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ScienceDirect

Journal of Pragmatics xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

journal of
PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Don't make me laugh: Responsive laughter in (dis)affiliation[☆]

Rebecca Clift^{*}

University of Essex, Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK

Abstract

This paper examines laughter as a methodical resource for marking a just-prior turn as laughable, even when that turn has not been designed as such by its producer. It focuses in particular on one usage, where laughter targets a prior turn as preposterous and thus laughable: laughter is seen to be but one possible response in such contexts, and, as such, highly disaffiliative. By examining instances of video-taped family interaction and audio recordings of broadcast interviews, I examine the sequential environment both leading up to the production of the laughter – what makes the targeted turn so laughable – and subsequent to it, that is, how the laughter is elaborated verbally. I also examine the features of the laughter itself, and specifically what makes it recognizable as marking a highly negative stance with respect to what it targets. But who exactly produces the responsive laughter is here critical: when the laugh producer is not the ostensible recipient of the prior, laughable turn, the laughter produced is heard both to disaffiliate from that prior but in so doing, to affiliate with its recipient. Such uses show how a single action can be simultaneously both affiliative and disaffiliative.

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Keywords: Conversation Analysis; Laughter; Stance; Affiliation; Disaffiliation

And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations: kings of people shall be of her.

Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?

Genesis, Chapter 17, 15–17

1. Introduction

The Book of Genesis reports that Abraham, having been told by God that his wife Sarah, aged ninety, will bear a child, 'fell upon his face, and laughed'. Laughing in response to something ostensibly 'serious' is thus a practice which has clearly had interactional salience across the ages; and, in what follows, I investigate, using conversational data, this practice of laughing in response to a turn not obviously designed to elicit laughter. I further explore the ways in which such laughter is implicated in affiliation and disaffiliation.

[☆] Early versions of this paper were given at the International Conference on Conversation Analysis at UCLA in July 2014, at the University of Leeds in May 2015, and the International Pragmatics Conference in Antwerp in July 2015. I'd like to thank those audiences, and, in particular, Steve Clayman and Elliott Hoey, for constructive feedback. I'm also very grateful to my editor for this paper, Hiroko Tanaka, for her conscientious support throughout its development.

^{*} Tel.: +44 1206872204; fax: +44 1206873598.

E-mail address: rclift@essex.ac.uk.

Given the common associations of laughter with humour, the use of laughter as an affiliative resource is easily recognizable and has been well documented across a number of contexts (see, e.g. Jefferson et al., 1987; Jefferson, 1979; Glenn, 1991; Holt, 2011). ‘Affiliation’ here is characterized as action that endorses the stance or perspective expressed by a prior speaker. In a characterization that distinguishes ‘alignment’ from ‘affiliation’, Stivers et al. state:

...we conceptualize alignment as the structural level of cooperation and affiliation as the affective level of cooperation (Stivers, 2008). Thus, aligning responses cooperate by facilitating the proposed activity or sequence; accepting the presuppositions and terms of the proposed action or activity; and matching the formal design preference of the turn. By contrast, affiliative responses cooperate at the level of action and affective stance. Thus, affiliative responses are maximally pro-social when they match the prior speaker’s evaluative stance, display empathy and/or cooperate with the preference of the prior action (2011:21).

However, work in CA has also, from its earliest days (see, e.g. Sacks, 1992:12–20),¹ recognized that laughter has a rather more nuanced relationship with the actions it implements (see, e.g. Jefferson, 1974, and the collection in Glenn and Holt, 2013). The distinction between ‘laughing with’ and ‘laughing at’ (Glenn, 1995) is one that captures the ways in which laughter may equally be implicated in disaffiliation – expressing disapproval of, or distance from, another’s perspective – as affiliation.

Both Clayman (1992, 2001) and Romaniuk (2013) have shed light on this disaffiliative use of laughter by examining it in a specific institutional context: the broadcast political news interview, where political positions are assumed, maintained, and defended. In this context, laughter is used, either by the audience or by the interviewee, as a resource to uphold the laugh-producer’s own sharply distinct political perspective from the laugh-target. But, as Abraham’s documented response to God suggests, this practice is a generic one, across interactional contexts; and this paper investigates a number of audio- and video-taped exemplars across both British and American interactional data to explore further the ways in which this use of laughter is mobilized by participants in an episode of interaction. And, as we shall see, in multi-party interaction, while laughter may serve to disaffiliate from one recipient, it may in fact serve to affiliate with another.

The following excerpt² shows one such instance. It is taken from a dinner-time conversation recorded in the early 1970s in the USA. The mother of the family (‘Mom’, l.16) has left the table to fetch ice-cream; the fourteen-year old Virginia uses this absence as an opportunity to attempt to enlist her brother Wesley’s support in securing a raise in her weekly allowance (lls.16–20), a plea that is met, at l.22, with a burst of laughter from Wesley:

(1) I’d do it for you

Virginia, 17:15 (V = Virginia, W = Wesley, Virginia’s brother, P = Prudence (girlfriend/fiancee of Wesley)³)

1 W Where’s your daddy goin’ t’morrah.
2 (2.4)
3 P Oh. (0.6) He’s not goin’ yuh-) `e’s: gonna be (0.3)
4 M? (from distance, but loudly) ([])=
5 P [at a dinner t’morrah night.
6 M =(]]
7 W (oh [I see.]) [(In Canyah?)]
8 V [°Wesley.] [°Wesley.]
9 V [(leaning over table to W, bouncing up and down in her
10 seat, agitating her RH, bringing it up towards her
11 mouth at second ‘Wesley’)
12 P [Mm hm
13 W [(brings eye gaze to V; hands clasped in front of face
14 with elbows on table)
15 (.)

¹ This references the second of Sacks’s topics in his collected lectures, from Fall 1964–Spring 1965: “On suicide threats getting laughed off” (1992:12–20) – an indication of how early on in CA laughter was treated as a topic of investigation.

² All video clips accompanying transcription extracts (that is, all exemplars except for (4)) are available at <http://privatwww.essex.ac.uk/~rclift/>.

³ Since brackets indicate actions (including non-verbal actions in the course of pauses) simultaneous with each other, so the single brackets at lls. 27 and 28 indicate simultaneous actions. The double brackets from lls. 29–31 inclusive thus mark that the actions indicated at lls. 30 and 31 take place in the (0.9) pause at l.29. The triple brackets at lls. 32 and 33 then indicate that Wesley’s action in lls. 33–35 take place in the (0.4) pause marked at l.32.

