

Just a joke! A critical analysis of organizational humour.

Dr. Barbara Plester

Senior Lecturer
The University of Auckland Business School
Department of Management & International Business

Tel: 64 9 3737599 ext 82484
Mob: 021 424468
Fax: 64 9 3737477
Email: b.plester@auckland.ac.nz

Postal Address:
University of Auckland Business School Private Bag 92019 Auckland New Zealand

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Abstract

Humor is ubiquitous throughout modern Western organizations but because workplace humor occurs within contexts of power, control, resistance and authority there are some complex and ambiguous dynamics involved. Drawing upon a variety of empirical research, this critical analysis considers the ways that humor can be used at work and the implications of humor use by managers and workers in everyday interactions and activities. Specifically, this chapter shows situations when management attempts to control workplace humor as well as outlining an idiosyncratic organizational context where humor was the primary method for dominating and controlling subordinate workers. Finally the chapter discusses the use of humor by workers when they resist or challenge managerial power and concludes that using humor in this way does not significantly change organizational power and control but can temporarily disrupt managerial discourse and domination. Humorous disruption can provide workers with some relief from tension and pressure that may even restore some goodwill in adversarial management – worker interactions. The chapter emphasizes that workplace humor ranges from fun, pleasurable interactions to dark, biting and confronting events disguised through being framed as ‘just a joke’. Considering critical aspect of workplace humor may help organizational members negotiate the complexity of workplace relationships conducted within contexts of tension, status, patriarchy and power.

Key words: *humor, fun, organization, control*

A bitter jest, when it comes too near the truth, leaves a sharp sting behind it.

(Tacitus, AD 117)

This chapter offers a unique critical analysis of workplace humor based on empirical research situated within a variety of different corporate organizations. The research is unique because specific analyses of humor are few and this one is based on an ethnographic approach incorporating observations, interviews, documentary data, and everyday conversations from actual workplaces. Not only are workplace analyses of humour scarce but they are mostly based on a functional interpretation of humor that assumes the uses of humor to be ‘self-evident’¹ and functionalist approaches are ‘associated with a range of presumed positive managerial and organizational outcomes’.² Functionalist approaches do not always adequately account for the ambiguity and complexities of humor² and workplaces are often complex sites of history, tradition, patriarchy, power and control. Therefore it is important to research organizational humor in a ‘nuanced and radical way’² in order to address the complexity and depth of the concept.

Although there are many positive functions attributed to workplace humor, a critical analysis of workplace humor must consider the crucial elements of power, control, resistance and authority. Therefore, this analysis considers the way in which humor might be co-opted by management in order to control employees’ behavior, how management attempts to limit and control workplace humor, and finally it explores employees’ use of humor to resist, challenge and disrupt organizational power and control. A crucial element in such an analysis is the recognition and exploration of humor with a darker agenda that may be interpreted in a more problematized manner in order to explore humor that can harm, manipulate or disturb people

at work. In other words, this chapter discusses workplace humor that shows the ‘dark side’ of people, organizations, and work.

Humor in modern organizations is ubiquitous, complex, influential and multifunctional.³ In a functional sense, humor may be used to release tension,⁴ reveal hidden emotions, make sense of the working environment,⁵ create affiliation and harmony in groups,^{6,7} challenge powerful organizational members,¹ display cultural values and norms^{8,9,10} and even can be used to disrupt and reframe normal everyday working processes. Although the majority of organizational humor analyses tend to emphasize the positive and potentially productive aspects of workplace humor, recent research is emerging that cautions about adopting an overwhelmingly upbeat approach and suggests instead that the dark, biting and mocking elements of humor should be recognized and considered.^{11,12,13,14} It is therefore important to understand humor in a comprehensive way that encompasses both the happy, optimistic and upbeat aspects alongside the contentious, problematic dark humor that may create disruption and dissonance in modern organizations.

