Introduction

Those who attempt scholarly works about laughter or humor often begin with an apology responding to one of two sorts of complaints. The first is that laughter is trivial, unimportant, associated with children and with momentary diversions from the more serious, important business of (adult) human life; therefore, it hardly seems worth serious scholarly investigation. The second is that, even if one grants the potential importance of studying laughter, one kills the joy in the subject matter by analyzing something so natural and spontaneous, perhaps akin to dissecting fish in an attempt to understand the way they swim in streams. I will not begin this book by making such apologies. The defenses they might generate, however, are worth noting. Briefly, for those who might wonder, the following assertions underlie this study of human laughter in interaction. In its ability to display affiliation, friendliness, or even intimacy, laughter plays an important role in the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. It can also serve to mock, deride, and belittle others, when it is the laughter of cruelty and triumph. We laugh accompanying and responsive to all sorts of talk and actions: often but not always as a response to humor, but also when we feel nervous or simply when others are laughing. Laughter has been part of the human communicative repertoire for a very long time, probably even predating speech, and our higher primate cousins also enact behaviors that look and sound like laughter and serve similar purposes. It appears to be universal in form and function across diverse human languages and cultures. Plenty of evidence suggests that plenty of laughter provides significant physical and psychological benefits that contribute to individual well-being.

Laughter, then, is important. It is also study-able. Contrary to some popular notions, we humans do not laugh uncontrollably or randomly. Rather, transcription and analysis of everyday interaction reveal that people laugh in systematic, sequentially, and socially organized patterns. Laughing is finely coordinated with speech and with various social activities. Through laughing, and laughing together, we contribute to the ongoing creation, maintenance, and termination of interpersonal relationships. We also display, read, and negotiate identity. In short, the careful study of human laughter reveals much about its forms, functions, and uses, and such study reveals much about human communication in all its facets.

The research reported in this book follows methods of an empirical, inductive, descriptive research tradition known as conversation analysis (CA). With intellectual ancestry in phenomenology, born from the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel and influenced by the micro-sociology of Erving Goffman, CA concerns the description and interpretation of peoples' methods for organizing their social interactions. Conversation analysts study recordings of naturalistic interactions, create detailed transcripts which attend to features of sequential organization, identify particular phenomena, and provide analysis of how those phenomena work situated in local contexts. Within CA research, numerous articles, papers and monographs over the past twenty-five years have described various aspects of the sequential organization of laughter in interaction (Glenn, 1987, 1989, 1989a, 1990, 1992; Glenn, 1995; Glenn, Hoffman, and Hopper, 1996; Haakana 1999; Hopper and Glenn, 1994; Jefferson, n.d., 1972, 1974, and 1979, 1984, 1985, 1994; Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff, 1977, 1987; Sacks, 1992, vol. 1, 671–672) . These articles are dispersed among various journals and edited books. One purpose of this book is to provide comprehensive review of CA research on laughter, from the 1970s to the present.

Plan of the book and preview of chapters

Chapter 1 leads to a rationale for a social interactional approach to laughter via a brief critical overview of the diverse writings on the subject. Physical approaches treat laughter as natural, instinctual, common in humans and primates; such approaches feature scientific description of laughter as vocal and visual behavior. Psychological

approaches treat laughter as the product of external stimuli plus mental mechanisms and seek to identify variables in both domains. Included here are theories about why we laugh, sometimes framed as what makes humor. Social approaches regard laughter as fundamentally located between people and strive to identify how such factors as presence and behavior of others, role, and context influence laughing. Still, laughter tends to get treated as a passively produced, dependent variable. An alternative view put forward treats people as rule-orienting social beings who actively produce laughter at particular moments in order to accomplish particular ends. Much remains to be learned about how we do laughter in everyday life and how laughter does us. By this (perhaps strange) use of the verb "do" I mean to suggest that people produce laughter, like we do all aspects of communication, in orderly and patterned ways. Furthermore, as we do laughter, it "does" us: laughing contributes to the ongoing creation of meaning, self, relationship, society, and culture. The study of laughter-in-interaction yields surprisingly robust and compelling findings about these processes.

