about this transgression's complexity and centrality within the practice and culture of stand-up comics. I learned the significance of this norm while naively taking fieldnotes in the back of a Los Angeles comedy club:

> Just as my pen hit the page of my small notebook, [the talent coordinator] jetted over to my direction and loudly hurled a stern directive toward me, "No writing in the room!"… I felt all of the eyes of the comics shifting my way... Spotting the talent coordinator in his booth, I peered into his window. He looked up and smiled. I apologized, "Listen, I am deeply sorry. My foul, man. I just had a slip of judgment and I was not trying to copy—" He quickly replied, "It's alright. We have to be careful. I mean, unless you are a talent agent or manager, people see someone writing, they get afraid about stealing jokes. Comics are paranoid people." I responded, "Oh, I know, I just had something to write down as a note for my

> thesis and—" He countered, "Dude, you could be writing a note to your girlfriend, and they will be suspicious. It's not good to have that energy." (fieldnotes 3/29/2010)

This inadvertent transgression—in addition to my later observations of social dramas concerning other possible violations and comics' frequent discussions about joke theft—led me to realize the local importance of this phenomenon and its potential contributions to the literatures about norm enforcement, informal property rights, and authenticity. On three further occasions, I found myself in private discussions with peers concerning the similarity between jokes that I tried on stage and those of other performers. These instances were coincidental and not deliberate breaching experiments (see Garfinkel 1967). It became clear that any such deliberate approach would threaten my acceptance in the field. These accidental conflicts, of course, were highly informative interactions that I drew from to develop my framework.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews (n=30) with a snowball sample of comics who I directly observed within my ethnographic research. I provide greater detail about my sample in Appendix A. These interviews offered access to information that would be less salient within the confines of participant-observation, such as experiences that occurred prior to my research window, life backgrounds, motivations, and detached reactions to current events within the industry. The data collected within these interviews were complimentary rather than definitive, as I abstracted interviewees' responses in isolation from social action (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). In practice, I employed my interview data as a lens to ascertain ideal intentions. I then contrasted interview data with the interviewees' and their peers' observed actions to find salient instances of contradiction. This aided the construction of my models. I employed open and axial coding for my fieldnotes and interview transcripts (Strauss and Corbin 2007), but I analyzed this coded data following the program of abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). In addition, I abstracted the underlying mechanisms that underlie sanctions for joke theft and other relevant norms and employed analogical reasoning (Vaughn 2014) to discern their theoretical generalizability.

Public accusations of joke theft were a low-frequency phenomenon. As chronicled in detail by Oliar and Sprigman (2008), adjudicating instances of potential joke theft was typically private. Given the sensitive nature of these interactions, I rarely directly observed such negotiations. I draw from my own experiences to illustrate some key points of these consultations. However, comics' references to joke theft and instances of it were a high-frequency occurrence. I also observed comics discussing and reacting possible transgressions, both in retrospect and during the performances of these potentially actionable jokes. It was especially visible when they openly discussed major controversies, had private conversations with trusted peers about possible transgressions that they recently witnessed, or when a comic with a discreditable reputation leaves the room. Such cases were central to my analysis, given that there was strong ambiguity concerning which acts fit community standards for joke theft; the archive of possible material to plagiarize was so expansive that most participants lacked complete knowledge of all jokes' attributed authorship. While the community must monitor colleagues' actions, comics often paid little attention to others' performances. Detecting every case that could potentially constitute joke theft would be infeasible. If I observed a conspicuous reaction, I assumed that the infraction it referenced could be severe enough to occupy the risk set for eventual punishment.

In this article, I referred to comics within my data with pseudonyms, which I signal with only first names. Furthermore, I kept identifying details about a comic, venue, or other subjects—such as credits or social affiliations— general enough to maintain confidentiality while not obscuring pertinent information to the development and articulation of my theoretical perspective. I made exceptions for widely publicized controversies involving celebrities, such as those concerning Carlos Mencia or Amy Schumer. I will refer to such individuals by their whole names and, subsequently, their last name. Following Institutional Review Board protocol, I exercise discretion to document information that would not harm my subjects' careers or livelihoods.

Identifying Stolen Jokes

In 2011, Troy, an aspiring comic, started to advance in the talent roster at a major showcase comedy club in Los Angeles. His performances at their open-mic attracted the attention of its then talent coordinator, which yielded him more consistent spots there at more attractive times when the audiences of "civilians" (i.e. non-comics) were more plentiful. However, two fellow comics noticed that Troy's regular set consisted entirely of five minutes of material that previously belonged to a recently deceased star. After garnering support from more respected and senior performers at this club, they orchestrated a show trial where they featured Troy, who obliviously did his usual routines. Following his set, the two comics projected a video depicting the deceased performer doing the exact same jokes verbatim with accompanying physical act-outs. While the audience of other comics heckled mercilessly, the two attempted to interview Troy about his obvious misconduct. Sensing he that was exposed, Troy ran out of the theater. After a video of this episode appeared on the internet and circulated widely, he left Los Angeles and stand-up comedy altogether, never to return.

While an example of effective enforcement, the incident concerning Troy is atypical. While verbatim cases do occur, most cases of possible joke theft are not so simple to identify, because of imprecise standards and certain conditions that make conclusive detection difficult. Most incidents that could constitute joke theft involve a comic "re-writing" others' previously performed routines, which is a strategy one may use to avoid the impression of copying (see also Stebbins 1992). A related complication was the high probability of parallel thinking between two acts working independently of one another:

> I think, to some extent, people writing the same joke is unavoidable, because parallel thinking exists. It's, like, comedy covers a set number of topics about everyday living, and people are going to have the same experiences. That's a given. (interview, Medha)

Routines covering very common themes, such as those engaging stock premises or current events, have a high risk of coincidental overlap. While comics may exercise care to craft their own

distinctive approach, the universe of possible humorous takes that resonate with civilians tends to be limited regarding such topics. Therefore, insiders abstractly associated joke theft with routines exploring personal themes or those featuring idiosyncratic punchlines or framings.

