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6. Short Abstract
This paper discusses a project that used comedy workshops to explore the humour of autistic teenagers, focussing the discussion around three traits often – and negatively – associated with autism. The paper will then point to ways of rethinking these traits, and argue that doing so opens up a space for considering the aesthetics of comedy on the spectrum. In this way, I suggest that we can understand autistic humour on a model of difference rather than deficit.

7. Author Information
Shaun is Lecturer in Drama at the University of Kent and author of *A Philosophy of Comedy on Stage and Screen* and *Rethinking Practice as Research and the Cognitive Turn.* He was Primary Investigator on the BA/Leverhulme funded project, *Comedy on the Spectrum: Exploring Humour Production in Adolescents with Autism*.

Introduction

In this paper I discuss a pilot project conducted with colleagues in Drama and Psychology, *Comedy on the Spectrum: Exploring Humour Production with Adolescents with Autism.* [1] In this project, we recruited nine participants aged between 13 and 16, five of whom had a diagnosis of autism[2] and four of whom did not, and invited them to participate in six comedy workshops in October 2015. Three workshops were in stand-up comedy led by Oliver Double and three were in clowning led by Marcelo Beré. The purpose of these workshops was to explore what differences, if any, there are between the humour of autistic[3] teenagers and their neurotypical (non-autistic) counterparts. This project sits uncomfortably between disciplines – responding to a literature on autism and humour that has developed primarily within psychology, but methodologically drawing more from theatre practice. Moreover, the paper is influenced theoretically from critical autism studies, and writings of autistic self-advocates, that challenge the 'autism as deficit model' that is prevalent within psychology. Despite this, and within the scope of a relatively short research article, I hope to demonstrate that the area of autism and humour is ripe for further research and exploration.

In one of the first descriptions of autism, Hans Asperger stated that

> '[one] characteristic of autistic children is the *absence of a sense of humour*. They do not "understand jokes", especially if the joke is on them. [They] never achieve that particular wisdom and deep intuitive human understanding that underlie genuine humour'. (Asperger [1944] 1992, 82)

The suggestion that autistic people lack a sense of humour, or at very least have an impaired sense of humour, is prevalent within the psychological literature despite a range of anecdotal reports to the contrary. Samson (2013) provides a thorough overview of previous research, and importantly she notes that 'most of the studies up to the present have focused on humour processing, but almost none of them has examined humour production in the laboratory or in everyday life' (404). This project seeks to redress this, using theatre workshops to create a space in which the participants can generate material that they find amusing. Moreover, this paper is an attempt to understand this material on the model of difference rather than deficit – instead of assuming a neurotypical 'baseline' against which we assess the autistic participants, I attempt to understand autistic humour on its own

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[2] Participants were recruited through the Psychology department, using the criteria for what is commonly described as 'high-functioning autism' within this discipline – i.e. a formal diagnosis of autism or Aspergers, and an IQ score of 70 or above. Although the terms 'high-functioning' and 'low-functioning' are often used in autism research they are unpopular within the autistic community (Baker and Walsh 2013) and 'autistic with / without an intellectual disability' is preferred. I share these reservations about the functioning labels, but we recruited participants using the criteria above to ensure we were studying a similar cohort to those in previous studies on autism and humour, such as Wu et al. (2014), which ultimately I aim to critique.

[3] There is an ongoing debate within the autistic community about whether it is better to use person-first ('person with autism') or identity-first ('autistic-person') language (e.g. Sinclair 2012). To avoid picking a side on this, I use the two phrases interchangeably throughout.

terms. Creating a rhetorical space in which to do this can be difficult because, as Stuart Murray observes, autism is defined negatively against a neurotypical 'norm' throughout diagnostic manuals and criteria.