16 V [°Plea:se try tuh help me talk Mom into't. Please?<I'd=
17 [(V raises LH, extending it out on first 'Plea:se' and
18 then bringing it up towards neckline, then fiddles at
19 neckline till around 1.26)
20 V =do it for you, (holds head cocked to R till 1.25)
21 [(0.4)
22 W [(hands clasped together in front of face, elbows on table,
23 gazing at V)
24 W→ EHHHH! [hih|heh huh| uh! | oh u h huh] (.)ouh
25 (W visibly bursting into laughter, eye-gaze on V)
26 P [Ah | h a h |hah h| uhhuh huhhuh]
27 V [Plea::se.⁴
28 [(V tilting head to L)
29 [[(0.9)
30 ? [[(sniff)
31 P [[ouh .hhh
32 [[[(0.4)
33 [[[(W, smiling, unclasps hands and, as V picks up
34 glass to take a sip, W picks up glass with RH as if
35 to drink)
36 W [eh-uh:: (.) I'll think about it.
37 [(W, glass at lips, as if to drink, moves it away
38 slightly, to talk; at 'I'll think about it' keeps
39 glass suspended just in front of lips; V puts glass down)
40 V [uhh!
41 [(V deflates slightly and tilts head to L)
42 W→ eh huh huh huh .(hm) (raising glass to drink)
43 [(0.5)
44 V [(picking up fork to eat, looking down at plate)
45 V Goh::lly: I'd do it fer y:ou:.=
46 P =How much didj you get in high sch'l.
47 (0.2)
48 W I didn' get an allowance.
49 (0.4)
50 P ^I don't think I did either.

Virginia's attempt to enlist Wesley's help to 'talk Mom into't' (l.16), with both an initial and terminal beseeching 'please', and its annexed pledge of reciprocity, gets, after a brief pause, a burst of laughter from Wesley – and, following him, his girlfriend Prudence.⁴ Sacks, musing on laughter, notes that 'Laughing is the sort of thing that, when it's done it will be heard as tied to the last thing said' (1992:745). In this context, that last thing – a request – as the first pair part of an adjacency pair of course makes immediate compliance the preferred response, such that any other response, or lack thereof, is clearly structurally disaligning and potentially disaffiliative. So Wesley's laughter at this point is interactionally problematic, such that it delays any preferred response. In some observations on adjacency in the course of his lectures, Sacks notes that:

it's one criterion of an utterance being a first pair member that it can be followed with, not only the second pair member but either the second pair member or laughter – or, alternatively, the question "Are you kidding?" or "Are you serious?" And that is to say that the occurrence of that sort of phrase locates for you that you have one of these first pair members having been uttered. For example, a person makes an 'announcement' – "I'm getting married," "I'm getting divorced," "I flunked my course," whatever else – there's an appropriate second to it – "Congratulations," "I'm sorry," whatever else. In alternative to those you can say, "You're kidding." "Are you kidding?" (1992:672)

Abraham's response to God constitutes, in effect, this kind of 'You're kidding' response – in this case, to an informing – and it is this response to a turn not designed to be a so-called 'laughable' (Glenn, 2003), that is examined in what follows.

⁴ Prudence is off-camera to Wesley's right in the accompanying clip.

In the first instance, we investigate the sequential environment of the laugh turn across three initial cases, before considering the 'laughable' turn itself, and then going on to examine cases in which the laughing itself becomes topicalized.

2. The sequential environment of the laugh turn

In the audiovisual data captured in (1) above, there are several noteworthy features. In the first instance, it is clear that Virginia's terminal 'Please?' at l.16 and her subsequent pledge 'I'd do it for you' are produced in the absence of any immediate – and thus preferred – uptake from Wesley in the wake of her request. There is then a pause of four-tenths of a second as Wesley holds his position with his elbows on the table, and his hands laced together in front of his face, looking at Virginia; it is only after this significant delay that he laughs (l.24). Wesley's laughter is thus produced in an environment of dispreference. The laughter has a somewhat explosive, staccato quality, such that what Wesley does might be glossed as bursting into laughter – laughter with which Prudence, off-camera to Wesley's right, also joins in after a beat. Prudence's laughter *with* Wesley and *at* Virginia encapsulates the distinction, evident here, between affiliation and disaffiliation. Virginia does not join in the laughter but repeats her 'Please' at l.27, effectively sequentially deleting the laughter, whereupon Wesley chooses not to address this, but, in a further delay, to reach for his own glass with his right hand. As he moves his glass to his lips, displaying his priority to his drink over responding, he suspends the glass to respond to Virginia (l.36) in a way that is as equivocal as it is non-committal. It is upon this response, 'I'll think about it', that Virginia utters a pained 'uhh!' as she once again slumps her body and tilts her head slightly to the left in a visible deflation (Clift, 2014): a display of exasperation at a thwarted course of action. Virginia's deflation in turn prompts another couple of bursts of laughter from Wesley (l.42).

This sequence thus displays two instances of laugh responses by a participant – Wesley – to actions not, in fact, designed to be laughable: the first in response to a verbal plea; the second to an embodied expression of exasperation. It also shows a laugh response by someone – Prudence – who is not an addressed recipient of the laughter-prompting turn, laughter which simultaneously affiliates with one party (Wesley) and disaffiliates from another (Virginia).

Before investigating in further detail exactly what it is that may prompt the laughter, it may be instructive to examine a couple of other exemplars to understand the sequential contexts in which the laughter is produced. Sacks's observations, cited earlier, about how a 'you're kidding' response may be produced in response to the first part of an adjacency pair are instantiated in, and so endorsed by, Wesley's first burst of laughter. But neither Prudence's laughter, which hearably joins in with Wesley's, rather than being self-initiating, nor Wesley's subsequent laughter, are responses to such initiating actions. Indeed, Wesley's laughter is addressed to the dramatic (and responsive) display of defeat embodied in Virginia's deflation – itself a response to Wesley delayed stalling ('I'll think about it', l.36). So it is evident that responsive laughs are not always responsive solely to first pair parts, something apparent in the following two cases. In both cases, the laughter is produced not by the recipient of the laughable turn, but from an observer.