The bodily expression of laughter offers verbal and visual clues that people find something humorous.¹³ Simon Critchley¹⁵ cites Descartes among others and defines laughter as an ‘*explosion* expressed with the body’. There are physical, philosophical, psychological components to laughter and it may occur when people cerebrally perceive a stimulus to be amusing which may engender the response of laughter. Conversely when a person experiences supposedly humorous incident as *not* amusing they may indicate displeasure or disapproval, through withholding laughter – a phenomenon known as ‘*unlaughter*’.^{11,13} Laughter then has twin aspects that combines physical, embodied components with a metaphysical or intellectual element.¹³ Laughter can be a paradoxical occurrence¹¹ because it involves ‘those who laugh as well as those who are laughed at’.¹³

Of course laughter does not always denote amusement and can be a polite social response, an expression of embarrassment or it may even be ‘pathological’ and an involuntary disorder.¹⁶ Moreover laughter may be caused by tickling which is a completely different response from laughter caused by mirth.¹⁶ In theorizing laughter in modern workplace contexts, Butler¹³ highlights the social significance of laughter in workplaces and suggests that it has two key functions that are either ‘collective’ or ‘corrective’. The collective aspect creates collegiality goodwill and enjoyment but laughter may also be used to *correct* behavior. People do not like being laughed *at* and thus the threat of laughter, may ensure behavioral conformity in work groups. This type of laughter may ensue from mocking and derisory teasing, sometimes called jocular abuse,¹⁷ and although it is still humor, it is barbed, biting and aimed humor that may have the specific purpose of changing behavior or inhibiting specific activities. Although mocking humor is still functional and may have a specific purpose, it is also associated with elements of organizational power and control and the quick-witted workplace joker can wield fierce social power and influence through jests, barbs and witticisms- all delivered as jokes.¹⁸

In order to explore and understand the concept of organizational humor from a critical perspective a rich understanding of the organizational contextual factors such as norms, activities, assumptions and power restructures is highly important and relevant. Therefore the methodological approach adopted in this research is an ethnographic one, whereby I entered, affiliated and socialized (fulltime) into several different organizational contexts in order to interpret the prevailing social cultural conditions that influence everyday humor events and

enactments. Correspondingly, the humor displays offer a reflection of organizational norms and values assumed by power holders, workers and the organization itself.

Methodology and data

My empirical workplace humor research, conducted over the last 12 years, adopts an ethnographic approach which is based on observing and participating in humor first-hand as it occurs in its natural setting and context. The philosopher Bergson¹⁹ in his famous essay *Le Rire* asserts:

‘To understand laughter we must put it back in its’ natural environment’.

Contemporary humor scholars also contend that context is an extremely important element when examining organizational humor.²⁰ Therefore empirical research needs to account for the rich contextual elements important to the experience of humor which leads to a deeper more nuanced understanding of workplace humor and its associated implications. Thus my empirical examples include detailed situational descriptions of humor events, the organizational actors participating, the preceding and contributing factors and wherever possible the outcomes, reaction and consequences of workplace humor. These examples are gathered from a variety of different organizations including: a prestigious law firm; a large financial institution; an energy provider; and four different Information Technology (IT) companies. These organizations range in size from one small owner-operated company of only 25 employees, to some larger institutions with global operations and comprising upwards of 900 staff. The data has been collected using 1) participant observation; 2) formal semi-structured interviews with staff from all hierarchical levels (90+); 3) document collection; and 4) ad hoc discussions with organizational members. This has resulted in a wide range of empirical material comprising verbatim examples of everyday banter, canned jokes, practical jokes and horseplay, email jokes, visual jokes, cartoons and a myriad of complex material encompassing the minutiae of daily barbs and quips, alongside complicated joke set-ups requiring coordination and planning. Only a small selection of this wide-ranging material can be used here but those presented are representative of many similar examples collected and analyzed.

Management’s imposition of humor

Although the creation and enjoyment of humor would seem to be a discretionary and voluntary behavior within an individual’s suite of communication practices, my workplace research would suggest otherwise, as exemplified within several of the studied organizations. In observed humor examples and in the excerpts from interview transcripts, it seems that humor and the more common notion of fun, may sometimes be imposed upon workers by their managers and/or through organizational expectations. The imposition of humor may be associated with programs designed to foster and artificially create workplace fun, and for some organizations, fun and humor are endorsed as workplace objectives and /or espoused values.

