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## 'Essex girls' in the comedy club: Stand-up, ridicule and 'value struggles'

Abstract:

This article presents findings from a qualitative study carried out on how audiences of stand-up comedy are entangled in 'value struggles'. It focuses on a group who through classed and gendered ridicule are often drawn as valueless – women from Essex, or 'Essex girls'. The article explores how a group of women from Essex negotiate their value in the face of Essex girl-based ridicule, experienced while part of a live comedy audience in a London comedy club. The analysis reveals an ambivalence in how the group utilise and view their 'Essex girl' status, which challenges the view that this is a valueless identification. They oscillate between the joy of revelling in the Essex girl role and disidentification from the shame of this disreputable status. It concludes by highlighting how ridicule does not necessarily perform a disciplinary function and considers if the joy of 'being Essex' has any hope of escaping into everyday life.

Keywords: affect, class, Essex girl, gender, laughter, ridicule, stand-up comedy, value, values.

### **Introduction**

This article begins with the proposition that contemporary UK society is saturated with classed, gendered and racialised value judgements. Certain groups find themselves routinely devalued, and experience this as a structuring force within their lives (Loveday, 2014: 722). White, working-class women often face denigration through the cultural signifier of the 'Essex Girl'.<sup>1</sup> I use the expression 'white working-class' cautiously. Gurinder Bhambra (2016) clearly articulates the issues with using it, and how it often expunges the multi-ethnic nature of the working class. This is not my intention in using it – the working class is not white. However, the term 'Essex girl' has been historically applied to white women in the working class (Biressi and Nunn, 2013), and I would not want to generalise the findings in this article to different ethnicities who form part of the working class.

The Essex girl is, as Beverley Skeggs (2004) states, the 'condensed signifier of the epitome of the white working class woman in the UK' (112) - tasteless, promiscuous, loud, fake. This cultural cipher has come to the fore of UK public life through the 'structured reality'<sup>2</sup> television series, 'The Only Way Is Essex' (2010-). Faye Woods (2014) draws out how the re-emergence of the Essex Girl tag has coincided with new vitriolic classed discourses surrounding the demonisation of the 'chav', characterising the working class as 'lazy, tasteless, unintelligent or criminal' (Tyler and Bennett, 2010 cited in Woods, 2014). In online discussion and newspaper commentary, both middle-class dominated forums, the Essex girl tag is conflated and merged with the chav (Woods, 2014: 205-206) to form a potent set of judgements that women, and particularly white women from Essex, find they must struggle with and against.

The interest of this article is in the contribution contemporary UK comedy culture makes to the continuation of these judgemental social standards. In the last forty years, since the Alternative Comedy boom in the 1980s, through to the mainstream success of the television programme *Live at the Apollo*,<sup>3</sup> comedy's stature has grown as a significant

constituent of the culture industries (Friedman, 2014). A 2014 survey carried out by Ticketmaster UK revealed that 50% of the UK population had attended a live comedy event in the previous three years (Ticketmaster, 2014). Stand-up comedy forms a major and under-researched part of the UK's cultural life. Stand-up comedy is also no stranger to mockery, ridicule and joking which has included the Essex girl joke (Davies, 2011: 65) and the classed and gendered ridicule of women (Lockyer, 2011; Tyler, 2013).

Comedy taste has also been shown to be a battleground where boundaries around value and worth are drawn and reinforced. Sam Friedman (2014) contends that differential levels of 'embodied cultural capital', that is the skills and knowledge of how to appreciate cultural artefacts appropriately (Bourdieu 1986:47), lead to different 'styles of comic appreciation' (Friedman, 2014:51). These styles of appreciation are used as distinction strategies to draw strong symbolic boundaries between a tasteful, 'enlightened' 'us' and a tasteless 'lacking' 'them' (p.69). How somebody reacts to a comedy product is (mis)recognised as a legitimate basis on which to judge the 'worth' or value of that person. In this way, comedy and humour are used to 'police the boundaries of cultural and class identity' as a form of symbolic violence (p.168). Not only does devaluation of 'Essex girls' happen through the more direct and overt form of comic ridicule, but there are assumptions about how women who might be labelled as 'Essex girls' do not enjoy comedy in the 'right way'. The bind is double - white working-class women are laughable, and they cannot laugh back correctly.

The empirical focus of this article centres on the experiences of a group of four women from Essex, who decided to go to a central London comedy club to celebrate a 'hen night'.<sup>4</sup> Part of their experience on the night did indeed include facing Essex girl-based ridicule. Beverley Skeggs and Vik Loveday (2012) highlight an issue here, asking 'how do we comprehend what value means to those symbolically positioned to have no value...?' (2012:487) suggesting that those positioned as valueless engage in 'value struggles'. This article, therefore, explores how those who face comedic devaluation engage in struggles for value through laughter and humour, and further to consider what hope there is for revaluation through humour and comedy consumption. Given the double bind my participants face, what is the value of comedy consumption for them? I explore this through the analysis of a video observation of the comedy night, a focus group discussion with audience members, and interviews with two white, male, middle-class comedians who performed on the night in question.