> The ways in which autism is considered a differentiation from the medical norm are all associated with the negative. Just to take the *DSM-IV* nomenclature, the language of 'impairment' is centered around examples of listed 'failure', 'lack', delay', 'stereotyped', 'repetitive', 'restricted', 'inflexible', 'non-functional', 'disturbance', and 'abnormal' behaviors. This is the full blown 'autism as deficit model' in operation. (Murray 2012, 19)

This model is similarly operating throughout most psychological studies on autism and humour – both in terms of how the research questions are framed and the methodologies pursued. For example, Lyons and Fitzgerald begin their abstract with the statement, 'research has shown that individuals with autism and Asperger syndrome are *impaired in humor appreciation*, although anecdotal and parental reports provide some evidence to the contrary' (2004, 521, my emphasis). I would suggest that this discrepancy between the psychological studies and what the authors call 'anecdotal and parental reports' points to a methodological issue with such studies. Many of them select cartoons or other stimuli the researchers found amusing, show that material to the participants in a lab and, if they fail to respond 'appropriately', conclude that they have an impaired sense of humour. In my view, there are two main problems with this approach.

First, it seems unlikely that the lab environment is going to be particularly conducive of laughter. Quirk (2011) notes that a range of factors influence how effective a particular room is as a site for stand-up comedy, and professional comedians and promoters consider such factors when planning a gig. In this project careful consideration was given to the environment of the workshop, a theatre space that is used for teaching drama students. Moreover, I would suggest that both Oliver and Marcelo – as a professional comedian and clown respectively – have the sensitivity to 'the room' which Quirk identifies as playing a central role in the success of a comedy event.

Second, there is a logical leap from 'this person does not find this cartoon funny' to 'this person lacks a sense of humour'. The peculiarity of this is apparent if we consider a similar scenario at a dinner party: Imagine that a guest tells a joke to the host that falls flat, from which the joke-teller concludes that the host lacks a sense of humour and circulates throughout the party sharing his conclusion with the other guests. Whereas in everyday life we would be more likely to think that host and guest simply have a different sense of humour, the assumption within these studies is that a deficit model is the best way of understanding this. By contrast, several people with autism themselves suggest that they simply have a *different* sense of humour.

For example, the American comedy troupe Asperger's Are Us have suggested that they have a greater preference for absurdity and wordplay, and less interest in observational humour, compared with neurotypicals that they know (May 2013, 104). Rosquist's interviews with people with Asperger's in Sweden also suggests a distinctive sense of humour amongst this group, indicating a similar preference for wordplay (2012, 240) as well as a level of 'childishness' and a tendency to joke about the differences between them and neurotypicals (241). The congruence between these two accounts suggests not only that there is a difference between the humour of autistic and neurotypical

individuals, but that this might be found across different cultures. This idea also seems to be supported by studies involving participants from Taiwan (Wu et al. 2014), Ireland (Lyons & Fitzgerald 2004) and Germany, Austria and Switzerland (Samson & Hegenloh 2010), although these researchers frame their claims within the deficit model. As such, although this project took place in the UK it does not seem unreasonable to think that it might be relevant to other cultural contexts, albeit with the caveat that the topics that the participants discuss will usually be culturally specific.[4] However, this is not to suggest that the national and cultural contexts in which the autistic person is situated is unimportant. Public awareness of, and social stigma around, conditions such as autism varies greatly from culture to culture. Moreover, as Chamak and Bonniau (2013) note, there is far less engagement with the concept of 'neurodiversity' in France, compared to the US, so humour that builds upon this idea seems less likely to develop there. A concrete example of this kind of humour that they discuss is the satirical 'Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical' website developed by an autistic person called Muskie in 1998. (245) This comic technique – of inverting the biomedical gaze and ironically construing neurotypicals as mentally disordered – is also discussed by Rosquist (2012) in relation to people with autism in Sweden, suggesting there might be some cross-cultural similarities in this regard. Additionally, it is important to note that Chamak and Bolliau's work suggests that there are some cultures in which it seems likely that the deficit model is even harder to resist.

