# It’s Like Being on a Tight-Rope: An Ethnography of the Working Lives of Professional Stand-Up Comedians in the UK

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This, like everything, is for my Mum and my Nana.

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*"I've got no choice*

*I can't do what everybody else does*

*I can't be a civilian, I've got no backbone*

*I've got a funny bone instead".*

*"I died years ago love*

*I'm a comedic zombie*

*They can't touch me anymore*

*Dead man walking, me*

*Now if you'll excuse me*

*I'm going swimming in a sea of beer*

*It washes away all the hurt and the dirt*

*It's the stains though*

*It won't shift them".*

Funny Cow, 2018

Directed by Adrian Shergold

Written by Tony Pitts

Starring Maxine Peake

# Abstract

While previous research has tended to examine the personalities of stand-up comedians, this research contributes to a gap in the literature by ethnographically studying the working lives and lived experiences of professional stand-up comedians on the UK live comedy circuit. Ethnographic fieldwork took place over eight months and was specifically concentrated in the busiest part of the week for performers, principally the weekend. This research deployed participant observation and adopted a 'go-along' approach (Kusenbach, 2003) to follow comedians beyond the twenty minutes they spend on stage making an audience laugh. The researcher travelled with comedians to their gigs and gained access to 'liminal' spaces such as backstage areas and green rooms, observing backstage happenings, activities and interactions.

This research makes two original contributions to knowledge. Firstly, it applies a novel methodological approach to study the working lives of stand-up comedians – an occupational group that has previously received limited attention in sociological work examining professional lives. Analysis of the rich observational data collected enables this thesis to present a dramaturgical account (Goffman, 1959) of comedians' work and illustrate how being a part of the night-time economy shapes the working life and culture of comedians. Secondly, this thesis expands upon the sociological concept of edgework (Lyng, 1990) and develops the analysis to propose the original theory of Theatrical Edgework, which incorporates an accompanying model for understanding the working lives of stand-up comedians. Theatrical Edgework encompasses the occupational culture, performer-audience relationship and risk-taking to explain the edgework and emotional work that comedians are engaged in before, during and after their on-stage performances.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

*"A good gig would send me floating off on a warm cloud of delirious happiness for at least a week. A bad gig would give me an eye-stinging feeling of being alone and unloved, which would last for about the same length of time".*

*(Double, 1997:5)*

This thesis is all about stand-up comedians – a unique occupational group within the performing arts (Butler and Stoyanova-Russell, 2018). The prospect of standing up on-stage in front of an audience of strangers and attempting to make them laugh would likely strike fear into many, but for stand-up comedians, this is part of their everyday working lives.

Stand-up comedians are prevalent figures in both the public consciousness and popular culture. They host television programmes, make appearances on panel shows and front their own stand-up specials. They also take their live solo shows on the road, touring on national and sometimes international scales, selling out theatres and arenas and recording those live shows for future release via television, home video or global streaming platforms. While most people have a favourite performer they watch on the television and buy tour tickets to see live, there is an entire underworld to television stand-up comedy and the famous comedians populating it. Here, I am referring to the live stand-up comedy club circuit and it is those who work and perform there that this thesis is focussed on.

The live stand-up comedy club circuit in the United Kingdom is part of the night-time economy and encompasses independent and chain comedy clubs as well as comedy nights staged in the basements and back-rooms of pubs, bars and restaurants. The circuit is populated by freelance professional stand-up comedians who ply their trade performing several nights a week, usually at the weekend and always at night-time.

The comedians working and performing on the live comedy circuit are typically anonymous to their audiences. This contrasts with the audiences of television stand-up comedians who attend live performances to see a specific performer whose work they are already familiar with. Unlike such famous UK television comedians as Peter Kay, Sarah Millican, Romesh Ranganathan or Eddie Izzard, well-established and successful performers on the comedy

circuit do not elicit recognition from the broader public. On the live comedy circuit, audiences are typically unfamiliar with the comedians performing on a given night. This has implications for the circuit comedians who must establish a positive rapport with a different audience every night, which is fundamental to winning the audience over and making them laugh.

It is well-established that audiences of live stand-up comedy play a significant role in distinguishing the medium from other types of live performances. Indeed, the dynamic between comedian and audience is often viewed as being symbiotic and one of co-dependency (Westwood, 2007; Ritchie, 2012; Miles, 2014). Audiences of live stand-up comedy adopt an active and engaged role in the construction of the on-stage performance through the requirement of the performer to make them laugh (Double, 1997). Although the comedian's material may have made an audience laugh one night, this is no guarantee of laughter the next night. There is always the possibility that a performer may fail to make an audience laugh.

This brings attention to stand-up comedy as an occupation with a propensity for dizzying 'highs' and equally sinking 'lows', which unfold before an onlooking audience. Previous research regarding the personalities and psyches of stand-up comedians relates to this assumption. In the existing literature, the propensity for experiencing 'highs' and enduring 'lows' is aligned with the commonly held beliefs associated with the profession. For example, comedians being depressed when not on stage or craving the 'highs' of the performance and the adulation of the audience.

## 1.1 The Impetus for the Research

The working lives of stand-up comedians is a topic that provokes curiosity but it is under-researched. Although there are accounts of working as a stand-up comedian in the autobiographies and memoirs of famous performers, little sociological research has focussed on the working lives of those performing on the live comedy circuit. Indeed, Robert Stebbins' (1990) *The Laugh Makers* is a rare example. Stebbins (1990) studied both amateur and professional comedians performing on the live comedy scene in Canada. Though this

study remains the most relevant to this thesis, it is not without its limitations, which I discuss in due course. However, previous empirical research on comedians has largely focussed on studying their personalities (Janus, 1975; Janus et al, 1978; Greengross and Miller, 2009; Ando et al, 2014). This enduring interest is reflective of the domination of the field by academics from the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis.

I would argue that such work is predicated on the assumption that the personalities of stand-up comedians are somehow distinctive from the general population. This is usually on the basis that it would take a certain personality type for someone to have the ability and desire to perform in this way. I would further argue that such studies indulge some of the commonly held beliefs and stereotypes which beset comedians as an occupational group and permeate the public consciousness. Such commonly held beliefs being that comedians are tragicomic figures plagued by depression, anxiety and melancholy, which are illuminated through such stereotypes as the sad clown and the tears of a clown cliché (McBride, 2004). This trend in the extant literature does little to direct the spotlight towards the working culture and professional lives of comedians.

## 1.2 Overview of the Research

This research seeks to move beyond the trend in studying the personalities of stand-up comedians and instead it aims to explore their working lives and experiences on the live comedy circuit in the UK. This research is underpinned by three simple and succinct questions:

1. What is the working culture of stand-up comedians?
2. What is it like to work as a stand-up comedian?
3. What is the nature of the relationship between stand-up comedians and their audiences?

This research adopts an ethnographic approach to provide answers to the research questions and move beyond the on-stage dimensions of the occupation. Ethnography is well-suited to exploring phenomena about which little is known and the working lives of

stand-up comedians on the live comedy circuit is one such phenomenon. I sought to embody the values and principles of an ethnographic approach to social research and appreciate the importance of committing myself to intimate and in-depth fieldwork sustained by an extended period of engagement with direct participation and observation in the field. Thus, I set out to immerse myself within the UK comedy circuit and amongst the community of stand-up comedians. In conducting ethnographic fieldwork, I was able to 'go-along' (Kusenbach, 2003) with performers and follow them as they travelled the circuit. I observed them across multiple gigs, whether for one night or an entire weekend. I observed their on-stage performances, as well as the backstage happenings and goings-on. I was privy to conversations, interactions, behaviours and activities, and directly observed and participated in stand-up comedians' working lives.

## 1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of nine chapters, the first of which has introduced this thesis and put forward an overview of the motivations for undertaking this research. The remaining eight chapters elucidate the journey of this research from beginning to end. In Chapter Two, I present the background and contextualise this thesis. I begin Chapter Two by exploring the development of stand-up comedy from its historical roots to its present popularity and consider some of the commonly held beliefs and stereotypes regarding stand-up comedians. There is a review of the relevant academic literature and the chapter concludes by identifying that a sociological understanding of the working lives of comedians is a gap within the literature. Finally, the chapter sets out the emergent research questions, which this ethnographic research aims to answer.

In Chapter Three, I discuss ethnography as a distinctive approach to social research and make the case for adopting an ethnographic approach to studying the working lives and experiences of professional stand-up comedians on the live comedy circuit. I consider existing research related to comedians that has used similar approaches and methods (Stebbins, 1990; Rutter, 1997; Friedman, 2014) and discuss in detail the methods I used to conduct this research and how I gained access to the comedy circuit. I also detail the analysis of the data and the ethical considerations underpinning the research.

Chapter Four is presented in two parts and forms the bridge between the methods and subsequent findings. In the first part of this chapter, I introduce the stand-up comedians who came to be involved as participants in this research and do so through a series of vignettes, which profile each participant's individual journey to becoming a professional comedian. Two participants, Adam and Dave, are the focus of their own comparatively more in-depth biographies. In the second part of this chapter, I bring attention to a selection of the places and spaces where ethnographic fieldwork took me. I present a synopsis of some of the venues I visited, followed by an in-depth descriptive account of the pseudonymously named comedy club 'The Chuckle Factory'. This chapter sets the scene for the findings that follow.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven present the findings of this research thematically. All three chapters come together to paint a rich, vibrant portrait of this occupational group and tell the tale of the journey of working and performing as a professional stand-up comedian on the live comedy circuit. Chapter Five concentrates on three different aspects of their working culture and begins by looking at the notion of 'hack' before exploring the working hours of comedians and their life on the road.

Chapter Six addresses the relationship between comedians and the audiences they encounter on the circuit, which despite the co-dependency involved is characterised by something of a love-hate and antagonistic dynamic. Chapter Seven explores the unpredictability and risk-taking that came to characterise the working lives of comedians. In this chapter, I look at the contrasts that can exist between gigs and how this led performers to describe a sense of perennially being 'on edge' regarding their working lives, this leads into Chapter Eight.

Chapter Eight forms a discussion of the findings within the context of the existing literature and sociological theory. This chapter situates the work of comedians within the night-time entertainment economy before going on to provide a dramaturgical account of the performance involved in working as a stand-up comedian. Following which, this chapter explores the edgework, emotional labour and emotion-work involved in comedians' working lives and then introduces my theory of Theatrical Edgework.

Chapter Nine brings this thesis to its conclusion. Here, I discuss the strengths and limitations of the research and consider potential avenues for future research. I then reflect on my time on the comedy circuit and conclude this chapter by summarising the original contributions of this thesis. [1]

[1] Subsequent to all nine chapters is a full reference list and appendix. Enclosed appendices include the participant information sheet (appendix one), participant consent form (appendix two), ethical approval letter (appendix three), and a model of my theory of Theatrical Edgework (appendix four).

# Chapter 2: Background and a Review of the Literature

## 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the background and context to this thesis. In it I outline the main reasons for conducting ethnographic research to explore the working lives of professional comedians on the UK live comedy circuit. This chapter provides a review of the existing literature and adopts an interdisciplinary approach as it discusses work from a range of academic disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis, humour studies, and drama and performance studies. This chapter highlights the limitations of existing research and makes the case that the working lives of stand-up comedians is sociologically neglected territory.

There is a sense amongst some academics writing in the field that stand-up comedy is viewed as an artistic form of inferior cultural standing (Friedman, 2014) or what Kuipers (2006:374) describes as "low-brow art par excellence". As Stott (2005) suggests, stand-up comedy is considered as a form of entertainment with little 'serious' knowledge or meaning to be excavated. This can lead to the subject of stand-up comedy or comedians being dismissed as trivial and having its analytic potential overlooked (Kuipers, 2008). There is a longstanding impression that despite stand-up comedy being an increasingly significant feature of British cultural life (Friedman, 2011), it is perceived as less deserving of academic attention than more traditional areas of sociological focus (Miles, 2017; Fox, 2017).

This sense of inferiority has extended itself to the sociology of humour. A number of the early contributions to a then emergent sociology of humour were apologetic for even daring to approach and analyse humour from a sociological perspective (Fox, 1990). This led some humour studies academics to go to the lengths of including not just an apology but a disclaimer regarding the lack of humour within their work (Davis, 1995). Nevertheless, humour has proved to be a popular topic for academic exploration and has been addressed by philosophers (Koestler, 1964; Critchley, 2002; Bergson, 1900/2008), psychologists (Provine, 2000) and sociologists (Fine, 1983; Powell and Patton, 1988; Mulkay, 1988; Koller, 1988; Kuipers, 2008). Stand-up comedy has had some attention from sociologists (Stebbins, 1990; Rutter, 1997; Friedman, 2014; Smith, 2018). However, much of the scholarship

regarding stand-up comedy has been undertaken by drama and performance academics (Double, 1997; Ritchie, 2012; Double, 2014; Quirk, 2015). This work has focused on the medium as a type of performance and has neglected the lived working experience of being a stand-up comedian.

Much of the existing empirical research directly concerning stand-up comedians has followed a psychological orthodoxy and focused on the psyches and personalities of comedians (Greengross and Miller, 2009; Ando et al, 2014) with an accompanying interest in their childhood experiences (Janus, 1975; Janus et al, 1978; Fisher and Fisher, 1981). I will go on to argue that such research is demonstrative of a tendency to indulge the commonly held belief that stand-up comedians are tragicomic figures plagued by depression, melancholy and troubled childhoods, which limits understanding of them as an occupational group.

The working lives of comedians have mostly evaded the gaze of academics and especially sociologists though there are a small number of exceptions. In *The Laugh-Makers* (1990) Robert Stebbins explores the business of becoming and being a stand-up comedian on the comedy scene in Canada. In his monograph, *Stand-Up!* (1997) Oliver Double, a former comedian and now drama academic, reflects on his own experiences of working as a professional comedian. Lastly, Butler and Stoyanova-Russell (2018) study the precarity and emotional labour involved in working as a freelance comedian. Accounts of working life as a circuit stand-up comedian remain few and far between with the majority arising from the memoirs, diaries and autobiographies of now-famous performers – *Saturday Night Peter* (Peter Kay, 2010), *On The Road* (Frank Skinner, 2009), and *Born Standing Up* (Steve Martin, 2007) to name but a few examples. While the working lives of stand-up comedians remains an under-researched topic, the subject of humour has attracted multidisciplinary attention.

## 2.2 The Emergence of Humour Studies

The field of humour studies was once a niche area (Rutter, 1997) but has since developed into a multidisciplinary field with the subjects of humour, laughter and comedy galvanising academics from the social sciences as well as the arts and humanities. Although many of the

early contributions to the field were made by philosophers, linguists and psychologists (Kuipers, 2008), the field has come to encompass a developing literature on the sociology of humour.

As Fine (1983) argues, humour is inherently social because it typically arises from a ‘real’ or imagined dialogue between different people; it is dependent upon a teller and a recipient. In his book *On Humour* (1988), Michael Mulkay takes some inspiration from Goffman’s (1974) concept of frame analysis to explore the social nature of humour and how it functions and operates in the context of both small-scale social settings and wider society. Mulkay offers one of the first major contributions to the sociology of humour and presents his interactionist theory of humour within society. Central to Mulkay’s (1988) analysis is his distinction between the ‘serious’ and the ‘humorous’ as not just two different discourses but interpretive modes that individuals adopt to make sense of social reality. Mulkay identifies the ‘serious’ as being the dominant discourse within a society and the ‘humorous’ as a subordinate counterpart. Both the ‘serious’ and the ‘humorous’ operate according to different principles and the boundary between the two is easily blurred.

In the ‘serious’ mode, individuals subscribe to a singular social reality where inconsistency, incongruity and interpretive diversity problematise the stability of social interaction. In contrast, the ‘humorous’ mode is dependent upon interpretive diversity and individuals being open to incongruity, ambiguity and multiple meanings. While the ‘serious’ mode appeals to a common and shared interpretation of the social world, the ‘humorous’ mode can fragment and disrupt this. This is because individuals are being asked to entertain incongruity and implausibility in appreciating ‘humorous’ discourse, which goes against the ‘serious’. To this end, Mulkay’s analysis of humour fits within the ‘classical’ incongruity theory of humour (Carrell, 2008) due to the ‘serious’ and the ‘humorous’ being positioned in a state of juxtaposition.

Mulkay makes use of different empirical materials to conduct a conversation and discourse analysis respectively. This enables him to examine the semantic and linguistic features and functions that sustain and separate both the ‘serious’ and the ‘humorous’ discourses. Mulkay suggests that during social interaction, individuals deploy and make use of a range

of verbal and physical cues to help distinguish between the ‘humorous’ and the ‘serious’ frames and facilitate the negotiation of transition between the two. He argues that individuals must be able to distinguish between the ‘serious’ and the ‘humorous’ otherwise the nature of the social interaction can break down. In other words, the ‘serious’ may become confused with the ‘humorous’ and vice versa. It is the transition between the ‘serious’ and ‘humorous’ that primes individuals and renders them amenable to humour. This transition facilitates successful negotiation of the inevitable ambiguities and incongruities that arise in the ‘humorous’ discourse and enables individuals to appreciate them without seeking out the ‘serious’.

For example, in the ‘humorous’ interpretive mode, common sense and the desire for coherency and logic are temporarily paused. Thus, when humour is presented, those involved in the interaction do not attempt to interpret it as they would in the ‘serious’ mode. This results in the ‘humorous’ discourse being produced and received as intended. Interestingly, Mulkay also draws a distinction between what he labels as ‘spontaneous’ and ‘standardised’ humour, both of which arise depending on the interactional context. ‘Spontaneous’ humour can be seen to exist in the moment and derive from the surrounding interactional context and circumstances, whereas humour of a ‘standardised’ nature exists independently of the interactional context. For example, a joke is not contingent on the immediate context but can exist independently because the receiver knows that a humorous dialogue has been entered into.

Mulkay’s work does not make explicit reference to humour in stand-up comedy or its use by stand-up comedians. Nevertheless, his theory of humour offers a useful lens through which to regard the context of live stand-up comedy performances. The social scene of a live stand-up performance is an interactional context in which participants (that is the comedian and the audience) are fully embedded within the ‘humorous’ realm and expecting ‘humorous’ discourse. Both are fully committed to the ‘humorous’ frame of the interaction and ready themselves accordingly. In this context, the humour of both a ‘standardised’ and ‘spontaneous’ nature can exist concurrently as the performer weaves their prepared material, which can exist independently of the interactional context with the improvised

dialogue involving the audience that is contingent on the immediate interactional circumstances.

While Mulkay (1988) considers the function of humour within society, in her part-manifesto *Comedy and Social Science: Towards a Methodology of Funny,* Cate Watson (2015) considers humour as an underused aspect of the sociological imagination. Watson argues for the adoption of humour as a potentially fruitful methodology within social science research. However, Watson (2015) is not the first scholar to make such an appeal. Murray S. Davis (1979:110) also invited the use of humour as a method to 'reinvigorate' sociology, following his unflattering assertion that 'boring' had become something of a trademark of sociological work.

Watson (2015) stresses that her call for humour is not simply about producing witty or amusing academic written work for the sake of entertainment. Rather, it is about recognising the opportunities for social inquiry and the analytical possibilities that adopting a humorous perspective can provide. The use of humour as methodology is demonstrated in the work of Fox (2017). In their study of the 'northerness effect' as a socio-cultural bias within the stand-up comedy industry, Fox (2017) makes use of a humorous and reflexive self-commentary that appears at explicit 'serious' or 'pretentious' moments. This commentary interrupts their work to put forward an alternative analysis and critique, connoting a self-heckle within the text and embodying a 'comic' mode of representation. By using an incongruous interpretive lens in this way, Fox (2017) opens up the analytic scope of their work.

Watson (2015) does acknowledge the lingering academic snobbery regarding the study of humour, comedy and allied subjects, arguing that humour is appreciated in the arts but generally rejected in the social sciences. Watson highlights the irony at the heart of much humour or comedy-based research in that it is usually only ever presented and disseminated in a 'serious' fashion and is rarely amusing or entertaining. Indeed, there is something of a developing remedy here in the form of the Bright Club, which is a public engagement venture that captures some of the sentiments expressed by Watson (2015). The Bright Club can be described as an academic comedy club, where academics present

their research to an audience in the style of stand-up comedy (Lipsett, 2010). Academics are essentially being tasked with presenting their 'serious' research in a 'humorous' way, which demonstrates that there is some mileage in Watson's (2015) argument.

In Watson's (2015) advocacy for humour to be taken seriously as a methodology within the social sciences, she acknowledges the enduring paradox that if she attempts to make her case humorously then she courts the risk of being dismissed as trivial, whereas if she is to proceed seriously, she risks undermining her argument. Such a paradox is longstanding within the field of humour studies where there is an ongoing negotiation between the 'serious' and 'humorous' and the most appropriate way to approach the analysis of humour. As Mulkay (1988) argues, academic analysis of humour often falls short because it seeks to engage and explain humour from a 'serious' stance.

This thesis circumvents such issues as those identified by Mulkay (1988) and Watson (2015) as it does not seek to explore the nature of humour or indeed engage in a specific analysis of it. The emphasis of this thesis is on understanding the working lives and occupational culture of stand-up comedians rather than examining their use of humour. Consequently, this thesis does not share the same concerns as those scholars involved in studying the sociology of humour. While humour is the preserve of comedians and the developing sociology of humour literature is a theoretical backdrop relevant to the contextualisation of this research, it is limited in that it does not shed light on the working culture or professional lives of stand-up comedians.

## 2.3 The Development and Popularity of Stand-Up Comedy

British stand-up comedy is rooted in the music hall and variety shows of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Ritchie, 2012) when comedians performed alongside magicians, jugglers, ventriloquists, acrobats, dancers, singers and showgirls. Comedians would typically deliver their performances in front of the archetypal red velvet theatrical curtains and this led to them being known as 'front-cloth comics' (Double, 2012). It was the responsibility of the comedian to keep the audience amused and entertained whilst the stage was being prepared for the next act. In music hall and variety, the performances of comedians typically

involved comedy songs and developed to incorporate standalone comedic patter with joke-telling between songs (Double, 2014).

Following the decline in popularity of music halls and variety theatre in the nineteen sixties and seventies, stand-up comedy found a new home on the club circuit. This was not the live stand-up comedy club circuit as it is today but the circuit of social and working men's clubs. Such clubs are associated with what has come to be referred to as 'traditional' or 'old school' stand-up comedy (Friedman, 2014:17). The peak in popularity of this 'traditional' and what was then the 'mainstream' style of stand-up comedy arguably came in the early nineteen seventies when '*The Comedians'* began airing on Granada Television. The programme sought to emulate the 'feel' of the club environment and was recorded in front of a live studio audience and eschewed the use of a laughter track. Many of the stand-up comedians who featured on the programme were gigging performers from the social and working men's club circuit.

The social and working men's club circuit was linked with The Club and Institution Union (CIU) who operated a repository of jokes, gags and routines and from which stand-up comedians were able to bulk buy jokes in a pick and mix fashion (Critchley, 2002; Stott, 2005; Friedman, 2014). At this time, stand-up comedy was characterised by what Stott (2005:114) refers to as an "aggressive subtext". This is because the jokes that performers delivered were typically racist, sexist, homophobic and generally oppressive towards particular groups within society (Ritchie, 2012). However, as Friedman (2014) recognises, this style of stand-up comedy also preceded the performers of the CIU era. In the music hall and variety period, 'the Irish' and 'mother in-law' were frequent targets in the jokes of comedians.

When British music hall and variety faded in popularity, so too did the American equivalent of vaudeville. However, America was beginning to set the trend for what was to become modern-day stand-up comedy and a trend that the UK would follow (Double, 2014). In 1979, The Comedy Store opened in London, inspired by its Los Angeles namesake and underpinning ethos (Cook, 2001; Double, 2020). The Comedy Store became a hub for the

counterculture of the alternative comedy movement that emerged and continued into the nineteen-eighties.

The alternative comedy movement is documented as lasting from around 1979 to 1989 (Smith, 2018) and engendered a rebellion against the ‘traditional’ and then ‘mainstream’ stand-up comedy of the day. This movement signalled what Double (2020) argues to be the reinvention of stand-up comedy. Alternative comedy was so-called because it offered an alternative to the ‘traditional’ and ‘mainstream’ comedy of working men’s club comics (Limon, 2000). According to Smith (2018), the alternative comedy movement had two principle aims. Firstly, to revolutionise stand-up comedy beyond its bigoted roots, departing from an emphasis on ‘comedy targets’ (Lockyer, 2015). Secondly, to see the stand-up comedian maintain a marginal position from which they could examine and critique modern life and ‘mainstream’ society (Smith, 2018). Both aims are intertwined with the sense of authorship that the alternative comedy movement promoted (Cook, 2001) and paved the way for the stand-up comedian as not just the performer but also the writer.

The ‘traditional’ stand-up comedians were not just performing what would be considered as politically incorrect material, they were also using many of the same jokes as other performers. Then, jokes were freely traded and borrowed amongst comedians, which is presently much of a no-no (Reilly, 2018). The alternative comedy movement led to the on-stage material of performers becoming more informed by self-identity and autobiography (Limon, 2000). Comedians began to talk about their own lives and personal experiences and sharing their perspectives on politics, modern life and ‘mainstream’ society (Smith, 2018).

The alternative comedy movement has developed from being the radical ‘alternative’ to the ‘traditional’ and once ‘mainstream’ style of stand-up comedy, as embodied by the working men’s club comics of yesteryear and emerged as the new ‘mainstream’ style that remains ‘in vogue’ today (Quirk, 2018; Double, 2020). Nevertheless, there is what could be considered a second-wave in ‘new alternative’ comedy, which follows the legacy of the comedians who prompted the original ‘alternative’ comedy movement (Quirk, 2018; Double, 2020). This second-wave continues to be exemplified by a style of comedy that is distinctive to what was once the ‘alternative’ but is now the contemporary ‘mainstream’

style. This second-wave is alternative in that it strays from the observational thrust of contemporary comedy. It remains deeply politicised according to liberal values and accommodates the quirky on-stage personas of comedians whose material does not follow or adhere to the current conventions and formal rules of 'mainstream' stand-up. It is represented by such performers as Josie Long, Stewart Lee, Paul Foot, Bridget Christie, Isy Suttie, Tim Key and David O'Doherty.

It is worth highlighting that none of the performers who participated in this research would fall under the category of 'new alternative' comedians. I would suggest that all the stand-up comedians who participated in this research are of the present 'mainstream' variety. However, during my travels on the comedy circuit, I did meet a few stand-up comedians who would come under the 'new alternative' umbrella, and I did encounter one stand-up comedian of the 'traditional' type, who did subscribe to a pre-alternative ethos of comedy and was subsequently ostracised by their 'mainstream' peers.

Stand-up comedy is a popular form of entertainment and global industry built on television, film, radio and live performance (Ritchie, 2012). The well-known British stand-up comedian Peter Kay broke the Guinness World Record for the biggest selling live stand-up comedy tour of all time. Peter Kay's 2010/2011 '…Tour That Doesn't Tour Tour' sold 1,140,798 tickets for 113 shows in arenas (Chortle, 2012). This increase in the popularity of stand-up comedy has been attributed to what Lockyer (2015:586) refers to as the "celebritization of stand-up comedy". This so-called "celebritization' arises from the attention that stand-up comedy has come to be afforded by television and the increased presence of performers across different aspects of the creative and cultural industries – film, television, live performance, advertisement, home video, global streaming and print media (Logan, 2010; Moon, 2010; Lockyer and Myers, 2011; Lockyer, 2015).

Since 2004, the BBC has broadcast the television programme *'Live at The Apollo'*, which aired its fifteenth and most recent season in 2019 and has proven to be a mainstay of the television listings. *'Live at The Apollo'* has served as a launchpad for performers earning their living by performing on the comedy circuit. Since appearing on the programme, several comedians have progressed from the circuit to becoming household names – appearing on

television, touring their live shows and publishing autobiographies. Television panel shows also facilitate the progression of performers from relative anonymity as jobbing comedians on the circuit to wider household recognition. Television panel shows continue to dominate the comedy offerings and programmes such as *'Mock The Week'*, *'8 Out of 10 Cats'*, *'Would I Lie To You?'*, *'QI'* and *'H*ave I Got News For You' are all structured around showcasing stand-up comedians and bringing them to the attention of a bigger audience. All of this comes together to exemplify the process of "celebritization" that Lockyer (2015:586) describes.

This increased television exposure has also shaped the traditional live setting of stand-up comedy. Lockyer (2015) highlights the transition of stand-up comedy from its archetypal setting of the comedy club to the large arena. In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, only a few performers in UK stand-up comedy were playing to sizeable audiences in large arenas. The double-act David Baddiel and Robert Newman were the first comedy performers to headline their own show at London's Wembley Arena. Meanwhile, Eddie Izzard was the first British stand-up comedian to play a multiple date tour set entirely in arenas (Lockyer, 2015 and the late Victoria Wood (1953-2016) held multiple-night residencies at the Royal Albert Hall. Comedians such as Lee Evans and Peter Kay have since toured their live shows entirely in arenas, reserving theatres and comedy clubs for 'work in progress' performances to 'warm-up' before taking the 'finished product' into arenas.

Arenas are a world away from the foundations of the form in intimate clubs on the comedy circuit (Double, 1997; Quirk, 2011; Lockyer, 2015) but have become commonplace as many stand-up comedians' live tours are staged in arenas up and down the country. Such UK stand-up comedians as Alan Carr, Jason Manford, John Bishop, Michael McIntyre, Frankie Boyle, Russell Howard, Jack Whitehall, Bill Bailey and Al Murray have all staged lengthy, multiple date arena tours based on their television exposure. This suggests that the arena has become the preserve of the famous television comedian with the profile and following to fill it with an audience.

The preceding sections have addressed a familiar dimension of the industry regarding television stand-up comedy and famous comedians. However, there is a dimension of the industry less familiar and that is the live stand-up comedy club circuit. Following the success

of The Comedy Store in London, several comedy club chains set up operations and opened venues around the country. Jongleurs opened in the early nineteen-eighties, and The Glee Club, The Stand, and Just The Tonic all followed in the nineteen-nineties as other smaller comedy clubs also started to open their doors. For example, The Last Laugh in Sheffield and both The Frog and Bucket and The Comedy Store in Manchester have become well-established comedy clubs.

Stand-up comedy is typically performed at dedicated nights and designated venues. In bespoke comedy clubs – be those operated independently or as part of a chain - and at comedy nights staged in the basements and backrooms of pubs, clubs and bars. Famous stand-up comedians have a dedicated audience and sell out a large venue based on their 'name' whereas performers on the circuit do not have a dedicated audience. As Quirk (2011:220) notes, "…stand-up gigs come in all shapes and sizes, from small struggling clubs above pubs to the O2 Arena". This brings some attention to the hierarchical workings of the industry – famous performers working on television and touring their live shows around theatres and arenas will usually have previously been working on the live comedy club circuit. The circuit forms the workplace for stand-up comedians who despite not being on television are nonetheless professional performers. While some comedians progress from the circuit to television and wider success, fame and fortune, many remain on the circuit for the duration of their career.

## 2.4 Defining Stand-Up Comedy

Oliver Double (1997), a former stand-up comedian who is now an academic and prolific contributor to the literature on stand-up comedy, acknowledges the difficulty of defining stand-up comedy. Beginning with a simple explanation, Double proposes the following definition.

*"I would define stand-up comedy as a single performer standing in front of an audience, talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh".*

*(Double, 1997:4)*

Like Double (1997), Limon (2000) also argues the production of laughter to be the single aim of stand-up comedy and suggests that a performance is judged entirely on whether the performer has made the audience laugh or not. Therefore, the value of a performance rests on the production of laughter, which renders the technical execution, intelligent mechanics or underlying message of a joke or routine irrelevant.

Nevertheless, there is some understanding that stand-up comedy can serve a purpose beyond simply making an audience laugh. Stand-up comedians have previously been characterised as social commentators (Mintz, 1985), cultural critics (Koziski, 1997) and even comedic sociologists (Smith, 2015). This emerges from the tendency of performers to make use of the social and cultural in their on-stage material. Certainly, there is a tradition of the comedian dissecting social and moral laws, conventions and political allegiances as part of their on-stage performances (Stebbins, 1990). As Mintz (1985) suggests, certain American comedians became very well known for their critical social and cultural commentary. For example, the likes of Lenny Bruce, Bill Hicks, George Carlin and Richard Pryor were all well known for tackling social and political issues (Harbridge, 2011). In the UK, such counterpart examples would likely include Ben Elton, Stewart Lee, Sara Pascoe, Alexei Sayle, Mark Thomas, Nish Kumar, Katherine Ryan and Frankie Boyle.

In *Why Stand-Up Matters* (2015), Sophie Quirk explores how stand-up comedians manipulate and seek to influence their audiences. Quirk frames stand-up comedy as a form of social critique and argues that performers use their art as social and political activism. This involves them seeking to persuade their audience to consider ideas or subjects that may not ordinarily be open for discussion or debate. Quirk (2015) argues that stand-up comedians have the potential to be agents of positive social change. For Quirk, stand-up comedy is not just about being funny but is also about communicating ideologies, making audiences think following the performance and inviting them to challenge their norms, values, attitudes and beliefs. This partly chimes with Stebbins' (1990:15) notion of 'take-home humour' in that comedians are attempting to do more than simply make an audience laugh. The comedian is seeking to convince the audience of the value of their perspective on the world, politically, socially or culturally, and offer something that resonates long after the curtain falls.

In *Comedy and Critique* (2018) Daniel Smith follows a lineage of scholars who have argued that stand-up comedy performance functions as a means of critique (see Weaver, 2010; Lockyer, 2015; Quirk, 2015). Smith situates his argument against the backdrop of New Left politics and highlights how contemporary stand-up comedy sees performers taking the side of the oppressed in contrast with 'traditional' or 'old school' stand-up comedy. Smith (2018) sees comedians as tackling the power structures, inequalities and state of contemporary society, presenting their critical commentaries on the modern social world. Smith (2018) captures the apparent similarities between sociology and stand-up comedy and argues that while stand-up comedy is not sociology and sociology is not stand-up comedy, there is an affinity between their scope as an art form and a social science respectively. Smith argues that comedians present what amounts to sociological truths but through the prism of humour. Comedians, like sociologists, are dealing in the 'social' but analysing this through their very own 'comic ontology' – the 'humorous' (Smith, 2018). This resonates with Mulkay's (1988) 'humorous mode' as a particular interpretive approach, which for Smith (2015) underpins a 'comedic sociology'.

Smith (2018) supports Quirk's (2015) assertion that comedians manipulate their audience to communicate their critique of modern society and convey their perspective of the world. However, Smith acknowledges that the potential of stand-up comedy to power political and social change is somewhat limited. Smith (2018) argues that the production of laughter is the central object which stand-up comedy claims as its jurisdiction. Irrespective of the social, political or cultural critique which underpins a routine, the production of laughter comes before any of the more elaborate ambitions performers may have for their material.

This does lend some support to the work of Mulkay (1988) and suggests that even in an interactional context entirely about the production and consumption of humour an underlying 'serious' discourse can exist concurrently. However, negotiation between the 'humorous' and 'serious' is not straightforward (Mulkay, 1988). Therefore, it can be understood that for the comedian, the production of laughter does take precedence over any accompanying social or cultural critique. In his later work *Getting the Joke* (2014), Oliver Double revisits his original understanding of stand-up comedy (see Double, 1997:4-5) and

moves towards a more developed definition beyond the overarching intention of the performer being to make the audience laugh.

*"Personality*
*It puts a person on display in front of an audience, whether that person is an exaggerated comic character or a version of the performers own self.*

*Direct communication*
*It involves direct communication between performer and audience. It's an intense relationship, with energy flowing back and forth between stage and auditorium. It's like a conversation made up of jokes, laughter and sometimes less pleasant responses.*

*Present tense*
*It happens in the present tense, in the here and now. It acknowledges the performance situation. The stand-up comedian is duty-bound to incorporate events in the venue into the act. Failure to respond to a heckler, a dropped glass or the ringing of a mobile phone is a sign of weakness which will result in the audience losing faith in the performer's ability".*

*(Double, 2014:19-20)*

What stands out here is how Double (2014) incorporates the temporality of stand-up comedy and captures the influence the audience and environment have on the performance. This is in respect of the in-the-moment, immediate and interactive nature of stand-up comedy, which is prone to and dependent upon audience interaction be it good, bad, welcome or unwanted. There is the absence of the fourth wall in live stand-up comedy performances and unlike stage plays or stage acting, comedians mostly acknowledge and interact directly with their audiences (Ross, 1998). Although a lack of the fourth wall is not entirely exclusive to stand-up comedy, Ritchie (2012) does single this out as something that characterises stand-up comedy more than other types of live performance.

As Wilkie (2016) argues, a successful comedy performance requires an interplay and interaction between performer and audience. Two of the three features outlined in Double's (2014:19-20) definition of stand-up comedy, direct communication and present tense, align to this absence of the fourth wall. In that the three coalesce to either work with or against the stand-up comedian during their performance. For example, heckling and disturbances in the room can interrupt the performance due to the 'proximity and intimacy' of live stand-up comedy (Lockyer and Myers, 2011:177). This highlights the centrality of the

audience to the function of the on-stage performance and their ability to influence proceedings.

## 2.5 The Stand-Up Comedy Audience

The audience has an essential role in the effective organisation of live stand-up comedy (Rutter, 2000) and there is a sense of co-dependency in that the comedian cannot exist without the presence and engagement of an audience (Ritchie, 2012; Miles, 2014). As Westwood (2007) argues, the live stand-up comedy performance is one of co-creation, produced by the coming together of the comedian and the audience, which emphasises Fine's (1983) assertion that humour is inherently social.

Like Ritchie (2012) suggests, audiences of live stand-up comedy are not spectators or passive observers; they influence proceedings and are involved in shaping the performance. Live stand-up comedy requires that the audience participate and engage with the comedian's performance. As Double (2014:187) puts it, "…take the audience away from stand-up comedy and it starts to look weird… stand-up comedy without an audience is only half there". It can be understood that stand-up comedians share a distinctive relationship with their audience. This is largely attributable to the context of live stand-up comedy performances and the purpose of the stand-up comedian.

*"Your job is to make the audience laugh. What you do is defined by your ability to create a specific response in a roomful of people… If the audience doesn't laugh, you've quite simply failed. The content of your act is irrelevant. You may have been inventive, imaginative, intelligent, but if they didn't laugh, you're a failure".*

*(Double, 1997:5)*

This does make stand-up comedy slightly different to some other types of live performance. For example, if a play, musical, opera or indeed a concert or recital of some description fails to elicit the desired response from the audience, while this may still be of detriment to the performance or indicative of audience dissatisfaction or failure on the part of the performer, by and large, the performance continues mostly unaffected. In stand-up comedy, a lack of response and reaction from the audience is not just indicative of a failure on the part of the performer but it also means that the form does not function as it should.

Audiences of live stand-up comedy are continually incorporated into the interactional context. This is during the performances of stand-up comedians (Scarpetta and Spagnolli, 2009) and through the sequencing, introductions and chit-chat of the compere on the night (Rutter, 2000). For Double (2014), there is an exchange of energy between performer and audience. As routines are delivered by the comedian on stage and directed towards the audience, the laughter and applause of the audience are directed back towards the stage and the comedian. The performer and audience give and take energy from one another (Double, 2014).

Tim Miles (2014) challenges Bergson's (1900/2008) stance that emotion is detrimental to the production of humour and argues that the comedian and audience are emotionally bound together. Miles (2014) supports existing perspectives of the audience-performer dynamic and suggests that the comedian and audience are interdependent, and their relationship is similar to that of a doctor and patient. Drawing on data from an analysis of television documentaries featuring comedians, transcripts from interviews conducted with performers and audience completed questionnaires, Miles (2014) argues that the comedian-audience relationship is underpinned by notions of empathy, human connection, recognition, validation and mutual wellbeing. Miles highlights that audiences are seeking escapism while comedians have an emotional need to perform and are seeking validation, attention and recognition.

This sense that comedians have an emotional need to perform before an audience and make others laugh is well established in the existing literature. In *Pretend the World is Funny and Forever* (1981), Fisher and Fisher argue that comedians are eager to be loved by their audience and enjoy producing laughter and receiving applause. Based on his reflections, Double (1997:5) describes how a good performance would afford him feelings on a spectrum somewhere between delirium and happiness, whereas a bad performance would leave him feeling as though he was alone, isolated and unloved. Miles (2014) lends support to Double's (1997) personal reflections and highlights the transcendent and ethereal experience of performing. In doing so, Miles draws attention to the potential for comedians to encounter emotional difficulties following a performance due to their relationship with an audience reaching a temporary conclusion. I would argue that Miles writes of the

dynamic between comedian and audience in a romanticised fashion. Nevertheless, Miles (2014:17) does acknowledge that the comedian-audience relationship is one which "…exists in a constant state of tension and peril" and Smith (2018:73) concurs suggesting that the relationship can be "mutually antagonistic" or one of "symbiotic harmony".

The dynamic between comedian and audience involves the negotiation of power and control throughout the performance (Ritchie, 2012). Ritchie (2012) identifies that laughter permits a comedian to continue with their performance. However, just as an audience can laugh in unity, they can also fail to laugh at all or remain silent. As Fisher and Fisher (1981) argue, the comedian is being tested on their abilities and is on trial before the audience. This highlights the tension that exists between the audience as a collective and the performer as an individual. Smith (2018) compares this with the tension between individuality and collective cohesion within society – arguing that although the stand-up comedian is on stage and performing to fulfil their own needs, they remain dependent on the audience.

While being a stand-up comedian offers emotional rewards, it can also bring emotional challenges. Audience members may be fearful of being selected as ripe for comedic pickings given the 'proximity and intimacy' of live stand-up comedy (Lockyer and Myers, 2011:177). But comedians are also at the mercy of their audiences who retain the ability to accept or reject the performance. This highlights the conflicting tensions and emotions central to the comedian-audience relationship and the risk that comedians are confronting during their on-stage performances.

## 2.6 Stand-Up Comedy and Risk-Taking

It can be argued that stand-up comedians are engaging in risk-taking each time they appear on stage. As Peacock (2017) states, a live performance that encourages audience participation runs the risk that the involvement of the audience may not unfold as the performer envisaged. The position of stand-up comedians can therefore be interpreted as one of precarity and vulnerability. This position is only heightened by comedians appearing as their 'naked selves' on stage or at least projecting a version of self (Double, 2000:315).

Smith (2018) suggests that the comedian's comic persona is not an entirely fictitious creation or a true authentic reflection of their personality, rather their comic persona exists on a spectrum somewhere between the two. Cook (1994:4) suggests that "…stand-up comedy is probably the least fictional of all the performing arts". The boundary between 'performance' and 'reality' are blurry and this is perhaps due to stand-up comedy straddling social and theatrical performance (Miles, 2014).

*"Without the protection of the formal mask of narrative drama, without a song, dance, or any other intermediary composition that creates distance between performer and performance, without even, necessarily, some remarkable physical trait or ability to gratuitously display, the stand-up comedian addresses an audience as a naked self, eschewing the luxury of a clear-cut distinction between art and life".*

*(Marc, 1989:13)*

Comedians are vulnerable during their on-stage performance in that there is seemingly no formal façade to hide behind and this can lead to a sense of risk and exposure. The most immediate risk facing the stand-up comedian is of course that they fail to make an audience laugh (Ritchie, 2012) which, in essence, is to have failed as a stand-up comedian (Double, 1997). Scott (2017) argues live performance to be a form of risk-taking (Scott, 2017) and situates this argument alongside their concept of the 'shy performativity paradox'. This conceptualisation seeks to explain how seemingly shy individuals in everyday 'real' life can deliver confident and at-ease displays on stage and in front of an audience. Therein, Scott argues that live performance is risk-taking because being on stage would seemingly clash with the very nature of shyness.

Scott is inspired by the work of Mead (1934) and suggests that the splitting of the Meadian social self, the 'I' and the 'Me' facilitates this paradox. Scott suggests that this enables transition and transcendence in consciousness – the self-doubting 'Me' recedes as the confident 'I' emerges. Still, there are moments where this process is disrupted and the confident 'I' slips and the self-doubting 'Me' reappears, which Scott illustrates through the notion of stage fright. Scott (2017) makes use of Lyng's (1990) concept of 'edgework' to explain how performers navigate the splitting of the Meadian social self (Mead, 1934) and draws upon different types of performers to demonstrate her argument – from drag queens to actors to musicians as well as two stand-up comedians. Lyng's (1990) conceptualisation

of risk-taking as edgework is used to support Scott's (2017) shy performativity paradox. However, Lyng's (1990) concept could perhaps be used further to make sense of the specific risk-taking stand-up comedians engage in during their on-stage performances.

Lyng's (1990) concept of edgework arises from his seminal paper, which focused on providing a sociological account of the motivations for individuals voluntary engagement in risk-taking activities. Lyng sought to overcome the dominant psychological discourse surrounding risk-taking, which was focussed on personality predispositions and notions of intrinsic motivations. Lyng (1990:857) defines activities that can be identified as edgework as being primarily characterised by an "observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence". It is suggested that the 'edge' is versatile and can vary amongst different activities. However, Lyng (1990:857) acknowledges the following as initial examples "life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, an ordered sense of self and environment versus a disordered sense of self and environment".

Lyng (1990; 2005) proposes that individuals engage in risk-taking activities not only as a way of deriving pleasure but to overcome the structural and institutional constraints and restraints of modernity, to transcend feelings of alienation and over-socialisation and to experience self-actualisation. The examples of edgework presented by Lyng (1990) include high-risk sports such as skydiving and rock climbing but also alcohol abuse and substance misuse. Scott's (2017) application of the concept to a live performance context broadens the horizons of what may constitute edgework. Three pertinent features of Lyng's (1990) edgework are a sense of control over the risk-taking activity, the emergence of unanticipated threats which challenge that sense of control, and the sense of exhilaration or 'buzz' that follows the successful negotiation of the 'edge'. In looking at these aspects of Lyng's (1990) work it is possible to see how they may align with the risk-taking involved in live stand-up comedy performance.

In going on stage, stand-up comedians must believe that they can make an audience laugh and exert control over the potential risk that the audience may not laugh or find them funny. The sense of exhilaration or 'buzz' that follows successful edgework is alluded to in

Scott's (2017) own work where they identify the post-performance 'buzz' or what is sometimes referred to as the performer's 'high'. This is also something likely to apply to the case of stand-up comedians as live performers.

This section has briefly acknowledged the risk-taking involved in live stand-up comedy performance. The work of Scott (2017) has been discussed as a conduit between conceptual models of risk-taking (Lyng, 1990) and the example of live performance. This has highlighted the potential for a more focused consideration of stand-up comedy as a particular form of risk-taking or indeed edgework (Lyng, 1990).

## 2.7 The Stand-Up Comedian as 'Sad Clown'

Stand-up comedians have captured the public imagination and there is much curiosity about who they might be and what their lives are like when they are not on stage (Moon, 2010; Greengross et al, 2012). It could be argued that such interest is in some way attributable to many of the enduring commonly held beliefs and stereotypes associated with stand-up comedians, which have taken on a folklore quality (McBride, 2004). Such stereotypes and commonly held beliefs pivot on the notion of a paradox between their on-stage and off-stage selves with stand-up comedians often being portrayed as somewhat dysfunctional and tragicomic figures. Much has been written in the media about comedians as figures of paradox and dysfunction. The notion of a 'link' between being a stand-up comedian and mental health issues or mental illness either as a prerequisite or after-effect continues to be one of journalistic interest (Clark, 2013; Chortle, 2014; Wax, 2014; Perry, 2014; Cox, 2014). Indeed, the stand-up comedian Robin Ince fronted his own BBC Radio Four documentary in which he set out to investigate whether comedians are as emotionally troubled or disturbed as they are so often believed to be (BBC, 2014; Chortle, 2014).

There are several popular stereotypes and commonly held beliefs exemplified in the form of the sad clown, the troubled comedy genius or the tears of a clown cliché. All of this suggests that while on stage the comedian is an extroverted, entertaining and funny figure who can make an audience laugh, but when not on stage and in front of an audience, they are depressed, anxious and melancholic. This is often aligned to the 'come down' of the

performer's 'high' that Scott (2017) refers to. Double (1997) articulates a scepticism towards such notions and argues them to be myths, suggesting that their perpetuation arises from a sense of romanticism ascribed to the paradox between the on-stage and off-stage self.

*"There's a sad face behind the clown's happy mask… The comedian can coax gales of laughter out of everybody else, but can't find happiness himself. Poor comedian. He has the rare gift of being able to spread laughter to all around, but the gift carries a terrible price: unhappiness. In another version of the same kind of myth, the comic's career starts at school. He is the outsider, picked on or ignored by everybody else. He starts joking to avoid being bullied… What's enticing about the myth of the tragic comedian is the idea that behind the outward show is a reality which is the very opposite".*

*(Double, 1997:254)*

This notion of comedians concealing anguish, anxiety or depression behind their on-stage persona or performance is traced by Stott (2005) to an age-old anecdote involving Joseph Grimaldi (1778-1837). Such narration however is perhaps unreliable as the anecdote has also been attributed to Grock (1880-1959) and Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977).
*"There is a story about a man suffering from depression who goes to see his doctor. After a cursory examination, the physician turns and says, "There is only one cure for you. You must go and see Grimaldi the clown". "Sir" replied his patient, "I am Grimaldi the clown".*

*(Dickens, 1968:13 cited in Stott, 2005:146)*

Established British comedy critic Bruce Dessau (2011) wrote of another anecdote involving Grimaldi further pertaining to this sense of the comedian as a tragicomic figure. Dessau refers to Grimaldi's opening line, "I make you laugh all night, but I'm grim-all-day" (Dessau, 2011:2). This is a neat bit of wordplay that illuminates this supposed paradox between the stand-up comedian's on-stage and off-stage self. Dessau (2011) suggests Grimaldi as being the prototype for the modern notion of the dysfunctional stand-up comedian.

Such notions and commonly held beliefs also align with the ongoing 'creativity and madness' debate. This debate has long sought to explore and establish a connection between the abilities of artistic types with their psyche and susceptibility to mental health issues and mental illness (see Rothenberg, 1994; Jamison, 1993; Ludwig, 1995; Silvia and Kaufman, 2010). In correspondence submitted to the British Journal of Psychiatry in response to a study of jazz musicians, McBride (2004) informally reflects upon the occupational group of stand-up comedians. McBride lists several eminent performers who were well known for their experiences of a similar ilk to those reported by the jazz

musicians - alcohol abuse, substance misuse and mental illness. McBride pondered the attraction to the occupation of stand-up comedy, framing the desire to stand up on stage in front of many people and attempt to make them laugh as something unusual. McBride suggests that there may be an element of determinism and that stand-up comedy attracts particular types of people. It seems that stand-up comedians have captured the attention of psychiatrists, psychologists and psychoanalysts who have all sought to understand their personalities and psyches. The public psychologist Richard Wiseman (2015) considers why this might be.

*"Professional comedians are, if you will excuse the pun, a funny group of people. They have chosen to make their living in a difficult and highly stressful way. They have to walk out on stage, night after night, and make a group of complete strangers laugh out loud. No matter how they feel, or what is happening in their own lives, they have to be funny. In view of this, a small of number of psychologists have been interested in analysing their minds".*

*(Wiseman, 2015:203)*

## 2.8 The Personalities of Stand-Up Comedians

The most prevalent trend in the existing literature is the study of the personalities of stand-up comedians. I would argue that this is influenced by the aforementioned commonly held beliefs and stereotypes associated with performers. One of the first academics to turn their attention towards researching the personalities of comedians was Samuel Janus (1930-2011). Janus conducted two studies on the subject - *The Great Comedians: Personality and Other Factors* (Janus, 1975) and *The Great Comediennes: Personality and Other Factors* (Janus et al, 1978). Janus (1975:169) argued that "it would be reasonable to assume some awareness of the fact that comedians are very anxious and often depressed people". Based on this assertion both studies set out to investigate the relationship between comedians and their apparent anxiety, depression and how this may have contributed to their success in the profession.

Both studies make use of different data collection methods including in-depth interviews, clinical and projective psychological tests regarding intelligence scales, handwriting analysis, early memories, dreams and human figure drawings. All of which are popular techniques aligned to the psychoanalytic approach. In the first study (Janus, 1975) all but four of the

fifty-five comedians involved were male, which is reflective of the male-dominated nature of the stand-up comedy industry. However, Janus sought contrast and comparison, and this led to the second study Janus et al (1978) which largely replicated the first, except it focused entirely on 'comediennes'.

Both studies (Janus et al, 1975; 1978) also had quite specific sampling criteria. The participants had to be full-time and nationally known performers with a minimum of ten years' experience and a salary of at least six figures. It is suggested that this was to ensure representativeness, but no further explanation is put forward. It could be inferred that to be nationally known refers to a level of fame. It could be argued that sampling based on whether participants are famous or not neglects those comedians who may not be household names earning six-figure salaries but are professionals working and performing on the live comedy circuit. Furthermore, there is a distinct lack of detail regarding the recruitment of performers, which poses questions as to how they were discovered and then recruited by the author.

The collective work of Janus et al (1975; 1978) delivers some intriguing findings and conclusions regarding comedians. In the first study, Janus (1975:173-174) found male stand-up comedians to be "brilliant, angry, suspicious, and depressed" as well as being "shy, sensitive, fearful individuals, who fight their fears constantly and who win only for short periods of time, needing repetitively to do battle with the enemy both within and without". In contrast, the second study (Janus et al, 1978:370) found that female stand-up comedians remained just as "vivacious, frenetic, hypomanic and hyperactive" when off stage as they were when on stage. Such findings both affirm and negate some of the tragicomic notions associated with stand-up comedians.

Janus et al (1975; 1978) argue that the comedians developed their sense of humour as a defence and coping mechanism against feelings of anxiety and depression as well as childhood experiences characterised by isolation, deprivation, and difficulties in establishing positive relationships with parents. The authors suggest that such feelings and experiences may have influenced the pathway of comedians into the occupation. Stand-up comedy is

argued to be a means through which they could alleviate their anxieties and fears through channelling them into their on-stage performances (Janus et al, 1975; 1978).

However, it could be argued that the work of Janus et al (1975; 1978) presents findings indicative of their time and the tropes of psychoanalysis. I would argue that both studies are constructed upon what could be considered conjecture as they are positioned entirely on the assumption that comedians are anxious and depressed individuals. Indeed, both studies are emblematic of a tendency to situate the study of performers and their personalities within the frame of the comedian as a tragicomic figure.

The authors also adopt an anecdotal writing style when reporting on the findings and describe what comedians said rather than demonstrating this directly through participant voice. In the few moments where there is an illustration of participant voice, this is brief and reduced to a single line long, which makes it difficult to appreciate not just the authenticity of the findings but the data and context from which the authors base their knowledge claims. Where Janus et al (1975; 1978) left off, Fisher and Fisher (1981) picked up as they directed critique towards the work of Janus et al and the image presented of stand-up comedians as depressed and anxious, as well as the anecdotal nature of the reporting. In *Pretend the World is Funny and Forever*, Fisher and Fisher (1981) also set out to form a psychological profile of comedians, their personalities and the factors underpinning their career in comedy.