I begin by exploring the potentially serious influence of Essex girl-based ridicule and its involvement in valuation processes. I then describe my approach to comedy audience research, explaining what insights it might provide for an exploration of the effect of ridicule on devalued groups. Turning to the data, I first reflect on a couple of key incidents captured through the video observation, and consider how the women go about 'making their night'. I then analyse the comedians' interview data to draw focus to the strategies of power and control these comedians felt were vital to their successful comedic performance. The Essex focus group data is then discussed, revealing how the group's 'Essexness' is both central to their approach to comedy consumption, but also perceived as a shameful subject position from which they attempt to disidentify. I conclude by reconsidering the 'disciplinary'

function of ridicule and suggest that the 'Essex girl' trope may hold the potential of positive reevaluation in specific contexts.

### **Ridicule as a serious business**

Contemporary UK society has a strong public arena for joking and ridicule in the mainstream, through the culture industry of stand-up comedy. It is the contention in this article that this does something *serious* in a society. Michael Billig (2005) suggests how ridicule and humour define social boundaries and carry out a disciplinary function. Humour feeds into social constructions of who counts as laughable and reinforces the terms on which someone might be considered worthy of ridicule. It is associated with social control and processes of devaluation, related to ethnicity/race (Billig, 2001; Weaver, 2011; Kuipers, 2011; Malik, 2011), sexuality (Finding, 2010) and ability (Montgomerie, 2010; Mallett, 2014). Here, I am more specifically concerned with humour's entanglement with social class (Adams and Raisborough, 2008; Lockyer, 2010; Tyler, 2008) and gender (Abedinifard, 2016; Gray, 1994; Foka and Lilequist, 2015; Pailer et al., 2009). These critical humour studies demonstrate how joking and ridicule are part of the process of the 'othering' of specific disempowered groups, simultaneously reflecting and reinforcing power relations.

Humour and joking also impinge on the behaviours of people in their everyday lives. Billig (2005: 219-220) argues that avoiding ridicule, and the laughter associated with embarrassment and shame, is a central component of social order. This relates to cultural valuations – to be tainted by ridicule and to be laughed at is a potential threat to your 'person value' (Skeggs, 2011). The central trope of concern here, the 'Essex girl', finds herself as a figure of 'fun' precisely because she is socially incongruous to expected standards of valuable 'respectable femininity' (Skeggs, 2005). Her supposed sexual promiscuity is an affront to these standards, and therefore laughable. This effects everyday behaviour as to avoid attracting such laughter and ridicule, women from Essex may change their behaviour to eschew such a disreputable label.

A recent campaign launched by two women from Essex to get the term 'Essex girl' removed from the Oxford English Dictionary and the Collins Dictionary (The Guardian, 2016) indicates how women from Essex may feel this cultural formation as a real structuring force in how they are viewed and valued. The organisers of this campaign repudiate the unsavoury aspects of the trope and suggest reclamation of it based on examples of 'talented and inspirational women' from Essex that they know, such as fundraisers, full-time workers and entrepreneurs (motherhub.co.uk, 2016). The term Essex girl would therefore apparently be of worth if it meant being materially productive, and thus it is a thoroughly classed conception of valuable femininity. This message of productivity is embedded in the history of the Essex girl joke and linked to the construction of the blonde joke (Davies, 1998; Kuipers, 2006), which itself blossomed and spread alongside the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century growth in women as part of the labour force (Oring, 2003). The Essex girl joke is functioning as intended – impacting behaviour and valuations to the point that women actively seek to embody productive, respectable femininity. Indeed, in railing against the Essex girl trope, these campaigners are in a sense doing its work for it. This cultural construction therefore represents quite a serious bind.

Giselinde Kuipers (2011) notes that those who find themselves the subject of ridicule, and therefore subject to similar binds, struggle to find 'elegant responses' (p.76), particularly emphasising the example of women's reactions to humour. Women can laugh along, ignore the joke, or object, though the latter opens the likelihood of being positioned as humourless – for instance, a 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2010). Kuipers suggests that the route of 'escape' is to joke back, but that this is only open to those in a powerful position bolstered by other intersecting factors (2011:77). Lisa Merrill (1988) suggests that if women laugh along they 'reinforce the negative view of women depicted in the joke' (p.275), suggesting that female laughter at jokes that ridicule women is complicit in self-denigration.