This article will attempt to resist the deficit model by working its way through it – focusing on three traits that are typically (and negatively) associated with autism, then discussing the ways in which they presented in the workshop before pointing to ways of rethinking them to disclose their comic potential. First, social anxiety, which the DSM 5 describes as a 'hallmark of autism spectrum disorder' (APA 2013, 207), and the 'awkwardness' which results from it. Second, the tendency to be 'very concrete and literal in the way that they use and understand language' (Dodd 2005, 159) which Susan Dodd suggests is characteristic of autism. Finally, the 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities' (APA 2013, 50) that is one of the diagnostic criteria for autism within DSM 5. The purpose of this critical engagement with these traits is not to deny that some autistic people show them – insofar as they are used in the diagnostic process which gives the individual the autistic label, it is tautological (at least within the biomedical framework) to suggest that they do. Rather, it is to put pressure on the idea that they ought to be understood on what Murray calls the 'autism as deficit' model. Fundamentally, my argument is not that the participants were funny *despite* being autistic, but rather that their autism opened up different possibilities of being funny.

"Have any of you got problems with personal space?" – Rethinking Anxiety and 'Awkwardness'

Although we tried our best to make them feel comfortable, several of the participants seemed anxious within the workshops, particularly in the first week. Warren,[5] for example, would not come out of his mother's car in the first week and it took her 2 hours to coax him to come into the theatre in the second week. Once he did come into the space, he spent the rest of the second week observing the workshop through a gap in a curtain and in the third

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[4] One participant, for example, had a routine about the British children's show *Teletubbies*.
[5] Pseudonyms are used for all participants throughout this article.

he decided to watch from the wings, occasionally shouting responses during 'audience participation' sections. Another participant in the workshops, Esther, was visibly uncomfortable and for the first two weeks mainly participated in the stand-up. However, by the final week she took part – rather successfully – in both stand-up and clowning. For most of the autistic participants, their anxiety was evident in their physicality, with body language that was rather closed and awkward movement. This awkwardness undoubtedly had an effect on their performance.

At this point, I already find myself struggling to discuss the physicality and 'awkwardness' of the participants in a manner that doesn't fall back into the deficit model. This kind of difficulty is addressed by Matt Hargrave in his book *Theatres of Learning Disability*.

> By critically appraising a disabled actor on stage the critic is negotiating a territory (disability) that is already a performance and one in which the performer is most often framed by his *lack* of competence or by the *adjustments* that the 'audience' (non-disabled society) has had to make for him. My conversations with [Jez] Colborne about my criticism of [his] show have been some of the most difficult and ultimately beneficial aspects of the research. Colborne's definition of 'good' is 'slicker'. Does this mean that the definition of his 'success' will somehow be the attainment of a kind of invisibility, his ability to 'pass' as a nondisabled performer? (Hargrave 2015, 156)

On the UK comedy circuit there are comedians on the spectrum that are able to 'pass' as neurotypical and choose not to disclose their diagnosis. Yet, like Hargrave I am reluctant to limit the scope of successful performance to those who are able to 'pass' as neurotypical/nondisabled, or to suggest that physical awkwardness is always a negative trait in performance. Part of my reluctance stems from the fact that many autistic people go through intensive behavioural therapy to train autistic behaviours, such as stimming[6], out of them in an attempt help them 'pass', and a number of autistic self-advocates have criticised this. For example, Penni Winter challenges the practice she calls 'normalisation' whereby the aim 'is to make us "indistinguishable" from our "normal' peers." Instead she advocates 'maximisation' – that is, 'seeking to simply grow the child's capabilities *as an autistic person'* (2012, 115-116).

To be very clear, maximisation rather than normalisation is the goal of this project, for two reasons. First, I agree with Winter's argument that normalisation is a problematic idea. Second, it is not clear that becoming exceptionally 'normal' (whatever that might mean) is necessary or even conducive for becoming exceptionally funny. In fact, both of the workshop leaders I was working with believe the opposite, that the key to finding your comic voice is to figure out what is unique and interesting about you and then work with that. In this way, my engagement with the idea of awkwardness is similar to that of neurodivergent artist-researcher Daniel Oliver (2015) – I am interested in its aesthetic and comedic potential.