Fisher and Fisher (1981) interviewed stand-up comedians, collected biographical materials published about eminent performers and made use of personality questionnaires and psychological tests purportedly designed to reveal unconscious thoughts and feelings. Fisher and Fisher spoke with professional and amateur stand-up comedians to see if there is a difference between the personality of the professional and that of the amateur. In quite the peculiar turn of events, the amateur category did not consist of individuals who had performed at amateur comedy nights but rather included college students and children who were considered to fit the typology of the class clown.

Contrary to the findings reported by Janus et al (1975; 1978), Fisher and Fisher (1981) found there to be little to no evidence of the apparent depressive and anxious tendencies amongst their sample of performers. Instead, Fisher and Fisher argue that comedians appear to be robust and resilient given the occupational pressures and failures experienced and in overcoming deprived childhood experiences to enjoy professional success. Interestingly, Fisher and Fisher articulate their surprise at this finding as they had anticipated quite the opposite based on commonly held beliefs and the claims of previous research (see Janus et al, 1975; 1978). This challenges the assertion of Janus et al (1975; 1978) that comedians are neurotic, depressed and anxious when not on stage. However, Fisher and Fisher (1981) do affirm Janus et al (1975; 1978) view that stand-up comedians use their humour as a defence mechanism and a means through which to distance themselves from others. Fisher and Fisher base this on their experience of interviewing comedians and the difficulties encountered in approaching certain topics due to them retreating into a performance and making use of jokes as an avoidance tactic.

The research of Janus et al (1975; 1978) and Fisher and Fisher (1981) makes use of methods associated with the discipline of psychoanalysis and such methods have been criticised. Greengross et al (2012), argue that Janus et al (1975; 1978) employed projective tests that are low in reliability and validity. Martin and Ford (2018) are also critical of the use of such tests and label the psychoanalytic approach and its methods as archaic and controversial. In many ways, the collective three studies (Janus et al, 1975; 1978; Fisher and Fisher, 1981) are characteristic of classic psychoanalytic tropes focussed on childhood experiences, recurring dreams, and Freudian notions of humour as defence and coping mechanisms. Both Greengross et al (2012) and Martin and Ford (2018) highlight the subjectivity involved in the psychoanalytic approach and this is illustrated in Janus et al (1975; 1978) and Fisher and Fisher (1981) using similar samples but producing contradictory findings.

Greengross and Miller (2009) also set out to examine the personality characteristics of stand-up comedians but to compare them with members of other 'unique' occupational groups and individuals who are not members of such groups. Greengross and Miller recruited a sample of professional and amateur comedians alongside comedy writers and a control group of college students. The comedians, writers and students all completed a

Likert scale survey examining the five main personality traits, which assesses an individual's openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. The comedians were recruited via a local comedy club and while the recruitment of the students is unexplained it may be reasonable to deduce that they are taught by the researchers.

Much like Fisher and Fisher (1981), Greengross and Miller (2009) also challenged the tragicomic image of comedians as depressed, anxious and neurotic. Fisher and Fisher (1981) reported that comedians demonstrated resilience in overcoming adversity to enjoy professional and creative success. Building upon this notion, Greengross and Miller (2009) argue that neuroticism is not complicit with being a stand-up comedian. Rather, to perform stand-up comedy requires an emotional stability and robustness to cope with anxiety and nerves and to be able to maintain control over these emotions during the performance. In their findings, Greengross and Miller found that while comedians appear extroverted when on stage, they were more introverted when not on stage by comparison with non-comedians. This challenges the stereotype of the comedian as some sort of extrovert riddled with neuroses.

The academic infatuation with studying the personalities of stand-up comedians has persisted. Most recently, *Psychotic Traits in Comedians* (Ando et al, 2014) received substantive media attention, perhaps owing to its provocative title. The purpose of this study was to test whether comedians would, like other creative individuals, exhibit a higher level of psychotic characteristics in their personality structure. Comedians were recruited online alongside a control group of actors, thus resembling aspects of Fisher and Fisher's (1981) work. Although previous research had studied the personalities of stand-up comedians it had not addressed psychotic traits, which Ando et al sought to remedy. The stand-up comedians and actors completed the Oxford-Liverpool Inventory of Feelings and Experiences questionnaire, which is designed to measure the predisposition of healthy individuals to psychotic type traits.

As hypothesized, the comedians were argued to resemble other creative individuals. The researchers found performers to have a distinctive personality profile in that they scored

highly on the measurement of introvertive, asocial tendencies and ability to derive pleasure socially and physically (introvertive anhedonia) and the measurement of disposition to unstable mood, behaviour, extroverted and manic-like traits (impulsive nonconformity). Both scales exist in complete contrast to one another, yet stand-up comedians scored highly on both. This led the researchers to describe comedians as having the "personality equivalent of bipolar disorder" and suggest that this is what facilitates their humour production abilities (Ando et al, 2014:344). In making this assertion, Ando et al (2014) namecheck Spike Milligan (1918-2002) and Stephen Fry to labour the point of comedians having the personality equivalent of bipolar disorder, it is public knowledge that both Milligan and Fry had and have bipolar disorder. I would suggest the status of both Milligan and Fry as being 'stand-up comedians' to be contestable, and that this example does little in the way of representing the likely thousands of comedians within the industry who are not eminent names.

Although *Psychotic Traits in Comedians* received national media attention (BBC News, 2014; Campbell, 2014) and makes arguably bold claims about stand-up comedians, it is not without its flaws. An entirely online recruitment process and anonymous completion of the data collection questionnaire makes it difficult to account for representativeness. Indeed, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the authors themselves acknowledge this but provide no further explanation as to the implications for their findings and resultant claims. The work of Ando et al (2014) also poses a question that persists regarding the personality literature, which is how stand-up comedians are defined. The anonymous and online nature of recruitment in this study enables individuals to self-define as a stand-up comedian with no way of measuring or distinguishing between amateur or professional status. Whereas for Janus et al (1975; 1978) it was a six-figure salary, ten years of experience and being nationally known that made someone a comedian.

Much of the personality literature has both appealed to and challenged the commonly held beliefs and stereotypes associated with comedians. While there are studies that have reported a sense of contradiction between what performers are like when on stage and not on stage (Janus, 1975; Greengross and Miller, 2009) there are others that have not (Janus et al, 1978; Fisher and Fisher, 1981). The literature does offer some curious insights into the

personalities of stand-up comedians. However, it also illustrates the back-and-forth nature of the argument as to whether comedians are the tragicomic and dysfunctional figures they are purported to be. Such research has arguably ventured into sensationalist territory as it continues to indulge the sense of romanticism associated with the paradox at the heart of many of these beliefs and stereotypes. I would conclude that this does very little in the way of shedding light on the occupation and what working life is like as a stand-up comedian.

## 2.9 Working as a Stand-Up Comedian

Stand-up comedy forms a particular branch of the entertainment sector (Hesmondhalgh, 2007) and like other types of live entertainment and performing arts, it is part of the wider creative and cultural industries (Hartley et al, 2013; Butler and Stoyanova-Russell, 2018). Indeed, Deveau (2016) argues that working as a stand-up comedian is one of the more distinct forms of creative and cultural work because comedians often talk about their work as part of the performance. They regularly deliver jokes of the '…a funny thing happened to me the other day…' or '…a funny thing happened to me on the way here…' variety as well as refer to working experiences such as 'hell gigs' (Shouse, 2017), or sharing particularly amusing heckles and stories from previous gigs.

Working and performing as a professional stand-up comedian can be understood as involving artistic work. Howard S. Becker was one of the first sociologists to study the working culture of those involved in artistic work. Becker (1951) studied a group of jazz musicians and focused on the conflict that occurs between the artist and the audience. Becker (1951:137) identifies a particular feature of the occupational culture, which is how the jazz musicians referred to non-musicians as being 'square' and having little knowledge or indeed appreciation regarding jazz and musicianship more broadly. This highlights the self-segregation of the artist with a talent that distinguishes them from others, which is perceived as being innate in that one either has 'it' or not.

There is seemingly no formal route or education to becoming a stand-up comedian and so a similar claim concerning Becker's (1951) jazz musicians could equally be applied to comedians. Either one has 'it' and can make an audience laugh or they do not. Nevertheless,

there are comedy courses aplenty operated by comedians, comedy clubs and universities to help the aspiring comedian harness whatever innate potential they may already have. This does however raise some questions regarding whether the stand-up comedian is born or made, which Double (2014) and others have considered.

Hesmondhalgh (2013) acknowledges the prestige and distinction so often ascribed to those engaged in artistic work within the cultural industries and the sense of mysticism that pervades their creativity and resultant production of art. Those engaged in artistic work are the subject of some romanticism. The artist is often viewed as being imbued with some sort of genius-like creative brilliance (Wolff, 1993), which is countered by the Marxist perspective that artistic labour is no different to other kinds of labour or what may be deemed 'normal' labour (Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

Still, working as a comedian is viewed as being distinct from other kinds of 'normal' labour. Double (2015) considers stand-up comedians as existing outside of conventional employment and highlights their work being perceived as an unusual choice of occupation and one which does not constitute a 'proper' job. However, as Butler and Stoyanova-Russell (2018) suggest, it is the very nature of the job existing outside of conventional employment that makes it attractive and appealing. Therefore, stand-up comedians as an occupational group could be conceived of as being 'outsiders' (Becker, 1963).

Stand-up comedians fall into the category of self-employed freelance workers (Edgell, 2012), a group that is particularly prevalent within the creative and cultural industries (Davies and Sigthorsson, 2013). Comedians are self-employed in that they ostensibly work for themselves rather than any single individual or organisation, they undertake and fulfil bookings by performing at gigs for a range of different comedy clubs and promoters. They own the means of production and have autonomy over their work in terms of creative and artistic control over the content and art that they produce, but they are freelance in that they work for a variety of clients (Edgell, 2012). Below, Double (2005:654) refers to the economics of working and subsequently earning a living as a professional stand-up comedian.

*"Stand-up comedians are self-employed as sole traders seeking contracts from venues and broadcasters, often employing agents to help them achieve this. Ultimately, their market value is based on their ability to make an audience laugh, as the venues which contract them are unlikely to offer future bookings if they send the punters home disappointed. As a result, by paying the ticket price, it is ultimately the audience that employs them in a commercial venture which trades laughs for money".*

*(Double, 2005:654)*

This brings attention to where exactly stand-up comedians engage in their 'comic labour' (Deveau, 2016:169). Stebbins (1990) reports on 'the circuit' and 'the road' as being two of the defining features of the industry, one is either performing in the venues on 'the circuit' or travelling and touring on 'the road' (Stebbins, 1990). Regarding the circuit, Stebbins (1990) identifies three separate stages involved in working as a professional comedian – the development stage, the establishment stage and the maintenance stage. Stebbins (1990) aligns the first two stages respectively to amateur and professional status. The amateur passes through the development stage and to the establishment stage as they begin to be offered paid work at gigs, which is enough to allow them to quit their 'day job' and focus on stand-up comedy full-time. Stebbins (1990) acknowledges that the transition from amateur to professional is usually facilitated by a gatekeeper who judges the amateur comedian to be worthy of paid and full-time work. The comedian then enters the maintenance stage where they are earning a respectable living, accruing the best work available and seek to maintain this.

Though the maintenance stage is indicative of the comedian having climbed to the top of the comedy circuit hierarchy, Stebbins (1990) considers the potential for a fourth stage – advancement. The advancement stage refers to television success, fame and subsequent fortune. Typically, comedians start their career by performing on the live comedy club circuit before the opportunity for advancement arises and they are propelled to wider recognition and build such a profile that their live performances come to be hosted in theatres, arenas and stadiums, where they perform in front of a dedicated audience and fanbase. However, most stand-up comedians remain in the maintenance stage (Stebbins, 1990) and are anonymous to a wider audience. Although a professional comedian may well have a successful career working and performing on the live comedy circuit, a sense of precarity can characterise their working life (Deveau, 2016).

Butler and Stoyanova-Russell (2018) found the occupation to be characterised by economic precarity with perennially insecure employment, low wages, short-term contracts, irregular hours of work and underhanded employers. Butler and Stoyanova-Russell also argue that working as a comedian involves 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983). Briefly, the concept of emotional labour arises from the work of sociologist Arlie Hochschild who in *The Managed Heart* (1983) identifies emotional labour as the management of feelings as part of one's employment situation. This may involve inducing or suppressing feelings to fulfil the requirement of a role or produce a particular response in others.

Butler and Stoyanova-Russell's (2018) argument is based on comedians suppressing feelings of frustration and anger towards promoters and projecting an image of positivity about being willing to work for little to no money and when waiting to be paid. Butler and Stoyanova-Russell assert that this kind of emotional labour is important to enable comedians to maintain favourable professional relationships and remain in the 'good books' of the promoters who can provide them with work. In this sense, comedians are exemplifying the 'service with a smile' adage long associated with emotional labour as they 'perform' a display of gratitude for the gigs that they receive, that is despite the overall precarity of their position and the exploitative working practices they encounter from promoters.

Although Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labour has advanced the sociology of emotion and developed it as a field of study, it has provoked debate. The most critical of which arrives courtesy of Bolton (2000; 2005:53; 2009) who suggests that the popularity of the concept and subsequent 'emotional labour bandwagon' has devalued its analytical value. Bolton (2005; 2009) suggests that Hochschild's (1983) concept is oversimplified and reductionist in that it only considers workplace settings where worker behaviour is controlled by a profit motive. This is exemplified in the literature which is generally orientated around service work. According to Bolton (2005; 2009), this limits its potential to be applied to non-commercial contexts. However, there is suggestion that work does not have to be commercially or profit-motivated to constitute emotional labour, rather one's labour only has to be commodified or subject to being emotionally controlled (Brook, 2009). The work of Butler and Stoyanova-Russell (2018) does demonstrate this and illustrates that

emotional labour is still applicable even if it does unfold a little differently in freelance artistic work.

Hochschild's (1983) original work is focussed on case studies of flight attendants and debt collectors. Though Hochschild does present a list of occupational groups whose work involves emotional labour, this lacks a specific analysis of the aspects of those occupations detailed and how the required behaviour constitutes emotional labour (Wharton, 2009). Although this list is extensive it does not explicitly consider performing artists or entertainers. While the work of Butler and Stoyanova-Russell (2018) does remedy this somewhat, they do not consider the wider emotional labour stand-up comedians may be engaged in as part of the on-stage aspects of their working lives.

However, the work of Butler and Stoyanova-Russell (2018) does address the sense of precarity that seems to characterise artistic and creative work more generally (Lloyd, 2010; Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013; Banks et al, 2013). Indeed, precarity appears to be tolerated owing to ideological factors, such as the self-realisation and sense of fulfilment that accompanies embarking on a career that makes use of one's talent, creativity and passion (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Umney and Kretsos, 2015). Based on their ethnographic study of Canadian circus artists, Stephens (2015) argues that the notion of 'artistic freedom' comes to glamourise the precarity that performers experience as part of their working life.

Most artistic workers within the creative and cultural industries are freelancers. The freelance nature of this kind of work creates insecurity and sustains unpredictable fluctuations in income (Davies and Sigthorsson, 2013) owing to the gig-by-gig nature that workers get by on (Gill, 2011). This brings attention to the 'gig economy' as characterised by brief working engagements, project/portfolio work, short-term contracts or freelance work (Morgan and Nelligan, 2018). Instead of receiving a regular fixed income, workers are only paid for the gigs that they undertake (Morgan and Nelligan, 2018). Comedians are part of the 'gig economy' as their working life, quite literally, is orientated around performing at gigs in exchange for a wage.

Other allied performers offer comparable insight into the precarity of the 'gig economy' of artistic work. For example, the up-and-coming gigging jazz musician encounters precarity in trying to 'break through' to the jazz scene and become an established professional (Umney and Kretsos, 2015). Much like comedians (Butler and Stoyanova-Russell, 2018), jazz musicians also tolerate low unpredictable wages and informal arrangements with bookers and promoters (Umney and Kretsos, 2015). They have to 'perform' gratitude for the offer of free gigs under the guise of 'experience' and 'exposure' with the hope of this advancing their transition to professional status and the offer of regular paid work (Woodcock and Graham, 2019). Although the gigging musician may be booked for one gig, this is no guarantee of future work. Similar to the comedians this is dependent on bookers and promoters, and the musician putting in a suitable performance and building a reputation for themself (Woodcock and Graham, 2019).

As self-employed freelancers, comedians occupy a similar position of precarity. They are not afforded a salary or fixed regular income from one comedy club, and they earn their living on a gig-by-gig basis. While comedy may be lucrative, there are only a few nights a week where comedians can go out and work due to the operating hours of the circuit. While one weekend may bring two gigs on a Thursday and Friday and three gigs on a Saturday night, the following weekend may only bring two gigs in total. The precarious position of the circuit comedian is reflected in the pursuit of 'double-ups' whereby the comedians' book in two or three different comedy clubs in a single night to maximise their earning potential. For comedians, and perhaps other allied gigging entertainers, it is only through what Ritzer (1972) describes as 'chance events' that the performer escapes the precarity of freelance artistic work and progresses through the occupational hierarchy. For example – if the comedian is spotted by a comedy scout, whether that is an agent or television producer, subsequent television exposure can lead to them becoming a television comedian (Friedman 2014) and moving away from the economic insecurity of being a jobbing circuit comedian.

At the beginning of this chapter, I highlighted the paucity of research concerning the working lives of stand-up comedians. As Deveau (2016:169) recognises, existing research demonstrates a tendency to largely overlook the working lives or 'comic labour' of stand-up

comedians. While the work of Butler and Stoyanova-Russell (2018) puts the spotlight on some of the off-stage aspects of the occupation, it is Robert Stebbins' (1990) ethnographic study *The Laugh Makers* which is of most relevance to this thesis.

In view of what this thesis is about, Stebbins (1990) study forms what could be considered as the breakthrough predecessor. Amidst research aplenty from the disciplines of psychoanalysis and psychology, it was Stebbins (1990) who was the first to specifically study the occupation and industry of stand-up comedy. Stebbins spent eighteen months on the live comedy scene in Canada studying what it takes to become a comedian. Additionally, Stebbins spent time in comedy clubs by watching the shows and observing the on-stage performances of comedians alongside interviewing amateur and professional performers, comedy club owners, managers, show bookers and agents as well as speaking to comedians after the show.

Stebbins (1990) provides a comprehensive and wide-ranging overview of the stand-up comedy industry in Canada. He begins by charting the history and development of stand-up comedy before going on to focus on the industry itself, looking at what attracts someone to a career in comedy, how they progress from amateur to professional status and how the occupation comes to be defined by the 'the circuit' and 'the road'. Although Stebbins' (1990) study is original and the first to provide valuable insights into the industry and the nature of working as a stand-up comedian, it is not without its limitations.

Stebbins' (1990) research could be considered as limited by both time and place. It resides very much in the live scene in Canada and the fieldwork central to the research was carried out between 1987 and 1988, which is over thirty years ago. Although Stebbins' (1990) research is original in being the first field-based study of live stand-up comedy and comedians, I would argue that it is characteristic of its time. It is apparent from the brief history and contemporary picture of live stand-up comedy that I presented at the beginning of this chapter that the industry has changed significantly since Stebbins' depiction.

Though the scope of *The Laugh Makers* is wide-ranging, to say the least, it could be argued that this is a shortcoming. Stebbins' (1990) reporting of the research is largely descriptive,

and while the research is not explicitly branded as an ethnography, it does lack the richness, thick description and in-depth insight so well associated with the ethnographic approach. The relative absence of verbatim and substantive quotations to illustrate what stand-up comedians shared also contributes to this. As Morris (1991:1296-1297) argues, the lack of in-depth insight and sociological analysis is a significant limitation of the work; they describe the monograph as providing "…a more or less journalistic overview of the world of stand-up comedy".

Much of Stebbins' (1990) time in the field appears to have been spent conducting interviews and watching live stand-up comedy. Stebbins does put forward reasonable insight into what happens off-stage, but this is gathered through interviews. The study does not move beyond the frontstage and neglects the backstage 'regions' of the occupation (Goffman, 1959). This coupled with most of the data seemingly gathered from interviews with comedians and others who work in the business means that the potentially unique insights that could have been generated by a closer and more intimate ethnographic engagement are overlooked. It is based upon this assortment of limitations that the opportunity arrives for the present research to be done.

## 2.10 Chapter Conclusion and Introducing the Research Questions

This chapter has provided a review of the existing literature related to stand-up comedy and comedians. It began with a brief overview of the humour studies literature, followed by a discussion of the history and development of stand-up comedy and consideration as to defining the role of the comedian. This chapter then progressed through several thematic areas regarding existing research on stand-up comedians and some of the appropriate sociological literature.

The prevailing trend within existing empirical work is the study of the personalities of comedians. In this chapter, I have argued that while such studies produce thought-provoking insights, they are often predicated on the popular assumption that the personalities of comedians are somewhat different from the rest of the general population. I have also highlighted the tendency of such work to indulge some of the commonly held

beliefs and stereotypes associated with performers, perpetuating the age-old notion of comedians as tragicomic figures. Other academic work has tended to focus upon the on-stage dimensions of stand-up comedy, for example, the performer-audience relationship as essential to the function of the form, without really interrogating the dynamic.

While stand-up comedians are producers of humour, the humour studies literature is limited regarding the interests of this thesis. As a multidisciplinary field within the social sciences and humanities, the humour studies literature has tackled the psychology and linguistics of humour as well as developed a body of humour theories to explain the mechanics of jokes. The developing sociology of humour has also revealed insights about the place and function of humour within everyday social interaction and society more broadly. However, the focus of humour research, much like the psychological orthodoxy within the personality literature, does not explore or explain the work and culture of being a stand-up comedian.

Little research has addressed the off-stage dimensions of working as a stand-up comedian, though Butler and Stoyanova-Russell's (2018) study of the economic precarity involved in the occupation is a welcome addition. Stebbins' (1990) study is somewhat dated and limited in terms of its deployment of the ethnographic approach and theoretically due to the absence of sociological analysis. Instead, Stebbins provides a largely descriptive if not journalistic overview of the occupation. Collectively, the existing research only goes some way to illuminating what it is like to work and perform on the live comedy club circuit. Therefore, this thesis aims to explore the working lives and experiences of stand-up comedians on the UK live stand-up comedy club circuit and three emergent research questions have been developed from this chapter and its review of the existing literature:

1. What is the working culture of stand-up comedians?
2. What is it like to work as a stand-up comedian?
3. What is the nature of the relationship between stand-up comedians and their audiences?

# Chapter 3: Methods

## 3.1 Introduction

Between January and August 2017, I spent every Thursday, Friday and Saturday night conducting fieldwork on the live comedy circuit. In this chapter, I explain how I gained access to the comedy club circuit before discussing my ethnographic fieldwork and use of participant observation, 'going-along' (Kusenbach, 2003) and semi-structured interviewing as data collection methods. I then provide an account of the analysis of the data and discuss the ethical considerations underpinning this research.

## 3.2 Introducing Ethnography

*"Ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry".*

*(Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:3)*

Ethnography is rooted historically within the work of social and cultural anthropology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). The ethnographer sought to develop an understanding of 'other' societies deemed to be very different from their own. This was usually based on them being non-western and thus considered as being 'exotic' or 'traditional' (Coffey, 2018). Typically, the ethnographer lived alongside those they studied and immersed themselves in the everyday happenings and practices of the group and its culture by observing, participating and interacting with its people to examine their rituals, routines and everyday way of life (Scott, 2009).

The Chicago School is recognised for developing ethnography from its anthropological beginnings and bringing it to wider methodological attention within the social sciences (O'Reilly, 2009). The Chicago School of the early twentieth century is well-known for using ethnographic research conducted in Chicago to theorise about social life in the city (Coffey, 2018). Indeed, it was at The Chicago School that Robert E. Park, who championed first-hand and immersive engagement in studying a place and its people, famously and allegedly

instructed his students to "…go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research" (Bulmer, 1984:97).

Following the ethnographer immersing themselves within a particular community and engaging with its people, they would then produce a written descriptive account detailing their findings. This brings attention to the double meaning of ethnography. Whilst ethnography refers to a particular way of conducting social research, it also refers to the result of the research (Wolcott, 2005; Bryman, 2015) and this is captured in the tracing of ethnography as a term. Ethnography has emerged from both 'ethno' which refers to people and 'graphy' which refers to the act of writing (Coffey, 2018), as well as being identified as the science of 'ethnos' which is to study people or culture (Sarantakos, 2013). Ethnography is about representing the way of life of a group of people and as Scott (2009) succinctly points out, ethnography can be understood as literally depicting people.

There are some misperceptions concerning ethnography and what credibly constitutes an ethnographic study. Such terms as ethnography, fieldwork, case study, qualitative research and participant observation have all been used interchangeably and as though they represent the same thing, which they do not (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Indeed, Coffey (2018) recognises that qualitative research and ethnography are often used interchangeably. Atkinson (2015) argues that there is an appropriation of ethnography and highlights the instance of research being labelled 'ethnographic' despite a complete absence of fieldwork or sustained in-situ engagement within a given social setting. Although ethnographers do draw upon a range of different data collection methods to best explore social phenomena (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), a period of first-hand, intensive and sustained engagement involving direct participation and observation within a particular field is integral to the ethnographic approach (Atkinson, 2015).

The question of how much time one should spend in the field pervades ethnographic debate. There is some consensus that ethnography is not a short-term or quick-fix solution to exploring a social problem or phenomenon. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) highlight the extended period of time feature that is so well associated with fieldwork and it is clear that ethnography is not a "grab-it-and-run" method (Gobo and Molle, 2017:14) or a "quick

dip" into a setting using surveys and interviews (Cunliffe, 2010:227-228). The time spent in the field can range from a truly long-term engagement lasting several years to more of a short-term engagement lasting several weeks (Coffey, 2018). It has been argued that short-term ethnographies can also provide valuable insight through intense and brief forays into the field (Pink and Morgan, 2013). As Coffey (2018) suggests, there is a need to consider the quality and not the quantity of one's engagement with the field. There is some sense that a balance between the two may best enable the ethnographer to paint the fullest picture of the field. The length of time conducting fieldwork in this research was influenced by several factors, which I discuss further in this chapter. However, I do consider my eight months of fieldwork to pay heed to spending not just quality time in the field but constitute an extended period of engagement.

Ethnographic fieldwork can be conducted in an array of spaces and places from the exotic to the urban and the mundane to the mysterious. Potential fieldwork settings can range from factory floors to farms and funeral parlours (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Such stand-out historical examples as neighbourhoods in the North End of Boston in Massachusetts (Whyte, 1943/1981), psychiatric hospitals (Goffman, 1961), Las Vegas casinos (Goffman, 1967), public toilets (Humphreys, 1970) and a Chicago cafeteria (Duneier, 1992) come to mind. More recent examples of interest include pub and club doors (Calvey, 2000; Calvey, 2017), a boxing gym in Chicago's South Side (Wacquant, 2004), a disadvantaged Philadelphia neighbourhood (Goffman, 2015) and lap-dancing clubs (Colosi, 2017).

Ethnography is a distinctive way of approaching social research and part of what makes it unique is the commitment of the ethnographer to understanding another way of life from the point of view of those who live and experience it. This brings attention to the notion of immersion and the significance of the ethnographer immersing themselves within a particular social milieu to become part of and share in the everyday lives and realities of other people. It is the centrality of participant observation as the primary data collection method and the ethnographer's direct participation within a particular setting and first-hand engagement with its people that is considered to be the added value of ethnography (Gobo and Marciniak, 2016:113). It is the active, involved and engaged position of the ethnographer in the field, what Van Maanen (2011:133) describes as the very fact of the

researcher being there, that marks out ethnography as distinctive. Ethnography is born of some commitment to naturalism. This manifests in the ethnographer seeking to study a social phenomenon in its natural setting and context, rather than recreate it in contrived or controlled laboratory-like conditions.

However, ethnography has not escaped criticism. One long-standing critique of the ethnographic approach is that it is very often accused of simply being journalism in disguise (Brewer, 2000), but this is a crude misrepresentation of ethnography. Much of the criticism directed towards ethnography stems from the critique of qualitative research more broadly and has raised issues such as subjectivity, authenticity, representation, generalisation and validity. Criticism of ethnography is often focused on the perceived subjectivity of the ethnographer and their representation of the field being influenced by their own inclinations and distortions. However, the ethnographer can counter such criticism and take steps to ensure validity in their work (Wolcott, 1990). This brings attention to the need for researcher reflexivity, which I discuss later in this thesis.

## 3.3 Researching Stand-Up Comedians Ethnographically

Aside from Robert Stebbins' (1990) study of amateur and professional stand-up comedians on the live comedy scene in Canada, little to no research has set out to study the occupation and working lives of stand-up comedians using an ethnographic approach. Although Stebbins (1990) deployed an ethnographic approach, I would argue that his study lacks the intimacy and immersion that is characteristic of ethnography. Though Stebbins attended live stand-up comedy shows and conducted participant observation, this was limited to watching the on-stage performances of comedians. Indeed, interviewing appeared to dominate the study as Stebbins interviewed comedians and others who worked in the business of stand-up comedy. Although Stebbins did converse with comedians after-hours, there is a neglect of the backstage regions of the occupation and a dependency upon interviews to acquire insights from behind the curtain.

In this research, I seek to overcome such limitations and advance ethnography as an appropriate way through which to explore the working lives of stand-up comedians. This

research takes some inspiration from Rutter's (1997) advocacy for a shift towards in-situ observation of stand-up comedians following his study of comedy from a humour research perspective. This research also takes further ethnographic inspiration from Friedman's (2014) study of comedy scouts seeking out new talent at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and his use of the 'go-along' approach (Kusenbach, 2003) as part of this.

## 3.4 Finding the Field

The comedy circuit encompasses the comedy clubs and comedy nights where live stand-up comedy is staged and stand-up comedians perform. Although I travelled as far as the West Midlands, the majority of fieldwork took place in the major cities of the North West, which as it happens is a very well-populated part of the comedy circuit in the United Kingdom. The comedy clubs and comedy nights that I visited were staged in an assortment of venues with different audience capacities, theatrical facilities and varying degrees of prestige bestowed upon them by performers.

Such venues ranged from well-established and purpose-built comedy clubs open for business three or four nights a week, to basements and backrooms of pubs, bars and restaurants that hosted a weekend comedy club or comedy night. I visited other venues such as leisure centres and village halls that held a monthly comedy night and I also found myself at a working men's social club that doubled up as a fully-fledged boxing gym. On one occasion I visited a theatre where one participant was supporting a famous act on their national live tour.

Participants were enthusiastic about particular aspects of their working lives which they wanted me to experience first-hand and the flexibility of ethnography accommodated this. One such aspect was the desire of several participants to show me how the time spent on stage 'working' was eclipsed by the time spent behind the wheel driving to gigs. This was labelled by the participants as the part of the job that audiences, onlookers and outsiders typically do not see. Thus, a significant part of my time during fieldwork was spent in a 'go-along' capacity as I occupied the passenger seat in the comedians' cars, travelling to, from

and between their gigs. The passenger seat of the many Volvos, Skodas and Mercedes I travelled in became fieldwork settings in their own right.

As well as the aforementioned wayfaring, I also spent time in and around the venues of the gigs I attended with participants. The time I spent amongst the audience watching a participant's on-stage performance was quite minimal compared to the time I spent sitting in green rooms, dressing rooms or improvised backstage areas. It was in these areas that I became privy to what could customarily be referred to in an ethnographic sense as 'locker room talk'.

## 3.5 Accessing and Recruiting Stand-Up Comedians

One of my foremost concerns ahead of this research was how I was going to acquire access not just to professional stand-up comedians but the places and potential goings-on that I was interested in. I knew that purchasing a ticket and taking a seat in a comedy club would not have sufficed in answering the research questions underpinning this study. This would also not have offered the degree of intimacy of observation necessary for me to best explore the working lives of stand-up comedians in the manner I aspired to.

I had perceived comedians to be something of a difficult-to-access group. As well as not knowing any comedians, there were also several other reasons underpinning this initial perception. Aside from the work of Stebbins (1990), there is little to no contribution in the existing literature from researchers of an ethnographic persuasion and his work did little to alleviate my concerns, given that the reported fieldwork illustrated a distance between Stebbins and the comedians.

Much of the existing literature on stand-up comedians is overwhelmingly represented by such data collection methods as interviews, surveys and questionnaires. One such study, Greengross and Miller (2009) did take time to consider how comedians may be difficult to access, acknowledging that they spend a significant amount of their time on tour, away from home and travelling from gig to gig, suggesting that they may be somewhat tricky to pin down. Indeed, during fieldwork, I did encounter some of the issues that Greengross and

Miller (2009) mention, particularly around the arranging of interviews, which I discuss later in this chapter.

I did ponder as to whether the possibility of stand-up comedians being a potentially difficult to access group was reflected in this lack of ethnographic interest in stand-up comedians. Long after the conclusion of my fieldwork, I read Calvey's (2019) reflection on his own 'lost ethnography' (Smith and Delamont, 2019) of offensiveness and censorship in live stand-up comedy where he also alluded to some of the challenges encountered in accessing stand-up comedians. Despite these potential challenges to acquiring access, I needed to recruit individuals fully embedded within the phenomenon (Sarantakos, 2013) to capture that insider's perspective so well associated with ethnography.

I adopted a purposive sampling approach to the recruitment of participants. Purposive sampling is an approach that posits recruiting participants based on them sharing a particular characteristic or feature relevant to answering the research questions (Silverman, 2009). In this research, all participants needed to be professional stand-up comedians working on the comedy circuit. Participants were recruited as fieldwork unfolded as is usual in ethnographic research (O'Reilly, 2009) and the gaining of access was subject to ongoing negotiation and renegotiation. Even after weeks spent in the field with different comedians, access continued to be negotiated every time I set foot into the live comedy scene as I recruited new participants and revisited existing ones.

I defined stand-up comedians based on professionalisation, as individuals who are booked and paid to appear at comedy clubs and comedy nights and do so on a full-time basis as their occupation. As Smith (2018) notes, the professionalisation of stand-up comedy involves the earning of a salary through working on the comedy circuit and having representation through an agency or manager. It is worth addressing my differentiation between amateur and professional here. Recruiting participants based on professionalisation could be considered as a crude distinction to draw, but I would argue that it is one worth making. This is because in much of the existing empirical literature, the presence of amateur stand-up comedians looms large yet there is little reflection as to what constitutes amateur and professional status. For example, there may be somebody who

undertakes a few gigs here and there to make some extra money, has performed at one or two open-mic competitions or has undertaken a handful of unpaid open spots at comedy clubs. I argue that this is a useful distinction because I wanted to capture stand-up comedians as an occupational group. This study is firmly rooted in the comedy circuit as a dimension of the professionalisation of the occupation; it is about those who are living a working life as a stand-up comedian.

In beginning participant recruitment, I quickly learnt that there are many highly ranked and rated comedy clubs within the industry. It was the advertised billings of stand-up comedians' forthcoming appearances at such clubs that assisted me in assessing the appropriateness of individual performers as prospective participants to approach regarding an invitation to be involved in the study. I adopted an approach that was, in hindsight, similar to that used by Butler and Stoyanova-Russell (2018) who made use of contacting stand-up comedians directly via their websites.

I compiled a list of all of the comedy clubs and comedy nights operating within the North West, which spanned major cities and several local towns. The process of compiling this information was assisted by knowledge I already had as a regular attendee and audience member at live stand-up comedy events. The majority of comedy clubs and comedy nights list their future shows online months in advance as well as detailing the performers who will be appearing. Additionally, both the entertainment listings website Ents24 and the UK comedy guide website Chortle proved to be valuable resources in locating local comedy clubs and comedy nights.

I consulted the forthcoming line-ups at each comedy club and comedy night to find out which stand-up comedians would be performing over the coming weeks. I would then set about tracking down the contact details of performers soon to be in the area and making initial contact, promoting the study and inviting them to consider participation. Contact was established through three mediums – websites, email addresses or a social media page in the instances where a stand-up comedian did not have a website or publicly available email address. In all of these initial correspondences, I attached the participant information sheet (see appendix one) which explained the study and answered any likely arising questions.

Much of the discussion around gaining access in ethnographic research addresses the importance of gatekeepers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2009; Gobo and Molle, 2017), that is those who may provide or guard access to a given setting and can either facilitate or reject the ambitions of the ethnographer. At the very beginning of this project, I had initially expected to contact comedy agents, comedy orientated websites and comedy clubs. I came to learn early on that most stand-up comedians working on the circuit handle their affairs and are, in effect, their own gatekeepers. Those stand-up comedians I met and spent time with who are represented by high-profile industry agencies still managed their diaries and day to day lives.

Once contact was successfully established, I then exchanged correspondence with each stand-up comedian and this typically resulted in a date being fixed for me to 'go-along'. On a handful of occasions, this involved talking on the telephone or meeting for coffee and conversing further about the research before the comedian agreed to be involved. Some emails promoting the study unsurprisingly went unanswered. Interestingly, two stand-up comedians who did not reply to my initial communication were later recruited after I happened to meet them in person at other gigs. This demonstrates how spending time in the field in itself can prove to be fruitful and lead to the recruitment of participants via snowballing.

I had initially considered the potential for snowballing as a way of recruiting participants. Snowball sampling is common in ethnographic research and typically refers to the recruitment of a participant(s) through recommendation by another participant (Bryman, 2012). Snowballing has long been viewed as a way of recruiting participants when researching hard-to-reach populations or difficult-to-access groups (May, 2011), which I had perceived stand-up comedians to be. Famous early examples of snowballing being William Foote Whyte's (1943/1981) *Street Corner Society* and Howard Becker's (1963) *Outsiders*, which highlights how snowballing is perhaps more commonly associated with studying 'deviant' subcultures.

Whilst I was with a participant who would be considered as the host of the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), that is the stand-up comedian who I was observing on

that particular night, I would meet other stand-up comedians. It is well documented that being introduced by a member of the community provides the ethnographer with a ticket of sorts (Fetterman, 1998). This was a very standard occurrence as at any given live comedy gig, there were usually at least three or four other stand-up comedians performing on the bill. Opportunities for snowballing typically unfolded in one of the following three ways.

Firstly, I was regularly asked by the other stand-up comedians present in the settings, what I was doing, what my work was about and why I was following the participant in question around. In answering such questions, interactions would evolve into what would be considered as conversations with a purpose (Burgess, 1984) and some participants were recruited from this kind of scenario. Some stand-up comedians expressed an interest in assisting with the research and then provided me with their contact details, inviting me to get in touch with them. Whereas others invited me along to follow them on one night the following week, actively pencilling in the date of a gig and planning where to meet me or pick me up.

Secondly, several participants suggested other stand-up comedians who they believed would be willing to take part in the research or would be interesting for me to spend time with. In doing so, the hosting stand-up comedian passed on my details and acted as an intermediary, leading me to benefit from what Fetterman (1998) describes as a ‘halo’ effect.

Thirdly, during fieldwork, I did bump into stand-up comedians who had not replied to my initial contact. These interactions were somewhat awkward, with the hosting comedian introducing me, explaining the reason for my presence and the subsequent penny dropping. Two stand-up comedians took the discovery as to who I was in good humour and were later recruited as participants. It was interesting as a researcher to hear of the many and often untold reasons for prospective participants shunning, implicitly or explicitly, involvement in academic research. One of the aforementioned stand-up comedians had previously assisted some university students with a project and found the experience to be insufferable and so decided to abstain from assisting student projects. Seven participants were recruited via snowballing through one of the three ways described above.

### 3.6 The Diversity of the Sample

Since the alternative comedy movement of the nineteen-eighties, the UK stand-up comedy industry has diversified and there are now more female, LGBTQ+, disabled and ethnically diverse performers taking to the stage. Hence the stage of the comedy club has emerged as a site of resistance with regard to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and class. As Lockyer (2015) eloquently puts it – the targets of comedy have started to advance towards becoming the makers of comedy.

Those from already oppressed and marginalised groups within society were typically 'othered' in 'traditional' stand-up comedy (Pickering and Lockyer, 2008) but have now started to occupy positions as stand-up comedians. This has facilitated social critique through comic material that tackles the unequal power structures within society, one example being material that is actively anti-racist (Weaver, 2010; DeCamp, 2016). As Krefting (2014) argues, through their individual lived experience and worldview, stand-up comedians can unmask the inequalities in society and challenge that which has become normalised as the status quo. Nevertheless, there is much more progress to be made in terms of diversity and representation within the industry. Indeed, Smith (2018) highlights the enduring hegemony in stand-up comedy with most performers being white, male and middle class.

There is developing literature concerning race and ethnic discourses within stand-up comedy (Weaver, 2010; Green and Linders, 2016; Perez, 2016; DeCamp, 2016). There is also emergent literature on the prevalence of racial inequality in the comedy industry. For example, Perez (2017) presents a striking analysis highlighting the reproduction of racial inequality in the awarding of comedy prizes. Additionally, Jeffries (2017) argues that the comedy business can be limiting, if not inaccessible, for those who are female and of Black and Asian ethnicities. Jeffries (2017) argues that industry gatekeepers (bookers, promoters, managers) sustain existing inequality through only promoting performers they can relate to socially and culturally. Despite the growing literature, the race and ethnic dynamics of working stand-up comedians on the UK comedy circuit remain a neglected academic territory. Interest in a disproportion between performers in terms of race and ethnicity and

the prevalence of racial inequality in the comedy industry appears to remain at a journalistic level (Logan, 2015; Bakare, 2020).

There is also a longstanding gender disparity in stand-up comedy and this is reflected in the distinct lack of female performers compared with male performers (Lockyer, 2011; Tomsett, 2018). Smith (2018) and Tomsett (2018) offer figures that are useful in highlighting this. Smith (2018) identifies that of one-hundred and ninety-six stand-up comedians who appeared as guest interviewees on the well-established and popular The Comedian's Comedian Podcast between 2012 and 2017, one-hundred and fifty-nine were male, whereas only thirty-nine were female. It is also worth noting that when it came to ethnicity, only sixteen of those males and two of the females were of Black and Asian ethnicities. Additionally, Tomsett (2018) points out that since the inception of the Edinburgh Festival Comedy Awards in 1981 and until 2017, only sixteen nominations were attributable to a solo female performer, and three of those were for the same performer, Josie Long. It is worth noting here that none of those female nominees were of Black and Asian ethnicity.

The enduring male domination of the industry is also reflected in the samples of previous research. The work of Janus (1975; 1978) is a particularly illuminating example in this regard. In their first study of stand-up comedians (Janus, 1975) fifty-five performers were interviewed and only four of those were women. Such was the degree of disproportion, Janus et al (1978) repeated the original study, this time focussing only on female performers and even then, they only managed to interview fourteen of them. This pattern repeats itself throughout much of the literature – for example, forty-eight male comedians and nine female (Stebbins, 1990), fifty-five male comedians and nine female (Butler and Stoyanova-Russell, 2018). This highlights that little appears to have changed and that male performers continue to dominate the profession.

The underpinning reasons for a lack of female performers in the industry continues to be a pertinent question for researchers and whether this is because of personal choice or sexism within the industry or even audience tastes (Lockyer, 2011; Colleary, 2015; Tomsett, 2018). There is some sense that stand-up comedy is a 'masculine' space and that to be successful as a female performer, they must adopt a 'masculine' persona and suppress their own

feminine identity by avoiding talking about female issues to appeal to an audience (Lockyer, 2011; Limon, 2000; Krefting, 2014). Although some of the most eminent female comedians have done the very opposite of this, for example, Jo Brand, Sarah Silverman, Amy Schumer and Luisa Omielan. In some sense, 'doing femininity' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) clashes with stand-up comedy as a hyper-masculine space. This highlights that segregation by sex (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2015) is still apparent within stand-up comedy as one domain within the creative and cultural industries.

This alludes to deep-rooted sexism amongst comedy audiences and within the industry – with women being defined, unlike their male counterparts, based on their gender rather than their abilities as a performer, the now-archaic term 'comedienne' being one early example of this. This is perhaps intertwined with the enduring cultural prejudice rendering women as being somehow inherently unfunny or not as funny as men, with the basic capabilities of women to even perform stand-up comedy being questioned (Lockyer, 2011; Moon, 2012; Tomsett, 2017). It is worth acknowledging the criticism that has unfolded in recent years on the comedy circuit regarding the persistence of 'all-male bills' at comedy clubs, where not a single female performer appears in the line-up. Journalistic attention has also been drawn to the instance of female stand-up comedians being removed from a bill that already has a female performer on it (Chortle, 2019; 2020). Such criticism has also permeated the debate about representation on television. Television comedy panel shows have been challenged over a lack of diversity (Addley, 2016; Moore, 2020) and criticised for having overwhelmingly male line-ups of stand-up comedians appearing, and where female performers are represented, this could be considered 'tokenism'.

The notion of classism in the industry has also received recent academic attention as Fox (2017; 2018) refers to the 'northerness effect'. This being a form of socio-cultural bias underpinned by both a gendered and classed stigmatisation of northern working-class performers that sees them 'othered' from their fellow stand-up comedians. Fox traces this to the stereotype of the 'northern comic' performing in the working men's social clubs and suggests that this haunts contemporary northern working-class comedians and limits their career opportunities. This socio-cultural bias is detrimental to diversity and does little to ensure fair representation within the comedy industry and the heterogeneity of comic

voices. A lack of working-class performers leads to the underrepresentation and perhaps the misrepresentation of the working-class voice and lived experience.

It is worth discussing how the aforementioned dynamics are reflected in this research sample. While the only criteria used were that participants are professional, full-time stand-up comedians working, performing and making their living on the UK live comedy circuit, I aspired to recruit a diverse sample of participants. However, such aspiration was limited by recruitment within an occupational group, which as I have already highlighted is not all that diverse. This was also impacted upon more broadly by the success or lack thereof in recruiting participants who agreed to be involved in the study.

On the comedy circuit, I was very much in the majority as a male. Looking back over my fieldnotes, I am taken aback by the distinct lack of female performers present at the gigs and comedy clubs I attended during fieldwork. In eight months of fieldwork, there were only ten gigs I attended at which a female stand-up comedian featured on the line-up of performers. At all but two of those gigs there was only one female stand-up comedian and this was amongst a line-up of three male performers. At five of those gigs, the female performer appearing was one of the recruited research participants. It says much about my identity as a male researcher that despite being mindful of a gender disparity amongst stand-up comedians, entering green rooms and backstage spaces where there were usually only ever male comedians present was not something that always immediately struck me but rather it appeared to be very much the norm.

I recruited nineteen full-time and professional stand-up comedians who were all working, performing and earning their living on the comedy circuit. Only three of those participants were female, the remaining sixteen being male. This is not to say that I did not pursue the recruitment of more female participants. On the contrary, I was in correspondence with a further five female comedians about prospective participation in the research, but this did not come to fruition, which is disappointing but thought-provoking. There is every possibility that my status as a male stranger shaped these encounters and interactions. On one occasion, a female participant initially requested to meet me in person, possibly to assess my character before agreeing to participate in the research and allow me to follow her

around during a night gigging. On another occasion, a female participant waited until they had already met me at a previous gig before they were happy to let me join them on the road and in their car as they travelled between gigs. This was very different to my interactions with male participants who just simply instructed me to meet them at a train station, outside a comedy club or offered to collect me in their car.

Two of the participants were of Black and Asian ethnicity, the remaining seventeen being white. Seven participants were from the North of England while eight were from the South of England, one was from North Wales, one from Northern Ireland, one from the Republic of Ireland and another from outside of Europe. I was not privy to the sexuality and disability characteristics of the participating stand-up comedians I recruited.

I contacted many stand-up comedians promoting and inviting participation in the research. I also met many stand-up comedians and having discussed potential participation, I then followed up such discussions with a more formal invitation. Many of these communications did not elicit a reply and others led to an initial correspondence, which then broke down. As well as the dependency on snowballing to recruit participants, there was also an aspect of convenience and opportunism to the recruitment process. Indeed, snowballing did not remedy the gender disparity within my sample as I was mostly meeting male comedians on my travels on the circuit, so snowballing proved to be unproductive in this sense. This has resulted in a sample that, although reflective of the wider comedy circuit, is not all that diverse and which does mirror previous research.

## 3.7 Observing and 'Going-Along' with Stand-Up Comedians

Participant observation is the main data collection method associated with ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Indeed, as an approach to social research, ethnography emerges from the act of direct and first-hand observation. Ethnographers argue that the most effective way to begin to understand the way of life of others is through direct observation in the natural context (O'Reilly, 2009). Participant observation enables the ethnographer to step into and share in the everyday lives and realities of others and directly observe, engage and participate in their experiences, activities and actions (Spradley, 1980).

Being able to directly observe these actions, behaviours and interactions transcends the limitations of what can be captured via such data collection methods as interviews, questionnaires and surveys. Through adopting an ethnographic approach, these things can reveal themselves in context. In ethnography, the researcher is an engaged and immersed research instrument actively involved in the data collection process. This enables the ethnographer to work towards achieving an understanding of what a way of life of others is like in all of its uniqueness, nuance, messiness and complexity. Though there is mileage in the argument that people behave differently when they know that they are being observed (Marsh et al, 2009), there is also the counter-argument that in good time, people's sense that they are being observed recedes and they revert to their usual behaviours (Fetterman, 1998).

I conducted this ethnography from a 'traditional' standpoint involving old-fashioned fieldwork. I sought to become a part of the comedy circuit, to see and experience it, to get to know and immerse myself within it. I committed myself to an extended period of engagement with the environment through fieldwork, participant observation, 'going-along' and the subsequent writing-up of fieldnotes. The writing-up of fieldnotes was also the preliminary first step towards the analysis of the data.

In 1974, as part of a panel event at one of the meetings of The Pacific Sociological Association, the late Erving Goffman (1922-1982) delivered a talk on the subject of fieldwork. Goffman was reluctant to be taped and requested that people resist recording him but despite such a request, some bootleg recordings were made by enthusiastic attendees. Lyn H. Lofland later came to transcribe one particular recording and with the agreement of Goffman's widow, the sociolinguist Gillian Sankoff, permission was granted for Lofland's transcription of the talk to be published and made available in the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, it was entitled *On Field Work* (1989).

In *On Field Work* (1989), Goffman reflects on participant observation and in doing so beautifully articulates not just the uniqueness of the method but the embodiment of the ethnographer within the lives of others and the commitment that this requires. I quote a particular and favourite extract below, which captures the very approach that I set out to

adopt during my participant observation. I wanted to get as close as possible to the work situation of professional stand-up comedians on the live comedy circuit, to be present in their circumstances and happenings, to share in their situations, their successes and defeats and to come to understand their frustrations and satisfactions. Below, Goffman depicts the embodiment demanded of the ethnographer during participant observation.

*"…by subjecting yourself, your own body, your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation, or whatever. So that you are close to them while they are responding to what life does to them. I feel that the way this is done is to not, of course, just listen to what they talk about, but to pick up on their minor grunts and groans as they respond to their situation. When you do that, it seems to me the standard technique is to try to subject yourself, hopefully, to their life circumstances, which means that although, in fact, you can leave at any time, you act as if you can't, and you try to accept all of the desirable and undesirable things that are a feature of their life".*

*(Goffman, 1989:125-126)*

I did observe the on-stage performances of stand-up comedians and the build-up to and after-events of those performances, but this was not limited to the frontstage regions (Goffman, 1959). Rather my ethnographic emphasis was on the backstage regions of the occupation (Goffman, 1959). I aspired to explore beyond the on-stage performance of stand-up comedians and orientate my ethnographic gaze backstage, and so I shadowed and observed comedians beyond the twenty minutes they spend performing on stage.

In *Everyday Arias,* Atkinson (2006) writes about the exploration of backstage regions in theatrical settings, arguing that the literal backstage forms and functions as a working environment as much as what happens on the stage in front of the audience. In researching the Welsh National Opera, Atkinson's fieldwork led him to observe the unloading of scenery from lorries, theatrical fit-outs and all manner of production rehearsal stages, in addition to the on-stage performances of the various staged operas. Like Atkinson, I too aspired to peek beyond the curtain and revelled in being able, in my guise as an ethnographer, to journey across the boundary between the frontstage and the backstage and enter those special and sacred spaces which are not normally accessible to the audience.

To look beyond the on-stage performances of stand-up comedians and undertake observation in backstage areas and spaces, I adopted a 'go-along' approach (Kusenbach, 2003). Kusenbach (2003) defines the 'go-along' approach as involving the ethnographer accompanying participants on their natural outings and excursions and in doing so, watching, listening and asking questions along the way to explore the practices and experiences of participants as they happen. The ethnographer journeys with the participant through their physical and social environment whether through 'walk-along' or 'ride-along' (Kusenbach, 2003:464).

The approach of the 'go-along' could be considered not that different to the purposeful 'hanging out' and 'hanging around' with participants in their given social milieu, which is a longstanding staple of ethnographic work. However, Kusenbach (2003) acknowledges this and argues that what makes the 'go-along' approach distinctive is that it is not focussed on studying of individuals' lives within one or two places. Rather it is about 'moving' with participants through their multiple environments to capture the meaning of other places that are also prominent. In the spirit of the 'go-along' approach, I travelled with stand-up comedians to, from and between their gigs, regularly taking in two or three gigs in a single night of fieldwork, usually on wheels but occasionally on foot. As a happy medium between participant observation and interviewing, my adoption of the 'go-along' enabled me to observe some of the occupational practices of stand-up comedians in-situ and ask questions along the way, capturing post-performance reflections and confessionals and pre-performance routines and rituals. I was able to explore comedians' experiences of a night at work gigging as it happened in 'real' time.

## 3.8 Field Relations, Roles and 'Going Native'

The notion that as an ethnographer one can be entirely impartial or that complete objectivity is possible or even desirable is debateable. Ethnography is a deeply relational approach to social research that is messy and complex (O'Reilly, 2012; Madden, 2017) as well as emotional and intimate (Coffey, 2018; Parvez, 2018). In his famous and ever popular essay, Howard Becker (1967) poses the still pertinent question – whose side are we on? Becker directly challenges the lingering myth of the impartial researcher and suggests that

there is little to be gained from claiming sociological research to be neutral, arguing that research is always going to be flavoured by one's personal inclinations and involvement with a given field and its actors. Consequently, it is not simply a case of whether or not we take sides as Becker argues that a researcher will inevitably do so. Instead, it is about acknowledging whose side we are on and being transparent about our biases.

