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Comedy Makes Me Cry: Seeing Myself in Mediated Disclosures of Mental Illness

Cover Page Footnote

Darren J. Valenta is currently a PhD student in the Communication Studies Department at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. The author would like to thank Michael Forst, Colin Whitworth, and the reviewers for their careful critiques and recommendations. Also, a thank you to Michele Valenta for fact-checking the author's memory, and Ashton Madsen whose insight made this project possible.

Comedy Makes Me Cry: Seeing Myself in Mediated Disclosures of Mental Illness

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*In this answer to the special call, I layer accounts of my reaction to Bo Burnham's stand-up comedy special *Make Happy* with discussions of the stigma surrounding mental health and personal narratives about my own difficulties with anxiety. Dutta argues that "narratives are sites of contestation where cultural meanings are played out through dialogues among cultural participants" (91). He goes on to add that the sharing of narratives reveals the cultural politics involved in models of health and allows for the exploration of new possibilities (Dutta 103). In this light, disclosing struggles with anxiety or other mental illnesses represents a means of challenging and destabilizing stigmas that depict mental illnesses as shameful states-of-being. This essay reflects on the profound effects of seeing my greatest insecurity reflected in a mediated performance, and the implications for sharing my own personal narratives in order to erode the stigma surrounding mental illness.*

Keywords: comedy, stand-up, anxiety, mental illness, personal narrative

I am crying while sitting on my second-hand couch late one night. Tears trace tracks down my cheeks and drip off my chin, splashing my "Weird Al" t-shirt with the product of my muffled snuffles. I look down at my chest where a cartoon Al once grinned up at me, but it now looks like he is crying, too. These are not sad tears, though. They are the result of a profound catharsis, the kind that happens when someone else reveals they share the same struggle. I am crying because I have identified deeply with another person, someone who was supposed to make me laugh.

Bo Burnham, the YouTube star turned stand-up comedian, is responsible for my late-night sobbing. It is towards the end of his Netflix special *Make Happy* that he gets me, releasing a linguistic and performative arrow that pierces my funny bone and starts the water works. To close his show, Burnham channels Kanye West by standing alone at center stage and ranting into an auto-tuned microphone (Burnham 49:00-49:49). His voice sounds ethereal and omnipresent, which presents an interesting juxtaposition to his seemingly trivial stories about the width of Pringle cans (too small for

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his hands) and Chipotle burritos (too full to roll). His performance takes a turn from silly to serious. And my laughter turns to tears.

* * *

As the second Darren in my household, I'm used to nicknames. People called me many things as a kid—a worrier, a perfectionist—but anxious was never one of them. I used to get stomachaches worrying about whether or not my schoolwork was good enough. Perfection, it seemed, was the only standard that would ensure that everyone would think I was a decent person. In the second grade, my mom arranged an impromptu meeting with my teacher, a jovial woman with a bowl cut and red fleece vest. For weeks, I'd been telling my mom that my teacher wasn't letting me go outside for recess, forcing me, instead, to stay inside and finish my work. My mom, concerned, was determined to find out what was going on.

* * *

After a video of an original song posted on YouTube went viral, Bo Burnham quickly earned a special on Comedy Central, a theater tour, and a deal with Netflix, which allowed him to “[bypass] the traditional route to stand-up success” (Zinoman). Burnham incorporates original songs, poetry, observations, puns, and one-liners into his highly-stylized, theatrical productions. Each of his stand-up specials are exercises in misdirection meant to disorient the audience and “expose the absolute silliness...of 800 people sitting watching a guy tell them a story that he’s already told 800 times” (Logan). By his own admission, Burnham’s earlier material was “‘cheap and shocking’” (Logan), but his Netflix special, *Make Happy*, represents a turning point, an opportunity to “stop hinting and add a thesis statement of sorts” to his more subtle critiques of popular and Internet culture (Zinoman). In it, he expresses his skepticism about social media, calling it “the market’s answer to a generation that demanded to perform” (Burnham 47:38-47:59). He continues to use his performances to critique the technology that made him famous because of the Internet’s effects on his anxiety: “‘In my adult life, and especially in my stand-up career, I’d felt like the way my anxiety is interfacing with the Internet is very specific and strange...The Internet isn’t helping. It’s exacerbating it’” (Schulman).