Excerpt (2) is taken from a corpus of videoed British family interaction.⁵ The mother of the family, Jane, has summoned her children to the dining room (l.1), where she sits at a table, pen in hand, with a diary open in front of her. She projects an inquiry at l.5, '... I just wanna ask you about Saturday'; her daughter Emily undertakes to respond, and the following exchange takes place between Jane and Emily. The laughter from the father of the family, Simon – the analytic focus here – is produced some thirty-five turns later:

(2) Fortieth birthday

C:1, Family 1; J = Jane (mother); S = Simon (father); E = Emily; T = Tom; C = Charlotte (children)⁶

An hour or so prior to this exchange, Jane and Simon had upbraided Emily for not going to work and falsely claiming to be ill. In the following, Jane calls Emily, Tom and Charlotte into the dining room from the kitchen where they have been washing up after dinner:

- 1 J: Ki:ds?
2 (0.6)
3 J: sorry to stop you a minute, can I just speak to you a se:c?
4 (0.4)
5 J: [Come on I just wanna ask you about Saturday:
6 [(J is playing with her ear)

⁵ I am grateful to Dragonfly Productions for permission to use the data excerpts which appear here as (2), (3) and (5).

⁶ It is at this point (before l.11, and the cut to the camera on Emily's face) that the footage (on the basis of Emily's l.11) appears to have been edited.

7 E: [[>What's going on Saturday<
8 [(E and T enter room)
9 (1.2)
10 J: hhhhh.⁷
11 E: Why, [what's going on Saturday nig:ht
12 [(E gazing at J. Slight lateral head shakes)
13 S: (Has['e?)
14 J: [it's my birth- my fortieth bir[tthday
15 (E glances across to right)
16 T: [No:.
17 (0.6)
18 (C and J are sitting at the dining table. C is drawing in a
19 sketchbook. J is fiddling at the back of her neck. S is
20 sitting at a computer in the top RH corner of the room side
21 on to camera.)
22 E: Working.
23 (1)
24 (J is looking straight at E, smoothing hair down on neck with
25 LH, pen in RH resting on an open book on the table)
26 J: Right.
27 (E looks [away to R, biting lower lip)
28 (1.2)
29 J: [An'- (.) An' the other thing, what's happening
30 on Sunday, Simon;
31 (0.2)
32 E: I'm [working.
33 [(E returns gaze to J; purses lips on 'working')
34 (0.4)
35 (J gazes at E with mouth open. J's right hand, holding pen,
36 drops down to table. J's L elbow is on table, with lower arm
37 up; hand goes back to cradle chin. Simon at computer turns to
38 look over right shoulder, then laughs; RH releases mouse, LH
39 on desk in front of computer)
40 S: → heh heh heh heh heh heh [heh heh.hhh
41 [(S raises arms in the air in
42 'surrender' gesture. C is ripping page in book. S returns
43 right hand to mouse. C looks to S then J)
44 J: It's my fortieth birthday [and mother's day
45 (J opens hand that chin was resting on, and spreads fingers
46 of left hand. Both hands outstretched as she says this)
47 (C shifts gaze to E)
48 E: [I tried to get it ↑off
49 (0.3)
50 E: I: tri:ed
51 (J raises eyebrows and shifts gaze away from E; moves LH
52 off table and sits back)
53 C: Are you act[ually joking;
54 E: [I asked her weeks ago:
55 (2.4)
56 [(J puts hands to face to cover it up. S has hand round the
57 [back of J's chair)
58 S: [You a:re a case, Emily honestly.
59 (0.2)
60 S: You're gonna miss your Mum's birthday (.) and Mother's day
61 (E puts hands to face and turns to walk out)

Simon's bellowing laughter at l.40 is accompanied by a dramatic gestural movement – the raising of his arms in the air – and is produced simultaneously with a similarly non-verbal movement from Jane, a visible deflation (Clift, 2014): on this occasion, a drop of her hand an inch or so to the table, a movement as minimal as Simon's is expansive. The simultaneous but sharply distinct non-verbal responses to Emily's 'I'm working' (l.32) are to be understood in the context of the entire sequence initiated by Jane. In the first instance, Jane's assumption that the significance of 'Saturday' (l.5) is recognized is immediately challenged by Emily's next-turn repair initiator (initially l.7, reiterated and expanded in l.11): a clearly dispreferred response. After Jane's clarification in l.14 – the insertion repair only underlining the significance of 'Saturday' ('it's my birth- my fortieth birthday') – Emily produces the single-word response, 'Working' (l.22). By eschewing possible alternative responses, such as a news receipt, account or appreciation, Emily's telegraphic response – in a context in which she had earlier been upbraided by her parents for skipping off work under false pretences – amounts to an egregious affront. However, in the face of this, Jane produces only a neutral and visibly withholding response (l.26). She then addresses Simon, who is behind her to her left, sitting at a computer terminal (l.29): 'An' the other thing, what's happening on Sunday, Simon?'. Although Simon is being addressed, it is Emily who undertakes to respond, once again, in a virtually identical format to her previous response (l.32): 'I'm working'. It is in response to this unyielding, and so hearably insolent, intervention, that, after a brief pause (l.34), Jane (lls.35–39) and Simon (lls.37–43) produce their distinct responses.

The visibility of Jane's response, minimal as it is, is located in her status as next allocated speaker, in both turn- and sequence-organizational terms. What is due next is thus some action from Jane; the dropping of her hand on to the table, however minimal, is therefore particularly salient in enacting a very visible shift of posture. By contrast, the amplitude and volume of Simon's response has its origins in his position hitherto as an overhearer. As Emily produces her response, his bodily and gaze orientation and displayed attentional focus are towards the computer. Upon the completion of her response and after the pause, Simon turns to Emily, establishing eye gaze; his subsequent animated burst of laughter, accompanied by the flinging up of both arms in a studied display of surrender, are designed to draw the attention. As Jane launches a rebuke to Emily, it becomes evident that Simon's dramatic response is clearly bounded: his laughter stops abruptly, he returns his right hand to the mouse, and his attention back to his computer. It is in response to Emily's in these circumstances hearably belated pleas, 'I tried to get it off. . . I tried' (lls.48 and 50), that he then delivers an assessment that idiomatically formulates a negative stance: 'You are a case, Emily, honestly', and then its warrant (l.60): 'you're gonna miss your Mum's birthday and mother's day'. Clearly, then, Simon's dramatic burst of laughter in response to Emily's turn is produced as a display of affiliation with Jane, the primary recipient of Emily's response. In this respect, it bears similarity with Prudence's laughter in (1), used to affiliate with Wesley and against Virginia, although of course in this case Prudence laughs after Wesley himself has started to laugh.