It could be considered that there is some ethnographic merit in side-taking. To return to the sentiments expressed by Erving Goffman (1989) in *On Field Work,* part of the core of participant observation is to be so present in the circumstances of others that one becomes empathetic to their encountered frustrations, and thus can come to understand the undesirable dimensions of their lives. Indeed, an empathic approach is important within ethnography not just to build a rapport and relate to those one is studying but to commit to sharing in and coming to understand the complex lived realities of other people. Nevertheless, the notion of 'going native' is seen to be one of the great dangers of conducting ethnographic research (O'Reilly, 2009; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

The term 'going native' refers to the ethnographer becoming so immersed within the setting and involved with the people and culture being studied that they begin to adopt the attributes, beliefs, behaviours and in some cases the lifestyle to the degree that they become a fully-fledged member (O'Reilly, 2009). The risk of 'going native' is considered to be heightened if the researcher adopts the field role of a 'complete participant' (Gold, 1958; Spradley, 1980) or 'complete member' (Adler and Adler, 1987). The central issue with 'going native' is that you become so socialised into the culture, community or group that the ethnographer becomes 'lost' in the process (Madden, 2017:77).

While Williams (2002) suggests the lack of awareness that accompanies one 'going native' to be most problematic, there is some sense that intentionally courting the notion of 'going native' is beneficial to getting by effectively in the field and establishing relationships, trust and rapport with those in the setting (Coffey, 1999). As Wacquant (2011:88) argues, "go native but come back as a sociologist" – that is, you should attune yourself to the personal, physical, social and emotional day-to-day activities of those in the setting in order to get as

close as possible to their lived realities, but you must always return from the setting to the task of analysis and be aware of positionality and reflexivity.

This highlights the need for nuance and that you should be getting close enough so as to be physically, socially and emotionally engaged in the setting in order to capture the best possible data that you can but perhaps not 'too' close (Lofland, 1995). Alice Goffman's (2015) famous urban ethnography *On The Run* is notable for evoking ethical controversy – for example, Goffman chauffeured her informant Mike, who was carrying a firearm, around the locale seeking to carry out a revenge attack. This is quite the ethical transgression and Goffman has been accused of being an accessory to conspiracy to murder (Rios, 2015; Manning et al, 2016; Zussman, 2016). This example serves as a dramatic illustration of an ethnographer becoming 'too' close to those they are studying, as well as alluding to the debate around ethnographers breaking the law in the name of research (see Pearson, 2009).

Despite the assortment of field roles that can be adopted (see Gold, 1958; Spradley, 1980; Adler and Adler, 1987), Hammersley and Atkinson (2019:93) suggest that the ethnographer should aim to "maintain a more or less marginal position" in the field. It is this marginal position and the ethnographer hovering somewhere between an insider-outsider, familiar-stranger, or stranger-friend that enables the ethnographer to maintain their analytic sensibility (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). The 'overinvolvement' (Adler and Adler, 1987), 'over-rapport' (O'Reilly, 2009) and resultant bias that can accompany 'going native' may mean that participant accounts are not subjected to appropriate investigation and analysis. Instead, and in the absence of critical reflexivity, such accounts can end up being taken as a given and adopted at the expense of others (Coffey, 2018; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

To have 'gone native' in this ethnographic research would have likely involved me enrolling in the occupation and becoming a stand-up comedian in some capacity. This would have been akin to the likes of Calvey (2000) working as a bouncer, Wacquant (2004) training as a boxer or Colosi (2017) re-entering the lap-dancing profession. As an ethnographer, I did not embark on this research with the intention of becoming a comedian and immersing myself to the extent that I would participate in all of the activities that the comedians did.

However, a few performers did their best to try and convince me otherwise. Indeed, one stand-up comedian said that they could secure me an open spot at a local comedy club and help me put together a five-minute routine. It seemed as though the comedian was trying to gauge my character, though I wonder if they sincerely thought that I had the potential to make a go of stand-up comedy professionally, perhaps seeing something in me.

This research was not focused on me becoming a stand-up comedian and experiencing the occupation first-hand from that particular vantage point. This is not to censure those ethnographers who do immerse themselves in the worlds of their participants to the degree that they enter the occupation, sometimes already possessing a degree of relevant capital to help enable their immersion. For example, Becker (1951) was already a talented musician and member of the jazz club scene, Colosi (2017) had previously worked as a dancer and Calvey (2000) had existing training in martial arts before going covert as a bouncer. One stand-up comedian, Peter, reaffirmed this one night in the green room as he said to me, *"…we're all fucking narcissistic, not one humble person in the room apart from you, and that's why you're not a comedian" (extract from fieldnotes).*

While I was able to vicariously experience what stand-up comedians do through deploying the ethnographic approach in the way that I did, it was my lack of 'performing' that maintained this degree of marginality and continued to distinguish me. Though I gained a rich and in-depth understanding of their work, skills and competencies, this did not automatically equip me to hit the road as a stand-up comedian. That said, I am not subscribing to the notion that I was adhering to some kind of pseudo-objective distance. I was certainly not following the performers from a 'complete observer' position (Gold, 1958; Spradley, 1980). Rather, I sought to get as close as I possibly could to their working lives and by not taking on the role of a stand-up comedian, I was able to preserve my marginality and avoid fully 'going native'. Of course, this is not to say that I did not come to find myself embedded within the occupational group, experiencing emotionality and encountering messiness during fieldwork.

I adopted a position hovering between the categories Spradley (1980) defines as moderate participation and active participation; I was neither a 'complete participant' nor a 'complete

observer'. This drifting between moderate and active participation was also shaped on a night-by-night basis depending on the relationship, rapport and degree of interaction I had with the particular participant hosting the research. I could spend an entire weekend travelling between two or three gigs a night with a participant who was eager to show me everything they believed would be of interest or important for me to see with conversation flowing all the while. Conversely, I also spent single nights observing participants who left me to my own devices and to passively observe proceedings. On these occasions, I became more of a bystander and observer, than an active participant.

In embarking on fieldwork, I had to think about how I was going to manage and maintain my 'personal front' (Goffman, 1959). I was more than happy with occupying the position of the young and naïve PhD student who was just 'happy to be there'. This 'front' was not cultivated or contrived, rather it was a true reflection of how I felt and viewed myself, but it also seemed to be how the participants viewed me. I was in my early twenties during fieldwork and significantly younger than the majority of the stand-up comedians I spent time with who were usually ten, twenty or thirty years older than me and this only further entrenched my personal front.

The older stand-up comedians adopted something of a pastoral and paternalistic role towards me during fieldwork, putting their arm around me, guiding me around the comedy club, checking that I was able to get home okay and dropping me off after a gig. Arriving at gigs with participants, venue security staff would often make jokes about asking for age verification or look at me and then wait for an explanation from the participant who would promptly declare 'he's with me' or that I was their friend. This emphasises that although the stand-up comedians were my participants, they were also my gatekeepers to the setting. My relative youthfulness came to be productive in a number of other ways. The significant age gap between myself and many of the participants led to me being enthusiastically schooled in regard to the various histories of comedy clubs and the comedy circuit. This helped to develop and deepen my understanding of their work, enabling me to be explicitly curious and inquisitive without unnerving them and it enhanced my ability to ask what may have been obvious, silly or self-explanatory questions.

In some cases, my youthfulness helped facilitate what Spradley (1980) describes as a 'fair return' for a participant. Many of the stand-up comedians were more than happy to help a young and seemingly naïve PhD student out with his project. I believe that the sizeable age gap and the similar age of myself to many of the participants' own children afforded me a certain kindness and generosity. I suspect that the age gap also disarmed the stand-up comedians somewhat and diluted any lingering suspicion that I might write something defamatory or critical about their work and culture akin to an exposé. If I had been a professor twenty to thirty years older, my fieldwork experiences may have told a very different tale of the field and this ethnography resembled something quite different. For example, it is unlikely that I would have been taken under the wing of the comedians in the way that I was. I believe my relative 'innocence' and apparent 'naivety' was beneficial to my closeness and rapport with participants, enabling me to experience the field and capture insights in a way that I might not have been otherwise able to.

There were moments of mistaken identity in regard to my personal front (Goffman, 1959) and this was shaped by the perceptions of stand-up comedians regarding my presence. A number of comedians mistook me for a psychologist seeking to trace the sad-clown stereotype. On another occasion, one comedian misunderstood what kind of 'researcher' I was. The comedian in question assumed that I was a comedy scout from a television production company and on the lookout for new talent, which explained why it felt like they were pitching me ideas for a new topical format for television. A couple of performers jokingly sought assurances that I was not from HMRC looking to catch comedians out or a comedy critic sent in by The Guardian for an exposé of the circuit. It is well-documented that such cases of mistaken identity are prevalent within ethnographic fieldwork. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:63) note, "people in the field will seek to place or locate the ethnographer within the social landscape defined by their experience". This can arise from people having not been involved in social research previously and resultantly lacking a frame of reference. Thus, people's expectations of what social research entails, why it is conducted and by whom can be quite different to the reality. This can lead people to misinterpret the intentions and work of the ethnographer (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

However, there is some sense that people are more interested in what the researcher is like to be around and the kind of person they are rather than the actual nature of the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). The aforementioned moments of mistaken identity enabled me to not only be open about the nature of the research but also to demonstrate the kind of person I am. I was able to show that I did not take myself too seriously and that I could withstand the 'banter' of the green room without feeling the need to try and be funny in order to impress the comedians. I came to learn that this only endeared me to them and influenced my apparent acceptance into 'the fold' of the circuit. As one comedian, Will, told me, *"You're different to most lads who come back here, you're not turning it into a pissing contest. Some people get in a room full of comics and they just want to prove to us how funny they are and that just pisses us off" (extract from fieldnotes).*

Before fieldwork, I knew that I would have to be mindful of 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959) in order to get by and be viewed as an acceptable hanger-on by the participants; somebody who they did not mind having around. Through reading and watching interviews with stand-up comedians, I found that performers find audience members approaching them with jokes, offering unsolicited feedback and suggesting material to be frustrating. Consequently, I knew that this would likely not engender rapport. My apparent lack of desire to try and show the stand-up comedians that I too could be funny was something that they liked about me. I sense that they appreciated this aspect of my personal front (Goffman, 1959) in that I was simply 'happy to be here' and to be around them but also appreciated the fact that I knew my place. I would suggest that my behaviour was, more than anything, shaped by my inhibitions in embarking on fieldwork as a first-time ethnographer, venturing into unfamiliar settings and being around people I did not know, which only maintained the authenticity of my personal front.

### 3.9 Making Use of Eavesdropping

In defining what ethnographers do, Hammersley and Atkinson (2019:3) recognise listening to what is said as one of the main activities of the ethnographer. Such listening does not always have to be 'official' and can take the form of eavesdropping (Taylor et al, 2015; Gobo and Marciniak, 2016). As a fieldwork tactic, eavesdropping is most well associated with

ethnographic research of a covert nature (Calvey, 2017). This is perhaps because eavesdropping does involve some degree of deception as it is conducted without the knowledge of those being listened to. For example, one might eavesdrop on a ‘private’ conversation that is taking place in a public space, while those engaged in the conversation are unaware that they are being listened to.

Eavesdropping is typically employed within the roles of the complete observer or the complete participant (Gold, 1958; Spradley, 1980). In both of these instances, whether the ethnographer is completely detached or completely embedded within the social setting, they are seeking to conceal their identity and their research activity. Therefore, eavesdropping becomes a way of collecting data without the researcher disturbing the setting or revealing their identity and intentions.

The use of eavesdropping is by no means exclusive to covert research as it has also been used by ethnographers engaged in overt research (Calvey, 2017). Eavesdropping is recognised as a way of collecting valuable data (Berg, 1995; Gray, 2004) and can be a productive fieldwork tactic. Eavesdropping by its very nature involves a degree of opportunism on the part of the ethnographer as they seek to capitalise upon their access to a setting and proximity to people to “surreptitiously exploit the accessibility” (Goffman, 1981:132).

Eavesdropping can be undertaken wittingly or unwittingly and without the ethnographer even realising that they are necessarily doing it (Calvey, 2017). It is worth considering Goffman’s discussion of the act of eavesdropping within his work on participation frameworks and the status of listeners and hearers in conversation. Goffman (1981:132) recognises that eavesdropping can happen quite innocently and without malicious intentions. In this sense, eavesdropping can be viewed as inoffensive voyeurism akin to being a ‘fly on the wall’. In contrast, Goffman (1981:132) also recognises the devious potential of eavesdropping and the ability of the would-be eavesdropper to ‘engineer’ situations to listen to the self-contained and private interactions of others.

In this study the act of eavesdropping proved to be a productive way of collecting data and my use of it was not planned in advance but rather it emerged during fieldwork. Indeed, I would describe the kind of eavesdropping that I was engaged in as moments of impromptu 'overhearing'. I would say that my use of eavesdropping fits more within Goffman's (1981) category of the 'unintentional overhearer' rather than the 'premeditated overhearer' actively seeking to listen in on the interactions of others.

While my use of eavesdropping was subtle and serendipitous, it was nonetheless valuable as an opportune fieldwork tactic. Through being able to overhear little comments and snippets of conversations with relative ease, I was able to gather information that I would likely not have been otherwise privy to. Although my use of eavesdropping was unobtrusive, I still had to be careful in engaging in this kind of practice. As Calvey (2017) highlights, there are risks involved in eavesdropping and one must be mindful of doing it sensibly. The most significant risk of eavesdropping is of course that one is caught doing it. This could result in the eavesdropper being reprimanded for being 'nosy' at best or being invasive of other's privacy at worst. This could lead to the loss of participant trust, reputational damage to the researcher, a breakdown in researcher-participant relations and withdrawal of field access. I was not caught eavesdropping, which is just as well because owing to it being unplanned and emerging in the moment, I had not given much consideration as to what I would have done in the event of being caught. This is not exactly demonstrative of the requirement for the good sense that Calvey (2017) advocates.

In the field, I had my aforementioned personal front (Goffman, 1959) as the PhD student who was simply 'happy to be there' and could not quite believe his luck at getting to hang around with comedians. I was risking my personal front and reputation as something of a 'harmless' hanger-on by engaging in moments of impromptu eavesdropping, irrespective of how easy it was to overhear and however innocent my underpinning curiosity. To have been caught eavesdropping would likely have seen me no longer viewed as a 'harmless' hanger-on or PhD student who was just 'happy to be there'. Instead, I would have been viewed as somebody with a hidden motive. This could have affected my rapport with the stand-up comedians and threatened my access to the field with a possible shunning as someone not to be trusted.

I mostly engaged in eavesdropping in the backstage spaces of the comedy clubs I visited. I was able to overhear different conversations and interactions between the stand-up comedians present and with relative ease. For example, in sitting at the 'comedians table' at the back of a venue, I was able to watch the show and also catch snippets of the other performers commentating on the performance and sharing their opinions, good and bad. I regularly caught snippets of the comedians talking about the performances of their colleagues and this was the most common form my eavesdropping took. This helped me to capture insights into how stand-up comedians are continually engaged in status ranking and constructing a hierarchy on the circuit. These are insights that are perhaps more 'honest' and forthright, and it is unlikely that I would have been privy to such insights had I not been granted access to these usually private spaces and able to overhear these 'private' conversations and engage in what Burke (1989) describes as 'privileged eavesdropping'.

I did occasionally venture into the auditorium during the show and was near audience members. I was almost always situated at the back of the venue or in the corner of the room and tucked away from the seats of audience members. On a handful of occasions, I found myself sat at the bar or loitering in the foyer area and it was here that I was able to listen to conversations between audience members quite easily. In doing so, I was able to overhear their thoughts on specific stand-up comedians who had performed on the night, including those they did and did not warm to.

On one occasion, I overheard a group of female friends who had attended the comedy club together as a hen party complaining about the female comedian compering the show. The comedian had told the group to stop talking earlier in the show and when the group continued to talk, the comedian then singled out the bride of the party and made a number of jokes at her expense. The group was questioning the authority of the comedian to tell them how to behave on what they saw as their big night out. On another occasion, I was sitting alone on the row behind a group of men during the show when I overheard the bit parts of a conversation between the men that followed one of them heckling the comedian performing on stage. When the comedian in question asked which one of the men had heckled, the group articulated their collective panic, reminding each other to just stay quiet until the comedian left them alone.

These two episodes of eavesdropping enriched the data as they afforded me an awareness of the perspectives of the audience. In exploring the audience-performer dynamic during fieldwork, I had come to understand the perspectives of stand-up comedians and their view of the audience, and through engaging in eavesdropping on the audience, I was able to develop my understanding further and integrate the audience-performer perspective within the data (Miles, 2014; Lockyer, 2015).

In terms of recording the data I had captured through eavesdropping, I did so in the same way as with data generated through participant observation. I generally sought to avoid being seen taking down notes with pen and paper so as not to unnerve those comedians present. Instead, I opted for mental notes until I had an appropriate moment to physically note down my observational data. This also extended to when I was directly engaged in a conversation or sat alone and overheard something of interest in the background. When I was in the audience, it was much easier to keep myself to myself and openly make notes on what I had eavesdropped on without having to be as discreet as I was when in the company of comedians. The data captured through eavesdropping was incorporated with my participant observation data into my field notes.

The lively and longstanding debate around the ethics of covert research and covert techniques is well documented (see Calvey, 2017). The use of eavesdropping as one particular fieldwork technique does raise some ethical considerations and can provoke some anxiety from the researcher owing to the perceived deviance involved (Punch, 1986; Katz, 2002). My use of eavesdropping was sporadic and unplanned but came to yield rewarding insights that I would not have otherwise captured. While I acknowledge the apparent ethical ambiguity in using such 'covert' fieldwork tactics, I balance this with the overt nature of the research and my openness with participants and those within the setting as to my identity as a researcher.

### 3.10 Fieldnotes

There are many ways to document ethnographic data, such as filmmaking, photography, audio and video recording (Madden, 2017; Coffey, 2018). However, fieldnotes remain at the

heart of ethnographic practice and are the archetypal form for recording data collected during fieldwork and participant observation (Emerson et al, 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

Although I had been a regular attendee at live stand-up comedy events in the capacity of a paying audience member, I had not been exposed to the backstage areas or behind the scenes workings of the comedy club. I was familiar with sitting in the audience, watching the show and enjoying the performances of the stand-up comedians. However, I was entirely uncertain of what to expect during fieldwork, let alone how I was going to 'collect' data.

Fieldnotes are always selective as the ethnographer is unable to capture and record everything that happens in a setting. As Wolfinger (2002) suggests, there is a trade-off to be made between breadth and depth. Indeed, what is recorded in fieldnotes will always be shaped by one's ethnographic gaze, expectations and sense of what is relevant to exploring the research problem (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

Ahead of my first foray into the field, I decided that it would be useful to enter the field with a sense of wonder as to what I might uncover, a sense that perhaps comes with being an 'outsider' granted access to the 'inside'. I took some early inspiration from Spradley's (1980) work on participant observation, specifically the nine dimensions identified as facilitating the reading of social situations and along which observations can be made. In navigating my early visits to the field, I kept Spradley's nine dimensions in the back of my mind.

*"Space: the physical place or places*
*Actor: the people involved*
*Activity: a set of related acts people do*
*Object: the physical things that are present*
*Act: single actions that people do*
*Event: a set of related activities that people carry out*
*Time: the sequencing that takes place over time*
*Goal: the things people are trying to accomplish*
*Feeling: the emotions felt and expressed".*

*(Spradley, 1980:78)*

My fieldnotes functioned as a journey through time of a night spent shadowing a stand-up comedian at work. They form, as Lofland and Lofland (1995:93) describe, “a running description of events, people, things heard and overheard, conversations among people, conversations with people”. They incorporated the pre-performance business such as arriving at a gig with a participant, their interactions with the venue staff and their fellow performers, working through their material, weighing up the audience and preparing to go on stage. My fieldnotes also captured the on-stage performance of the stand-up comedian, coming off stage and hurriedly departing for their next gig or lounging around socialising with their fellow stand-up comedians. I also documented the aesthetics and layout of the performance venues, the green rooms and backstage areas.

One of the main features of my fieldnotes that is not incorporated in Spradley’s nine dimensions is the talk of participants. This was ‘naturally occurring’ talk and was instigated by any impromptu questions I asked and conversation I had initiated, engaged in or overheard. The talk of participants and others was something I became more and more interested in as I aspired to capture the richness and vibrancy of their occupational jargon and idioms within my fieldnotes. Language is very much the stock-in-trade of stand-up comedians and many of those I encountered could be considered wordsmiths. The talk of participants was particularly animated, always witty, poetic in places, imaginative and illustrative of the occupation.

Whilst ‘going-along’ and travelling with participants between gigs, much impromptu interviewing occurred. Impromptu interviewing usually arises from spontaneous and informal conversations amid other things going on (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Impromptu interviewing resulted in participants reflecting on their performances and audiences, meditating on life as a stand-up comedian and speaking critically of their colleagues, audiences and the industry.

Although I was conducting this research overtly, I was eager to avoid being seen with pen and paper in hand and taking fieldnotes when in the presence of participants, venue staff or other stand-up comedians. I was concerned that being seen scribbling down notes at every utterance, gesture or action would unnerve those in the setting, be detrimental to rapport

and lead to others feeling spied upon and adapting their talk, actions and behaviour accordingly.

Occasionally, my status as an outsider was advantageous to data collection. For example, upon learning that I was a researcher, other stand-up comedians and venue staff would take an interest in what I was doing. They would begin to converse with me and articulate their perspectives, sharing anecdotes and offering their opinions on a multitude of matters associated with the occupation and the business. This helped to furnish my fieldnotes with insights that I might not have otherwise gathered.

Although the taking of fieldnotes is the most prevalent method for recording observational data, it is not always practical or possible (Sarantakos, 2013). This is irrespective of whether the ethnographer is occupying a covert or overt position in the setting (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). The very nature of participant observation has the potential to make taking fieldnotes problematic (Mack et al, 2005). Tales abound of the imaginative methods ethnographers have deployed to take fieldnotes – from visiting toilets with alarming regularity to acquire privacy and be able to take notes (Emerson et al, 1995) or stuffing tape recorders under a jacket while supervising the doors of the pubs and clubs in Manchester's night-time economy (Calvey, 2000; Calvey, 2017).

Throughout my time in the field, I quickly learnt that the green room, dressing room and backstage areas are intensely private and personal spaces. I had to adapt and devise my approach to taking fieldnotes to accommodate for this but also to ensure that I did not compromise what sense of 'naturalism' might remain despite my lingering, loitering and overt researcher status. I wanted to avoid intermittently disappearing to take fieldnotes and risk missing out on potentially significant happenings. I quickly learnt that I could use the rhythm of the settings to my benefit. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) point out, the activities that take place in a social setting run to a timetable and this can present opportunities where the taking of fieldnotes can take place in and around moments of observation. I came to understand the typical structure of a night with a participant and the key moments I could seize to take fieldnotes.

Examples of two key moments advantageous to note-taking were when participants were performing on stage or when I was left alone in the backstage area. During the on-stage performances of participants', I was able to fully take notes as I was usually sat behind the rest of the audience at the back of the auditorium or out of the way on a balcony. As well as taking notes about the performance itself, I also grabbed the opportunity to transcribe any mental notes I had made up to that point in the night.

I was confident that I would be able to accurately recall the layout and aesthetics of the venues that I visited and procedural matters such as arriving and leaving gigs. I was equally confident that I would be able to recall key events or unusual occurrences throughout the night. I developed a preference for mental notes and the intermittent taking of notes either by pen and paper or the notes application on my smartphone. It was because of my desire to capture direct speech that I knew verbatim note-taking would be a must and so I chose to concentrate my note-taking opportunities on preserving the direct speech of the comedians. The deftness comedians have with words was also helpful, as many a lengthy line was made all the more memorable due to its whimsical and lyrical qualities.

Despite my initial reservations, some participants encouraged me to take notes. For example, one stand-up comedian told me to *"grab a pen, you might want to write this down for your book" (extract from fieldnotes).* I took this encouragement remained reserved in my note-taking so as not to disrupt the flow of conversation and only when something was said that I had the compulsion to write down. Three participants suggested that I record our conversations as we chatted and travelled in their car between gigs. I had my rucksack with me, containing all manner of fieldwork paraphernalia, including my trusty dictaphone. I opted to record those conversations at the encouragement of those participants. This freed me from the shackles of having to frantically scribble notes into a notepad or hastily tap them into my smartphone. I was able to fully engage and be truly present in the conversation as well as capture verbatim and lengthy participant talk.

At the end of each night, upon exiting the field and locating a suitable place to work and write I began to fully expand my fieldnotes. This was usually upon arriving back home and on some occasions returning to a hotel, riding on public transport or sitting in a twenty-four-

hour greasy spoon. I paid heed to the ethnographic consensus that full expansion of fieldnotes should commence as soon as possible after leaving the field. I also paid great heed to the motto of back-up, save, copy and secure (Madden, 2017). As Madden (2017) points out, fieldnotes are hard-won artefacts and the ethnographer must pay due diligence to their safe and secure storage. I sought to avoid the doctoral horror stories of a failed hard drive or a missing laptop. I made use of paper copies, hard computer copies and cloud storage.

The nature of the working hours of comedians meant that I would regularly still be typing up fieldnotes until the early hours of the following morning or the morning after a night spent in the field. Atkinson (2020:32) highlights that ethnographers "…should not let the sun go down on unfinished fieldnotes". Such an adage had a different resonance for me in that I was regularly working to beat the prospect of the sun coming up on unfinished fieldnotes.

A single night of fieldwork would easily generate thousands of words and fill multiple pages. Much of my time spent in the field was in intense bursts over consecutive nights – always Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. I had to write up my fieldnotes both swiftly and efficiently I would be back in the field the next night. My fieldnotes took the form of a chronological account of what happened throughout a particular night with a participant and would typically begin when I arrived at a gig to meet a participant and concluded when we parted ways at the end of the night. After fully expanding my fieldnotes, I would journey back through them, adding memos and highlighting events, activities or talk that I thought was of interest or had further questions about.

### 3.11 Interviewing Stand-Up Comedians

Interviews continue to prove to be a popular qualitative method of data collection within social scientific research (Punch, 2005; Creswell, 2007) and are commonly used by ethnographers to complement participant observation. I conducted five face-to-face and semi-structured interviews with comedians. The interviews took place in a variety of locations including a coffee shop, a pub, a deli, an office in the back of a comedy club and a tapas restaurant followed by the kitchen table in a participant's house. I allowed each

interviewee to choose the location to create a more relaxed interview scenario. However, I did not account for how the more sociable settings would affect the quality of the audio recording and ease of subsequent transcription. For example, the interview I held in a pub was underscored by a punk band sound checking. Despite this, the settings appeared to positively affect the interview itself and the dynamic between myself and the interviewee emerges in the recordings and later transcripts as friendly and relaxed.

Each interview lasted in the region of fifty to ninety-five minutes and was mostly directed by the observations I had made during participant observation. The interviews also provided the opportunity to access biographical and life history data. All of the interviews were audio-recorded using a dictaphone before being transcribed and typed up. The transcripts were only cleaned up to add clarity or context to the industry references participants made or to identify inaudible segments of the recording.

I had initially anticipated that participant observation and interviewing would co-exist equally as data collection methods and that the interviews would provide something of a follow-up to participant observation. As fieldwork progressed, interviewing quickly began to take something of a minor role compared with participant observation and 'going-along'. The arrangement of interviews proved to be a challenging logistical task. Comedians travelled extensively and many of the comedy clubs where I observed participants were a few hundred miles away from where they lived. Furthermore, participants would often not return to the same comedy clubs as part of their gig schedule for months at a time. This was common on the circuit and stemmed from comedy clubs wanting to ensure variety in their line-up and mitigate the risk of their audiences seeing the same act twice.

A couple of scheduled interviews had to be re-arranged and some were also cancelled due to filming and television commitments. Indeed, one interview did not materialise because the participant in question had acquired national fame in the intervening months and sitting down to converse with a PhD student inevitably tumbled down their list of priorities.

The richness and thickness of the data I was collecting from 'going-along' and participant observation were overshadowing the quality of the interview data. As Gobo and Marciniak

(2016) argue, it is through directly observing the actions of those under study that the ethnographer can come as close as possible to seeing what happens. Participant observation and 'going-along' quickly became the most rewarding methods of data collection. Impromptu interviewing occurred throughout but particularly in the instances of me 'riding-along' with comedians as they travelled between gigs. By comparison, impromptu interviewing felt much more natural and elicited richer and more insightful data than what I was gathering through more formal semi-structured interviews. After following participants in quite a casual manner and having established rapport, it became quite challenging to then foster the more formalised approach often required in the semi-structured interview scenario.

### 3.12 Analysis of the Data

I adopted a flexible, iterative and thematic approach to analysing the data. In my analysis of the data and keeping with the ethnographic nature of this research, I was not seeking to unearth causation, correlation or indeed generalise the research to a wider population. Ethnography generates empirically informed 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of a given social setting, its social actors and their everyday lives and experiences. However, analysis of ethnographic data can also transcend 'thick description' and lead to the development of theories or concepts that can account for and explain a particular phenomenon. In my analysis of the data, I aspired to generalise the findings of this research to theory. This has resulted in the development of my theory and original model of what I call Theatrical Edgework (see Chapter Eight and Appendix Four).

#### 3.12.1 The Non-Linear Nature of Analysis.

I did not view analysis as a standalone stage or a distinctive phase in a linear process that succeeds data collection and the conclusion of fieldwork (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; O'Reilly, 2009; Coffey, 2018). Although analysis of the data started 'formally' at the end of the first night of fieldwork, I was engaged in analytical thinking about the research long before I set foot in the field. Before fieldwork, I was thinking about what I was going to do and how I was going to do it. I was having to consider my preconceived and existing ideas

about the phenomenon, I was thinking about potential research questions, possible lines of inquiry and reviewing the existing literature and relevant previous research.

Analysis of the data proceeded in a flexible and iterative fashion, which is in line with the approach emphasized by Hammersley and Atkinson (2019). Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) highlight that theory is best developed from repeated interaction with existing ideas, which can then be used to make sense of the collected data and used to influence developing descriptive and explanatory ideas about the phenomenon under study.

In line with this, I was engaging in fieldwork, returning from the field and writing up, then beginning to analyse my fieldnotes before returning to the field for further data collection. I was in a constant cycle of observing, participating, writing and analysing throughout the fieldwork period. This is particularly pertinent in ethnographic research, where the analysis of the data supports the collection of data and vice versa. This reflects the spiral-like approach to analysis central to ethnography described by O'Reilly (2009). This enabled me to pursue burgeoning points of interest, areas of intrigue, explore emergent ideas and test out developing theories and concepts. This is not without its challenges and the difficulties of balancing concurrent data collection and analysis have been recognised (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Coffey, 2018). There is consensus that it is intensive, demanding and time-consuming. However, the very nature of the working lives of stand-up comedians and how data collection was undertaken did assist me in following this approach. This is because the data collection period was characterised by brief, but intensive, forays into the field.

The typical structure of fieldwork – Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights supported concurrent data collection and analysis, offering the intermittent 'respite' necessary to commit to this approach. Whilst Thursday to Saturday was reserved for data collection, Sunday to Wednesday became designated data analysis days. This arrangement maintained the necessary integration and open dialogue between data collection and analysis. It enabled me to pursue and explore the ideas that I was working on during the week, by taking them with me when I returned to the field at the weekend.

### 3.12.2 ‘Grounded Theorising’ and Ethnographic Abduction

This flexible and iterative approach to analysis can be viewed as emblematic of ‘grounded theorising’ (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) or akin to a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory posits that theoretical findings are grounded in the data through concurrent data collection and analysis. The repeated interaction and comparison between the two means that the ideas of the researcher are being developed as the data is accumulated.

There is some sense that the initial spirit and intentions of the original grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) have come to be misrepresented. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), grounded theory was a perspective on how social research could be conducted to build on existing theories and develop new ones. However, it has come to be viewed as a fully-fledged prescription for doing qualitative research and data analysis characterised by rigid coding steps and a sense that theory is lurking within the data and that following such steps will lead the researcher to ‘discover’ it (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). There has also been debate as to which approach, if any, takes precedence, whether it is the original (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), Barney Glaser (1992), Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1998) or Kathy Charmaz (2006).

It has been argued that this formulaic take on proceedings neglects the creative and imaginative thinking central to ethnographic analysis. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2019:167) assert, there is little in the way of prescription or procedure that will lead the ethnographer to successful analysis. Such a procedural approach ignores the active and engaged role the researcher plays at every stage of the research (Atkinson, 2013; Atkinson 2017). The inspirations at the heart of the original incarnation of the grounded theory approach (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967) can be understood to have become obscured as it has come to be entrenched as a formulaic method for doing analysis (Atkinson, 2013). Atkinson (2015) argues that the process of ‘grounded theorising’ as depicted in the original approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) should be taken as good practice and what all researchers should be doing in going about their respective social research. Indeed, engaging in ‘grounded theorising’ does not mean one must adhere to the label of grounded theory or support that particular approach (Coffey, 2018).

Qualitative research is typically seen to involve the researcher following an inductive logic and reasoning to theory-building. This is where the researcher begins with an open mind having apparently shed their preconceptions and set aside a priori knowledge related to the phenomenon under study to enable theory to emerge organically from the data collected. In contrast, deductive logic and reasoning are about making use of empirical research to test existing theories rather than to generate new ones. A deductive approach does not appeal to the open, curious exploratory spirit that resides at the heart of ethnographic research and a purely inductive stance can also be considered as problematic and perhaps ill-suited to ethnographic research. When it comes to induction, researchers are always likely to have some preconceived ideas about the phenomenon they intend to research, what Bronislaw Malinowski (1884 – 1942) labelled as 'foreshadowed problems' (O'Reilly, 2009) as well as potential avenues of social inquiry and possible research questions. Induction follows what is perhaps a naïve logic and leaves the researcher without any guiding inspiration for the development of original theory. Adherence to purely inductive logic and reasoning neglects the necessary interactions between existing ideas and the emerging ideas being developed from one's data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

There is an advocation for a third way and that is abductive logic and reasoning (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Coffey, 2018), which Atkinson (2015:57) describes as ethnographic abduction. Atkinson (2015) highlights the compatibility of abductive logic and reasoning with ethnography. Throughout data collection and analysis, it is an abductive approach that I was guided by. Abductive reasoning places empirical research central to the development of ideas, it emphasizes the importance of an iterative approach that sees the researcher moving between existing ideas and developing new ideas to the generation of theory (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Coffey, 2018). Abductive reasoning also rejects the perhaps misguided idea within an inductive approach that the researcher can be sufficiently open-minded enough to enter the field with a blank canvas ready to 'discover' the theory and see it 'emerge' from the data.

An abductive approach steers the process of 'grounded theorising' within data collection and analysis (Coffey, 2018). Ethnography tends to begin with the local and the particular and works back and forth towards generalising theory. This is where those ideas generated

from the local and the particular may have wider resonance in making sense of a phenomenon. Therefore, abductive logic and reasoning complement the open and exploratory spirit of ethnography. This is because there is an appreciation that the illumination and explanation of a given social phenomenon are most rich when there has been considered and creative interaction between existing ideas and developing ones.

### 3.12.3 The Practical Steps of Analysis.

I began the full writing-up and expansion of my fieldnotes after I had exited the field and found a suitable place to work. This was to ensure that I captured as much as I could rather than rely on distant memory and risk forgetting things, as well as to prepare the data that I had collected for analysis. Such urgency did not extend itself to the five semi-structured interviews I conducted, all of which were audio-recorded and kept safely for later transcription. Typically, this was a week or so after the interview, but I did immediately document my observations and my reflections on those interviews in my fieldwork diary. I transcribed the interviews during the fieldwork process in keeping with my iterative approach. I found this was a valuable way of facilitating comparison between my interviews and my experiences of conducting them but also as a way of thinking about my interview practice.

I engaged in an initial reading before re-reading the notes where I began to annotate the observational data, usually on the same night or first thing the following morning. This could be considered as pre-coding or preliminary coding (Layder, 1998). At this point, I was not looking at data reduction or data complication (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Rather, this was about picking out what it was that surprised me, intrigued me and what was unusual or unexpected. It did not matter how significant or insignificant I perceived it to be at the time, I circled, underlined and highlighted these moments of interest. At this stage, I also jotted down my thoughts and hunches, questions I had or things to follow up on. These were half-formed memos and things I sought to keep in mind before my next night in the field.

This preliminary exercise also helped me to think about what I was gravitating towards in my observations and why this might be. It prompted me to think about why particular

actions, interactions and behaviours were catching my attention. It also made me reflect on the composition of my fieldnotes and how I was putting them together and writing about my time spent in the field. I would typically repeat this over the two or three consecutive nights of fieldwork that followed. It was in the days between weekends of fieldwork that I engaged in what would be considered comparatively more formal and systematic analytical work. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) note, researchers must be intimately acquainted with their data and detailed, close and repeated readings of it are essential, which is what I did. This familiarising of oneself with the data through repeated readings is a long-standing first stage in most approaches to the analysis of qualitative and indeed ethnographic data. I also found that fully writing up my fieldnotes, transcribing and double-checking the interview transcripts were valuable opportunities to relive my fieldwork experiences and further attune myself to the textual reconstruction of the data.

Like most approaches to qualitative data analysis and in keeping with the overarching thematic manner that I adopted, following this sustained familiarisation with the data, I then set about coding it. Coding the data is considered the first 'formal' stage in analysing qualitative data (O'Reilly, 2009), though as mentioned I had been engaged in a preliminary kind of coding and annotation after the initial expansion of my fieldnotes and transcription of interviews. Though coding is a part of the process of analysing qualitative data, it does not constitute analysis alone. As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue, the process of coding is about reducing and condensing the data into more organised and more manageable segments for analysis. When coding the data, I sought to avoid the perils of fragmentation and the accompanying loss of context. To avoid this, I coded inclusively and contextually as much as possible. For example, rather than coding a few words at a time, I coded in complete sentences or even a paragraph.

Initial coding of the data was principally about data reduction and summation, sorting and ordering the data into more manageable segments. As O'Reilly (2009) puts it, it is about moving from a usually chronological order to the order of coded data. I was working through my fieldnotes and transcripts as they were accumulated. I was assigning and labelling segments of data with a code, usually between one to five words in length, that best categorised and summarised that segment of data. In doing so, I also opened myself up

to surprise, contradiction and the content of the data not necessarily aligning to what I had originally perceived to be the focus of the study.

As I was coding, I coded about occupational tasks, routines and rituals, regular and unanticipated events, interactions, roles, encounters, relationships, identities, institutions, emotions, hierarchies and spaces. I was asking myself three particular questions – what name can I give to this particular segment of data? What might this be an example of? And why did I include this specific piece of data? But there were also other questions that I was asking of the data – such as, what is going on here? What are people doing? Why are they doing it? What are they working to achieve? How do they talk about themselves? How do they talk about other people? And what assumptions are they making? (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Emmerson et al, 2011; Silverman, 2015).

I did not have a predetermined scheme of codes, rather I allowed the data to serve as my guide to the coding process. To have used a prefixed set of codes would have been pointless. It would have undermined the exploratory nature of this ethnographic research, leading to the stubborn grafting of codes and categories onto the data and risk jumping to analytical conclusions (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). This would have especially undermined the abductive approach to theory building that I was following alongside the 'grounded theorising' I was engaging in. Indeed, this is what is also distinctive about ethnographic analysis, that codes are developed and devised from analysing the data (O'Reilly, 2009). This is largely how I proceeded, as segments of the data were identified as illustrating types of goings-on, events, actions, interactions, behaviours or demonstrating arrangements and aspects of the comedians' occupational culture and working lives.

The naming of codes was influenced by several factors. Firstly, through local categories such as the talk used by participants in the setting. Secondly, based on the research problem, concepts and theories within the existing literature as well as my broader sociological theoretical and conceptual knowledge. Thirdly, through my categories which I had developed from fieldwork and grounded in observation within the setting. Indeed, I was fascinated by the sayings and shorthand of stand-up comedians or what would be deemed as the 'folk' terms of the occupation. I was intrigued by the specific language and terms

used that are particular to their social setting, the local turns of phrase and the occupational jargon that they employ.

I made use of local categories as names for codes to capture the essence of the various segments of data. Such codes were made up of local turns of phrase, occupational idioms, witty or poetic turns of phrase. I used participants' speech, keeping categories as local as possible, and given that language is the stand-up comedian's stock-in-trade, this made for vibrant and catchy codes. For example, several segments were assigned the code of 'putting out fires'. This is a term that the stand-up comedians used to refer to a gig in which their twenty-minute stage time was dominated by them having to deal with interruptions in the room and amongst the audience. This way of looking at the data also led to the titles of some of the chapters that structure this thesis.

### 3.12.4 Making Use of NVivo

Early into the data collection period, I had a sizeable amount of data; much more than I had anticipated I would end up with after only a few weeks of fieldwork. I knew that I still had some way to go with data collection and sought to organise myself accordingly. However, I found it difficult to try and devise a system for keeping track of everything. I was word processing my fieldnotes as standard at the end of a night of fieldwork and printing them out to work through them. It was tricky to establish the best way forward in terms of organising the original notes and the various successive versions that were analysed. I was trying to keep track of my documented thoughts, ideas, notes and memos as well as attempting to figure out the best way to leave a coherent trail of my analysis.

After spending some time navigating analysis by hand and hard copy and then later via MS Word, I decided to make use of computer-aided qualitative data analysis software. I opted for NVivo as having undertaken a training course at the university I was aware of some of the benefits of using the programme. I imported the accumulating data corpus into NVivo and worked from there, using it primarily as a way of organising the data, retaining the origins of data segments, collating and managing codes and for its efficient search and retrieval qualities.

I believe this to be the most appropriate way to use such software. It is worth documenting my sincere scepticism of such tools as a means of 'doing analysis'. I knew that whilst NVivo could support my analysis by helping me to organise and manage the data, it was no substitute for the actual analytic and creative thinking I had to engage in to interpret the data, make sense of it and bring meaning to it. I would reject the perhaps naïve perspective that CAQDAS packages constitute or amount to analysis and my scepticism is by no means a unique perspective (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Bryman, 2008, O'Reilly, 2009; Coffey, 2018; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). NVivo supported me in going about some of the practical and data management aspects of analysis.

### 3.12.5 Making Use of Memos

Throughout data collection and analysis, I was an enthusiastic memo-maker, and my memos served different purposes. Memoing began in the preliminary stages after a night spent conducting fieldwork. After fully expanding and typing up my fieldnotes from that night, I then began to read back through the produced fieldnotes and annotated them. I would add comments, questions and jottings that captured my initial thoughts related to both the data and my collection of it. Memos facilitated my thinking about the motivations and interests that underpinned my observations and prompted me to think about why it was that I had made certain observations and selected particular interactions, actions, activities and behaviours. The following extract illustrates some of this in practice.

*FIELDNOTES: Adam was sat on one sofa, whilst I was sat on the other. Adam had his notebook and pen in hand and was writing and flicking back and to between other pages and tapping the pen. Adam mentioned that tonight and indeed at most [name of comedy club night removed], "I'm the resident compere" he would be trying out new material, "some of it is half-baked, some of it is literally just an idea and I'll work it out on stage".*

*MEMO: Adam points out here that he is the resident compere of the new act competition the comedy club hosts every Monday. I should have followed this up – how prevalent is a compering residency on the circuit? How does this fit in with the notion of the jobbing comedian? Is this a desirable role as it provides regular and guaranteed work? I'm surprised that stand-up comedians on the circuit can have a regular gig that they always play, especially on the same day each week.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes analysis, February 2017)*

I needed to be able to identify my memos with ease and distinguish between memos and the data. On hard paper copies, I used a red pen and I only wrote in the margins of the page and on post-it notes affixed to the print-out. When I turned to use MS Word, I attached and differentiated my memos by making use of the comment function. When I then came to use NVivo, I attached my memos to extracts within the data, collating them under nodes (codes) and linking to specific participants and categorising them under developing themes.

In my memos, as the extract above demonstrates, I was reflecting on my conduct and how I was collecting the data. I was thinking about moments where I viewed myself as not being forthcoming enough with participants or perhaps too reticent when it came to participating in the repartee between those in the green room and backstage areas. I was recognising moments where I believed that I was perhaps leading participants, as well as moments where I had missed an opportunity to follow up with a relevant question or to delve deeper into a conversation topic. This was as well as reprimanding myself for putting my foot in it, such as disturbing an interesting moment in the field and asking a question, rather than allowing the moment to breathe and unfold at its own pace.

As I was coding the data, making memos helped me to unpack and elaborate upon the codes I had assigned to segments of data. This enabled me to document why I had chosen specific codes, entitled them in a particular way and why the data demonstrated the kind of thing the code represented. This was about showing my working out and capturing what I was thinking when I labelled the data. This assisted me as I continued to navigate accumulating data and revisit data already collected.

Memos afforded me an analytical peace of mind, as I was able to put the different unfolding and developing ideas I had down on the page. The content of my memos typically contained reflections, interpretations, feelings of surprise, intrigue, allusions to sociological concepts and theories and notes of similarities and contrasts with other instances from across the data and existing research related to stand-up comedians. It helped build an overarching picture of how different parts were linked together and enabled me to fashion particular themes from the data that came to represent working life as a circuit comedian.

My memos were not immaculate in their expression and they were certainly not well-polished thoughts but they formed what I would describe as written thinking out loud. Initially, my memos were something akin to a rambling stream of consciousness. Indeed, I felt a sense of disinhibition as I knew that they were for my eyes only. I would suggest that this made me somewhat bolder in my interpretations of what happenings might mean, what they might indicate and what they might be a wider example of.

Memos came to be invaluable when I took the preliminary and burgeoning ideas contained within them back to the field. This is where I sought to explore my ideas further, refining and developing them or changing tack if they did not prove to be analytically fruitful. I was able to steer conversations towards certain subjects and test out my developing hunches, emergent lines of inquiry and see what the comedians made of them. The memos came to form the backbone of my writing as they were an intermediary linking analysis and writing-up. I refer to 'writing up' here not in the sense it is commonly used as a separate phase in doctoral research but in the sense of developing the themes that came to represent my analysis through writing about them.

Wolcott (1994) writes about the transformation of qualitative data and the importance of progressing from coding towards interpretation and transcending the factual or obvious within the data. This is about moving towards offering an analysis of the data, bringing meaning, and making sense of it. I found my memos to offer a pathway through coding towards an interpretation and analysis of the data. From fieldwork to coding, to interpretation to writing and back again, data was continually collected and coded and organised, followed by more collection, more coding, recoding and reorganisation. I was developing my ideas and returning to the field to explore them and consider their relevance and resonance. This whole process resulted in the development of three themes, each of which acquires its respective chapter in the findings section of this thesis. The three themes come together to tell a particular tale of the field and present a journey of what it is like working and performing as a professional comedian on the live comedy circuit.

### 3.13 Ethical Considerations

By its very nature, ethnographic research can be invasive. I was entering into and sharing individuals' everyday working lives as stand-up comedians, observing at their gigs, travelling alongside them on car journeys and running with them from one gig to the next when they were late. I was 'going-along', participating, observing, questioning, probing and shadowing. As an ethnographer, I was asking a great deal of the individuals who had kindly granted me access to their working lives. Nevertheless, ethnography can be viewed as a profoundly ethical way of conducting social research. As Atkinson (2015) asserts, ethnography is built upon a commitment to the everyday lives one is studying and that this is not only an intellectual commitment, but a personal and emotional one also. The commitment that the ethnographic approach requires outshines that of its fellow research methods.

Researchers have a moral and professional responsibility to research in a way that is ethical (Neuman, 2007). Decision making must be ethically informed and based on what is morally right as opposed to what is advantageous to the researcher (May, 2011). There is not one formulaic ethical approach that can be readily applied to any research undertaken. However, there are several principles for universal consideration that transcend academic disciplines and research approaches, which form the hallmarks of ethical research practice. The ethical considerations underpinning a piece of social research must concentrate upon protecting, safeguarding and respecting the rights of participants and avoiding causing them harm, which emphasizes such concepts as autonomy, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and privacy.

In considering the ethical dimensions of this research, I paid heed to the requirements of the British Sociological Association and the Framework of Research Ethics from The Economic Social Research Council. Foremost guidance came from the School of Health and Society Ethics Committee at the University of Salford. A full ethics application and supporting evidence were submitted to the committee in alignment with the institutional requirements and ethical approval was successfully granted (see appendix three).
All the stand-up comedians who participated in this study were provided with a participant information sheet (see appendix one). This detailed the nature of the research, its purpose and wider objectives. It also outlined why the stand-up comedians had been invited to

consider participation and what their involvement would entail. Participants documented their informed consent through signing and dating the participant consent form (see appendix two). This contained many clauses about what participants were agreeing to and outlined their rights as participants.

Participant confidentiality and anonymity is one of the most significant ethical considerations and is integral to protecting the true identities of participants. In this research, participants were assigned a pseudonym, which is one of the most popular ways of disguising the identities of participants. Although the use of pseudonyms enables participants to be freely discussed within the findings, there is the argument for further vigilance in ensuring that characteristics within the data do not lead to the uncovering of a participant's identity (McNeill and Chapman, 2005). Nevertheless, in explaining the process of anonymity and the application of pseudonyms to participants, I received some interesting responses. As one participant indicated agreement with the various clauses, they confessed and quite poignantly told me, *"comedians don't want to be anonymous" (extract from fieldnotes).*

The act of anonymisation sometimes extended to bystanders, other stand-up comedians, performance venues and on occasion, the cities and places I visited during fieldwork. In some cases, I removed the name of a place or a person and this is denoted through parentheses in the relevant data extracts throughout the findings of this thesis. I do not disguise all references to comedy clubs. I considered this on a case-by-case basis but generally, I make some use of performance venue typologies. In Chapter Four, where I provide a synopsis of some of the comedy clubs I visited, I refer to the venues descriptively, for example, the longest-running comedy club in the city; a comedy club in a basement. I also make use of a pseudonymous comedy club in my much more in-depth and detailed account of one particular comedy club, which I call 'The Chuckle Factory'.

Ethical considerations most naturally direct themselves towards the protection of participants. However, I still had to extend due consideration to the safety and wellbeing of myself as an ethnographer. Fieldwork is a significant dimension when considering the safety and wellbeing of the researcher (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000; Oliver, 2003). I spent

several months conducting fieldwork, lone working, entrenched in the hours of the night-time economy, meeting and spending time with individuals who I did not know.

Throughout fieldwork, I was venturing into the relatively unknown and I was negotiating this period alone as an ethnographer. Although I had spoken to some participants on the telephone, emailed considerably beforehand or already met some individuals in person, I needed to take my safety into account. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted at comedy clubs and theatres, pubs, clubs, bars and basements, which were all well populated by members of the public. All of the interviews were carried out in public places and only on one occasion did I interview in a participant's house. Although by this point in the process I had been in contact with the participant for around three months and had got to know them well and felt comfortable entering this scenario. Throughout fieldwork, I maintained regular contact with my supervisors and kept them updated as to my entrances and exits from the field and where I was going. This included letting them know of my safe return home from trips away with participants. Despite all this ethical pondering and process, ultimately, I do not believe I compromised my safety and wellbeing any more than I already do as I navigate the humdrum of my day-to-day life.

## 3.14 Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced ethnography as the research approach and considered its appropriateness for studying the working lives and experiences of stand-up comedians. In this chapter I have discussed in detail how I went about conducting fieldwork on the comedy circuit, recruiting participants and gaining access to the field, the data collection methods used, my approach to analysing the data and the ethical principles which informed the research. In the succeeding Chapter Four, I set the scene for the imminent findings chapters as I introduce the people and places involved in this ethnography.

# Chapter 4: Introducing the Stand-Up Comedians and Comedy Clubs

## 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the stand-up comedians who participated in this research. I make use of a series of vignettes to profile each stand-up comedian and this is followed by in-depth biographies of two participants, Adam and Dave. I focus on Adam and Dave not least because I spent a considerable amount of time in their company during fieldwork but because they are at very different stages in their respective careers. Adam and Dave are both well-established performers on the circuit and well-respected by their peers. Adam is about to part ways with his longstanding agent and is pondering his future in stand-up comedy and pursuing wider recognition. Whereas Dave is considered to be a living legend of the circuit and is particularly reflective about what continues to motivate him as a comedian while many of his peers have acquired television success and fame.

I present these vignettes and biographies for three reasons. Firstly, the individual 'stories' of the comedians have become something akin to collateral damage due to the thematic approach to data analysis and the customary ethical principle of anonymity for research participants. I seek to remedy this by profiling each participant and depicting their 'comic' life history. Secondly, the prevailing focus in the existing literature on the personalities and childhood experiences of comedians has led to much 'pathologizing' as to the reasons why comedians enter the profession (see Janus et al, 1975; 1978; Fisher and Fisher, 1981; Ando et al, 2014). This does much for the enduring tragicomic stereotype of comedians but fails to put forward the individual stories of comedians and their journey into the occupation. Thirdly, the vignettes also lend some empirical illustration to Stebbins' (1990) classification of the four stages of career development in stand-up comedy - development, establishment, maintenance, and advancement. Some participants lingered between the maintenance and advancement stages. For those comedians, a transition between the two stages was ongoing as they spent their working life on the circuit whilst steadily accruing more television work.

Succeeding the vignettes and extended biographies, I present a synopsis of some of the different performance venues I visited during fieldwork. Alongside this I present an

extended profile of one comedy club in particular, this comedy club, which I call 'The Chuckle Factory', was the venue I spent most of my weekends in during eight months of fieldwork on the circuit.

## 4.2 Introducing the Stand-Up Comedians

**Simon**

Simon has been a professional stand-up comedian for over sixteen years, having originally trained as an actor. Simon was very much in demand on the corporate circuit and regularly hosted large corporate events. There was a sense of injustice regarding a lack of television exposure, which appeared to bother Simon during my time with him. A new topical and political comedy television programme had recently started airing and Simon spoke of his frustration at having been overlooked in favour of his political comedy peers, expressing his criticism of the programme in the green room to his fellow stand-up comedians.

**James**

James moved to London in his twenties to pursue a career in stand-up comedy. He worked in a pub by day and gigged on the open-mic comedy circuit by night. James had recently undergone an operation and was unable to drive. Resultantly, James's wife was having to drive him to his gigs to enable him to return to work, as he had already had what he considered to be too much time off work. The precarity of self-employment as a freelance comedian became apparent during my time with James and his wife driving the three-hundred-mile round trip to the gig. James also works as a television warm-up act as well as writing for a few prominent long-running television panel shows and is also a support act for a number of his famous peers on their live tours. During our time together James was in the process of plotting tour dates as a support act for a very well-known stand-up comedian undertaking a national arena tour.

**Jason**

As a teenager and an aspiring stand-up comedian, Jason would stage performances in the family living room, imitating and recycling the material of Billy Connolly and Bill Bailey. Jason has been a professional stand-up for ten years. He previously worked in finance where upon

being made redundant Jason interpreted this as a 'sign' from the universe or indeed a higher power, and attempted stand-up comedy for the first time. While getting started in stand-up comedy, Jason worked part-time at a secure unit for self-harming children and only departed that job when his earnings from stand-up comedy became enough to live off. Soon after turning professional, Jason had taken his debut one-hour show to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and appeared on a major stand-up comedy television programme. Jason had recently signed to one of the major London agencies, made several television appearances and worked a support act for a number of his famous colleagues.