Chapter 2 responds to the call issued in Chapter 1 for a social interactional approach by introducing CA as a research method and some of the initial findings about laughter drawn from close attention to details of recorded and transcribed interactions. In a brief overview I discuss theoretical assumptions and research procedures followed in CA. The transcription of naturally occurring interaction that is central to CA procedures makes available for study the systematic features of laughter. A review of early CA research on laughter, primarily that by Gail Jefferson, presents initial observations and terminology for describing laughter. The chapter closes with a discussion of how laughter coordinates with speech and with other laughter.

The coordination of one person's laughter with another's leads us to a consideration of *shared* laughter in Chapter 3. The sharing of laughter with others indicates affiliation, an alignment of perspectives, and perhaps even celebration. Jefferson first observed that much shared laughter comes about not through simultaneous onset but through a sequence of one person laughing first in a way which invites another to laugh along. First laughs occur within speech or following the completion of an utterance. Recipients respond with laughter, thus accepting the "invitation" and co-initiating shared

laughter; with silence, which invites pursuit of shared laughter; or with serious talk on topic, thereby declining the invitation to laugh. Brief laugh particles and smiles sometimes serve as mid-points between accepting and declining a laugh invitation, and data from institutional interactions point to ways in which people orient to certain roles and situations by limiting their laugh responses. Furthermore, in certain contexts a first laugh routinely gets treated not as inviting other to laugh along but as displaying the speaker's orientation towards the talk-in-progress. In these and other ways, the placement of laughs shows sensitivity to the sequential environments in which they occur.

Much of the early CA research on laughter relied on audio recordings as primary data, and claims were limited to aural features. A next section of this chapter extends earlier findings by considering visual cueing of shared laughter. Smiles can operate as milder alternatives to laugh invitations, when they appear in slots where second laughs might occur. Furthermore, smiling and establishing mutual eye gaze can work to create an environment ripe for beginning shared laughter. In these and other ways examination of video materials enriches understandings of laughter in interaction and renders the picture more complex. The final section of this chapter considers how people continue laughing together once they have started. As with beginnings, extensions do not just happen automatically; people must create them, and there are methodical procedures for doing so. These include extending laugh units themselves; extending reference(s) to a single laughable; and extending a shared laughter episode by generating next-in-a-series laughable(s). Through such techniques, a single moment of shared laughter may evolve into a prolonged, communal laughing together.

Chapter 4 raises the question of who laughs first. Laughs generally have a clear referent (the laughable), and ownership or responsibility for the laughable proves a social feature of some importance. A first laugh by the person who also produces the laughable offers quite different interactional possibilities than does first laugh from someone else hearing/perceiving the laughable. The latter situation may involve teasing or laughing *at*. Whether the current speaker laughs first reflects an orientation to the number of parties in the interaction. In two-party shared laughter, commonly the current speaker laughs first. In multi-party instances, shared laughter is more

likely to begin with someone else proffering first laugh. Reasons for this and implications of these differences provide the focus for this chapter. The argument is developed that laughing or not laughing, first or following, provide ways for participants to align themselves in respect to the laughable and to each other.

Issues of alignment remain the focus in Chapter 5, as analysis increasingly shifts from central concern with how people organize laughter to what people do through and with the organization of laughter in interaction. Laughter can bring people together, but it can also provide a way for people to show disaffiliation, superiority, or disdain towards others. The terms *laughing with* and *laughing at* reflect these different possibilities. Four keys appear pertinent to how people negotiate whether one's laughter is *with* or *at* another: the nature of the laughable, (who produces) the first laugh, (presence or absence of) a second laugh, and (possible) subsequent talk on topic. Negotiating these matters is emergent and subject to redefinition, however, and the chapter closes with case studies of people transforming a *laughing at* environment to *laughing with*, and vice versa.

The fact that laughter plays a part in displaying affiliation or disaffiliation leads to a broader consideration of its potential contributions to creating, maintaining, and transforming interpersonal relationships and facets of individual identity. Chapter 6 explores how laughter contributes to interactional *intimacy*, treated here not as a static or stable feature of relationship but as emergently displayed at particular moments. The analysis also shows how laughter contributes to *play* in conversation. The treatment of play here draws on frame theories developed by Bateson and Goffman regarding play as a metacommunicative frame created, maintained, and terminated through particular keys, sometimes present and sometimes taken-for-granted. A case study shows how a young woman and man laugh their way through talk which allows them to tease, flirt, play, and suggest (but ultimately back away from) displayed relational intimacy. *Laughing along* implicates participants in activities such as teasing or using improprietous language. Recipients may also *resist* through their laughter. A case study shows how such resistance gets accomplished. Just as laughter provides a resource for working through issues of relationship, it also provides a resource for displaying and negotiating facets of individual identity.