Burnham’s turn to the personal, in general, is not wholly original. As a performance community, stand-up comedians increasingly began drawing on personal experience as the basis of their material in the mid-1950s (Nesteroff 157). Recently, however, comedians like Tig Notaro, Chris Gethard, and Maria Bamford have begun performing sets centered on their own health narratives, which seems to signify a turn in the types of personal narratives shared on stage (Corbett; Doyle; Marantz). Seeing or hearing these comedians share their darkest experiences in public is profound in and of itself as these kinds of raw and difficult stories do not often find their way into the public

eye. The fact that they do so with the intention of creating laughter, however, creates a truly unique opportunity to connect with their audiences, fostering a sense of community while challenging stigma.

Despite advances in the medical community's understanding of mental illness, the associated stigmas still persist, causing social, psychological, and material difficulties (Corrigan & Watson 16). As Goffman suggests, a stigmatized person is seen as "not quite human," which causes others to "reduce [their] life chances" (5). While it is certainly helpful to understand the prejudice and discrimination resulting from the stigmatization of mental illness, Corrigan and Kosyluk argue that true progress is made by addressing stigma and "stopping the discrimination and replacing it with affirming attitudes and behaviors" (131). The stigma surrounding mental illness may cause some to bury their struggles in order to appear perfectly fine, but that cognitive dissonance carries with it an incredible burden. As a means to engage and perhaps alter that stigma, some, like Bo Burnham, share their stories. Whether consciously or unconsciously, public figures who share stories about their mental health create the possibility for identification, or the recognition that "their interests [and the audience's] are joined" (Burke 20). For me, identifying with another comes with the compulsion to share my own story.

I am certainly not a stand-up comedian, but as a writer, I have the opportunity to "distance myself from [my] experiences in an attempt to discern and analyze patterns" (Adams 159). Like Burnham, I endeavor to utilize my own sense of humor to challenge the ideologies that make my anxiety seem like a deep shame I am supposed to hide. Dutta argues that "narratives are sites of contestation where cultural meanings are played out through dialogues among cultural participants" (91). Burnham, myself, and others serve as those cultural participants, utilizing our experiences to (re) negotiate the stigma surrounding mental illness, which is why I combine these experiences in a layered account. Ronai argues "the layered account is a narrative form designed to loosely represent to, as well as produce for, the reader, a continuous dialectic of experience" (396). As a researcher interested in how my personal experience of anxiety stems from and interacts with broader cultural understandings of mental health, I utilize a layered account and autoethnographic writing as means of self and cultural analysis.

Therefore, in this essay, I analyze Bo Burnham's Netflix special *Make Happy* as an example of a particularly profound personal moment of identification and relief as someone who deals with anxiety. Using my reaction to Burnham's disclosure and interrogation of his own experiences with anxiety as a case study, I argue that stand-up comedy can provide catharsis for individuals with stigmatized identity markers by naming their experience and launching larger critiques of cultural ideologies that reinforce stigmatization. In order to do so, I, first, discuss the clinical and philosophical definitions of anxiety. Next, I define identification and what makes stand-up

comedy a particularly influential performance genre. Finally, I layer past experiences with my reactions to and analysis of Burnham's performance in *Make Happy*. The stigma surrounding mental health forces many into isolation, but mediated representations of others facing similar issues may offer a reprieve. Especially when done with a sense of humor.

* * *

Philosophers, psychologists, and mental health professionals have attempted to define and understand anxiety for decades. A common definition links anxiety with fear, dubbing it “fear without object” (Heller 78). The link to fear suggests anxiety is a response to an external threat. Some, however, have suggested that the root of anxiety is more intimate. Robertson argues in his distillation of Jacques Lacan that the object of anxiety is so difficult to identify because of its close proximity to the anxious individual (5). Hyde agrees, locating the origin of anxiety within an individual's potentiality-for-Being (147). In other words, anxiety is a negative reaction to what we worry we will become. Over the course of our lives, we continuously test our self-concept against others' perceptions of us through various kinds of interactions (i.e. interpersonal, public, performative, etc.). We want people to like us, to confirm our self-conception and evaluate us favorably. It is a natural and often productive desire. However, sometimes this anxiety becomes an obsession that impairs and overrides other aspects of our lives.