**Bill**

Before becoming a stand-up comedian, Bill worked as a musician on the cabaret circuit. Bill was looking for a way to increase his income and had always contemplated attempting stand-up comedy. Whilst driving to his first-ever open-mic gig, Bill's wife tried to talk him out of it, assuring him he would likely be terrible. Despite his wife's protestations, Bill did his first ever gig and it went well, though he told me that he would likely not have made another attempt at comedy had it not. It took Bill five years to break through onto the comedy circuit and turn professional. Bill has been a professional stand-up comedian for twelve years and has performed on an international scale, specifically entertaining the armed forces. In recent years he has performed twice on a major stand-up comedy television programme.

**Paul**

Paul has been a professional stand-up comedian for five years and his experiences in stand-up comedy are slightly different to other participants. Paul had appeared on a major television programme and achieved some success following this – playing all of the main comedy clubs and gaining a major agent. However, Paul described such success as arriving before he was ready and had the skills to underpin him being afforded such opportunities. Paul soon quit stand-up comedy before returning and taking open spots, working to impress promoters, beginning to be paid for gigs and turning professional. Paul has gone on to perform internationally and as a support act for another stand-up comedian on a national tour including dates in arenas.

**Jack**

Jack has been a professional stand-up comedian for eight years. Jack originally trained as an actor at drama school and appeared in films and television dramas. Jack's first attempt at stand-up comedy was at a new act gong-style competition, which he won. Jack performs at all of the major comedy clubs on the UK comedy circuit and has sold-out shows at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and toured around the country off the back of subsequent television exposure and success. As well as providing the voiceover for a popular reality television programme, Jack is also the voice of a television advertisement for a multinational company.

**Gary**

Gary has been a professional stand-up comedian for seventeen years, having started performing stand-up comedy during his time at university. In the weeks preceding his involvement in the research, Gary had made a few high-profile appearances on the television with video clips of his performances going viral and bringing him much public attention. At one gig I accompanied Gary to, he was recognised by audience members and asked to sign merchandise and pose for photographs. A couple of months after his participation, Gary is signed to one of the biggest talent agencies in London, has a television show and announced a UK theatre tour.

**Rob**

Rob studied stand-up comedy as part of his degree in performing arts at university. After working as a producer at the BBC, he turned professional and has been working as a stand-up comedian for ten years. Rob also works as a warm-up act for television recordings and is a regular at the annual Edinburgh Fringe Festival. During fieldwork, Rob was panicked that the festival was fast approaching, and his show was yet to be written and rehearsed. Rob is also a regular at international comedy festivals and has taken a few of his Edinburgh shows to Australia. He had previously been represented by one of the major stand-up comedy agencies and made some television appearances that came with such high-profile representation. Rob is now an independent stand-up comedian and no longer has an agent.

**Mark**

Mark has been a professional stand-up comedian for fourteen years. Previously, he was an English teacher before going on to become a fashion buyer earning a six-figure salary with a major high street retailer. As a fashion buyer, Mark had to do presentations and product pitches but struggled with shyness and told me that he would stumble and stutter his way through them. Mark's employer sent him on a comedy course to develop his confidence, public speaking and presentation skills. Mark attended the weekly course and was of the view that he would avoid having to perform at the obligatory showcase upon completion of the course. Mark learnt that despite his introspective tendencies, stand-up comedy seemed to come somewhat naturally and he later left his job to pursue stand-up comedy full-time.

**Rosie**

Rosie has been a professional stand-up comedian for eight years. Rosie had always wanted to be a performer and originally attended university to read psychology, which was intended to form a backup plan. She later dropped out of her degree to fully pursue her desire to perform and went on to study elsewhere for a degree in theatre. Rosie later enrolled on a comedy course, though admits that it offered very little in the way of practical advice about creating and performing comedy but acknowledged that it afforded her confidence for her first few gigs. Whilst trying to break through on the circuit, Rosie worked as an administrator at a comedy club. Now an established stand-up comedian, Rosie has enjoyed sold-out runs at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and has fronted a stand-up comedy series for a major television network, as well as appearing on several high-profile stand-up comedy television programmes and panel shows.

**Sarah**

Whilst at drama school, Sarah was told by her teacher that she would never be a serious actress on account of always trying to make people laugh. After a stint abroad as a hotel entertainer, Sarah returned to the UK and upon being labelled work-shy by her then-boyfriend and told to get a 'proper' job, Sarah gained office-based employment at the BBC. Sarah booked herself onto a comedy course with a graduation showcase competition and finished in last place having 'died' on stage in front of all of her friends and work colleagues. Sarah considered this to be the worst night of her life up to that point. Sarah's second gig

was a gong style competition which she won, her third gig was another gong style competition in which she lasted one minute and three seconds before being booed off by the audience. At Sarah's fourth gig, she was supposed to perform for five minutes but ended up doing eleven minutes as it went so well. Sarah has been a professional stand-up comedian for fifteen years.

**Sam**

Sam started performing stand-up comedy after an injury put an end to his career as a circus performer and he has been a stand-up comedian for twenty-five years. Sam performs all over the world and is a tour support act for a few well-known comedians with whom he has been friends since long before they found commercial success and fame. Sam described himself as a stalwart of the circuit and pointed out how much the circuit had changed. While most of his early work coming from word of mouth, Sam was now having to market himself and maintain an online profile.

**Peter**

Peter has been a professional stand-up comedian for twenty years, having previously worked as an upholsterer by day with a nightly moonlight as a DJ at clubs, discothèques and northern soul events. Peter had always wanted to attempt stand-up comedy but did not know how to go about it. His first ever attempt at stand-up comedy was an open-mic gig, which also happened to be the first time he had ever set foot in a comedy club. Peter was accompanied to his first-ever gig by his then-girlfriend and now wife. He described being bitten by 'the bug' and explained that visiting the club and getting on stage became a weekly ritual. Peter was open about his near misses with television success, having made one television appearance alongside a couple of fellow stand-up comedians from the circuit, both of whom went on to become household names. Peter was candid about how he had to reconcile himself to the fact that he is too old for television, whilst remaining stoic about his position and believing the job to be a privilege and not work.

**Josie**

Josie has been a professional stand-up comedian for ten years. Before attempting stand-up comedy, Josie worked in a biscuit factory and did a stint as a sex and relationship education

teacher in secondary schools. Following her graduation from drama school, the casting panel at an audition told Josie that she was funny and suggested she consider a career in comedy. Following this, Josie booked her first-ever gig and at an all-female comedy night, which she compared somewhat self-deprecatingly to the Paralympics. Josie soon began amassing open spots and then started getting paid work on the circuit. Josie has performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and at the time of her participation was nominated for an award at a major comedy festival.

**Michael**

Michael has been a professional stand-up comedian for over twenty years and is a stalwart of the comedy circuit. Michael runs a comedy club and has given many household names their first ever gigs. Instead of gigging all over the country, Michael has three gigs each week where he is the resident compere. Michael also works as an actor and has appeared in stage plays and television sitcoms.

**Johnny**

Johnny has been a professional stand-up comedian for over twenty years. He previously performed in a low-charting boyband, worked in a young offender institution and as a delivery driver for Marks and Spencer. One night, Johnny reluctantly went along as an audience member to a comedy with a friend who kept telling him that he should attempt stand-up comedy. The gig was something of a transformative experience for Johnny and he described how it left his head spinning. After his first-ever gig, Johnny was paid forty pounds in cash for ten minutes, which it had taken him a whole day to earn at the institution. Johnny’s third ever gig was a high-profile new comedian competition, which he won. Johnny soon quit his day job and turned professional. At the time of his participation in the study, Johnny described how he was feeling trapped as a stand-up comedian, unable to face the prospect of returning to working for somebody else were he to quit stand-up comedy.

**Harry**

After completing his degree, Harry had planned to be a teacher but ended up working in house removals before a stint as a receptionist. Harry became interested in circus skills and obtained work as an entertainer at a major tourist attraction. Harry later took part in a

television documentary and was tasked with being a stand-up comedian for a night at a comedy club. He was supposed to put together a six-minute routine but ended up performing for 12-minutes and getting a standing ovation. The proprietor of the comedy club then booked Harry for a weekend's worth of paid gigs. A local, eminent stand-up comedian and now household name had heard about Harry. After attending a gig, the comedian in question invited Harry to be their tour support act and later cast him in their television shows. Harry has been a professional stand-up comedian for twenty years.

### 4.2.1 "It's All I've Ever Been Good At" – Introducing Adam

It was a Monday evening and approaching seven-thirty as I made my way from the station, across the city centre, down the street and in the direction of the comedy club where I was due to meet Adam. I had visited this club before with three other participants on separate occasions. I walked through the main entrance and was greeted by Tony the doorman who recognised me as he always did albeit with a sense of amusement. "Are you still knocking around?" he said to me, I chuckled but found myself ever so slightly unnerved. Tony assured me that I knew where I was going and he let me through into the main auditorium, which was already beginning to fill up with audience members.

I slalomed around the tables and chairs surrounding the stage and made my way through a door at the back of the stage, navigating the kitchen space and climbing the two flights of stairs that led to the green room. There are photographs of now household names who played at the club in years gone by adorning the walls. In the green room and sat on a sofa was Adam, he was flicking through a notebook, scribbling and tapping his pen. Adam shook my hand, told me to take a seat and as I sat down, he did a double-take, "have you never done comedy, cause you look like an act?" I laughed off the suggestion, Adam remarked with enthusiasm "you've got the look, he's got the look".

On this night, Adam was the only professional stand-up comedian on the bill and found himself surrounded by amateurs. The gig is a competition where first-timers, novices and newbies attempt to perform stand-up comedy for five minutes without being gonged, carded, or booed off the stage by the audience. Such a quest was fuelled by the hope of

lasting the full five minutes and being rewarded with an opportunity to perform in an open spot at the comedy club on a professional night.

Adam has been a professional stand-up comedian for sixteen years. Before this, Adam worked as a technician at a comedy club before going on to try stand-up comedy himself when an act failed to turn up one night. Adam was at something of a turning point in his career for a myriad of reasons. One of which was having been represented by the same agent for twelve years his contract was soon to expire. Adam had re-signed and renewed with his agent several times over the years but he had now made the decision to part ways and become independent. This meant that rather than his agent handling his diary, bookings and overall accrual of work and assurance of income, Adam would be doing all of this himself and he appeared to be looking forward to it very much.

*"It's the most drawn-out break up ever. I signed a one-way street contract that benefitted me not one jot, locked me in, the problem is they're really close friends, but I feel like a prisoner who's about to get out for good behaviour, but I want to shank a guard on my way".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

During my time with Adam, it was clear that up until a few years ago, he had enjoyed the trappings of the working hours and environment. Adam was consuming alcohol, partying after gigs with fellow stand-up comedians, enjoying a city-centre lifestyle and happily surrendering a percentage of his earnings for his agent to look after the admin he openly admitted he was too lazy to do himself.

*"Years ago when I was living in Manchester city centre, I didn't wanna do the admin, I wanted to pay someone else a chunk to do it, you tell me where I am, you sort it, they did the work, I'm looking at my outgoings going there is a big chunk that's unnecessary".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

In the last three years, Adam had married and become a father for the first time. It was clear that this appeared to have triggered something of a shift in work ethic. Adam recognised his status as a well-established performer on the circuit, well-connected with promoters, well-thought-of and capable of generating his workload, all without submitting twenty per cent

of his income to his agent. Adam was in demand on the circuit as a compere and headline act. He gigged most nights of the week and had a busy diary. Although parting ways with his agent and going independent would mean more work for Adam, it would also enable him to spend more time with his family.

*"I'm looking at my diary going I know all these people, and I could do it all myself without giving up a chunk…"*

*"…Four, five nights a week, on a quiet week you can even have four nights off, but usually I've a couple of nights off, sometimes you hit a busy period where you'll have one night off in two weeks…There will be loads more work now admin wise but factoring in the twenty per cent I won't have to give them I think I'm gonna end up with exactly the same amount of money in my pocket with an extra day off a week".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Despite being eager to leave his agent, Adam's excitement was tinged with nerves about going independent. Adam did tell me that he would not rule out abandoning his independent future and signing with a more high-profile agent who could take him to the next 'level'. I took this to mean television appearances or perhaps more lucrative live work such as corporate gigs or supporting famous television comedians on their national tours. It was clear that Adam's future in stand-up comedy was something he was pondering – from leaving his agent, going independent, missing television and commercial success to feeling as though he was bumping his head on the ceiling of the circuit. Adam contemplated his worst fear being realized, that is that he might suddenly realise he does not want to be a stand-up comedian anymore.

*"I don't wanna do this anymore, it's my worst fear, going I don't want to do comedy anymore, it's all I've ever been good at, it's all I wanna do, like all my eggs are in this basket".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

### 4.2.2 "Do I Look Like a Racist Grandad?" – Introducing Dave

For two nights, I observed Dave as he was gigging in the same comedy club. Dave had asked me to meet him at his hotel, which is where he would be staying for the duration of his time in the city and at the expense of the club. I arrived early and found myself a seat by the lifts in the hotel foyer, Dave told me to ask the reception desk to call up to his room to let him

know when I had arrived. Aside from the two members of staff on reception and me, the hotel foyer was both silent and empty.

A few minutes later, a bell jingled. It was the hotel lift, the doors separated and Dave stepped out. Dave cuts an imposing figure, he is over six-foot tall and has a big, strong build, cleanly shaven head and an appearance many would perceive as intimidating. Dave's exterior conjures up comparisons with that of a nightclub doorman of yesteryear and he did not look like somebody one would try to initiate fisticuffs with on a dark night. Dave's on-stage act was the antithesis of that which audiences would perhaps expect based on his appearance; his on-stage material tackled gender, identity and sexual politics, race and ethnicity, popular culture and political theory.

Dave has been a professional, full-time stand-up comedian for over twenty years. Dave had always talked about wanting to try stand-up comedy and when his flatmate bought him a comedy course as a gift, he attempted stand-up for the first time at the age of forty. Whilst attending the comedy course Dave was a mature student and in the process of completing his master's degree. Dave was also working as a part-time lecturer, having previously worked in high-end menswear and fashion.

*"So I'd done a BA and then I was doing my MA part-time, so I was in a position to pursue being a comedian. I was in-between jobs if you like, which means being an open spot, so I started being an open spot when I was about forty-one, did the course, left it for a while… I'm sixty-one now, and it was about twenty years ago, so whenever that is, that's when it was, I'm not quite sure, ninety-six maybe, and then I started being an open spot, you know".*

*(Extract from interview, Dave)*

It was this flexibility on completing the comedy course and being in-between employment that meant Dave was able to pursue stand-up comedy as a viable career. Dave was clear that at this point in his life, he needed to be able to earn money through stand-up comedy and progress to making a living through working as a comedian. Fortunately, live stand-up comedy was a rapidly expanding industry and Dave appeared to break through onto the live comedy circuit at the 'right' time.

*"I started doing it, started doing open spots and within a couple of years I was earning a living being a stand-up comedian. I could only start actually doing it because I had children, I could only start if I thought I could earn a living out of doing it. And at the time I started, there was a sort of boom in stand-up comedy, mostly engendered by a club called Jongleurs who had a chain of comedy clubs, so it meant that you could earn a living and I very quickly got into the system and was earning a living as a stand-up comedian. It was a thriving, a thriving industry at that time, more than it is now".*

*(Extract from interview, Dave)*

After a couple of years performing in an open spot capacity, Dave was soon making his living as a professional comedian. Dave refers to this period within the industry as if it were the halcyon days. The now omnipresent gong-style competitions for aspiring first-timers had not yet taken hold and Dave's turnaround from being an open spot to a professional was much quicker than it seemingly would be now for new comedians. As Dave describes it, the industry was thriving and the Jongleurs club chain was running a sizeable operation of gigs around the country, which generated plentiful work for circuit comedians.

*"There weren't so many competitions, the culture of comedy competitions hadn't been instigated at that time… in those days what happened is you went to a club, say The Comedy Store, as an open spot and the aim was to have such a good gig that the next time you came back they paid you and that's what being an open spot was when I started. Now, as you probably know, there's a whole culture, a whole, there's lot of clubs where lots of people are just open spots for the rest of their life, they have no intention of being a professional comedian, they're happy to be doing it on that amateur level, and that's been one of the biggest changes in the years that I've been doing it".*

*(Extract from interview, Dave)*

What seemed to distinguish Dave from his fellow performers was just how accomplished he seemed to be on the circuit. Dave's on-stage act was honed to the finest detail and his on-stage material was polished, every beat, line and intonation was measured. There was a complete clarity and precision to his on-stage persona and appearance, which steered much of his material.

*After finishing the ironing, Alan put his shirt on, and Dave put his on. Dave looked in the mirror a couple of times and asked Alan "do I look like a racist grandad?" Alan told him he did, and Dave said, "good, cause if I don't look like a racist grandad my act doesn't work". Dave then removed the shirt and hung it back up again.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Dave)*

I came to learn quite quickly how well-respected Dave is by his contemporaries and colleagues. Many of the stand-up comedians featured in this research were entirely unprompted in their praise of Dave. Dave graced many comedian's lists of favourite performers to watch and was viewed as somebody consistently headlining gigs, being creative and committed to advancing their craft. During fieldwork, I did ask participants about their favourite performers on the circuit and many would instantly mention Dave's name first.

*"You can't control the rest, the progression and becoming a star there's a lot of variables and maybe you make mistakes, sometimes you hit a level of ability where you're just naturally so good you'll go and then there's a grey area where people are very good but haven't positioned themselves but what you can do is do what* Dave *is doing, you can become a fucking legend".*

*"He's very well thought of, he's been going for ages, always got new stuff, really smart and he loves it… I've got loads of time for anyone who's been going donkeys and still loves it and loves the craft".*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes)*

At the end of our time together, Dave pondered what motivated him as a professional stand-up comedian working and performing on the live comedy circuit. Dave considered relevance, intelligence, and creativity, but it appeared that it ultimately came down to stand-up comedy being his way of earning a living and providing for his family.

*"I wonder if not being a comedian you want to be or thinking you're not as good as you should be or as relevant as you should be is a good thing, you know the thing that drives you, what really drives me is not an intellectual thing necessarily, though I have intellectual ambitions with comedy, I think it's just earning a living, that more like a craftsperson more like a bricklayer or something."*

*"If I'm not funny then I don't get booked then I don't eat, pay my rent, feed my kids, so I have a fear of that, this fear of, and I wonder if that's the thing that, I always seem to be skint, I'm a headline act, everywhere, but it's not, we're not earning the money we used to earn, so some weeks I'm earning the same as a bus driver or a road sweeper in reality, cause I'm only working a couple of days, if I worked every day it'd all be alright… So sometimes, I will think my biggest motivation to make it be good is I need to earn the money".*

*(Extracts from interview, Dave)*

## 4.3 Introducing the Comedy Clubs

As I have introduced the stand-up comedians who participated in this research, it is relevant to introduce and profile some of the settings I frequented. Each comedy club is different and has its characteristics and quirks – from the layout of the auditorium and performance space to the backstage area and the facilities on offer. While some comedy clubs are modern and flashy, others are tired and shabby. All of the settings were unique and boasted characteristics considered by the comedians as either conducive or detrimental to the performance of stand-up comedy.

In this part of the chapter, I provide a synopsis of a small number of the venues I visited. I then go on to present a much more in-depth and vivid account of one comedy club. This particular comedy club, which I pseudonymously call 'The Chuckle Factory', was the venue I spent most of my weekends during fieldwork. It was also imbued with significant prestige by circuit comedians who ascribed it with a nirvana-like status and viewed it as the 'home' of live comedy. Hence, I afford it particular attention in order to convey a sense of what it is like to be in a comedy club and illustrate how the comedy club is a distinctive venue within the night-time economy.

All of the clubs depicted are specific venues operating as part of the night-time economy where stand-up comedians work and perform. Exploring the different spaces where comedians work builds a located picture of the working culture of comedians by situating their actions, interactions, behaviours, routines, and rituals in the context of the spaces that make up the live comedy circuit. The contents featured here originate from my fieldnotes and the descriptive observations I made as I navigated these venues during fieldwork.

**The longest-running comedy club in the city**

This comedy club has been operating for twenty years. It is open for live stand-up comedy four nights a week and runs a weekly new act competition. In the main entrance to the venue there is the box office and through another set of doors is the auditorium with a capacity for two hundred audience members.

Unlike comedy clubs which may boast theatre or cinema-style seating, at this comedy club the audience sit around tables and chairs in a cabaret-style set-up. The stage is raised high up and those audience members sat at the front are required to crane their neck upwards. At the back of the room are the bar and several booths. There is also a staircase that sweeps around the back of the room and leads to a balcony area with additional seating and booths.

At the side of the stage is a door that leads backstage. Indeed, a large part of the backstage area is occupied by the kitchen which serves food before and during the show. A staircase leads upstairs to the green room and some office space. The walls of the venue are adorned with old photos documenting shows from years gone by. The photos capture several well-known faces during their performances at the club when they were much younger. The green room door was decorated by a sign that read, '…comedians not performing on the night must not be in the green room'.

The green room was a cramped space consisting of two sofas and an empty fridge between them. On the other side of the room was a small bathroom. Affixed to the walls was a tray containing blank invoices for the stand-up comedians to complete and sign, certificates from charity fundraising events and something that caught my attention. This was a framed complaint letter from an audience member. The complaint detailed an interaction with a compere which left the audience member and complainant upset and offended. However, here it was displayed with some pride and the stand-up comedians readily mocked the letter and its sender.

**A comedy night in a pub and boxing gym**

This was one of the more unconventional venues I visited during fieldwork. The gig was staged in a pub that could be described as fairly neglected and not too dissimilar to The Jockey Pub from the Channel 4 drama 'Shameless'. The bar was in the corner of the room and continued to serve drinks and bin empty bottles during the performance, the glass smashing, banging rumbling over the sound of the performance. The stage was in another corner of the pub, framed between two speaker stands and on the stage was a pop-up banner with the logo of the comedy club emblazoned on it. The audience were sat around chairs, stools and tables, with some audience members standing by the fruit machines,

which also made various unwelcome noises during the performance. The makeshift green room space for the comedians was a fully-fledged and fitted out boxing gym. There was a full-size boxing ring in the middle, surrounded by weights, gym mats and punchbags suspended from the ceiling. The stand-up comedians sat on some battered leather couches next to the ring and took it in turns to bounce off the ropes.

**A comedy club in a basement**

This comedy club is in the basement of a popular pub in the city centre. Although the club is not purpose-built, it is a permanent residency and fully fitted out as a comedy club. It was small, intimate and claustrophobic in places. The backdrop was red velvet, theatrical style curtains, in front of which was a lightbox sign displaying the logo of the club. There was a small bar area in the back corner of the room.

The space had an audience capacity of one hundred and forty and audience seating was in long rows spanning the width of the room. The audience was seated on three sides surrounding the stage, some seats were raised and on the stage. Such was the closeness of the stage to the audience seating; the incoming stand-up comedian had to squeeze past audience members to make it to the microphone stand. One stand-up comedian explained how performers feel about the audience being so close to the stage.

*"This is what we call the bear pit, like being in with the lions, they're right there in your face".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes)*

Stage right and just behind a bank of seats was a black curtain, behind which was the makeshift backstage area. Directly behind the curtain was a sound and lighting desk, where the technician sat and worked. There was the option of two chairs or a corner step to sit on. Pinned to a corkboard on the wall was the running order for the show and this was timed to the minute, listing each stand-up comedian performing on the night and the time that they were due on and off stage. The backstage space was a confined area and careful choreography was required on exiting and entering the space. There was very little room and just enough space for five people.

*"As you can see Thomas, most comedy clubs' dressing rooms are basically a cupboard".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes)*

**Another comedy club in a basement**

This is the longest-running comedy club in the city and is in the basement of a popular bar that has changed ownership over the years but has always been home to a comedy club. The club stages live stand-up comedy on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights with a capacity for one hundred and fifty audience members. A flight of concrete steps leads to the basement and through the doors at the bottom is the foyer area. There was a desk and two members of staff, the show manager and an usher who checked tickets and directed audience members to their seats. Next to the desk was a sign which listed the rules of the comedy club, mostly about avoiding talking and heckling during the show and switching mobile phones off. Through another set of doors is the auditorium. There was a sizeable bar running along the side of the room. The stand-up comedian waiting to be introduced on stage would loiter at the bar before walking through the audience and onto the stage. The auditorium was an expansive basement; it was dark, with low ceilings and an exposed brick aesthetic. It looked like it could have been a nightclub in a former life but was viewed as beneficial to the comedy.

*"A low ceiling, that helps. High ceilings make a worse gig, that's a fact".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes)*

At the back of the room was the 'comedians table' and this is where those performing on the night would sit and socialise. There was no green room or backstage facility here. In the middle of the table was a pile of drinks vouchers for each stand-up comedian, which entitled them to free drinks on the night. In the middle of the back wall was the stage, it was slightly raised and there was a backdrop of red velvet curtains. One participant made light of the backdrop during their performance.

*"The last time I saw a curtain like this, I never saw me grandad again".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes)*

### 4.3.1 Introducing 'The Chuckle Factory' – A Comedy Club

'The Chuckle Factory' stands in a prominent position within the nightlife and entertainment quarters of the city centre. The exterior of the building is simple brickwork, but the sizeable neon signage adorning the front of the building makes it visually striking. The distinctive and brightly lit neon frontage is in itself performative as it creates a sense of carnival and frames the building with a gloss of showbusiness pizzazz. 'The Chuckle Factory' is a purpose-built comedy club and houses three bars, a restaurant and a five-hundred seat auditorium over stalls and balcony level. The auditorium is situated in the basement of the building.

The green room in the club is one of the more luxurious on the circuit. There is a long leopard print sofa and a few matching stools. In the corner of the green room is a table of amenities, a fridge full of complimentary lager and beers for the performers, a water cooler, kettle, high-end coffee machine, a jar of biscuits and a bowl of fruit. The centrepiece of the green room is a dressing table spanning the length of the wall with mirrors and bulbs of the archetypal showbusiness dressing room variety. There were sliding French doors, which opened out onto a decked balcony overlooking the river. There was an outdoor seating area and this is where comedians would sit and smoke cigarettes or drink together before the show and during the interval.

Affixed to the wall of the green room was a television that relayed a live feed of the stage during the show. In the other corner of the room is an en-suite bathroom complete with a shower. A whiteboard attached to the wall displayed the running order of the show, down to the minute of each comedian's stage time. The whiteboard also listed the size of the audience *'…Audience? 200+'* and some areas for the *'…MC to plug – pizzas, other shows'*.

A long and clinical white corridor leads from the green room to the stage. An unsuspecting cupboard door opens to reveal a spiral staircase leading up to a small platform. There is a television on the wall which relays a live feed of the stage, another door that opens outwards, and a handwritten sticker conveniently stuck to the door reading '…don't fuck it up'. The door opens and immediately there is a black curtain, which brushed to one side leaves you standing on the stage looking out into an empty auditorium.

As the evening arrives and audience members file in through the doors of the comedy club, the neon lights go some way to set the tone for the audience, affirming their expectation to be entertained, designating the space inside as being distinctly theatrical. A slow and steady flow of people arrive at first but as showtime approaches, the bar area naturally and increasingly gets busier to the point of standing room only. This only engenders further anticipation amongst the audience. The weekend has arrived, and drinks are flowing, background music competes with the conversations of those socialising, the bar area fizzes with excitement as the audience anticipates the comedy show that awaits them, they know that they are in for a good night and the alcohol consumption only assists in getting them 'in the mood' for laughter. The audience is a mixture of couples, groups of friends and of course, hen and stag parties. These parties are easily identifiable by their large group numbers, homogeneity of gender, fancy dress accessories and inflatables, which only add to the sense of carnival. However, such paraphernalia is confiscated by the security staff under the rules of entry specified on the tickets. This club welcomes hen and stag parties but seeks to dissuade the raucous atmosphere that they can bring with them.

The auditorium steadily begins to fill up as audience members take their seats. Most of the seating is allocated on a first-come, first-served basis although audience members can pay more to be sat in the front rows and closer to the stage. The seating is tiered and surrounds the stage at one hundred and eighty degrees, resulting in a good view from every seat and creating a sense of intimacy. The 'good seats' as in those with a clear view of the stage become increasingly hard to come by as the audience rush and pile into the auditorium as showtime approaches. Interestingly, the first few rows of seating are not occupied with any sense of urgency, instead audience members tend to begin seating themselves from the rear, side sections of the stalls and the balcony. This is likely due to wanting to watch the show from a 'safe' vantage point to avoid the 'comic gaze' and becoming a part of the show.

In the auditorium, the lights are soft and low, creating a sense of intimacy in the space. There is background music playing and audience members venture back and forth to the bar. The stage is illuminated by fixed spotlights and theatrical smoke is pumped into the stage area emitting quite the distinct smell, the kind of smell you only really come across in theatres or nightclubs.

‘The Chuckle Factory’ stage is minimalistic. In terms of a backdrop, this is simply a brick wall, which has taken on an essential quality in comedy clubs. There is a simple black curtain draped to the side of the stage, covering the door from which the incoming comedian appears onto the stage. There is a complete absence of a proscenium arch and the archetypal red velvet theatrical curtains associated with theatrical performance. The stage is uncluttered and bordering on bare aside from the microphone in a microphone stand and a wooden stool. Indeed, the combination of a brick-wall backdrop, microphone in a microphone stand and stool have become iconic and emblematic of stand-up comedy, the stripped-back theatricality, the simplicity of the form and the intimacy between performer and audience.

Several factors signal the start of the show - the doors to the auditorium close, the background music gets progressively louder and becomes integral to the building of atmosphere and excitement in the audience. As the lights are dimmed further, only the stage spotlights remain, which focuses the full attention of the audience towards the stage. The excitement continues to build, and the buzz of the audience increases, reaching its peak as the compere is introduced and appears from behind the curtain, striding towards the microphone stand as applause ripples around the auditorium.

Once the show has ended, the theatrical veneer of ‘The Chuckle Factory’ has already started to fade. The audience members have left the auditorium and begin to depart the premises. The life and atmosphere that they bring to the club have already started to diminish. The stage is swiftly stripped of its theatrical paraphernalia – the microphone and stand have been packed away; the spotlights are switched off; background music is no more, and the smoke has evaporated. The house lights are on full brightness, banishing any remaining theatrical atmosphere and bringing stillness to the club, leaving it feeling a little cold and empty.

The houselights and the absence of audience members reveal the previously camouflaged blemishes of the club, which now detract from the overall showbusiness gloss. The worn upholstery on the flip-down seats is exposed and the drinks stains on the carpets are visible. The space looks and feels distinctly less theatrical and has lost some of its magic. All that

remains is the detritus left behind by the audience, discarded beer cups, empty wine glasses and pizza boxes – all artefacts of the venue having been full of life only an hour or so earlier and leaving the distinct aroma of stale alcohol and the smell of sweat, up to five-hundred people having been packed into the room.

The excitement of the audience and the buzz of the performance is long gone. The club is silent and mostly vacant aside from the front of house staff who remain for the clean-up operation. The atmosphere and energy that the audience bring to the venue have come and gone for another night. The front of house team gets to work to ready the club for the next night or prepare it to remain empty until the following weekend. While less than pleasant smells linger and the cosmetic blemishes of the venue are now there to be seen, there remains something romantic about the sense of stillness and emptiness of 'The Chuckle Factory' auditorium after it has been busy with paying audience members laughing, applauding and revelling in the on-stage performances of the appearing comedians. It feels strange that a space reliant on a mass gathering to bring it to life is now empty. Much like the empty theatre, the comedy club remains something of a dormant space until a couple of hours before showtime. In that sense, the comedy club has a transitory quality to it, it operates of a weekend and after dark, only to close its doors again until the next night or following weekend.

As late-night arrives and 'The Chuckle Factory' falls silent as the show has come to an end and most of the audience has departed to the bar or moved on elsewhere to other venues. Outside of the comedy club, the bars, pubs, and clubs begin to thrive. The soundtrack to the city's nightlife can be heard – the shouting, singing and chanting of groups of people on their night out, the horns of cars and taxis as they pass by and dodge those carelessly crossing the busy city centre roads. The dance music being played in the nearby bars and nightclubs echoes out into the street. The auditorium of 'The Chuckle Factory', like so many other comedy clubs, is situated below street level, deep in the basement of the building. Thus, the auditorium functions as a 'bunker' for both comedian and audience, offering a cocoon of sorts, if only for the duration of the show, from the pleasure-seeking and partygoing of the night-time economy that is in full swing outside and at street level.

Exiting ‘The Chuckle Factory’, the comedian is thrust into the hustle and bustle of the night-time city centre and the carnivalesque nature of Friday and Saturday nights. They are surrounded by the Friday-Saturday crowds of revellers who inhabit the city-centre streets sampling the offerings of the night-time economy and its businesses of pleasure, seeking to have fun and lose themselves in a haze of intoxication. The comedian has to navigate the crowds queuing for bars and clubs, lingering and loitering in the designated smoking and al-fresco areas, slaloming between the drunken bodies and congestions of clubgoers huddled together. In the absence of a formal ‘stage door’ – the comedian usually enters and exits the venue through the same doors as the audience.

On their way into ‘The Chuckle Factory’ and many other comedy clubs, the comedian generally goes unnoticed. However, in leaving the venue having just performed on stage, they can be recognised by audience members. In such instances, the comedian responds to any attention with a nod or wave, hoping to maintain a fleeting encounter. The comedian is at work, distinctly sober and seeks to avoid those drinking and partying and the erratic interactions that can follow. This results in stand-up comedians usually opting to make a swift getaway and sometimes leaving the club via a fire exit or goods entrance, not only because they are on the clock and in a rush as they try to make it to the next gig on time.

## 4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced all the professional stand-up comedians who participated in this ethnographic research and sketched their ‘comic’ life histories. This chapter has also provided a synopsis of some of the different comedy clubs I visited during fieldwork. In this chapter, I also include a more in-depth account and profile of the pseudonymously named ‘The Chuckle Factory’ to provide a vivid descriptive account of what it is like to be in a comedy club as it comes to life as night-time arrives. The introduction of the stand-up comedians and the rich description of some of the settings where this ethnography is based set the scene for the discussion of the research findings which follow in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

# Chapter 5: The Working Culture of Stand-Up Comedians

## 5.1 Introduction

The findings section of this thesis is structured thematically. I begin this presentation of findings by exploring the theme of the working culture of stand-up comedians and I do so through the use of three sub-themes, which are outlined below.

**"The Language of Advanced Comedy Is Not for Everyone"**

This sub-theme considers the notion of 'hack' which forms part of the occupational jargon of comedians and comes to represent on-stage material that is considered by the comedians to be unoriginal, obvious or somewhat stale. Stand-up comedians who deliver this kind of material are deemed to be 'hack'. They are then looked down on by their fellow comedians and referred to disparagingly. The notion of 'hack' underpinned the status ranking of stand-up comedians and created and sustained a hierarchy on the comedy circuit.

**"We're the Night People That Take the Money from the Day People"**

This sub-theme looks at the occupation as one that is firmly embedded within the night-time entertainment economy and sees stand-up comedians plying their trade after hours and of a night-time. Comedians highlighted the contrast between their working hours and those of their audiences and bystanders. Based on their working hours, comedians distinguished themselves from the wider public and this was underlined by a sense of superiority; a perspective that seeped into the ways comedians referred to non-comedians. This captures how stand-up comedians construct their shared identity as an occupational group.

**"I'm Just a Driver Who Drives Four Hours for Twenty Minutes of Glory"**

This sub-theme explores the travelling and touring that epitomized the working lives of stand-up comedians. This was an aspect of the occupation that was viewed as something of a necessary evil which came to overshadow the on-stage dimensions of the occupation. Being a self-employed, freelance stand-up comedian on the live comedy circuit means having to travel around the country wherever they are booked to appear. Stand-up comedy

emerges as a solitary occupation whereby the off-stage personality of comedians is just as important as their on-stage personality.

## 5.2 “The Language of Advanced Comedy Is Not for Everyone”

Stand-up comedians were critical of their fellow performers who they considered to perform ‘hack’ material and be apathetic about developing new material. ‘Hack’ is derived and abbreviated from ‘hackneyed’ and forms part of the occupational jargon of comedians. ‘Hack’ is used interchangeably to refer to on-stage material that is obvious, unoriginal, cliched or plagiarised and to refer to performers who have been using the same material for years.

There was a stigma attached to being ‘hack’ and those who fitted the bill were generally looked down on by their fellow comedians and subject to scrutiny and disapproval. Such scrutiny was irrespective of how well the on-stage material of a ‘hack’ comedian was received by an audience. ‘Hack’ is self-policed by the comedians and this led to the emergence of a hierarchy amongst performers aligned to how original or indeed ‘pure’ a stand-up comedian is. ‘Pure’ being the term one stand-up comedian, Johnny, used to refer to the antithesis of ‘hack’. Those deemed to be ‘hack’ were placed at the lower echelons of the hierarchy in comparison with their ‘pure’ counterparts who reside in the upper strata of the circuit. In the following extract from my fieldnotes, Adam puts forward his perspective on what constitutes ‘hack’ stand-up comedy.

*“Hack and basic stuff, scousers steal, hack as fuck, I’m married, it’s great to be here but obviously I’m married so it’s great to be anywhere, it’s so boring, it’s so repetitive, it’s what other comics say, don’t get me wrong I’ve gone on and said oh I feel tired cause I’ve had a baby, it’s so well-trodden”.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Adam identifies jokes that play upon stereotypes and pivot on subject matters that are already well-excavated comedic territory, which audiences may have heard like-for-like perspectives on before. This suggests a sense of repetition and tedium as underlining on-stage material that is ‘hack’ - comedians delivering jokes that are perhaps stock lines or variations of stock lines that other performers use.

*"A hack comic is one of my bugbears, it's part of the deal with loving comedy, that you also feel so tortured by it".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Of all the stand-up comedians I met during fieldwork, Adam was particularly critical of 'hack' stand-up comedy and comedians alike. This perhaps demonstrates the overlap between stand-up comedy as work but also as a creative and artistic endeavour underpinned by a passion for the craft. Such was the disapproval with which 'hack' was regarded, some comedians actively sought to avoid topics they viewed as being well-trodden or what other performers talk about on stage, including Dave.

*"I don't like to do what anyone else is doing, if I see someone with a topic I don't like to, I like to have my own topics… I don't really like talking about kids, I don't like seeing comedians talk about kids, now I know I talk about my son but it's a get to talking about attitudes about homosexuality, it's not to talk about my son or funny things my son says, so there's things I avoid like the plague".*

*(Extract from interview, Dave)*

Like Dave, many stand-up comedians pursued originality and placed importance on being original, not only in their choice of subject matter but in their interpretation of a subject. Although Adam and Dave do not consider themselves to be 'hack' they do acknowledge that there are some moments in their act that may border on being 'hack'. However, Adam and Dave see these moments as mere entry points to their original routines, therein both absolving themselves of being 'hack'. This is a practice that makes an early reference to a hierarchy amongst stand-up comedians and how it is produced. Whilst Dave articulated a reluctance to performing material about his children, Adam was also eager to avoid what he perceived as being the tropes of a male stand-up comedian who has recently married and become a father.

*"I'm really reluctant about anything that concerns being a dad, I don't really want to get typecast as a dad comic, I will do stuff about being a dad if it's excellent and the stuff I've got so far I wouldn't really call it excellent".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

One stand-up comedian, Rosie, was also critical of how 'hack' material was noticeable amongst male stand-up comedians. Similar to the example Adam provided earlier in

defining what constitutes 'hack' material – Rosie identified derogatory comments towards one's marriage and indeed wife as being emblematic of 'hack' material, well-trodden and unoriginal comedic territory.

*"A man just goes on and says how much he hates his wife and that they don't have sex".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rosie)*

Fatherhood and relationships emerged as examples of potentially 'hack' material and Adam suggests there has to be the application of certain criteria as to whether such material 'cuts the mustard' and is included in his act. This indicates that a 'hack' subject matter may be permissive if the material itself is original or of a good standard. Adam was particularly critical of stand-up comedians whose material is grounded in parenthood, marriage and relationships, which Adam and another comedian, Paul, framed as being strong contenders for 'hack' subjects.

*"There's so many comics especially around here who do material about their wives, I almost have a stricter filter process for that stuff, if I have an idea and it involves Anna it's gotta be funny, it's gotta be really funny because I don't wanna be a comic who's like, my wife".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

*"I don't really, relationships, try and avoid it, everyone does it, I talk about me and just how shit I am at life, I feel like that's unique, because you can't get up and talk about me, only I can talk about being me".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Paul)*

Between being 'hack' or 'pure' is an underlying tension between the public and private self the stand-up comedian presents on stage and how this is reflected in their material. Stand-up comedians are seeking to avoid well-travelled subject matters that would be considered inauthentic and 'hack' on account of offering little insight into the private self of the performer. Whereas in Paul's work, he seeks to avoid material about relationships due to many other stand-up comedians also doing it. In a similar sense, Adam addresses how he seeks to avoid the typecast of being a comedian whose on-stage material is focussed on their wife.

That is unless the material in question is viewed to be of a particular quality. What is interesting here is how the material that would be viewed as a 'hack' subject may be suitable to include in one's act. Throughout fieldwork, I observed the delivery of on-stage material, which whilst it resonated with an audience and made them laugh, would still receive the disapproval of other comedians who would identify it as exemplifying 'hack'. After one gig, Adam reflected on his performance and highlights one of the difficulties that can pervade working life on the comedy circuit and affect one's ability to avoid 'hack' material.

*"It's Friday night, it's a drinking, partying sort of crowd, they're out for a night out and I'm trying to combine funny stuff that works in the sets and also serve my own purpose which is to feel like I'm progressing my art, you know, I am literally trying to balance what works with what I think is good and if you watch what Phil did there compering, that's what works well, fucking men and women go out differently, men are like this but women are like this, Jesus that is seriously fucking old cliché stuff, that material is gonna work but it's exactly the example of hack".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Adam makes an example of another comedian who performed a routine based on the perceived differences between how men and women behave on a night out. Adam emphasises the dichotomy between 'hack' material being viewed as inferior yet still making an audience laugh. This identifies a tension between being creative and original in the face of other comedians delivering material that is unoriginal and unambitious but is still enjoyed by a comedy club audience.

Working and performing as a stand-up comedian on the live comedy circuit, there is perhaps a trade-off to be made between what material works well in the comedy club and what fulfils the impulses and ambitions a stand-up comedian has for their work. This exemplifies a battle between choosing art and playing the club. A disdain emerges for those who are 'hack' and still able to earn their living as professional stand-up comedians irrespective of this label. 'Hack' was also regarded as constituting laziness on the part of stand-up comedians. However, there is a multitude of factors underpinning the manifestation of 'hack' and to view it as a creative apathy or being artistically idle may be reductionist. The sense of familiarity and perhaps confidence associated with well-trodden

topics or one’s well-established material the stand-up comedian may have been delivering for years underpins a reluctance to move away from ‘hack’ material and develop new material. One performer, Johnny, discussed how throughout his twenty-year career as a professional stand-up comedian he had drifted through phases of being ‘hack’.

*“I was unoriginal and hacky as shit before, I think it was just a lot of stock lines, like put-downs and I can’t even remember but stock lines will definitely get you a bad reputation. I did that for a long time and I think I got a reputation of not being pure because of that, which I didn’t really care about, it didn’t bother me as such, because I was still getting the work and getting paid but I think that would have made a lot of original pure comics quite angry”.*

*(Extract from interview, Johnny)*

The notion of being ‘pure’ represents authenticity in stand-up comedians who deliver not just original on-stage material but continue to turnover new material as opposed to leaning on established material for years and years. Notions of ‘pure’ and ‘hack’ become a way through which hierarchy is initiated and superiority enacted amongst circuit comedians. While being ‘hack’ arises from unoriginal or cliché material, it can also stem from the failure of comedians to develop new material, replace and replenish their established existing material. Johnny makes an interesting point here that chimes with the earlier sentiment expressed by Adam regarding ‘hack’ material still resonating and making audiences laugh. Johnny suggests that the motivation to develop new material can become disincentivised by the ability to still gain paid work on the comedy circuit with material that one has been performing for years or which other comedians would consider as ‘hack’. Despite Johnny acquiring a reputation from his peers for being ‘hack’ he remained unruffled as he continued to earn his living as a comedian.

While audience members retain the ability to validate stand-up comedians during the on-stage performance through laughter or non-laughter, comedians validated their fellow performers and the status ranking based on notions of being ‘pure’ or ‘hack’ underpin this. To be ‘pure’ affords one status on the circuit and amongst fellow stand-up comedians, whereas to be ‘hack’ sees one maligned.

Like Johnny, another stand-up comedian, Dave, recognised that for a period in his career he was operating in a perfunctory manner and was exhibiting 'hack' tendencies. Dave had an established twenty-minute act that continued to earn him his living on the circuit, which much like Johnny diluted any motivation to develop new material.

*"I think for many years I just went out to earn, there were periods in doing stand-up comedy where because it was a thriving industry I just went out to earn a living, had a few jokes, went out, knocked out a few jokes and I think for many years on and off that's pretty much how I operated, and I was still good enough but I think different people at different stages become in more control of what they're saying an what they're doing, and have an agenda or a strategy and it's taken me quite a long while to work that out so even though for maybe ten years of fifteen years I was out there being a successful circuit comic, there's more I could have been doing".*

*(Extract from interview, Dave)*

On one night of fieldwork, I found myself with Paul at a gig in a rural local theatre-cum-village hall. This arrangement evoked an atmosphere of what I imagined a comedy night in a working men's club of yesteryear would be like, the ticket price including a pie and pea supper. This gig was unlike the comedy clubs I had become accustomed to during fieldwork. 'Hack' stand-up comedy became a focus for Paul on this particular night as he shared the bill with comedians he considered to be the embodiment of 'hack'.

*The show was about to get underway, the compere John took to the stage, Paul made some comments about the level of 'hack' pervading the night, which we both laughed about, "give me a cheer if you're local", "give me a cheer if you're drinking", "give me a cheer if you're not drinking" were all comments Paul made to me, mocking the level of 'hack' within the compere's shtick.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Paul)*

Paul mocks the compere for making use of tired compering tropes. This notion of a hierarchy amongst stand-up comedians based on whether one is 'pure' or 'hack' prevails here as does the accompanying senses of superiority and inferiority. Such superiority arises from this sense of being 'pure' and is illustrated by Paul taking it upon himself to critique the compere who he deemed to be 'hack'. Paul does not view himself as a 'hack' comedian but rather one who is of 'pure' stature.

*The first act of the night Steve went on stage. Steve's act was much as he described "old school". There were a number of looks of disapproval and head shaking whilst Steve was on stage and the compere commented that his act was entirely borrowed, "it's all lifted". After Steve came off stage Paul went outside for another cigarette and I tagged along. Paul was shaking his head and said, "I just can't get over that, I'm doing the middle and he's getting the opener spot with that shit".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Paul)*

Interesting here is how the compere of the gig who Paul had earlier mocked as being 'hack' now joins in with a conversation that sees one of the other stand-up comedians being accused of joke theft, which is viewed as a form of misconduct in the stand-up comedy community. The opening act of the night, Steve, was the subject of much scolding from the other comedians who collectively claimed that Steve's on-stage material was stolen and attributable to other well-known performers.

On the night, Paul was the middle spot on the bill, which is typically viewed as the least prestigious position at a stand-up comedy gig given that one is neither tasked with opening nor headlining the show. Paul was flabbergasted by the hierarchy of this gig and that despite Steve's on-stage material apparently being stolen from other performers, he was in the more prestigious position on the bill. It was clear that Paul viewed Steve as a lesser stand-up comedian than himself. This further highlights how hierarchy and status ranking can unfold amongst comedians based on being either 'hack' or 'pure'.

*Paul remarked that Steve had been paid over double what he had, "he was paid more to do hack material that isn't even his own".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Paul)*

This hierarchy was constructed by stand-up comedians themselves. Certainly, the bookers of this gig did not appear to consider 'hack' or a lack of 'purity' in the same manner as the performers. This is reinforced through Paul's continued dismay, which came to a head when the wages were distributed at the end of the gig. Paul was being paid the least, whereas Steve was paid double the fee Paul was receiving, Paul was insulted and felt disrespected by this because he perceived Steve to be 'hack' and low-status, and undeserving of such a fee. There was the need for comedians to develop and generate new material or what was referred to amongst performers as the turnover of new material. Most performers have an

established and well-honed twenty-minute act, which over time they develop and generate new material for. However, there were some comedians with little to no turnover of new material who have been performing the same twenty-minute act verbatim night after night for many years. This was something that other stand-up comedians were also critical of.

*"Some comics just give up, they get an hour, half an hour and just give up and do that forever… You do some weekends and you say oh let's go for a pint afterwards at the hotel and they're like no I've gotta get back to the room and write and you're like you haven't written a fucking new joke for six months". Bill at this point returned, overheard and said, "or ten years even" as he popped his head around the corner of the door.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

*"I mean some comics have been going longer than me and all they have is a twenty-minute club set and it's stayed exactly the same, they're just repeating, you can tell, you can see it, they're dead behind the eyes, I couldn't do it, I just couldn't, you've got to entertain yourself I think, foremost, you've got to entertain yourself".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Peter)*

Both Jason and Peter are critical of stand-up comedians who have not deviated from their longstanding twenty-minute act and whose repertoires have remained unchanged for years. This chimes with earlier sentiments expressed by Johnny and Dave who reflected on their creative inactivity regarding developing new material. They saw this as informed by the ability to maintain paid work without having to keep their act afresh and put the underpinning work in. The self-policing of 'hack' amongst stand-up comedians also unfolded in the conflict between the generations of stand-up comedians, as one stand-up comedian Johnny highlighted.

*"There is a hierarchy in comedy and there can be a of bitterness on occasion from younger comics who feel we're hogging the headline spots or they think you're hack".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Johnny)*

Whilst those 'hack' comedians may be able to get the job done they can be viewed by younger performers who consider themselves to be 'pure' as less worthy of such work, as is evident in the episode involving Paul. It was apparent that to not just succeed, but to thrive on the comedy circuit creatively and professionally, it was necessary to continually turnover

new material and be original in content and approach. This work was also required if comedians were to be viewed favourably by their peers and contemporaries.

*"It's about the standards you've gotta hit, I really like how my life works out with getting doubles and you've gotta work your fucking nuts off now, he's from a generation where I reckon he earned his money a little bit easier and stuff changes, the more comics going I'm doing what I always used to do, I'm going that's not good enough anymore, that's what the difference is, it's not that the gigs are different or anything, you've been doing the same stuff for ten years".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

There was a sense that stand-up comedy was something of a shrinking industry with more stand-up comedians working and performing on the comedy circuit. There was also a feeling that fewer gigs were operating than there may have been previously. However, as Adam suggested it was those who do not develop their on-stage material and become stale or stray into 'hack' territory who may struggle to gain work. Adam refers to instances of comedians bemoaning the apparent lack of work available when this may not be the reason for their dwindling bookings. Instead, they have perhaps become the 'left behind' because the circuit has moved on and their material has remained the same.

Two stand-up comedians, Dave and Johnny, described the lack of incentive to develop new material as their work became about earning a living, and how this saw them slip into 'hack' territory. A lack of incentive to develop new material may be aligned to lethargy but it was apparent that trying out new material is accompanied by trepidation and a palpable fear of failure, which could reduce stand-up comedians to feeling like an amateur or beginner. This could go some way to explain the hesitancy of some performers to progress beyond their long-standing established material and leads to one becoming 'hack'.

*"Trying new stuff it's like going back to being a new comedian again, people can stick to their set for so long, they're then scared to do new stuff, they panic because they haven't been doing it, they don't write, but then where's your love for it".*

*"There's a lot of hack material out there and it's like, you don't need to play with the form but just be original, say something new, I feel sorry for them in some ways but also good I'm glad it's hard, I'm glad you got lazy and now you're feeling how hard it is, you have to work hard at some point".*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Rosie)*

Adam referred to the notion of an advanced language of stand-up comedy. Adam makes use of an analogy to clarify his perspective and compares stand-up comedy to the scientific discipline of physics. Adam suggests that whilst many might be able to understand stand-up comedy, not everybody can appreciate its more advanced counterpart, referring to both stand-up comedians and audiences.

*"The language of advanced comedy is not for everyone, it's not for all crowds, it would be easier to do Michael McIntyre, John Bishop, cause it works to more people but really good comedy and this is a very shoddy analogy, is like advanced physics where the workings of some people cannot be understood by most people who are even qualified in physics.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

While 'pure' stand-up comedians speak this advanced language of stand-up comedy due to their originality and creativity, 'hack' stand-up comedians do not. 'Hack' comedians could still thrive in front of the audiences on the live comedy circuit and continue to earn their living as professional stand-up comedians.

## 5.3 "We're the Night People That Take the Money from the Day People"

The night-time economy formed a backdrop throughout fieldwork and part of the distinctiveness of the occupation resides in its working hours being exclusively at night. Every gig I attended during fieldwork took place in the evening; the majority of shows at comedy clubs beginning at 8pm or 8:30pm. While some comedy clubs only staged one show nightly, other comedy clubs staged two shows nightly, an early show (7pm or 7:30pm) and a late show (9:30pm or 11pm). The line-up of stand-up comedians performing at the early and late show offerings of a comedy club is usually the same. The working hours of comedians are firmly embedded within the night-time economy. Indeed, many of the comedy clubs and venues that I visited are licensed premises and the doors are managed by security supervisors.

While stand-up comedians were out working, many others appeared to be engaging in their social, leisure and recreational time outside of their own working lives. This became a point of interest for stand-up comedians who contrasted their working hours with the seemingly

nine-to-five and Monday to Friday working hours of many others and their audiences. In contrasting their working hours with those of their audiences and the wider public, there was an accompanying sense of uniqueness participants were identifying with. They used their status as stand-up comedians and their working hours as ways in which to establish and distinguish themselves from others.

I followed one stand-up comedian, Dave, across the two nights he was gigging in the same comedy club. The club is located in a popular nightlife area of the city centre and is surrounded by nightclubs, pubs and bars. Dave was staying in a hotel a short walk away. On each of the two nights, Dave and I walked between the comedy club and the hotel before and after the gig. At the end of the first night, we exited the comedy club and started walking back to the hotel that Dave was staying in.

*"Shall we walk this way and see what's happening?" we strolled along, navigating our way through small huddles of people on a night out, Dave laughed at me with my carry satchel come briefcase, and said "weird isn't it that we've been working and everyone else is out".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Dave)*

Departing the premises to return to his hotel, Dave had to make his way through crowds of people on a night out, all socialising, smoking, drinking, lingering and loitering outside nightclubs and bars. Dave highlights what he considers to be the strange dynamic of him having only just finished work whilst those around him are out on the town. The next night, Dave expressed similar sentiments on the very same walk back to his hotel after the gig.