The following exemplar similarly shows two distinct responses to the same turn, with laughter constituting one of these – laughter, moreover, produced by someone who is, once again, not, ostensibly, the recipient of the laughter-source turn. Once again, Emily has been chastised by her parents, this time for her irresponsible behaviour and apparent lack of commitment to looking for full-time work. But at this point, Emily is sitting on her mother's lap, and her parents have been visibly attempting to be supportive rather than confrontational. Simon at lls.1 and 3 makes two suggestions – in the light of Emily's known attachment to nightclub life, hearably sardonic – whereupon at l.8 Jane launches a complaint, the two main charge lists of which are at lls.16–19 and then at lls.22–24. The second of these is an assessment which contrasts her labours, both in the workplace and domestically, with Emily's apparent indolence ('. . . Emily goes out all the time and sleeps', lls.23-4) and is underlined by Simon at l.26: 'Yeah'. Emily does not respond, whereupon Jane produces a hearably closing assessment (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1992) that combines intimacy and rebuke: 'I love you (.) but I am getting fed up with it' (l.28). In the absence of any response from Emily, Jane thereupon pursues one with 'Alright?' (l.33). Emily's response, gazing, not at Jane but at Simon, is the defiantly terse 'Why' (l.35). Just after Simon launches his verbal response with 'Because. . .' addressing Emily's challenge, Jane – not ostensibly the recipient of Emily's gaze, but nonetheless the producer of the turn to which Emily's 'Why' is addressed – produces a burst of laughter (l.37):

(3) Fed Up

C:1; J = Jane (mother); S = Simon (father); E = Emily

```

01 Si:      Get uh job as a waitress in a club
02          (0.6) ((J looks to S and holds gaze))
03 Si:      >become a D:↓J<
04          (3.4) ((S's gaze is directed downwards))
05 Si:      ((clears throat))
06          (1.0)
07 Si:      .hhhh
08 Jan:     we've had this conversation before about [.hhh you know=
09 Em:                                     [ ((sniff))

```


10 Jan: constantly
11 ((S's gaze shifts towards J & E; he moves towards them. S bends
12 down to E on 'you know', kissing the back of her neck, RH on table))
13 goin' ou:t.
14 Si: >((kiss kiss kiss))< >((kiss kiss kiss))<
15 Si: [(Play hard.)
16 Jan: [and I don't know why:: love you think you can just go out [all
17 Jan: thuh ti:me pay
18 ((E wipes eyes with left hand))
19 [get taxis all thuh time and not pay (.) fer your living.
20 Em: [(sniff))
21 ((S looks over to J then begins to stand up))
22 Jan: I am getting a little bit fed up with having to get up n' go
23 t' work, clean the house, do all the washing, while Emily: goes
24 out all thuh time or sleeps
25 (0.2)
26 Si: Yeah.
27 ((E slight shake of head - J is looking straight ahead))
28 Jan: I love you (.) but I am getting fed up with it.
29 ((J is gazing downwards but raises gaze towards E after 'it'
30 with eyebrow flash))
31 (0.2)
32 Si: hhh.
33 Jan: Alright?
34 (0.4)
35 Em: Why.
36 Si: Be[cause you're supposed to contribute you're nineteen=
37 Jan:→ [hehhh. ((J produces a burst of laughter, looks towards S on
38 'supposed'. S is standing up))
39 Si: =years old you're a young woman you've got a jo:b,.hhh n' it is a
40 a [bit like uh hotel that you never pay thuh bill on isn't it;
41 [(J gazes at E with a frown))
42 ((J looks away from E then raises right hand to scratch
43 between eyes on 'never', shuts eyes))
44 (2.0)
45 Em: °>No<°
46 Jan: ↑Nobody lives for free.
47 (0.4)
48 Jan: No one.
49 (3.4)
50 Si: Shall we stop now;
51 ((S looks up))
52 Jan: ↓yeah
53 ((S looks back down))
54 (2.6) ((S raises gaze and holds it through turn))
55 Si: Cuz we've got roast duck for dinner,
56 (5.0)
57 ((E is seen sitting still on J's lap as Jane cuddles her. E
58 wipes forehead with right hand. Noise is heard from kitchen - S
59 leaves the room)

Once again, then, two participants give sharply distinct responses to the same prior turn, this time the laugh response following the launch of a verbal response from a co-participant. While Simon engages with Emily verbally by delivering a clarifying second pair part to her 'Why' ('Because you're supposed to contribute...'), Jane's laugh response constitutes an assessment of it – and, as Simon's verbal elaboration makes clear, a vehemently negative one. Simon's questioning

assessment ('It's a bit like a hotel you never pay the bill on isn't it') and Jane's subsequent closing-implicative adage – 'nobody lives for free...no-one' (lls.46 and 48) subsequently reiterate their joint position.

This latter exemplar shows particularly clearly how a task may be distributed across speakers; here, Simon and Jane collaborate in their censuring of Emily. Nowhere is this more apparent than in lls.33–37, where Emily's 'What' responds to Jane but, in gazing at Simon, selects him as next speaker; in her responsive laugh, Jane is neither wholly overhearer in the sense that Prudence is in (1), but nor indeed is she wholly recipient, like Wesley; by the same token, she is also potentially both.⁷

