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Humor and Work: Toward a More Contextual Understanding of Humor in the Workplace

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HUMOR AND WORK: TOWARD A MORE CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF
HUMOR IN THE WORKPLACE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
The School of Graduate Studies and Research
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Title: Humor and Work: Toward a More Contextual Understanding of Humor in the Workplace

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Humor is a unique aspect of human behavior. It offers researchers a chance to understand social relationships in the context of a nearly universal experience: the interpersonal connection that occurs as a result of laughter. This is not to say that all humor is positive. As a distinctly human dynamic, humor mirrors the social realities of dominance, oppression, and difference, as well as the social realities of connection, joy, and intimacy. Understanding humor has powerful ramifications for contemporary workplaces. It facilitates effective communication, eases workplace stress, and is generally considered a sign of positive leadership and organizational health. Humor can also reinforce negative power dynamics and lead to hostility, resentment, and charges of harassment or discrimination.

Most research into humor in organizations adopts a highly functionalist approach, and accounts for effective or ineffective uses of humor in the workplace. This study, in contrast, is more contextual and attempts to describe the circumstances under which humor occurs. The author uses an ethnographic research approach to describe and understand various occasions and experiences of humor as they occur within select nonprofit human service settings. This ethnography gives rise to a grounded theory that attempts to account for context as an important aspect of workplace humor.

iv

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who has been an example to me my whole life, including completing a qualitative dissertation of her own. She has given me an immeasurable amount of encouragement, support, humor, and hope.

To my children: Jamie, Nate, and Greg, who have been be an endless reservoir of joy and laughter – your patience and willingness to put up with the times when your dad was taking classes, and immersed in research, truly made this possible. Finally, to my wife Amy, who knew even before I did that a Ph.D. was something I wanted to do, and who encouraged me from the very beginning. You shouldered an unequal burden of responsibility for our family, and kept us all together while I was taking classes, exams, and writing. I am forever grateful to you for all of this and more!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Prologue

The energy in the old, wood-paneled conference room is noticeably low as the 10 program directors shuffle in for their bi-weekly two-hour management team meeting. It is 8:00 AM on a grey, rainy, cold Monday morning in early March. As they take their seats around a large oak conference table, some sip coffee, others arrange papers, tap at their cell phones or talk quietly to the person next to them. There are no immediate pressing issues, and nothing really to anticipate about the next few hours. Today it's Donna's turn to run the meeting. Her colleagues rarely do anything different when they facilitate and generally plow through the agenda as always: program reports, finance, board report, personnel, etc. It is clear that almost everyone in the room wants to be doing something else, either addressing other work priorities, or extending the weekend into Monday. But Donna has something up her sleeve. She announces before the meeting officially starts that she wants to share some of her actual experiences from her years conducting job interviews as director of an entry level human service program. Such experiences included:

- The woman who showed up wearing purple attire from head to toe. She had a purple hat, purple makeup, purple hair, purple jewelry, purple jacket and blouse, and purple socks and shoes. She carried a purple purse. When asked for her name she said: "Violet"

- Another applicant, when asked if she had ever been convicted of a crime, responded: "Does welfare fraud count?"

- A third applicant, when asked if she could be flexible in regard to the job hours, responded with: "Sure, I can bend down real good!"

This all occurred in a meeting I attended over 6 years ago, just as I began my doctoral coursework. I am the Executive Director of a small Family Service agency, and Donna was one of my managers, who ran the Homemaker Health Aide program. Donna continued with her stories for another few minutes. She told them with a dry, matter-of-fact wit befitting a stand-up comedienne, and the team was soon in hysterics. By the time she was through the atmosphere in the room was palpably different. We still had plenty of time for our agenda, but the team was engaged. We had shared something significant, a level of safe intimacy that enabled us to continue the meeting with increased energy and enthusiasm. Donna had specifically planned this. She knew what the management team is sometimes like on a Monday morning and she wanted to do something different. Everyone thanked Donna for her stories, and the meeting ended on time.

Later that afternoon, as I drove to my doctoral courses thinking about what my research topic could be, the idea hit me: something happened in that conference room that I really wanted to figure out. It was more than just a lighthearted moment. Donna's humor and the resulting laughter were highly effective but there was also an edge to it, in part because we were laughing at the expense of other people. It brought us closer together as a team, but it did so because we allowed ourselves the shared experience of laughing at others. Realizing that there was something meaningful, important, and deep occurring here, I endeavored to explore and understand the dynamics of humor as it occurs in the workplace.

Background of the Problem

Humor is a unique aspect of human behavior. It offers researchers a chance to understand social relationships in the context of a nearly universal experience: the interpersonal connection that occurs as a result of laughter. This is not to say that all humor is positive. As a distinctly human dynamic, humor mirrors the social realities of dominance, oppression, and difference, as well as the social realities of connection, joy, and intimacy (Westwood & Rhodes, 2007).

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2008 roughly 145 million people in the United States were employed ("Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," 2008). The circumstances of their employment vary significantly, and represent the diversity and size of the country. Some work from home, some belong to unions, some work part-time, and some are migrant or seasonal workers. According to a recent Harris Interactive survey, 45% of American workers are highly satisfied with their job, and overall 80% were either highly satisfied or somewhat satisfied (Harris-Interactive, 2007). One factor that may contribute to job satisfaction levels is the experience or use of humor at work. According to Decker (1987), there is a correlation between a subordinate's rating of their supervisor's sense of humor and job satisfaction. Employees who rate their supervisor as high in sense of humor also have high job satisfaction scores, and are also more likely to positively rate their supervisor on other leadership qualities.

Conversely, according to the same Harris Interactive survey, almost 20% of American workers are either somewhat or very dissatisfied with their current job (Harris-Interactive, 2007). Again, many different factors are likely to influence this dynamic,

including type of workplace, salary, benefits, work hours and other compensation issues. However, the interpersonal aspects of organizational culture, including relationships between co-workers and managers are generally considered to be important correlates to job satisfaction (Chung, Chan Su, Kyle, & Petrick, 2010) (Teven, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006).

It is also broadly acknowledged that traditional roles within the workplace are changing, or have changed significantly, in the last 25 years (Bauer & Gruber, 2007; Pitt-Catsouphes, 2007; Pitt-Catsouphes & Matz-Costa, 2008). Technology, the growth of women in the workforce, the aging of the workforce and the popularity of less hierarchical organizations all contribute to broad organizational changes and challenges. Humor is often cited as one way to manage such changes more effectively (Morreall, 1997), however, it is not a complete panacea. Humor itself can cause as many problems as it solves, especially when dynamics of power, interpersonal conflict, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are involved.

It spite of its obvious benefits in the workplace, from resolving stress, to reducing conflict, to improving communication and morale, research on workplace humor is relatively sparse. Additionally, much of the research that does exist focuses solely on the positive aspects of humor, and generally fails to account for the broader social contexts in which workplace humor occurs. This study will address some of these gaps in extant research and humor theory.

<div align="center">Statement of the Problem</div>

For the most part, laughter coming from a meeting or on an assembly line is considered healthy, within limits. These limits include issues of safety and boundaries,

especially with regard to values related to race, gender, sexuality, and organizational power. Employers, managers, and leaders in contemporary workplaces are becoming more aware that sexual or ethnic jokes can often cross the line into harassment, yet awareness has not necessarily led to understanding. Quinn (2000) cites the Supreme Court confirmation process of Clarence Thomas in 1991 as the beginning of this awareness, although the origin of harassment as a concept in law can be traced to cases from the 1970's and 1980's. This underscores the importance of the academic investigation of workplace humor. What was perceived in the past by some employees and employers as innocent fun can now result in serious lawsuits, yet clarity regarding acceptability and boundaries is very difficult to attain. Sensitivity is increasing that a sexualized environment can affect both employee well being and productivity (Hemmasi, 1994), yet the ambiguities regarding this complex dynamic often provide many more questions than answers.

These ambiguities, inherent in both the nature of humor itself and the way in which humor occurs in the workplace, make for very rich possibilities for qualitative inquiry. Put simply, in spite of the far reaching and potentially serious consequences of humor research, there are just too few attempts to understand the complex contexts in which humorous experiences occur in the workplace. This is also due in large part to the nature of humor research itself. As will be shown in subsequent chapters, humor research is a multifaceted, multi-dimensional endeavor which lacks on the whole any unified theoretical perspective. This research is an effort to bring together these diverse approaches to humor research and humor theory into a more unified focus, again, in an attempt to better account for context.