In addition to similarity, joke theft also definitionally involves an intent to make deceptive claims concerning authorship. While this is obvious when the joke is a verbatim copy or a performer makes obvious overtures about his or her motivations, intent is difficult to establish and is a typically speculative exercise. Regarding this process, comics express some openness to conditionality. For example, they tend not to punish novices for performing routines that strongly resemble others' material—especially jokes by star comics. They usually opt for private consultations with the newcomer, where they can caution them about the consequences of joke theft. Such an even occurred when seven months into my study, when I performed a bit about how I could edit the video of me officiating a friend's wedding to make it less humiliating:

> After getting off stage, [a comic]—who has a reputation for being harsh to "hacks" and comics who take shortcuts—approached me. "Hey, [author]! Did you see *Saturday Night Live* last week—the one hosted by Jon Hamm?" "No, I didn't." "They had a bit about auto-tuning embarrassing events. I mean, it has some connections to that joke you have about taking solace in the fact that you can auto-tune the video of the fuck-up when you were officiating that wedding to make it better." "Oh, no!" "Don't worry, man. It happens. Watch it, and try to find the stuff from that thing you actually did that makes it different and work from there. So, if anyone tries to disrespect you and ruin your reputation by saying you stole, you can tell them to fuck off!" (fieldnotes 11/2/2010)

Alternately, more senior comics may also respond to such gaffes by novices with apathy. For example, this was clear during an instance where three experience comics were watching newcomer at a popular open-mic night:

> [Ryan] cocked his head pensively and asked the three of us, "Is he doing Aziz Ansari's bit? The one about black people watching magic?" Everyone quietly processed this question and a nodded affirmatively. [Greg] replied, "Yeah, but it could be a not totally novel premise." Ryan retorted, "It is really similar, right? But, I guess that he is just doing it at an open-mic." Another voice chimed in, "But, if you are going to do it in public, you have to really mix it out and make it, uh, not Aziz." Ryan sighed and said, "Well, is someone going to tell him? Oh, well. This sort of thing corrects itself. Or not." (fieldnotes 3/7/2016)

There is common assumption that newer comics who are trying to learn are prone to do accidentally others' jokes due to a lack of expertise about craft and local customs. If they appeared to be minimally trying to write their own material, they typically received some lenience. Novices rarely received sanction, as the similarity was most likely an unintentional rookie mistake.

Given such constraints, the number of accused joke thefts greatly dwarfs the overall population strongly similar jokes that may constitute possible cases, which are plentiful. Unless verbatim, the identification of this norm violation is inexact due the ambiguous standards concerning intent and thresholds of unacceptable similarity. Comics in my study only offered an abstract pattern of what ideally constitutes joke theft (see also Oliar and Sprigman 2008). They contend that there must be pronounced similarity, which is especially relevant for material that covers personal experiences or peculiar perspectives on routine events. Due to the likelihood of parallel thinking, overlaps concerning current events or stock premises generally do not connote theft—at worst just laziness. There must also be intent, which could be evident through obvious gestures (e.g. writing in your notebook in the theater). It also reflects an assumption that misconducts by experienced comics are more likely intentional. This may be either deliberate or subconscious, as they should be fully aware of craft and local customs. In practice, though, the questionable acts that insiders do and do not label as joke theft rarely fit this template.

Inconsistent and Selective Framing of Norm Violations

Consider the following three bits:

> "I'd like to have nineteen kids. I think naming them, that's going to be fun…I already have names picked out. First kid—boy, girl, I don't care—I'm naming it 'Rrrrrrrrr'."
> -Dane Cook, *Retaliation* (2005)

> "I'd like to give my kid an interesting name. Like a name with no vowels…Just like forty Fs, that's his name."
> -Louis CK, *Live in Houston* (2001)

> "I think a lot of time has passed and audiences are sophisticated now that they won't laugh at my real name. My real name is [rolls tongue for ten seconds], because my parents had a sense of humor."
> -Steve Martin, *Wild and Crazy Guy* (1978)

These jokes feature the same central premise of naming a child vowel-less gibberish. Many stand-up comedy insiders and aficionados pilloried Cook as a joke thief for allegedly stealing this bit, along with a handful of others that exhibited a lesser standard of similarity, from Louis CK. However, Louis CK did not appear to attract sanction or criticism for his version, which strongly resembles a trademark bit on an iconic double platinum-selling album by Steve Martin. One could contend that distinction lies in that the comic, rather than a third-person, names the hypothetical child in CK and Cook's jokes. However, such inconsistent and selective attribution of joke theft is not merely reducible to the degree of similarity between jokes.

While the risk-set of possible joke thefts is large, the frequency of enforcement is disproportionately few, even when the cases involve material with remarkable similarity and rather novel premises.[2] I observed numerous instances where insiders acknowledged a comic's track record for performing jokes that are problematically similar to others' works. However, they declined to make public accusations of theft and frequently offered *post hoc* excuses for these highly questionable acts. I frequently heard privately corroborated narratives from multiple comics that chronicled possible (and likely) thefts by superstar club performers. For example, multiple insiders recounted stories about Manny—a national touring headliner—taking jokes from his openers and renowned counterparts. Kim—another superstar comic—recounted one instance where he caught Manny red-handed performing one of his jokes:

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[2] During one interview, one comic explicitly listed a few instances of strong similarities between jokes by well-known and respected performers. He strategically picked comics with peerless reputations to emphasize both the sheer number of jokes that *could* be construed as stolen and how many individuals received the benefit of the doubt in the form of parallel thought. He strongly asserted that he believed these similarities were purely coincidental. Following his wishes, I will not include a transcription of this segment or identify names.

> Kim showed some ambivalence to stealing. He recalled, "Well, Manny stole one of my bits. I was headlining in Houston, and the club projected a video of previous performances before the show before people were coming in. And they had a clip of Manny from the previous week doing one of my jokes. And I did that joke the previous, and it had fallen completely flat, and it usually kills. And Manny fuckin' killed with it. And you know what? I still made the $25,000 for headline, and the only thing I can do is write more"… [Kim] later made the contention that such stealing is tolerable when a person who is a "performer" takes a premise by a "writer" and crafts it into a performance rather than material. [Another comic] nodded his head and agreed. (fieldnotes, 6/5/2011)

Furthermore, I witnessed many comics explicitly reference instances where Max, a national headliner and network television star, performed others' jokes. One comic outlined during our interview an intense conflict between Max and Saul, a comparatively newer aspirant, which other comics later reiterated:

> Max stole one of Saul's jokes, and there was a whole beef between them. I never wanted to get involve in it. So, I heard hearsay and shit like that. I didn't want to get on one side either way, but Max stole one of Saul's jokes and did it front of him… And then when Saul confronted him, he was like, "Dude, that's my joke." And [Max] was just like, "So?" So, there was like a big thing, for a year, and [Max] went on stage and talked about how he fucked [Saul's] girlfriend before they got together. They were going back and forth, and it became a big thing to the point that people stopped kind of talking about it… they swept it under the rug.