*As we walked along the road a group of people of similar age to me walked towards us all dressed up in partywear. Dave commented, "you see the way these girls are dressed for example, we're out at work, so being a comedian at work, I'm surrounded by people who are dressed to go out on a Saturday night, that's a very odd thing as well, we're out at work and it's everyone else's downtime".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Dave)*

Much like the night before, Dave again draws attention to this contrast between him being at work yet surrounded by people for whom it is their downtime and for whom Dave and his fellow stand-up comedians are providing the entertainment. One comedian, Michael,

encapsulated the sense-making of stand-up comedians regarding their working hours and how being approached by intoxicated audience members after the performance emphasised this contrast.

*“It’s funny because when we stop work for most people it’s the climax of their night so we’re a bit battered and resolutely sober and they’re absolutely mushed so you may as well be talking to an alien whether they’re saying nice things or nasty things”.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Michael)*

I followed Adam across two gigs one Saturday night. It was gone midnight and having started his working night at 7pm, Adam had finished performing at both of his gigs for the night. He was driving through the city centre and back to the hotel. The city centre was very much ‘alive’ as partygoers and revellers trailed the streets as we passed by them.

*Adam made a comment about the pedestrians, “all these guys on their night out and I’m just clocking off”.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

There is a sense of recognition from comedians as to perhaps the irony of the situation, if not a grumble about those seemingly out enjoying themselves whilst they, as performers, are out working or have just finished work for the night. Nevertheless, many comedians recognised how their working hours exemplified the uniqueness of their occupation and functioned as a way in which they could distinguish themselves from others. For stand-up comedians, this seemed to give them what appeared to be something of a sense of status and superiority.

I was walking through a city centre with Jason, it was around 8pm and the weekend was in full swing. Jason had just performed at his first gig of the night, and we were on our way towards his next gig. We passed a variety of cocktail bars, nightclubs and pubs as well as those making their way to these premises. As we walked through one nightlife hotspot, promotional staff from the various establishments had lined the streets armed with flyers and primed with patter. They stopped us in our tracks and tried to entice us into their respective venues under the promise and proviso of cheap drinks deals.

*"I detest that, every time, offering me a night out, I'm working mate, I'm at work".*

*"People are looking at us thinking we're just two lads on a night out, but I've just done something that's their biggest fear, even over dying mate, speaking in public".*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Jason)*

Jason's frustration with being on the receiving end of the promotional tactics employed by the staff of pubs, clubs and discotheques as he goes about his working night as a comedian is captured here. This frustration does not just come from Jason not wishing to be bothered but rather because this appears to align to his perceived sense of status as a stand-up comedian and the recurrence of being mistaken for being otherwise challenges this. Those seeking to lure Jason into their venues were unaware that Jason is a comedian going about his working night. Instead, they took him to be a man having a night out on the town with a friend. Jason emphasises in the second extract that by being a stand-up comedian he is engaging in an activity that he considers to be something most people fear doing, that is speaking to the public and attempting to make an audience laugh. Yet bystanders believe he is just somebody going about a night out. Jason is distinguishing himself as a comedian and the wider public and what emerges and is implicit here is a sense of superiority that accompanies this distinction he makes.

This experience of apparent anonymity clashes with Jason having just minutes earlier performed to an audience of five hundred people who ratified his status as a stand-up comedian. However, off stage and while strolling the streets to his next gig Jason is entirely anonymous. Jason appears to want others to appreciate his status as a comedian and acknowledge that he is not an 'everyday' member of the public. This offers insight into how this lack of recognition and the contrast in working hours sees comedians constructing their identities through their professional status. This is characterised by the frustration and dismay Jason feels at being mistaken for as he puts it "just two lads on a night out". During our time together, as well as instances of this ilk coming to illustrate Jason's perspective on his identity as a stand-up, he continued to distinguish between himself as a stand-up comedian and the wider public in other ways.

*"I used to find comedians very rock and roll, I can't be because I've got an addictive personality, a lot of comics are like that, but they're intelligent people, they're outside, they're not inside, there's the public and over here's the comedian, we're not present enough, there's four hundred people on a night out and we couldn't be further from it, we're working".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

A sense of isolation pervades this image of the stand-up comedian as an outsider and suggests that they exist on a periphery looking in on everybody else. Stand-up comedians are a part of the night out of audience members but only insofar as they are at work and providing entertainment for the audience.  Jason views himself and stand-up comedians generally as being different from the wider public, standing outside of conventional employment and as being outsiders.

This distinction comedians make between themselves and the wider public is reflected in their discourse and how they referred to non-comedians. In this talk it was clear that because of their status as a comedian they considered themselves to a have distinctive work culture, outside of conventional working practices, but also to be somewhat superior to those not in this occupation.

One stand-up comedian, Johnny, made use of a popular culture metaphor to highlight his reluctance to be considered not as a member of the general public but foremost as a stand-up comedian. This was grounded in his desire to be viewed as a 'somebody' rather than simply a member of the public, something Jason had also exhibited when as he became the target of nightclub promotional teams.

*"You want the adulation, it's needy, you don't want to be the general public, when you're up there you're a somebody, if they laugh you've been validated, everyone else is just muggles and it sets you up for the rest of the week, I'm easier to live with, I'm more cheerful, I improve at home".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Johnny)*

Johnny describes how stand-up comedy affords him the status of a 'somebody'. This is facilitated by the professed validation and adulation of his performance and the applause and laughter of the audience afford him. It is apparent that Johnny derives some aspects of

his self-worth from being a comedian. Of interest here is how being out at work and the adulation and validation this brings perhaps makes the more day-to-day off-stage aspects of his everyday life more palatable. During the rest of the week, Johnny can handle the more mundane aspects of his life because at the weekend and at work he is a stand-up comedian, he is on stage and distinguishable from the wider 'muggle' general public.

The term 'muggle' was of course popularised into mainstream discourse by the JK Rowling authored Harry Potter book series and film franchise. In that context, the term 'muggle' signifies an individual who, unlike their wizarding counterparts, does not have any magical abilities or skills. In this context, Johnny is using the term to represent those who are not stand-up comedians and he is not the only performer who uses this term of reference.

*"There's this thing where we call the public muggles, you know, they're civilians, they're not one of us".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rob)*

The otherness with which stand-up comedians regard those who are not comedians hence them being referred to as 'muggles' and likewise 'civilians', highlights the degree of superiority comedians afford themselves as an occupational group. In a subsequent interview with Johnny, he elaborated further upon the distinction he draws between comedians and non-comedians as well as his deployment of the term 'muggle' to refer to the latter.

*"Because you're not a member of the public anymore, what you are is what Rich said to me about four weeks ago…"you got to remember what my father told me, that you're the night person now, you're the night person that takes the money from the day person and that's what we do that's why we're here" (Johnny stops impersonating) and he's right, we're the night people that take the money from the day people and that's what am going to do forever… that's everybody else who's the muggle who produces the cash".*

*(Extract from interview, Johnny)*

This extract sees Johnny recounting a conversation with one of his fellow stand-up comedians, Rich, as they propped up the hotel bar after a gig one night. Much like Johnny and Rob's use of the term 'muggle' Rich also has his terms for distinguishing between

comedians and non-comedians and refers to the former as 'night people' and the latter as 'day people'. These references to 'day people' and 'night people' further highlight this contrast in the working hours of comedians but also how they construct this contrast as part of their occupational identity.

References to 'muggles', 'civilians' and 'day people' abound as ways in which stand-up comedians address and label the wider public. Rosie also articulated a sense of this distinction as she considered the differences between comedians and the wider public. In doing so, it was clear which one of the two groups she would rather be in the company of.

*"It is a weird one, thing is I think a lot of normal people are boring, comedians have to be politically aware and they have to be engaged in the world, they're funny and then hanging out with normal people is like booooo".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rosie)*

Much like Johnny, Rosie also appears to derive some sense of worth and status from being a stand-up comedian. Whilst other performers label the public as 'muggles', 'civilians' and 'day people' – suggesting them to be ordinary by comparison with themselves. Rosie too contributes to this routine of distinction-making and refers to non-comedians as being 'normal people'. In doing this, Rosie emphasises the prestige accorded to her won status as a comedian and this chimes with the 'somebody' status Jason and Johnny subscribe to.

## 5.4 "I'm Just a Driver Who Drives Four Hours for Twenty Minutes of Glory"

As I took my first few steps towards immersing myself in the UK comedy circuit, I was aware that there would be some legwork involved. However, I was naive as to just how much time I would spend journeying the many motorways that delivered the comedians I was travelling with to their gigs. The travelling and touring undertaken by stand-up comedians was extensive and very much part and parcel of the occupation and something which for many comedians encapsulated the occupation entirely. The time spent on the road could far exceed the time spent on stage and performing in front of an audience. While audiences only see the twenty minutes the comedian spends on stage performing, travelling and touring is one of the hidden backstage practices of their working lives and comedians were eager to emphasise this.

Stand-up comedians gigged all over the country performing at different comedy clubs and it was clear that being a comedian was a solitary existence. This was shaped not just by the time spent on the road but by the periods of inactivity between one weekend of gigs and the next. One would reasonably assume that the on-stage persona or personality of a performer is central to their professional success. On the contrary, the off-stage personality of a comedian was equally important, if not more important to getting by in the occupation.

The working week of stand-up comedians typically runs from Thursday to Saturday as these are the peak hours of the live comedy circuit. Only one comedy club I visited during fieldwork hosted live stand-up comedy seven nights a week. Most comedy clubs staged live stand-up comedy on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. Some comedy clubs also hold open-mic events on Sunday or Monday nights for amateur and aspiring comedians to perform, and which a professional stand-up always hosted. The working week(end) of stand-up comedians usually unfolded in one of the following ways – performing nightly at the same comedy club, performing at a different comedy club nightly or performing at the two same comedy clubs nightly, beginning with a performance at one comedy club before travelling to perform at another comedy club.

Life on the road as a stand-up comedian would vary from week to week, for example, one weekend could be spent in Manchester, the following weekend could be spent in Liverpool one night, Birmingham the next night and Sheffield the night after. While one weekend could be spent living out of a suitcase and staying in a hotel, another weekend could be spent travelling extensively for a gig one night, only to then drive home ahead of another gig in another comedy club elsewhere in the country the next night. In the following extract from my fieldnotes, Rosie reflects on her lifestyle as a stand-up and the travel involved.

*"So lifestyles, well it's a bit mad, so I've just come back from London today, then I'm going back there tomorrow for a few days for gigs then I'm doing the podcast in Newcastle before coming back to Manchester for a gig that night".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rosie)*

I was observing Rosie in the North West at one of her gigs, she had travelled from London that day for the gig that night. Over the next few days, Rosie's workload was widespread

and so too was the journeying involved. The gigs Rosie mentions are twenty-minute stints at comedy clubs and the travelling back and forth to the gigs involves hundreds of miles. The time spent travelling to the gigs was far greater than the time spent on stage performing, placing emphasis upon the integral nature of travelling to the job. Adam compared this aspect of the occupation to being a travelling salesman and affirmed that travelling can supersede the time spent on stage.

*"I'm a national comic, I'm based in the East Midlands but I gig everywhere where there's proper gigs, the further you go in the country it's more likely they're the better paid cause they're the more prestigious gigs, I'm not doing a £120 gig in Yeovil but I did go down to Glastonbury for £280 cause it's worth the extra drive…"*

*Adam added that he would travel if it's a prestigious gig, "I'll go to Edinburgh to close The Stand cause it's the most prestigious gig in comedy so that's a bit of a trek but absolutely fine, cause I'm a national comic, I do 30,000 miles a year in a car, that's full on by anyone's measure". Adam compared this to "travelling salesman mileage". Adam also explained, "those hours away are in the evening as well, it's not like oh yeah I travel all day but I'm back most nights, I'm not home now until late Saturday night and my wife's at home with the baby".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

In ranking himself as a national stand-up comedian, Adam is perhaps suggesting that he is more committed as a performer owing to his willingness to travel far afield but stipulates the lengths of travel that he is willing and unwilling to journey for gigs. This is influenced by the level of prestige or lack thereof affixed to a gig but also the money that is on offer. Of interest here is how the more prestigious gigs may appeal irrespective of their financial reward. Although there may be substantial travel involved, Adam takes such opportunities as the prestige further enhances his status as a national stand-up comedian, whether the gigs are financially lucrative or not. This means he is playing gigs that are reputable, well-established and well-operated and such a sentiment was also expressed by other performers.

*"This is one of the less well-paid gigs but I don't know if you know but it's quite a prestigious one, it's been going a long time, it's a nice gig".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Sam)*

For Sam, the opportunity in question was not a lucrative earner for him, but it was one of the more prestigious gigs on the circuit. Like Adam, it is a case of prestigious gigs functioning as a way through which to maintain status and rank on the comedy circuit. The more prestigious a gig is the more likely it is to be well-operated and such gigs can make for a pleasant night at work thus highlighting the degree of autonomy that well-established and in-demand stand-up comedians retain in their working lives.

Adam's discussion of the alignment between the extent of travel and the fee involved suggests two things about how life on the road unfolds for stand-up comedians. Firstly, there is the precarity that underpins the profession for some stand-up comedians, perhaps those who are younger, inexperienced and trying to climb the circuit hierarchy to the better paying, the more established and 'proper' gigs. Secondly, more established performers such as Adam, have a degree of autonomy as they pick and choose the gigs in their diary. This is reflective of Adam's established status and profile as a performer who is in demand on the circuit. However, for less established performers, there can be extensive travelling for gigs that pay less lucrative fees to gain experience or, at the very least, only break even.

There is much more work to being a stand-up comedian beyond simply stepping on stage and making an audience laugh for twenty minutes before alighting and collecting a paycheque. Jason was eager to direct my attention to this hidden work and highlight how stand-up comedy might appear to be lucrative based on this assumption that it is only twenty minutes of work.

*"Comedians work hard like, I know it looks like its twenty minutes, but it took me four hours to drive here, it's a shift mate".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

Jason seeks to justify stand-up comedy as being authentic or 'real' work, acknowledging that whilst it looks like twenty minutes, it involves hours of travelling, which is something that the public does not see. It is interesting to see him allude to shift work, particularly as this is in contrast to Jason's earlier expressed sentiments about comedians existing outside of conventional employment. There is an underlying tension between Jason's desire for recognition of stand-up comedy as legitimate work compared with his earlier comments

around the something special, out of the ordinary nature of stand-up comedy as work. Comedians were keen to point out that while the occupation is unusual, it was just as legitimate as other occupations and had its own share of mundanity that is in contrast to the more unusual aspects, such as the 'highs' of being on stage and performing to an audience. The more mundane aspects of the occupation and the hidden work of being a comedian, that is the travelling and touring involved, defined the occupation for many participants much more than the time they spent on stage.

*"Comedy isn't what people think it is, I'm just a driver who drives four hours for twenty minutes of glory".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Mark)*

Mark acknowledged the fleeting nature of the time he spends on stage performing compared with the time he spends in his car travelling to gigs. Mark frames the twenty minutes he spends on stage as being a moment of glory, which to achieve, he has to drive considerable distances. This again highlights the compromise between the more ordinary parts of the job with the more extraordinary aspects of it. A note of interest here is the overlap between passion and talent but also the necessity to work and how the impulse to be on stage and entertaining an audience, even if only for twenty minutes, is viewed as a moment of glory within the wider banality of the travel and touring required in order to experience that highpoint.

Much like Jason, Mark is also quick to identify misconceptions which surround the business of being a comedian and emphasises stand-up as authentic and 'real' work. Mark portrays the on-stage performance as almost secondary to travelling and touring. The emphasis that the comedians placed on travelling as part of the occupation that goes unseen led me to be invited to experience travelling and touring first-hand. Therefore, I did plenty of 'riding-along' as I joined comedians as they travelled to, from and between their gigs.

*Paul had suggested a number of gigs that I was welcome to come along to, though recommended that tonight's gig may be of interest given the long distance and, in his words, "you'll see the travelling side of it, which nobody ever does".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Paul)*

*"It's so much driving, more than people think".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Bill)*

Being a stand-up comedian emerges as an occupation that is not necessarily associated with the perceived glamour of showbusiness. The extent of the time stand-up comedians spent on the road driving from one gig to the next inspired Johnny to refer to his care as his office as opposed to the comedy club stage.

*We got into the car, I nearly sat on a pair of Johnny's spare glasses in the process, but nevertheless we left Manchester. Johnny said, "welcome to the office, my cars the office, you spend so much time in the car, it's the comedian's office".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Johnny)*

One stand-up comedian, Neil, only gigged in his city at a comedy club where he is the resident compere. Neil does juggle his live stand-up with television work, which perhaps facilitates his selectiveness. Therefore, Neil's decision to have a residency at a comedy club and not engage in the wider circuit might not be feasible for other performers who rely on travelling the circuit to make their living.

*"It's a good gig and here you're not having to travel forever for crap money that hasn't gone up in the last fifteen years. I lost my passion for comedy somewhere on the M6 between Liverpool and Birmingham".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Neil)*

Neil appeared jaded about the travelling involved in the occupation. He cites a lack of an increase in circuit wages despite some of the travel involved in a gig and suggests that the travelling had exhausted what passion for stand-up comedy he had. Interesting here is how the overlap between passion and the economic imperative to earn a living unfolds for stand-up comedians. It appears that being on stage, performing and entertaining an audience, this moment of glory as Mark put it, becomes less enticing as life on the road weighs heavy.

Spending so much time on the road proved difficult for those with families at home. Adam was navigating life as a first-time parent and our first of three weekends together involved me following Adam across a Thursday, Friday and Saturday night where he was gigging twice nightly, firstly in Liverpool and then in Manchester. Adam was living in the East

Midlands and staying with a relative just outside Liverpool for the weekend. Adam's wife was at home alone with their newborn baby and he seemed to be worried about this. Adam talked openly about balancing the time he was spending on the road gigging and away from his wife and daughter with the need to earn a living and provide for his family.

*"I had to go away for three days to the Middle East to do a gig cause I got a forces gig… that was brutal cause you're like I am leaving my wife with a young baby but it's sixteen hundred quid for four days, no one in the industry is saying no to that and I've got another one coming up in May, I'm very high up their roster and I don't want that to change, every time one of those comes in your month changes".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Fulfilling this booking means that Adam would be leaving his wife and newborn baby at home for several days. While Adam describes this unfavourably, the fee attached to the gigs makes it more than a worthwhile work endeavour and something Adam does to make a good living. Indeed, despite Adam finding it difficult being away from his family he appeared to mitigate this with humour.

*"I felt guilty saying goodbye to them for the weekend, just leaving your family behind". Adam then joked that it was teaching his wife what it was like to be a single mum, "no matter how much of an idiot she thinks I am, she's experienced the alternative".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Whilst many comedians are not enamoured with travelling and touring, Adam was one comedian who in contrast to others was largely optimistic about his working life spent on the road.

*"Going to Cardiff for the weekend and hanging out and then going to Bath, going around cities, getting a free hotel and a free tea and you get to be a part of people's nights out, it's how you spin it for yourself".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

I spent one weekend with Rob who was performing nightly at the same comedy club. He lived in London and had travelled up on the train ahead of the first of three nights at the club. Rob explained that travelling outside of his locale was now a necessity due to the changing nature of the circuit.

*"There's not as many weekends in London that you can do anymore, you used to do a Jongleurs weekend in Camden and a Banana Cabaret and a Comedy Store and you could spend the whole month's weekends in London but it's a bit hard to come by now".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rob)*

Rob was the headline act at the comedy club and was booked into a nearby hotel by the promoter. He was the only comedian on the bill afforded accommodation and was very much on his own for the weekend.

*"I'm the only act in the hotel, they only tend to book a hotel for the headliner or the person who's travelling from quite a way away, but it really depends I think on the relationship you as an individual have with the booker, like Dave said to me on the way out, oh you're in the hotel then are you but he's got a couple hours' drive home tonight".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rob)*

The other three stand-up comedians performing alongside Rob at the club were local and within reasonable driving distance of a couple of hours and so did not qualify for accommodation courtesy of the promoter. Rob was not due on stage until after 10pm and would arrive at the club around twenty to thirty minutes before he was due on stage. Consequently, Rob faced the prospect of having to pass an entire day and most of the evening by himself, which is something he found difficult while on the road.

*"Nobody's around so you are literally killing time each day until the gig, and I'm not on until gone ten at night so I'm killing an entire day".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rob)*

Rob drew comparison with his previous weekend gigging when he stayed in a hotel with two of his fellow comedians who were performing at the same comedy club and they spent the weekend socialising.

*"Sometimes you go to lunch with the other acts, like the other week, George and Will and me went to lunch then mooched around, I came back, watched Indiana Jones, had a bag of crisps and went to work, and that's nice when you've got your friends with you but this weekend it is a case of killing time".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rob)*

It is clear then that the working life as a stand-up comedian could be underlined by solitude. Rob reflected upon life on the road, being away from home, staying in a hotel and how this would see him resorting to perhaps unhealthy ways of passing the time and coping with the solitude when not at the club and on stage.

*"I'd just get pissed after shows, with the other acts and with alarming regularity, if you're all in the hotel, it's easy, what did you do today, I recovered, a room service burger, had a bath, three litres of diet coke and watched two films, then you get ready and go to the gig, that pattern is three times in a weekend and then you're not thinking of how to kill a day, you turn up to the gig a bit hungover but then a gig helps, it's a dangerous habit or whatever you want to call it".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rob)*

Here, Rob reveals how previously a weekend gigging for him would turn into a weekend of binge drinking with fellow performers, spending the daytime tending to a hangover ahead of the gig as a way of killing time. This highlights the 'party' lifestyle comedians can fall into when away from home. The solitary nature of being a comedian can pose something of a risk to wellbeing and see them adopting coping strategies orientated around the night-time economy, which stand-up comedians occupy as part of their working life. Indeed, the prevalence of alcohol consumption amongst comedians and this 'party' lifestyle was something several performers alluded to. Adam made a striking remark in which he sought to summarise the occupation for me. This was in response to me explaining the purpose of the study, following which Adam reduced the occupation, really rather quite bleakly or perhaps cynically to the comment below.

*"It's mostly loneliness and drug addiction".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

The candid tone of Adam's comment left me wondering as to how sincere he was being, but it did direct my attention towards this feeling of stand-up comedy as a solitary occupation that led to loneliness. It was apparent that this sense of solitude was not exclusive to the time spent on the road but the periods of downtime in between weekends of gigs, when at home and whilst those in perhaps more conventional forms of employment are at work. This brings attention back to the contrast between the working hours of comedians and the

wider public. A comedian's work is undertaken at night and a weekend, this moves their downtime to the midweek.

*"What I find interesting about what comedians say is getting up on stage is the hard bit, the hard bit really is killing eight hours on your own, my friend Jamie is a school teacher and has two kids, he doesn't have a spare fucking thought in his head to get existential, that's the interesting part about the comedians lifestyle, I wake up on a Monday and have nothing until Friday".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rob)*

The most difficult aspect of being a stand-up comedian may not be appearing on stage before an audience and attempting to make them laugh. Rather the most difficult aspect of the job might be managing the solitude and being alone.

*"I've had mates say to me it's a fucking easy life, they think you're at home chilling all day then go to a gig, I told him to take two weeks off work and stay in the house all day on his own and you'll choose to go back to work after a week. You go to the gym and drag out meals but you're still in your own head all the time and demons can creep in if you haven't socialized, that kind of stuff fucks comics up and makes them drink and party too much, it's easier to just get smashed then face a day of boredom".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rob)*

The above extract illuminates not only the solitude that can shape life as a stand-up comedian but the effects of such solitude and the difficulties that can be encountered in seeking to manage it. The working life of comedians means they inevitably spend much time alone, whether behind the wheel driving long distances from gig to gig, during the week when not gigging or of a weekend whilst gigging and away from home. Being a stand-up comedian is a solitary occupation with the potential to prove lonely and this may lead to a reliance on audiences.

*"It is a lonely life being a comedian, you've got to manage it though, first people you speak to can be an audience".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jack)*

*"I've done gigs where I've not spoken to anybody all day… I turn up and the first time I speak to anybody is through a microphone to a room full of people and then you get off… you go home and the only time you've spoken to anybody is through a microphone to one hundred and fifty people…".*

*(Extract from interview, Josie)*

The loneliness stemming from the solitary nature of the occupation is something that comedians have to learn to manage over time and some may be more adept at this than others. The solitary nature can affect comedians and lead to perhaps risk-seeking behaviours, unhealthy methods of coping or indeed a dependency upon audiences.

*"I'm glad you came mate, would have been proper lonely, this far out, you're travelling like three hours for fifteen minutes".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Paul)*

Paul had experienced a difficult night gigging in terms of the distance involved and the amateur-like operation of the gig, which left a lot to be desired. This was coupled with the fact that the other 'hack' comedian Paul was performing alongside had gone down very well with the audience whereas Paul and his 'pure' material struggled. A bad gig only enhances the emotional difficulties comedians can encounter as part of a working life spent on the road. Earlier Mark challenged the perception of what being a stand-up comedian entails and referred to himself as a driver who journeys hours for what he deemed to be twenty minutes of glory on stage. Here, Paul shares a similar perspective and reiterates the time spent travelling superseding the time spent on stage and telling jokes. On the drive home from Paul's gig, he proclaimed his post-gig hunger and we stopped off at a service station for fast food. Paul affirmed the displeasure of life on the road but did maintain some degree of amusement about what he encountered on his travels.

*"You can see why they put some people on the night shift can't you, this is the stuff, the travelling and the service stations, it's grim isn't it".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Paul)*

While life on the road and journeying through the night can bring discontent, solitude and fatigue, there remained some sense that going on stage and having this moment of glory as Mark put it earlier, makes it worthwhile and provides a remedy for when comedians least feel like undertaking a gig, going on stage and being funny.

*The comedians were sat around the green room and there was little interaction between them. Johnny and Michael both appeared to be tired from their journey to the gig. Johnny had his eyes closed and his feet up on the coffee table, Michael was yawning and rubbing his eyes. It struck me how they were able to go from this state to being on stage and appearing*

*full of energy and enthusiasm in the space of two minutes, Michael told me "…you just have to get up there and attack it, but it takes care of itself" as Johnny followed, "Dr Theatre we call it".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Johnny)*

This notion of Dr Theatre, as Johnny calls it, resonated with sentiments expressed by other comedians, Harry and Rob, both of whom did not feel 'ready' for their respective gigs. For reasons unknown, Rob was not in the mood to go on stage and Harry had received news before the gig about his father being taken to hospital. Despite these circumstances, they were both at their gigs and preparing to go on stage.

*Rob had told me that he was feeling ropey on the journey over and was not in the mood for the gig. I wondered if he would cancel and put this to him. "I'll feel better once I'm up there, that's the weird thing, it's like you've been rebooted, you feel like you've been turned off and on again".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rob)*

*"That's the hard part of this job, you get shit news and you've gotta go on, you have that in the back of your mind but as soon as you're on stage, everything else disappears, once you get on you just change and if you get a good crowd, you soon forget".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Harry)*

For various reasons, all three comedians were reluctant to go on stage, perform for an audience and attempt to make them laugh. Johnny was half-asleep, Rob was not in the mood and Harry had received bad news concerning his family. While there was of course the economic need to go on stage and perform to receive their fee. It appeared that their personal circumstances and related reluctance did not prevent them from going on stage and entertaining the audience. Johnny's allusion to Dr Theatre is of interest here and suggests that as the comedian takes to the stage, something 'changes' and enables them to become fully immersed in the performance, which only makes them feel better afterwards.

Even when comedians do feel like going on stage in front of a room of strangers and attempting to make them laugh, this requires some initial and continued strength of character, especially given the always lingering prospect of a bad gig or a hostile audience. However, the real challenge of the occupation may well reside in being off stage. Whilst being on stage might perhaps be the most compelling aspect of the job and the adoration of

an audience is appealing, there is a balance to be struck. The stand-up comedian has to balance the 'highs' of performing on stage in front of an audience with the more mundane and solitary aspects of the job, such as travelling, touring, and driving, which are all often undertaken alone. Adam suggests that working life as a stand-up may require robustness of character, though perhaps not necessarily for the part of the job others might expect.

*"A pretty solitary existence and I think you probably, there's a load of things that stop you becoming a comic, there's everything to do with the stage, whether you want to put yourself through the hardship of learning to do comedy which is trial by fucking emotional fire. If you're decent it will get easier but you still get put through the ringer constantly, some of the time your soul can take an absolute kicking and that is not for everyone. People can see the upside of it and go oh yeah that's addictive I want it but can they put up with the what the fuck am I doing here?"*

"*Who wants to be in a fucking Travelodge on a Wednesday night in Exeter? If you like your own company, it's a great gig, the driving's hard because the driving is tiring".*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Adam)*

The view that the off-stage business of being a stand-up comedian is more challenging than the on-stage side of things is shared by several performers. One comedian, Sam, argued that the off-stage personality of a stand-up comedian is central to managing the solitary nature of the occupation.

*"Your personality is more important off stage than it is on stage as a comic, you're travelling so much and you're spending a lot of time on your own, not everyone can do that".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Sam)*

This suggests that there can be a tension between the off-stage personality of stand-up comedians and their on-stage work. There is perhaps the commonly held belief that one's personality and on-stage persona are integral to success in the occupation and of course one does have to consistently deliver the goods when on stage. However, it could be argued that one's off-stage personality is just as important, if not more, to getting by in the business and sustaining a career as a stand-up comedian.

## 5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored the working culture of stand-up comedians. Beginning by looking at 'hack' as a distinctive feature of the occupation and a way through which comedians engage in status ranking. 'Hack' stand-up comedians are assigned low status whereas those viewed as 'pure' are assigned high status in the circuit hierarchy.

This chapter then addressed the night-time as the temporal rhythm that underpins the work of comedians who are gigging 'after hours'. Comedians distinguished themselves and non-comedians based on their working hours and this offers insight into how they construct their shared identity as an occupational group.

Working life as a stand-up comedian is defined as much by life on the road as it is by the twenty minutes spent on stage performing to an audience, which pales in comparison. The more mundane aspects of the job are contrasted with the 'highs' of being on stage and in front of an audience. While the on-stage persona of the stand-up comedian is typically considered as important to occupational success, it is apparent that how they cope with the off-stage business of being a stand-up comedian is equally important if not more so.

# Chapter 6: The Relationship Between Stand-Up Comedians and Audiences

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the relationship between stand-up comedians and their audiences. It explores the complex nature and seemingly love-hate dynamic of that relationship and makes use of three sub-themes to do so, which are detailed below.

**“The Audience Just Want a Night Out, Not a Comedy Night”**

This sub-theme further explores stand-up comedy as an occupation entrenched within the night-time entertainment economy. It begins to consider how conflict arises between performers and their audiences regarding the consumption of the on-stage performance. It captures the perspective of comedians that audience members attend live stand-up comedy primarily for a night out, to socialise, party and consume alcohol, and that such behaviour can be of detriment to the performance.

**“They’re Not Too Bad, Not the Worst You’ll Ever Have”**

This sub-theme explores how audience behaviour can pose a threat to the stability of the on-stage performances of comedians. This is illustrated through the case of heckling, which can see a conflict of power roles emerge between performer and audience member. The performer seeks to assert their authority on stage as the focus of audience attention, whilst the heckling audience member seeks to disturb and disrupt this.

**“You Can’t Find a Better Audience”**

Bringing together the preceding two sub-themes, despite the conflict over the production and consumption of the on-stage performance, audience member behaviour and subsequent scrutiny, stand-up comedians only have the audience in front of them. The reality of working and performing on the live comedy circuit means that comedians must go on stage and attempt to make the audience laugh, irrespective of what that audience may be like and how stand-up comedians regard them.

## 6.2 “The Audience Just Want a Night Out, Not a Comedy Night”

Stand-up comedians were of the view that some audiences primarily attend live stand-up comedy for a night out and not necessarily to consume live stand-up comedy. This perspective is underpinned by audience behaviour during the on-stage performance, which could often be disruptive. Comedians regularly referred to the excessive alcohol consumption of audiences and argued that this was problematic. The night out mindset and subsequent behaviour of audiences formed concerns for stand-up comedians when it came to weighing up an audience and considering their performance ahead of appearing on stage.

All of the comedy clubs I visited during fieldwork are licensed premises where alcohol is readily available and served to audience members. I came to learn that this ensured comedy clubs were profitable endeavours as the money generated from ticket sales typically went towards covering the wage bill of the comedians performing on the night. In addition to excessive alcohol consumption, some comedians also suggested that audience members do misuse substances on the premises of comedy clubs.

Many of the gigs I attended were populated by stag, hen and workplace parties and audiences would often be intoxicated. This could result in rough and rowdy audience behaviour, which are conditions that comedians identified as not being conducive to live stand-up comedy performances. This made it a challenge for them to maintain the attention of audiences and led to a conflict between performer and audience as to the conditions and manner in which stand-up comedians desired to deliver their performance and how audiences should or wanted to consume it.

On one night, I was sat backstage in the green room of a comedy club as a conversation amongst the comedians turned to a gig one of them had performed at the previous night. The following extract illustrates the audience hostility that a stand-up comedian can be greeted by during their performance. The direct conflict between performer and audience is clear in this instance – the former is there to entertain the audience and to make them laugh but is met with contempt and treated as though they are an obstruction to the audience’s night out.

*"I turned up, everybody was pissed, one of those gigs where in the end you come close to walking off but then I did fifteen minutes and just said goodnight and walked off, some bloke in the front row just had his finger to me the whole time, not even looking at me". Pete sounded surprised, "see that just wouldn't happen in any other job would it, working in a post office or a supermarket, it just wouldn't happen".*

*The green room went quiet after Stephen filled the other comics in on last night's second gig. Simon then asked Stephen, "so, who books that?" and the other comics burst into laughter, including Stephen who was changing into his stage shirt, shaking his head with a grin and laughing to himself.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Simon)*

One stand-up comedian, Dave, reflected on the prevalence of excessive alcohol consumption amongst audiences on the comedy circuit. Dave and I were leaving a comedy club together after his gig and walking down the street of a popular nightlife area in the city centre. The street was populated with bars and nightclubs and the pavements were bustling with people in various states of inebriation. Dave and I slalomed through huddles of partygoers and we had barely made it three doors down from the comedy club when a young woman came running up to Dave, tapped him on the shoulder and told him how funny he is. Dave was very courteous and proffered a sincere handshake as he thanked her for her comments and as we walked away, Dave commented on just how drunk the young woman appeared.

*"In this job you talk to a lot of drunk people and a lot of drugged people" this led Dave onto his performance, "did you notice how I just mentioned they're doing Charlie and it got a laugh? I told him I did, "people taking cocaine and it's so obvious because what happens, they're getting up and going out and then it's the next one getting up and going out, clearly what was going on, and you notice each time they come back less self-aware".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Dave)*

This highlights the reality of working and performing on the comedy circuit that stand-up comedians were often performing to audiences where people are under the influence of alcohol and, potentially, other substances. In the following extract, Adam introduces the apparent contradiction of audiences on the circuit that they will attend live stand-up comedy but appear disinterested in watching the on-stage performances of stand-up comedians and instead are primarily attending a comedy club as part of a night out.

*"Sometimes on a Friday you are playing to a lot of people who don't want stand-up they're going oh yeah we'll go and watch comedy".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Audiences at live stand-up comedy were often drinking, socialising and partying as part of a wider night out with a live stand-up comedy gig being the main attraction. Resultantly, the behaviour of the audience strays from the expectations of comedians regarding audience etiquette. Adam's reference to a Friday night audience suggests that this might form a typology of audience and one which exemplifies this dynamic of wanting a night out and not a comedy night. Several other comedians also referred to a 'Friday audience' or 'weekend audience' in the same manner. One night in a comedy club green room, the wife of one of the comedians performing on the bill was also present and asked the comedians if they had noticed the audience member with an inflatable doll.

*"Did you all see the guy with the blow-up doll on your way in?" to which nobody said they had but Bill commented, "it's all part of the course though really, it's normally the Friday night they're partying".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Bill)*

It was not unusual for stag, hen and workplace or office parties to populate the weekend gigs at comedy clubs. Indeed, weekend shows at comedy clubs were often characterised by the party atmosphere of the audience. Such groups embodied the 'Friday audience' or 'weekend audience' typology and would sometimes be wearing fancy dress and brandishing the paraphernalia associated with stag and hen celebrations. The 'Friday audience' and 'weekend audience' was very different to the audiences that attended live comedy on other nights of the week and Harry considers why this might be.

*"Thursday's are a hybrid between your Monday nights and the weekends, Thursday audiences tend to be your comedy fans, they can be quiet compared to the weekend but they're always alright, they're comedy fans, comedy aficionados if you like, they like comedy and they're here for comedy, but of a weekend, your Friday and Saturday nights, they want a laugh obviously but mostly they just want to drink loads".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Harry)*

This sense of an audience desiring a night out rather than live stand-up comedy was best characterised by the excessive alcohol consumption and how this affected the on-stage

performances of stand-up comedians. Whilst midweek audiences were aficionados of stand-up comedy and attended comedy clubs specifically for live stand-up comedy rather than as part of a night out, 'weekend audiences' were rather different, as a conversation between two comedians, Rachel and Sarah, highlights.

*Both [Rachel and Sarah] talked about how "as an audience they're so slow". Sarah added, "it's because they're hammered, it's because they're there for a nice weekend". Rachel added, "they don't know what's happening". Sarah followed, "they don't, but it's because they're on a hen do or a stag do or a night out, they don't necessarily go to comedy they just want to get pissed".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Sarah)*

Sarah and Rachel capture the predicament that faced stand-up comedians working and performing on the comedy circuit. This predicament Sarah illustrates further emphasises the perspective shared by comedians, which is that some audiences simply do not understand the etiquette of live stand-up comedy. Rather they attended live comedy as one part of their night out where their focus is on consuming alcohol, becoming intoxicated and socialising instead of watching, listening and appreciating the comedians' performances.

## 6.3 "They're Not Too Bad, Not the Worst You'll Ever Have"

It was a Saturday night in the height of summer and I was following Jason around his gigs that night, which involved an early show (7pm) and a late show (9:30pm) at one comedy club with a third gig at another club (8:30pm). After his first performance of the night at the early show, Jason and I walked across the city centre to the other comedy club for his second performance of the night. We then strolled back to the first venue for his final performance of the night at the late show.

I met Jason at the first comedy club of the night, which would host both the early and late shows. Jason had some time to pass before he was due back at the venue and so he suggested that we venture for a coffee to fuel ourselves for the long night ahead. As we stood at a puffin crossing awaiting the green man, Jason reflected on one of his two gigs the night before, which was at the same comedy club we would later be visiting.

*"You should have seen it last night, it was disgusting mate, I walked in Tony had opened, some bloke's in his face trying to start a fight with him and Tony's shouting where's the security, I'm waiting to go on and people have stormed the stage, I go on and the top of the morning shit starts, constant heckles, at that point I'm thinking this is work now, I'm just sparring and have to hold my own…"*

*"…I walked on and people are just shouting potatoes at me, I had to stop the gig and ask one table if they were alright, said to another like look we're gonna get through this, another two girls started shouting that they want to learn Gaelic, it was disgusting..."*

*"…I walked in at the back of the room up to Tony and this bloke is starting on him, I see Phil and he goes mate I wouldn't do your gluten free stuff tonight, before Phil introduces me, he's got people up on stage and he's trying to wrestle the mic off them, four people run the stage and security is nowhere to be seen, in all my years, never seen anything like it".*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Jason)*

A particularly erratic atmosphere at the comedy club that night emerges. This was not the sort of reception Jason had anticipated. Jason's remark that he had never quite witnessed happenings like this at a gig before characterises the propensity for audiences to be unpredictable and challenging for even the most experienced of performers. Such was the atmosphere at the comedy club that night, Phil the compere advised Jason against performing a particular routine in his repertoire, which he had deemed incompatible with the temperament of the audience. This hints at the need to assess the audience and tailor one's approach accordingly. This episode highlights that however undesirable a gig may be and despite the rowdy behaviour of an audience, the stand-up comedian still has to go on stage and attempt to make them laugh.

This episode also illustrates the underlying battle for power and control that can emerge and come to characterise the relationship between performer and audience, which is relatively overt in the case of Jason. The instances of an audience member seeking to engage one of the comedians in fisticuffs and the compere ending up physically wrestling the microphone from a stage invader provide quite visceral examples of this battle for power. However, it is Jason coming under fire from a flurry of heckles, shout-outs and interruptions by audience members during the performance that is of interest here. Heckling serves as an instance in live stand-up comedy where this notion of a battle for power between performer and audience emerges at its most tangible.

Jason is doing battle with an audience seemingly intent on derailing and disturbing his performance, he is trying to silence hecklers, deal with disruptions and interruptions from the audience, all the while trying to deliver his prepared material. Jason's reflection of the gig has a sense of fight or flight about it as conveyed in his comments about sparring and having to hold his own, both of which illustrate a sense of Jason having to survive and overcome that which confronts him during his performance. Jason is trying to retain some degree of control over his performance, which comes under threat due to the behaviour of audience members. There is a feeling of not being in control, which underpins this battle for power as the gig becomes about Jason getting through his twenty-minute stage time and fending off threats to his performance.

Heckling was one of the more pertinent examples of the sort of disruptive behaviour exhibited by audiences that can see the relationship between stand-up comedian and audience develop into a battle for power. When a heckle arrives, the dynamic becomes about the performer preserving both their performance and their status as the stand-up comedian in command of the room and the audience. Many of the comedy clubs I visited during fieldwork advised against audience members heckling the stand-up comedians during the show as it spoiled the performance for other audience members. Those comedy clubs claimed to enforce the rule of the right to eject hecklers and offending patrons from the premises. Though I only ever observed one instance where an ejection took place and another where one stand-up comedian bemoaned the reluctance of a comedy club to impose their rules against heckling.

*During this section, Michael did have to "shhh" the stag party on the balcony a number of times, though engaged with them no further. The security guard came up to the balcony three times to tell the stag party to stop talking. In the middle of Johnny's set, the security guard approached the stag party for another time to ask them to be quiet, moments later after more talking, he then ejected one of the group.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Johnny)*

*At this point the stage manager Colin popped his head around the door and asked the acts if they were enjoying it. Adam asked Colin "are they rough?" Ray shrugged his shoulders and said, "they're not too bad, not the worst you'll ever have". Rob added, "they're not horrific, just two tables of bellends". Adam turned to Colin and said, "we used to chuck those out didn't we Col, back in the day".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Heckling emerges as something that is viewed as a transgression of the expected behaviour and etiquette of those attending live stand-up comedy. Nevertheless, heckling is commonplace and seemingly an integrated feature of the performance medium and one which exemplifies the 'liveness' and interactive dimensions of stand-up comedy. Some comedians disagreed with the perception of heckling as something that audiences should engage in when attending live stand-up comedy. One comedian, Peter, suggested that audience members believe heckling is a convention of the form and that it adds to the performance in some way.

*"Hecklers sometimes think they're helping, they come round going I was the one shouting out, fuck off mate, they think they're helping, oh it wouldn't been a good night would it unless me mate had heckled tonight".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Peter)*

Peter challenges what he believes to be the perception of audience members that their heckling somehow enhances or enriches the performance. Peter describes an instance of being approached by a heckling audience member and his dismissiveness towards the heckler. It is evident that Peter felt somewhat affronted by the audience member's heckling and their inference that they may have improved his performance. Peter appears to take heckling quite personally and assumes it as a challenge to his competence as a performer. This suggests that for some comedians heckling is regarded as a breach of the etiquette that they expect of audiences and consequently is unappreciated.

I observed several instances of heckling whilst watching the on-stage performances of comedians. One notable instance was on the night I followed Bill around all three of his gigs. It was at Bill's second gig of the night, with another act still to perform and another interval yet to take place before Bill was due on stage as the headline act. We watched the show from the back of the venue and the following extract details the exchange between Kevin, the compere and a heckling audience member.

*We took our seats as Kevin was talking to the audience asking people where they were going on holiday and so forth. Kevin was talking to a man in the audience who was sat at the side of the stage, the intimate nature of the auditorium meaning he was almost on the stage*

*itself. The man made a comment about Kevin's shirt and Kevin had to put him down telling him to "sleep" and suggesting the man's "drink has been spiked"…*

*…Throughout this part of the show, the man kept interrupting Kevin, quite persistently so and Kevin had to keep putting him down. Kevin was talking about a sexual encounter as part of a routine, the man continued interrupting and Kevin began ignoring him, the audience was beginning to ignore it and was laughing at Kevin's material. After this Kevin referred back to the audience talking to a group of men in the audience who were on a night out and from Macclesfield, "now we've a group in from Macclesfield somewhere haven't we"...*

*…Kevin was talking back and to with the audience, saying to one person, "what do you think when someone says they're from Cheshire?" This elicited a number of people shouting out random words. Kevin continued with his performance. The man continued to heckle, Kevin stopped, and the room went silent and Kevin said to the man "I'm assuming this is not the first time you've opened your mouth in front of another man in a cellar" the audience laughed loudly and the man went quiet to cheers from other audience members.*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Bill)*

Kevin made use of a variety of putdowns in an attempt to silence the heckling audience member-only for them to persist and continue heckling. A battle for power arises as Kevin's control over the gig recedes, his putdowns fail to work, and the heckler continues as they and Kevin are both vying for the attention of the audience. It is only upon Kevin delivering a joke to the embarrassment of the heckler and it eliciting a substantial laugh from the rest of the audience that they stopped. It was then that this battle for power reached its conclusion as Kevin was now in control having overcome the heckler and the threat that they posed to the stability of his performance.

As the stand-up comedian performing on stage and compering the gig, Kevin must maintain the attention of the audience and make them laugh. The heckling audience member is infringing on Kevin's jurisdiction as the performer and challenging his status. This leads to the emergence of a battle of wits between performer and audience as the heckler attempts to capture the attention of the audience and the performer seeks to maintain their role and status. Backstage in the green room and before Bill was due on stage, the conversation between the performers and the venue staff turned to the heckler.

*"He's just one of those guys who's got to be the funniest bloke in the room and doesn't wanna shut up, the thing is at the start of the night it's endearing and he came up with a*

*few funny lines that got a laugh but after a while it gets irritating" Kevin said. The soundman then joined in, "you can see it in someone's eyes though, they think they're enhancing the night" and Kevin commented, "he's of the age where he probably went to working men's clubs with his dad and every act he pipes up and thinks it's part of it".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Bill)*

The battle for power that can surface between performer and audience is underpinned by a sense of competition oriented around who is the funniest individual in the room and whether it is the comedian or the heckler. This need of the heckler clashes with the goal of the comedian, which is to be the funniest individual in the room, a status that affords them the ability to stand on the stage and entertain the audience as opposed to being an audience member. The following extract sees Simon recall a heckler persistently interrupting his on-stage performance despite Simon repeatedly putting them down. This chimes with similar sentiments shared by Simon's fellow performers, Peter and Kevin.

*"I was doing this gig in Huddersfield, took a girl with me and it was fine but some prick at the bar who just kept on interjecting and I kept on dealing with him and he just wouldn't shut up, there's nothing you can do because it's their ego, obviously it's my ego as well but the people have paid to see us, he just kept chipping in again and again, tenth time I'm just going shut the fuck up, then does the classic, comes up to me after the gig and goes that was great hi, I tell him to fuck off and he says what you can't take it, I can take it but you wouldn't shut up, then he goes if you can't take heckles shouldn't be a comedian, they think they can keep interrupting but that's not how it works, they think it's all banter and it's not".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Simon)*

Simon suggests that this tussle for power and control is underpinned by a conflict of ego. This conflict of ego is being fuelled perhaps by a desire on the part of the heckler to evoke a laugh for something they shout out during the stand-up comedian's performance and the requirement of the comedian to be the performer who is provoking the laughter. This highlights the preservation of status central to the performer and audience dynamic. During fieldwork, I observed another comedian, James, become entangled in an encounter with an audience member who had been particularly disruptive throughout his performance.

*"I think it's got to that stage in the evening where you just want to fucking entertain yourselves" a woman at the front then shouted out and James replied, 'fucking hell you really do comment on everything don't you, twenty minutes of this, great stuff"…*

*…Mid way through a routine, James was interrupted by the same woman at the front and responded, "I bet your husband is just sat at home relieved isn't he" the woman then complained that she's allowed a voice, to which James responded, "of course you are, just know when to use it".*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, James)*

Backstage after James's performance, the conversation in the green room became about the disruptive audience member and it sheds light on how the night out mindset of audience members can lead to heckling and disruptive behaviour.

*"She kept trying to get a word in, you couldn't hear from the back, but they didn't stop the whole time, yeh yeh yeh shouting out, you couldn't stop her, those women did not stop when I was on, she was well pissed, yeah, you go girlfriend, they cheer you on after every sentence you say, she was completely twatted that woman at the front, she only had one eye open".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, James)*

Heckling has developed as something largely considered to be of detriment to the on-stage performances and comedians dealt with hecklers in a myriad of different ways. For some comedians, an instance of heckling turned into a competition where the performer sought to overpower the audience member and arise victorious having preserved their status and asserted authority. Whereas for other performers an instance of heckling was viewed in a much less precious manner and as something playful and part of the medium, rather than anything malicious and those comedians were much more relaxed in their approach to dealing with hecklers.

Returning to the earlier episode involving Kevin who was the compere at one of the gigs I accompanied Bill to. As Bill and I set off on the forty-minute drive to his next gig, Bill pondered as to why the audience member heckling Kevin was quite so persistent despite Kevin's attempts to control the audience member with put-downs.

*"Kevin was a bit gentle with him really, the comperes they normally use Neil and Chris they put people down really hard".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Bill)*

This suggestion from Bill that Kevin was perhaps too moderate or soft in his approach potentially explains why the heckler continued to disrupt Kevin and why Kevin's initial putdowns failed. By comparison with Kevin, another comedian, Simon, demonstrated an attitude to dealing with hecklers that were rather different.

*Mid-joke, a man on the balcony heckled Simon, repeating Simon's line back at him, out loud. Simon paused, looked up to the balcony and said, "what was that?" to which silence fell in response, and Simon said, "excellent" followed by a big laugh, "well there we have it, a bellend in the balcony, it's the second half, I'm a drunken twat and probably a bellend how can I prove that to a room full of strangers, is that your best heckle for fuck sake?" followed by more silence from said heckler. Simon then said, "if you were that entertaining we'd have all paid to come round to your house and listen to you so shut the fuck up" followed by laughter and applause, before a small pause and Simon saying, "sorry, I meant caravan..." followed by more laughter".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Simon)*

Simon's approach is much tougher and more brutal in comparison to Kevin, as he instantly pounces and dominates the heckler with a series of punchlines and insults at their expense. Simon makes use of an expletive as a means to order silence from the heckler and while maintaining the attention of the rest of the audience as he continued to make them laugh with his jokes about the heckler. This is a particularly interesting example as whilst Kevin's heckler was quite overtly seeking to disturb his performance, in this case, there is no obvious offensive heckling here. Nevertheless, Simon reprimands the audience member and asserts his status as the performer by stating that the audience is there to be entertained by him, thereby ranking himself superior to the offending audience member. Although a back and forth battle for power between performer and audience does not emerge here, Simon remains assertive of his status as the performer and this was something that other stand-up comedians also demonstrated.

*Sarah was entirely in charge on stage, riffing back and forth with audience members, some of whom were prone to the odd moment of seeking attention, but Sarah kept them in their place, telling one man she'd just finished speaking to, who then started talking amongst his friends "you've had your moment in the spotlight my love, so shut the fuck up".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Sarah)*

Much like Simon, Sarah also plainly asserts her authority as the performer who is superior to the audience member. In this instance, she tells the audience member that their moment in the spotlight had passed, and like Simon, Sarah uses an expletive to enforce the silence of the audience member. It was not a heckle that prompted this reproach from Sarah but rather the individual audience member talking to their friends at their table at a volume that disturbed her performance.

Interesting here is how the structure and environment of live stand-up comedy may facilitate a false sense of security amongst audience members as to its seemingly informal nature. Live stand-up comedy is perhaps viewed as not being typically aligned to the usual tropes of theatrical performance and the associated, well-entrenched expectations of audience etiquette in a theatre. Therefore, due to the social-like properties of the performance, the audience member was lulled into a false sense of security by Sarah interacting with them before chastising them for talking.

In her role as the compere of the gig, Sarah was chatting back and forth with audience members as part of opening the show and establishing a rapport with the room. This action perhaps inadvertently sets the tone for the rest of the show and possibly misleads the audience member in question as to the informal nature of the gig. This extract illustrates Sarah swerving a battle for power and the audience member simply being submissive as Sarah directly exercises power. Sarah asserts her status as the performer and situates herself central to the attention of the audience as she disciplines the audience member for talking and implicitly establishes the expectations of behaviour from the audience.

One stand-up comedian, Adam, viewed heckling quite differently from his fellow performers. The respective approaches of some of Adam's contemporaries are about dominating a perceived offending audience member, putting them down and silencing them. In contrast, Adam's perspective regarding heckling and his subsequent approach to dealing with such instances were more lenient and tolerant than some of his colleagues.

*"It's rare you just get someone going you're shit get off, not only is that rare, I'm not saying it's cause oh I'm good, it's rare that you see it generally because you've got to be really*

*mean spirited, very rare you see that, a lot of the time it's people joining in, either cause they're pissed, a lot of the time you can just hang them with their own rope just by going what are you on about, what are you saying, just dissecting what they say, a lot of the time people are playful, but I've seen some really aggressive comics just trying to make it a battle that they need to win which I don't think it needs to be like that, because there is some really funny punters out there, I just see it as joining in".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Unlike his fellow comedians addressed in this section, Adam views heckling in a much more playful manner and expressed his perspective that heckling simply stems from audience members seeking to revel in the 'nowness' of live stand-up comedy. Adam does not appear to interpret heckling as an attack on his ability or something that challenges his status. For some stand-up comedians, an encounter with a heckler would manifest into a tussle for power, underpinned by ego and competition for control over the situation. Whereas Adam regards heckling as part and parcel of the medium, an aspect of the form and one which distinguishes stand-up comedy from other modes of live performance. Adam went on to describe his approach to dealing with hecklers and how he actively tries to avoid making the exchange reminiscent of a contest.

*"I try to make it ungladitorial, try and avoid one-upmanship, you set yourself up for a bit of a fall, if someone's being genuinely funny, you shouldn't make that a contest, that's not fair. People know comedy and one of the things that makes it different from the other arts is interaction and people like that and that's part of the excitement of it, so if you make everything a pissing contest cause someone's dared to join in, it looks joyless and you can end up looking a bit of a bully..."*

*"Comics make the mistake of making it gladiatorial and having to win, where a lot of the time there is only a very sweet spot where you lose and if you make it a battle, you can lose, whereas if you say that was funny you defuse it and if you go where's this come from fella, you engage them".*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Heckling then can see the interaction between comedian and audience member descend into something gladiatorial, whereby the comedian must claim some sense of victory over the audience member. Indeed, this is something that has been illustrated through several of the extracts included so far in this section. This makes one wonder why Adam's perspective and approach to dealing with hecklers may be different to his fellow comedians. Adam demonstrates a self-awareness of his position of power as the comedian who is stood on

stage, amplified and a professionally funny performer. Adam seems aware that to tackle a heckler in a gladiatorial manner would do little to endear him to an audience. This approach may be underpinned by how he views his position as a performer working on the comedy circuit.