Purpose of the Study

This study filled the gap described above by investigating humor in a social services environment, with an eye toward understanding and describing the contexts and relational dynamics that create humorous meaning systems within the workplace. It adopts an explicitly non-functionalist and contextual approach to humor, and endeavors to explore the many facets of this interpersonal dynamic, including those usually construed as negative alongside of those seen as positive. The locus for this study is nonprofit workplace settings. I have employed a qualitative research methodology using an ethnographic approach that enabled me to experience, describe, and analyze occasions of humor in nonprofit human service workplaces. The ethnographic approach included a combination of embedded observation, key informant interviews, and document analysis. This fieldwork gave rise to a grounded theory of humor which more adequately accounts for context in understanding the meaning of specific humorous episodes.

Research Questions

In the broadest sense, this research addressed the following question: What happens when people experience humor (or attempts at humor) at work? This very broad general question gave rise to ever more specific but no less interesting questions, many of which were addressed and explored as part of this research. Using nonprofit organizations as an example, I approached my ethnographic observation wanting to understand:

What do people at work find funny?

How and when do they joke with each other?

How do they react to each other's jokes?

When does humor go badly and why?

How does authority, ethnicity, gender, or other human differences affect

occasions of humor?

These questions served to outline and describe my very broad, initial research

interests. Because my research approach was ethnographic and observational, more

specific questions and insights arose from the data collection process. Such questions

included:

How can we account for the ambiguity of meaning with regard to the use of

humor in the workplace?

What are the contexts in which humor happens at work?

How do my observations fit with and compare to the general literature regarding

humor in general and workplace humor in particular?

The Researcher

I am a white, middle class, male in a position of authority at a small to mid-sized

nonprofit human services agency in Eastern Pennsylvania. The agency has an annual

budget of 2 to 3 million dollars, and employs between 75 and 100 people at multiple sites

in three counties. As the executive director I am responsible for overall agency

operations, contract and fiscal management, strategic planning, human resources, and

leadership of the management team. I have been the executive director for over 17 years,

considerably longer than the national average for similar positions.

Currently I am a doctoral candidate in the Administration and Leadership Studies

program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. In addition to my doctoral work, I have a

Masters Degree in Theology, and I am a certified addictions counselor. I came to this

position by accepting increasing levels of responsibility, and have found that a combination of experience, strong communication and writing skills, as well as interpersonal skills in managing conflicts and listening well to others have contributed to my success as a leader. Humor has been an invaluable aspect of all of these interpersonal skills. I am politically liberal, and consider myself as culturally competent and feminist as a white male can be; however, I naturally possess the inherent biases that a person of privilege and power are likely to have. I endeavor as often as possible to be aware of these biases in my work and personal life. My experiences as an executive of this small nonprofit organization certainly informed this research; however, the data collection for this study was carried out in settings other than my own agency.

Assumptions

This study is grounded in descriptions of the experiences of humor as manifest in a few select nonprofit human service organizations. From these I have gained some insights regarding what I understand to be broader, more general social processes that apply to other settings. I therefore assume that cultural and human experiences can be understood, interpreted, and described using either emic or etic approaches. A well constructed description of such experiences has value, and can make a contribution to the broad, scholarly investigation into the human condition generally and the workplace specifically.

Because I endeavor to account for the context in which humor occurs, and I include dynamics of power, authority, race, gender, and sexuality as important in that context, I am assuming that these dynamics exert a level of social coercive influence on individuals. In other words, power, authority, gender, race, organizational structures, and

8

interpersonal differences are important to people. This importance is manifested in part via the use, abuse, or even via the absence of humor, especially in workplace settings.

I perceive, along with other humor scholars, that humor is a generally misunderstood but universally valued phenomenon. It is misunderstood because it is largely taken for granted by most cultural actors, and rarely critically examined by those who value and experience it. On the other hand it is broadly understood, in that most people have a subjective understanding of what humor is, and feel that they themselves are experts in its use. As a culturally valued characteristic, most people feel they have a good sense of humor, and yet clearly not all of us do. This self-evident and self-referential characteristic is one of the many aspects of humor that make it such a fascinating yet difficult target of scholarly investigation.

<div align="center">Rationale and Significance</div>

This study began with an attempt to address the questions that occurred to me after that morning meeting described in the prologue. Clearly something important occurred when Donna told her stories. Illuminating this dynamic could help increase organizational effectiveness. Since the locus of this study is nonprofit human services, it can also be hoped that increasing organizational effectiveness can improve their ability to accomplish their important missions, which are usually aimed at decreasing human suffering.

This study also has significance in that it will uncover not only the positive but also the potentially negative aspects of humor. Even in our prologue, where lighthearted humor made a meeting more effective, it was clear that such humor was at someone else's expense. While humor certainly positively lubricates social interaction, it can also

<div align="center">9</div>

negatively affect our relationships with others. This research will attempt to address both aspects of humor, and account for some of the broadest and most problematic aspects of social interaction, including power, authority, race, gender, class, and other human differences.

Finally, on a much broader level, it became clear as I worked through the data that the field of humor research as a whole would benefit from an approach that accounts for context. I have a natural interest and background in philosophy and theory. It is not surprising, therefore, that as I reviewed and gathered my data I critically applied what I was experiencing to the overall literature. This iterative process gave rise to a new theoretical approach which is grounded in the data, but also grounded in my own life experiences.

Chapter Summary and Research Overview

This chapter provided an initial introduction to the research topic, using a personal workplace experience of humor as an example. Some general background data pertaining to workplace experience was provided and a tentative link based on the literature was made between the experience of humor at work and job satisfaction. Inherent ambiguities surrounding research into workplace humor were pointed out, and a call was made for more research into the context in which humor occurs. The purpose of the study was described as an attempt to fill a perceived gap in existing literature by using an ethnographic research methodology to adequately account for the complex context in which humor occurs at work. Nonprofit organizations are presented as particularly fruitful locations for such an inquiry. Broad, general research questions were proposed.

The positionality, background, and experience of the author were described in some detail, along with assumptions, a rationale, and potential significance of the research.

The following chapter (2) will provide a review of relevant literature regarding humor in general, and workplace humor in particular. Current humor theory will be described in some detail, along with its concrete application in relevant empirical research.

Chapter 3 will provide an overview of the research methodology used in this study. It includes a description of relevant theoretical bases: the symbolic interaction theory of Herbert Blumer, the hermeneutic, ethnographic approach of Clifford Geertz, and the grounded theory approach to research proposed by Charmaz. This methods chapter will provide detail as to sampling strategies, data collection, research design, ethical considerations, and limitations of the proposed project. It will also explain my approach to how the data is presented here.

Chapter 4 is a representative sample of the data I collected. It is organized into what I call *pericopes*, or narrative retellings of a few of the humorous interactions I took part in as I proceeded with my ethnography. These are presented here in order to provide examples which will illuminate the grounded theory which arose from my data collection and analysis.

Chapter 5 is devoted to an analysis of the data. Here I take the narrative pericopes presented in chapter 4 and analyze them with an eye toward understanding their meaning as part of a broader context. This chapter is organized according to some major themes which arose out of the ethnographic observation.

Chapter 6 presents my attempt to organize the preceding research into a broader theoretical structure. It presents a new theoretical schema for understanding and approaching humor research. This theory is based on the phenomenological hermeneutic of Paul Ricoeur, combined with the literary criticism of M.H. Abrams, and the symbolic interaction theory of Blumer and Meade. After a description of these theorists, a new, grounded theory is presented which more fully accounts for the context in which humorous communication occurs.

Chapter 7 revisits my original research questions, and explores the ramifications of the grounded theory proposed here. It presents potential applications for this theory as well as possibilities for further research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

"I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others" – Thomas Hobbes-

"Laughter is the shortest distance between two people" – Victor Borge –

The general purpose of this research is to contribute to the field of humor and organizational scholarship by understanding the complex context in which humor occurs in the workplace. Nonprofit human service organizations are seen as potentially fruitful places to understand this context. The following chapter will provide some detail as to current humor theory, and review the research related to humor and organizations seen as relevant to this study. It is organized to move from the very general to the more specific. I will begin with a general overview of humor theory then move into specifics regarding humor in workplace organizations. I will also discuss the theory which underlies the methodological approach of this research.

Introduction

The quotations at the beginning of this chapter manifest two distinct understandings of humor. Philosopher Thomas Hobbes describes humor that originates with differences between people, and in fact achieves its effects because of those differences. Comedian Victor Borge implies emotional intimacy, and describes the sense that humor, in the form of laughter, functions to bring people closer together.