I overheard many insiders make coded quips or engage in backroom rants about Max's unrepentant use of others' jokes. The gossip indicated that their plagiarism might be more profound than Cook's transgressions or at least exhibited more profound similarity.

Even regarding extreme cases, some insiders contended that all instances of joke theft do not dictate sanctions. While many comics at one club supported the public humiliation of Troy, some found it unnecessary, even though it was unquestionably plagiarism. During the fallout of the public outing, I witnessed two comics talking about it:

> William and Marvin shifted their conversation to the controversy. I caught them having the following exchange:
> Marvin: "I don't understand why people are talking about Troy. I was not like he was a celebrity. He ain't famous!"
> William: "Well, I think that the big issue is that he used to hang out here the most. And, because of that, people feel that they have to discuss it, because they attach the controversy to this place."

> Marvin: "I still don't care. It's not a big deal! He is not a celebrity! You can just ignore the motherfucker!" (fieldnotes, 6/5/2011)

Much as the framing of questionable actions as joke theft is inexact and uneven, punishments can be inconsistent and appear loosely coupled to the severity of the case. Although the reaction of Marvin and other like comics suggest that norm sanctioning should be reserved for stars, such cases as those involving Manny and Max indicate that high-status performers do not attract public accusations. However, insiders stigmatized Cook for his borderline and comparatively less egregious acts. As joke theft is loosely coupled to similarity, what is the mechanism that compels peers to frame one's questionable behavior as a norm violation and punish him or her for this transgression?

Authenticity as a Mechanism

Though my ethnographic research of stand-up comics, I found that peers' recognition of an individual's authenticity proved highly influential in the identification and, later, sanctioning of joke theft. Local constructions of authenticity were the most salient mechanism enforcers used to interpret questionable acts, negotiate their typical ambiguity, and impute intent. It explains the selectivity of enforcement, as one's vulnerability to accusations of this norm violation and punishment for it follows how much peers acknowledge him or her as a committed member of their community. I argue that authenticity proves especially salient in the identification and framing of transgressions, because it is the most critical determinant for peer respect and a comic's recognized membership in this community. In this section, I outline (1) how authenticity in stand-up comedy is constructed, (2) how it informs vulnerability to joke theft accusations, and (3) how it manifests in the social process of enforcement. This addresses the overarching question of why enforcement appears inconsistent, and why authenticity proves to be the compelling mechanism behind these outcomes.

Authenticity and the Ideal of the Comics' Comic

Authenticity in stand-up comedy involves peer recognition of one's backstage conduct, craft expertise, work ethic, and impression of egalitarianism, which signals his or her membership within and commitment to the community. It conveys that one peers perceive an individual as truly a *comic*, rather than "actor" who solely pursues stand-up comedy to secure acting work or a "hack" who takes the easiest route to getting a laugh and, thus, bookings. It also reflects the premise that, despite whatever commercial success comes, one gives the impression of being a primarily a stand-up comic and see others, whatever status they occupy, as relative peers in the same pursuit. For insiders, authenticity constitutes the primary determinant of whom they respect.

The ideal of the comics' comic exemplifies and best articulates authenticity in stand-up comedy. While this concept partially evokes images of a commercial obscure performer who "plays to the back of the room" to entertain fellow comics rather than the civilian audience, it more represents a comic who is very dedicated to craft and community, despite his or her celebrity. Certain individuals epitomize this:

> The respect of your peers is phenomenal. To have, like, when people see Dave Chapelle come in, or Dave Attell, and the respect other comics give them, Chris Rock… Like, they talk about Greg Giraldo like that. Everyone loved him, and he was phenomenal on stage. It was the best of both worlds. As a comic, he is a guy you can get a beer with and hang out, and he is just phenomenal on stage. (interview, Anthony)

While technical expertise is an important component to this distinction, comics' comics are also adroit with backstage aspects of the community. Despite their celebrity, they constantly perform—regularly before unaccommodating crowds or for little pay—to develop new routines and refine their comedic voice. They "hang" with fellow comics, especially relative newcomers, and dispense advice or share lessons. While they are not always personally likeable, they extend courtesy to fellow performers. Even though they may have achieved stardom, they engage in the same hustle and express similar priorities as they did prior to their success and as their less famous counterparts.

They present the impression that they see themselves as stand-up comics above all, rather than actors or writers that merely use the craft as another tool in their repertoire or avenue of securing work elsewhere. Within the stand-up comedy community, the comics' comic ethos provides a common standard for how performers should typically conduct themselves and to determine who is an authentic member of the community and, thus, worthy of respect.

However, there are certain behaviors that violate local customs and especially signifies one's inauthenticity to peers. Comics consider "bumping"—where a comic uses his or her relatively higher status or celebrity to intrude into an advertised bill and cut ahead of other comics without prior arrangement—to be a potentially offensive gesture. It can become especially distasteful when he or she habitually "runs the light" and goes beyond one's allotted stage-time. In addition, insiders malign performers who constantly advertise their commercial success or celebrity, which they appear to use as a rationale to "big time" other comics or not feel obligated to participate in the social world of the backstage. Some comics also assign inauthenticity to those who they perceive to have taken shortcuts to success. This can manifest in early stages, as some insiders denigrate stand-up comedy classes as imperfect substitutes for the experiential learning through performing (and failing miserably) at open-mic nights. In later stages, this can encompass a nebulous suite of qualities that connote shortcuts—such as having zealous talent representation, relying too heavily on one's physical attractiveness, or not "grinding" hard enough.

Authenticity is not necessarily synonymous with being regarded as nice or personally likeable.[3] For example, one seasoned comic articulated this:

> You know who has the reputation for being the biggest cock? Bill Maher. So, if people like your comedy, they might overlook you being a dick, and, if they think you are an intellectual, they will overlook it… I guess Dane Cook is maybe that terrible combination of being super-successful, for the masses, and, on top of that, being a dick. (interview, Paul)

[3] Insiders concede that inauthentic comics who they are personally friends with are joke thieves. For example, Kim labelled Carlos Mencia, who he counts as a friend, an obvious joke thief (fieldnotes 6/5/2011).