Adam is well-established on the circuit and is in demand, residing perhaps in the upper strata of what circuit hierarchy may exist. Such a position is possibly reflected in his perspective and approach to hecklers. While some performers feel that their status is threatened by a heckling audience member and react in an irascible manner. This is not the case for Adam who can appreciate a witty heckle and can simply dismiss a heckler as eager to be involved. Adam's established status and comfortable position on the circuit seemingly dissuade him from feeling the need to assert authority over an audience member and turn an encounter with a heckler into a competition. Another comedian, Dave, shared a similar perspective but demonstrated a previous sense of preciousness regarding having to always have the attention of the audience on him.

*"It's only in the last couple of years that I've stopped being precious about it, you used to go on and hear a noise in the room or someone go out and you would be squaring up going fucking let me do my material, you'd go on with your agenda and it'd be listen to me, but now I'm not precious about it, I'll just go with how it goes, if a routine is scuppered, it doesn't bother me, I don't need to be controlling them too much"*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Dave)*

Of interest here is how Dave's approach to dealing with heckling and disruptive audience members has changed throughout his career. Previously, Dave would have found himself irritated if not offended by instances of heckling or disturbances in the room which interrupted his on-stage performance and disrupted the delivery of his material. Presently, Dave appears much more lenient and forgiving towards audience behaviour and does not feel the need to be entirely in control of the audience. Dave surrenders somewhat to the unknown during his performance, dismissing heckling and overlooking disruption as threats to his performance. Much like Adam and his position in the field, Dave is also an established circuit performer who is well-respected by their peers and promoters alike. It is perhaps this which accounts for their shared perspective and approach towards hecklers and audience disruption.

## 6.4 "You Can't Find a Better Audience"

The relationship between stand-up comedians and their audiences was underpinned by conflict concerning the delivery and consumption of live stand-up comedy as an experience, which can develop into a battle for power and control between performer and audience. The previous section alluded to the 'rules' and values of the environment in which live stand-up comedy takes place. Such 'rules' and values are sometimes unwritten and at other times explicit, they can be different for comedians and audience members and it is in this difference where the conflict came to shape the relationship between performer and audience. Comedians referred to audiences in an often-unfavourable manner and were critical of audiences generally concerning their lack of etiquette, disruptive behaviour during the performance, alcohol consumption, night out mindset and lukewarm responses to the performance.

The different comedy clubs on the circuit all had different reputations when it came to the kind of audiences that they attracted. One comedy club I regularly visited with comedians was in the basement of a bar located in the nightlife and entertainment quarter of a city centre. It was a popular destination for a night out and attracted stag and hen parties as well as office and workplace outings. There was a consensus amongst comedians on the circuit about the reputation of the audiences who frequented the comedy club and it was viewed as being something of a nightmarish gig. The audiences that frequented the comedy club fit the bill of the 'weekend audience' typology with a propensity for being trouble during the performance.

The following extracts illustrate the perspectives of performers regarding the audience at this comedy club and contain particularly disparaging remarks towards the audience, revealing the judgement comedians make of an audience, especially about their intelligence and ability to 'get' the performance.

*Adam cheered that they were starting on time, the audience reaction was slightly muted and Adam said to the table of stand-up comedians, "it's gonna be shit this, you can just feel it instantly, I don't know what it is, they're just a bit stupid this crowd".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

*On the walk back to Rosie's car, we talked about the gig just now. Rosie described how she wasn't overly enthusiastic about playing this comedy club, "I don't enjoy it that much, it's kind of oh it's a woman sort of response, it's material they're not used to, a man just goes on and says how much he hates his wife and that they don't have sex, I've always found them to be quite thick here".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rosie)*

This was not the only comedy club that had acquired a reputation for 'difficult' audiences. Comedians on the circuit regularly referred to a national chain of comedy clubs. The chain had been in and out of management and financial difficulties over the years and had gained a reputation for paying acts late or not paying them at all, which adds to the precarity of being a self-employed stand-up comedian that I addressed in Chapter Two of this thesis. This was something several stand-up comedians informed me had happened to them and they now refused to work for the chain. The chain had developed a reputation for attracting particularly unruly and disorderly audiences due to them actively promoting bookings and discounts for stag, hen, office and workplace parties. Some comedians on the circuit were highly reluctant to gig for the chain and this was not only due to concerns about being paid late or not being paid at all but rather to avoid the audiences who attended the chain's clubs. A conversation between comedians in a green room one night captured their thoughts about the audiences who came to characterise the experience of performing at gigs operated by the chain in question.

*"[name of comedy club chain] seem to have mastered that ability though with that particular audience, I've never experienced anything like it, you'd see them walking in smiling then they'd sit down, you'd hit the stage and they'd look at you going what the fuck is this". Chris continued, "it wasn't like it was bad though, they were just arrogant miserable bastards". Andrew added, "thing is, they pay a lot of money an all". Conversation regarding this chain continued, Chris explained, "[name of comedy club chain] is the only gig I've even been to where I've seen a black act be heckled and called the N-word, twice, two different times". Mark joined in, having played on his phone for the past few minutes, "try Kings Lynn, fuck me, that's in a league of its own, in a bad way".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Simon)*

The audiences that frequented the chain's clubs have a notorious reputation. This is reflected in the comedians trading and sharing anecdotes that have a 'war story' quality about them. There is a dichotomy here in that however critical or whatever the degree of contempt stand-up comedians had for their audiences, they remain entirely dependent

upon them. Nevertheless, stand-up comedians expressed frustration with their audiences and would regularly scrutinise and disparage them over their lack of etiquette and appreciation of their performance and work.

*"They're quite an irritating audience, I just had a quick look, but they just keep muttering, audiences just don't know how to behave anymore, the classic description is would you behave like that in the theatre but that is how people behave in the theatre now".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Simon)*

Simon's comment arrived as he returned to the green room, having just popped into the auditorium during the show ahead of him going on stage later that night. Simon's comment signals a sense of frustration with audiences, and he draws comparison with the behaviour of audience members at other types of live theatrical performances.

*"The crowds don't know, some people go to comedy clubs and they are not used to being asked to be quiet, they don't get that's a rule, you could say it a million times please don't talk while the acts are on stage, please respect the stage and those around you, just get that it's a rhetorical performance and they don't need you chatting".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Adam also conveyed a sense of exasperation as to the lack of etiquette of audience members during the performance and suggests that they are perhaps not aware of the rules which govern live stand-up comedy performance as a space of cultural production. Adam argues that audiences do not understand how to behave whilst in a comedy club, irrespective of being instructed how to do so. Another stand-up comedian, Jason, was waiting to be introduced onto the stage at one gig when the compere, Phil, instructed the audience not to talk during the show. Much like Adam, Jason too expresses his disbelief that audience members need to be explicitly told how to behave during the show.

*Phil then welcomed the audience to the club, told them not to chat while the acts were on stage, "no chatting while the acts are on, you've paid money to hear them, they're very funny and we'll have a good time." Jason leant across again and told me, "it's mad like that you have to tell them how to behave".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

The expectations comedians have of audiences and their behaviour clash with how audiences do behave and the effects this has on the performance. This further illustrates how the 'rules' and values of live stand-up comedy underpin a conflict of interest between performer and their audience. Although such 'rules' are not unspoken, there are misconceptions as to the cultural space with comedians having a particular view as to how the space should operate and some audiences having a different view. Misconceptions of the space may also be influenced by the context stand-up comedy is delivered in. Stand-up comedy is simultaneously theatrical and social, the lack of the formal framing of stand-up as theatrical performance due to the 'liveness' and its interactive nature means that it takes on more of a social character perhaps than traditional mediums of theatre performance.

One night, I was at a comedy club with Johnny who had two gigs, an early show (7pm) and a late show (9:30pm). There was a thirty-minute break between both gigs and the comedians were sat around waiting for the late show to start. The stage manager wandered into the green room and suggested that they should speak to the bar staff to try and gather some information on what the incoming audience was like. One of the comedians, Michael, who was compering both shows made his opinion on the audience quite clear.

*"We're not really that interested in them, I just want them all to sit there and shut the fuck up and let us do what we're here for, it's not about you sunbeam, I've come with all the raw material I don't need you to provide it, you don't go to a restaurant and go I've brought some bananas can you do something with these". The stage manager laughed and then left the green room.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Michael)*

This is a perspective that subjugates the audience as to the part they play in the dynamics and proceedings of live stand-up comedy. Michael does not acknowledge his reliance as a performer upon the audience and uncompromisingly states his expectations regarding their etiquette, though he does so privately. The 'rules' of live stand-up comedy were often intertwined with the introduction of a stand-up comedian to the stage. At every live stand-up comedy gig I attended, the compere of each gig delivered a similar spiel as they introduced a performer to the stage. This always involved the compere instructing the audience as to the behaviour expected from them and the following fieldnote extracts capture the many ways comedians went about this.

*Before introducing the first act of the evening Sarah informed the audience of the structure of the evening and how it would work, explaining, "don't talk while the acts are on stage".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Sarah)*

*"It's going to be a genuinely great show, your first act is shooting off to another gig so we're going to get her straight off, I mean straight on, or off, fuck it, a few things to remember, please don't talk while the acts are on stage, switch your phones off, if you have an iPhone put it in flight mode because your night's about to take off, sit back and laugh a lot".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rosie)*

*Andy welcomed everybody before explaining the rules of the night, "if you've got a mobile phone switch it off and don't talk while the acts are on stage, you've paid to hear them talk not you".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Harry)*

Despite all of the conflict that flavoured the performer-audience relationship, and the scrutiny and disenchantment comedians would articulate regarding audiences, there was an overarching acceptance that there is not necessarily a better audience to be found. From one gig and one night to the next, stand-up comedians have to embrace the audience that they have in front of them. Whether or not comedians consider an audience to constitute a good or bad one is of little relevance – a stand-up comedian must go on stage and attempt to make the audience laugh, highlighting their dependency upon the presence of audiences.

*"The problem is you can't find a better audience, all you've got is the great British public, there's a problem with comedy these days is that if it's not about the audience, they don't like it, they need to put effort in as well, one of my friends Sean was trying out new material at a comedy club in London, the crowd were lairy but he still managed to get his new stuff out and he was from the telly, if you're not from the telly, we are under constant pressure, there's comics nipping at your heels to get these gigs, if you're not famous you have to be in the top five per cent of comedians to get the best gigs".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Simon)*

Simon highlights a predicament of working and performing on the circuit regarding audiences – that seeing as there is not necessarily a better audience – comedians have little choice but to deal with the audience they are presented with. This is a predicament that Peter also addressed. Although comedians scrutinise audiences, they are not in a position to stipulate to comedy clubs as to the audience members they allow to attend their shows.

*"It's hard to say to a venue oh please don't have them kind of people in cause then that venue won't operate and that'll be less money in my pocket and other comedian's pockets but you just, I feel it's more the manners of people I get more exasperated about, what I've just never understood is why some people behave the way they do in public like that, I don't get it, I don't understand it, I think that's where the real problem lies".*

*(Extract from interview, Peter)*

There is some sense that the status which accompanies being well-established on the circuit may lead to being booked for 'better' gigs. However, the prestigious, humble or low status of a gig is no assurance of a good or bad audience or a good or bad gig. Nevertheless, Simon refers to the high status and profile of some performers, specifically those from the television and suggests that this might influence the kind of audiences they encounter.

*Simon told me, "you don't get afforded any luxuries if you're not from the telly". Frankie added, "if we pumped out the kind of shit the people on television do we'd get booed off the fucking stage".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Simon)*

This interaction between Simon and Frankie points to the contrast between being a comedian on the circuit and being a comedian on television and highlights how the respective relationships the comedians have with audiences differ. There is the anonymity that accompanies the comedians working and performing on the circuit and this is distinct from their television counterparts who attract an audience specifically to see them. Audiences on the comedy circuit attend a comedy club to see live stand-up comedy and not necessarily to see a particular comedian whose work they are a fan of. Therefore, a distinction between circuit comedians and television comedians is that the latter already have an existing relationship with their audiences, whereas the circuit comedian must craft this afresh each night.

There is some sense that the distinction between the relationships television comedians and circuit comedians share with their audiences results in differing standards of on-stage material. The conversation between Simon and Frankie suggests that circuit audiences are perhaps more unforgiving than audiences who are enamoured with a particular television comedian with an existing status and profile. Comedians working on the circuit are perhaps

held to a higher standard as they do not have a pre-existing relationship with their audience before their live performance. They are unknown to the audience and have to prove their comedic credentials and win the audience over at each performance.

All of the comedians I spent time with are full-time professional stand-up comedians working on the circuit. While some performers had other sources of income allied to the comedy industry, for example, writing for television programmes, writing for high profile performers, and working as a warm-up artist for television recordings, all of them made their living primarily by working the circuit and performing at comedy clubs. Therefore, this perspective shared between Simon and Frankie and the other stand-up comedians featured in this research is likely to be reflective of comedians who work and perform on the live comedy circuit. In exploring the relationship between stand-up comedians and their audiences – this chapter captures a particular incarnation of this relationship – that between circuit comedians and audiences. Based on the conversation between the comedians, it is apparent that circuit comedians are not afforded the luxury of an audience that is present specifically to see them perform. This is something the stand-up comedians who feature in this research and share the lived experience of gigging and working on the comedy circuit can only think about the prospect of.

## 6.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter presents a picture of stand-up comedians as disenchanted with the audiences that they perform to on the comedy circuit. While comedians sought an attentive and engaged audience, they could find themselves performing to hostile, unruly and intoxicated audiences and having to contend with behaviour that disrupts their performance. There is a tension between the expectations comedians have of their audiences and the reality of what greeted them at their gigs on the circuit. The relationship between stand-up comedians and their audiences is complex and ever-changing from one audience to another and from one night to the next.

While there is some sense that there may be a ‘better’ audience out there, this is for the comedians with fame and television success. The relationship is characterised by a love-hate dynamic – for all the disenchantment and dissatisfaction stand-up comedians express

towards their audiences, they remain entirely dependent upon them. Irrespective of whether a comedian considers an audience to constitute a good or bad one, they must embrace them as they have only that audience at a given gig and are dependent upon them for their performance and wider ability to make a living as a stand-up comedian performing on the UK comedy circuit.

# Chapter 7: The Unpredictability of Being a Stand-Up Comedian

## 7.1 Introduction

The third and final chapter in the findings section of this thesis explores the unpredictability of being a stand-up comedian. This chapter builds on the one before it which explored the relationship between comedians and their audiences and how the unpredictability of audiences – their behaviour, alcohol consumption, heckling and etiquette during the performances, led to comedians being uncertain as to what to expect during a performance. Ahead of going on stage, stand-up comedians were weighing up every audience and wondering what they would be like.

Through the structure of three sub-themes, this chapter explores how unpredictability and uncertainty came to characterise the occupation and led comedians to describe a sense of perennially being on edge regarding their working lives due to the constant risk-taking involved in their work.

**"You're Desperate to Get That First Laugh"**

This sub-theme looks at the on-stage material of comedians and the state of uncertainty within which the provocation of laughter from an audience exists. It begins with the importance of getting the first laugh from an audience and how this can shape the rest of a comedian's performance. It then looks at the development and attempting of new material for the first time and how for some performers this is laden with uncertainty and trepidation.

**"You Have Seen Possibly the Worst Gig of My Year and the Best Gig of My Year"**

This sub-theme explores the contrasts that can exist between gigs and how this too highlights the unpredictability of audiences and thus the occupation. This section places focus on stand-up comedians performing at multiple gigs in one night and looks at the striking contrasts that can exist from one gig to the next and one audience to another. Whilst one audience could be idyllic, the next audience could be hostile and unforgiving, and this is something that comedians are continually having to navigate. Stand-up

comedians were venturing into the unknown at every gig, uncertain as to how a night at work would unfold.

**“You're Constantly on the Edge”**

This sub-theme develops from the preceding two sub-themes and identifies stand-up comedy as an occupation characterised by unpredictability. It explores this feeling of working and being ‘on the edge’ that stand-up comedians described regarding their working lives. Stand-up comedians were continually weighing up each gig and every audience, wondering whether they would thrive or ‘die’ on stage. Whilst performers become accustomed to the unpredictability of audiences and the risks involved in their work become routine, they are nevertheless engaging in risk-taking each time they perform on stage in front of an audience.

## 7.2 “You’re Desperate to Get That First Laugh”

A primary concern of stand-up comedians was how their on-stage material would fare before their audiences. Comedians typically had a prepared and polished twenty-minute set which they delivered at each of their gigs. This set was usually in the same order, largely verbatim and typically remained the same until they incorporated new material into their act. Routines were chopped and changed and replaced and replenished gradually over time.

Whether I was observing a stand-up comedian across multiple gigs in one night, over an entire weekend or at gigs that took place months apart, I expected to observe the same act in terms of content – that is the same material, jokes and routines. The twenty-minute performances of stand-up comedians generally remained the same. Such was my immersion within the comedy circuit, I believe that I could recite by memory alone, some routines word for word of at least three particular participants, as a result of my time spent with those performers during fieldwork. Several comedians reflected upon how they could perform the same on-stage material from one audience to another but that the response could differ dramatically from gig to gig. Laughter, or indeed lack of it, became a substantive aspect of the unpredictability which characterised working life as a stand-up comedian.

*"Audiences are interesting because we can do the same shit night after night but depending on where you are it can go completely different".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Sarah)*

Sarah introduces audiences of live stand-up comedy as a variable here and the source of much of the unpredictability experienced in working as a stand-up comedian. In the preceding chapter, I illustrated how the unpredictable behaviour of audiences can affect the performances of comedians. Here, I explore how comedians come to make sense of the unpredictability of audiences and how this shapes their view of the occupation as one that involves working 'on the edge'. Whilst Sarah can deliver what she believes to be arguably identical performances at multiple gigs, the audience reaction can be wildly different from one gig to the next.

*The applause stopped and Bill said, "good evening, I'm Bill and as you've probably gathered I have absolutely no charisma" which didn't get the laugh it had received in the previous two of tonight's gigs, rather a titter. Bill then did a couple of jokes to fairly modest laughter including ones that had been on the receiving end of near-hysterical belly laughter at [name of comedy club removed] and the early show at [name of comedy club removed]. After about a minute and a half Bill got his first big laugh across the room. From this point the gig then seemed to be back on track and no different to how the early show or the gig at [name of comedy club removed] had gone.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Bill)*

Like Sarah described, this episode involving Bill demonstrates that the reaction to one's on-stage material can vary entirely throughout an evening gigging; this material can seemingly depreciate and appreciate in comedic value. At his final gig of the night and from which this extract arises, Bill's opening joke did not provoke the same level of laughter as it had at his two earlier gigs that night. Yet as I observed, the same joke had induced expansive belly laughs from the two previous audiences that night. At this gig, Bill was playing to a mixture of silence and polite but modest chortles here and there. This was until Bill triggered his first big laugh, at which point he was able to settle into the gig having finally won the audience over.

This points to the importance of the comedian getting their first laugh from an audience and the uncertainty that can accompany this. Whilst comedians' on-stage material is prepared and rehearsed, they remain at the mercy of their audiences as to whether the audience

finds the material funny and laughs or not.  A failure to acquire the important first laugh from an audience can see the success of a gig hanging in the balance. Later that night, Bill reflected on the uncertainty that surrounds each gig and the urgency with which the comedian must get their first laugh.

*"Once you've got the first laugh that's the time I go okay I can relax now and do my thing, if you've gone a couple of minutes and you haven't got a laugh the alarm bells start ringing and it's holy shit, for me it's happened several times, awful gigs, I'd liken it to trying to tread water or not being able to swim and you're desperate to float, you just have to carry on and you've got to get a laugh so then you'll start going for stuff that isn't subtle and some of my stuff is quite subtle, not a lot of it, but there's no way I'd keep subtle you know our local Maplins store or any of that bollocks, I'll be looking for a big laugh".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Bill)*

Bill's reflections highlight the unpredictability of audiences and the uncertainty that surrounds obtaining the first laugh, which whether it arises or not as intended, is framed here as being an early indicator as to how a gig may unfold and what an audience might be like.

*"You just wanna get the first laugh as soon as possible just to give them confidence, the longer it goes the worse it is, I've had times where it's taken me five or six minutes to get anything and then it's a slog, it's very hard to have a really good gig if you've struggled for the first bit"*

*"On stage if you take it too lightly and just walk on and think I've done this a thousand times I'm just going to be on autopilot, you can get bitten quite badly, once I get out on stage it's like a fight to the death, you're desperate to get that first laugh and you need to".*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Bill)*

In failing to acquire the all-important first laugh from an audience, a sense of desperation arises as the stand-up comedian must keep trying until they secure that first laugh. Unable to abandon the performance, the performer has to make the audience laugh or play to silence until their time is up. The longer the comedian performs without laughter the likelihood of redemption recedes further and the prospect of even a reasonable or average gig becomes increasingly unlikely. Another comedian, Jason, also highlighted the

importance of getting not just the first laugh from an audience but as many laughs as possible soon after beginning the performance.

*"I'm just working out what I'm gonna do, we need to try and get three or four laughs within thirty seconds".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

Stand-up comedians working on the comedy circuit are typically anonymous, certainly by comparison to their television counterparts, and unknown to audiences. Consequently, those comedians have much to prove to audiences who have likely never heard of them and so provoking the first laugh is a vital first stage in establishing rapport with an audience. Back in the green room after his performance that night, Bill reflected upon failing in his attempt to get his first laugh from the audience.

*"Did you see what I mean there about getting the opening laugh? It didn't get the usual response, I was like oh shit, and they were like make me laugh…"*

*"…it was like being on a tight-rope, much more than normal, a funny atmosphere".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Bill)*

I had observed Bill use his standard opening line regarding his apparent lack of charisma to great effect on previous occasions. In this instance, however, his opening line did not elicit the usual response from the audience. This predicament induced something of a panic in Bill as he describes how he saw the audience emerge as hostile, almost demanding to be made to laugh following the failure of his opening line.

While a stand-up comedian may have material that is tried, tested and refined over many performances, this is no guarantee of laughter. What is evident here is that comedians cannot take a gig, an audience or indeed their material for granted. The unpredictability of audiences stipulates that where one audience might laugh, another may not. One comedian, Rob, describes a corporate gig at which he performed.

"*I died on my arse, the booker had seen a gig on YouTube I did in Melbourne, which to be fair was one of my best, she saw it and then afterwards complained saying we didn't get the guy*

*off the clip who did those jokes, I told her you did get that guy who did those jokes, I started off doing that but the gig was just a nightmare, that guy did do that guys jokes he just didn't get that guys reactions… I started with my line that brought the house down in Melbourne, about posh people saying yes they pronounce it as ears, at the corporate it got nothing*".

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rob)*

Having 'died' with some of his jokes playing to complete non-laughter, Rob was challenged after the gig by the booker of the gig who was disappointed having watched him deliver the same jokes in an online recording of another performance. This highlights the fickle nature of the reaction to comedian's on-stage material from different audiences. Although Rob had previously delivered such jokes to great success, the same jokes failed to raise a laugh at this gig. There was some sense that comedians are not fully satisfied unless they have every audience member laughing. In some cases, even if most audience members are laughing and enjoying the performance, comedians could not help but fixate on those few audience members who are not laughing.

*The night before Peter mentioned how an older couple in the audience who just seemed to stare at him all the way through his performance with a look of disapproval and not laugh put him off. I asked if this bothered him and he explained, "…there could be 500 people in the room, 499 of them laughing but it's that one person with a face on them, they could be at the back and it just sticks with you".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Peter)*

*"It's that thing I always say, you always pick up on that one person who isn't laughing, when I did the Manchester Arena, fifteen thousand people a night and I was still coming off going have you seen that fucker in the front row, it's that one person".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Harry)*

While the non-laughter of audience members was always a point of concern for comedians, this was especially heightened when comedians were developing and attempting new material on stage and in front of an audience for the first time. In Chapter Five, I explored the notion of 'hack' stand-up comedy and how 'hack' functions as a means to sustain a hierarchy within the working culture of comedians where status is ranked based on such factors as originality and creativity.  One aspect of being 'hack' was comedians using the same material verbatim for years without developing or introducing new material into their act. There were many reasons put forward as to why some comedians have a lack of

turnover of new material – creative apathy, a lack of commitment and passion, a lack of ideas and the ability to still earn a living with established unchanged material. However, I suggested that these might be overly reductionist and that instead there was also a prevalent fear and anxiety associated with developing and trying out new material on stage in front of an audience.

Attempting new material was laden with uncertainty; often these were ideas that a stand-up comedian was working on and trying out for the very first time. It was likely that a new joke would play to silence or that a set piece the comedian thinks might have comedic mileage falls flat. Developing and attempting new material felt like starting over and comedians were very much out of their comfort zone, separated from the safety and security of their established material. Much like the emphasis and anxiety around acquiring one's first laugh, there was a fear of being exposed in front of the audience when trying out new material. The material failing to work and arising in non-laughter being the fear. Unlike established material, there was no track record of the new material having ever made an audience laugh before. This was its first airing and it was underlined by complete uncertainty and unpredictability.

One night of fieldwork took me to a new material gig that Sarah was compering. This was a monthly gig staged on a midweek night that attracted a modestly sized audience who had paid a couple of pounds entry to the comedy club. This was a fraction of the price of a ticket to a weekend show at the club and the price was reflective of the 'trial and error' nature of the comedian's performances. This gig was specifically for established stand-up comedians wanting to try out new material and it was something of a 'safe space'.

Around the time of fieldwork, the annual Edinburgh Fringe Festival was fast approaching, and performers were looking to road test their new material. Typically, each performer would enter the stage with their notes in hand and work through each idea with very little flow and narrative between routines. They were trying to discover what provoked a laugh from the audience and what did not. The entire night had a work in progress feel about it and comedians would actively read from and refer to their notes. In the green room and before the gig there was a tangible sense of unease amongst the stand-up comedians and

nervous energy permeating the backstage space. The ambience in the green room was much more subdued and the interaction between the comedians was minimal and much less jovial compared with my fieldwork experiences of being in green rooms at weekend gigs.

*Tony confessed to the room, "I'm nervous I don't normally do these new material gigs". Sarah told him "there's no fucker in pal, you'll be alright" to which Tony responded, "I know but I've been going twenty-five years and it still gets me".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Sarah)*

Tony was clearly nervous to try out his new material for the first time on the night. Irrespective of his credentials, successes to date and having been a professional stand-up comedian for many years, new material was still something that provoked a strong reaction within him. Interesting here is how the attempting of new material might pose something of a threat to individuals' status as stand-up comedians and their confidence in their ability to make an audience laugh. Although there is always the lingering possibility that the comedian's material may not induce laughter in an audience, when it comes to attempting new material, this is very much heightened.

Of note here is how Tony perhaps asserts his status as a stand-up comedian within the green room and in the company of the other performers present. As Tony emphasises that he has been in the business for twenty-five years, it seems he is absolving himself in advance of the gig in case his new material does not work in front of the audience and his onlooking colleagues. It could be interpreted that Tony is rendering the outcome of the gig as irrelevant given his 'stalwart of the circuit' status - a twenty-five-year professional which must seemingly count for something. This is perhaps a strategy deployed by comedians to overcome them failing to make an audience laugh with new material.

Charlie, another stand-up comedian at the gig, was also particularly nervous and fearful of having to go on last. Charlie was due to close the show, his position on the bill and his negative perception of his new material leading him to convey a sense that the inevitable was being prolonged. The running order was in no way a reflection of each performer's importance, competence or ranking; Tony was an established headliner and yet he was the

opening act on this night. Still, Charlie did appear to be concerned about going on last and what this might mean for him and whether this would give the impression to the audience that he is a headliner - when in fact he is also trying out new material for the first time, material which may well fail.

*Charlie said, "I don't want to go on last with new material cause it's all new material, it will most likely be diabolically terrible".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Sarah)*

This sense of absolution in advance of a bad gig and resignation to a bad gig before even setting foot on stage exemplifies these feelings of trepidation that performers associated with new material. This perhaps explains why some comedians are concerned about moving away from their established material as they worry that their new material may not have the same impact or may simply fail to make an audience laugh. One stand-up comedian, Adam, described how the fear associated with trying out new material can squash any desire or ambition to try it out at a gig, with stand-up comedians preferring to stick with tried and tested material rather than chance the prospect of not making the audience laugh.

*"The reason I'm like that is because if I don't get those notes out, I will not do the new stuff cause on stage as soon as you feel any sort of uncertainty, you go back to the script that's in your head cause we've all got a safe, we know these jokes work, we've done them in this order, and I did it tonight, eventually I got to the I live on a student street bit and I was back on script".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Adam made it clear that he has to force himself to work through his new material and commit to delivering it when on stage, sprinkling it across his performance, interspersed amongst more established jokes, which prop up his new material during its infancy. During fieldwork, I came to form the impression that Adam is perhaps one of the more studious performers when it came to the development of new material. Upon arriving at a gig Adam would retrieve his notebook from his bag and actively work through his jottings and ideas.

An element of being in one's comfort zone regarding established material emerges. The act of trying out new material challenges stand-up comedians' sense of security and possibly their self-image regarding their ability to make an audience laugh. This leaves them feeling

uncertain, fearful and perhaps even vulnerable in front of an audience.

### 7.3 “You Have Seen Possibly the Worst Gig of My Year and the Best Gig of My Year”

The unpredictability involved in stand-up comedy was most noticeable in the instance of a comedian performing at multiple gigs sometimes in a single night. The contrasts that could exist from one gig to the next and from one audience to another were striking - capturing and highlighting this unpredictability and the accompanying uncertainty the stand-up comedian experienced in action. It would be reasonable to assume that comedians only perform at one gig a night - the impression perhaps being that they arrive at the comedy club, await their turn before walking on stage, performing their twenty-minute act before departing. All being well, to applause and ovation aplenty before venturing home having earned their wages for the night.

On the contrary, many comedians working on the circuit engage in what is known as doubling-up, which is industry jargon for having two or three gigs in one night. Most comedy clubs on the circuit only operated shows nightly from Thursday to Saturday. This meant that comedians typically had three days each week where they could perform and earn a living. Therefore, by doubling up, performers can double or triple their income for the night, and it is here where gigging could prove to be financially lucrative. By doubling up and squeezing in as many gigs as possible, comedians can make the most of their time spent in a locale making the travelling involved perhaps less unappealing. The following extracts from my fieldnotes offer an illustration as to the logistics of doubling up.

*This was the first gig of tonight’s double up. Both gigs were booked and run by a local and well-known promoter and comedian and each gig featured the same line-up, albeit with different comperes, and the stand-up comedians swapped over at each venue.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, James)*

*Johnny was the first act on, referred to as the ‘opener’. This was because we were then travelling to Liverpool where he was the ‘headline act’ at another comedy club.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Johnny)*

A stand-up comedian with two gigs would usually be the opening act at one gig before then travelling to another gig at which they were the headline act. Doubling-up could see comedians gigging in two separate cities with an hour-long stretch of motorway in between and it could also extend itself to undertaking three gigs in one night.

*Tonight I would be observing Jason over the course of the evening, he had three gigs in tonight, beginning with the early show at [name of comedy club removed] at 7pm in which he was the second act on the bill, before opening [name of comedy club removed] where the show starts at 8:30pm where he was the first act on the bill, after which Jason was then the second act on the bill at the late show back at the first comedy club of the night.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

I came to learn that two or three gigs in a single night were a common occurrence for many of the stand-up comedians I spent time with during fieldwork – although a number of those had on occasion performed at even more gigs in one night. One comedian, Bill, had performed at five gigs during one night in London.

*"In a single night I've done five gigs in one night, that was in London, started off at The Comedy Store and I did one in Heaven which is a gay nightclub, then I did one near London Bridge then I did one in a big tent then I went back to The Comedy Store". I asked Bill what the means of travel was across all of those gigs, "mostly tube and running, it was very tight, I don't like it but I've got to feed the family, in an ideal world you'd do one gig then have a beer at the end of it but the reality is you're running around a lot, and because the energy's different and ideally you want the last gig you do to be the good one otherwise if you have a terrible gig you've got to get back on the horse".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Bill)*

The contrasts that could exist between multiple gigs in a single night illuminated the unpredictability which came to characterise the occupation for stand-up comedians. The contrasts between gigs were something comedians were perennially seeking to make sense of but struggled to do so. Over the course of a night, their on-stage material would seemingly depreciate and appreciate in comedic value from one audience to the next. While one audience could be laughing and applauding in all the right places, attentively listening and watching the comedian's performance, the next audience could be hostile, intoxicated, talking during the performance and heckling. Where one venue could be purpose-built with showbusiness flair, house rules and a comfortable backstage area, the next venue could be

a glorified beer cellar with fold-down chairs and a corner of the room curtained off to serve as a dressing room.

I observed two stand-up comedians, Peter and Rosie, as they went about their respective double-ups. Although this was on two different nights and months apart, it was the same double-up and one well-trodden by comedians on the circuit. Peter was opening a comedy club in Liverpool and then journeying to Chester to play another comedy club, whereas Rosie was opening the same comedy club in Chester then making the journey to the same comedy club in Liverpool. Interesting here is how similar their respective experiences are at each of the two gigs.

*"They were disjointed, they didn't have a clue what they were doing there and weren't working together". There was some disruption from the audience during his performance of young females who kept going back and to the toilet and coming back staggering and disruptive. On stage Peter made quips about drug use saying, "did you leave her a line in there?"*

*"What you've seen there is two completely different gigs, great sightlines in here, no pockets of chatting, people-focused and paying attention, just shows you run it properly with an audience that can focus, completely different, I really enjoyed that gig".*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Peter)*

At his first gig of the night, Peter found the audience to be disruptive during his performance. There was talking amongst tables and movement in the room as people ventured to and from the bathroom and bar, which disturbed the flow of Peter's performance and distracted other audience members. At his second gig of the night, Peter was much more satisfied with the audience who were much more attentive and engaged and refrained from chatting during the performance. Consequently, Peter enjoyed this gig much more than the first one. Peter was delivering the same material at both gigs, yet the effectiveness of that material and the success of his performance resided with the audience at each gig, the unpredictability of the audiences leading Peter to have two very different gigs, both in complete contrast to one another.

Before observing Rosie, I was intrigued to see how the night would develop and if her experiences at the two gigs might reflect those of Peter. Whilst Peter ended his night at a comedy club in Chester, Rosie began her night there and the following extract captures her reflections as she was driving to Liverpool for her next gig.

*"They were nice, it was quiet but you could see from how they were with Al that they were going to be fine, I thought I'm going to do some new stuff cause they're so nice but if there's not many of them it is a bit of a risk, cause it'll just be like batten down the hatches at [name of comedy club removed]".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rosie)*

In contrast with her first gig of the night, Rosie remarks that her next gig will be like "batten down the hatches". This brings a new dimension to the unpredictability of working as a stand-up comedian. Although Rosie is uncertain as to what might happen at the next gig she anticipates an unruly audience and is preparing herself accordingly for the difficulties she might encounter at the same gig where Peter also found the audience challenging. This indicates how the unpredictability and risk-taking involved in working as a stand-up comedian operates. Here, the audience is unpredictable in that Rosie cannot predict what will happen thus making it risky. Nevertheless, Rosie is perhaps aware of what the gig might be like and is preparing herself for anything and everything that she could be confronted by. This illustrates how stand-up comedians manage the risk and unpredictability that they face going from gig to gig.

Much like Peter who appeared to engage in an act of self-protection as he apportioned blame on the audience based on their disruptive behaviour. Here, Rosie is already establishing her self-protection as she makes clear the reputation of the audience at the upcoming gig. While stand-up comedians are accustomed to unpredictability; this is not to say that there is not some degree of expectedness as to what might happen. Indeed, and as anticipated, Rosie's two gigs were entirely different from one another and mirrored the experiences of Peter at the same two gigs.

*I noticed as Rosie started, the audience was talkative during Rosie's performance. There were a couple of pockets in the audience of people chatting, a man shouted out during Rosie's set, as an audience they seemed unsettled, though Rosie interacted with each one in*

*and amongst her set, it seemed like she was constantly being interrupted by things happening in the room….*

*…Danny and Dave made comments about the audience, Dave asked Danny "can they not just sit and listen?" Rosie ended up side-tracked and seemed to be ad-libbing as an audience member tried to have a conversation with her, and by comparison with her set in Chester earlier tonight, it seemed like she couldn't get into her actual material. The audience would mutter after each joke with various, "oh no's" and "awwws" in the silences that preceded the punch lines. A few moments later, shouting began to emerge from the foyer, Joanne the show manager looked annoyed and went over to see what was happening, and Danny and Dave were shaking their heads...*

*…One man got up during Rosie's set and went to the toilet and Rosie abandoned a routine mid joke and addressed this, chatting back and forth with the table he was sat at. Moments later and mid-joke, a woman then started swearing loudly at the man she was with, Rosie said, "bloody hell it's kicking off now" before picking up where she left off mid-sentence.*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Rosie)*

This extract captures Rosie's second gig of the night and illustrates this "batten down the hatches" description she had earlier ascribed to the gig. During Rosie's performance, the audience was loud and noisy, and the conversations of audience members continued. Heckling, swearing and shouting out proliferated, an argument between audience members in the foyer spilt into the auditorium, and audience members were moving around the room going to the bathroom and bar. All of this blended to disturb Rosie's performance, thus making it a significantly different working environment and a second gig that contrasted sharply against the first that night, but which did imitate Peter's gig.

I observed another stand-up comedian, Jason, across three gigs in one night, which were all in complete contrast to one another. Walking through the city centre on our way to his second gig of the night, Jason reflected upon his first gig and weighed up the next one.

*"This is potentially going to war now though, I've had that gig just now, I'm happy with that, if I get heckled to fuck walking on here, whatever mate I've just smashed [name of comedy club removed], a footballer will go on, they know they've got the fitness they just hope they have the touch that night, or a musician, their hands are just moving perfectly, they've rehearsed and trained, it just needs to be in sync".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

A successful first gig does not necessarily lead to confidence or assurance for the next one. This reinforces the notion that the performer cannot take an audience or gig for granted. Instead, like his colleagues Rosie and Peter, Jason engages in self-protection. He acknowledges that he is riding 'high' from his first gig of the night going so well, meaning that whatever happens at the next gig is irrelevant. Jason compares how he 'smashed' the gig with the skills required to be successful in a range of other creative professions and to explain the unpredictability of working as a stand-up comedian. Whilst stand-up comedians have their experience, their skills and their material prepared, the outcome of the performance is subject to a range of factors, and the audience forms the most significant factor in the success of a performance. Jason's reference to the gig as potentially representing going to war conjures up this sense of risk-taking the stand-up comedian is engaging in.

*"I just don't want to look at them just yet, Phil will be in there so I can talk to him, I get more nervous here than doing [name of comedy club removed] at five hundred people, this gig has more potential for trouble, here looks like a bar, I'm not saying it's rough, but we could go in and it could be a beautiful crowd in there or absolute bastards".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

Jason is hesitant to enter the venue and like Rosie, he is anticipating the potential for a troublesome audience and the likelihood of a tough gig. Jason's comment captures his uncertainty as to what the audience is going to be like and his nervousness due to the reputation of the gig.

*Jason told Phil that "[name of comedy club just played removed] was out of this world wasn't it" as I agreed, Phil then said, "well this will bring you back down to earth don't you worry about that mate".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

Upon entering the comedy club and venturing backstage, Jason's exchange with the compere, Phil, summarised the contrast between the two gigs Jason was playing on this night. It also offered an insight into the status that stand-up comedians afford particular comedy clubs and the audiences who attend them. Despite having just 'smashed', as he puts it, his first gig of the night, Jason is now waiting to go on stage at his second gig of the

night, at a comedy club where he had a particularly rough gig the night before owing to a rowdy and unruly audience. Phil's assurance that this gig will bring Jason back down to earth from the 'high' he was experiencing from the gig before highlights this contrast between multiple gigs in one night. After this second gig, Jason and I were walking back across the city centre towards his third and final gig of the night. As we walked and talked, Jason reflected on his second gig.

*"There was no momentum but I did well there, they liked me, I didn't rip it I didn't smash it, but I opened the show in a good way, I did a good job opening on a Saturday night, couple of big laughs, a little clap break and that's it, there was work, just a nice gig, but [name of the first comedy club removed] that was amazing".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

While Jason continues to talk enthusiastically about his first gig, he portrays his second gig as much more run-of-the-mill by comparison. Jason's third and final gig of the night was back at the same comedy club where his first gig of the night took place.

*Midway through Jason's set, the door of the function room on the balcony opened and the music from inside blared out. Jason paused; a man on the balcony was stood at the front of it and raised a glass to him, the audience in the stalls looked up. Jason appeared to lose his train of thought and asked the audience what he was talking about; he then abandoned that routine and moved onto a different one. At the end of his set, Jason seemed to lose his train of thought again and began rambling several lines before leaving the stage, Jimmy returned and announced the interval, I made my way back down to the green room.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

All three of Jason's gigs that night were entirely different to one other. Jason's on-stage performance at his final gig was disturbed by an audience member and noise seeping into the auditorium, both of which diverted the audience's attention away from Jason and the stage. This also distracted Jason to the point where he lost his place in his routine and the rest of his performance appeared to suffer from this moment of disruption. Back in the green room, Jason reflected on his performance with the compere Jimmy.

*"I got caught up and couldn't remember where I was, the door opened and music bled in, it wasn't great was it, I was too fast, I lost control". Jimmy added, "they're not one audience, Ian had peeks and highs, he didn't have a great one". Ross the stage manager walked into*

*the green room and apologized for the noise to Jason. Jason continued, “after the first Europe line I go bam I’m in now, then I didn’t get the reaction for one line and thought I’ll play around, but then the gluten bit didn’t get what it needed I think I’m going to take that out of late shows”.*

*Jimmy added also, “I had bits where I was in and then others where I wasn’t, I think it’s just that kind of crowd”. Jason said, “I just lost the plot, I’ve had worse, big time, still a good gig but I lost my way”.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Jason)*

The fluctuation in the comedic value of the material of comedians reappears here. Much like with Bill, Jason’s on-stage material also seemed to depreciate in comedic value, as a number of Jason’s opening jokes failed to elicit laughter from the audience, whereas earlier in the night they had. During his performance, Jason ends up on the backfoot as his opening joke, which brought the house down at the first gig of the night, fails to get a laugh here and in the same comedy club. This pattern of self-protection against the unpredictability of being a stand-up comedian continues as Jason and Jimmy begin to blame the audience. Jimmy describes how the audience were not working together, leading to moments when his performance was going well and others where it was not going so well, he concludes that the audience is at fault. Jason made use of his first gig going very well as a defence against the likelihood of his second one going badly. After his third gig, Jason explained that he had endured worse.

The unpredictability involved in working as a stand-up comedian also came to incorporate the comedy clubs and performance spaces themselves and how these too can shape the contrast between multiples gigs in a single night. The clubs and performance spaces in which live stand-up comedy gigs are staged can all be very different from each other and so too can the prestige, or lack thereof, that stand-up comedians ascribe to the clubs and venues.

One of the most striking contrasts between gigs and a significant example of the unpredictability and uncertainty facing comedians working and performing on the circuit that I observed was during one night with Adam. I was in Birmingham and Adam was performing at three gigs over the weekend, two of which were at a purpose-built, well-established comedy club. The club was popular amongst comedians on the circuit due to its

professional operation. I was invited here to observe Adam based on his belief that this club is one of the best in the country. The following extract from my fieldnotes records a previous weekend with Adam and captures the moment he invited me to Birmingham as well as his thoughts regarding the differences between some of the clubs on the circuit.

*"Come and hang out at the Birmingham [Comedy Club C] and I'll show you what a real comedy club looks like, you've seen [Comedy Club A] which is one of the better ones but it's very rough and ready". I said that I had thought that and commented that [Comedy Club A] isn't as necessarily well-polished as [Comedy Club B]. Adam described, "they're the premier league and [Comedy Club A] whether it likes it or not is at championship level, still great but definitely one below".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Back to my weekend in Birmingham where Adam's first gig on Friday night was at the comedy club he had spoken highly of, and on this night, Adam was the opening act on the bill. A few minutes into his performance Adam became involved in something of a squabble with a man and woman who were a couple in the front row of the audience.

*Midway through this routine, Adam had to stop to tell a couple in the audience, to the left of him to stop talking. Simon and I had noticed the couple talking and it was distracting, particularly in the bits where Adam was setting up his jokes and the room was quiet. Mid-sentence, Adam turned, stepping towards them saying, "are you alright? Are you okay? Do you know there's a performance going on eight feet from your fucking heads? Jesus Christ". At this point the audience began to cheer and then applaud, "I mean it's not just me who noticed that is it, I thought it's been four minutes, I'll give them a chance, you've got fish and chips, a curry, jugs of cocktails, I don't know if this is your release from prison night" and the audience then cheered again and applauded.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Adam's confrontation with the front row couple who had been chatting through his performance generated the vocal support of the rest of the audience at first, but it soon started to turn sour.

*Adam continued, "but mate you have got to shut the fuck up for the next two hours" to which the female half of the couple then asked loudly, "do you want to join in?" to which Adam laughed and then came back with, "no I don't want to join in, it's a rhetorical performance you arrogant bitch" the audience then gasped, laughed and cheered before applauding. Adam then deconstructed the situation somewhat, "I'm sorry, that was a bit much, look at the hen do all going I didn't like that I feel like you lost the moral high ground*

*on that one Adam, I apologise… not to her!" Adam then picked up the routine from where he had left off; the couple were now somewhat self-conscious and now watching Adam's performance without talking.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

The confrontation between Adam and the front row couple had escalated. Adam's use of a gendered slur to put down the woman created tension in the audience and Adam was aware of this and began to apologise, albeit with humour. Adam continued his performance and delivered a routine about the Manchester accent and its perceived monotone nature. This did provoke some big laughs from the audience, including the couple he had just confronted. Back in the green room after Adam's performance, he was discussing the incident with his fellow comedians, Maureen and Simon.

*Adam was stood talking to Simon, "it's been a long time since I've had to tell people off, they were that desperate for attention". Simon told Adam, "it was very well dealt with mate". Adam added, "I can't describe the volume, the room is proper Friday night bubbly, they're on board and you can hear that couple chatting away, people get giddy post compere not knowing what's going on but I tripped over it" to which Simon described, "your rhythm was different, I could hear them from where I was". Adam added, "it takes a lot for me to stop a bit halfway and go what the fuck are you doing, it was so loud"…*

*…Adam explained that he regretted using the word "bitch" in his putdown, Maureen jumped in, "Adam don't analyse it" as did Simon, "as a comic I loved it and as an audience member I was going that's totally fair enough, cause also when you did it you did the whole ad-lib, I'm sorry not to them, to you, I loved it".*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Adam's post-performance confessional captures the errors in judgement he believed he had made regarding his handling of the confrontation with the couple in the front row. Adam then begins to seek and subsequently gains the reassurance of his fellow comedians on how he handled the situation. Moments later and we were hot-footing it from the green room and out of a fire exit onto the street. We then clambered into Adam's car as he set off for his second gig of the night, which was in a suburb of the city centre. On the drive there, Adam shared his thoughts about the gig ahead.

*"I've never seen of it or heard of it, two hundred and fifty quid to close, the gig though is totally down to the promoter and these boys are local Birmingham promoters, they run some fucking weird gigs, so if I'm totally honest my expectation for this is pretty low but*

*that's the deal isn't it, you've got to be able to do both, so it's dust off your fucking pride and do the job, I've said yes to the gig, it's a four hundred and seventy quid night, that for the circuit on a Friday night is as good as you're going to get, so I'm in premier league".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Like Rosie, Adam also addresses his expectations ahead of the gig and is preparing himself. Adam has never played this gig before and is walking into the unknown, which highlights the reality of earning a living as a comedian on the circuit. Based on the reputation of the promoters, Adam is not convinced that the gig will be a good one. However, as he is doubling his income for the night, he accepts the situation irrespective of what might happen, labelling it as part of the deal. It seems Adam must forego his pride regarding gigs when he needs to earn a living, and this points to the flexibility required of the circuit comedian, going from a prestigious comedy club to the back room of a pub.

The unpredictability of being a stand-up comedian did not simply reside with audiences and their behaviour during the performance but also the gigs and venues that comedians have to take and perform at. We had arrived at Adam's second gig of the night; the car park was in the middle of a dual carriageway and as Adam pulled into the car park, I'll allow my fieldnotes from the night to narrate proceedings.

*"oh no, this isn't it is it, please god don't let it be here". We crossed the road; there was a bouncer in the process of throwing somebody out of the venue, as two groups of people were shouting at each other. We slalomed around the crowd outside before stepping up to the venue and walking through double doors into what could only be described as a fairly neglected, rough-looking pub that had seen better days, it was not too dissimilar to The Jockey pub from Channel 4's drama Shameless. The stage was in the corner of the pub, it had a speaker stand either side of the stage and on-stage were two pop-up banners brandishing the comedy club logo.*

*The audience was sat around on stools and at tables; the bar was open and was in the process of throwing empty bottles into the bin seemingly forgetful that there was a performance on. Adam and I sat at the back of the room. The current act on stage was in the process of finishing their performance, "I ain't going to lie to you, this has been fucking painful at times" and was in the process of exchanging middle-finger gestures with an audience member who returned the favour. Adam looked at me and said, "what the fuck is this?"*

*The act then left the stage. Scott, one of Adam's friends was compering, he returned and announced the interval. Adam and I were then ushered by Andy, the promoter into what he described as the green room, but was in fact a fully fitted, boxing gym, with some battered leather couches next to the ring. The gym had punch bags suspended from the ceiling, weights and other paraphernalia.*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Based on this account of the gig, the striking contrast between the two gigs that night is apparent as is Adam's uncertainty and acceptance that such gigs, however undesirable, are simply part of being a comedian working on the circuit. Whilst Adam already had low expectations of this gig, he was still shocked as to the situation that greeted him upon his arrival at the venue, highlighting the unpredictability in action. It was evident that Adam had only taken this gig for money. I asked Adam if other stand-up comedians would walk away if they were confronted with a scenario of this type.

*"Definitely but two hundred and fifty quid will make you not walk out, the other thing is, you have to maintain a level of professionalism, if you walk out of a shit gig, they're not going to book you again, everyone's just got to go on, do it, get off and make sure they get paid".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

To make a living on the circuit, comedians take bookings for gigs that they have never played before or may have low expectations of. This illustrates a conflict between stand-up comedians' passion and talent for stand-up comedy and the need to earn a wage from that passion and talent. Adam appeared to be taken aback by the gig and how it was unfolding, describing a feeling of being trapped.

*"Scott is doing really well but what the fuck is going on here Thomas? We're trapped in here now, we can't leave, this is the reality when you're starting out but then once you move up the notches you do these gigs less and less".*

*"Well there's every chance this is going to be dreadful, ten years ago this was bread and butter to me".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Despite describing feeling trapped and expecting the gig to be dreadful, Adam was committed to the gig having taken the booking. His professionalism and the matter of preserving his reputation prevented him from absconding from the gig, as does the fee he

will receive which increases his nightly income two-fold. What is apparent here is the effect of progressing through the comedy circuit hierarchy and the stratification of comedy clubs, that the gigs and venues get somewhat ‘better’. Indeed, Adam suggests that gigs of this variety were common workplace haunts early on in his career and how he earned his income as an up-and-coming comedian on the circuit. There is a sense that there is a felt loss of status produced by performing at a gig such as this, that as a comedian quite a few years into their professional career Adam is above gigs of this standard. However, as Adam alluded to earlier it is about putting one’s pride aside and taking those gigs to make a living.

Nevertheless, despite Adam’s admission that progression through the circuit hierarchy means that the standard of gigs one performs at supposedly improve, there is still an unpredictability that characterises the working lives of comedians going from gig to gig. For example, Adam was playing at one of the most well-established and prestigious comedy clubs earlier in the night, but this did not eliminate the chance of him getting into a confrontation with two members of the audience and consequently disrupting his performance. Returning to the gig, Adam continued to ponder how it would unfold as he awaited his performance. Interestingly, and as other stand-up comedians had exhibited during fieldwork, Adam began to detach himself from any investment in the outcome of the gig.

*“I almost don’t care; I have zero emotional attachment to this gig right now”.*

*Scott, before going on, told Adam, “there’s a couple down the front, Becky and Mark, you can actually interact with them” and Adam told him, “I’m not interacting with anyone, there’s every chance this gig is going in the fucking ground”.*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Adam’s professed lack of emotional attachment to the gig, his disregard for audience interaction and his apparent acceptance as to the likely negative outcome of the gig illustrates this pre-work of self-protection comedians engage in ahead what they anticipate will be a difficult show or audience. They build a shield against the unpredictability and uncertainty of their work. Whilst fellow stand-up comedian Scott attempts to assist and even reassure Adam, Adam constructs a divide between himself and the audience, almost as though to preserve his pride if he fails to make them laugh. The following extracts from

my fieldnotes depict Adam's performance, Scott's real-time backstage commentary, and Adam's thoughts coming off stage.

*Scott said, "he's just banging it out isn't he, he's not enjoying it though I can tell you that, he's kind of got them". Adam did some of the material that was part of his set at the first gig of the night, though he did seem to be powering through it at speed and not pausing for any nuances or interactions as he had at the previous gig.*

*When Adam reached the end of his set, he started wrapping up, "I've come out expecting an absolute blood bath and you've listened, you're fucking mavericks, I hope this becomes a gig and runs for years just so all of my colleagues get to fucking play it" at this point Scott laughed heartily and clapped.*

*Adam left the stage and Scott returned and closed the night. Adam returned to the green room, he looked relieved, "the worst thing is they did start listening, I got them with the performance exactly where I wanted them, just go up and don't fuck about, don't get bogged down in chat, hit them with it, the first ten minutes was rolling and they were listening, then they lost it. I'm sort of mortified, there's part of me that's a bit embarrassed by how mental that gig was, that is as bad as it gets in stand-up".*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Adam)*

In this chapter so far, the unpredictability of being a stand-up comedian has emerged in a largely negative sense – that is how audiences are unpredictable in respect of their lack of etiquette and disruptive behaviour during the performance. However, Adam anticipated a terrible gig and a difficult audience, yet for a reasonable portion of his performance, the audience was, although not ideal, mostly attentive in their listening and watching of his performance. Although ultimately the gig did then unravel as Adam initially predicted and he lost the attention of the audience. It is interesting how despite professing a lack of investment or indeed emotional attachment to the gig ahead of going on stage, Adam was frustrated post-performance.