Modern Western workplaces are striving hard to be considered healthy and vibrant places where people can portray themselves authentically and seemingly without restraint. There is a new imperative for work to be fun but Fleming²¹ cautions that contrary to the spirit of freedom and playfulness enthusiastically espoused, only organizationally approved forms of fun are endorsed and sanctioned. According to Warren and Fineman²² the term ‘managed

fun' is an oxymoron and such prescribed fun is 'oppressive' and silences opposing perspectives held by workers. Fleming and Sturdy²³ discuss neo-normative cultures where employees are encouraged to enjoy humor, fun, display their individuality, and even their sexuality - seemingly without restraint- as management seek to increase commitment, performance and motivation at work.

Fleming²¹ extends this argument in his book: *Authenticity and the cultural politics of work*, claiming that modern managerial practices embrace fun and light-hearted play and that an endorsed anti-authoritarian stance has become 'chic'. Such an approach seeks to stave off skepticism about corporate life in the attempt to elude workers' feelings of alienation and to encourage (apparent) authenticity in the interests of whole-person engagement in the workplace context. Yet such manufactured approaches to humor and fun, and an enthusiastic willingness by management to make work enjoyable, may have the effect of inhibiting genuine self-expressed forms of humor and fun. Genuine and spontaneous workplace humor can mock managerial actions³ and organizational initiatives which can be challenging to management. Thus by appearing to embrace and create humor and/or fun, managers may try to avoid ridicule and derision from workers who may use *joke work* to express their feelings thinking they are safe from censure and reprisals.⁴ In other words, management may prefer to make the jokes before they become the target of jokes. Critical scholars highlight that management has co-opted the freedom and expressive capabilities of humor and fun in order to transform it into a tool with which to control and manipulate workers.^{21, 22, 23} However, Parker²⁴ cautions that humor should be 'central to constituting a sense of an oppositional identity at work' and when this aspect of expression is co-opted by management for organizational purposes, workers may be denied a useful form of resistance and opposition.

The next section presents examples of actual workplace humor combined with workers' reflections upon humor expressions and dynamics and these come from a variety of the studied corporate organizations. These extracts suggest that on the surface, managerial use of humor appears to be friendly and even good-natured but it also serves to emphasize power, control and an authoritarian perspective. Even more insidious is the sense that the concepts of humor and fun have in these instances, become an organizational imperative and that subordinate workers must participate, endorse and respond to managerial humor initiatives. Non-participation or unlaughter carries the risk of not only being considered humorless and dour, but also of disapproval and condemnation from those with organizational power. These examples suggest that humor and fun at work may (in some cases), constitute a new managerial initiative that does not promote happiness and well-being but simply represents a new form of tyranny and control which workers hesitate to condemn or resist because it is supposedly 'all good fun' and 'only joking'.

Displaying the boss's buttocks

*Ann, a woman in her fifties and the Office Administrator leaves her desk unattended one Friday afternoon to go and purchase alcoholic drinks for the regular after-work 'Friday drinks'. During her absence, Jake (the CEO) pressgangs Adrian (a young male employee) and stepping behind a partition, Jake orders Adrian to photograph his (Jake's) naked buttocks. This is uploaded to Ann's computer screen. She returns and re-opens her computer to be greeted with the full-screen photograph of her boss' naked buttocks. She screams in shock, laughs loudly and shouts (jocular) abuse at her boss and her colleagues who have surrounded her desk. Much laughter ensues from all.*¹⁴