Comics' admiration of one's material and performance moderated the deleterious effects of anti-social behavior. Dave Chapelle, who is highly respected among comics, has a reputation for regularly running the light for as much as an act. Insiders excuse this, because of his craft expertise and his rarified stature. In contrast, many considered Cook a hack whose material explored trite premises and did not reflect originality or presumed technical sophistication.[4] They interpreted it Cook wasting time purely at the expense of his peers and, to a certain extent, the civilians' enjoyment. Furthermore, comics will excuse comics' comics for hiring joke-writers. In these cases, they recognize this as necessary for one remain productive and maintain a high-standard of output when facing massive time constraints. Furthermore, some comics point out that comics' comics diligently practice this material before less than ideal audiences to "make it their own" and "put it in their own voice." Conversely, I frequently heard insiders also criticize perceived inauthentic comics for employing writers as a shortcut. Therefore, as one's perceived authenticity first hinges upon on backstage citizenship, it then depends judgments of craft expertise. Being personally likeable or pleasant is not necessarily a requisite. Comics' comics receive and, according to insiders, deserve more generous treatment due to the respect they earned. However, they deride inauthentic "hacks" for their perceived anti-social behavior, questionable aptitudes, and lack of commitment to the stand-up comic community. How may this inform the identification and enforcement of joke theft?

Who Might Be a Thief?

Authenticity informs one's vulnerability to having his or her questionable acts framed by peers as a violation of joke theft norms. When interpreting whether a transgression occurred, peers

[4] Stand-up comics' distinctions of who is a "hack" more reflects a performer's recognized technical competency, originality, and effort in regularly crafting new and bolder material than the content's themes. While some of these qualities fit the tastes found among high cultural capital consumers (Friedman 2014), comics' esteem more rewards virtuosity, even if one may not personally understand or have a strong taste for the content. Many comics express the ethos of "funny is funny," though sometimes with exceptions for jokes that have overtly offensive (e.g. racist or homophobic) elements. The distinction of who is a hack is subjective and the standards can be inconsistent or contradictory.

consult one's recognized prosocial behaviors, orientations, craft expertise, and other relevant qualities that convey authenticity to fill in the blanks of these uncertain situations. Individuals who resemble the comics' comic ideal receive more lenient judgments. However, inauthentic participants, especially those whose commercial success greatly outpaces their peer esteem, are especially vulnerable to harsher framings and shame. This pattern leads joke theft to be a frame that articulates one's inauthenticity, perhaps more so than copying.

The intertwining of joke theft and authenticity partially rests in how comics practically define this misconduct and the image of those who engage in it. A recurring theme in my ethnographic and interview data is the premise that joke thieves epitomize laziness and shortcutting. As one comic articulated in his explanation of why joke theft is wrong:

> [Jokes] are weapons and, frankly, pieces of intellectual, intellectual aptitude. They are intellectual feats… A great completed joke that always gets a pop, that has a good point of view, that has a good reversal in it, and the crowd is always surprised, and they give you a good laugh on it is a fucking feat, dude. So, I sat and slaved over that, and you are just going to take it? (interview, Terrance)

Cultivating an original routine requires months and, perhaps, years of typically unpaid performances. While comics understand joke theft as a brazen way to circumvent this toil, it also a gesture that connotes disrespect for fellow comics and the community. Insiders see it as antithetical to membership:

> You see a lot of what we call *wannabes*. Like, hacks and thieves. A lot of people that should not be in stand-up in the first place. They dilute the craft. They piss off audiences and other performers. I don't know. There are people that just do it for stage time so that they can get an audition or a meeting. And it is not about them treating stand-up with a real seriousness or respect. (interview, Luther)

From comics' general perspective, joke theft signaled desperation for extrinsic rewards and disrespect toward the craft, peers, and the community. I often heard comics refer to joke thieves as "sociopaths," a folk diagnosis that emphasized an orientation toward purely personal gain and a

disregard for other comics and the values associated with the field. In a sense, they constitute local constructions of inauthentic community members and, thus, unworthy of respect.

Even when similarity between jokes is pronounced, authenticity informs peers' attribution and accusations of theft by certain individuals. For example, when commenting on his podcast to Troy's public shaming, Los Angeles club comic Sam Tripoli observed, "Troy and Carlos [Mencia] get caught because they are assholes, but there is someone like [Manny] who is lovable, and those are the guys—it's very tough to catch them" (Tripoli and Redban 2011). Although this statement gives that selective enforcement reflects personal affinity, the distinction between "assholes" and those who are "lovable" is more a function of peer esteem. Mencia, who was the subject of a widely publicized joke theft controversy in 2007 that severely damaged his career, exhibited all telltale behaviors that comics associate with inauthentic comics—habitually running the light, bumping, hackiness, and excessive braggadocio concerning his, then, commercial superstardom. While there were numerous instances where his jokes where problematically similar to others' work, comics in my study reported likened Max and Manny's questionable jokes to Mencia's standard. Even in the case of Troy's verbatim theft, it went almost unacknowledged for months. The comics who orchestrated his show trial remarked to me that an additional impetus behind Troy's show trial were his anti-social behaviors, such as bullying newcomers, extorting money from them for stage-time, expressing superiority over peers, and personally slighting one of them (fieldnotes, 6/21/2011). In contrast, insiders—especially within certain comedy clubs—consider Manny and Max comics' comics, despite their acknowledged penchant for using routines that are extremely similar to others' work.