Beforehand, Adam had discarded all hope for the gig and strategized about going on stage, shunning interaction with the audience, doing his stage time and leaving. This gig remained unpredictable from the outset and manifested itself contrary to expectations, unexpectedly the audience did initially pay attention to Adam's performance and laughed accordingly. As Adam suggests, the audience was in the palm of his hand for the first ten minutes but he then began to lose their attention. Irrespective of the gig unfolding better than Adam had

initially anticipated, he appeared to be disappointed. This contradiction in Adam's declared detachment pre-performance and his disappointment post-performance suggests that there was some regard for his performance and the gig. On the drive back to the hotel, Adam compared the two gigs as he reflected ahead of his wife enquiring as to how his night at work had gone.

*"I tell her in the morning usually, [name of first comedy club removed] was fine, problem table but decent Friday, my stuff is developed for that gig I write and develop my material with the [name of first comedy club removed] in mind and it was a little eggy because of the chatting but I'm in my element there, the other gig though was fucking dire, she knows I'm hardened to it, so never worries, because I've been doing it so long, I've got all the defence mechanisms in place". I probed Adam further as to what those defence mechanisms are, "I've done probably about four or five thousand gigs, two hundred and fifty a year, the vast majority have gone well, I don't cry when one doesn't, my hit rate is pretty good, a sports bar stroke boxing gym in the roughest part of the midlands it's all over the shop, as soon as we walked in there you saw me, whatever happens in there happens".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

This extract captures Adam's sense-making of the contrast between the two gigs and indeed the unpredictability involved in stand-up comedy. What arises here is the need for stand-up comedians to surrender to the unknown of gigs and audiences and the uncertainty that accompanies this. Adam's reflections whilst showing a tendency to dwell on the contrast between the two gigs also indicate that there is a resilience to how he deals with the unknowns of a gig and audience. Adam's extensive professional experience has hardened him to the unpredictability and subsequent uncertainty of working as a stand-up comedian and the working experiences he encounters on the circuit.Adam refers to having defence mechanisms in place and this is perhaps a reference to the self-protection strategies I observed him and some of his fellow stand-up comedians engaging in. It could be interpreted that in addition to blaming audiences and detaching oneself from gigs, there is the use of one's status to manage the experience of gigs like this. As Adam expressed earlier, such gigs used to form his 'bread and butter' suggesting that they are not the norm for him anymore and that he has risen above such gigs to play the more professional and well-established comedy clubs. Hence, the odd unruly or poorly operated gig here and there is negligible in the grand scheme of his career and the sorts of gigs he usually performs at.

*Scott joked, "we must have had it too easy elsewhere, if comedy was like that nobody would do it, it's like being in an abusive relationship isn't it". Adam commented, "it has to be a one-off or you'd go back to teaching".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

The contrast between gigs continued as I observed Adam for the weekend. The following night, Adam was back at the same comedy club as the night before which hosted Adam's first gig of the weekend. In the green room and before Adam was due on stage as the headline act, the manager of the club asked him how his second gig last night went.

*"It was fun but it was shit, it was the edge of Birmingham, honestly, you had every right to be worried, it was very much in Birmingham but it was so laughable, not only would no one come from that area to this to see me, you wouldn't want them here, it will be a pop-up, pop down, grand opening, grand closing, Jesus it was fucking dire. It's not often it's dreadful but it was such a fucking horrific gig, the drug offer in the car park summed it up, mate I've got the flake, no thanks mate".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

Adam's description makes clear the contrast between his first and second gig but also the contrast between that particular gig and those he is accustomed to performing at on the circuit. Back at Adam's third and final gig of the weekend, the passage below from my fieldnotes documents his performance.

*Adam then referenced how Maureen introduced him, comparing it to the introduction Kevin Hart got when he saw him in concert, Adam talked about the British mentality of an audience, "this next act is great you're gonna love him and the audience response being… am I? I'm not now, not now you've told me that, I'm gonna hate him". Adam was landing huge laughs and intermittent applause breaks throughout his set.*

*Much of Adam's set was the same as what he did last night and what I had seen him do on previous occasions at gigs I had observed him at, though it was very conversational and looked off the cuff. Adam ended his set joking that if he was to take cocaine now he'd probably go home, seize his drug-induced energy and mow the lawn, which was a surprise as he had mentioned one or two bits more he was intending to do in his set, "Birmingham you've been an absolute fucking treat, thank you very much for listening" and left the stage to applause and whooping and cheering. Maureen returned and closed the night.*

*(Extracts from fieldnotes, Adam)*

This gig couldn't have been more different from Adam's two gigs the night before. Adam's interpretation of how the three gigs went with this one being the best also aligned with my perspective on proceedings. Back in the green room, Adam was experiencing a post-performance 'buzz' and 'high'.

*"That's one of the best gigs of the year for me, I could do that gig again right now, fucking great fun". The manager returned to the green room and commented "they liked you out there tonight then" as did Maureen, "that was brilliant, I was chatting to him and then the next thing you were coming off, I had to run in". Adam commented, "I got to twenty-one minutes and was just I'm gonna leave them there wanting more, I had another five-minute bit, British comedy crowds don't know how to give encores any more, they were a beautiful crowd, I've done three weekends here now, the best weekends I've had this year gigging".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

The weekend I spent observing Adam across all three of his gigs demonstrated how the unpredictability involved in working as a stand-up comedian would unfold throughout a weekend gigging and came to be illuminated by the contrasts that existed between gigs. There were few contrasts as striking as those I experienced first-hand during this weekend with Adam. Each gig was different, as were the audiences and their behaviour. Like other comedians have emphasised in this chapter, Adam performed the same material but the reaction from each audience was completely different. At the end of his final gig that weekend, Adam declared his desire to go back on stage and do it all over again, a sentiment that couldn't have been further from his mind after his two gigs the night before.

*"In the space of twenty-four hours you have seen possibly the worst gig of my year and the best gig of my year, but that's stand-up, I love that we've gone from how abysmal that one was last night but then look how brilliant tonight was.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

The contrast between all three gigs is illustrated in Adam's comment that within a twenty-four-hour period he had played what he considered to be both his worst gig and his best gig of the year so far, the weekend of observation being in July. As I reach the end of this sub-theme, I have concluded with this account of a weekend spent observing Adam and afforded attention to the particulars of each gig. This weekend was one of the more revealing examples of not just the contrasts that can exist between gigs and how stand-up

comedians respond to this, but also the overarching unpredictability which came to define their working lives and experiences. In the space of one night, the comedian can go from a good gig to a bad gig and in the space of two nights they can experience their best gig of the year and endure the worst. The uncertainty and unpredictability involved in gigging and the resilience required of the stand-up comedian is in the very nature of the job, as Adam put it so simply – "that's stand-up".

## 7.4 "You're Constantly on the Edge"

The preceding two sub-themes have explored the unpredictability and risk-taking involved in working as a stand-up comedian, which has been illustrated through the on-stage material of performers and the contrasts that can exist between gigs. This sub-theme brings attention to what this unpredictability means for stand-up comedians working, performing, and making their living on the live comedy circuit.

*"Anything can happen at any time, you could be thinking oh these are lovely and something happens in the room, something changes and it's like open-heart surgery on an armadillo, you just don't know".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Johnny)*

Whilst a stand-up comedian is on stage, anything can happen and at any point in their performance. This is irrespective of how positively they might believe their performance is going or however warm, engaged and receptive an audience may initially appear to be. There is always the lingering potential that the on-stage performance of a stand-up comedian may unravel, and the gig might come tumbling down, incidences of which have been depicted throughout the findings chapters of this thesis. Two stand-up comedians, Christian and Johnny, discussed this in the green room before a show.

*"Literally you can put your foot wrong, if you don't stick to what you know and you try and wing it or maybe introduce a later joke too early" Johnny said. Christian added, "it's like a driving test, there's like six hundred things they can fail you on, it's weird".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Johnny)*

It is perhaps not simply a case of making or failing to make an audience laugh but rather there is a multitude of factors that can influence what happens during a performance. In the preceding chapter, I discussed some of those factors, which largely involve the disruptive behaviour of audience members at live stand-up comedy gigs. How such disruptive behaviour clashes with the expectations of stand-up comedians regarding the consumption and delivery of their performance and how the cultural space of live stand-up comedy gigs should operate and be occupied.

Much of the unpredictability involved in working as a stand-up comedian arose from the audiences in attendance at live stand-up comedy gigs. The erratic nature of provoking laughter from an audience whether it be acquiring the first laugh, the appreciation or depreciation in comedic value of material or attempting new material for the first time. All of this led in part to the contrasts that can exist between gigs and sometimes multiple gigs in a single night. This led several comedians to describe a sense and feeling of perennially being 'on the edge' regarding their working lives gigging on the comedy circuit. One such stand-up comedian was James.

*"The thing is, you can do one gig and rip, leaving and thinking I'm a comedy genius after you've had a belter, then you go to the next one, it doesn't go so well and you spend the two-hour drive back dwelling on that one, it's unpredictable, you're constantly on the edge not knowing how a gig is going to go".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, James)*

James introduces this feeling of comedians being 'on the edge' concerning their work and aligns this not just to the unpredictability of audiences and gigs but to the sense of uncertainty that arises from this. There is uncertainty as to whether one is going to have a good gig or a bad gig, how their on-stage performance will unfold and what the audience will be like. James refers to the contrasts that can exist between gigs, seeking to make sense of how one gig can go exceedingly well and see the comedian assured, confident and riding the 'high' of a gig, only to go to the next gig and have a lesser experience.

Interesting here is how this can seep into one's sense of self as a performer. Performers are constantly being tested on their abilities by each audience they perform to and so there is

something of a trial-like nature to working as a stand-up comedian. However well-established and experienced they are, comedians are continually having to prove themselves to each audience they perform to as part of their working life. Such sentiments were also shared by another stand-up comedian, Peter.

*"As a circuit comic you're always having to prove yourself and no matter how many times I've done it, the thousands of gigs I've probably done, this next one might be the undoing of me, you can never tell. It doesn't matter if I made Manchester piss their pants last weekend, tonight I'm in Liverpool and they don't care about that, I have to make these lot laugh, it's likely I will, it'll probably be totally fine, a dream even, but in the back of my mind it might not, I might die on my fat arse, who knows".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Peter)*

Although Peter is rational about proceedings, acknowledging the probability that he will typically have a good gig and make the audience laugh, the chances of the very opposite occurring are never far from his mind. As Peter identifies, irrespective of his experience as a stand-up comedian and the many successful gigs he has had and the many audiences he has entertained, there is no guarantee or certainty of success going into his next gig. Rather, there is always the possibility that at his next gig Peter may 'die' on stage, theatrically speaking that is. Whilst Peter may have 'stormed' a gig in one city, this success does not automatically roll over to his next gig or the following weekend of gigs.

*"You're only as good as your last gig but if your last gig was good unfortunately, you're only that good for half an hour cause then you have got to do another one".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Michael)*

Michael also captures this trial-like nature to working as a stand-up comedian going from gig to gig and suggests that success can be fleeting, which leaves little time for the comedian to rejoice in a good gig or dwell on a bad one. Another stand-up comedian, Harry, recognises how a night involving multiple gigs can be turbulent, when one gig does not go well, the performer must quickly shrug it off and concentrate on their next gig.

*"It's up and down all night and you can have a horrifying gig and you've got to go to the next one and blank it out and not take it in with you because it can make it difficult, your knees have been knocking from the last one and the audiences can tell if you're nervous. That gig is*

*gone, I'm looking to the next one and focussing on making those people laugh and giving a good show*".

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Harry)*

The glories of being a comedian can be short-lived and so too must the horrors and lows as there is little time to reminisce or dwell when one must journey to their next gig and a potentially different gig altogether. The 'nowness' of stand-up comedy, the variety of audiences and the subjective nature of comedy taste come together to also underpin the unpredictability of working and performing as a stand-up comedian.

Comedians become accustomed to venturing into the unknown and not knowing how a gig will unfold or what an audience will be like. While there is the risk involved that the gig might go badly or the audience might be troublesome, this is still not indicative of the outcome. In the following extract, Rosie suggests that despite one's assessment of a gig before going on stage, one has to wait it out. Indeed, as the episode with Adam demonstrated, a gig anticipated as being a bad one could end up being the very opposite or it could unfold as expected. But in the 'liminal' backstage space between waiting to go on stage and being on stage in front of an audience, the stand-up comedian must hold their nerve and find out what happens.

*"The thing with being a comic is you never know what you're going to get and you have to get used to it, it's all part of the game, you can turn up to a gig and it might be horrific, but you have to hold your nerve, get up there and do it, then see what happens".*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Rosie)*

Adam summed up this sense of working 'on the edge' as a stand-up comedian on the comedy circuit. The stand-up comedian goes from gig to gig with the same script and on-stage persona. Whereas one night the audience offer adulation and a positive rapport is struck between them, on another night, the stand-up comedian is left trying to figure out where it all went wrong. The always enduring prospect of a bad gig or a bad audience and the risk of playing to silence and 'dying' on stage means that as an occupation, stand-up comedy is one where comedians are always 'on edge' in relation to their working life.

*“One night they instantly love you and warm to you, the next night you don’t know what you’ve done wrong, you walk on with the same face, same joke, you’re constantly on the edge”.*

*(Extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*

## 7.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored the unpredictability that came to characterise the working lives of stand-up comedians. It began by looking at the ability of performers to make an audience laugh and highlights that this is something continually being tested. Comedians typically performed the same twenty-minute act at each of their gigs. These acts are rehearsed and the material is ‘tried and tested'. However, the response to the comedian’s act could vary dramatically from one gig to the next as every audience is distinctive.

This led to some of the striking contrasts that could exist between gigs over the course of one night or an entire weekend. Where one audience may well split their sides laughing, the next audience could sit in stony silence in response to the same material. The comedian’s material was all that stood between them thriving and playing to laughter, applause and adulation or playing to non-laughter, silence, and running the risk of ‘dying’ on stage. Whilst the laughter or non-laughter of an audience was of immediate focus for performers, the nature of the gigs and venues alongside the behaviour of audiences also came to illustrate the contrasts that could exist from one gig to the next.

The unpredictability coupled with the tangible risk-taking involved led several comedians to describe this sense of feeling and being ‘on edge’ regarding their working lives. Performing as a stand-up comedian has the propensity for ‘highs’ and ‘lows’, all of which play out in real-time in front of a live audience. Comedians could never entirely predict what a gig or audience would be like and how their on-stage performance would unfold; stand-up comedy is an occupation that involves working ‘on the edge’.

# Chapter 8: A Discussion of the Findings

## 8.1 Introduction

This discussion chapter brings together and develops the key ideas from the three preceding findings chapters. I begin this chapter by contextualising the work of stand-up comedians within the night-time economy and I argue that this has a temporal rhythm that steers their working lives. I also consider other aspects of the night-time entertainment economy and draw comparisons with other performers who work and occupy this night-time space. This chapter then makes use of Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective to explore the performance and impression management (Goffman, 1959), emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), skills and competencies involved in working as a stand-up comedian. I then consider the edgework (Lyng, 1990) and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) involved in working as a stand-up comedian before introducing and articulating my original theory and accompanying model of Theatrical Edgework.

## 8.2 Working in the Night-Time Entertainment Economy

It has been argued that a good deal of social research is diurnal with the researcher visiting a given social setting during the daytime to carry out research only to return home in the evening (Shaw, 2018). This ethnographic research was the very opposite and I had to organise fieldwork according to the temporal flow of comedians' working lives. According to Hobbs et al (2000), going out and engaging in the night-time is something of an adventure, and throughout fieldwork I was going on my own nightly adventures on the comedy circuit with different stand-up comedians.

The findings of this research reveal the night-time and its entertainment economy to be important aspects of stand-up comedians' working lives. The findings uncover the nocturnal life cycle of circuit comedians with their work being undertaken 'after hours'. The night-time economy not only shaped comedians' working lives because of the spatial, temporal and economic context that the live comedy circuit and comedy clubs operate within, but it also affected their work in terms of their relationship with the audiences they perform to. As the findings of this thesis demonstrate, particularly in Chapter Six, the alcohol consumption and partygoing central to the night-time economy did pose problems for stand-up comedians.

The night out aspirations of audiences clashed with the aspirations comedians had for their performances and the way they wanted live stand-up comedy performance to function as a space of artistic and cultural production.

The night-time economy primarily encompasses the licensed leisure trade - pubs, bars and nightclubs (Hobbs et al, 2000) and other nightlife venues such as cinemas, theatres, live music venues, concert halls (Shaw, 2018) and lap-dancing clubs (Sanders and Hardy, 2012; Colosi, 2017). The findings of this thesis illustrate that comedy clubs can be incorporated under the umbrella of the night-time economy as they are also licensed premises providing entertainment during the night-time. As the data and findings presented in Chapters Four and Five indicate, comedy clubs are usually located in the nightlife areas of city or town centres and typically co-exist alongside pubs, bars and nightclubs. Comedy clubs share a clientele with these other night-time economy venues as audiences of live comedy are usually on a wider night out and populate these other venues before and after the show.

There is a well-developed literature on the night-time economy. However, it is very much dominated by alcohol consumption and binge drinking (see Measham and Brain, 2005; Hadfield, 2006; Jayne et al, 2011), club and drug cultures (see Jackson, 2004; Sanders, 2005; Measham and Moore, 2009; Ayres, 2019), violence (see Winlow and Hall, 2006; Ayres and Treadwell, 2012; Ellis, 2016) and regulation of the night-time economy (see Calvey, 2000; Winlow et al, 2001; Monaghan, 2002/2003; Hobbs et al, 2003; O'Brien et al, 2008). This orthodoxy within the literature neglects the diverse social and cultural aspects of the night-time economy and the other social actors who inhabit it. It also neglects the atmosphere of the night and what it is like to be a part of it (Roberts and Eldridge, 2009; Roberts and Eldridge, 2013; Shaw, 2014).

This provides the opening for the findings of this thesis to put forward an account of what it is like to be a part of the night as a stand-up comedian on the circuit and to show how this shapes their working life and occupational culture. The experience of conducting this research almost exclusively 'after dark' and the subsequent findings of this thesis go some way to remedy the neglect of the aforementioned areas. In Chapter Four, I present an in-depth descriptive account of a comedy club I pseudonymously call 'The Chuckle Factory' and

this captures the comedy club as a distinctive venue within the night-time economy as well as the aesthetic and affective contrast of the comedy club before, during and after a show.

The findings of this thesis portray the exclusive night-time operations of comedy clubs and their sole purpose of presenting live comedy shows. Therefore, they can be defined as 'night-spaces' (Lefebvre, 1990) that 'come alive' following the '5pm flight' of the city (Thomas and Bromley, 2000). Much like other venues in the night-time entertainment economy, the comedy club emphasises the distinction of the work and leisure nexus (Sanders, 2005), offering a place for people to congregate and come together to have a 'good time', a 'laugh' and gain respite from the 'reality' of 'everyday' life (Rojek, 2000). Comedy clubs open in the early evening, usually a couple of hours before showtime and they remain open late into the night but typically close as the early hours approach and audience members make their way to pubs, bars and nightclubs after the show. This dynamic is captured in Chapter Five as comedians make their way through the night-life areas of the cities they are gigging in, encountering partygoers, weekend revellers and drunken audience members.

Comedy clubs form a hybrid between the live performance offerings of the night (e.g. theatre, music, cabaret, drag) and traditional standalone licensed offerings (e.g. pubs, bars, nightclubs). As Melbin (1987) points out, few venues remain active and populated all night long, so they take it in turns, as one slows down another picks up. As such, revellers move between venues throughout the night (Hollands, 1995) to be 'where the action is' (Goffman, 1967). This is evident in the findings of Chapter Six, which found that audience members attending live comedy were typically doing so as part of a wider night out in the night-time economy. It is also evident in the findings of Chapter Five which captures comedians encountering and being mistaken for night-time revellers as they journey from one gig to the next.

The comedians featured in this research are what Murray Melbin (1987), one of the pioneers of the sociology of the night, describes as 'night-timers'. The night-time has traditionally been viewed as bohemian-like and considered to be the domain of those engaged in artistic pursuits (Melbin, 1987; Gwiazdzinski, 2005). This extends itself to stand-

up comedians who are engaged in artistic work and as performers, move from one comedy club to the next in a nomadic fashion, under the cover of darkness and 'after hours' as they go about delivering their comedic performances.

The night-time and its economy bring leisure and pleasure for those seeking to escape from the realities of occupational commitments, domestic duties and institutionalised everyday routines that underpin the temporal regulation of the day (Giddens, 1984; Nicholls, 2018), but for comedians, this is when they undertake their work. Comedians' status as 'night-timers' (Melbin, 1987) and their immersion in the temporal rhythm of the night-time came to underpin their occupational identity and culture, as the findings in Chapter Five illustrate. Melbin (1987) argues that there is something non-conformist about those who choose to engage in night-work and that 'night-timers' view themselves as 'misfits' who defy convention. The stand-up comedians featured in this research certainly subscribed to this view, self-describing as 'night people' and in doing so, emphasising that they follow an opposing temporal rhythm to their audiences, non-comedians and the wider public.

Melbin (1987) suggests that 'night-timers' adopt an attitude of self-importance towards 'day-timers'. They are united by their shared wakeful activity and a sense of superiority over those entrenched within the daytime schedule. The temporal and occupational aggrandisement illustrated by comedians in the findings of Chapter Five resonates with Melbin's perspective, from the contrasts they draw between their working hours and those of their audiences to their custom of referring to non-comedians as 'day people'. The comedians featured in this research viewed themselves as transcending the apparent constraints and conventions that discipline 'day-timers'.

The comedians I met during fieldwork tended to socialise with other comedians given that they follow the same temporal flow and work-leisure rhythm. This is evidenced in Chapter Five, where the reluctance of comedians to be in the company of non-comedians or those they viewed as 'day people' or 'normal people' emerged. This is not unusual amongst performers who work the night-time entertainment economy. For example, dancers lived alongside other dancers (Colosi, 2017), drag artists mainly socialised with their fellow drag performers (Ashforth et al, 2007) and jazz musicians sought the company of fellow

musicians and performers (Becker, 1951; 1963). As Hobbs et al (2000) argue, the night offers a way through which identity and camaraderie are formed. This was specifically about 'day-timers' who seek out the pleasure and leisure in the excess and opportunity of the night-time economy. However, this clearly extends to performers engaged in night-work and the comedians featured in this research. It is the presence of the stand-up comedians in the night that engenders occupational solidarity, if not partisanship, and marks them as 'outsiders' (Becker, 1951; 1963), distinct from 'day-timers' and non-comedians.

As I have alluded to, there are other allied performers who occupy a related space within the night and follow a similar temporal rhythm to comedians. The night-time work of comedians on the circuit is comparable with that of drag artists and lap-dancers, both of whom are live performers working in club entertainment environments similar to comedy clubs and also fall under the umbrella of the night-time economy as performers engaged in night-work (Taylor and Rupp, 2008; Colosi, 2017; Tillewein and Kruse-Diehr, 2021). The dancer begins work around 8pm and concludes in the early hours with several performances and breaks in-between (Colosi, 2017). This is like the comedian whose first gig of the evening typically starts around the same time and who will undertake two or three gigs in a night with breaks in-between whilst travelling from one venue to the next. For the comedian the early hours are reserved for driving back home or occupying themselves in overnight accommodation. While the dancer is usually based in one club (Sanders and Hardy, 2012; Colosi, 2017), the comedian is much more nomadic as they move through the night to perform at different venues; the findings of Chapters Five and Seven capture this in action. Like the comedy circuit, the drag circuit is also a touring economy as drag artists appear and perform at different venues nightly (Berkowitz and Belgrave, 2010; Mann, 2011; McCormack and Wignall, 2021).

The role of comedians in the night-time economy sees them journeying to the comedy clubs and pubs, clubs and bars that operate a comedy night and providing entertainment to audiences for whom the night-time economy offers leisure and pleasure. The comedians featured in this research recognise the temporal liminality that they occupy; they are part of the night-time economy, but not in the same way as their audiences, rather the night-time economy is how they earn their living through their performances at its venues (Smith,

2018). The findings of this thesis reveal the reality of being a jobbing comedian on the circuit and the night-time and its economy play a big part in shaping this. Comedians orientate themselves as ‘night people’ and with this comes a sense of specialness.

However, this does clash with the ambivalence of the night-time that comedians experience – from the late nights and solitary nature of life on the road to the hedonistic excess of the night-time economy and its drink, drug and party cultures. Excesses which can spill into the comedy club and affect the performances of comedians and create an antagonistic relationship between performer and audience. As the live comedy audience merges into pubgoers and clubgoers to explore the ‘urban playscape’ of the city’s night-time economy (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002), the comedians venture alone into the anonymity of the twilight hours, travelling to their next gig, returning to a hotel room or embarking on the drive home. This clashes with the romanticism of the night (Sharpe, 2009; Shaw, 2018) and the romantic image of the artist finding creative fulfilment in the night-time (Melbin, 1987) and highlights the aesthetic and affective juxtaposition which underscores comedians’ working lives as revealed through the findings of this research.

## 8.3 The Dramaturgy and Performance of Stand-Up Comedians

The dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman (1959) is productive in developing a sociological understanding of how the role of the comedian is performed and how their working culture is sustained through interactions with fellow comedians and other social actors such as audience members. The findings of this research have revealed the on-stage and off-stage dimensions of comedians’ working lives and it is this that brings attention to Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgy. This perspective is particularly useful in explaining the ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ regions of the working lives of comedians on the comedy circuit who were the focus of this research. In this discussion, I make use of Goffman (1959) to present a dramaturgical account of stand-up comedians’ work by considering regions and region behaviour, team performances, and the impression management, aesthetic, physical and emotional aspects of how comedians perform their role. As well as the kinds of repertoires, skills and competencies involved in the performance of their work.

### 8.3.1 The Frontstage and Backstage of Comedy Clubs

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective does take on a double meaning and functions both metaphorically and literally when applied to the work of stand-up comedians and live stand-up comedy performances. Essential to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy is the concept of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' regions. The frontstage being where the performance takes place and the backstage being where performers can step out of character and be themselves. Goffman's concept of regions is readily applied to the case of live stand-up comedy performances, which usually take place in venues that already boast the physical and symbolic boundary of a frontstage and backstage.

Frontstage is typically where the stand-up comedians appear on stage and in front of the audience during the show. However, the comedy club can itself form part of the frontstage setting (Goffman, 1959:32-34) comprising of the foyer, box office, bar, toilet areas and the auditorium, which houses the stage and the audience seating. While the on-stage performance of comedians takes place in the auditorium, their performances can extend to other frontstage areas, for example, comedians may bump into or share fleeting interactions with audience members in the foyer or as they are exiting the venue after the show, as shown with Dave in Chapter Six. All of the aforementioned areas can be readily accessed by audience members.

The backstage region, as Goffman (1959) indicates, is one of in-group privacy reserved only for those involved in the performance and is to be kept hidden from audience members. In the comedy club, the backstage is not just a symbolic boundary, but it is also physical. The backstage exists in the basements or back-rooms of venues, behind doors with code locks and key card entry systems. It is usually away from the frontstage spaces occupied by audience members and almost always illustrated through signs that adorned these areas of comedy clubs, emblazoned with 'Artists Only' or 'Performers Only' or 'Reserved for Comedians Only'.

The backstage can take different physical forms – from a comfortable green room or dressing room fitted out with mirrors, sofas, refreshments and wash facilities, to a back-office or large cupboard with a couple of chairs, to the 'comedians table' at the back of the

auditorium reserved exclusively for their use. These backstage areas can leave a lot to be desired and while some may be fancy and comfortable, many are cramped, shabby and very basic indeed. This is emblematic of the contrast in 'glamour' between the comedians working on the circuit featured in this research and the superstar comedians performing in theatres and arenas who are likely accustomed to more luxurious trappings and surroundings. In Chapter Four, I depict a few of the venues I visited and capture their backstage spaces.

The backstage forms a sacred space where comedians await their on-stage performances and it is here where comedians sustain their working culture, build relationships with one another and participate in their interaction rituals. The backstage sees the comedians catch up on each other's life events and talk about personal issues relating to work and home. Goffman (1959) suggests that members of a group trade and share stories that sustain their collective identity and affirm shared objectives, beliefs and values. This is apparent in Chapter Six where comedians are 'talking shop' by trading and sharing anecdotes of recent 'war stories' or 'hell gigs' (Shouse, 2017) only for the other comedians to ask *"…and who books that?" (extract from fieldnotes).* Such an inside joke is a go-to line amongst comedians in response to a fellow performer describing a bad gig and hinges on the insider knowledge that circuit comedians are so desperate for work they will play anywhere.

The backstage promotes an atmosphere of 'anything goes' and was observed as a taboo and judgement-free domain in this research. Comedians would laugh and joke about all manner of subjects they deemed ripe for the 'comic gaze' as notions of good taste, censorship and political correctness were abandoned. This was a private space just for comedians who would 'banter' in an uninhibited way and without fear of causing upset or offence, as the comedians collectively subscribed to the 'rule' that they are 'only joking'. This is emblematic of backstage behaviour where audiences are not present (Goffman, 1959). Such behaviour would not be appropriate for the frontstage and the dark humour exhibited contrasts starkly with the comparatively diluted material comedians present during their on-stage performances. The comedians would additionally make fun of each other and crack jokes at each other's expense. For example, when one comedian informs the others that they are trying out a new joke which they had written that morning, another comedian would deliver

the witty retort *"…you're on a roll, that's two new jokes you've written this decade" (extract from fieldnotes, Simon).* Backstage interaction rituals such as these sustained a sense of solidarity amongst the comedians as a group of performers working together.

### 8.3.2 The Teamwork of Stand-Up Comedians

Every weekend a group of usually four comedians come together at a comedy club for a series of live stand-up comedy performances and they form what Goffman (1959) calls a 'performance team'. Goffman (1959:85) uses the term performance team to refer to "…any set of individuals who cooperate in staging a single routine". A team can therefore be understood as a group of individuals who come together for a performance and are dependent on one another to play their role and maintain the 'façade' of the performance. One of the essential features of a performance team is the 'privilege of familiarity' (Goffman, 1959:88), which is a shared familiarity amongst team members and means they do not have to continue the performance or remain in their roles while backstage and around each other. This familiarity between comedians is well-illustrated in Chapter Six, where the shared backstage of comedians emerges as they come together to disparage, blame and criticise their audiences. The findings of this research demonstrate that the occupational group of comedians fit with Goffman's understanding of a performance team. In this section, I illustrate with reference to the findings how comedians are engaged in acts of dramaturgical cooperation and work together as a Goffmanian performance team.

The nature of the comedy circuit as a touring economy means that the team is only a temporary formation as comedians' part ways at the end of the night or weekend and continue their respective working lives on the circuit. While some comedians gig together frequently or regularly cross paths on the circuit, other comedians very rarely see each other or perform together on the same bill. Nevertheless, comedians are united through their shared experience of being on the circuit.

Before the performance, there is a division of labour as the comedians are assigned the different parts that they will adopt for the duration of the performance. One comedian takes the part of the compere while the other three comedians do what is known as

‘twenties’ or twenty-minute sets. Each of the three comedians doing sets is further allocated a particular ‘part’ which corresponds to their order of appearance during the performance. The parts are separated into the following – the ‘opener’, ‘the middle’ and the ‘closer’ or ‘headliner’. In Goffmanian terms, the compere can be considered a part emblematic of ‘directive dominance’ while the ‘closer’ or ‘headliner’ is in a position of dramatic dominance (Goffman, 1959:97). The compere is responsible for keeping the performance moving along, explaining the rules, introducing each performer to the stage and encouraging the audience to welcome the comedian and applaud their arrival. This is demonstrated through the various compere introductions depicted in Chapter Six of the findings.

Throughout the performance, the comedians are engaged in different acts of ‘team collusion’ (Goffman, 1959:174). For example, in between introducing the other comedians to the stage for their respective sets, the compere returns backstage and in these moments of dramaturgical respite, they brief their fellow comedians with the ‘intelligence’ that they have gathered on the audience. For example, they may explain that there is a couple on the front row who are particularly nice and can be talked to, as we see in the Chapter Seven episode involving Scott and Adam at a gig in a Birmingham pub-cum-boxing gym. This information can then be used to enhance the performance – for example, the comedian can use their acquired knowledge to interact with the audience members, segue into a routine and tailor their performance. This gives off the impression that the comedian’s routine is being improvised based on the audience and portrays the performance as being wholly unique.

The team collusion (Goffman, 1959) also extends to the frontstage. As a comedian and compere cross paths on stage and shake hands while the audience applauds the incoming comedian, they exchange information about the audience. This is performed with subtlety to ensure that the audience is none the wiser. An example of this that I became privy to during fieldwork involved one comedian whispering to the other about a hen party on the front row getting increasingly more intoxicated and becoming problematic. During this transition, the microphone remains in its stand centre of the stage and consequently does not pick up the audio of this concealed exchange of information and sharing of ‘strategic

secrets' (Goffman, 1959:141). This information assists the incoming comedian as it makes them aware of any potential issues with the audience that may affect their performance. This kind of team collusion continues as the comedians return backstage following their individual performances. They are always asked by their fellow comedians what the audience are like and how their performance went.

As a performance team (Goffman, 1959:85), the comedians are constantly working towards an assessment of the audience before they take their turn on the stage. They are looking for clues and indicators of the audience's behaviour and how their performance may unfold. Comedians are weighing up the audience – their class, gender, intelligence, sense of humour, state of intoxication, etiquette, behaviour and general sensibility. The ability to 'read' an audience is an essential part of the comedian's repertoire of occupational skills, which I will come to explore in further detail. The comedian 'reads' the audience to enable them to adapt their approach and material, recalibrate their delivery, pace and timing. This is illustrated in Chapter Six, where Jason avoids his usual routine about being gluten-free due to its unlikeliness to resonate with a rowdy and drunken weekend audience. This is further illustrated in Chapter Seven when Adam, ahead of going on stage in Birmingham, plans to avoid any direct interaction with the audience and eschews pausing between jokes to get through his performance as quickly as possible.

This 'reading' of the audience also continues during the on-stage performance. The comedian exhibits a 'dramaturgical discipline' (Goffman, 1959:210-212); to the audience they appear to be seemingly immersed in performing but are, in fact, simultaneously monitoring the reception of their performance and remaining attuned to the reactions of the audience. The comedian is thinking about what is getting laughs and what is not and what usually gets a laugh but is not. If one joke or routine does not work, the comedian remains poised, retrieves a backup joke or routine from their wider repertoire of material and deploys it. The comedian is thinking about their next move and may bring out a 'tried and tested' routine in a bid to preserve the performance. This is illustrated in Chapter Seven where the usually dependable opening jokes of Bill and Jason fail to provoke laughter from their audiences. They both then begin to rework their performances in the moment by

avoiding subtle material and retrieving previously reserved jokes that should get them the big laughs they require.

This competency comes intuitively to the comedian after years of experience; they learn to attune themselves to a room and synchronise their performance to each audience. This staging work of stand-up comedians as a performance team is evidence of both dramaturgical 'loyalty' and 'circumspection' (Goffman, 1959:207-222). The comedians coordinate their efforts and are motivated to work together for the greater good of the performance, to minimise potential risks and maximise opportunities to strengthen and support it. This highlights the rapport and solidarity amongst comedians as an occupational group and their dependency on one another as a performance team. The green room talk between comedians that is exhibited throughout the findings of this thesis demonstrates this.

Working as a stand-up comedian does not have a formal rehearsal period. Indeed, the closest comedians get to a rehearsal is the new material or work in progress nights, such as the one featured in Chapter Seven. However, there are various rituals of preparation that the comedians participate in before the performance. All comedians have a repertoire of material they select from for routines that they intend to deliver in their twenty-minute set and they run through it, much like the magician who has a running order of tricks and illusions (Stebbins, 1984) or the jazz musician performing a particular set (Becker, 1951; 1963).

As the findings in Chapter Five highlight, comedians' sets largely remain the same aside from the swapping of a routine or joke here and there. Yet they still engage in the ritual of writing out keywords or prompts on a crib sheet and folding it up in their pocket or writing these words on their hand in biro, which I observed many times during fieldwork. This ritual verged on the superstitious and despite the comedians almost always performing their set verbatim, it seemed to me that they feared 'drying' whilst on stage and forgetting which routine or joke came next. The comedian could, by having their set scrawled on their hand, sneakily glance at this aide-memoire while holding the microphone or handling the microphone stand. They could achieve this without the audience noticing, which otherwise

would expose the illusory sense of spontaneity the comedians wish to give off. In the instance of those comedians with their prompts written on a paper crib sheet, retrieving this would be less inconspicuous. It is unlikely they would ever retrieve their crib-sheet and consult it mid-performance, but its presence in their pocket offered a certain peace of mind.

This preparation is also evident in the different ways the comedians coordinate their respective performances. There is the 'staging talk' (Goffman, 1959:173-174) between sets and shows where comedians plan their collective approach to the staging of the performance. For example, the compere may inform the 'opener' that they will do ten minutes 'at the top' before bringing them on stage, a comedian may ask the compere not to mention a television show that they have recently appeared on or ask the compere not to bring them on stage 'cold' without warming the audience up. These are all happenings that I observed first-hand during fieldwork.

The comedians also make use of their familiarity with their fellow performers and knowledge of their trademark routines to avoid covering similar topics of material or routines that follow the same premise or comedic device. The comedians followed tacit codes of conduct – for example, they recognised that the compere's 'shtick' was significantly grounded in direct interaction with the audience. Therefore, the other comedians would stick to their prepared material and avoid focussed interaction with the audience, eschewing 'getting to know' conversations with specific audience members to avoid intruding on the jurisdiction of their teammate.

As the findings of this thesis convey, the moments leading up to going on stage can be filled with apprehension and a fear of failure, which increase as showtime approaches. This arises from the transition between the backstage and the frontstage where the comedian goes from being amongst like-minded teammates to being in front of an audience. This is reflected in my direct observations of comedians pacing the room and physically 'psyching' themselves up and others having a beer to relax before the show. This pre-performance apprehension and fear of failure is rooted in the prospect of failing to make the audience laugh and resultantly 'dying' on stage, which would see the comedian's identity claim discredited and 'spoiled' in front of the audience (Goffman, 1959; 1963). If the audience

became privy to this, it would contradict the confident and charismatic self-presentation comedians give during the performance.

As each comedian prepared to go on stage, the support of the other comedians who can relate to this dramaturgical anxiety arrived in the echoing well-wishes of 'have a good one' and 'break a leg' or 'just enjoy it' and the slightly more tongue in cheek 'don't fuck it up'. While the backstage is a communal space and one of occupational cohesion and solidarity, comedians were usually alone in the moments before going on stage – whether in the wings behind a curtain, waiting in a corridor or stood at the bar. As the comedian's name is called, they cross the physical and symbolic boundary from the backstage into the frontstage. They are no longer backstage with their fellow performers but are frontstage before an audience and they have to preserve their self-presentation as a professional stand-up comedian.

### 8.3.3 The Impression Management, Skills and Competencies of Stand-Up Comedians

During their on-stage performances, stand-up comedians are engaged in what Goffman (1959) calls 'impression management'. They work to make a favourable impression on their audiences and seek to present the image of being an experienced, skilled, professional stand-up comedian who can make the audience laugh. The impression management begins as soon as the compere announces the comedian's name and asks the audience to welcome them to the stage. The customary applause of the audience follows and the comedian begins their walk from the back of the room or bar area, making their way through the audience and towards the stage or stepping out from behind the curtain to appear immediately on the stage. Comedians' entrances to the stage area very much depend on the venue, which as I address in Chapter Four, have unique layouts and idiosyncrasies.

At the beginning of their on-stage performance, the comedian's repertoire of skills is immediately obvious. I will focus on the example of microphone technique here to illustrate one such skill. There is the timing of making it to the microphone before the applause of the audience stops and being ready to verbally address the audience as soon as it does. If this does not happen, the comedian usually has a stock line ready *"…I couldn't help but notice some of you stopped clapping there as soon as you saw me, as if there had been some sort*

*of mistake" (extract from fieldnotes, Dave)* or *"…that walk took longer than I thought and clearly a lot longer than you all thought it would" (extract from fieldnotes, Michael)*.

Then there is being able to 'work the mic' by effortlessly retrieving the microphone from the stand. The ability of the comedian to retrieve the microphone swiftly and with dexterity sets the tone for the performance. If the comedian struggles to remove the microphone from the stand and unloop the cable, this can spoil the impression of the competent and experienced performer that the comedian is seeking to display. Nevertheless, the comedian can make use of a witty remark to circumvent this *"…don't worry, I have done this before" (extract from fieldnotes, Harry).* The competencies of the comedian are evident in their ability to 'work the mic' – they remove and replace it in the stand effortlessly and without generating audible echo or feedback, they avoid getting tangled in the cable, they hold the microphone at the appropriate distance from their mouth, adjusting their pitch accordingly to avoid over-amplification. Whilst this skill is focussed on stand-up comedy, there are comparable competencies in other types of performances. For example, the lap-dancer can 'work' the pole and dancefloor, interpreting the music, moving and manipulating their body accordingly (Pilcher, 2016; Colosi, 2017), and the opera singer controls the timing of their breathing whilst singing and projects their vocals without forcing it (Atkinson, 2006).

As the comedian enters the stage, their physical appearance is clear for the audience to see before they even begin with their material. In stand-up comedy, there is not a particular 'look' required of comedians and indeed one does not necessarily have to look 'funny'. The comedian typically appears as themselves insofar as there is no elaborate costume, their accent usually remains the same, hair and make-up is of no concern and physically they look just as they did before they entered the stage.

Comedians can make use of their physical appearance for comedic advantage. One comedian, Peter, referenced his portly build and handle-bar moustache as he reached the microphone *"…that's right ladies, the eye candy has arrived, that's it, just drink it in" (extract from fieldnotes, Peter)*. Another comedian, Adam, would reference his appearance early on "*…I know I don't look like a comedian, I know I look like a Danish sex offender, and I know that, because I got told it by an audience member, but I am a comedian and it's nice to be*

*here*" *(extract from fieldnotes, Adam)*. These moments of self-deprecation by the comedians about their appearance capture attempts at 'dramatic realisation' (Goffman, 1959:40-44) as the performer seeks to stress a particular aspect of their appearance for comedic effect. This is important as their appearance may come to form a significant part of their material, for example, several of Peter's routines were based on his experiences of being a larger man, drinking heavily and trying to lose weight.

The clothing of comedians is a part of their appearance and the expressive equipment underpinning their personal front (Goffman, 1959). There is no official uniform for the comedian and the clothing they wear on stage is at their discretion. Some performers appear on stage wearing a suit (with or without a tie) or a formal party dress. Other performers choose a smart but casual look with smart shoes and jeans/trousers/skirt with a shirt/blouse or a more casual dress. Some comedians opt for an entirely casual ensemble of jeans and trainers with a t-shirt or shirt. While the on-stage clothes of some comedians are the same as what they would wear when not on stage, other comedians have clothes specifically for the stage.

In this sense, the attire of the comedian is reflective of the image that they seek to create and how they wish to be perceived by their audience. For example, Simon wore a full suit, which was rare on the circuit and usually the preserve of the middle-aged male comedian who sought to be taken seriously and who delivered material steeped in politics and current affairs. Likewise, t-shirt, jeans and trainers were the domain of the comedian seeking to play the part of the everyman or 'that funny mate' people have, for example, the likes of Adam, Paul, Johnny and Jack all played to this. Many comedians opt for a floral or patterned shirt to convey a sense of quirkiness, for example, Michael and Harry both wore rather colourful and 'loud' shirts, which matched their playful and surreal stage presence.

The clothing of some comedians could be integral to the function of their material. One comedian, Sam, wore tracksuit bottoms and sports trainers with a formal Oxford shirt, and this was key to their opening jokes about their uncertainty as to the dress code - so they had opted for being smart-casual. Another comedian, Dave, made use of his physically imposing appearance to deliver self-deprecating material that subverted the expectations the

audience constructed of him based on his appearance. As I describe in Chapter Four, Dave had a shaved head, tall and solid physique - the physical appearance of a stereotypical nightclub bouncer of yesteryear or member of the National Front, both of which Dave referenced. Dave, on account of wearing a traditional African dress shirt made by his West African wife, would make use of this as a point of juxtaposition with his actively anti-racist material and self-deprecation, remarking *"…how is it that even in this shirt, I still look like a fucking racist grandad" (extract from fieldnotes, Dave)*.

Each performer also has their own way of being on the stage and physically occupying the performance space. They have their own embodied presence and way of standing, moving, posing and gesturing. Stand-up comedy performance involves varying degrees of physical labour and the body of the performer can be utilised to bring their textual script (jokes, routines, material) to life. Some comedians stand still on stage and remain relatively immobile, leaving the microphone in the stand with one hand resting on the microphone and the other hand in their pocket or intermittently clutching the stand, they deliver their act from a fixed position and rigid posture – for example, Josie, Bill, Rob and Simon all did this. This style is usually associated with comedians who deliver one-liners or simple quick-fire gags, perhaps in a deadpan fashion.

Some performers, like Jason, Rosie, Peter and Sarah, are a little more physical in their embodied presence on the stage. They take the microphone out of the stand and move it behind them to the back of the stage or leave it beside them and lean on it with their elbow in a relaxed, nonchalant fashion. They move around the stage but remain mostly central, stepping and lunging forwards and backwards, left and right, as they directly interact or deliver parts of their performance to different members and areas of the audience. Other comedians have a much more animated if not frenetic presence on stage akin to physical clowning, demonstrating a comedic athleticism – for example, Adam, Johnny and Harry had a very physical and energetic stage presence. They made use of the entire performance space, moving around it as they embellish their material with mimetic skill through grotesque mannerisms, inflated motions, extravagant gestures and exaggerated actions to heighten the visual imagery of their material. The comedian uses their body to physically imitate aspects of their routine. For example, the comedian may 'act out' using a particular

piece of equipment at a gym, dancing at a nightclub or trying to navigate a busy train carriage.

There are also ‘props’ involved in the performance, for example, the microphone, microphone stand, stool and drink or bottle of water. Although these ‘props’ are minimal they do serve different purposes, which is something Stebbins (1990) also found in his study of comedians’ performances. The microphone is not simply a piece of technical apparatus but is symbolic of the status of the comedian as the performer stood on stage delivering the performance before an audience, and comedians reflected this in their interactions with hecklers in Chapter Six. The bringing of a drink on stage, usually water but sometimes an alcoholic beverage, not only serves the purpose of ensuring the comedian avoids a dry throat, but it also demonstrates a certain nonchalance, highlighting the social nature of the performance (Miles, 2014) and in turn sustaining the impression of the comedian as being ‘at home’ when on stage. These objects can all be used as theatrical ‘props’ during the performance – the microphone, microphone stand, stool and drink all doubling up in versatile ways to aid the comedian in bringing their material to life. Indeed, Stebbins (1990:43) documents the versatility of the microphone as a prop, it doubling up as a rope, a penis or an electric shaver.

### 8.3.4 The Impression Management and Emotional Labour of Stand-Up Comedians

Another aspect of the impression management of stand-up comedians is their emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). In drawing upon Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective, Hochschild (1983:7) considers the ‘performance’ of emotions and feelings and defines emotional labour as “…the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value”. Hochschild (1983:37-42) suggests that emotional labour is performed through ‘surface acting’ and ‘deep acting’ which can be seen to contrast with Goffman’s (1959:28-32) notions of ‘cynical’ and ‘sincere’ performances. The method of surface acting operates similarly to Goffman’s (1959) impression management in that it involves the social actor using their expressive equipment (voice, facial expressions, bodily gestures, verbal and non-verbal cues) to put on an outward emotional display that is disconnected from what they feel

internally. Conversely, deep acting is where individuals seek to induce and feel the emotions that they are expressing; the process becomes internalised and therein more natural and 'authentic'.

Emotional labour also involves the production of emotions and "…the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild, 1983:7). This chimes with the purpose of the stand-up comedian and their work, which is to make the audience laugh and produce emotions of happiness, pleasure and joy in their audience (Double, 1997; Limon, 2000; Smith, 2018). Indeed, the stand-up comedy performance is staged for the enjoyment of the audience with members specifically attending live comedy to experience these emotions (Miles, 2013; 2014).

Comedians must also perform particular emotions themselves as part of their wider impression management (Goffman, 1959) and in keeping with their on-stage persona – whether that be cantankerous and deadpan, energetic and larger than life or straight-faced and acerbic. At particularly rough or raucous gigs, the comedian is tasked with projecting an emotional front of bravado, embodying an alpha-like status to command the audience and the room. Adam's performance in Birmingham as depicted in Chapter Seven is one example of this. There is an interactional demand placed upon the comedian as part of their on-stage work and irrespective of their on-stage persona (grumpy, cantankerous, or otherwise), they must still exude a certain affability to establish a positive rapport with the audience. This positive rapport with their audience is the defining aspect of the comedian accomplishing their work and producing the necessary emotions in the audience.

The emotional labour of comedians also unfolds in other aspects of their on-stage performances. Stand-up comedy can be deeply personal and confessional as the comedian mines their own lived experience for comedic effect. In doing so, comedians 'play' the different associated emotions underpinning their material. For example, self-deprecation as they address their own personal failings and embarrassing moments from their own lives and share them with the audience, which Peter, Rosie and James all did, from talking about personal grooming to their sexual activity. This involves an element of surface acting as the comedian displays the emotions that correspond with their material, whether this is evoking

irritation, confusion, vulnerability or glibness, the comedian projects the emotional tone and character of a joke or routine.

Comedians also have to suppress their emotions towards audience members. As we saw in Chapter Six, comedians deal with disruptive audience members and hecklers in a multitude of ways – from ignoring a heckle to 'bantering' with the heckler, to singling them out and vilifying them. However, there are some 'display rules' (Hochschild, 1983) that guide the approach of most comedians. To vilify or verbally assault the heckler can undermine the image of likeability and affable impression the comedian is seeking to portray. It can also taint the light-hearted atmosphere of the comedy club and threaten the stability of the 'humorous mode' (Mulkay, 1988).

As the findings illustrate in Chapter Six, the comedian has to suppress their frustration at having been interrupted and remain composed in response to the unwanted interaction and provocation of a heckling audience member. At the same time, the comedian cannot show fear or weakness. Nevertheless, they must be proportionate in their put-down to avoid appearing as a bully and being perceived as having been too hard on the heckler, which could potentially see them losing the audience, as became apparent during Adam's first gig in Birmingham captured in Chapter Seven. The comedian must suppress what may be an inner emotion of affront or annoyance and instead deliver the outward display of a much more good-humoured and playful stance. This links back to the contradiction between the inner emotion and the outward emotional display that is central to emotional labour with the social actor using their facial expressions, bodily gestures, tone of voice and choice of language to perform an emotional display that is at odds with their 'real' feelings (Hochschild, 1983).

The suppression of 'authentic' emotions also manifests in other ways concerning the on-stage performance. In Chapter Five, Johnny, referred to Dr Theatre – which can be understood as a kind of theatrical lore, which fits within this analysis of stand-up comedy as involving emotional labour. Dr Theatre can be understood as an adrenaline-fuelled shift in the comedian's psychological and physical being that enables them to go on stage and perform when they least feel like it. This is whether they feel ill, fatigued, unfunny or are

experiencing emotions that would conflict with the outward emotional display they need to present during their on-stage performance, Dr Theatre remedies this. Other comedians, such as Harry and Rob articulated similar sentiments about how the experience of being on stage and a good audience gave the comedian the necessary energy to perform, irrespective of what they were thinking and feeling beforehand. The 'sensation' of Dr Theatre mediates between surface acting and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983) as it acknowledges the necessary feelings at surface level to enable the comedian to take to the stage. Once on stage and in front of the audience, Dr Theatre takes over and the comedian's display becomes natural and spontaneous having induced the 'real' feelings and energies necessary for the comedian to undertake their work.

There is tension regarding the reality and the contrivance of comedians' on-stage selves. In following Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy, the person the comedian is when on stage should be different from who they are when off stage or backstage. However, the self-presentation of a stand-up comedian's on-stage persona is not so easily distinguishable. The stand-up comedian does not immediately appear to be somebody else and at face value, they do not seem to be playing a character per se. Rather, they appear to be performing as themselves, their material, jokes and routines appear to be steeped in their lifeworld and based on their own experiences and worldview. Nonetheless, the self the audience see can be understood as an exaggerated, animated or fictionalised version of the comedian's 'everyday' self with them dramatizing aspects of their off-stage self for their on-stage persona and performance. Live stand-up comedy remains a performance and the impression management that the comedian is engaged in extends to their on-stage persona and personal front (Goffman, 1959). For example, the comedian may overemphasize a much more subdued cynicism they have off stage to play their self-presentation of the cantankerous and deadpan comedian. Bill and James both did this, performing a grumpy façade, but backstage they were anything but grumpy.

Comedians seek to maintain the impression that their on-stage performance is naturally occurring or spontaneous and as though their observations are being made on the spot. However, each performance follows a script and synchronisation of words, vocals, actions, facial and bodily gestures. They also work to give off the impression that their apparently off

the cuff remarks are improvised, this is not always the case and comedians preserve this level of 'mystification' (Goffman, 1959). In spontaneous moments that happen in the room, the comedian may make use of a stock line. One example of this being when upon seeing a female audience member hot-footing it out of the auditorium mid-way through the performance and presumably to the toilet, the comedian paused their routine and remarked *"…quick, run lady run, cystitis really can be a terrible thing" (extract from fieldnotes, Bill)*. Another example of this being when Johnny took to the stage and behind him were a set of closed red curtains reminiscent of those seen in most crematoriums, leading him to remark "…*the last time I saw a curtain like this, I never saw me granddad again" (extract from fieldnotes, Johnny)*. All comedians have similar stock lines in their repertoire, some are shared amongst fellow performers and others are bespoke to themselves and while they appear improvised and maintain the impression of the comedian as quick-witted and sharp, they are prepared in advance and deployed when an appropriate moment arises. This mystification (Goffman, 1959) extends more broadly as comedians have to sell particularly elaborate events or happenings as authentic and convincing truths, portraying imagined scenarios or fictional embellishments as being 'real'.

In addition to managing their self-presentation and impression management, comedians must also manage the audience. The findings of this thesis in Chapter Six reveal the antagonistic relationship between comedians and their audiences and this dynamic is comparable to other allied gigging entertainers and performers. Howard Becker's (1951; 1963) famous study of jazz musicians revealed a performer-audience relationship prone to conflict as jazz musicians found themselves disenchanted with the meddling of audience members who limited their creative artistry and musicianship. A similarly antagonistic dynamic emerged in Cohen's (1991) study of musicians, which depicted the propensity of audience members to disturb and disrupt the performance through drunken heckling and shouting out. Much of this is linked to the setting of the night-time entertainment economy, where audiences can be intoxicated and performers feel like the audience just seeks to get drunk rather than watch the performer and appreciate their performance (Simpson, 2015; Forsyth et al, 2016).