Additionally, Friedman (2014) highlights how the consumption of stand-up comedy that uses ridicule is entangled in cultural class relations. For the comedy consumer with 'high' cultural capital, comedians who ridicule the powerful are fine and good - 'punching up' is tasteful. Comedy that ridicules disempowered groups is tasteless, and no comedian should 'kick down' (p.75). However, these same 'high cultural' consumers pull on classed assumptions and use devaluing classed language to express their disgust for audiences who laugh at humour that kicks down.<sup>5</sup> Value judgements concerning the appropriate use of ridicule are used to elevate one cultural class position against the other. The working class are drawn as 'cheap and lazy' (p.117), mindlessly lapping up comedy at other people's expense, leaving the middle class as untainted, ethical consumers.

Some recent work, however, has established that people's responses to attempts at classed and gendered positioning are not readily determined. Helen Wood (2017) describes the situation that faces young working-class people who participate in the structured reality programme *Geordie Shore*. These participants could easily be seen as dupes or pawns in a game of symbolic violence. Yet through an exaggerated performance of working-class aesthetic values - 'being mint' (p.45) - they can stake a claim to a form of value that represents 'one of the depressingly few routes to some form of ill/legitimate subjectivity' (p.52). Moreover, Anne Graefer (2014) demonstrates how audiences of *Geordie Shore* are not necessarily revelling in the ridicule of the show's participants, but instead their laughter is delighting in the relatability of their excesses, as a form of 'affective solidarity amongst women' (p.118). This would at least theoretically suggest a space of possibility for those facing ridicule to find strategies or live values (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) that can accrue value, despite the intention of the ridicule. Participants, audiences and laughter have polysemic potentials that might frustrate the vagaries of classed and gendered power plays.

The working-class woman from Essex, therefore, is taking somewhat of a risk if she publicly attempts to consume comedy – which sounds ridiculous. Consider, however, that an evening out at a comedy night for women from Essex runs the risk of exposure to material that will directly target them. It may portray them, in public gaze, as promiscuous, unintelligent and distasteful. If they laugh at a comedian who is indulging in ridicule, they are either drawn as classless dolts or are complicit in their devaluation. If they do not laugh, they are humourless, running the risk of more targeted ridicule. Yet there is space for hope that in the struggle against devaluation, spaces for revaluation might be forged. The focus of this piece is precisely on a group of female friends from Essex who, celebrating one of their numbers' coming nuptials, decided to attend a comedy night in central London, sit in the front row and face direct Essex girl-based ridicule. Which begs the question, what do my

research participants get out of comedy, and in becoming targets of class and gender-based ridicule, how do they negotiate their value in this potential mine-field?

### **Approaching the live comedy setting**

To attempt to address the experience of my participants in the comedy club, I draw on material taken from a wider project about how audiences of live stand-up comedy are entangled in 'value struggles' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). Drawing on Bourdieu (1986) and Friedman (2014), the project has been concerned with exploring how cultural capital is enacted in the live comedy context. Is there a straight line between class, comedy taste(s) and the production of laughter in the comedy setting? How is laughter in the comedy club experienced and understood by those who 'live' it and what values do they bring to bear in reflecting on their experiences of comedy consumption?

This broad area has been approached through a qualitative strategy that includes video observations of three comedy nights, qualitative interviews with comedians, and focus group discussions with audience members in attendance at the observed events. The aim here was to build an augmented picture of the live comedy environment. Each video observation consisted of two cameras being set up, with one situated to the rear of the audience facing the performance space, and one situated towards the front of the room facing back towards the audience. I was also present on the night, diligently taking notes on audience reactions to comedy material, and any interesting behaviours that I thought might need exploring later. These video observations are intended to capture 'fine-grain' (Jewitt, 2012) situated action forming the basis for analysis of the intersubjective and 'intensely felt' practice of comedy consumption (Bottero, 2010:10) that may bear the trace of value struggles. The subsequent focus groups and interviews were intended to explore the values people attributed to their action within the comedy environment, to connect everyday practice to extra-interactional fields of power relations.

For this article, the analysis is drawn from one of the video observations, carried out in a central London stand-up comedy club attended by the four women from Essex, a subsequent focus group discussion with this group, as well as interviews with two comedians who performed on the night. The front row of the audience included my Essex participants, in attendance to celebrate a 'hen night': Jan, the bride-to-be; and three of her 'hens', Chloe, Esther and Megan.<sup>6</sup> Occupationally and educationally, these participants would be 'classified' as working class - two are housewives, one is a customer service assistant in a supermarket, and one works part-time as an office administrator. None of the participants had completed university education, although one participant is part way through an education studies degree. The two comedians performing on this night (Jack and Martin) are white middle-class males. Both have a university level education. Jack attended theatre school before turning his hand to stand-up and is now a full-time comic. Martin, alongside his work as a comedian, owns a comedy club and is the landlord of several properties in East London.