The described prank was typical of the many jokes that were observed and/or physically experienced in this organization. The CEO (pseudonym *Jake*) of this small, predominantly male IT organization identified himself as a '*joker who loves humor*' and he was similarly described by all of his employees. This practical joke exhibits several significant elements relevant to a critical agenda, specifically power, dominance and a gendered aspect predicated on the ideal of hegemonic masculinity.¹⁴ This organization was defined by an overtly masculine culture and one of only a few women, Ann is subjected to a photograph of her male boss' buttocks. She is definitely shocked and screams out loud in reaction- but quickly changes her protest into laughter when she realizes it's a joke and her reaction is being observed. It is difficult to discern whether she was genuinely amused, embarrassed or felt compelled to laugh at a prank enacted by her dominant, male boss. Adrian is also forced to comply in taking the photo and this action could not be considered a typical or reasonable workplace task. The practical joke highlights the masculine and sexualized culture prevalent in this workplace and the display of the boss' buttocks could be considered sexual harassment of both Ann and Adrian.²⁵ Elements of power and control are clearly discernible and both employees must laugh and 'take the joke' or risk being excluded from the organizational culture. The only recourse open to these employees would be to create a sexual harassment suit but as Jake is the owner and boss of the company this would be risky, time consuming and probably fraught with stress. When questioned about his employees' reactions to the incessant and confronting humor the Jake blithely responded: '*If they don't like it they can leave!*' Laughing along is the safest and easiest option and Jake's uncompromising response suggests that employees who do not accept such humor enactments will not be welcome in the organization and their only alternative is to 'leave'.

One of the issues in the concept of humor is that what one person finds highly amusing and deeply funny is only mildly amusing or even offensive and outrageous to a different person or group.³ In other words, humor is highly ambiguous. In the IT organization, Jake the CEO uses this uncertainty to enact humor that he personally finds very funny and his contentious humor reinforces his power and domination over both work activities and organizational humor and fun. Jake has crafted a notorious identity as a powerful boss and as the '*industry's biggest joker*' (participants' words). Although a prank depicting bare buttocks is considered inappropriate in most corporate (Western) organizations, Jake uses the inherent ambiguity in humor to justify his sexualized display. By claiming '*it's just a joke*' he coerces his subordinate employees to accept many similar displays. Most of the time his employees accept the 'jokes' because not to do so risks termination of their employment and opposition carries the risk of further mocking and ridicule. Humor in the form of ridicule can be used to control and correct those who do not conform¹³ and to complain about a joke one risks being deemed humorless and a 'spoilsport'.³ Furthermore, Freud⁴ claims that sexualized humor allows a joker to 'display himself' and that the 'joke-work' offers safety from recriminations and condemnation.

Confidential interviews with employees of this company elicited expression of distaste at some of the humor that they felt compelled to endure. Humor was used by the powerful CEO to create a very specific and somewhat threatening organizational culture, ostensibly focused on fun and laughter- but simultaneously rife with control, aggression, sexuality and domination. Control was achieved through the use of humour by the CEO and senior managers and employees were daily subjected to ridicule and mockery about all facets of working life. However, as a feature of this humor dynamic, workers also felt free to respond in kind and used some teasing humour back to their CEO. It was notable that the employee's

jokes and pranks were much more moderate than those instigated by the CEO. In some cases when an employee instigated a prank or a teasing joke towards a co-worker, the CEO joined in enthusiastically, encouraged the interaction and even escalated it –often adding extra profanity or derisory jibes.¹⁴ Thus an effective way to invoke the boss' approval was to create a prank or joke, particularly when targeted at a co-worker and specific people seemed to receive more of the teasing, particularly the younger, less-experienced workers. Senior managers mimicked the CEO's fondness for scatological and sexualised humor and thus outrageous joking and physical jokes constantly permeated this workplace. Employees in this organization, accepted that participating in and even creating humour was a component of their job. There were rare occurrences when employees dared to complain, withhold laughter, or challenge the constant barrage of jokes and such individuals were subsequently more ferociously mocked and derided (through 'jokes' of course). During the research period two employees resigned both stating that they could not tolerate this chaotic context any longer. The following quotes from employees reflect some of these complex dynamics:

It's very important that people fit in. They need to fit in because you won't be lasting very long if you didn't like humour. You need someone to enjoy the culture, the tricks, the jokes and all that. It's useless getting rid of non-fits (Sean, 25, Sales Consultant).

Someone who can't handle the culture or take the jokes is never going to really loosen up and become part of the team, and the team is a very important part of the job, being able to work with other people, etc. There are a couple of people I thought were very hard to break them in, they did eventually fit in but it took them a little while to loosen up. The culture can be a little overwhelming for new people (Pete, 35, Engineering Manager).