The antagonistic relationship between comedians and their audiences is dramaturgically interesting in two ways. Firstly, it complicates the 'frame' (Goffman, 1974) of live stand-up comedy performance. As the findings show in Chapter Six, for comedians this was a theatrical performance; they aspired to enter the stage and perform their material to an engaged and attentive audience who wholeheartedly watched, listened and appreciated their work. The comedian sought to build a positive rapport, entertain and make the audience laugh. However, for audiences, the frame (Goffman, 1974) could differ from that of comedians. Audiences viewed it as a night out and would become intoxicated and disrupt the on-stage performance. This leads to a conflict as to the shared meaning of the situation and the expected social conduct according to the 'rules' of the performance.

Secondly, this produces cynical performances (Goffman, 1959). In being greeted with antagonistic or hostile audiences, the comedian's belief in the part they are playing diminishes as they encounter a kind of artistic identity crisis. Like Becker's (1951; 1963) jazz musicians who felt limited in their artistic freedom by the requests of the audience, there was a tension between the comedian they wanted to be and the comedian they had to be to get by on the circuit. For example, the bright, whimsical and creative material of some comedians did not necessarily translate to the raucous or rowdy comedy club audience in the night-time economy. This led to comedians struggling over choosing art or playing the club, which is captured in the findings of Chapter Five. The cynical performance (Goffman, 1959) arises in the comedian who is not invested in or convinced by their artistic work and performance. Instead, they are doing it for the benefit of the audience and as a means to an end, that is getting through the gig without their identity being discredited and for the money rather than the fulfilment of any wider creative or artistic impulses.

As Goffman (1959) suggests, an unsuccessful performance can unmask the actor in front of the audience. In live stand-up comedy performances, comedians receive instant feedback as to how their performance is unfolding and whether the audience is enjoying it or not – laughter, applause, cheering, silence, jeering, booing or heckling. Each time the comedian makes the audience laugh, their impression management and identity work are strengthened. Conversely, non-laughter, silence or heckling on the part of the audience is indicative of the comedian failing and 'dying' on stage and can give way to what Goffman

(1963) calls a ‘spoiled identity’. If the comedian does not make the audience laugh, their performance has been compromised and their identity claims have been discredited; the audience has unmasked the comedian.

Goffman’s work (1963; 1967; 1974) and especially his dramaturgical perspective (1959) has helped me to frame the discussion and analysis and develop an understanding of how the role of the comedian is performed and the different skills and competencies used in accomplishing their work. This has extended the application of Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective through applying it to the work of stand-up comedians. This has enabled me to make visible their working culture and its distinctive qualities, which addresses the first two research questions central to this thesis concerning their working culture and what it is like to work as a comedian. However, this does not account for the unpredictability, risk-taking and emotional intensities that comedians are pursuing through their work, which leads me to turn to the work of Lyng (1990) on risk-taking and edgework to discuss and analyse this aspect of comedians’ working lives.

## 8.4 Edgework

Stephen Lyng’s (1990) concept of edgework can be expanded and developed from the findings of this thesis. It is well established in sociological theory and has been applied to a range of experiences and activities. From its beginnings in skydiving (Lyng and Snow, 1986), the concept of edgework has since been applied to a myriad of examples from sexual activity (Newmahr, 2011; Hickson, 2018) to financial trading (Smith, 2005), drug use (Reith, 2005; McGovern, 2011; Wilson, 2012) and bodybuilding (Worthen and Baker, 2016).

Stand-up comedy may not immediately stand out as a likely example of Lyng’s (1990) edgework. This is perhaps because it does not epitomize the high-octane and death-defying connotations of edgework and its theoretical foundation in dangerous sports and high-risk leisure pursuits. However, stand-up comedy involves a significant degree of risk-taking on the part of the comedian. Indeed, their working lives demonstrate several features essential to the character of edgework. In defining the parameters of edgework, Lyng (1990:857) describes it as involving an observable threat to the individual’s mental and physical

wellbeing or their sense of an ordered existence and thus Lyng argues that activities of a death-defying nature are the quintessential form of edgework.

During their on-stage performances, comedians are also seeking to defy the risk of death, but this is a very different kind of death altogether. What I am alluding to here is the notion of a theatrical 'death' and a metaphorical 'dying' on stage. As Ritchie (2012) explains, 'dying' on stage is when the audience rejects the comedian's persona, performance style and material. In this sense, and as I illustrated earlier, their performance has been compromised and their identity claim as a stand-up comedian has been discredited (Goffman, 1959) which can result in what Goffman (1963) refers to as a spoiled identity.

The language of death and demise was a prominent feature of the working culture of comedians and goes some way to highlight the high-stakes nature of live stand-up comedy performances. On stage, comedians are negotiating the 'edge' between 'thriving' and 'dying' and to avoid crossing the 'edge' and enduring a theatrical 'death' they must preserve the stability of their performance. By effectively preserving the stability of their performance, the comedian can experience what Stebbins (1990) describes as 'autopilot'. This is a state in which the comedian is "…entertaining at an intermediate level of effectiveness" which, in essence, equates to having an 'average' gig (Stebbins, 1990:116). While the comedian does not wish to 'die' on stage and though they can appreciate an 'autopilot' gig (Stebbins, 1990), it is what I term the 'thriving' outcome that the comedian aspires to. It is only 'thriving' on stage which produces the emotional rewards that comedians desire, that is the performer's 'high' and the sense of transcendence that follows the applause, admiration and ovation of the audience.

Much like other types of edgeworker, comedians develop a repertoire of skills to ensure that they deliver a 'skilled performance' (Lyng, 1990:858-859), navigate threats to the stability of their on-stage performance and maintain a safe distance from the 'edge' and avoid 'dying' on stage. I have discussed some of the skills from this repertoire in the preceding section concerning the dramaturgy and performance of stand-up comedians. There is an overarching skill pertinent to all forms of edgework and this is the ability of the edgeworker, in this case the stand-up comedian, to remain in control of situations that

appear to be uncontrollable. This is a skill that Lyng (1990:859) refers to as a 'survival capacity'. However, the degree to which stand-up comedians retain complete control over the performance is nuanced and perhaps even illusory (Lyng, 1990:872). This 'illusion of control' (Lyng, 1990:873) identified amongst edgeworkers is apparent in how comedians approach their on-stage material.

The material of comedians generally remains the same. It has been honed over many performances and has form for resonating with audiences and making them laugh. Although comedians imbue their material with a 'tried and tested' quality, it is not infallible and there is always the possibility that it may fail to make an audience laugh, as the findings in Chapter Seven reveal. The attempt or non-attempt of new material was also a way through which comedians subscribed to this 'illusion of control' (Lyng, 1990:873). Comedians who did not attempt to turnover new material were deemed by their fellow performers to be 'hack' and in Chapter Five, I link this to the status ranking of comedians.

I would argue that the apparent resistance and reluctance to attempt new material was a way through which comedians managed their edgework and formed a risk management strategy. While 'hack' comedians are still engaging in the on-stage edgework, they are not fully engaging with all the edgework that the occupation entails. The status ranking of comedians based on being 'hack' or 'pure' that I uncover in Chapter Five resonates with Lyng's (1990:858) discussion of 'survival capacity' and notions of certain edgeworkers being made of 'the right stuff'. 'Hack' stand-up comedians are viewed by their 'pure' colleagues with a degree of condescension, as not being made of 'the right stuff' such is their lack of risk-taking regarding the attempting of new material.

Audiences of live stand-up comedy have articulated a fondness for its unexpected and unpredictable potential and the feeling of not knowing what is going to happen on the night and during the performance (Lockyer and Myers, 2011). In contrast and based on the findings of this thesis and as is evident in Chapter Seven, this fondness is not reciprocated by the comedians working on the circuit. Comedians are constantly being tested on their abilities and the possibility of their performance falling flat with an audience and them subsequently 'dying' on stage is one that always lingers. Indeed, comedians do cross over

the ‘edge’ and experience a theatrical ‘death’ from time to time. In the instance of ‘dying’ on stage, the comedian could choose to abandon their performance and bring it to an early conclusion. However, most comedians continue and deliver their act in a monologue fashion until they do start getting laughs or they continue playing to a silent or distracted audience until they have lasted their stage time. This approach is apparent in the episodes depicted in Chapter Seven involving Jason, Bill and Adam.

In more ‘traditional’ forms of edgework, crossing over the ‘edge’ may negate any chance of redemption, however, stand-up comedy is not quite so final. Following a theatrical ‘death’ there is a comeback for the stand-up comedian. As the findings in Chapter Seven demonstrate, while there may be moments where the comedian experiences a bad gig, encounters a bad audience or ‘dies’ on stage, they go on to perform at other gigs that very same night, the next night or the following weekend and Adam’s weekend in Birmingham is an example of this. Ultimately, the comedian continues their working life, yet in front of a particular audience at a particular gig, their edgework and confrontation of the ‘edge’ has not proved fruitful, the performer’s ‘high’ has eluded them and they have ostensibly ‘died’.

## 8.5 Emotion Work and Edgework Sensations

Edgework is intertwined with emotional intensities or what Lyng (1990:860) refers to as ‘edgework sensations’ – from the fear, nervousness and anxiety that precedes edgework to the excitement, exhilaration and thrill that follows. The emotional aspect of edgework is not simply about the experience and pursuit of emotional intensities it is also about managing them. I have already discussed the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) that forms part of the impression management and dramaturgical competencies of stand-up comedians during their on-stage performances. Emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) can account for the production of particular emotions and the regulation of emotional displays during the on-stage performance, as well as in the off-stage relationships between comedians and promoters (see Butler and Stoyanova-Russell, 2018). However, it is limited in its ability to account for the comparatively more ‘private’ emotion management comedians are engaged in when not on stage.

This brings attention to Hochschild's (1983) 'emotion work', which can help to illustrate how comedians manage the off-stage emotional intensities and sensations that their edgework and on-stage performances produce. Emotional labour is emotion management that is performed publicly and has exchange value in that it is performed in exchange for a wage. Emotion work is emotion management that is undertaken privately and has use value in that it is generally conducted for one's own benefit (Hochschild, 1983:7). While comedians are engaged in emotional labour when they are frontstage (Goffman, 1959) and on stage at the comedy club, they are engaged in emotion work when they are backstage (Goffman, 1959) at the comedy club and not in front of the audience. Although the emotion work of comedians is carried out as part of their wider work role, it is conducted privately.

Before going on stage, the emotion work of comedians involves them having to manage any pre-performance concerns, fears, anxieties, nerves or episodes of stage fright. Indeed, the act of appearing and risking 'dying' on stage in front of an audience to experience the perceived rewards and willingly experience these intense emotions highlights the very edgework involved in working as a stand-up comedian. In preparing for their on-stage edgework, comedians would employ different strategies to control their emotions – from expecting the worst and feigning indifference, to engaging in self-protection by professing an emotional detachment and doing it for the money. The habit of contemplating the different scenarios that could unfold and balancing the probability of a 'thriving' or 'autopilot' gig (Stebbins, 1990) when compared with previous gigs enabled comedians to feel some sense of control over the unpredictability inherent to their performances. Such emotion management strategies can be considered as examples of deep acting whereby the comedian seeks to 'forget' their 'real' feelings and convince themselves they feel differently to accept their work; some of which are undertaken in 'bad faith' (Hochschild, 1983:43-47). For example, both Adam and Jason demonstrate this in Chapter Seven where they profess their detachment and disinterest in a gig only to then be dispirited when the gig, as predicted, does not go well.

The audience impacts the emotions of comedians and this produces emotional intensities and edgework sensations (Lyng, 1990:860). As Miles (2014) argues, the performance of stand-up comedy is an emotion-laden experience for comedians and one that can entail

fulfilment of emotional needs and emotional costs and consequences. Like Double (1997) suggests, a good performance generates emotional 'highs' whereas a bad performance produces emotional 'lows'.

Much like the boxer who becomes accustomed to being punched by their opponent and over time physically hardens to it (Wacquant, 2004), the comedian becomes hardened to playing to hostile or tough crowds. They come to adjust themselves to the antagonistic potential of the audience, the possibilities of 'dying' on stage and the negative emotions that a theatrical 'death' can evoke. In time, such experiences become occupational 'war stories' about 'hell gigs' (Shouse, 2017), which leads comedians to trade and share anecdotes based on the audiences they encountered, gigs they are bruised by but survived and lived to tell the tale of. This kind of emotional work as shown in Chapters Six and Seven is illustrative of comedians forming 'communities of coping' (Korczynski, 2003) to process their theatrical 'deaths'.

Comedians developed a range of mechanisms as part of their emotion work to mitigate the emotional strain of a bad gig or a theatrical 'death'. The apportioning of blame on the audience was one particularly prevalent approach and this is illustrated in the findings across Chapters Six and Seven as the comedians regularly come to blame the audience, questioning their comedy literacy and intelligence, criticising their drunkenness and disruptive behaviour. The comedians would also consume alcohol after a show to dampen negative feelings. Indeed, alcohol-fuelled socialisation formed a kind of deep acting (Hochschild, 1983) to mitigate a post-performance low. In coming off stage after a bad gig or following a theatrical 'death' negative emotion comes to the fore following its suppression before and during the performance – disappointment, frustration and disenchantment with the profession and audiences arise and can produce subsequent cynical performances (Goffman, 1959:28-32). Comedians must suppress these emotions if they have another gig to get to, a gig which may come to remedy the bad one before it. However, if the last gig of the weekend was a bad one and involved a failed performance, this could send the comedian on a 'downer' for days, as we saw in Chapter Seven concerning multiple gigs in a single night.

Nevertheless, a good gig is emotionally rewarding and after a successful on-stage performance in which the comedian has effectively negotiated the ‘edge’ between ‘thriving’ and ‘dying’ on stage, the suppressed pre-show feelings of nervousness and anxiety recede. As the comedian exits the stage and returns backstage, they exhibit a post-performance ‘buzz’ or what Scott (2017) labels as the performer’s ‘high’. This is reminiscent of the feelings of exhilaration and thrill that typically follow successful edgework (Lyng, 1990:860). Much like Lyng’s (1990) original case of skydivers, the very reason comedians are engaging in their on-stage edgework is to experience these feelings. It is the prospect of the performer’s ‘high’ that compels comedians to engage in the edgework of stand-up comedy in the first place, such ‘highs’ insulate comedians against the occasions where they ‘die’ on stage and make the bad gigs tolerable, the perceived rewards outweigh the risks of theatrical ‘death’.

The post-show ‘buzz’ and ‘high’ could be short-lived. In the instance of performing at multiple gigs in one night, this involves the comedian in continual management of their edgework (Lyng, 1990) and the accompanying emotion work (Hochschild, 1983). The comedian must manage the ebb and flow of emotional intensities preceding and following their on-stage performances. If the comedian has two or three gigs in one night, there is little time to revel in the ‘buzz’ or ‘high’ and likewise dwell on a theatrical ‘death’. The comedian has to venture onwards to their next gig and negotiation of the ‘edge’ and this continual management is illustrated in Chapter Seven in the episodes involving Jason, Adam, Rosie, Bill and Peter.

Comedians are engaged in cycles of emotion work here, from managing pre-performance feelings of nervousness and anxiety to managing post-performance feelings of exhilaration and thrill or disappointment and dejection, to again managing pre-performance anxieties as they emotionally ready themselves for their next gig. As part of their emotion work, comedians demonstrated emotional stoicism (Lois, 2001), following the occupational proverb that they were only ever as good as their last gig. This affirms the trial-like nature of working and performing as a comedian (Fisher and Fisher, 1981) and also the up and down shifts in emotion throughout a night gigging and the requirement of comedians to manage this.

The work of stand-up comedians is characterised by emotional intensities and there are emotional costs and rewards – from pre-performance fears and concerns, post-performance 'highs' and the validation of the audience to post-performance 'lows' and the rejection of the audience. Such emotional intensities and the need to manage them to effectively navigate the on-stage edgework are illustrative of both the bright side (Humphrey et al, 2015) and the dark side (Grandey et al, 2015) of emotion work and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). The consequences of emotional labour and emotion work are well-documented regarding anxiety, stress, depression, burnout and exhaustion (Wharton, 1993; Zapf, 2006; Wharton, 2009; Jeung et al, 2018), with an emotional attachment to one's work identified as exacerbating such consequences (Wharton, 1999).

Comedians have a profound emotional attachment to their work and according to Miles (2014) and Fisher and Fisher (1981) have an emotional need to perform to acquire validation and recognition through the love of an audience. Indeed, as the findings of this thesis reveal in Chapter Five, comedians construct their identity based on being a comedian. They derive much of their self-worth from their working culture and the emotional rewards of the occupation, and this connects to the sense of transcendence described in 'traditional' forms of edgework (Lyng, 1990).

There is some sense that comedians are transcending their 'ordinary selves' through their edgework and its accompanying intense emotional rewards. Notable examples of this are evident in Chapter Five when Johnny described how the applause and validation of the audience make him a 'somebody' and Jason highlighted comedians as existing on the margins and engaging in what many people fear – public speaking, being on stage and making others laugh. Comedians were of the view that being on stage, making an audience laugh and receiving the applause and adoration of an audience elevated them to being, colloquially speaking, a 'somebody'. They struggle to reconcile the anonymity that came with working on the circuit and wanted to be recognised as 'comedians' who through their on-stage edgework, are engaging in an activity that many are fearful of. The practice of stand-up comedians distinguishing between themselves and non-comedians resonates not only with Lyng's (1990:860) account of the 'elitist orientation' of edgeworkers but with the

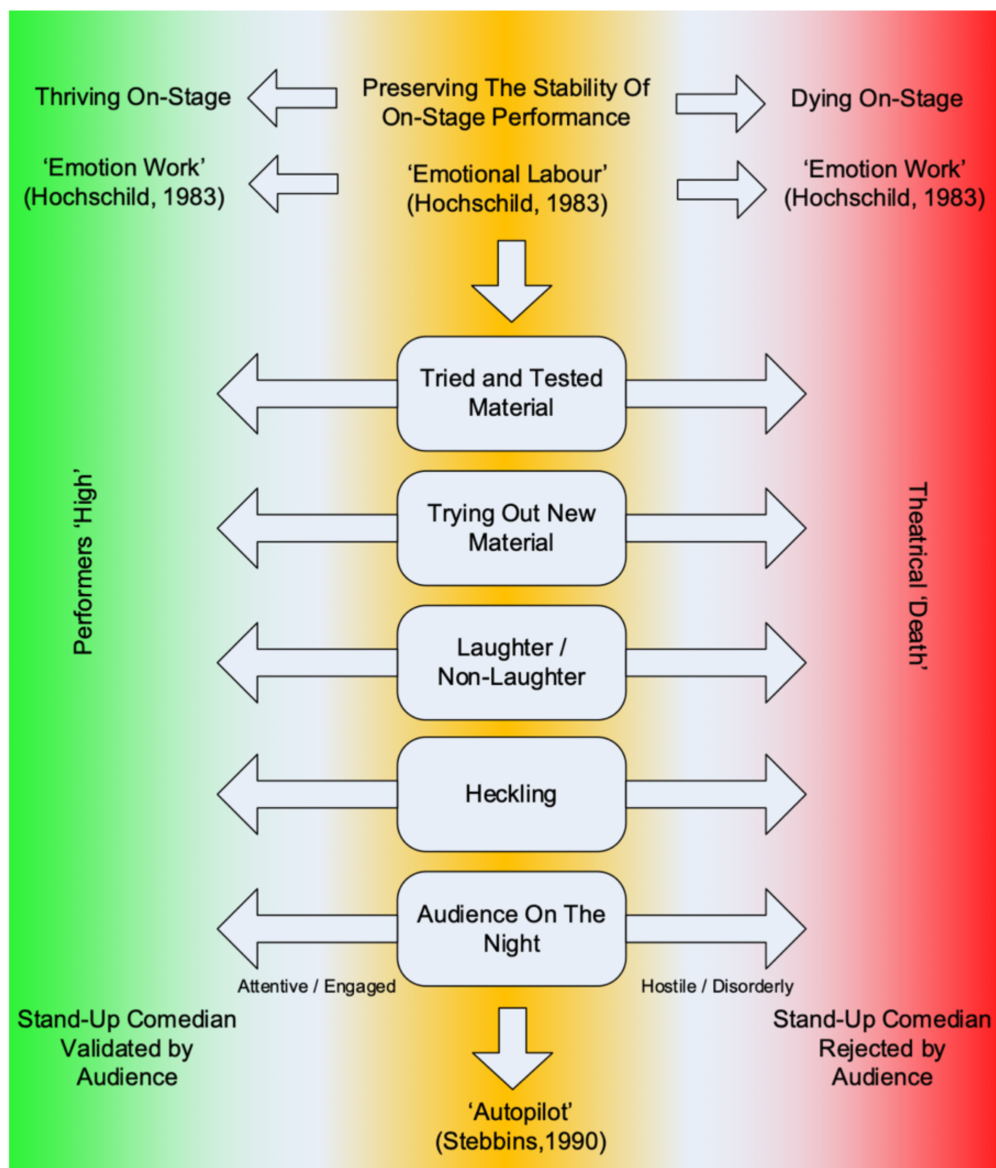
distinction drawing that was exhibited by other artistic workers (Becker, 1951; 1963; Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

## 8.6 Introducing 'Theatrical Edgework'

In the preceding sections, I have considered Lyng's (1990) edgework and Hochschild's (1983) concepts of emotional labour and emotion work. Comedians are engaged in edgework during their on-stage performances through their risk-taking and negotiation of the 'edge' between 'thriving' and 'dying' on stage. Comedians are also engaged in emotional labour through the requirement to produce emotional states in the audience (laughter, happiness, pleasure) and regulate their outward emotional displays as part of their wider impression management (Goffman, 1959). In the extant literature, the emotional labour of comedians is argued as extending off stage to their interactions with comedy promoters (Butler and Stoyanova-Russell, 2018). The findings of this thesis reveal that comedians are also engaged in comparatively more 'private' emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) in managing the emotional intensities produced by live performance and edgework. Edgework (Lyng, 1990), emotional labour and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) all offer productive layers of understanding to make sense of the working lives of comedians. However, working life as a stand-up comedian cannot be fully explained through these respective prisms alone.

This leads me to introduce my theory of Theatrical Edgework which forms a revised interpretation of Lyng's (1990) concept. Through my theory of Theatrical Edgework, I widen the conceptual scope of edgework to the case of stand-up comedy and incorporate both emotional labour and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) to put forward a conceptualisation of the working lives of stand-up comedians. Through my theory of Theatrical Edgework, I argue that the working lives of professional comedians working and performing on the live comedy circuit are characterised by moments of edgework and that emotional labour and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) are required to manage the emotional intensities that edgework produces before, during, after and between on-stage performances. I present an accompanying model (see below, and also Appendix Four), which illustrates and animates its essence.

**Figure 1. A Model of Theatrical Edgework**




This model depicts my theory of Theatrical Edgework and illustrates the edgework that stand-up comedians are engaging in as part of their working lives. Comedians are primarily negotiating the 'edge' between 'thriving' and 'dying' on stage and this is central to the model, which follows a continuum and presents three outcomes of an on-stage performance – 'thriving', 'autopilot' and 'dying'. The positioning of 'thriving' and 'dying' on the model emphasises the contrast between the two as opposing outcomes of the comedian's performance - 'thriving' being as good as the on-stage performance gets for the comedian and 'dying' being the complete opposite. Residing between the two and forming a midway point is 'autopilot' (Stebbins, 1990), which denotes what would be considered as an 'average' gig. Although an 'autopilot' gig is still reflective of successful edgework, insofar

as one has negotiated the ‘edge’ and avoided a theatrical ‘death’, it does not produce the heightened emotional intensities that accompany the rejection of the audience and a theatrical ‘death’, nor does it see the comedian experience the performer’s ‘high’ having ‘thrived’ on stage and been validated by the audience.

Several factors influence the on-stage edgework of stand-up comedians, which can pose a threat to the stability of the on-stage performance. Such factors highlight the centrality of the audience to live stand-up comedy performances and thus occupy the middle of the model to illustrate how they form moments of negotiation. For example, ‘laughter/non-laughter’ – in the instance of making the audience laugh, this leads the comedian towards ‘autopilot’ or ‘thriving’ on stage. Whereas failing to make the audience laugh, leads the comedian towards the ‘edge’ and the possibility of ‘dying’ on stage. Earlier in this chapter, I have explored the various occupational repertoires and skills comedians make use of in managing these moments of negotiation.

The model incorporates the emotional labour central to the on-stage performance as well as the off-stage emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) required of stand-up comedians in managing the emotional intensities both before and after the on-stage performance and throughout edgework. This is especially important as it is the emotional rewards such as the performer’s ‘high’ and the accompanying validation of the audience and subsequent sense of transcendence that fuels the willingness of comedians to engage in the risk-taking and edgework that underpins their working life on the circuit.

## 8.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter offers a discussion that develops the key ideas from the findings of the research and situates them within the context of existing research and established sociological theory. This chapter traces the journey of the comedian through the night-time entertainment economy and the temporal rhythm of the night, which forms the backdrop to their working lives and occupational sense of self. I have explored the limitations of the night-time economy literature and provided an account of the comedy circuit and comedy club that ‘comes alive’ at night-time. This chapter presents a dramatic account of the

dramaturgy and performance of stand-up comedians and explores their self-presentation, impression management and the occupational skills and competencies required to undertake their work. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective is applied and functions both literally and metaphorically to bring a further layer of understanding to the work of stand-up comedians.

Following an analysis of the edgework (Lyng, 1990), emotional labour and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) stand-up comedians are engaged in. This chapter concludes by articulating my theory and accompanying model of Theatrical Edgework, which presents a reinterpretation of Lyng's (1990) concept of edgework. Theatrical Edgework widens the conceptual scope of edgework to incorporate the emotional labour and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) involved and applies edgework specifically to a theatrical context and the work of stand-up comedians. Theatrical Edgework puts forward a conceptualisation of the working lives of stand-up comedians as underpinned by moments of edgework, which requires emotional labour and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) to manage the emotional intensities that the on-stage performance produces.

# Chapter 9: Conclusion

## 9.1 Introduction

This thesis is about the working lives and lived experiences of professional stand-up comedians on the UK live stand-up comedy club circuit. In this chapter, I bring this thesis to its conclusion. I begin by recapping the research questions that guided the research and address how the adoption of an ethnographic approach has led to the uncovering of some of the hidden occupational practices of stand-up comedians and made visible particular aspects of their work and culture. I then consider my own journey as an insider-outsider 'on the circuit' and the emotionality I experienced and 'messiness' I encountered in conducting this research. Following this, I go on to think about the strengths and limitations of the research alongside potential directions for future research. Finally, this chapter then highlights the original contributions that this thesis makes.

This research set out to answer three particular questions as developed from the limitations of the existing literature regarding stand-up comedians and documented in Chapter Two of this thesis.

1. What is the working culture of stand-up comedians?
2. What is it like to work as a stand-up comedian?
3. What is the nature of the relationship between stand-up comedians and their audiences?

In order to achieve the understanding required to provide answers to those questions needed an immersion, direct engagement and participation within the very culture of professional stand-up comedians. To have simply interviewed stand-up comedians would not have sufficed in exploring and answering the posed research questions. In Chapter Three, and in illustrating my own use of semi-structured interviews, I discuss some of the challenges encountered. Essential to this research was the sustained contact and deep level of immersion within the comedy circuit and community of stand-up comedians.

Key was the wayfaring and 'going-along' with stand-up comedians and travelling with them between their gigs. Lingering and loitering in the 'liminal' spaces such as backstage areas and green rooms, watching the on-stage performances, returning to those 'liminal' spaces, and then journeying onwards with them to the next gig. It was the act of 'being there' (Van Maanen, 1995; 2011) and my ethnographic engagement with the field that has allowed me to present this journey of what it is like being a professional stand-up comedian working and performing on the UK live stand-up comedy club circuit and ultimately explore and answer the research questions.

## 9.2 A Journey of Being an Insider and Outsider on the UK Comedy Circuit

I take this moment to reflect on my journey as an ethnographer on the comedy circuit and in doing so I consider my positionality and insider-outsider status. As I briefly discussed in Chapter Three, there is commentary within the ethnography literature as to the notion of an insider and outsider distinction, which can be problematic (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Reflecting on my experience of being an ethnographer, it seems to me that approaching the insider and outsider distinction as a binary dichotomy disregards the nuance and fluidity between these two positions. It implies that one can only ever be a complete insider or a complete outsider, which neglects the 'messiness' and 'blurring' associated with ethnography. If the ethnographer were to claim to be a complete 'outsider' this could be perceived as a claim of value-neutrality or objectivity, whereas claims of becoming a complete 'insider' could lead to accusations of one having fully 'gone native'.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) do attempt to remedy this and conceive of the 'space in-between' the two dichotomous positions of insider and outsider. In doing so, they attempt to challenge the static nature of being an insider or outsider. Instead, they recognise the more active dynamic of being a hybrid insider-outsider in regard to the culture, group or community under study and how the researcher can simultaneously be 'one of them' but also not 'one of them'.

The hybrid of being an insider-outsider definitely relates to my experience in the field. In the beginning, I was certainly an outsider, if not, a stranger. Although I was no stranger to a

comedy club as a paying audience member, I was not a stand-up comedian and did not know any stand-up comedians. In beginning to access the backstage regions of the occupation that one would not normally be able to, I was an outsider being given access to the 'inside'. As a non-comedian but a PhD student and ethnographer, I did anticipate being thought of as an outsider and that this would form something of a barrier to not just access and being able to 'get in' and 'get along' with the group but also to being able to sustain this project.

However, I quickly became familiar and friendly with different comedians and the staff working at several venues owing to me visiting the same venues regularly. I was bumping into the same comedians as I journeyed the circuit and getting to know them and them getting to know me. I was also bumping into previous participants that I had followed, and this was helping me to settle into the circuit. I was getting closer to the 'inside' and so came to occupy the 'space in-between' (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

I came to be thought of as something of an associate 'sponsored' by some of the more respected stand-up comedians working on the circuit. This did see my initial outsider status progress towards an insider and there are two particular episodes that emphasise this. On one occasion a comedian told me *"…an associate of Adam's is always welcome here. You just let us know when you want to come backstage and knock about with us and we'll see you right" (extract from fieldnotes).* On another occasion, I had arrived at a gig early and the comedian hosting me had not yet arrived. I told the show manager that I would come back later but they insisted that I stay. I was sat on a stool at the bar and out of the way when one of the other comedians I had previously met approached me and told me to sit with him at the 'comedians table', telling me *"…don't be sitting like that on your own. If you've been out with Mick, you're as good as running with the firm so come and chill with us" (extract from fieldnotes).*

I no longer felt like a stranger but rather came to feel like 'one of them'. This was certainly facilitated by accessing these private and privileged domains, usually only reserved for performers. I was able to walk through doors adorned with the notice 'Artists Only' or 'Performers Only' and occupy these spaces. Fieldwork felt akin to being invited into a

private members' club, and some stand-up comedians encouraged this by telling me, as aforementioned, that I was "…as good as running with the firm…". I came to research stand-up comedians because I was fascinated by them and in the field I was being treated as though I was one of them. It was tricky not to be beguiled by this 'lure of acceptance' (O'Reilly, 2009:89).

I came to enjoy the trappings that accompanied being 'one of them'. I began to adopt the same distinction drawing comedians engaged in regarding non-comedians and soon started to subscribe to these views myself. I was able to walk past the audience queueing to get into the venues and have the bouncer let me in after stating my name, and on other occasions I arrived at the club and was simply given an approving nod and let in. In hindsight, I did wonder whether the bouncer had mistaken me for a performer given that he had previously seen me arriving and accompanying one of the acts. I was able to freely access the green room spaces and backstage areas, I was by the side of the stand-up comedians and enjoyed the privileges that came with being a 'hanger-on'.

As I discussed in Chapters Five and Eight, stand-up comedians afforded themselves the status of Becker-esque (1951) maverick-like outsiders. I too came to absorb the sentiments of this; I was not a stand-up comedian but felt like I had become part of the group and that this status extended to me by association – I was closer to a comedian than I was to an audience member. I too came to enjoy the 'buzz' and adrenaline rush of the performer travelling between gigs. It was easy to get caught up in the thrill of the comedian dashing off stage, quickly gathering belongings from the green room, hotfooting it out of the venue, rushing to the car and racing to make it to the next gig on time. It was in moments like this where the fluidity of my insider-outsider status shifted from the 'space in-between' towards insider. However, my outsider status soon returned as upon arriving at the next gig and having been caught up in the 'buzz', the stand-up comedian went on stage and I waited backstage or watched the show from the auditorium. Although I came to experience many aspects of what it is like to be a circuit comedian it was the not going on stage that continually reinforced the outsider aspect of my researcher identity.

Fieldwork was characterised by emotional ups and downs from excitement and frustration to sympathy and nervousness. On one Saturday night, I was in the green room of a comedy club when a comedian asked me*, "…being backstage at a comedy show is that exciting for you?" (extract from fieldnotes).* It was indeed exciting and throughout the entirety of fieldwork, I sought to take in everything that I experienced, to revel in the excitement, tension and action of what was happening in the setting. But I was also conscious of not neglecting my reasons for being there. This was a research endeavour, not a recreational behind the scenes showbusiness sojourn. I had to balance and occupy the space between 'surrendering-to' the field (Wolff, 1976; Whitaker and Atkinson, 2019) and 'going native'. In other words, it was about surrendering with intention and embracing the 'here-and-now' of the setting and opening myself to the emotional ups and downs involved but always consciously returning to my analytic perspective.

In considering Becker's (1967) eminent question – whose side are we on? – in this ethnographic account, I do take the side of the stand-up comedians working and performing on the comedy circuit. One example of this is regarding the relationship between comedians and their audiences, which I fully unpack in Chapter Six. The relationship is characterised by conflict as comedians are often disenchanted with the unruly and raucous behaviour of the audiences they perform to, there very much being an us and them divide. I also came to share the sensibility of comedians that the audiences they encountered left a lot to be desired. In observing a performer over the course of a weekend or on a night with multiple gigs with varying outcomes regarding the success of their performances, I too found myself as frustrated as the comedian, feeling like they deserved a 'better' audience. The close relationships that I built with the comedians over eight months of fieldwork clearly influenced me in taking their side. This is underpinned by the lack of time I spent around audiences as the research intentionally did not explore the comedian-audience relationship from the perspective of the latter. My side-taking was also likely influenced by the stand-up comedians accepting me into their 'fold'.

I was not indifferent to the stand-up comedians and therein I was not objective. I am very much intrigued by their work and way of life, hence committing to this very research project. I was on their side; I was in some sense perennially cheering them on. I absolutely

wanted their performances at the comedy clubs to go well, I wanted them to succeed in entertaining the audience, making them laugh and in turn receive applause and ovation. It was uncomfortable to watch a stand-up comedian 'die' on stage and then have to journey alongside them to another gig with their bad gig and 'death' being an elephant in the room. In being on their side in this way, I became aware of not just my own emotional journey as an ethnographer but my entanglement in the emotional journeys of the comedians. I was acutely aware of how I formed something of an impromptu crutch for some of the performers I spent time with and I was providing confidence boosts and cheerleading on a regular basis.

There were several episodes during fieldwork when I observed participants experience a bad gig and recognised that for the comedian there was a sense of embarrassment at me having seen it. It was in these moments that I found myself sincerely reassuring those comedians. I was telling them it was not as bad as they perceived it to be and sharing in their placing of blame upon the audience, agreeing that the audience was disruptive or challenging. I was affirming that the particular venue did not lend itself well to live comedy and confirming that their successful previous gig was demonstrative of the audience being to blame. On other occasions, I found myself playing the part of a cheerleader, having to bolster the confidence of comedians ahead of gigs that they were clearly anxious about, I felt compelled to 'talk them down' from catastrophising the outcome of an imminent gig. Similarly, in the post-show 'high' of a good gig, I found myself involved in the comedian's 'high' and 'buzz' and telling them how good or great a gig it was, their exhilaration affecting me also.

In addition to such emotional ups and downs, I also encountered moral conundrums. One example of this was the workplace politics of the live comedy circuit and the personal relationships between performers. I became aware of the conflict between comedians on the circuit and I was regularly privy to conversations where other performers were being ridiculed and criticised. This placed me in an awkward position, both morally and emotionally as I had usually already spent time with those comedians being targeted. It made me question the blurring of boundaries; I was there as an ethnographer and yet I was being drawn into the conflict on the circuit that would typically only be reserved for those

working there. Through such happenings, I was drawn into the emotionality of the stand-up comedians' working lives and this only blurred my insider-outsider status further.

When it came to my departure, I had not anticipated spending as long as eight months conducting fieldwork. It is now that I can look back and appreciate how this was not a 'quick' or 'short-term' ethnography (Pink and Morgan, 2013). Over the course of the eight months, I developed not only an ethnographic stamina, but I had also developed a real fondness for my weekends spent wayfaring on the comedy circuit and put simply, I did not really want to leave the field. Whilst there is an argument that the ethnographer never really leaves the 'field' behind (Stebbins, 1991), the time does come for the ethnographer to depart from the research site and leave people behind, which can be difficult (Roadburg, 1980). It is recognised that the emotional impact of exiting the 'field' can be profound and linger long afterwards (Coffey, 1999; Parvez, 2018). For me, the thought of leaving the field was very similar to remembering that one's summer holiday would inevitably come to an end. I was saddened to bring fieldwork to a close and leave behind the comedians I had come to know.

I had formed working relationships, friendships and made acquaintance with many stand-up comedians. I was embedded within the circuit and sometimes socialised with the comedians before and after a show – from having lunch together or meeting for coffee to break-up the weekend of a comedian who was away from home, to sharing pizzas and post-show drinks (I always opted for a Coca-Cola) in the green room or in the bar area. I had formed close kinships with a few performers who could be considered as my 'boomerang' participants in that I kept in touch and continued returning to them over multiple weekends during the fieldwork period. Journeying alongside one another in close proximity and sharing the ups and downs of a weekend gigging, I had formed a certain attachment to these participants.

This is common in ethnographic research such is its highly interpersonal and relational nature. As Coffey (1999:47) suggests, it is inevitable that prolonged fieldwork and good ethnographic practice can lead to the development of 'ethnographic friendships'. Indeed, in her well-known ethnography *On the Run,* Alice Goffman (2015) declares her affection for her participants and attachment to them, describing how they had become and remained

close friends. I kept in touch with participants throughout the fieldwork period and intermittently once fieldwork had come to an end. I had a phone call from one participant telling me that they were supporting a television comedian at a nearby venue and asking me if I wanted to tag along for the night. I also received an email from another participant asking me if I wanted to accompany them to one of their preview gigs to see what it was like road-testing a show for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It was on these occasions that I came to experience how the blurring of boundaries can continue post-fieldwork.

Despite being 'ethnographic friendships' (Coffey, 1999), I felt I had established genuine bonds and relationships with a number of comedians, particularly those who became my key participants and informants. But I did have feelings of guilt that I was establishing these relationships purely for my own research needs and that they were somehow disingenuous, which did not always sit comfortably with me. I was always conscious of this during fieldwork, but the gravitas only really struck me on the two aforementioned post-fieldwork occasions. I felt that I was being inauthentic or disloyal to those participants and the 'friendship' built during fieldwork. Therefore, I was unsure as to what was the right thing to do, and this was certainly bound by my sense of what was professional and ethical. This required a certain kind of situated ethics (Calvey, 2008) and demonstrated to me how one never really leaves the field (Taylor, 1991) and that the ethical implications of research continue long after. I decided that it was most sensible to suggest that I was unable to make the two offers rather than bluntly state that the research had come to an end.

Post-fieldwork, it took some time to adjust back to 'reality' away from the circuit. I had not thought about returning to a comedy club since leaving the field; I knew that it would be different. I would have had to accept that I was no longer part of the 'firm' or 'one of them' but rather I would just be another paying audience member. However, nearly three years on from fieldwork and just three months before the COVID-19 pandemic completely shuttered live performance venues for over a year, I was on a train when I spotted Peter, one of my former research participants, who was walking down the carriage towards the on-board shop. He returned a look of recognition and we immediately struck up conversation. He came and sat with me, and we chatted like 'old friends'. It was a Friday and I was travelling to Edinburgh for a weekend away and Peter was travelling for a weekend

worth of gigs at a comedy club in the city centre. Peter asked me what I was doing on the Saturday night. I mentioned that I had no plans and he insisted on inviting me along to the club to see the show, which I happily agreed to.

That Saturday night, I sat in a comedy club for the first time since fieldwork had ended; I was just another audience member, albeit with a complimentary ticket. I did miss being in the green room, I missed travelling around with the comedians, dashing from one gig to the next and the thrill of it all. The show ended and the audience made their way out of the comedy club. I too followed and returned to my hotel having enjoyed watching the comedy show, not as an ethnographer or an insider-outsider but as an audience member. If I was back to being a stranger, I was certainly a familiar one.

## 9.3 Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

My use of ethnographic fieldwork and deployment of participant observation which encompassed 'going-along' (Kusenbach, 2003) has enabled me to explore the working lives of comedians in a way that is original from previous work and present the journey of working and performing as a professional comedian on the UK live comedy circuit. Indeed, I would not have been able to uncover and report on the particular aspects of the working lives of comedians, namely their working culture and the off-stage dimensions and the backstage regions of the occupation, had I not committed myself to this particular ethnographic approach and immersed myself in the field in the way that I did. It was only through doing this that I was able to capture these particularly rich and insightful findings, leading to the development and articulation of my theory of Theatrical Edgework as a revised interpretation of Lyng's (1990) edgework concept.

In thinking about the limitations of this thesis, one such limitation relates to the time I had to conduct fieldwork. Whilst I did spend eight months conducting ethnographic fieldwork and although the argument has been put forward for quick or indeed short-term ethnographies (Pink and Morgan, 2013), I would have preferred to have spent more time in the field. I am sure that this is symptomatic of many who conduct ethnographic research involving people, places, and a phenomenon that they are fascinated by. Of course, I have

to mitigate such a limitation and remember that this research forms part of a doctoral research project. Therefore, it was not conducted on an open-ended basis but had to reach a conclusion in line with the wider parameters and deadlines of the project.

There is limitation in regard to the sample of comedians who participated in the research. The sample is predominantly male and of the nineteen comedians who participated, only three were female. This is reflective of the wider stand-up comedy industry, and it is also reflective of existing research and this research does little to remedy the gap in diversity. This research does not tackle the intersectionality or diversity of stand-up comedy performers and so it can only represent the specific experiences of these particular individuals. But, perhaps going forward, future research could focus on the diverse groups working and performing on the comedy circuit, their particular experiences and how they may or may not be distinct from the male dominated nature of the industry.

A further limitation perhaps resides in the inherent subjectivity involved in proceedings. The ethnographic account at the heart of this thesis is subjective and an artefact of the time I spent conducting fieldwork and the subsequent telling of the tale of the field. It is important to address that while the findings of this research paint a rich portrait of what it is like working and performing as a professional stand-up comedian, they may be limited by the setting and those who participated in the research. All of the stand-up comedians I met and spent time with are professional performers who made their respective livings by gigging at the different comedy clubs and comedy nights that make up the comedy circuit. The live comedy club circuit is just one domain of the industry and does not represent all manner of live stand-up comedy performance or indeed a universal working life as a professional comedian.

This thesis cannot account for the lived experience of famous superstar comedians who perform in theatres and arenas. There is a significant difference here, which is that stand-up comedians performing on the comedy circuit are usually anonymous to their audiences, whereas those performing in theatres and arenas are household names with a dedicated audience and fanbase. This did much to shape the dynamic of the relationship between circuit comedians and the audiences they performed to. Therefore, this thesis can only

make claim to representing the working lives and experiences of professional stand-up comedians performing on the UK live comedy circuit.

One of the biggest challenges in writing this thesis has been in discovering and deliberating on the data collected and painting the most compelling and representative portrait of the group that I can. In looking to potential future research, I believe there are many more research journeys I could venture based upon what is presented in this thesis. Throughout fieldwork, I was not short of encouragement from a number of comedians who did their very best to try and persuade me to attempt stand-up comedy for myself. Post-fieldwork and presently as I sit here writing this thesis, my lack of desire to embark upon a career as a comedian remains firmly intact. This is influenced by my own ethnographic peeking behind the curtain and learning what it is like to work and perform on the comedy circuit. While I can rule out all prospect of any future autoethnographic ambitions regarding researching the working lives of comedians, this is not to say that I do not remain resolutely intrigued by comedians as an occupational group. Simply, there is something captivating about stand-up comedians that I hope translates in this thesis – a group of comic troubadours, emerging of a night-time and weekend, journeying the comedy circuit, performing to audiences at comedy clubs up and down the country. Working and performing as a stand-up comedian is a distinctly unusual way to earn a living.

Looking forward, I would be inclined to carry out future ethnographic fieldwork to further develop my theory of Theatrical Edgework. Although I would be enthusiastic to return to the comedy circuit to conduct this, there is the potential to develop my Theatrical Edgework theory and underlying model by studying other types of live and theatrical performance to see how, if indeed at all, the edgework involved may resemble that I identified in stand-up comedy.

Throughout fieldwork and through interviewing – both impromptu and by comparison more formalised semi-structured interviewing, stand-up comedians shared with me their own career journeys from the initial appeal of stand-up comedy through to, beginning to earn a living and turning professional. With this in mind and in a different direction to my ethnographic leanings, research of a narrative or life history nature would perhaps capture

individual's own stories of entering the profession. This could yield new insights that would complement this thesis and its findings as well as continue to demystify the comedian as a tragicomic figure.

## 9.4 Considering Original Contribution

This thesis makes two original contributions to knowledge. The first contribution this thesis makes is through the application of an ethnographic approach to studying the phenomenon. Ethnographic fieldwork supported my immersion within the comedy circuit and community of stand-up comedians and allowed me to experience many aspects of being a stand-up comedian. It enabled me to get as close as possible to the action without appearing on stage and performing myself.

This approach has enabled me to present in this thesis an ethnographic account that captures the journey of working and performing as a professional stand-up comedian on the live stand-up comedy club circuit. This account uncovers how the night-time and its economy are important aspects in shaping the working lives and culture of comedians. While the temporality of the night came to underpin comedians' occupational identity and sense of distinction from others, its economy and culture of excess affected comedians' work and informed their somewhat turbulent relationship with their audience. The rich observational data collected and its analysis has also enabled me to present a dramaturgical account (Goffman, 1959) of how the role of the comedian is performed. In doing this I have been able to illustrate the self-presentation and impression management that comedians engage in. Importantly, I have also been able to uncover and reveal the kinds of skills, competencies and labour that are involved in their work, and which contribute to their identity as professional stand-up comedians.

The second original contribution that this thesis makes is through the development of my theory and accompanying model of Theatrical Edgework. This thesis puts forward Theatrical Edgework as a reworked version and reinterpretation of Stephen Lyng's (1990) concept of edgework and conceives of the working lives of stand-up comedians as Theatrical Edgework. Theatrical Edgework can only be understood by considering the off-stage and backstage

dimensions of the working culture and the role that emotion work and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) plays in negotiating the edgework. It is only through adopting this particular ethnographic approach, one that embraced the off-stage dimensions of the occupation and the journey involved in working and performing as a professional stand-up comedian that I was able to do this.

This theory and model of Theatrical Edgework contributes to theoretical considerations of the application of the edgework concept and provides insight and a rethinking of the way in which working as a professional stand-up comedian can be conceptualised sociologically. It is these moments of edgework on stage and off stage and the accompanying emotional labour and emotion work involved that underpin and knit together the working lives and experiences of stand-up comedians. Indeed, for stand-up comedians working and performing on the live comedy circuit it is like being on a tight-rope.

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# Appendices

## Appendix One: Participant Information Sheet

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

**Title of study:** An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Stand-Up Comedians.

**Name of Researcher:** Thomas Hurdsfield

**Invitation paragraph**

This research explores the lived experiences of stand-up comedians, as a stand-up comedian you have been invited to consider participation in the research. Whilst previous research has looked at stand-up comedian's personalities and childhoods, little academic research to date has explored the lived experiences of stand-up comedians and the meanings and sense stand-up comedians make of their experiences.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of stand-up comedians and attain an insight into the lives and experiences of stand-up comedians and the sense and understanding stand-up comedians make of those experiences. As aforementioned, whilst academic research into stand-up comedians has ventured other avenues with much of a focus on stand-up comedians personalities, little academic research to date has explored stand-up comedians lived experiences. This study aims to spend time with and speak directly to stand-up comedians and allow them directly share their own perspectives on their lives and experiences.

**Why have I been invited to take part?**

This study concerns the lived experiences of stand-up comedians and as a full-time, professional stand-up comedian you fulfil the criteria for this study and have resultantly been invited to consider participation in the study.

**Do I have to take part?**

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary and at your own discretion. Please read through the following information, which should provide you with a well-rounded overview of the study before considering whether to participate or not. If you do decide to participate in the study, you will then be required to sign a consent form representing your agreement to take part. If before or during the study, you wish to withdraw, those wishes will be accepted and respected. However, any information gathered up to the point of withdrawal may be used; furthermore, participants will be unable to withdraw once any publications have been submitted.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

Your participation in this study would involve being accompanied and observed by the researcher for a portion of your day in the build up to a performance *(referred to as participant observation in the consent form)*, simply going about your standard practices and routines that day, however ordinary or extraordinary you may perceive them to be. Following this you will then be observed during a performance *(referred to as observation of performance in the consent form)* from the audience, simply as an audience member would and then interviewed at a later point in time convenient to yourself on a number of areas, some of which may have emerged from the two observations *(referred to as full interview in the consent form)*.

The total length of your involvement in the study involves the portion of the day spent with you in the build up to a performance, the performance itself and an interview lasting in the approximate region of ninety minutes to two hours at a later date. Your own availability and scheduling will naturally contribute to the length of your participation in the process.

There may also be the need to spend some time at a much later date going over the interpretation of the information you have provided to the study, simply as a quality assurance measure, it is expected, if so, that this would occupy no more than sixty minutes of your time.

**Expenses and payments?**

Participation in the study will not result in reimbursement of monetary value either in the capacity of expenses or payment for time. Participation in the study is entirely voluntary.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no immediate, foreseeable disadvantages or risks to participating in this research. It is possible that in conversation throughout the process, given its orientation around lives and experiences that sensitive issues and the recollection of them may arise and as such the potential for upset or distress exists. Participants are reassured that the environment of the study is one which is calm, judgement free, controlled and participants needn't feel uncomfortable and anything they feel uncomfortable in discussing is respected and their participation at all times is valued. Should any participants feel they may benefit, signposting to seeking support services is available. It is important to note at this point that participation in the study is at all times at the participants discretion.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There are number of potential benefits of participating in the study. The opportunity to participate in research making an original contribution to academic knowledge about stand-up comedians as well as the opportunity to do something you may not have had the opportunity to before, that is a unique, interesting and potentially rewarding and enjoyable experience. Participation in the study will also increase the understanding of the lived experiences of stand-up comedians.

**Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

The identities of all participants will remain confidential and in the instance of transcription, writing and publication, all participants' identities will be made anonymous using a pseudonym. Any personal information relating to participants will be held securely and treated with the upmost respect and confidence. Any data related to the participant and collected during the study will only be used in ways in which they have agreed to in the participant consent form.
In the instance of any information being disclosed which identifies a risk to the participant or another individual or criminal activity then as would be agreed to in the signed consent form, the researcher would be obliged to alert the appropriate authorities.

**What will happen if I don't carry on with the study?**

Participants reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any point in the process at their own wishes and of their own accord. In the instance of a withdrawal, any data collected on the participant up until the point of withdrawal may be used, following which it will then be responsibly, securely and systematically destroyed. It must also be considered that participants are unable to withdraw at the point of any publications stemming from the study going to publication.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results of the study will be disseminated in the following ways, through all versions (*printed and electronic)* of the final PhD thesis, university libraries and archives and the British Library and archives and likely in addition to EThOs type services. Furthermore, results may form the basis of any academic papers or publications or presentations composed upon completion of the PhD thesis or en route to completion of the PhD thesis.

Version 2 Date 7th November 2016

**Who is organising or sponsoring the research?**

This research study forms part of a PhD undertaken by the researcher at the University of Salford, Manchester.

**Further information and contact details:**

In the event of any questions, concerns or considerations at any point in the process, you are more than welcome to direct those to any of the following.
(Thomas Hurdsfield)
(Dr Gaynor Bagnall - Supervisor)
(Dr Joy Probyn - Co-Supervisor)

**What if there is a problem?**

If you have a complaint you wish to make about any aspect of the research you can register this confidentially with any of the following:
(Dr Gaynor Bagnall - Supervisor)
(Professor Alison Brettle - PGR Director
Anish Kurien - Research Centres Manager

**If after being interviewed you feel you would like further support for any issues that have arose you can contact the following organisations:**

## Appendix Two: Participant Consent Form

**CONSENT FORM**

**Title of study:** An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Stand-Up Comedians

**Name of Researcher:** Thomas Hurdsfield

Please complete and sign this form **after** you have read and understood the study information sheet. Read the statements below and yes or no, as applicable in the box on the right hand side.

| Statement | Response |
|---|---|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and understand the study information sheet version 2, dated 7th November 2016, for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions which have been answered satisfactorily. | Yes No |
| 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without my rights being affected. | Yes No |
| 3. If I do decide to withdraw I understand that the information I have given, up to the point of withdrawal, may be used in the research. Participants can withdraw at any point in the process. | Yes No |
| 4. I agree to participate through participant observation, the observation of performance and a full interview. | Yes No |
| 5. I agree to the interview being recorded using audio recording equipment. | Yes No |
| 6. I agree to being observed prior to and following a performance and for the researcher to take notes during this stage in the process. | Yes No |
| 7. I agree to being observed during my performance and notes being taken during this stage in the process. | Yes No |
| 8. I understand that my personal details will be kept confidential and not revealed to people outside the research team. [If appropriate - However, I am aware that if I reveal anything related to criminal activity and/or something that is harmful to self or other, the researcher will have to share that information with the appropriate authorities.] | Yes No |
| 9. I understand that my anonymised data will be used in the researcher's thesis and any other publications, presentations or papers connected to the thesis. | Yes No |
| 10. I agree to take part in the study: | Yes No |

| ____________________ | ______________ | ______________ |
|---|---|---|
| **Name of participant** | **Date** | **Signature** |
| ____________________ | ______________ | ______________ |
| **Name of person taking consent** | **Date** | **Signature** |

## Appendix Three: Ethical Approval Letter

**Research, Innovation and Academic Engagement Ethical Approval Panel**

Research Centres Support Team
G0.3 Joule House
University of Salford
M5 4WT

T +44(0)161 295 2280

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22 November 2016

Dear Thomas Hurdsfield,

**RE: ETHICS APPLICATION HSCR 16-95 – An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Stand-Up Comedians.**

Based on the information you provided, I am pleased to inform you that application HSCR16-95 has been approved.

If there are any changes to the project and/ or its methodology, please inform the Panel as soon as possible by contacting Health-ResearchEthics@salford.ac.uk

Yours sincerely,

Sue McAndrew
Chair of the Research Ethics Panel

## Appendix Four: A Model of Theatrical Edgework