It should be stated here that my participants were not planted by me. I contacted the comedy venue to gain access to carry out the video observations, went to the venue to set up my cameras, and then waited to see who would end up on the front row and who would be performing. Before the event got underway, I approached those in the frame to gain their

consent for recording, and to ask for contact details to arrange the follow-up interviews and focus groups. It was only at this point on that night that I became aware that the front row was a hen party of women from Essex. In the process of contacting them after the event, and interviewing them, I checked their consent, including agreement to use material from the video in subsequent publications. It is the experiences of that night and the analysis of the data that have led me to consider the Essex girl trope, and ridicule more generally, as a feature of value struggles in the experience of comedy.

Analysis of the data started with a watching and re-watching of the audience and performance video data. Some clips of material were then cut out of the original video, becoming 'key incidents' that I then used as an elicitation tool within the subsequent focus group discussions and performer interviews. These interviews and the focus group were then transcribed and analysed to identify major themes related to values, value struggles, and participants' understanding of the video data. In this article, I am therefore looking at how the cultural formation of the 'Essex girl', and what it carries by way of cultural value, is active in the experiences of the participants within the comedy club, and in the participants' understandings of their actions.

This approach was inspired in part by Skeggs, Thumin & Wood (2008), where the authors reflect on the use of mixed methods in audience research, and how configurations of class and gender are constructed in different ways by the form(s) of the research encounter. Central to the research design utilised here is my awareness that if I rely solely on my observations of the comedy club, I would be drawing an analysis based on relatively privileged positional viewpoint. The use of video data to allow for both my interpretations, as well as those of my research participants, was explicitly designed to disrupt my observer's eye and attempt to ameliorate some bias. Additionally, by drawing together different research forms in this way, I aimed to elucidate further how stubborn and pernicious classed and gendered practices can be in different contexts.

Despite this attempt at methodological disruption, my impact on the research encounters inevitably remains. As a white male academic, my immediate presence in the interview and focus group will have influenced the narratives provided, and the discussions had. That being said, with my Essex participants, I had a certain level of 'insider' access. I am also an 'Essex boy', brought up in the town of Benfleet, nestled between Basildon, the spiritual home of 'Mondeo Man', and Southend-on-Sea, notable for having the longest pleasure pier in the world. My knowledge of the county and my accent, similar as it is to my Essex participants - but also my experience of negotiating my Essex-ness in forging an academic career - has influenced the analysis set out below.

The next section focuses on some of the key incidents identified in the video analysis of the night itself, drawing out ways in which the actions of audience and performer are wrapped in gendered and classed value associations, but how these emerged in some unexpected ways. The article then moves into linking this situated action to broader power relations through the analysis of the more 'discursive' data.

### **Essex girls in the comedy club**

The idea of Essex establishes itself in the interaction of the event early in the proceedings.

The compere of the night, Martin, finds out quickly that the front row comprises of women on a hen-do. Martin is initially alerted to the front row by some 'out of place' laughter from, as it turns out, the bride-to-be. Here, he engages them:

Martin: settle down ladies, settle down, what the fuck, is this some sort of celebration?

Jan: It's my hen-do!

Martin: Oh it's a hen-do, that's why you're all so fucked up and pissed.

Martin then implores the audience to clap for Jan, vigorously gesturing – it is a way to restore some order, to re-establish that he, as MC (emcee), oversees the affective happenings in this space. He goes on to state that hen-dos are 'a comedy gig's worst nightmare', alluding to the fact that drunken disruptiveness does not necessarily help comedy to work, supporting the idea that he is trying to re-establish a comfortable performer-audience dynamic (Rutter, 2000). His next utterance again is an attempt to ameliorate the perceived threat of a potentially disruptive group, but perhaps does not go quite as planned:

M: Now usually a hen-do is a comedy club's worst nightmare, but these ladies seem quite middle class and well-to-do so we should be able to...you're, you're not?

[the group look at each other, laugh]

J: You don't know us yet.

M: Whereabouts are you from?

J: We're from Essex.

M: Oh fucking hell, Essex hen-do everybody.

The salient point to note here is that there is an understanding on both sides of the interaction that geography is entangled with class. When Martin perceives that the group are refusing his middle-class label, his next port of call in establishing their class 'credentials' is to ask where they are from. This, I suggest, is a valuation practice, a way in which the comedian can size up the 'value' of the audience member to ascertain how laughable they might be. For her part, in rejecting the attempt at middle-class labelling, Jan does not simply answer Martin's question flatly. Her gesture and intonation make it abundantly clear that she knows her utterance will meet with class-based judgement, and that it is related to the performance of femininity. Her movement and facial expression starts sweetly, almost coquettishly, before breaking into a full laugh and ending with a defiantly raised arm (Figure 1). There is an implicit understanding that the confession of Essex-ness may not be viewed as valuable, but the bold gesture suggests she will fight for value regardless – a value struggle.





Figure 1: 'Essex girl' confession – smile, punch, laugh.