Variations of Hobbes' and Victor Borge's perspectives frame most existing social theoretical explanations of humor in human society. The first section of this chapter, *Accounting for Humor in Human Societies*, describes these major theories in

detail, generally labeled superiority theory, release theory, and incongruity theory, and places them in a historical and theoretical context. This section also addresses issues associated with defining humor and/or operationalizing it as a concept for research.

Humor scholarship is unique in that it is truly multi-disciplinary. Some authors claim that psychological research has the longest history (Raskin, 2008a). Others claim that philosophers and theologians as far back as Plato, Aristotle, and the authors of the Hebrew Bible were the first to address humor as an important part of human life (Morreall, 2008b). Major contributions to humor scholarship are also made from fields as diverse as linguistics, literature, anthropology, and sociology. The first section of this chapter, therefore, also provides an overview of some disciplinary approaches to the topic, with particular attention to psychological and sociological theory. This section ends with a discussion of the sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism as particularly helpful in understanding occasions of interpersonal humor.

Section two of this chapter, *Accounting for Humor in Organizations*, provides a more focused discussion of humor scholarship as it has been applied to organizations. In particular, a theoretical distinction between functionalist and contextual approaches to humor in the workplace as provided by Collinson (2002), as well as Westwood and Rhodes (2007) is presented in some detail.

The third section of this chapter identifies some gaps in existing literature. Specifically, there are few examples of applied research that explicitly account for and describe the rich and varied contexts in which humor occurs at work, contexts that include dynamics of power, authority, gender, and ethnicity. This third section introduces a theory of humor as provided by Michael Billig. His approach critiques almost all other

descriptions of humor and humor scholarship, claiming that they suffer from an "ideological positivism" (Billig, 2005, p. 5), which predisposes researchers and theorists to take for granted the positive aspects and experiences of humor. The 'positivism' Billig describes in humor research is not at all akin to 'positivism' as used in methodological or philosophical contexts. Instead, he means merely that we are too 'positive' about humor in the comparative sense. He believes we are predisposed to assume that humor is good, happy, and constructive, so he critiques this predisposition within humor theory. Billig adds an accounting of the social dynamic of ridicule.

The final section of this chapter discusses the theoretical basis for the methodology used in this research. Specifically, the constructivist approach to grounded theory as espoused by Kathy Charmaz is presented as a useful framework for the data and analysis that is presented in chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

Section 1 – Accounting for Humor in Human Societies

Humor as a topic of interest is not new, and has been discussed and described throughout history by theologians and philosophers (Carrell, 2008). As a specific discipline, however, humor study is still in its infancy and may or may not grow into its own field. Victor Raskin, whose earlier work in linguistics made a major contribution to the theoretical understanding of semantic humor, points out in the introduction to a recent compilation of humor research that in fact "there are no full-time humor researchers in the world" (Raskin, 2008a, p. 3). Humor theory and research all comes from individuals in adjacent fields who each bring the presuppositions and perspectives of their own fields to the subject. Raskin hints at the need for a more unified approach to humor theory, but

admits that it would be very difficult to combine the theoretical and disciplinary disparity that now exists into one single field of humorology.

Defining Humor

This theoretical disparity in humor study is seen from the outset in various attempts to define the concept of humor. Carrell aptly describes this definitional problem by saying "While the definitions of humor abound and circle, like a wagon train, around the term, there is still no precise agreement on exactly what is meant by humor, and there may well never be" (Carrell, 2008, p. 306). In many cases humor is understood, judged, and quantified via the external manifestation of laughter, or in some cases smiling (Ruch, 2008). Studies abound which examine humorous expression in jokes, cartoons, religion, art, film, television, and political speeches (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004; Capps, 2006; Davies, 1982; Henkin & Fish, 1986; Scharrer, Bergstrom, Paradise, & Ren, 2006; Scruton, 2007; Speier, 1998). Each tends to define humor according to its specific context and approach. Many of these approaches place the locus of humor within the text or utterance itself. A primary example of this would be Raskin's (1985) "Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor" , which analyzes the linguistic and semantic structures of humorous utterances to explain and understand them. Scholars have since used Raskin's theories or other similar humor descriptions to analyze and dissect much more than conversational jokes, by applying them to film, cartoons, standup comedy, and literature. The assumption of all of these analyses is that the humor exists within the text or humorous utterance itself, and can be understood and analyzed by examining the text.

In contrast, other studies place the emphasis for the locus of the humor on the listener or hearer. Many psychological studies focus on what it is that people find funny, what situations or states of mind are conducive to humor, and even what exactly is meant by a sense of humor. Carrell's work includes an "Audience-Based Theory of Verbal Humor", which claims that nothing is in itself humorous, and all humor resides within the audience (Carrell, 2008).

Because defining humor is such a tricky enterprise some researchers avoid it entirely. Others, by attempting to define the concept, limit themselves to more narrowly focused examples. Linguists Holmes and Mara (2002b, p. 67), for example, define humor as "utterances which are … intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants". This definition is limited to verbal expression and would exclude situational or physical humor (like someone slipping and falling for example), as well as, possibly, cartoons, pictures, or written/electronic communications. It includes a requirement for intentionality on the part of the originator, as well as a perception of amusement on the part of the listener or hearer.

In a study specific to humor in the workplace, Romero and Cuthrids (2006, p. 59) provide a slightly broader definition, combining Martineau's (1972) description of humor as "any communicative instance which is perceived as humorous" with Crawford's (1994) additional refinement that humor "consists of nonverbal and verbal communications which produce a positive cognitive or affective response from listeners." While this definition includes nonverbal communication, it limits itself to a positive response from at least one of the listeners. Positive responses, however, do not always occur in humor communication, and requiring a positive reaction to a humorous

17

communication or circumstance in order to consider it humorous would eliminate much

of the humor of interest in workplace interactions. Even if a joke is not considered funny,

it is still a joke, and therefore should fall within the bounds of humor discourse; however,

the definition above would preclude it.

Similarly, in his work on humor and ingratiatory behavior in the workplace,

Cooper (2005, pp. 766-767) defines humor as "any event shared by an agent (e.g., an

employee) with another individual (i.e., a target) that is intended to be amusing to the

target and that the target perceives as an intentional act." This eliminates the requirement

that the target perceives the humor to be positive, but adds the requirement that the

occasion of humor be understood as intentional. We will see later in our discussion on

humor in the workplace that the notion of intentionality is critical, but often highly

ambiguous, especially when a negative experience has occurred. It is quite common for

someone to apologize for something by claiming that he/she did not mean to offend, as

they were 'only joking.' Also, there are plenty of examples of unintentional humor which

share many of the same effects as intentional acts. Such unintentional events should still

qualify as humor, but fall outside Cooper's definition.

While the difficulty in defining humor may seem to make the topic itself too

ambiguous for academic discourse, in fact this ambiguity provides humor with its

richness and power. The following sections describe two of the main theories of humor

and social interaction: the superiority theory and the incongruity theory.

Superiority theories of humor

In a comprehensive account of the history of humor in philosophy and religion,

Morreall (2008b) asserts that the perception of humor in the implied or real misfortune of

others was understood as an integral aspect of humor as long ago as Plato and Aristotle. By the 18th century it reached concrete expression as a humor theory in the quotation by Thomas Hobbes that began this essay. This section will describe the superiority theory of humor in more detail, and provide examples of its application in empirical research.

Figure 1. Drawing by Charles Barsotti (Barsotti, 1994).

The above cartoon appeared in the August 1, 1994 edition of *The New Yorker* magazine. While it certainly includes elements of incongruity in its humor, not the least of which is an employee who is also a buffalo and a boss who has a gun, its primary power is best explained by the theory of superiority. The superiority theory of humor as applied to this cartoon does not even refer to the obvious superiority of the boss over the employee. Instead, it is the superiority we as the viewer feel over poor Mitchelson, the hapless buffalo. Not only is he clearly going to be fired, he is going to be fired at, and likely killed. But instead of eliciting our sympathy, there is something inherently humorous in this. We laugh at poor Mitchelson, because we are not him, and we see that he is generally unaware of the danger that confronts him. We as the viewer almost instantaneously understand his situation, but the poor buffalo does not, and he stands

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there unhappily facing an imminent demise. I would conjecture that this cartoon was funnier to more people in 1994 than it is today in 2011, in large part due to the superiority theory. In 1994 the economy was generally healthy, and unemployment was trending down. Layoffs were certainly less common than they are today in the midst of an economic crisis. More people therefore would feel superior to Mitchelson in 1994 than they do today. If you or someone you love has recently been fired, this cartoon would not likely be perceived as funny, and may in fact seem insulting. You would have no superiority over the buffalo. Instead you would have empathy and identification, and the humorous effect of the cartoon would be lost.