3. The characteristics of the 'laughable' turn

In each of the three cases we have seen, what happens subsequent to the laughter makes very evident that it constitutes an emphatically negative assessment of the prior turn: in (1) Virginia's deflated responses, and in (2) and (3) the subsequent verbal elaborations. In (2) this consists of Jane's rebuke 'It's my fortieth birthday and mother's day' and Simon's later assessment ('You are a case, Emily'), and in (3) Simon's explicit admonishment 'You're supposed to contribute' and the implicit assessments 'you're nineteen years old, you're a young woman, you've got a job...'. In each case, the laugh responses draw attention to the prior turns as in some sense absurd; indeed, in the non-technical sense of the word, laughable or risible. Thus Wesley's laugh prompts us to examine the characteristics of Virginia's turn for just such absurdity. Virginia's pleading – the laughter-source or 'laughable' turn – is a full-on, guns blazing form of request; with its buttressing 'please's and its earnest invoking of the possibility of reciprocity, it prompts the laugh from Wesley and again at l.39, constructing Virginia's deflated response as an overly dramatic reaction to his stalling. In examining turns designed to be laughables, Holt characterizes them as being 'in some sense, dramatic, exaggerated or 'overdone' (2011:399). Of course, by contrast, the exemplars examined here are not so designed; but the laughs that they do prompt draw attention to their exaggerated characteristics, whether over-earnestness in (1), brazenness and insolence in (2), and apparent obtuseness in (3) – not to mention the apparently unfeasible suggestion put by God to Abraham. In all cases, the laughter does a display of incredulity.⁸

These exemplars embody emphatically negative assessments of the prior turn that can be done by anyone, not just the ostensible recipient, but also, *pace* Sacks, in response to potentially any turn – while in the prompting turns in (1) and (3) are first pair parts, Emily's in (2) is a second pair part. And in the following exemplar, the prompting turn is neither a first nor second pair part, but an assessment⁹; a speaker in a radio interview here uses laughter to display a highly disaffiliative stance

⁷ Clayman (1992), examining audience behaviour during the 1988 U.S. Presidential debates, shows how the audience may collectively disaffiliate with an interviewee by means of laughter. In the following instance, a journalist interviewing Presidential candidate George Bush details the latter's opposition to abortion (lls. 1–2), notes his support for a constitutional amendment to outlaw it (lls. 3–4), and then asks whether women who have abortions and doctors who perform them should go to jail (lls. 5–9). Given the strong preference, in the format of the question, for an affirmative response, Bush's hearable evasiveness in the launch of his response prompts audience laughter (l.12) at the moment at which Bush can be judged to have responded inadequately:

(Clayman, 1992:49; JRN = Journalist; GB = Presidential Candidate, George Bush Sr.; AUD = Audience).

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1 JRN: ..You now say that you support abortion only in cases
2 of rape, .h incest, or: threat to a mother's li:fe,
3 .hh and you also support a constitutional amendment
4 (.) that if ratifi:ed .hh would outlaw most abortions.
5 .hh But if abortions were to become illegal again:,
6 .hh do you think that the women who defy the law:,
7 .hh and have them anyway:, as they did before it- (.)
8 w:as (0.2) okayed by the Supreme Court, (.) and the
9 doctors who perform them, .hh should go to jail.
10 GB .hh I- I haven't sorted out thuh penalties. But I do
11 know:: (0.7) [I do know]
12 AUD→ [h-h-h-h-h]hhhh[hhhhhhhhhh (2.5)]
13 GB [that I opPOSE::] a bortion.
14 .hh an' I favor adoption...
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⁸ The association of incredulity with a laugh response is neatly captured in the news headlines below. The phrase 'Don't make me laugh' suggests a reactive laugh being suppressed in the face of provocation – the provocation in these particular cases being a claim to a political ideal when the reality falls absurdly short. The claim itself is represented by the so-called 'rhetorical question' format (on such unanswerable questions, see Heinemann, 2008): by implication, a next-turn repair initiator implicating disagreement (Schegloff, 1979):

- 'Democracy? Don't make me laugh' (Robin Page, *Daily Mail*, 26 April, 2013).
- 'Power to the People? Don't make me laugh' (D.J. Taylor, *The Independent*, 3 November, 2013).
- 'Open government?' Don't make me laugh' (Nick Cohen, *The Guardian*, 28 September, 2013).

⁹ Stivers and Rossano (2010) discuss the extent to which first position assessments make responses conditionally relevant.

towards another speaker's claim. The context is the run-up to the Scottish referendum, in September 2014, regarding whether Scotland should separate from the rest of the United Kingdom. The journalist Edward Stourton is interviewing James Dornan, the Scottish National Party MSP, by phone; and in the studio with Stourton is Thomas Docherty MP, the Labour MP for the Scottish constituency of Dunfermline. Docherty, in lls. 13–14, makes a negative assessment in the form of a personal attack on Dornan: 'And the problem with James (.) it's all about divisiveness...'. As Docherty continues his turn, Dornan can be heard producing a few beats of laughter (l. 16), to which the host, Stourton, at l. 19 explicitly draws attention as a means of bringing Dornan back into the exchange, characterizing it (itself with infiltrated laughter) as 'harrumphing':

(4) Harrumphing

(BBC Radio 4, 'The World at One', 20th July, 2014. TD = Thomas Docherty, Labour MP; JD = James Dornan, MSP; ES = Edward Stourton, interviewer. Alex Salmond, Scotland's First Minister, has been booed at the launch of a new ship by the Queen. Dornan has accused Docherty of being misleading with respect to his portrayal of what will happen to jobs if Scotland votes to separate from the UK):

1 TD ...>first of all,< I didn't- I didn't n: (.) mislead people.
2 >Complex warships are not- and never built (.) .h in a
3 foreign country, these are- these are actually the
4 [TANKers:. And if-=
5 JD [HHHAAWWHH
6 TD =if James thinks (.) that [somehow Scotland are going to=
7 JD [(hh!)
8 TD compete with South Korea, then he's kidding on people. I'm
9 not- [I'm not thinkin- I'm British James, and Scottish.=
10 JD [.pt
11 TD =And there's nothing wrong with saying .h those workers in
12 Portsmouth and Plymouth and Barrow (.) who by the by helped
13 to build those carriers (.) do a fantastic job as well. And
14 the problem with James (.) it's all about divisiveness.
15 And the fact [that workers booed Alex [Salmond (.) they=
16 JD→ [Hehehehe [Heh
17 TD =don't [like Alex Salmond.
18 ES [Alright Ale-
19 ES→ I can- I can hear James Dornan harrumphing, let's g(h)ive
20 him a ch(h)[a(h)nche to come back.
21 JD→ [fYes, I- I wasn't harrumphing, I was
22 laugh[ing at his ludicrous comments. Alex Salmond may well=
22 ES [Well, we-
23 JD = have been booed...