As noted earlier, the disciplinary function of humour works through people avoiding the potential embarrassment of ridicule (Billig, 2005). The behaviour of Jan in this first instance does not fit this view. Indeed, when offered the relative safety of a middle-class characterisation, she rejects it. In the topsy-turvy world of the comedy space, Jan is positively and rebelliously embodying Essex, and opening herself up to ridicule.

Which surely comes. Throughout the rest of the evening, the Essex girl jokes and associations are played for laughs by both Martin and the later performer, Jack. I'm not inclined to give these jokes another airing in this article;<sup>7</sup> suffice to say they played on the familiar tropes, Martin alluding to tastelessness, criminality, and lack of intelligence, whereas Jack played on promiscuity. This represents an exact fit for the checklist of stereotypical judgements used to draw the valueless white working-class woman (Woods, 2014).

The ongoing ridicule, however, does not meet the response that might be expected. The women again do not fall under disciplinary control through the onslaught of ridicule, indeed quite the opposite – as the event moves on, where Jan made the early running, the rest of the group start to coalesce around these behaviours. There is a hint of this in Figure 1, where behind Jan's raised fist, another participant, Chloe, is laughing hard, testing the waters of rebellion. The more the ridicule continues, the more they revel in the event. There are instances where the group are provoking the performers, to break up the normal run of performance/audience response. They collectively emerge as loud, brash 'Essex girls'. To give one example, early on in Jack's performance, Meg and Esther can be seen trying to get Jan's attention, for Meg to take a photo of the bride-to-be using her mobile phone (Figure 2). It is very obviously done, undermines the expectations of comedian/audience interaction, and initiates the desired response, leading to the comedian beginning a prolonged interaction with the group, with more doses of ridicule. The more they become the centre, the more they double over with laughter (Figure 3).



Figure 2: Taking over.



Figure 3: Convergence of joy in ridicule.

This convergence of behaviour, this in situ negotiation and building of a collective response, can be usefully characterised as an ‘affective alliance’ (Grossberg, 1992:59): groups of people who come together in shared affection for a cultural product, and through this indicate possible shared ‘activities, practices and identities’ (ibid). In the original use of the term, a cultural product brings people together who are already aware of their affective connections to products. For example, people who go to see Eddie Izzard would assume that others going to the show have a similar affective connection to Eddie Izzard, and are therefore open to affective connections with others in that setting. I use this concept in an emergent sense, less based on a presumption of connection and more on the active audience practice of building connections – ‘affective alliance building’.

The group could not presume a pre-existing ‘fandom’ for the comedians, so they actively work to ensure some level of convergence in experience. In one sense, this is a form of ‘affective contagion’ (Wetherell, 2015); however, as Ahmed (2010:36) notes, contagion does not capture how an individual’s behaviour may impact their likelihood of ‘catching’ affect. A metaphor of alliance building leads my analysis to emphasise how the group are constantly active and enactive in this experience. They are doing precisely this through their provocations, through their processual taking on of the ridiculed role; they are building their own experience.

This does, however, leave open the question of quite why they took up the role of the Essex girl so passionately. The video analysis suggests that this group, led primarily by Jan, were determined to draw focus. They leveraged conventionally devalued characteristics to do this, and successfully garnered value on their terms (Wood, 2017). They had a wonderful time. This could, however, also be interpreted as a sign of complicity (Miller, 1998) - are they laughing along to deflect shame? This needs to be approached carefully. It is entirely possible that through their use of 'Essexness', the group are both inviting ridicule *and* collectively protecting themselves from the potential negatives of ridicule. This is what 'value struggles' are about. Additionally, the polysemic nature of humour and laughter (Kuipers, 2011:69) makes any analysis based on observation alone difficult. At the very least, however, I take forward the finding that ridicule based on devaluation, in specific circumstances, may have the potential to enable the devalued to accrue value on their terms.

Before I try to illuminate further these value struggles using focus group data, I first draw on the interviews giving the performers' perspective. This is to clarify what my participants were up against concerning attempts at devaluation, and to underline how their value struggle in the comedy space was quite an achievement, subverting the intention of the comedians.

### **Performers perspective - Controlling the Room**

There is an understanding amongst comedians that being able to control the room is a fundamental part of successful comedy. This indicates that in the first instance, comedy and laughter have a relationship to power – performers are to have more power than the audience. Any good feeling that is aroused should be based on the skill of the comedy performer to control a room and stimulate laughter.

Double (1997:132) refers to this need for control when discussing 'the confidence trick'. He suggests any competent comedy performer must pull this off and create the impression (at least) that they 'are in control of the room' (ibid). This is needed because, as Double puts it, 'like a dog, [audiences] can smell your fear...they will not believe that a frightened comic has the power to make them laugh' (ibid). There is a marked assumption of an oppositional relationship between a potentially intimidating room and a comedian who must wrest control from the jaws of hostility.