Not only was the superiority theory espoused in ancient times, it was in fact the dominant and possibly the only accounting of humor for most of western history. Put simply, the superiority theory states that all humor is the experience of being better, or at the very least being significantly different, than someone else. As Morreall put it, with the superiority theory "all laughter is at somebody" (Morreall, 1997, p. 24) and almost always it is somebody over whom we feel superior in some way or another. We can even laugh at ourselves, the theory states, only because we are recognizing the inferiority of some past state or version of who we were.

Morreall traces superiority theories from Plato and Aristotle through early church leaders who based their prohibitions against laughter on the perceived anti-social, vulgar, and decidedly non-empathetic aspects of humor. These culminate in the work of Thomas Hobbes who is presented as the first true theorist of humor as we know it today. His statement that laughter is nothing more than the "sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves" is often cited as the first formulation of

superiority as an explicit humor theory (Carrell, 2008; Kuipers, 2008; Morreall, 2008b; Ruch, 2008). According to Billig (2005), Hobbes was not devising a theory of humor for its own sake, but instead subsumed his understanding of humor into a broad sense of humanity which was deeply suspicious of human nature as selfish, materialistic, and prone to moral lapses of bodily desires.

The superiority theory has been variously called by different names, but each are generally cast in the same subgroup or family of theories. Thus theories that account for aggression, hostility, triumph, derision, or disparagement all are generally categorized together (Attardo, 1994). Carrell (2008), therefore, also includes accounts and descriptions of racial, ethnic, and "dumb" jokes with superiority/disparagement theories. Such jokes tend to accentuate differences between people. Many psychological studies have been devoted to descriptions and quantifications of how an individual's identification with a particular group may or may not effect his/her perception of a joke or humorous situation. Ruch cites a typical example in the work of Zillmann and Cantor, who proposed that "humor appreciation varies inversely with the favorableness of the disposition toward the agent or the entity being disparaged, and varies directly with the favorableness of the disposition toward the agent or the entity disparaging it"(Ruch, 2008, p. 29). In other words, referring back to our cartoon, the more you identify with the boss with the gun, the more likely you will find the cartoon funny, and inversely, if you tend to be favorably disposed toward the buffalo (Mitchelson) you will find the cartoon less funny.

Ruch cites further psychological studies that confirm these dynamics of disparagement humor in groups we identify with and groups we do not. McGhee and

Lloyd (1981), for example, found that preschoolers saw more humor in situations when adults/parents were victimized than they did when a child is similarly portrayed. These psychological approaches have clear applications in the everyday world, and in particular in the workplace where levels of hierarchy and power have so much meaning.

Given the patent negativity and anti-social bent in superiority theories it is not surprising that many authors are critical of superiority theory alone as accounting for all humor. Morreall (1997) points out that some humor simply has no superiority or hierarchical elements at all, citing the infantile laughter at the game peek-a-boo as an example. Others cite word play as examples of non-superior humor, although pure superiority theorists have countered with the argument that word play manifests its humor in a sense of superiority over the rules of language (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2008). Most authors recognize superiority as one aspect of humor, but disagree with Hobbes' attempt to account for all humor in this manner. We will see in section three of this chapter that Michael Billig (2005) relies heavily on superiority theory as part of his overall critique of humor and defense of the importance of ridicule in social interactions.

The superiority theories described above have concrete examples in everyday life, particularly in the workplace. In the prologue that began this research, for example, I told the story wherein my manager joked about an applicant who misunderstood a question about flexibility in hours by saying she is so flexible that "she can bend over real good." We laugh at this not only because of the obvious mistake. We feel superior to this person, because we understand the true intent of the question and she did not. Her language also displays simplicity, and perhaps even a class distinction that makes her an easy target for

laughter. She in fact becomes in our minds the caricature of a simpleton, who clearly does not understand the situation that faces her.

Similarly, it was quite safe for us as a management team to joke about potential job applicants. This reflects early work by Radcliffe-Brown (1952) as well as more recent research (Holmes, 2000; D. M. Martin, Rich, & Gayle, 2004) which suggests that hierarchy and power are among the most important variables when assessing the appropriateness of joking. We would have been much less comfortable if the butt of the jokes was a superior, or perhaps even a colleague, since it would have been more challenging to feel superior. This is not to say that management is not also quite often the butt of jokes, however, this is often done among colleagues within the same level of authority, and without the superiors being present.

Incongruity theories of humor

In the recently published *Primer of Humor Research* (Raskin, 2008b), multiple authors agree that the incongruity theory of humor has come to dominate contemporary thinking and research into the subject (Carrell, 2008; Morreall, 2008b; Raskin, 2008a). Billig (2005) critiques this assumption, claiming that doing so overemphasizes the positive aspects of humor. Even in light of this critique, it is clear that much humor, regardless of form, arises from occasions of absurdity, exaggeration, and/or the forceful unexpected pairing of disparate concepts. Consider the following joke:

> **Two cows are standing in the pasture. One turns to the other and says, "Although *pi* is usually abbreviated to about five decimal places, it actually goes on to infinity."**
>
> **The second cow turns to the first and says, "Moo".**
>
> (Cathcart & Klein, 2007, p. 20)

There are a number of obvious incongruities in these few simple lines, including, of course, a talking cow. In the world of jokes, however, talking animals are not so strange. We are generally quite willing in the context of a joke to suspend expectations of ordinary circumstances in order play along with the mutually understood social interplay of the joke.

Clearly the cow joke above does not belong to the category of joke that is incongruous because of shock value. It is merely about a talking cow. But to be funny it has to include more than just a talking cow. We actually have a highly intelligent talking cow, who espouses complicated mathematical concepts. Even this incongruity on its own would not create the dissonance necessary for the joke itself to invoke laughter. It is the punch line, when the second cow says just what cows are expected to say, which suddenly and unexpectedly returns us to our normal understanding of cows, reinforcing the initial incongruity and delivering the laugh. On a meta-analytic level, the incongruity is not even just about cows, but about jokes in general, in which cows can talk about things like *pi* and infinity. We laugh because we were lulled into the joke telling space where cows can philosophize, and are then suddenly jerked back to reality by the last word: 'moo'.

Some humor is incongruous merely by virtue of its subject matter. Many of these incongruous joke contexts are well known, and rise to the level of joke 'genres' such as chicken-crossing-road jokes, or frog-walks-into-a-bar jokes, and even elephant jokes. Sometimes the genres themselves can become objects of study, especially among ethnographers. Dundes (1987) investigated cultural cycles of 'sick' jokes about topics like quadriplegics, dead babies and Auschwitz. Based solely on topic, it is incongruous

that these are jokes at all, but nevertheless they have a documented history as such in modern Western culture. According to Dundes these joke types occur in cycles, the timing of which can be highly revealing when placed within a broader social context. Sick joke cycles serve the specific purpose within cultures of providing a socially acceptable outlet for addressing taboo or difficult topics (Dundes, 1987, p. vii).

Incongruity occurs in many different types of humor, not just in jokes. It is not necessarily funny if someone you know slips and falls. If you look out your window, notice it is icy, then see your neighbor slip and fall, you would quite likely rush to provide aid, not laugh. If, on the other hand, we see normally dignified people such as a clergy person, a head of state, or a bride at a wedding slip and fall in circumstances where falling is unexpected, we generally find it hilarious. Even if the circumstance is otherwise dangerous, when it is unexpected or incongruous it can be fodder for humor. There is no humor, for example, when an unknown, normal person is involved in a hunting accident. When the Vice President of the United States shoots his companion in the face, however, television comedians have a field day. It is the incongruity of his position as Vice President that makes the situation funny, not the situation, action, or circumstance itself.

Incongruity theories are traced back to Aristotle, but found strong expression by philosophers and theologians who were reacting to Hobbes. Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard are most cited as examples of the early philosophic and theoretical proponents of the incongruity theory (Morreall, 1987). Scholars still differ as to the specifics of the incongruity – is it in the structure of the narrative, is it in the concepts presented, is it between our ideas of the world and our experiences, or between our idealized sense of what the world should be compared to what it actually is? Morreall

cites a 19th century essayist named William Hazlitt who points out that not all incongruous experiences are funny. Many can be upsetting and create distress in the form of fear or anger. The difference lies for Hazlitt in the perceived severity of the experience. When it remains in the realm of cognitive play it is humorous. When it impedes our progress in serious matters incongruity is anything but humorous (Morreall, 2008b).