* * *

Stand-up comedy, like that of Bo Burnham, is particularly conducive to a potent form of identification. Burke sees identification as an audience member's perception or assumption that their interests align with that of the speaker, making them “substantially one” with a person other than [themselves]” (Burke 20-21). This moment of identification can be a particularly profound experience when performer and audience member share a stigmatized identity marker, like mental illness.

Stand-up is uniquely powerful because of its intimacy. As a performance genre, stand-up embodies a kind of mediated small-talk in which the performer and the audience engage in communication designed to develop and strengthen interpersonal relationships (Brodie 31). It is familiar and playful, much in the way a conversation with a friend would be. The comic can leverage this connection into laughs—the currency of the comedic realm—but they can also use it to encourage identification and, perhaps, a deeper sense of belonging. Within each set, a comedian builds and maintains a particular perspective to which each audience member must orient in order to participate in the performer-audience relationship (Granelli 63). Comics often use narratives to construct and communicate their worldview. As Granelli states, “the use of narrative, especially, in stand-up comedy allows the audience to situate the performer in contexts outside of the direct

performance, as the anecdotes provide windows into the life of the comedian beyond the stage” (63). By sharing pieces of their life on stage, the stand-up comedian creates an opportunity for each audience member to connect with them as a human being. The intimacy of the performance combined with the potential to connect in a pseudo-interpersonal manner makes stand-up comedy a uniquely influential performance genre.

Some comics attempt to capitalize on this persuasive potential to create positive social change. Krefting argues that these comics utilize “charged humor,” which is designed to rally marginalized individuals around a particular issue or struggle (5). Beyond creating a singular connection between performer and audience, comics using charged humor attempt to draw connections to a larger community. Doing so is an attempt to create “cultural citizenship,” which recognizes that “there are legal citizens [of the U.S.] who, historically and currently, have not been granted full rights as citizens based on age, sexuality, race, religion, and ability” (Krefting 17). Enacting cultural citizenship, therefore, is an attempt “to represent the underrepresented, to empower and affirm marginalized communities and identities, and to edify and mobilize” (Krefting 21). In this way, stand-up comedy can be used to draw marginalized communities toward the center by identifying the ways they have been ignored and pushing back. In regard to the stigma associated with mental illness specifically, Corrigan and Penn recommend suppressing stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors, replacing them with accurate understandings of mental illness, and establishing direct contact between people with mental illness and those who perpetuate the stigma (765). Stand-up comedy provides a platform to engage in all three of these strategies simultaneously while taking advantage of the deeply personal identification between performer and audience.

* * *

I remember standing there in the empty classroom, a shy kid among the empty desks and brightly decorated bulletin boards, waiting to hear my second-grade teacher tell my mom that I'd miserably failed everything. My mom, knowing she probably hadn't gotten the entire story from me, asked my teacher why I wasn't able to go out to recess. My teacher told my mom that I could, in fact, go out for recess, but I hadn't wanted to. I elected to stay inside and perfect whatever worksheets were assigned that day because I'd convinced myself that only pristine math equations and handwriting would please my teacher. In that moment, she told me that perfection was not the goal, that I could enjoy my recess. Relief washed over me as my anxiety melted off onto the grey and green tiled floor. That's the first time I remember feeling as though the giant sack of jagged, misshapen worries and doubts had been momentarily lifted from my shoulders. All because someone named my experience.

* * *

Something has happened. Burnham's concerns have shifted from Pringles and burritos to something much more serious: his anxiety. Kneeling at center stage in the midst of a mostly dark theatre, Burnham is lit from underneath, a small fan making his short hair flap back and forth against his forehead. The instrumental music decrescendos, making his auto-tuned voice the center of the audience's attention. Suddenly his silly, care-free persona is gone. For a few moments, we get a glimpse of the issues and concerns Burnham might actually grapple with. He sings, directly addressing the audience:

The truth is, my biggest problem's you. I wanna please you. But I wanna stay true to myself. I wanna give you the night out that you deserve. But I wanna say what I think and not care what you think about it. A part of me loves you. A part of me hates you. A part of me needs you. A part of me fears you. And I don't think that I can handle this right now. (Burnham 54:12-54:40)