Certainly, the comedians on this night give the impression that this characterisation of the comedy room is uppermost in their mind. They perceive the tussle between comedian and the audience members as a power struggle. The relationship between performer and audience is perceived to be antagonistic - for Martin, control of the room is key. While discussing those he admires as successful comics, 'stage confidence' is the number one trait for a good act. When reviewing his performance, he was very anxious and self-critical of what he was seeing, and couching this anxiety in opposition to what he was saying about acts he admired – "sometimes I can be very commanding, but sometimes I slip and I can't fucking control it". His notion of what it means to be a comedian is entangled with ideas of being in control. Control of the self, and confidence in the self, leads to a commanded room.

Jack also draws on notions of power. As described in the earlier section, a mobile phone made an early appearance in Jack's performance. Later in his set, Jan takes out her

phone, which Jack spots quickly. She protests - she was just taking a picture. Jack says that he will take a picture of the hen party with the phone. Jan hands it over, Jack slips it into his back pocket and says, 'You can come and collect it later'. Typically, the women react with gales of laughter (as does the rest of the audience) and this is yet another occurrence of their successful involvement in a memorable hen party moment. For Jack, this is a 'typical power move', a tactic he has used many times. It highlights the comedians' view that the responsibility for laughter is their own; to accomplish this, they need control of the room to get through their planned act. It also reinforces how comedy spaces are therefore a place where struggles for power, and value, are played out.

There are cultural assumptions that the comedians bring to and utilise in their attempts at control, and quelling of the potential threat of an Essex girl front-row. During my interview with him, and after reviewing the video footage of the exchange described earlier, Martin declares the following regarding Essex:

*The Only Way is Essex*. For fuck's sake, why is it, what is that such a popular show(sic)? ...They are, they are literally nightmares, right? ... So self-confident, so self-absorbed, so unaware...ruining thing's for everybody else, they are literally the worst form of humanity (laughs).

Strikingly, the notion of confidence comes up again – the performer must be confident, the confidence of the audience must be under control. He goes on to suggest why these unruly Essex folks attend comedy clubs:

They love ruining it, they actually joyfully, that's the whole point, they're out to ruin it...that's why they're having fun, because they are ruining it.

Martin is attempting to keep control of the room, as that is what successful comedians do. He is particularly keen on controlling the front row because, immanent to his reading of these 'Essex girls', they are 'fucked up' 'nightmares'. Their rowdy laughter, Martin understands, comes from the enjoyment of ruining it for everybody. His efforts at control, then, are not just in the service of smooth comedic performance – they are expressions of classed and gendered disgust. Martin seems particularly primed to perceive working-class women as threats to his control and employs humour (and altogether more bare-faced power moves) to enforce a hierarchy. Moreover, his distaste for them is intertwined with the depiction of people from Essex in structured reality television (Wood, 2017; Graefer, 2014). He is also calling into question their taste. They do not laugh as hard at the carefully constructed material of the comedian as they do at the direct interaction with the comedian and their antics - they laugh at the wrong things. The (mis)recognition of taste is a force that further informs devaluation practices in everyday life, but their effects are not predictable. The hen party was not doomed to be quelled. In fact, direct ridicule paradoxically enabled them to live out their values, garnering value on their terms.

## **Taste values and disidentification**

I now turn to the hen party's account of their tastes and how this impacted their audience behaviour, as well as how they viewed their antics post-event, to highlight how their comedic experience is structured and negotiated through value struggles. This draws on the data from a focus group discussion conducted with them three months after the comedy night.

The comedy taste of the group has important effects on how they generally function as a friendship group, on how they came to be in the front row of the club, and in how value was negotiated. As part of the focus group, a discussion was had on the comedians the group liked and why, to explore their comedy taste and see how it enmeshes with their value judgements. While names were offered, no one professed to be a 'fan' of any particular comedian. Moreover, the taste exhibited by the group was bound up in a sense to its 'use-value'. The group discussed a couple of types of comedy, but always came back to what it did for them as a group, rather than focusing on the 'formal' qualities of comedic performance. This supports Friedman's (2014) contention that the boundaries of taste, and I would argue value, is more to do with 'embodied cultural capital' rather than 'objective cultural capital' (Friedman, 2014) – the how and why of taste, rather than the what.

The first taste value expressed was a preference for comedy that relates to the everyday, or observational humour. This is often dismissed as 'easy stuff' by those with high cultural capital. Indeed, in Friedman's scheme (2014), my participants' taste for the observational would place them in the 'low cultural capital' group. The 'high' cultural taste view tends to assume that observational humour is simplistic, the humour is set at a lower bar. I argue, however, that this group has a form of cultural capital that leads to different tastes from those of the middle class and that are embedded in different and potentially valuable social values. The group's notion of the point of comedy includes creating a sense of belonging. The comedians they like are 'real' or engaged in 'banter' (Megan). Discussion of the appeal of Mickey Flanagan, a comedian whose material is based on his East-End roots and experiences, celebrated him as being 'the sort of person we know' (Esther), 'our sort of Essex-y' (Jan). Some of the characters that Flanagan evokes in his act bear a funny resemblance to those in the women's lives - 'We know people who would go out in their slippers to the pub wouldn't we?' (Chloe).