There is a third category of humor theory, generally attributed originally to Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960), that is called 'relief theory'. Some authors classify relief theories as their own category (Carrell, 2008; Morreall, 1997; Raskin, 1985), while others subsume them into incongruity (Attardo, 1994). In general, relief theories concern the psychic energy that is released in laughter, and focus on the sudden relief that occurs in the 'getting' of a punch line. For the purposes of this analysis there is no utility in considering relief theory as separate from incongruity theory. The results for empirical research in general and workplace humor research in particular are not affected by this taxonomy. Some actually subsume relief theories into incongruity theory by asserting that the relief felt is the resolution of the absurdity or anomaly created by the incongruity. Relief theory is therefore just a more descriptive analysis of what exactly occurs when humor as incongruity is perceived.

As with superiority theories, examples of incongruous humor at work abound. The woman who wore purple from head to toe to a job interview would be a spectacle in any setting, but was especially humorous in the workplace. Earlier research as part of my coursework in qualitative research included some focus groups about humor in the workplace. One participant in that group told a story about how their office would

periodically have a "whimsical Wednesday" where people were allowed and even encouraged to wear unusual clothing – funny hats, clown noses, mismatched socks, etc. Wearing unusual clothing is itself incongruous, but is even more so in the context of work.

Humor Theory Across Disciplines

Given the multidisciplinary nature of humor studies, it is difficult to cleanly categorize theoretical frameworks, research agendas, and methodological paradigms across the field. Also, there are only a limited number of humor theories to adopt that even attempt to explain humor, and each clearly accounts for only a part of this complex human dynamic. Raskin (2008a) accurately criticizes much of humor research for not being explicit about theory, although he excludes his own field of linguistics from this criticism. Therefore while many studies clearly assume an implicit theoretical understanding about the nature of humor, not all of them openly examine these assumptions. It is up to the reader therefore to theoretically categorize much of the research on their own.

Applied studies that address leadership, humor, and the workplace almost by definition attempt to account for hierarchy and power relationships. Some sense of superiority and humor is therefore necessary. I will provide more detail about workplace humor studies in Section 2 of this chapter (Accounting for Humor in Organizations), but it is clear, even from some of the examples already cited, that superiority theory has provided a solid foundation for empirical humor research.

Similarly, studies that quantify or describe the stress-reducing properties of humor quite naturally utilize some variation of relief theories. These studies generally attempt to

quantify how the experience of humor can reduce stress and improve communication, often making similar claims but focusing on different settings. Stress reduction and relief theory applies, therefore, across contexts from counseling services (Dziegielewski, Jacinto, Laudadio, & Legg-Rodriguez, 2004), workplace relationships between leaders and subordinates (Harris & Kacmar, 2006), and even the high-stress occupation of police work (Kerkkanen, Kuiper, & Martin, 2004).

Semantic, linguistic, or literary analyses tend to focus on the structures of the text or specific tropes, such as the use of irony and wit. Such studies tend to favor incongruity theories, although Cundall (2007) critiques the incongruity theory alone as accounting for all of humor in a study that examines creativity and group processes. Similarly, Gagnier (1988) includes an analysis of several humor theories in her discussion of Victorian women's autobiographies.

The psychological and sociological study of humor

Psychology. As has already been stated, psychology has generally dominated the field of humor research. This fact in and of itself has framed the content of humor research as well as its method. Ruch simplified this in his contribution to the *Primer of Humor Research* by saying: "As psychology is concerned with people, the view onto humor will be made from the individual's perspective; e.g. the phenomena associated with responding to or creating humor and not a description of humor itself" (Ruch, 2008, p. 19). Much of the description of humor itself has been left to the philosophers and linguists. Therefore psychology takes on the task of describing humor's dynamics; from what it looks and feels like physically, to what goes on in its cognitive processes, to how humor affects mood and motivation. Quite naturally, psychology has also concerned

itself with humor and personality, including temperaments, traits and styles of humor. These can be differentiated from the overarching theories of humor discussed earlier in that they codify and describe individual responses to humor or production of humor. One often used typology of humor styles includes affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating aspects of humor (R. A. Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) . Individual responses to humor or production of humor can also be quantified. One example includes the "Situational Humor Response Questionnaire" (R. A. Martin & Lefcourt, 1984) which is commonly used in quantitative studies across disciplines. Other attempts to quantify humor for psychological research include the "Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale" (Thorson & Powell, 1993) and the 'Relational Humor Inventory" (De Koning & Weiss, 2002).

Finally, we generally take it for granted that humor is a desirable personality characteristic, although historically this has not always been the case (Billig, 2005). This cultural reality will have some significant ramifications for the methodology of this research as described in chapter three. If humor is a desirable characteristic, necessary for enhanced self-esteem and positive interpersonal relationships, a researcher must take care to guard against reactivity in the field, especially if the participants know they are being studied for humor.

Psychology has also studied how humor appreciation and generation develops across the lifespan (Nahemow, McCluskey-Fawcett, & McGhee, 1986), as well as various pathological aspects of the dynamic. Ruch (2008) attributes the development of the term "gelotophobia" , meaning a "pathological fear of being laughed at" to the work of Michael Titze (1996).

In general the psychological approach to studying humor provides several fruitful insights relative to this study. Understanding individual styles, as well as various approaches to humor appreciation, temperament, and personality will be critically important in my attempts to examine occasions of humor in workplaces. By itself, however, the psychological approach is not enough, and requires the complimentary discipline of sociology in order to account for the interpersonal, social aspect of humor.

Sociology. The theoretical, philosophical, and psychological explanations of humor analyzed previously have, in my opinion, one critical weakness: they underemphasize the essentially social and interpersonal aspect of humor. The discipline of sociology quite naturally picks this up in their contributions to the field. I am indebted for the following to the comprehensive overview on the sociology of humor by Giselinde Kuipers as found in the very recent *Primer of Humor Research* (Kuipers, 2008).

As recently as 1988 sociologists Chris Powell and E.C. Patton felt it necessary to begin their comprehensive analysis of humor with a defense of humor as a legitimate topic of sociological reflection (Powell & Paton, 1988). Murray Davis's very interesting review of three British texts on the sociology of humor presents an analysis of exactly why sociology as a discipline, at least in America, has ignored or downplayed the analysis of humor (Davis, 1995). He considered labeling the sociology of humor a "burgeoning field", but eventually demurs, lamenting the relative lack of sociologists within, for example, the International Society for Humor Studies. Compared to psychology, linguistics, and philosophy, sociology as a discipline is a relative latecomer to humor studies. Zijderveld (1995, p. 341) considers this fact "remarkable", given the fundamentally social, cultural nature of laughter and humor. He feels this can be

explained by his characterization of sociology as being largely problem oriented and focusing mostly on aspects of society related to misery and tragedy, such as alienation, injustice, addiction, crime, violence, and poverty. Kuipers (2008) echoes this analysis and would essentially agree that from its inception through most of the 20th century even micro-sociologists mostly ignored the dynamic of humor. This changed after the 1970s with some of the work by the authors quoted above.

In her review of the classical humor theories Kuipers points out that superiority theory most clearly addresses social relationships, however, when considered carefully the theory "describes superiority as an individual experience: the communicative or relational aspect of the joking and laughing is generally not examined in these theories. In other words: while addressing a social event, superiority theories of humor are not very sociological" (Kuipers, 2008, p. 363). Conversely, the incongruity theories, while seemingly focused on the individual perception, recognition, and resolution of the incongruity within a humorous communication, have been incorporated into recent sociological thought, in large measure due to their predominance within humor research. Regardless of any specific theoretical approach to humor, sociologists focus on the way humor helps us to create meaning in social relationships, and how it therefore contributes to the general maintenance of social order.

Kuipers categorizes recent sociological studies of humor into the following five approaches: functionalist, conflict, symbolic-interactionist, phenomenological, and comparative-historical. Functionalism has a different meaning here than it will in section two. This more traditional sense approaches humor with an eye toward understanding what social functions humor fulfills within cultures or social groups. Humor clearly eases

tensions between individuals and groups and can serve as a social lubricant, but it can also function to exert social control and delineate social hierarchies. The work of Billig (2005) and also of Powell (1988) falls into this functionalist category, as do the studies that focus on the positive, more unifying character of humor. Kuipers points out that although the use of functionalism as a general sociological theoretical framework has declined since the 1960's it is still very prevalent in contemporary humor studies.

Conflict approaches draw quite obviously on the superiority theories, but focus on the sociological effects and ramifications of humor being used as a weapon, not just individually but also by one social group against another. As expected these feature prominently in analyses of ethnic and political humor. Humor is in this sense a type of social action. It can express power relationships and become a means of control of one group over another, but it also can be used to subvert those power relationships. Such analyses have decidedly functionalist overtones, however, the conflict approaches focus on the issues of power, conflict, and inequality. Studies about gender inequalities and feminist joking are also likely to draw on conflict approaches.