Someone will have to be able to take jokes. That would be quite important, if they can't then they won't enjoy it and we won't like working with them, because this is a fun kind of place (Adrian, 24, Engineer).

The humour can be a bit disturbing. A lot of the humour that I have seen is about putting someone or something down, Adrian for example, is the butt of a lot of jokes, mainly because he comes across as being really innocent and unable to stand up for himself. He gets a little upset every now and then and people pull back (Dylan, 34, Sales Consultant).¹⁴

The humor here is very crude, crass, rude, toilet humour. I don't know anywhere else the humour is that much in the gutter – it's better than no humour though. Whatever skeletons someone has – we will dig it all out. It's the nature of humour – the Koreans are the butt of jokes and get the piss taken out of them and ragged on – but they love it. Jake initiates it – so it's top down. Jake definitely creates the humour (Karen, 26, Sales Consultant).¹⁴

Although interpretations may be ambiguous, these quotes seem to emphasize the point that employees **must** accept the workplace jokes and 'tricks' (referring to actual physical pranks of which there were many) in order to be integrated into the work-place culture. These quotes were strongly backed up by the cornucopia of pranks, jokes, humorous email and displays that were observed and experienced while researching this company. There is a sinister undertone in Dylan's quote where he talks about 'getting rid of non-fits' suggesting that

workers who are not part of the humour must be dismissed. Sean talks of '*breaking people in*' and from my participant observations I noted that this occurred through a series of practical jokes played upon a newcomer whereby they were teased, tricked and then assessed as to their reactions and ability to take the humour. Upon observing a newcomer cope with a series of pranks involving toilet humour (fart jokes, stink bombs and an electronic machine making simulated flatulence noises) I noticed that she very quickly developed strategies for coping with the constant jokes. Her strategies included laughing heartily at pranks whilst also retaliating with vigorous jocular abuse towards her co-workers even when the jokes became very rude or profane. Such wholehearted embracing of the humor and fun helped her become 'one of the boys' quite rapidly.²⁶

Karen and Dylan (above) describe the humour as crass and disturbing and involving '*putdowns... 'taking the piss' and 'being ragged on*'. These phrases imply that mocking deriding and somewhat confronting humor is the norm in this organization. All of the IT employees identified the CEO as the instigator and main protagonist of humor and fun, and as owner/operator he was also the most powerful person in this organization. Thus Jake seemed to enjoy total freedom to inflict any form of humour that he liked upon his hapless staff. It was notable that humour in this organization was profane, highly sexual, homophobic, racist, and seemingly lacking in normal societal constraints or those limitations expected in typical corporate organizations. In Karen's words the humor is '*top down*' and therefore the elements of power and control permeate the humor and fun and the coercive elements of '*join in ...or leave*' are felt by all organizational members. Although earlier research suggests that workers can express dissatisfaction at managerial actions through using humor²⁷ and also that satire may be used to ridicule managers or authority²⁸ in this IT organization, humor is used by a powerful manager to control subordinate employees and display his dominance, sexuality and aggression.¹⁴ The appropriation of humor makes such power less-obvious because it is hidden behind the flamboyant, exuberant jokes and employees' reactions are tightly controlled because laughter is mandatory and career-enhancing.

Although humour was blatantly co-opted by management in this organization some of these effects were also seen in less overt ways in other, larger organizations where humor was enthusiastically encouraged and fun was prescribed as an organizational value or desired attribute. The following section highlights that although fun and humor are endorsed and explicitly encouraged they are also very much controlled by management who take an active role in deciding what constitutes fun, humour, and good taste. Conversely, management also decide which humour and fun is deemed to have 'crossed the line' and become an organizational transgression.²⁹

Management controlling humor

The first tranche of interview quotes (below) all originate from a large and prestigious Law Firm where senior management promoted the notion that this was a *fun* company. By promoting fun at work, management sought to differentiate the company from their competitors especially in regards to recruiting top University graduates and thus the fun element was prominently emphasized in recruitment brochures. The following four employees discuss their reactions to being labelled a fun company:

I think we want to tell people that we are a fun organisation but they can't use that word 'fun' because that would be downright lying. We are not really a culture around fun, we don't have a value called fun but I know that HR are very aware of

that. They sort of are trying to bring on people that might create that fun or introduce that fun (Kim, 37, Marketing Manager).