The group even suggest that it is only their 'sort' who could relate to Flanagan's material properly - 'we get the jokes more than what a Scottish or northern person would' (Jan). Their taste for his material chimes with how they see themselves as a group: it is enmeshed with assumptions about wider identities, and about the importance of comedy to reflect the experiences of wider groups. This is not to say that the group only watched comedians who met these identifications, as the group suggested a liking for northern comic Peter Kay and British-Iranian comedian and actor Omid Djalili, amongst others. It does suggest, however, that when they approach comedy, they are expecting it to relate to, or become part of, their story. For this group of friends, comedy is a way of sharing memories and making exciting experiences through their own identities. This understanding, I argue, can be seen in the way the group behave in the comedy club – the comedy directly becomes a conduit for them to create a memorable experience in celebration of a coming wedding.

The other taste value they show a strong affection for is ridicule:

‘I like people taking the mickey...I find it funny when he picks on people’ (Esther)

‘I like to see people squirm’ (Jan)

Again, a taste for straightforward mockery could be analysed as the preference of those who lack sophisticated taste, who are part of a lower cultural capital group (Friedman, 2014), a tasteless other (Skeggs, 2004). This is not the impression gained from my time spent with my participants - instead it is again the expression of a different value, based on an attitude of not taking oneself too seriously. Indeed, it is related to the idea of relevance discussed above. Everyday life is funny, the everyday things that people do are laughable. To be ‘over-serious’ is in some way to deny the inherent ridiculousness of everything - ‘you have to see the funny side of everything, even Trump’ (Esther). During the focus group, ridicule of themselves and each other suffused the discussions - at one point in my notes I write ‘they really enjoy taking the piss’. Ridicule, an act that is to do with diminishing the status of others, is pleasurable for this friendship group. This is not only the act of ridiculing others. The experience of being ridiculed is somehow pleasurable.

This was most acutely revealed in a brief discussion on the comedian Paul Chowdhury. His act is based on ridiculing a wide range of social groups, but the mockery of racial groups, and the ridiculing of his racial background (Chowdhury is of Punjabi Indian descent), dominates the act; the material has, however, been criticised for being outright xenophobic (Logan, 2014). Yet my participant group work with the attitude that if ridicule is doled out fairly and equally, and that the ridiculed are happy to laugh along with the mockery, then the objectionable humour can be given a pass. Everybody, laughing together at themselves and each other is assumed to create a kind of togetherness. The problems we face as groups are based on taking our problems too seriously.

There is a sense though that this like for ridicule is also part of a cultural defence mechanism. As Chloe states:

“You have to be able to take the pee out of yourself, so it doesn’t really matter if anybody else does” (Chloe)

A threatened self can deflect the seriousness or reality of the threat through taking one’s self to be laughable. This taste for ridicule, therefore, points more solidly to the idea of how value struggles are part and parcel of the experience of comedy for my participants. It suggests that they know there is a ‘person value’ (Skeggs, 2011) to be salvaged, and that this needs balancing with the values of non-seriousness and togetherness that, counterintuitively, can be reached through exposing the self to ridicule.

The twin tastes of relevance and ridicule were central to the group’s value struggle that night. Being in the front row and in the firing line of the comedians’ mockery ‘made their night’. Their ‘style of comic appreciation’ included the notion that ‘being picked on...is the funniest bit of all’(Jan). By inhabiting the Essex girl role, the group use this devalued subject position to garner value on their terms, becoming ‘the funniest bit’ and making their night.

The humour and laughter experienced, in pursuit of taking centre stage and ensuring the group come away with valuable memories, seems to allow them to escape from devaluation.

This is, however, also subject to a value struggle. While the Essex girl trope facilitated my participants in taking up a position and generating the experience they precisely wanted, in the focus group they were far from ‘owning’ this subject position. Thirty minutes into the focus group discussion, I played the clip discussed earlier, where Martin discovers the group are an Essex hen party. Unusually, the group did not wait for me to ask a follow-up question based on the clip - they immediately launched into a discussion, the opening point being ‘I don’t think we fit into the “Essex girl!”’ (Chloe). Distancing and ‘disidentification’ (Skeggs, 1997), a strategy of creating self-value through denying particularly classed and gendered aspects of identity, came to the fore. They primarily deny that their part of Essex has any true ‘Essex girls’, then focus on how they do not look like Essex girls (no fake lashes and nails for instance), before establishing some character traits which no member of the group fulfils – ‘I’d like to think we’ve got a little bit of brains between us’ (Esther). When asked outright regarding how they would define their social class, all identified emphatically with a middle-class label, in stark contrast to their denial of such an identification in the comedy club.