Kuipers uses the term symbolic interactionist as an umbrella for any approach that attempts to account for humor's role in how meaning is constructed in everyday life. She expresses in a footnote her awareness that this strategy lumps together a number of different schools of thought, some of which would not favor the term; however as an approach to understanding humor the term suffices. This approach is helpful in understanding the context in which humor occurs, and how the meaning of any given humorous communication can actually be constructed and reconstructed, negotiated and renegotiated each time a new communication occurs. And it is not just interaction over

the meaning of jokes. Joking relationships can actually assist in the creation of meaning in general, and thereby contribute to our overall understanding of ourselves in relation to each other and society. Kuipers uses gender as an example, and points out that joking, or humor frames can certainly contribute to both individual and common conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Of particular relevance to this study, Kuipers also points out that the symbolic-interactionist approach has given rise to "small scale ethnographic studies of humor, as an alternative to the analysis of standardized forms of humor, joke ratings from questionnaires." (Kuipers, 2008, p. 373) This gives further credence to the methodology proposed here. A symbolic interactionist approach, combined with an ethnographic methodology, aligns well with the goal of understanding and describing the context in which humorous meaning systems occur at work.

Humor is essentially one mode of interpersonal communication. It occurs within the social context, and is almost universally understood to be both deeply individualistic, as in a person who possesses an individual sense of humor, and also as inherently social. As such humor can be a very useful window into the relationship between the self and society. The micro-sociology of George Herbert Mead in some sense grappled with this very issue: what is the connection between a person's sense of self and his or her social context? For Mead the self is "essentially a social structure and it arises in social experience." (Mead, 2002, p. 242) This social experience is inherently intertwined with communication or discourse, which for Mead is a "system of universally significant symbols" (Mead, 2002, p. 249). One major theoretical assumption of this research is that humorous communications are particularly powerful examples of the symbolic discourse

that we as social creatures engage in. We understand ourselves and each other by communicating and acting through the use of symbols. Occasions of humor in particular use symbols, metaphor, language, pictures, and actions to provoke an experience in another, which results in laughter. But that experience has its basis in our own internalized understanding of that other as sharing our understanding of the humor.

Phenomenological approaches to humor attempt to describe an overarching humorous world view, which is often contrasted with a non-humorous or serious world view. These approaches, according to Kuipers, are very difficult to operationalize into a single coherent research methodology or theoretical framework, however, there are some specific examples of descriptions of the comic that become highly useful for understanding how humor functions to construct social reality. Analyses of the role of carnival in turning around social order, or the explicit role of the jester as more than just a joke teller but an important social critic can be included here.

The historical-comparative approach studies humor in different social and historical contexts then makes comparisons based on similarities and differences. Kuipers claims that most sociological work in humor since the 1990's falls into this category (Kuipers, 2008, p. 378). The acknowledged authority on the comparative analysis of jokes is Christie Davies, who has written numerous texts on ethnic humor, pointing out that although as a genre ethnic humor is almost universal, who is targeted and how they are targeted can vary immensely from culture to culture (Davies, 1982; Mintz, 1992). Such analysis of inter-cultural joking can be extremely revealing, not just about the target but also about the originator of the humor.

Conclusion to Section 1

This chapter began with a categorization of two types of humor: the kind that brings us together and the type that pulls us apart. It would be tempting to artificially impose this distinction onto the two theories subsequently discussed, and say that superiority humor emphasizes differences and therefore tends to separate individuals, while incongruity humor does the opposite. In fact the reality is much more complicated, and the world of humor research and practice cannot be so cleanly divided. Superiority humor can codify groups, and incongruity humor can alienate, depending on the context. The following section provides further detail on how the complex human social dynamic of humor is manifested in our social organizations, specifically in workplace organizations.

Section 2 – Accounting for Humor in Workplace Organizations

Most authors begin with the assumption that humor is beneficial on both a macro/organizational level as well as on an individual/micro level. While some studies focus on dyadic relationships and others on groups, it is clear that humor is a social phenomenon and occurs within relationships. It therefore both mediates and is itself mediated by the hierarchies of those relationships. On the positive side, humor is recognized across the board as a social dynamic that promotes both emotional and physical health (Caudron, 1992; Ford, McLaughlin, & Newstrom, 2004; Morreall, 2008a). Having a sense of humor is cited as a "characteristic frequently associated with leadership" (Avolio et al., 1999, p. 219) and is in this sense considered a symptom of cohesion and solidarity that contributes to a more productive and positive work environment. In addition to promoting overall health and emotional well being, humor

also can improve workplace performance by enhancing creativity. Drawing on incongruity theory, this perspective considers the mental acuity necessary for the successful resolution of incongruous concepts to be the foundation for the creation of new ideas. Thus thinking outside the box may in fact entail thinking with humor.

Morreall (2008a) identifies the importance of social lubrication within the newer style team-oriented workplaces. Many companies have intentionally adopted flatter, more horizontal, and less hierarchical organizational structures. Without the traditional hierarchy to delineate individuals and compartmentalize duties, people at work have to learn how to interact differently. Constructive positive humor helps to facilitate this interaction within the new workplace. At the same time, however, if humor goes awry the more interactive social grouping of teams can be badly damaged by relationships gone sour.

On the negative side humor is seen as having both subversive and potentially deleterious effects on workplace relationships (Decker & Rotondo, 2001; Holmes, 2000; Holmes & Marra, 2002b; Yarwood, 1995). These negative effects are usually described in combination with the positive, however, their consequences can be costly and interpersonally devastating. Collinson cites several examples of managerial reactions to this negative aspect of humor, from Plato, who prohibited humor in formal circles, to the Ford Motor Company of the 1940's who 'sacked' Mr. John Gallo when he was "caught in the act of smiling" (Collinson, 2002, p. 276). These attempts to suppress humor are bound to fail, as are artificial attempts to cultivate it. Most striking is the recent example, when, during a 'bad taste' costume day, a stock broker who arrived at work late was forced to wear a Nazi uniform (paid for by the company). The employee's grandmother

had been murdered at Auschwitz. He resigned, and won a case of racial discrimination against the firm. Such practices may start as innocent 'team building' endeavors, but as Collinson points out, "when managers artificially incorporate joking into their control practices, they reduce humor to a manipulated commodity" (Collinson, 2002, p. 278).

Regardless of focus or definition, most researchers argue for the efficacy of taking humor 'seriously' as more than a superficial phenomenon. It mirrors organizational culture, manifests critical social dynamics, and draws attention to the hierarchical power relationships that serve to accomplish social tasks. Humor also aids in communication. It allows for the expression of complex messages and divergent views. It is often employed when critical or negative messages are in order (Holmes & Marra, 2002a). For Collinson (2002), "jocularity is a medium for communicating sometimes quite serious messages" (p. 270). It allows us to express deep feelings and controversial views by serving as a kind of moral smokescreen that safely facilitates the expression of complex social and organizational relationships. The most visible and immediate factors affecting these complex relationships are gender and power. These therefore appear prominently in much of the literature.

Varying typologies of humor exist in the literature as well, some of which mirror our earlier discussion of humor theory. Workplace humor is seen as arising from incongruity (Yarwood, 1995), and also as having symmetrical and asymmetrical manifestations. This later distinction draws on early anthropological work on 'joking relationships' in African tribal societies (Radcliff-Brown, 1952), wherein humor use by individuals on the same power level (symmetrical) has different norms than humor use between power levels (asymmetrical). Feminist and critical theorists focus on these

power differentials in descriptions of differing uses of humor by different genders (Mullany, 2004) (Holmes & Marra, 2006), as well as the marginalizing and potentially liberating aspects of humor (Bing, 2004).

Humor and leadership

Organizational leadership theory usually distinguishes between leadership as an individual characteristic, and leadership as a response to situations or events. Humor is much the same, especially within organizations. It has character aspects as well as socially determined behaviors or exchanges; 'sense of humor' is both an individual trait and a learned social behavior. The context and manner of delivery are critical in evaluating the appropriateness and effectiveness of a humorous incident (Decker & Rotondo, 2001). Just as certain situations give rise to effective leadership, some situations lend themselves more effectively to humor. But situations alone are not enough – someone needs to take advantage of those situations, and to recognize how to respond. Priest and Swain (2002) assert that although humor is associated with effective leadership, it does not create effective leaders. In fact, they conclude that effective leadership is more likely to create the conditions that provide the context for good feelings and good humor.