A curious prediction posed to me by an experienced comic illustrated the possible primacy of inauthenticity over similarity in the identification or accusation of joke theft. Wayne, a respected comics' comic who found commercial success elusive, emphasized its selectivity on a few occasions

through the example of Lucille, then a fast-rising star who created two network television sitcoms and was a popular touring act:

> Wayne: [Joke theft] is basically the comedy community ganging up and telling somebody that they didn't deserve it. Because there are little anomalies, like, I think that is going to happen to [Lucille] soon. I think, within the next two or three years, that she is going to be accused of something. And everyone will go, "Oh, that is why it happened. That is why I am not successful. It's because she cheated."
> [author]: Is there any sort of indication or example?
> Wayne: No, no, no! What I am saying is that she has blown up out of nowhere, and a lot of people… think she doesn't deserve it. Nobody knows why the industry tries to anoint somebody. (interview, Wayne)

Although many comics that I talked to expressed admiration for her work ethic and diligence, I observed others strongly criticize Lucille for her unwillingness to participate in backstage social circles, her perceived arrogance, or an imputed belief that she was "too Hollywood" and only craved celebrity. Lucille acknowledged these critiques in numerous interviews and, even, on stage. Whether motivated by some insiders' distaste for her aloofness, desire to rationalize her rapid success, localized grudges, simple jealousy, or resentment over her being a woman with marketable good looks in a male-dominated field, Wayne suggested that there this occasioned a joke theft accusation without an obvious transgression. He revised his prediction after his performance at a Comedy Central talent showcase, after we passed by Lucille backstage at the venue. As we stood on the sidewalk of Sunset Boulevard, he expanded on his previous prediction:

> Wayne took a drag from his cigarette and opined, "You know, [joke theft] is about that misplaced anger that a lot of comics tend to have. When certain people get big, and there are those people every couple of years that get fucking huge in the industry, comic tend to focus negative upon them for no reason" (fieldnotes, 9/28/2011)

Indeed, no publicly observable accusations materialized against Lucille.[5] However, the mere potential for such *post hoc* joke theft accusations hinted at how community members could explicitly or implicitly manufacture norm transgressions. Joke theft could articulate a whole list of grievances

[5] It is worth noting that I observed comics privately ridiculing her for hiring writers, even though this is common among superstar performers and those she hired were comics who personally welcomed this opportunity.

about perceived inauthenticity, the least of which was the appropriation of another's material. It also suggested that it might offer a rationale for the outcomes of an unpredictable entertainment industry. Furthermore, it emphasized that joke theft controversies are loosely coupled to an actual transgression and, instead, reflected a commercial successful individual's perceived inauthenticity and lack of community esteem.

Insiders' recognition of a stand-up comic's authenticity shaped the likelihood of his or her actions being framed as joke theft. The cases of Manny and Max substantiated this relationship. Insiders resisted joke theft framings, despite privately admitting to highly problematic similarity, due to the general respect the two held within the community. This prohibited these thefts from becoming common knowledge, which occluded scandal (see Adut 2005). For comics like Dane Cook, previous anti-social behaviors and insiders' distaste for his on-stage performance diminished his peer respect. Wide aversion among community members of both front-stage and backstage presentation, especially vis-à-vis his celebrity, encouraged or validated third-party accusations of joke theft. This quality legitimized narratives concerning joke theft, which invited wide community punishment. Such outcomes reflect these comics' perceived inauthenticity—coupled with his commercial success— more so than the similarity between jokes, especially as suggested by Lucille's hypothetical vulnerability to joke theft framings.

As illustrated across the cases of possible joke theft in my study (figure 1), insiders' perceptions of a comic's authenticity inform whether they frame one's questionable act as a norm violation. Given the typical uncertainty surrounding intent and the conceivability of coincidence, enforcers consider one's prior anti-social behavior, transgressions of other professional courtesies, presumed extrinsic orientations, and craft expertise to key how to interpret and frame the situation according to a given social norm (see Fine 2001). These elements fill in the blanks of these uncertain acts. As hinted by the leeway afforded to newcomers, they are illuminative due to the presumption

those whom insiders might categorize as fully socialized comics should know the proper conduct concerning frontstage and backstage matters. Those whose attributes and proficiency (or lack thereof) signal inauthenticity would be more likely transgress this norm. As commercially high-status comics appear most vulnerable to joke theft accusations for even borderline similarities, the mechanisms of denigration suggested by Hahl and Zuckerman (2014) enhance authenticity's resonance in shaping how enforcers interpret potential norm violations. Since this interpretative process integrates other dispositional and behavioral matter, the violation of joke theft is a frame that articulates both one's plagiarism and everything else that renders a comic inauthentic. The enforcement of joke theft does not merely reflect *if* one appropriated another's material but, instead, *who* did it and how much he or she fits to the community's shared image of an authentic comic. While it appears to diminish one's vulnerability to attributions of wrongdoing, how does this effect manifest?

How Does a Comic Become a Thief?

In this section, I outline how authenticity acts as a mechanism behind which questionable acts peers label as joke theft and which among these cases attract sanctions. It manifests though the relationship between authenticity and respect, which informs localized status orders within the community. Insiders can rely upon it as a signal to negotiate the uncertainty typical of possible norm transgressions and determine one's blameworthiness, which connotes a halo effect (see McDonnell and King 2018). In addition, comics prefer to associate socially with authentic and esteemed peers, which tends to be independent of power-dependence dynamics (e.g. Emerson 1962). This resulting relational goodwill allows authentic comics to use social ties as relatively tacit form of protection against accusations and sanctioning.

The credence that comics grant to the respective players within joke theft controversies partially depends upon how much possible enforcers regard them as members of the community or,

at least, local networks. For instance, this was evident on an occasion where I performed a new, hackneyed joke about crystal meth use at an open-mic that I routinely attended. Afterwards, another comic privately confronted me and claimed that he used this premise previously. While we arrived at an amicable resolution where I resolved to shelve the joke, a group of other regular performers at the open-mic saw my concession as unnecessary:

> [Chuck] tried to convince me that the concept was now mine, and he had faith that I would do better it than [the accuser], while alluding to the fact that he wouldn't have the ability to make his version any good. Later at the bar, Kevin exclaimed, "Fuck him!" He pointed out that [the accuser] likes to make people feel uncomfortable… Nobody seemed to care about my deed and shifted their attention to [the accuser's] poor on-stage performances and his rather obnoxious eccentricities (fieldnotes 8/27/2011).

This episode illustrates a typical pattern of responses where insiders lend greater leeway and support to those who are members of their social networks and the community to some relative degree, and conversely downplay the veracity and property rights of outsiders. As I was a member of this sub-community of comics at this venue, my peers did not seem to entertain the idea that I stole this joke. My inclusion and relative respect within this small group enabled my halo within this individual case. In contrast, they judged the claim by a peripheral or less authentic participant as suspect. Furthermore, this and akin situations indicate that enforcers are more prone to discredit such individuals, but it also suggests that some observers may believe that comparatively more authentic and socially central comics deserve more legitimate ownership over certain joke premises.