One such facet, gender, provides the focus for a closing section to Chapter 6. A common assumption exists that women laugh more in response to men's laughables than do men to women's. Such a trend gets interpreted in light of claims that women orient more to politeness and do more of the "work" of conversation, whereas men orient more to status and holding the floor (as in joke telling). Empirically demonstrating the relevance of gender (or any other particular feature of context) to the organization of interaction requires documenting participant orientation to it. Evidence for such an orientation may appear in the choice to laugh or not, length and placement of laughs, and more. The attempt to find such a link raises substantive questions about gender and communication and methodological questions about how we may account for the influence of context in talk-in-interaction.

Chapter 7 offers concluding commentary and suggestions for future research. Following review of major findings, I make connections to related research agendas. I close the book with consideration of what "practical applications" might be extractable from the research presented herein.

1

Towards a social interactional approach to laughter

This book is about laughter as a part of everyday human communication. The central focus of subsequent chapters concerns sequential organization of laughter in interaction, what people do with and through laughter, and the ways laughter plays a part in constituting identities and relationships. These topics foreground laughter as communication and as fundamentally social. They represent a shift in emphasis from previous research that has given greater emphasis to its physical, biological, philosophical, and psychological dimensions. Specifically, this book addresses three general questions:

> How do people accomplish laugher in everyday interaction? That is, how is laughter organized, produced, and interpreted?
> How do people laugh together? How is shared laughter brought about, maintained, or closed?
> What do people accomplish through laughter in interaction?

These questions represent something of a departure from much previous research on laughter. However, they reflect grounding in over twenty-five years of conversation analytic investigations into the sequential organization and interactional workings of everyday laughter, and those materials are reviewed in detail beginning in Chapter 2. In this chapter I provide an overview of some ways laughter has been regarded and studied, thereby positioning this book as building on, and to some extent contrasting with, what has gone before. The familiar but enigmatic phenomenon of laughter has long drawn the fascination and interest of scholars of nearly every academic discipline (for other related reviews, see Monro, 1963; Hertzler, 1970; Goldstein and McGhee, 1972; Holland, 1982;

Morreall, 1983; Zijderveld, 1983; Norrick, 1993; Foot, 1997; and Provine, 2000). Although we tend to think of it as a unitary concept, the term laughter in fact covers a wide variety of behaviors, manifested in different sights and sounds, occasioned by diverse stimuli, and contributing in a multitude of ways to human interaction. We can consider laughter from many different perspectives. It is a physiological process and a perceptual phenomenon. It is universal among humans and probably shared with certain other species, prompting theorizing about its origins and evolutionary functions. It is behavior produced in response to certain stimuli. It is a lived experience involving one's body and emotions. It can make people feel good, and it draws attention for its possible physical and psychic benefits. It is communicative action, influenced by and contributing to social interaction. As a prime indicator of humor or play, it helps us understand what makes something funny, how we signal a playful mood, and what constitutes mirth. As an integral (yet commonly overlooked) part of our communicative repertoire, often accompanying linguistic activity, laughter invites examination of details of its systematic organization and the part it plays in bringing people closer together or pushing them farther apart.

The Oxford English Dictionary (Murray et al., 1933, p. 103) defines the verb *laugh* this way: "To manifest the combination of bodily phenomena (spasmodic utterance of inarticulate sounds, facial distortion, shaking of the sides, etc.) which forms the instinctive expression of mirth or of the sense of something ludicrous, and which can also be occasioned by certain physical sensations, esp. that produced by tickling." What this definition emphasizes, and what it overlooks, both prove instructive. It invites close attention to physical and psychological dimensions of laughter. The "utterance of inarticulate sounds" locates laughter as vocal behavior but different from speech. Descriptions of the face and body point out that laughter is visual as well as auditory. Use of the word "instinctive" suggests that laughter lies in the domain of automatic responsive behaviors. The phrases "expression of mirth or of sense of something ludicrous" imply consideration of mental causes of laughter and major theories of humor. The last clause reminds us that laughter does not occur solely as a response to humor but can have other causes, tickling being one. Absent from the *OED* definition, however, is an understanding of its social and communicative aspects.