In both stand-up and clowning, awkward physicality can be an effective comedic tool. For example, within a clown workshop Angus's physicality in a warm-up (a playful samba) was noted by Marcelo and Oliver as having a comedic quality reminiscent of Mr.

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[6] Stimming is a term commonly used within the autistic community to describe repetitive motor behaviours.

Bean's dancing that was brilliant, yet hard to convey here. Perhaps slightly easier to convey on the page is Esther's material about visiting an art gallery, in which her physicality combines rather effectively with her material criticising people who do not respect personal space.

> Esther: Have any of you got problems about personal space? I get freaked out with people who – even without warning – invade personal space […] In art galleries that goes completely out of the window […] sometimes they just put their head on your shoulder like… [Acts out the other person, then her reaction. Audience laughs.[7]] Jesus, what are you doing?!

I would argue that this routine was effective for two main reasons. First, it was addressing a topic that I would guess – from the response it received – resonated with other people in the room. (In fact, it did so rather strongly with me personally.) Secondly, and important for the present discussion, Esther discussed her discomfort in a light and funny manner, and the awkward physicality which accompanied it was part of what made it effective. In this way, Esther's performance was a really interesting example of a performer identifying something specific to them and drawing on that to develop material.

"This is a stick up" – Rethinking 'Literality'

As a National Autistic Society booklet by autistic self-advocates explains, some autistic people 'can be very literal in their understanding, and [for them] jokes, irony and sarcasm can be difficult to understand' (Nyx et al. 2013, 5). I would suggest that this is a key reason that the myth of autistic humourlessness persists, and moreover given that it is a difficulty that autistic people themselves report I would suggest that it merits further exploration. Within our project one participant, Angus, particularly demonstrated this tendency towards literal thinking. This tendency was evident in how he approached an exercise Oliver developed called 'finding the link'.

> The students sit in a circle, and the sequence moves clockwise around it. Person 1 starts the sequence by suggesting a subject, say, superheroes. Person 2…then suggests a second, completely unrelated subject, say, arson. Person 3…then has to find a link between the two subjects. (Double 2014, 462)

This exercise is essentially means of creating an incongruous combination of ideas, which sometimes (but not always) results in humour. So, in the example above Person 3 might imagine the Fantastic Four's Human Torch turning to a life of crime and arson – an idea that might then provide the basis of a whimsical stand-up routine.

At one point during this exercise, Angus was in the place of person 3, and he had to find a way to combine 'candy floss' and 'fire extinguisher', to which he responded: 'If you put candy floss in a fire extinguisher… the fire extinguisher won't work so…don't do it in the first place'. This is a good example of a tendency, seen at different points throughout the

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[7] It's perhaps worth being clear that the 'audience' in this context was the other participants – there was no external audience and the participants were sharing material within this relatively small group. Additionally, although the audience laughing or 'getting the joke' was really useful as an indicator of a gag working, the emphasis within the workshops was much more on the performer than audience.

workshops, of participants approaching exercises in a very literal manner. Although I do not want to trivialise the difficulty that some people with autism have in certain areas of life because of this tendency, I would suggest that it also opens up certain comic possibilities. Angus was successful in getting a laugh from this punchline, although it is not the way that Oliver intended the exercise to work when he developed it, and many of the drawings by the autistic artist Tim Sharp centre around a comically literal interpretation of an everyday phrase. For example, in one picture, he depicts a robbery and plays with the phrase 'this is a stick up', which is shown literally with a character holding a stick in the air.[8]

"That's Not £2.50" – Rethinking 'Inflexibility'

As noted above, the DSM often characterises autistic behaviours rather negatively using terms such as 'inflexibility'. Again, the purpose here is to critically examine this claim in relation to the workshop setting. In particular, I want to focus on a moment involving Angus. Specifically, Angus and Declan (a neurotypical participant) use a large cardboard tube to create an improvised scene in which Declan is a driver and Angus is a toll-booth attendant.