Stourton's gloss (l. 19) of what is being done in l. 16 as 'harrumphing' – an audible display of pique or indignation – is smilingly rejected by Dornan himself, who proposes the alternative characterization 'I was laughing at his ludicrous comments' (lls. 21–22). Characterizing oneself as 'laughing' imports a degree of levity that is absent from the irritated grievance conveyed by 'harrumphing', and the assessment item 'ludicrous' neatly grounds the laughter in its warrant. In the previous exemplars, taken from mundane interaction, laughter is used not only to target a prior turn as worthy of ridicule, but also to affiliate with another against the ridiculed party. In this case, similarly, the laughter is deployed explicitly – in this case, audibly – to register a vehemently negative stance with respect to the turn-in-progress; but in an institutional context where interviewees are selected by reference to their sharply distinct, not to say explicitly counterpositional, political stances, and where the interviewer standardly maintains a position of studied neutrality, the laughter is hearable as produced solely on the part of, and upholding the stance of, the producer (see also Romaniuk's (2013) exemplars in a U.S. context).¹⁰ Given that one task of

¹⁰ That laughing is potentially a resource for ridicule – again, here, in a political context – and that it is salient enough to be reported as such, is captured in the news headline below. In McConnell's subsequent reported gloss of what he did ('He wasn't trying to embarrass Geithner... only responding candidly to his one-sided plan...') there is an echo of Simon's assessment to Emily in (2), 'You are a case, Emily, honestly' (l. 58) – where appeals to candidness or honesty figure in accounts for the laughter:

the interviewer is to formulate the stance of the interviewee (Clayman and Heritage, 2010), evidence of that stance (albeit in this case non-verbalized) provides the interviewer with a resource for allocating the next turn to the laugh producer while indicating his oppositional stance. And the laugh producer is thus handed the floor and uses it as an opportunity to deliver his vehemently negative assessment.

4. Laughter as topic-implicative

The fact that the laughter in (4) becomes topicalized, and indeed named, is thus attributable, at least in part, to the institutionality of the context; it is clearly a resource for the interviewer mediating between two counterposed views whose task it is to give equal airtime to both.¹¹ The following is another case from a broadcast political interview, which might suggest that the topicalisation and naming of laughter as the prior action is a useful vehicle for the explicit assertion of a political position. It is taken from a radio interview with the leader of the Scottish Labour Party, Jim Murphy, in the weeks before the UK general election of 2015. There has been much talk of a possible coalition between the opposition Labour Party and the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) if there is a hung parliament. The SNP have been making advances to the Labour Party; the Labour Party have resisted. The interviewer, Martha Kearney, has noted the enhanced approval ratings of the SNP leader, Nicola Sturgeon, due to appear the next day on a hustings with the Labour leader, Ed Miliband. She suggests that ‘it has become hard for you to attack Nicola Sturgeon personally as she seems to have become the nation’s sweetheart’. Murphy, in response, says he doesn’t attack anyone personally; the end of his response here is at l.1:

(5) Advice to Ed Miliband

(BBC Radio 4 ‘World at One’ 15th April 2015. JM = Jim Murphy, leader of the Scottish Labour Party; MK = Martha Kearney, interviewer)

1 JM ...my view is, I play the ball rather than the person.
2 MK So what advice would you give to Ed Miliband because
3 tomorrow he’s going head to head with Nicola Sturgeon
4 =other leaders in the last of the: [(.) tee vee=
5 JM → [Hehhehehehe=
6 MK [debates (.) What advice have you given him on how he=
7 JM → [he .HH .HH hehe hehehe heh s-(heh) so-(heh) HEH
8 MK =[should approach that;?
9 JM £Sorry I’m laughing bec(h)ause .hh the (h)idea that I
10 would then: (.) share with your listeners any advice I
11 would give to Ed Miliband I’m not sure .h I’m not sure
12 any- I- as the leader of the Scottish Labour Party I
13 don’t appreciate public advice and I’m sure Ed (wouldn’t
14 (eith-) look wha- Ed- Ed will be himself.£ Ed will be:
15 someone who is passionate and fiery...

The interviewer at l.2 poses the question of what advice Murphy would give to the Labour leader; at l.5 Murphy starts to laugh in overlap with the interviewer’s ongoing turn, a laugh that becomes progressively more audible and dramatic. Perhaps because of the overlapping laughter as she comes to the end of her question at l.5–6 (‘...teevee debates’), the interviewer reformulates her question, ‘What advice have you given him on how he should approach that?’ (ll.6–8). Murphy continues to laugh throughout this reformulated question. Upon the end of the question, Murphy does not address

McConnell ‘Burst Into Laughter’ as Geithner Outlined Obama’s Plan

Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, says he “burst into laughter” Thursday when Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner outlined the administration proposal for averting the fiscal cliff. He wasn’t trying to embarrass Geithner, McConnell says, only responding candidly to his one-sided plan, explicit on tax increases, vague on spending cuts.

Geithner’s visit to his office left McConnell discouraged about reaching a “balanced” deal on tax hikes and spending reductions designed to prevent a shock to the economy in January. “Nothing good is happening” in the negotiations, McConnell says, because of Obama’s insistence on tax rate hikes for the wealthy but unwillingness to embrace serious spending cuts. (Fred Barnes, *The Weekly Standard*, November 29, 2012).

¹¹ However, in none of Clayman’s (1992) or Romaniuk’s (2013) exemplars from broadcast interviews is the laughter topicalised, so the institutionality of the context may facilitate topicalisation, without rendering it inevitable.

(6) The plant

C1; J = Jane (mother); S = Simon (father); E = Emily. 'Jessica' (l.70) is Emily's sister. All are standing.