When and where people laugh, how laughter takes on meaning, how it comes to be understood as nervous, hearty, mild, and so forth, how we use laughter to show who we are to each other: all these have provided topics for preliminary investigations in recent years but remain unexplored territory, as yet unreflected in the dictionary definition.

These and other themes are taken up in the following sections. The first section roughly organizes research investigating *how* we laugh. The second concerns *why* we laugh. Third, the section on *social aspects* of laughter pays more attention to ways in which activity, participants, context, and so forth shape human laughter. A final section, "Towards a Social Interactional approach to laughter," locates the approaches taken in this book in light of others reviewed above. CA methods and findings spelled out beginning in Chapter 2 offer new answers to the question of how we laugh, placing greater emphasis on laughter's sequential placement in the stream of human interaction. Subsequent chapters characterizing shared laughter and laughter's interactive accomplishments offer new insights into social aspects of laughter. Finally, exploring how laughter contributes to relationship and identity revisits the "why" questions by examining what people accomplish in and through laughter in interaction.

How we laugh

Research foregrounding the physical processes of laughter provides a major line of answers to the "how" question. Perceptually, laughter consists of a combination of phenomena involving the face, voice, and torso. Francis Bacon (cited in Gregory, 1924, p. 25) wrote: "Laughter causeth a dilation of the mouth and lips; a continued expulsion of the breath, with a loud noise, which maketh the interjection of laughing; shaking of the breasts and sides; running of the eyes with water, if it be violent and continued." Charles Darwin (1872/1955) gave this description:

> The sound of laughter is produced by a deep inspiration followed by short, interrupted, spasmodic contractions of the chest, and especially the diaphragm . . . From the shaking of the body, the head nods to and fro. The lower jaw often quivers up and down, as is likewise the case with some species of baboons, when they are much pleased.
>
> During laughter the mouth is open more or less widely, with the corners drawn much backwards, as well as a little upwards; and the upper lip is somewhat raised. (p. 200)

Visual manifestations of laughter are most noticeable in the face. The mouth opens and the upper lip is raised, partially uncovering the upper front teeth. There is a downward curving of the furrows that extend from the sides of both nostrils to the corners of the mouth. The cheeks puff out on the outer side of the furrows. Creases occur momentarily under the eyes. Prolonged laughter stimulates reflex lacrimation or production in the tear glands, resulting in a "brightening and sparkling of the eye" (Pollio, Mers, and Lucchesi, 1972, p. 212). There is a decreased tendency to maintain visual contact while engaged in laughing. Repeated head movements may occur (Van Hooff, 1972, p. 232; Black, 1984, p. 2995). In its facial appearance, laughter bears close association with smiling, and they often occur together. In the torso, hearty laughter involves involuntary contractions of abdominal muscles, heaving of the chest, and shaking of the sides. An intense laugh may also remove the laugher momentarily from participating in ongoing interaction, as that person may bend over, look down or away, or cover the mouth.

The sounds of laughter, although widely varied, share certain characteristics (see Provine, 2000, pp. 56–63). A minimal laugh sound consists of an explosion of air within speech or freestanding. Freestanding laughs include a number of short, rhythmic syllables, each containing the voiceless, glottal fricative *h*, preceding and/or following either an open-mouthed vowel or a nasal. With the advent of sophisticated recording and sound analysis equipment have come more technical descriptions of human laughter. Provine and Yong (1991) describe a stream of laughter as having a "sonic signature" characterized by four stereotyped features: note structure, note duration, internote interval, and decrescendo. The note structure tends to follow a distinct pattern. It begins with an abrupt, forceful expiration consisting of a "voiceless aspirant of about 200 ms" (milliseconds) (Provine and Yong, 1991, p. 116). The subsequent stream of laughter includes alternating syllables of the voiceless aspirant plus vowel sound, with interval pauses (Black, 1984, pp. 2995–2996). The average duration of one of these syllables is 75 ms. The average internote interval is 210 ms. Peak amplitude tends to be on the initial note followed by a decrescendo (Provine and Yong, 1991, p. 117). Measuring laughs produced under controlled conditions, Mowrer et al. (1987) found a mean duration of an entire laugh to be 1330 ms, and a mean number of syllables in such a laugh to be 7.16.