> The scene begins with Angus holding the tube out in front of Declan, who is pretending to drive a car, as if he is in a toll-booth in charge of a barrier. Declan drives up to the barrier, looks confused then puts his mouth to the end of the tube and says 'beep!'. He then taps the barrier. Angus declares "It's £2.50". Declan searches his pockets and finds a fart whistle. He puts it in the tube for Angus to receive. Angus tips the tube so the whistle falls on the floor. Angus says "It's the fart whistle! Not £2.50" and refuses to open the barrier. Declan tries to drive through the barrier but is unsuccessful. Declan tries to drive around the barrier but Angus extends it to stop him from getting through. Declan picks up the fart whistle and blows it at Angus. He searches his pockets again then has the idea to make the car smaller (miming the action of pushing down the car, getting back in then driving it at a lower position). Angus lowers the bar to prevent him driving under. An exasperated Declan searches his pockets once more, finds them empty then pretends to find money on the floor. He hands Angus the imaginary money and Angus lifts the barrier.

There are clear moments in which Angus seems to be 'blocking'[9] the offer of Declan – first, refusing to pretend that the fart whistle is money; second, preventing Declan from driving around the barrier; and third, stopping Declan's little car driving under the barrier. Watching the scene it seems like Angus has set up the premise, that Declan needs to pay £2.50 to pass, and inflexibly prevents the comic subversion of this premise. Whilst, of course, it's not unusual to find neurotypical students that are new to improvisation also blocking the offers of their improv partners, this is nevertheless a good demonstration of a tendency we noticed amongst the autistic participants and particularly in Angus.

Although, like awkwardness and literality, the inflexibility of participants like Angus poses particular challenges in terms of the creation of comedy, I would suggest that it also

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[8] www.autismandcomedy.com/stickup

[9] The idea of 'blocking' is defined here by Keith Johnstone. 'I call anything that an actor does an "offer". Each offer can either be accepted or blocked...A block is anything that prevents the action from developing, or that wipes out your partner's premise.' (Johnstone 1989, 97)

has a comic potential. Bergson (1980)[1901] famously suggested that inflexibility lies at the very heart of the comic, and although it seems likely that he over-generalises this point it is certainly present in some popular comic characters. Indeed, it is perhaps worth noting that the lead character in a very popular sitcom, Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory,* has all three of the traits discussed: He's physically awkward, very literally minded, and rather socially inflexible. It is for this reason that many people, including Jim Parsons who plays the character (Murray 2009), have suggested that he is autistic.[10] At the same time, this fact has led to a lively discussion about the ethics of laughing at this depiction of autism. The ethical issues around Sheldon are complicated by the fact that the show arguably perpetuates harmful stereotypes around autism and the character is written and portrayed by neurotypical people. In the case of this project, ethical qualms we had around laughing were more closely related to questions of intentionality – we felt a sense of unease laughing at moments when we were not sure if the participants were *intending* to be funny.

After one of the workshops we discussed this concern, particularly in relation to Angus, where Oliver said 'he clearly understands and appreciates humour but sometimes when he's being funny I'm not sure whether he's aware that he's being funny. Whether the humour is intentional or not'. There were times at which Angus delivered material that was structured in a conventional stand-up style, which we were sure he intended to be funny, but other aspects – such as his delivery and physicality which added to the humour - we were not sure about. This was a concern because many people autistic people have experienced bullying and have a fear of being laughed at (Samson, Huber & Ruch 2011) so we were keen to avoid them feeling that we are laughing at, rather than with, them. This is a concern we kept reflecting on and returning to as the practice developed.