Another case in my research provided hints for how perceived authenticity may allow similarity not to be interpreted as theft. Ted, a rising comic in Los Angeles' alternative comedy scene, allegedly performed a routine at a well-attended show after ignoring a peer's prior warnings that it strongly resembled another's rather distinctive bit. Shortly afterward, the story of his transgression spread through the rumor mill of the peer's extensive social network. After it occurred in early 2014, I recurrently heard some comics reference this episode over the following months. I heard a few quips in one-on-one conversations that "he might steal your material." I asked

Patterson, a comic who is close to the originator of this allegation, why nobody publicly confronted Ted about this open secret. He admitted, "Because everyone wants to do [Ted's] show… They are afraid of confrontation, and I am too. And I want to do that show" (fieldnotes 5/1/2014). In addition, he also expressed his faith Ted would be eventually punished in some form.

Though reticence to accuse Ted publicly seemed to reflect comics' self-interest, there were many shows in Los Angeles that attracted sizable audiences and being blackballed from his would have trivial direct effect on career development. While comics tend to be very self-conscious about burning bridges, Ted did not control resources (i.e. show bookings) that comics could not receive elsewhere. Therefore, he could not solely on coercive power to dissuade accusations or quash punishments.

Instead, the lack of public accusations and sanctions toward Ted could be explained through the expansive network of peers conspicuously lent him relational goodwill through the respect and support, because they conspicuously lend him for resembling a comics' comic. They would regularly watch his sets, which was a rare distinction as comics typically did not watch their peers' sets. Furthermore, these comics also interacted with him backstage and booked him on their shows. While one could attribute the attention Ted gains to comics hoping to access the resources he controls, I observed numerous insiders express heartfelt respect for him beyond what comics who occupy gatekeeping positions typically receive. They admired his rather unorthodox style. He especially developed bonds of mutual respect with esteemed comics' comics who had been long-standing fixtures in Los Angeles "alternative comedy" scene. Through his recognized authenticity among certain segments of his peer community, Ted cultivated relational goodwill through his social ties and achieved centrality. This provides three defenses against attributions of joke theft and resulting sanctions. First, his social ties provide a visible signal of his recognized authenticity and

respect, which could substantiate a halo effect. Second, these bonds provide opportunities for retaliation against accusers or sanctions. This could come in the form of explicit revenge.

Third, heightened relational goodwill also allow comics' comics to have enhanced avenues for conspicuous support that can delegitimize or reframe joke theft accusations. Authentic participants can more readily access and rely upon ties with respected community members who can widely influence and transmit shared interpretations of accusations and questionable acts. For example, in 2016, some comics accused Amy Schumer of stealing their jokes. Interested third parties also stressed the similarity between the closing bit of Schumer's 2015 HBO special *Live at the Apollo*, where she chronicled slang names for absurd sexual maneuvers, and a similar routine performed by Patrice O'Neal. Schumer denied stealing it and claimed the likeness was purely coincidental, because she had never watched O'Neal's original set. However, several esteemed comics—including Jim Norton and Marc Maron—vociferously supported her, expressed respect for her talents, and emphatically stated their judgment that she did not commit joke theft. Many attributed these accusations to uneasiness concerning her sudden fame and recent public support for anti-gun and feminist causes. Observing the comics in my research, I saw that their online posts were split concerning the plausibility of Schumer being a joke thief, but the majority supported her. While more effective accusations might emerge against Schumer for joke theft, the early-stage support granted by esteemed comics delegitimized this early round of charges.

Returning to Patterson's rationale, the lenience peers afforded can also reflect a fear of "confrontation," especially because it can undermine one's relational goodwill within the community. Despite their strong distaste for joke theft, comics tended to associate public accusations within inauthenticity. Even in the case of Troy's egregious plagiarism, an organizer of his show trial reported to me that the star comics who participated in the public shaming do so only under the condition that it involved verbatim joke theft (fieldnotes, 6/21/2011). Despite their

relatively greater localized and commercial status, they feared that observers may interpret their support as encouraging troublemaking and public shaming, which contradicts common practice. Some comics joke theft accusations signaling one's lack of talent:

> If you are the victim of joke theft and it is something you can't get back, I wouldn't spend my time to pursue it and trying to be an officer for justice, because there are other bits. There are other jokes to be written, um, and you can write them. You have that ability. You had it! It was there! Do it again… And if it ran out, then maybe you have run your course as a stand-up anyway. (interview, Malcolm)

I also heard comics associate enforcement campaigns with overzealous "fanboys" or moral entrepreneurs with self-interested ulterior motives (see Kim and Zuckerman 2017). Given the disrepute that peers link with such confrontational behavior, comics censor accusations as way to maintain their reputations and relational goodwill with peers, who prefer to associate with respectable counterparts and to avoid attracting false positives for joke theft violations when undertaking their very public creative process.

The enforcement outcomes concerning joke theft depend upon authenticity and, consequently, how respect shapes status and relationships within stand-up comics' community. Authenticity proves vital to impute the intent of social actors, to frame their questionable actions, and to stoke suspicion, this reflects an approach treats it as distinctive of status (e.g. Hahl and Zuckerman 2014). However, like the case of Thornton's (1996) ravers, authenticity greatly informs comics' localized status. One could assume that respected comics' comics can influence norm enforcement by marshaling their resources and power to retaliate against those who accuse and sanction. However, superstar comics who are deemed inauthentic by peers, who especially vulnerable to the joke theft stigma, also possess this capacity. For example, Joe Rogan earned multi-year ban from The Comedy Store and was released by his management company for publicly accusing Carlos Mencia—who many comics detested—of joke theft in 2007. While retaliation is a real threat, enforcement patterns more reflect implicit mechanisms that manifest through shared

culture and patterns of association. Authenticity influences peers' perceptions about the plausibility of joke theft, especially through status-based halo effects. It also encourages relational goodwill, particularly with esteemed insiders, which provides a conspicuous signal of one's authenticity and local status. These social ties also enable effective and amplified outlets to shape the framing of one's questionable acts. In addition, enforcement also encompasses potential reputational risks reflecting peers' distaste or hostility to accusations and sanctioning, which can be more profound if a comic who they esteem is the target (see also Di Stefano et al. 2015). This suggests that authenticity is a pervasive and salient mechanism, as it tacitly establishes how the community defines, identifies, and receives joke theft and the possible cases and perpetrators of it.