Interestingly enough we are trying to get a bit more of our humour out there to the guys who have come on board- a lot are very straight laced. If you have a bit of fun you will find your work a lot more enjoyable. You need a release and you've got to have a laugh... Join in and have fun then work is more tolerable (Clinton, 42, Law Partner).

Obviously there are some inappropriate things as well as appropriate things and they are restricting what comes in (via email and the internet) and there are some things that aren't appropriate that come in but then again they still let us have a little bit of fun (John, 26, IT Manager).

Humor is important, I seem to be the loudest – I think I am. I have only been told off once by my boss – oh no twice! I don't think there is enough humor (Amber, 25 Marketing Assistant).

There is palpable tension in these interview responses and the first comment from Kim was made quite ferociously as she discussed the perceived untruth in representing the organization as a *fun* place. Later in the same interview Kim points out that because Law Firms account for their time and bill in six minute increments, it is hard -if not impossible -to find the time to create or participate in fun activities, even though the organization aspires to be known for its' fun culture. During her interview, Kim laughed ironically at management's attempt to depict this organization as a fun company. Although these law employees acknowledge that fun and humour make work more enjoyable, they indicate that there is strong managerial control around what constitutes fun and they strongly suggest that this is a matter for management (or HR) to decide and articulate. John indicates that permission for fun comes from management in his comment: '*they still let us have a little bit of fun*' and Amber clearly indicates that she has been reprimanded for her humor-twice. So although this organization publicly promotes their so-called fun culture, employees perceive significant managerial control regarding when, where, and what type of activities constitute acceptable fun. Thus the possibility of any authentic and genuine fun is minimal and the only type of fun likely to occur in this Law Firm is that which is managerially created and endorsed.

Similarly the excerpts below also support the notion that management define and control fun and humour in this large financial institution. These respondents also refer to reprimands ('*smack your hand*') for perceived transgressions and they suggest that in this workplace, fun is careful, politically correct, appropriate and dispensed by management ('*handed out*'). Fun is encouraged and ardently espoused in this organization but only if it remains within prescribed 'professional' boundaries.²⁹ Transgressing these managerially endorsed boundaries brings about recriminations and disciplinary action.

Fun is definitely part of the culture... I think humour is always there in the background, because I think we do have a corporate-type company. Emails and dodgy jokes going around are frowned on if it is too politically incorrect. I think there is an unspoken understanding that people are careful with what they are sending and to whom (Fred, 32, Customer Services Adviser).

They'll certainly hand out the fun themselves which is kind of nice. But if you think you can do something that's inappropriate that shouldn't happen then they'll smack your hand (Fred, 32, Customer Services Adviser).

On the first day I came in they were all about having fun but they really do define some things such as what clothes you can wear. They do encourage the whole fun thing but there is a definite line there and as much as we do joke about it is still very professional (Paul, 25, Customer Service Adviser).

I think there is a line fully, and as much as it (humour) is encouraged and again just based on our team and our management. Our managers they have fun with us, it's great for the team, we all have a laugh and a joke, but I think everyone knows where the line is... You know where the line is with management because there is a line and you can't go over it. When you've gone beyond the line and are spoken to I think that is when you really know you've crossed the line where you shouldn't go (Paul, 25, Customer Service Adviser).