Instantly, I lock in with Burnham's perspective. At times, I feel like I crave acceptance and reassurance from those around me, my audience. Personally and professionally I want everyone to like me, and I hate that about myself because this need for approval sometimes exceeds the level of natural, productive anxiety. It keeps me awake at night as I replay and dissect the most inconsequential interpersonal interactions. It makes me agonize over every syllable in every essay I write because *maybe* I will just never get it right. It convinces me to stay in from recess as self-imposed punishment for never being good enough. In sharing this moment of inner-conflict and directly addressing the audience, Burnham gives us a peak into his life beyond the stage and contextualizes himself as a human being. He draws a connection between himself and a larger community of anxious people struggling with the same issues, and allows me to join in. This moment is profound because Burnham reaches into my skull, points to my gravest insecurity, and says, "I get it." It is remarkable, to have someone you will never meet speak to you in such an intimate way, to have a moment of performance resonate so deeply that you cannot help but react. Anxiety can be lonely, but, in this moment, I am not alone.

* * *

"You might have anxiety," my partner said casually, as if that notion wouldn't totally shake everything I thought I knew about myself up to that point. She is a mental health and substance abuse counselor, and a damn good one, so I didn't doubt her assessment. It'd just never occurred to me. People called me many things growing up, but anxious was never one of them. I always "worried too much" or "preferred to stay busy," but no one ever suggested that had anything to do with my mental health. "Maybe you're right," I replied, still reeling. I'd always felt as if my constant worrying was a failure of will; if I just tried hard enough, I could

stop. In an instant, my partner called that idea into question, providing an alternative interpretation. She named my experience, and, in doing so, helped me reconcile with all the personal shame I'd been carrying. I still wish I could just stop being anxious, but at least I know now that someone else gets it.

* * *

The main show is over now, and Burnham has walked backstage to uproarious applause. As the camera pans, following his transition backstage, he seems to have traveled from a crowded theater to a more secluded space. The crowd noise disappears abruptly as Burnham drops his notebook on the top of his keyboard and takes his seat. The camera pauses behind him and he glances back at it over his left shoulder: “Oh, good, it’s just us” (Burnham 56:38-56:41). I am sobbing after his abrupt and powerful self-disclosure. His meditation on his own anxiety has resonated so deeply that his final musical number is blurry through my tears. I think he might try to salvage it here; this is a comedy special after all, so perhaps he will end with one final punchline. I am wrong.

He begins playing, and, after he hopes aloud that we, the audience, enjoyed the show, asks a simple question: “Are you happy?” (Burnham 57:17-57:34). For me, the answer is sometimes. Confronted with this question I can think of moments of triumph, love, and companionship during which I was supremely happy, but they were often short-lived; I quickly brushed them away in my search for another injection of validation. My anxiety makes my self-worth seem like a moment-to-moment production contingent upon a rolling analysis. Sure, I may have done well a second ago, but the future is not guaranteed.

The precariousness of my happiness makes the very question useless, but Burnham is way ahead of me. He continues, “But what the fuck kind of question is ‘Am I happy?’ I really wanna try to get happy, and I think that I could get it if I didn’t always panic every time I’m happy like I’m owed some life where I’m always, like, happy. Which is stupid because I wouldn’t even want it if I got it” (Burnham 57:35-57:49). Again, Burnham highlights a truth underlying my experience. I am not only harsh in my evaluations of myself; I evaluate my harsh evaluations harshly, and so do others. The stigma surrounding anxiety and mental illness in general may be lessening, but it continues to place pressure on people with mental illness to “just feel better.” Burnham points here to the fact that happiness is always unstable, even for those free of mental illness. I feel him pushing back against that stigma, suggesting that compulsory happiness drives some to chase validation from others in the name of achieving the proper level of contentedness.

Burnham’s performance exposes stigma, discloses raw and personal depictions of anxiety, and offers his audience the opportunity to identify and connect with him. Stand-up, a genre focused on creating impromptu intimacy

among strangers and skewering taboos, allows Burnham the opportunity to make this kind of impact. Through Burnham's comedy, I am connected to a broader community and assured that I am not living a singular existence. My connection to this new-found community allows me to embrace the validity of my own experience and reject the stigma that threatens to isolate me and others living with mental illness. I no longer feel alone, even though I *am* alone on my second-hand couch, crying as the credits roll. People have called me many things in my life. Maybe anxious is not so bad.

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