In general, most researchers agree that further investigation into humor in organizations is warranted. The broad array of institutional manifestations of this dynamic provides fruitful areas for qualitative exploratory research. There has been almost no work at all that addresses workplace humor in nonprofit settings, with the exception of studies related to nurses/patient/physician relationships in hospitals. Most research into workplace humor and leadership has been quantitative, including the studies

by Avolio (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999) and Decker (Decker, 1987, 1991; Decker & Rotondo, 2001) cited earlier. While this trend continues, more recent studies from the fields of linguistics (Holmes & Marra, 2002a) and feminism (Bing, 2004) take more constructivist approaches. One author (Lockyer, 2006) recently considered the efficacy of mixed methods in humor research, and called for more attention to be paid to contextual investigations of humor.

Organizational humor and the critique of functionalism

Early functionalist organizational theory and 'scientific management' not surprisingly attempted to divorce the very human reality of humor from the workplace entirely. Collinson (2002, p. 276) quotes Henry Ford as stating "When we are at work we ought to be at work. When we are at play we ought to be at play. There is no use trying to mix the two." Organizational and management theory has progressed considerably, to the point where individuals in the workplace are seen as human resources who bring with them particular aspects of their humanness, including humor. Not surprisingly, then, the role of humor as important for work has increased significantly since the days of Henry Ford.

Workplace humor has been examined using a mixture of theoretical approaches. Collinson (1988) authored a groundbreaking study of humor on the shop floor in which he examined relationships between gender identity, humor, and organizational resistance as it played out among workers in a British lorry factory. In a more recent theoretical work, Collinson (2002) critiqued functionalist approaches to humor that encourage the artificial creation or suppression of employee humor by managers and affirmed contextual approaches that account for power relationships. Functionalism here takes on a

more focused meaning than it does when referring to a broad school of sociological

thought. The functionalism Collinson critiques is any approach that attempts to

manipulate workplace humor or discern its appropriate *uses* for the purpose of deploying

them in specific ways. Examples of these functionalist approaches continue to find

expression in current literature. Romero & Pearson (2004, p. 58), for example, explicitly

consider humor to be a "multifunctional management tool." Their work suggests that

managers can select specific humor styles, tailor them for a situation, and use them to

achieve specific desired managerial outcomes. As a rule, the majority of studies that

address humor in the workplace take a functionalist approach, as noted in a recent

compilation on workplace humor:

> To begin with interest and research on humor in organizations has had a patchy
> and intermittent history until relatively recently. Over the past twenty years or so,
> however, there has been a burgeoning interest in the issue. Much of this research
> has been within clearly functionalist traditions wherein organizational humour has
> been associated with a range of presumed positive managerial and organizational
> outcomes. (Westwood & Rhodes, 2007, p. 3)

Westwood goes on to warn that the rich and diverse arena of workplace humor is in

danger of being co-opted by a humor industry, which subjects this unique and powerful

social dynamic to authoritarian managerial control.

Morreall (1997) echoes this critique. Although he adopts a highly functionalist

approach to workplace humor, Morreall is suspicious of the workplace humor industry

that has capitalized on the recent discovery of the potential benefits of humor at work by

providing what are essentially stand-up comedy routines with very lean or nonexistent

bases in actual theory and research.

Functionalist approaches are contrasted by Collinson as well as Westwood and

Rhodes with conflict or critical theory approaches. Instead of determining how humor is

best used by managers and subordinates, the more contextual approach attempts to account for the broader aspects of workplace relationships, including power, ethnicity, and gender. When humor is artificially created or suppressed by management, or attempts to use or suppress it become controlled or controlling, an interesting dynamic occurs, and humor itself becomes a means of resistance and subversion. Consider the following story as told by a proponent of the non-functionalist conflict theory school of workplace humor:

> Imagine, if you will, a company called Humor Solutions International which endeavors to show how humour can produce greater social cohesion amongst the workforce and thereby increase efficiency and productivity. Some time ago, I was in Atlanta, staying at a huge hotel where one morning I had the occasion to observe such humour in action. About 50 people from the same company were engaged in collective hopscotch, Frisbee and kickball under the guidance of some consultants. There was much yelping and clapping to be heard – the very soundtrack of happiness. After breakfast I found a huddle of employees standing outside routinely smoking in the Georgia drizzle and we exchanged a few words. I was enormously reassured that they felt just as cynical about the whole business as I did, but one of them said that they did not want to appear to be a bad sport or party pooper at work and that was why they went along with it. Also, he concluded, they were not really offered a choice. I think this incident is interesting for it reveals a vitally subversive feature of humor in the workplace. Namely, that as much as management consultants might try and formalize fun for the benefit of the company, where the comic punch line and the economic bottom line might be seen to blend, such fun is always capable of being ridiculed by informal, unofficial relations amongst employees. Anyone who has worked in a factory or office knows how the most scurrilous and usually obscene stories, songs, and cartoons about the management are the very bread and butter of survival. Humor might be a management tool, but it can also be a tool against management. (Critchley, 2007, p. 17)

While for Critchley not all humor necessarily serves this critical function, some humor does, and this is the most important humor of all. This critical function of humor may be manifested best in a hierarchical workplace environment, but it has broader social implications as well, for humor "invites us to become philosophical spectators in our own lives; it is a practically enacted theory that might be said to be one of the conditions for

taking up a critical position with respect for what passes for everyday life." (Critchley, 2007, p. 19)

Although humor research as applied to workplace relationships will nearly always attempt to address issues of power, authority, and leadership, few studies have a very robust or comprehensive analysis of leadership theory. Avolio et al (1999), Decker (1991), and Decker & Rotundo (2001) are notable exceptions. Most studies that address leadership and humor take rather traditional approaches to leadership, often equating and therefore confusing it with management. This distinction between leadership and management, explicated by Hickman (1990), informs the distinction between functionalist and contextual understandings of humor. Managers take a functionalist approach to organizational tasks, and in fact have the functional structures and administrative duties within organizations as their primary concern. Leaders, on the other hand, are more concerned with broad, overall cultural realities within and around the organization, and the relationships between individuals, departments, and teams. To be a leader and understand humor at work means moving beyond a superficial analysis of specific functional applications and see with clarity the overall social and organizational dynamics that give humor its power.

Section 3 Gaps in the Literature

Billig and Ridicule

In his text, *Laughter and Ridicule – Towards a Social Critique of Humor*, Michael Billig (2005) sets out to skewer most contemporary humor theories. He manages to do so, in my opinion, with an erudite and comprehensive historic overview of humor theory, from Plato and Aristotle through Raskin and Morreall. He uncovers an obvious but highly

42

overlooked fact; most theorists today, along with our culture as a whole, overestimate and over emphasize humor's positive attributes, while at the same time underestimate or completely ignore the other side. "We belong to a society in which fun has become an imperative and humor is seen as a necessary quality for being fully human" (Billig, 2005, p. 13). This was not always the case. Throughout history there have been very different understandings of the nature of humor in social interaction, some of which Billig resurrects. This "ideological positivism" (Billig, 2005, p. 5) in humor theory and research has some important unintended consequences. It is not just that sometimes there is a negative side to humor that we want to dismiss and therefore downplay. This negative side, particularly in the form of ridicule, is for Billig an indispensable aspect of socialization, and as such plays a critical role in the maintenance of our social structures.

One important assumption of this approach is that humor itself is a social construct which we currently value. Humor theorists tend to get stuck within this ideology and therefore often lace their work with their own humor. Indeed, many of the theorists reviewed here addressed in their introductions the expectation that their text be funny. Some were of the opinion that to take humor seriously theorists need to be serious. Others felt that if there are social benefits to the use of humor in everyday life, these same benefits apply within academic discourse. As a self-dubbed 'misogelast' (one who hates or at the very least distrusts laughter), Billig obviously eschews joke telling in his text. Instead he resurrects and attempts to rescue theories that have fallen out of favor, particularly Hobbes' superiority theory, and presents a functionalist sociology that recognizes the important place that negative reinforcement, here in the form of ridicule, has in the maintenance of our social order. He then takes his critique of ideological

43

positivism even further and develops his own theory of humor that accounts for both sides of humor: the positive and the negative, embarrassment and ridicule, laughter and what he calls 'unlaughter'(Billig, 2005, pp. 175-199). Unlaughter is the strategic rhetorical withholding of laughter in a situation where it is socially expected. It is a social experience we have all quite probably shared, and is particularly relevant for an adequate understanding of workplace relationships, and yet is only accounted for adequately in Billig's text.