Thus it seems that organizational members desire the creation and encouragement of workplace humour and fun, but at the same time management feel the need to ensure that it is firmly controlled and monitored. Obviously management teams understand the capacity of humour and fun to create issues and disharmony and thus perceive a definite need to manage these potentially chaotic workplace dynamics. One could then question if the so-called fun activities that are organizationally manufactured are actually perceived as fun by any employees, or do such activities merely become just another imposed set of workplace demands that workers must respond to, enthusiastically endorse, and pretend to enjoy and relish? As found in the financial organization (above) employees can find themselves assessed on their commitment to and application of company values, and thus when fun is an espoused value, not only is work performance evaluated but also worker's fun performances and participation. Therefore it could be interpreted that for many workers, fun (and by association-humour) must be embraced, endured and outwardly enjoyed, yet it is management who decides what constitutes fun and humour. Being forced to have fun and laugh at work may be humiliating³⁰ and even unendurable when combined with stressful work demands and constraints, yet it is overwhelmingly assumed that having a fun culture or encouraging laughter at work is both desirable and beneficial in modern workplaces.^{31, 11} Forced fun and humor then may become yet another task on the long 'to do' list of harried but smiling workers. Sometimes the only way to resist such imperatives is to develop a wry or satirical sense of humour and workers may cope with the demands of too much fun, or unfunny humor, through either non responsiveness such as 'unlaughter'^{11, 13} or by using alternative humor forms humour to mock, challenge or resist the managerial fun perspective and cultivate their own voice.^{22, 24}

Resisting managerial directives through joking

Management cannot prescribe all behavior and expression and one great asset of humour (and fun) is that it is freely available to all and can be used to resist managerial directives and demands. Psychological research suggests that using humour provides a safety shield whereby a person can jokingly make an aimed point that is understood, but the recipient of the jibe cannot easily react negatively to something presented in the guise of joke work.⁴ Thus humour can be dark, biting, derisory and sometimes unkind. It can also be clever and quick-witted and make people laugh which may mitigate bad feelings towards organizational edicts or developments. Humor can allow people to save face³² and can soften harsh

criticisms and can be effectively used by both workers and managers as a way for releasing pent up emotions caused by work events. Humor and fun activities can also go horribly wrong and cause distress, offence and negative consequences but if the resultant distress is not too severe jokers may be able to retract or distance themselves from adverse reactions by claiming the ‘only joking’ defence –but this is not always successful.

People have differing communicative abilities and within all of the organizations studied, I have identified specific people who are more skilled at humour use. I call this group the *jokers* and their organizational colleagues also easily and consistently identify these characters. Not only do the jokers use humour to insulate them from organizational occurrences but jokers also have a tendency to create quips and jokes that make others feel better and they provide light-hearted relief from tension and pressure.¹⁸ The jokers play an important social role within organizations as they use humor to soften difficult interactions, relieve tension, sometimes challenge managerial directives and alleviate boredom associated with dull repetitive work tasks.³³

These final examples illustrate two different organizational jokers pushing back against managerial directives and expectations, relieving the tension for all involved.

The sales meeting is tense and uncomfortable and sales results are not ideal and a long way beneath the forecasted expectations. The CEO is unhappy and terse and questions each team member in turn, asking sharply what their sales figure is compared to what they had forecast for the quarter. Everyone looks tense and unhappy. Finally his gaze rests upon Zac who also has poor results. Zac earnestly and seriously justifies why his sales figures are low, but with steel in his voice the CEO firmly restates Zac’s forecast figure and then cites Zac’s much lower actual result. With his prior justification not making any impact on the CEO’s displeasure, Zac (a frequent joker) gives up trying to explain and instead quips: *‘Oh well, I’m revising next week’s forecast to zero sales!’*³

The room erupts into loud laughter at Zac’s joke which relieves the very tense atmosphere in the room. The laughter was heartier perhaps than the joke warranted but the CEO also joins the laughter and then he changes the discussion to a new topic. Zac’s well-timed quip has distracted the censorious manager from his recriminations and has obliquely challenged the CEO. Zac has jokingly suggested that the only way to escape chastisement for poor sales results is to forecast that he will make no sales, thus any sales he makes will be considered a good result. The quip protects Zac by distracting the CEO and at the same time sends the message that the workers are not enjoying this public dressing down and that they might have to take drastic steps to avoid future rebukes. The quip does not change the power dynamic or the imperative to improve sales but it does effect a change of subject and Zac’s colleagues hearty laughter show their support and endorsement of this mild jocular challenge to the CEO’s behavior.