Limitations and Future Research

This study addresses social norms that constrained within a given community setting. My findings are more relevant to the professional norms followed an occupational community's members (Van Maanen and Barley 1984) or those followed by groups oriented around a hobby (e.g. 2001) or craft. Furthermore, stand-up comedy in Los Angeles ([author] [year])—much like New York (Jeffries 2017)—is a community featuring tightly clustered social networks, a strong overarching identity, and a profound economy of respect. While the issue of joke theft is crucial stand-up comics and members of their ranks, my subjects freely admit that casual audiences, bookers, and entertainment industry executives care relatively much less about this issue. Structural and cultural dynamics of membership greatly influences underlying mechanisms and patterns of norm enforcement (e.g. Centola, Willer, and Macy 2005; Willer, Kuwabara, and Macy 2009). Indeed, comics report that joke theft amongst "road dogs," who transient performers that rely exclusively on touring, steal frequently—especially from their opening acts—and use coercion to limit sanctioning. Therefore, the mechanism of authenticity is especially pivotal under the condition of a tightly bounded community.

As I focus on a certain field, constructions and ideals of authenticity reflect specific components concerning behavior and orientation. In addition to examining this in other community contexts, future research can investigate how authenticity maps onto other attributional categories, such as gender or race, to encourage inequality. My findings (see also Jefferies 2017) indicate constructions of authentic comics exhibit constraints around gender and sexuality, but subsequent studies should engage this in more detail within stand-up comedy and other contexts.

Lastly, my model addresses the authenticity of the possible transgressor rather than enforcers' characteristics. However, Kim and Zuckerman (2017) find perceptions of an enforcer's authentic motives shape audience support for his or her campaigns. Future research can analyze how the interactions between these two directions shape norm enforcement processes and outcomes.

Conclusions

Peer enforcement of the prohibition against joke theft is typically a murky process that appears to yield uneven and seemingly capricious outcomes. It involves community members interpreting typically uncertain cases according to indeterminate and highly conditional standards and sanctioning violators through informal institutions. Given such ambiguity, perceptions of a focal comic's authenticity strongly shape enforcement. This reflects his or her recognized anti-social behaviors, breaches of professional courtesies, presumed lack of commitment to the community, and imputed prioritization of celebrity over craft expertise, coupled with lackluster peer judgments of one's proficiency on-stage. It reflects whether insiders perceive one as a member of the community, which is typically independent of personal likability. Authentic comics' comics receive significant leeway, while inauthentic commercial stars that lack community respect are especially vulnerable to having even borderline transgressions framed as norm violations. As such, joke theft is a frame encompasses and articulates a suite of inauthentic behaviors beyond the similarity between one's joke and others' work. Inauthenticity proves consequential to norm enforcement because

introduces suspicion concerning a comic's motivations and intent. However, authenticity also is also constitutive of local status, as it constitutes the main prerequisite for respect. This shapes the framing of possible joke thefts through halo effects and relational goodwill, which grants an individual greater social centrality and esteem-based social ties. Thus, such comics have access to avenues for the effective reframing of allegations, which can be especially potent if offered by another comics' comic. While direct retaliation can dissuade attributions of joke theft, its selective enforcement proves to be more a consequence of how the community of stand-up comics defines and differentiates itself and its members.

Furthermore, I found that the patterns that shape joke theft may also explain the uneven enforcement of other norms within stand-up comedy context. For example, peer criticism for those who employed joke-writers followed this pattern. Comics typically judged this as necessary concession if done by Chris Rock, but it was fodder for denigrating Lucille. However, this can cover more troublesome ground. I previously mentioned that Louis CK never attracted the slightest accusations of joke theft over his routine that resembled Steve Martin's bit, while Dane Cook was sanctioned by insiders for a, perhaps, equally borderline offense. I contend that CK benefited from being widely recognized, at that time, as a highly respected comics' comic, while insiders penalized Cook for perceived inauthenticity. My ethnographic data also suggests this also enabled significant delays concerning sanctions for CK's sexual harassment of female comics, which became widely publicized in 2017. During the course of my research, narratives concerning his misconducts circulated as gossip among stand-up comics. Furthermore, I observed two comics directly remark about them at length on-stage during their acts before sizable audiences of peers and civilians. However, many insiders appeared to treat his predatory actions as a hazard rather than a grave moral transgression. The *New York Times* article that broke this story to the wider public outlined how fears of direct retaliation by Louis CK or his manager Dave Becky contributed to the suppression of these

acts (Ryzik, Buckley, and Cantor 2017). While the limited accusations and profoundly delayed sanctions could be partially attributed to his power exercised through threats of retaliation, his authenticity contributed to a dynamic that tacitly allowed his now self-confessed misconducts remain an open secret that continued and went unsanctioned for years.

The case of joke theft offers two obvious theoretical contributions. First, it advances theories concerning social norms and their enforcement through focusing upon how social actors identify violations. This can be a highly complicated process because social norms are prone to profound ambiguity concerning their content and standards (e.g. Hechter and Opp 2001a; Jasso and Opp 1997). My findings indicate that enforcers reconcile uncertain situations through referring to a social actor's attributes and behavior as relevant and conspicuous contextual factors. In the case of a tightly bounded community, these are typically related to a social actor's authenticity as a member. A norm violation often does not just reflect stated misconduct, but it also integrates and articulates various aspects of behavior and identity relevant to a given setting. This pattern further substantiates the conceptualization of norms as generalized frames, rather than directive rules attached to a specific action (Fine 2001). It also suggests that enforcers employ them through a dual-process model of moral judgment, where they typically rely on heuristics shaped by shared cultural frameworks concerning community membership and articulate presumed transgressions in rule-based terminology (see Haidt 2012; Lizardo et al. 2016; Vaisey 2009). Adopting such perspectives can help reconcile how social actors enact social norms in practice and why enforcement yields uneven or selective results. Furthermore, researchers who investigate sanctioning in practice should account for a wider range of behaviors and qualities that surround the questionable action.