"Do I Look Stupid Here?" – Ethics and Consent

In recent decades, a growing body of scholarship has developed engaging with the question of the ethics of comedy about disability and/or by disabled performers. However, Rebecca Mallett observes that criticisms of disability humour often operate by positioning 'the disabled' as 'weak' in a problematic manner (2014, 11). This is an important critical tension to keep in mind when discussing the intentionality of autistic individuals, where the assumption of mental incompetence is often itself a disabling barrier. Yergeau (2013) discusses the work of psychologists who argue that autistic people have 'an impaired capacity for self-awareness'. In particular, she takes issue with the way in which they question the reliability of autobiographies by autistic individuals because of these putative impairments. Fundamentally, she suggests, such denial of autistic selfhood and the delegitimisation of autistic voices is a form of ablest abuse. In one sense, the ethical concerns we had around laughing at Angus's material was a specific instantiation of the ethics of the project more generally – that is, conducting research with autistic people. Deborah Barnbaum argues that such work requires 'an informed consent process that's as inclusive as possible [and that] inclusivity demands that each subject is presumed to be competent and given an opportunity to consent' (2008, 187). This presumption of competence, which Yergeau suggests autism research often denies, is deeply important. It was made clear to all of the participants that they did not have to do any exercises that they were not comfortable doing, and in this way participation itself was an indication of

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[10] See also Walters (2013) and Heilker (2012)

continual consent.[11] Throughout the workshops, Angus seemed to enjoy performing and making the others in the room laugh. Although there was some ambiguity around his intentions, as there most likely is for any performer, deciding that he is being funny unintentionally because of this ambiguity would be problematic. In one of his routines, Angus himself expressed frustration about being infantilised – giving the example of a recent visit to the dentist.

> Angus: [As I leave the dentist] I get given a sticker of some sort. And it says something like…'I was brave at the dentist today' [Audience laughs] They think I'm five! [Audience laughs] Well I'm not five, I'm fifteen. I mean, do I look stupid here? [Audience Laughs]

In their discussion of disability and stand-up comedy, Reid, Stoughton & Smith (2006) draw an important distinction between 'disabling humour' and 'disability humour'. The former refers to humour – often performed by non-disabled comics – that draws on problematic stereotypes and reinforces disabling barriers. By contrast, disability humour is usually performed by those with an impairment and often elucidates how 'the problem is not the impairment per se, but attitudes and structures that render the impairment disabling' (360). In the example above, the issue is the dentist's condescending attitude rather than Angus's diagnosis.

This conception of disability humour is particularly important when considering comedy by autistic people, many of whom advocate 'neurodiversity' (Jaarsma and Welin 2012) and therefore do not consider themselves to have a 'disability' at all. As such, I would argue that the idea of 'disability humour' is a useful framework in which to understand the material they produced. The participants seemed to find the experience of making a group of strangers laugh, whilst embracing their idiosyncrasies and sharing personal anecdotes, an enjoyable and affirmative experience.

Conclusion

This article reflected on a project exploring the humour of adolescents with autism, a condition that psychologists often suggest is accompanied by an impaired sense of humour. It tries to resist the deficit model of autism by working its way through it: first outlining three traits that are typically, and negatively, associated with autism, before then suggesting how they might be rethought as opening up new ways of being funny.

However, it is worth acknowledging three potential criticisms of the work as presented above. First, it should be noted that, despite my reservations about this paradigm, the project still operates within an institutional framework that is structured around the medical/deficit model. Second, the project seems to presuppose that the nature of autism is scientifically settled rather than, as some would argue (e.g. Nadesan 2005), a historically contingent category. Finally, this project, like much autism research, seems to presuppose that 'autism' refers to a single entity with a fundamental essence – a view challenged by, amongst others, Hassall (2016). Each of these criticisms are important ones that merit serious attention within autism research, and which I plan to address in future work. However, because they are equally true of most, if not all, of the existing literature on

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[11] This is in addition to, rather than instead of, written consent received by the parent/caregiver.

autism and humour – the main focus of this paper – it seems both possible and prudent to bracket them out from the discussion here.

Although the myth of autistic humourlessness has now been debunked,[12] there is still a need for more work like this that attempts to understand autistic humour on its own terms and through a model of difference rather than deficit. Importantly, I would argue that humour is a valuable tool for exploring autistic difference and celebrating neurodiversity.

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[12] See Samson (2013) for a concise literature review.

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