The next example (below) from one of the large IT organizations exemplifies a similar dynamic whereby workers suggest to their manager that they will only follow his instructions if they feel like doing so. The quip suggests that these workers have an alternative choice which is to disobey the directive. In this scenario, the Manager (Colin), one of the most senior staff in the organization, quietly but firmly requests that his staff complete some specific work tasks:

Colin: *'Can you guys please get these orders sorted out and send them off before the end of the day. Thanks- this is really important'*

Mac (joker): *'we **might** do it...**if** we feel like it...'* ³

Initially Colin seems quite startled by Mac's seemingly challenging response. Once he realizes that Mac is joking, Colin joins the laughter of his subordinates and a cheerful atmosphere prevails. As the group joker, Mac has indirectly challenged Colin's directive (phrased as a question but constituting a demand nonetheless). By suggesting that the subordinate workers will only complete the tasks if they *'feel like it'*, Mac has implied the possibility of free choice and worker resistance. Framing this mild challenge in a joke format creates a type of *mock* resistance because Mac and his colleagues know that they must complete these tasks as they are relevant to their continued employment. The humor comes from the incongruity created in Mac responding as if he really has a choice, making everyone laugh. No actual resistance or challenge to the manager's power is constituted in the joke, just the subtle reminder that noncompliance is an option, even if it is unlikely to occur.

These two observations exemplify effects that were consistent throughout my research. Self-nominated jokers are skilled in their humor use and through joking comments are able to respond to hierarchical power through suggesting alternative courses of action that could be considered by subordinate workers. Although the joking suggestion of a contradictory workplace response does not constitute a true challenge to authority, it does allow workers a voice and at least presents the notion that alternative actions can be contemplated. Joking also relieves tension that is created in overtly powerful scenarios (such as the censorious sales meeting). Laughter may be created from the incongruity that occurs when managerial discourse involving performance, tasks and actions is disrupted by the cognitive mind shift required to consider alternative responses - as suggested by the quips. Jokes such as this have the additional advantage of mitigating managerial hubris by reminding managers with controlling positions, that workers still retain free will and can make choices about whether or not to comply with directives. Although a challenge may be implied, the use of humor in these everyday work situations does not constitute serious defiance and therefore both managers and workers save face and may even experience shared goodwill as they join the collegial laughter.

Concluding remarks

Humor may be enjoyable and pleasurable but it can also be dark, aggressive and disturbing. It is inadvisable to entirely attribute positively functional and optimistic attributes to workplace jokes because humor may also convey unpleasant sentiments and can contain derision and mocking. Thus it is important to understand and explore the dark elements of humor. In the workplace, dark humor may be closely associated with organizational elements of patriarchy, dominance, and power. Humor may shield authority figures as they enact hegemonic practices that oppress and subjugate subordinate workers, powerless to react in any way other than with (seemingly) supportive laughter. Therefore some humor is threatening, challenging and dangerous and when enacted by a powerful organizational actor, this humor may be overwhelming and insurmountable for vulnerable workers.

However, workers can also use humor to jokingly defy managerial directives and actions and may lightly mock some actions and pronouncements, using the protection of a joking

framework work to escape disapproval. Of course, joking resistance does not actually change the organizational situation³⁴ but humor can at least allow workers some release of tension and frustration through having voiced their opposition, albeit in a joking manner. While humor may not alter workplace objectives and power structures it can disrupt and divert managerial discourse and workers may experience a momentary feeling of freedom from control and domination.

Critical aspects of workplace humor are difficult to access, analyze and interpret. There are few such studies in organizational studies and therefore the components of power, control, dominance and hegemony are scarce in organizational humor research. This chapter offers a distinctive critical approach to workplace humor based on unique, rich, ethnographic data and such approaches are uncommon in the current literature. This critical analysis problematizes workplace humor and fun and thus could be considered rather dark and dour. Of course, plenty of genuine, pleasant humor and fun occurs inside organizations and this is well-documented in a wide variety of studies. The point of difference for this current chapter is to explore the less-common aspects of power, control and resistance enacted through humor and fun. Humor is sometimes used to openly display power, control, and hegemonic masculinity and such behavior may be based upon the overarching (but erroneous) assumption that all humor is good humor.

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