1 S: Em.
2 (1.0)
3 S: Can we just cut to the chase here.
4 (1.0)
5 S: Right?
6 S: We know (0.5) hello:?
7 (*S's gaze moves repeatedly from E's mobile phone to*
8 *E's face; S is holding a loaded tray with both hands*)
9 E: Nyeah
10 (.)
11 S: [Am >I, I<, >talking to you, or are you
12 having it, you< mobile phone.
13 E: [Actually I was already on my phone before talking=
14 [(*E turns head towards J, who is looking at her*)
15 E: =to you, <so.> (*turns head towards S, looking*
16 *at him*)
17 (5.0)
18 S: ↑Why do we always have to do it the hard way.
19 (*S looks at E, R hand making slight up-and-down*
20 *movements; E looking down at her arm*)
21 (.)
22 E: .HHH HHH
23 (*E slumps*)
24 (.)
25 S: [You're gonna break the plant that you're leaning=
26 [(*Points towards plant with right hand, extending palm*)
27 S: =against.
28 E: [°Wha°? (.) I'm not
29 E: [(*E turns head and looks at plant; the rest of her*
30 *body shifts slightly away from plant; after "I'm not",*
31 *returns head to original position*)
32 (0.5)
33 J: → [Mh.hehh
34 [(*J standing with her arms crossed, turns head to L*
35 *and shifts weight to L leg, stepping to L*)
36 S: [You're not leaning against it, but you are. I mean-
37 [(*S holding extended arm with palm out, J puts R hand*
38 *on her neck*)
39 S: So it's [moving-
40 E: [(*E turns gaze to J*)So what's funny
41 S: [[Wl- cos you are leaning agai-
42 S: [[(*S looks at J at 'Wl' then turns back to E on 'are' with*
43 *a sharp beat of his RH down*)
44 (.)
45 E: [What's funny °in here°
46 [(*S puts hand down*)
47 J: [[Don't start with me (.) Don't start with me. And=
48 [[*J has R hand up to R side of neck, L hand holding*
pad against stomach; shaking her head as she says
'Don't'; moves forward on 'And' towards E

49 J: =don't start being aggressive towards me [Emily.
50 [(S. moves
51 towards E, opening mouth to speak)
52 (.)
53 J: [Thank you
54 [(S, eyes closed, turns towards J, mouth still open;
55 extends L hand towards J as if to stop her speaking as
56 she says 'I'm laughing')
57 J: [.hhh I'm laughing, because you're saying you're not=
58 [(J extends R forearm, palm out pointing towards E)
59 J: =[[leaning against it when you clearly are.
60 [[(J holds forearm extended, elbow bent, palm up,
61 emphatic beats on 'clearly' and 'are'. Mouth held open
62 in grimace)
63 (1)
64 S: Em
65 [(1)
66 [(J holds forearm and palm out)
67 (0.4)
68 [(E's mobile starts to ring))
69 [(J closes mouth, leans chin against R fist)
70 E: That's Jessica

Jane's laughter here at l.33 – produced, as in the other conversational contexts, after a pause – is not the kind of full-throated, animated laughter produced by Wesley in (1) and Simon in (2) but more like her own response in (3): an audible burst of exhalation, with her mouth in a smile; something that might be glossable evaluatively as a snort of derision. In combination with this laugh, she turns her body and head to the left, away from Emily, as Simon simultaneously engages with her denial verbally, pointing out the inherent contradiction of her claim, grounded in the visible evidence: 'You're not leaning against it, but you are. I mean- so it's moving' (lls.36–9). Intercepting this turn at the point at which Simon calls attention to the evidence belying her claim, Emily, picking up on Jane's laughter, and visibly disattending Simon, challenges Jane: 'So what's funny?'. Simon launches a clarification that is hearably addressed to Emily's query and insists, by means of its contrastive stress ('...you are leaning agai-...') and identical format, on the essential correctness of his earlier claim at l.36 (Schegloff, 1987). But Emily, disattending Simon's turn and gazing at Jane, reissues her earlier challenge, only minimally expanded: 'So what's funny^oin here^o'. Instead of addressing the substance of the inquiry, Jane responds to the challenge, issuing a rebuke: 'Don't start with me. Don't start with me. And don't start being aggressive towards me Emily' (lls.45–9) with its grimly sardonic appended 'Thank you' (l.53). Having responded to the challenge implicit in Emily's question, she then addresses the substance of the question with an account, reiterating Simon's position, that draws attention to the flat out contradiction displayed in Emily's conduct (lls.57–9): 'I'm laughing because you're saying you're not leaning against it when you clearly are'. In doing so, Jane treats as entirely warrantable and defensible the fact that she should laugh as a response to Emily's turn, which she formulates as literally – once again, in the non-technical, folk sense of the term – laughable or risible. Jane's account here indeed reclaims the term 'laughable' for such purposes, and, in drawing attention to the illogicality of Emily's behaviour, constitutes another element of the ongoing reproof – one in which the parents, once again, collaborate against their daughter.

On the face of it, Jane's laugh response is, compared to the expansiveness of Wesley in (1) and Simon in (2), minimal in nature. That her laugh should become topicalized, like that in (4) and (5), and unlike theirs, thus suggests that whether such responses become interactionally salient has less to do with their intrinsic articulatory and phonetic features than their status as a resource for participants. So, as we have seen, what the interviewee Dorman subsequently glosses as 'laughing' in (4) is explicitly picked up by the interviewer Stourton as 'harrumphing' as a means of allocating the next turn to him; in (5) Murphy uses his expansive laughter, produced after the question and in overlap with rest of the questioner's turn, as a means of displaying stance and building off it an assessment. In the same way, Emily's challenge to Jane with 'So what's funny' makes it possible for her to disattend – indeed sequentially delete – Simon's prior complaint. In this respect, Sacks's suggestion that sequentially inappropriate laugh responses always demand accounts appears to overgeneralize:

'It will always be heard as that, such that if you laugh after the next utterance, then, if that utterance didn't have laughter as one of the alternative appropriate next actions, people will ask why you're laughing, assuming that you're laughing at that one, and you have to name the utterance you're laughing at and, e.g., indicate that you just

now got it, etc. And if there was nothing available that people figured to be laughable at, and you laughed, then they would take it that something needed accounting for’ (1992:746).

Certainly, in (1), Virginia does not demand, nor Wesley provide, an account for his laughter, and in (2) and (3), while subsequent talk might make evident what prompted the laugh responses, it is only in (4) and (5) that the laughter becomes topicalized because it is a resource, either for its producer (in the former case) or its target (in the latter). These two final instances thus appear to underwrite the findings, in a somewhat different domain, of [Local and Walker \(2008:740\)](#), who establish that explicit lexical formulations of stance and affect (e.g. ‘you sound tired/happy’) are not necessarily straightforward indicators of the locus of ‘affect phonetics’ but rather an interactional resource for prompting a co-participant to talk about their state. Whether or not a laugh response is topicalized is thus down to indigenous features of the talk itself, rather than any intrinsic articulatory characteristics of the laughter.