In the context of this focus group, a relatively formal space compared to that of the comedy environment, shame takes over. Through reviewing their behaviour, and while continuing to assert throughout the focus group discussion how much of a great night they had, their own Essex girl behaviour becomes a threat to their person value (Skeggs, 2011). Being ‘Essex’ in everyday life holds very real potentials for shaming. This reveals the depth of the struggle concerning class, femininity and behaviour. For this group, there is a contradiction between being women of worth and respectability, and being women who can playfully, freely and brazenly enjoy comedy. ‘Essex girls’ in the comedy club find themselves oscillating between these subject positions, and struggle for value (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). The struggle for respectability manifests itself in the most mundane of pleasures – laughing at the comedy.

### **Conclusion – Situated Struggle and the Hope of Revaluation**

Facing ridicule does not necessarily lead to devaluation, but this does not deny that humour is entangled with what it means to have ‘proper personhood’ (Skeggs, 2014, see also Wickberg, 1998 cited in Kuipers, 2011: 76). Indeed, what this article demonstrates is that ridicule, in certain situations and under certain conditions, has the facility to open spaces for people to find value in previously devalued statuses. Ridicule and humour are negotiated with and through value and value judgements, but the outcomes of this are not straightforward. I argue, therefore, against understanding mockery and ridicule as having a straightforwardly disciplinary function. An overemphasis on the disciplinary function of humour gives a deterministic power to the humour of the powerful, a power that I have demonstrated they do not have in certain contexts. In my examples from the comedy night, the female participants found a way to use ridiculing statements to their advantage, through building and collectively harnessing an affective alliance that enabled them to create their memorable night out of comedic actions intended to devalue and control them. By suggesting that ridicule always works in the way the powerful intended, we paradoxically give away power to those who

seek to devalue others.

By understanding ridicule and humour as part and parcel of ‘struggles for value’ (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), this article shows how deep classed and gendered boundary-making goes, as well as highlighting the potential values which can be used to fight dominant forces. Ridicule is a social practice that can be used by active agents to attempt to devalue others, or crucially to gain value to the self. It is part of the ongoing process of the social construction of groups and values, but this does not doom the ridiculed to devaluation. It must be stated, however, that ridicule in current social conditions is commonly utilised to reinforce boundaries that suit the already powerful. It is not that this mockery made my participants feel worse, at least not directly. The temporariness of their joy on the night through ‘being Essex’ appears to define even more clearly for them how they must act in their everyday lives to be ‘women of value’. The playful ridicule of the stand-up comedy club is the exception that proves, and may in effect strengthen, the rule.

Finally, I want to contend that the joyous identification the group experienced in the context of the comedy club has the potential to become a valued identification in everyday life. Towards the end of our focus group discussion, a couple of the participants seem to re-engage, tentatively, with ‘being Essex’:

Jan: I like that we’re from Essex.

Chloe: I guess it’s a group to be part of.

Perhaps if the comedic space were being defined by comedians who did not instantly view groups of women as a threat, then the value of their Essex identification could have been celebratory rather than defiant. There is still a decided lack of female representation on the comedy scene, and more so a lack of working-class female comedians. With different performers -who might manage a space not based on an assumption of antagonism and control, but on the taste values of togetherness, relevance and ridicule - women might not find themselves having to deny the obvious joy of the laughter and alcohol-fuelled excess of the hen-do. I hold on to the hope that these forms of female experience can become a source of pride and value, rather than shame and disidentification.

## Notes

1. Essex is a county of the UK, situated in the South East of England.
2. Structured or scripted reality programming ‘looks like drama...but is based on the real lives of their subjects. “Story producers” plot out what they are going to film in advance after discussion with the cast’ (Raeside, 2011).
3. ‘Live at the Apollo’ presents the recording of live stand-up comedy acts as they perform at the Hammersmith Apollo, London. At its height, shown in a prime-time slot on BBC1, it was regularly receiving viewing figures of an estimated four million (Chortle, 2016: website)
4. Hen nights are a pre-wedding celebration for the bride-to-be, usually only attended by female friends and family. They have come to be associated with drunken excess (Skeggs, 2005).



5. See Friedman, 2014, pp.116-117 for one such example.
6. Names have been changed as per the request of participants.
7. Billig (2005) describes how humour analysts often face the dilemma of whether to reproduce or replace problematic language in their academic work. In the context of his work on racist joking, he outlines the two sides - "The argument for replacement is based on the assumption that some racist terminology is so offensive that it should never be reproduced...The argument for reproduction stresses the context of reproduction." (p.27). I have decided to omit the precise nature of the jokes aimed at my participants to affirm the view that such joking really should be a matter of taboo.

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