Second, it advances the development of authenticity as a sociological concept. Especially as it pertains to individuals rather than artifacts, I identify a few avenues through which it shapes judgment. First, presumptions about authenticity can introduce or confirm suspicions about specific

groupings of social actors, which fits with Hahl and Zuckerman's (2014) research into patterns of denigration toward high-status actors. My findings suggest that their mechanism manifests beyond the experimental domain. That approach treats authenticity as distinctive from status. However, I also that authenticity can be constitutive of localized status within the confines of tightly bound communities, as it denotes both how much and how well one is a member. This mechanism affords authentic participants greater access to scarce resources and enhanced social centrality, where one's "realness" or commitment to core community values attracts and characterizes social relationships. This is akin to the social dynamics observed within music scenes (e.g. Thornton 1996) and occupational communities (e.g. Desmond 2007; Van Maanen 1975). These benefits (or lack thereof) can shape how peers evaluate the moral character of one's actions. Furthermore, my case suggests that authenticity do not presume "economic disinterest" (Bourdieu 1993) when pertaining to symbolic valuation. While comics are devoted to their craft and community, they still welcome the opportunity for stardom. Their main point of opposition is those who seem to treat stand-up comedy as an exclusively means to the end of celebrity and superstardom and seek to take whatever shortcuts are necessary to attain this goal. Therefore, authenticity could be more generally encompassing as commitment to one's community and distinction from some oppositional quality or group, which could be based in the profanity of industrial logics or otherwise something else.

My findings have wider application to understanding the enforcement of ambiguous social norms in other community-based settings. While plagiarism is abstractly the practice of attributing someone else's ideas as your own in a written medium, the practical threshold between it and homage or pastiche depends upon subjective assessments of the author's intent and the value of his or her contributions (R. Posner 2007). Although verbatim copying is obvious, such judgments of borderline cases may depend upon the author's recognized authenticity within his or her respective academic or literary community. Scholars link the replication crisis in social psychology to

questionable research practices that they understand to be common in the discipline (John, Loewenstein, and Prelec 2012; Open Science Collaboration 2015). Although replication studies do not typically accuse the original study's authors with malfeasance, Amy Cuddy attracted scathing accusations and outsized attention during the controversy surrounding her "power-pose" research, which may be partially a consequence of her fame and presumed pop-academic orientation (Dominus 2017). Furthermore, it can identify the conditions in which uncertain normative frames like imitation—which are commonplace and sustain such fields of cultural production as fashion (Aspers and Godart 2013; Godart 2012) and popular music (Frith 1996)—cross the threshold into being problematic and worthy of opprobrium.

It can also explain cases outside of the realm of cultural production. For example, it corresponds with research on the identification of witches in societies without routinized judgment devices for detection. Evans-Pritchard (1935:420) observed "a tendency for socially undesirable members of a community to also be acknowledged witches." Such disrepute comes not through a perceived single act of sorcery, but traits or prior behaviors that signal inauthentic membership in the community. Such is evident in the Salem Witch Trials' initial stages. The first women accused of being witches were previously socially marginal pariahs as an enslaved Indigenous Carib woman, an indebted female beggar, and a woman who did not attend church and co-habited with a man prior to marriage (Erickson 1966; Schiff 2015). Though this might suggest that simply unpopular individuals are most vulnerable to sanctions (Mair 1969). However, a more compelling alternative explanation is that community members associate such antisocial behavior as coherent with the shared identity of witches as inauthentic members of a community (Karlsen 1998; Nadel 1952).

The case of joke theft and stand-up comedy also highlights some hazards and inefficiencies that arise when communities self-govern through norm-based systems and informal institutions. Without definite standards to define transgressions, enforcers often rely on the possible

transgressor's qualities and behaviors to determine wrongdoing and guilt. The process less reflects the questionable act and more involves "the social production of a target" (Bartley and Child 2014). Within-group enforcement often renders non-members most vulnerable due to their marginally (e.g. Willer, Kuwabara, and Macy 2009). The personal nature of informal institutions leaves them open to preference and domination by the high-status individuals in their ranks (Fukuyama 2011; Martin 2009; Weber 1978). Notions of costs and retribution that may compel sanctioning (Di Stefano et al. 2015) become shaped by a community's cultural and relational aspects, which may shield socially central transgressors from punishment. While scandal (Adut 2005, 2008) propelled by external outlets may prove a way to break such logjams in enforcement, it is crucial to understand how and what internal obstacles within community settings keep open secrets from taking the necessary step to becoming common knowledge.

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	Clarity of Transgressions	
Authenticity	Murky	Definite
High	Louis CK; Ted; Amy Schumer	Manny; Max
Low	Dane Cook	Carlos Mencia; Troy

Figure 1: Exemplary cases concerning joke theft arranged by reputation for misappropriation and local perceptions of a comic's authenticity.

Appendix 1: Interview Sample

The following table outlines the characteristics of my sample of interviewees and information about the interviews.

Table A1: Characteristics of Interviews and Subjects

Pseudonym	Years of Experience	Sex	Active at Time of Interview	Active as of 2015	Date of Interview	Interview Length (min)
Allison	5.5	F	Yes	Yes	Aug., 2011	78
Anthony	5	M	Yes	No (Deceased)	Sep., 2011	78
Brock	1	M	Yes	Semi	Nov., 2010	45
Charlie	6	M	Yes	No	Jul., 2011	71
David	5	M	No	No	Dec., 2013	70
Elliot	6	M	Yes	Yes	Jul., 2011	111
Inder	7	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	59
Jennifer	4	F	Yes	Yes	Mar., 2013	60
Joe	4	M	Yes	Yes	Jul., 2012	69
Jonathan	10	M	Yes	Yes	Mar., 2013	79
Joshua	2.5	M	Yes	Yes	Aug., 2011	104
Kirk	4	M	No	No	Dec., 2013	66
Luther	23	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	53
Malcolm	3.5	M	Yes	Yes	Aug., 2011	64
Medha	5.5	F	Yes	Yes	Aug., 2011	75
Mike	7	M	Yes	No	Nov., 2010	86
Mitch	3	M	Yes	Semi	Jul., 2011	69
Paul	25	M	Yes	Yes	Oct., 2011	91
Peyton	2	M	Yes	No	Dec., 2013	69
Rahul	6	M	Yes	Yes	Dec., 2011	64
Raza	0.75	M	Yes	No	Oct., 2010	51
Rick	34	M	Yes	Yes	Jul., 2012	77
Sabrina	10	F	No	No	Jan., 2014	63
Shane	23	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	82
Taylor	3	M	Yes	Semi	Nov., 2010	55
Terrance	5	M	Yes	Yes	Oct., 2010	80
Tom	13	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	56
Tre	2	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	61
Wayne	7	M	Yes	Yes	Aug., 2011	113
William	4	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	64