5. Conclusion: laughter in affiliation and disaffiliation

‘...laughing is the most widely occurrent sort of thing which one can do without regard to ‘one party at a time’’ ([Sacks, 1992:745](#))

We have seen, across a variety of contexts, a number of instances where a party to interaction constructs a prior action as risible or preposterous by means of laughter – as literally ‘laughable’; the practice of laughing in such contexts does an emphatic display of incredulity or disbelief. Sacks’s observations on laughter appear to assume that such a practice occurs in a particular sequential position (following the first-pair parts of adjacency pairs) and involving particular parties (the recipient of the so-called ‘laughable’ turn). But the data examined here suggest a rather more complex picture: firstly, that *any* action may be a potential target of laughter; and secondly, that the laughter may, and indeed in the current data overwhelmingly does, come from a party *other* than the recipient of the laughable, and, in certain contexts, may do a display of affiliation with the recipient of the laughable.

Examining the excerpts as a collection yields the schema below in [Table 1](#), in which the laughable, produced by speaker A addressing speaker B, occurs in Position 1; this may be a complete turn, or may, as in exemplars (4) and (5), be a TCU produced as part of a multiunit turn by speaker A. It is then followed by a pause (Position 2). As [Sacks \(1974\)](#) notes, delayed laughter is potentially disaffiliative, so the laughter is produced in an already disaffiliative environment. While the transcripts of the conversational exchanges show very clearly that there is a pause between the prompting turn and the laughter, this is less immediately apparent in extracts (4) and (5), where the speaker of the laughable TCU continues speaking. However, in (4) it is some way into Speaker A’s next TCU (apparent from the overlap at lls.15 and 16) that the laugh producer starts to laugh, so clearly there is in this context also some delay between the prompting turn and the laugh response. The same positioning is apparent in extract (5), where speaker B starts his laughter some way into A’s question, and continues laughing throughout the rest of it. Position 3 in the schema below constitutes the responsive laughter:

Only two of the cases show speaker B – the ostensible recipient of the laughable turn – responding with laughter. This is clearly explicable in the case of extract (5), where there are only two parties to the interaction, interviewer and interviewee. In the other cases, there are three co-present participants, and so extract (1), in which Wesley (speaker B in the schema above) laughs directly at Virginia in response to her plea, is, in the context of this collection, an exception. The disaffiliative character of the laughter in this case – Wesley laughing *at* Virginia – is particularly explicit because the laughter is produced by Wesley as the first response to Virginia’s plea to him, providing a resource for him to delay any preferred response to her.

Table 1
Sequential organization of incredulous laughter.

Position 1 ‘Laughable’ TCU/turn Speaker A	Pos. 2 Pause	Position 3	
		Laughter	
		Speaker B	Speaker C
1. Please try to help me talk Mom into it, please? I’d do it for you	√	√	√
2. I’m working	√		√
3. Why	√		√
4. The problem with James (.) it’s all about divisiveness	√		√
5. What advice would you give to Ed Miliband	√	√	
6. What? I’m not	√		√

In all of the other cases, it is not the ostensible addressee of the laughable turn, speaker B, who laughs, but speaker C. This is the case in exemplar (4), the broadcast political interview; once again, the disaffiliative nature of the laughter is explicit, and moreover, glossed (by speaker B as ‘harrumphing’) and accounted for by speaker C. In the context of mundane conversation, it is clear that disaffiliative laughter can be used by speaker C to affiliate with speaker B against speaker A; not only in cases when speaker B is already laughing (as when Prudence, in (1), joins in to laugh *with* Wesley at Virginia), but also in those cases (2), (3) and (6), in which speaker C’s laughter provides an alternative response to the laughable turn, at the same time as speaker B engages with it by different means (in (2) non-verbally, in (3) and (6) verbally, with sequentially appropriate nexts).

In this respect, speaker C’s self-selection with a laugh response shows how a single action may be both affiliative *and* disaffiliative. As such, it brings sharply into focus Goffman’s (1981) critique of a traditional dyadic model of interaction. In their subsequent refinement of Goffman’s approach to participation status, Goodwin and Goodwin observe that:

... the act of speaking always emerges within complex contextual configurations that can encompass a range of quite diverse phenomena. These include structurally different kinds of actors using the semiotic resources provided by their bodies to construct a range of relevant displays about orientation toward others and the actions in progress, the larger activities that local events are embedded within, past and anticipated encounters, structure in the environment, etc. . . (2004:239).

The displays of affiliation, and their opposites, made possible by responsive laughter from a non-addressed recipient, also illuminate the extent to which laughter can be used to do identity work. Most clearly in these data excerpts, the work of co-parenting is visible in the laugh responses of Simon and Jane in (2), (3) and (6) as they collaborate to sanction Emily for her conduct; laughter is used on each occasion by the non-addressed parent to affiliate with the other in the face of a response from their daughter which is thereby constructed as preposterous.

That such expressive, and in some cases, vehement displays of affect and emotion between family members constitute the majority of exemplars in the current collection is perhaps unsurprising (see also Clift, 2014, for another such case). Parsons, examining modern professional behaviour, in an implicit contrast with mundane conversation, claims that “affective neutrality” is a key element (1951; see also Sorjonen and Peräkylä, 2012:11). However, as we have seen, some professional domains, such as the broadcast political interview, are characterized by stances that are explicitly counterpositional, with the result that, as in extracts (4) and (5), affect may be given clear – and elaborated – expression, and, indeed, as in this particular case, encouraged.

These affective displays clearly vary in intensity, from the dramatic display by Simon in (2) to Jane’s more fleeting laugh in (6). But, as we have seen, there is no apparent correlation between the intensity of the laugh response and its sequelae; whether or not it becomes topicalized is ultimately down to interactional factors unconnected with its inherent articulatory or acoustic properties. But, whether or not an incredulous laugh on any given occasion becomes topicalized or not, it is evident that here is an interactional practice that is clearly registered. And, as Genesis shows, Abraham’s laugh is one with enduring salience in Judeo-Christian culture. Indeed, its significance is such that Abraham’s response to God is captured in the name he gave his son; for the meaning of ‘Isaac’ is: ‘he laughed’.

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