Gaps in the Literature - Conclusion

Within the highly eclectic sphere of humor studies, very little empirical research is currently being done regarding humor in the workplace. In that regard, simply investigating the topic itself addresses a gap. Additionally, I share the strong suspicion of functionalist approaches to workplace humor described in section two, yet most of the research currently being done on humor in the workplace is highly functionalist, and seeks to help managers and employers reap the benefits of workplace humor. Lastly, much of the research regarding workplace humor emphasizes the positives over the negatives, and seeks to promote the stress reducing, social lubricating, feel-good aspects of humor in the workplace. I believe, with Billig, that these approaches need to be balanced with the recognition that humor not only has a negative side, but that this negative side serves important functions within social and organizational structures.

A qualitative study that utilizes an ethnographic approach to describe and understand both positive and negative occasions of humor in the workplace extends the theories and research described above into uncharted territory. Additionally, given the importance within qualitative inquiry of engaging in thick description with information

rich cases, pursuing such a study within the confines of human service settings further stretched the boundaries of humor research. Since I began collecting research on this topic almost 6 years ago I have found only one study that explicitly references use of humor in human services (Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006) and this focuses on firefighters, corrections officers and emergency service personnel. Most other studies regarding humor and the helping professions address the medical field, and pertain to the benefits of humor in the healing arts, usually nursing.

Exploratory attempts to fill the gap identified above would be well served by a constructivist research paradigm. As we have seen, some useful measures certainly exist, yet it is difficult enough to define, let alone quantify, broad contextual schematics of humor in a relational context. To further attempt measuring Billig's notion of unlaughter, for example, or even laughter used as ridicule to reinforce social power relationships, would be an extremely daunting task. Instead, an initial exploration of the *context* in which such social dynamics occur, along with some thick description of examples of workplace experiences of both positive and negative manifestations of humor, would contribute to filling in these gaps.

Alan Bryman discussed the use of qualitative methodology by saying: "Because of the commitment to see through the eyes of one's subjects close involvement is indicated. There is a simultaneous expression of preference for a contextual understanding so that behavior is to be understood in the context of meaning systems employed by a particular group or society" (Bryman, 1984, p. 78). The research represented by this dissertation takes some initial steps toward filling the gaps described above. It is a qualitative investigation into the multiple uses of humor, both positive and

negative, that attempts to account for the contexts in which humorous meaning systems arise within the workplace.

Qualitative or mixed methods studies within humor research are also a relative rarity within the field of humor study. As noted earlier, in a recent paper calling for more qualitative and mixed methods studies of humor, Sharon Lockyer quotes Billig in support of the notion that there are surprisingly few critical analyses of the negative roles of humor (Lockyer, 2006). This certainly applies to the workplace, where the negative consequences of humor can move beyond bad taste and social ridicule into the realm of legal action and loss of income.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

This research endeavors to understand and describe occasions of interpersonal humorous interaction as they occur in the nonprofit workplace. It addresses the very general research question: what happens when people use humor at work? This general question gives rise to many others. How do complex human interrelationships interact with the dynamic of humor in the workplace? Does humor have a specific function in the everyday life of organizations? What role does humor play in the interactions between people at work? To address these questions, it is necessary to account for the workplace context, with its complex dynamics of power, gender, ethnicity, bureaucracy, and informal/formal organizational structures.

This research did not begin as an attempt to generate a grounded theory. Initially, my goal was to use ethnographic participant observation methods in order to understand the context in which joking behavior occurs in select nonprofit workplaces. As the data collection and analysis progressed, however, a theory began to emerge. This is in keeping with the inductive underpinnings of qualitative research in general and grounded theory in particular. This chapter will describe the rationale for this approach, which includes both ethnography and constructivist grounded theory.

This chapter is divided into seven sections. After this initial introduction I will provide a general theoretical framework for the research methods being proposed. Subsequent sections will cover sampling, data collection, design overview, ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and limitations.

Background & Theoretical Framework

I am interested in understanding how humor functions in the workplace, however it is important to understand from the beginning that the unit of analysis here is not organizational. I am less concerned with meso-level organizational theory than I am with understanding micro-level humorous interactions as they occur between and among various individuals and groups in the workplace. Even though I observed and describe humorous interactions as they occur within specific organizations, this is not an ethnographic description of any one organization per se.

Similarly, the individuals who engage in these interactions are not my primary unit of analysis. Of course, the specific characteristics and idiosyncrasies of these individuals are crucial. Who the participants are and their place in the organization clearly mediate their experiences and interpretations of their interactions, however, it was humor as it occurred *between* individuals that was observed, documented, and explained by this research. My unit of analysis is therefore the humorous interaction itself. I have endeavored to describe various occasions of humor, and failed humor, by placing these occasions within specific contexts and understanding those contexts.

Humor, in and of itself, is a fruitful mechanism for interpreting and understanding human social interaction. Humorous occasions, including but not limited to jokes, cartoons, stories, puns, and even physical comedy, are cohesive, but open-ended meaning systems than can be described and understood as individual units which are amenable to independent analysis, but also locatable within specific contexts that include broad social relationships.

As discussed in Chapter 2, at the most general level this approach rests on the micro-sociological theory of symbolic interactionism. According to Blumer (2002, p. 29), symbolic interactionism is an approach well suited to study the "natural world of human group life and human conduct" , thus making it an ideal theoretical foundation for qualitative social research into workplace humor. Symbolic interactionism has important methodological implications. Again, according to Blumer:

> Insofar as sociologists or students of human society are concerned with the behavior of acting units, the position of symbolic interaction requires the student to catch the process of interpretation through which they construct their actions…To catch the process, the student must take the role of the acting unit whose behavior he is studying…To try to catch the interpretative process by remaining aloof as a so-called "objective" observer and refusing to take the role of the acting unit is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism – the objective observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it. (Blumer, 2002, pp. 74-75)

Because occasions of humor can be set apart and investigated as individual experiences of interpersonal communication, humor is a specifically useful trope to use when attempting to 'catch the interpretative process', but to do so, as Blumer reveals in the quotation above, a student cannot attempt to objectively survey the acting individuals. The researcher must instead take on the role of the acting units and become immersed in the meaning systems they share in order to understand them.

In his landmark text The Interpretation of Cultures, Clifford Geertz (1973) underscores the importance of interpretation when attempting to ethnographically describe different social groupings. He explains that understanding the interpretive process is crucial for doing field work, and contrasts this approach with the assumptions of most prior ethnography which attempted to objectively observe and describe its

cultural object of interest. Geertz' work took him to far flung and exotic corners of the world to study cultures very different from his own. This study, in contrast, takes us into the more mundane, common, and familiar world of the contemporary American workplace, however, it is clear from the beginning that the role of interpretation is no less critical here than it was for Geertz. This is true for understanding all human interaction, but is made even more apparent when the topic of interest is humor.

Consider the following hypothetical example. It is completely fictional, composed to illustrate this point, but in all likelihood similar interactions occur regularly in thousands of workplaces everyday. Bob, Cindy, and Pat are about to start an early morning meeting. Cindy walks in as Bob and Pat wait at the conference room table. She balances a pen, a cup of coffee and a donut on her notepad as she sits down. Bob looks up, notices her breakfast and says "I see we're going with the health food today." Pat laughs. Cindy does too and replies, "Yeah right, health food. I really shouldn't eat this stuff. With our medical plan I need all the health I can get." All three laugh at Cindy's comment and the business of the meeting commences.

If we consider this example from the perspective of the interpretive process, the humor begins first with Bob's assessment that something is potentially humorous when Cindy enters the room. Until he makes an utterance the humor exists only in Bob's mind. He has interpreted a circumstance as potentially humorous and acts on this interpretation by speaking. His joke relates the donut to health food. His words "going with health food today" imply a connection with previous encounters and judgments about Cindy and food, and are a mundane, innocuous attempt at incongruity humor. Already this simple statement is loaded with subtle nuances and interpretations. Clearly he does not mean a

donut is health food as the words themselves taken alone would mean. The context, inflection, and contrast between reality and the words he uses provide the incongruity and therefore the humor.

But so far we have only considered Bob. His utterance, the joke, is then heard by Cindy and Pat. Their individual reactions to this joke are necessarily mediated by their personal standpoint as individuals in the conversation. Literally dozens of contextual and interpretive factors come into play with regard to their interpretation of the utterance. The content of the joke, which we generally take to be primary, is only one factor. Their perception of Bob's 'style' of delivery, their mood, their gender, their personal experiences with food, their position at work vis-à-vis Bob, as well as their own interpretation of the original situation which precipitated the joke all mediates their individual reaction to and interpretation of Bob's humor. In short, Pat and Cindy both have their own internal experiences of the joke which may or may not be externally displayed by the verbal and physical cues they subsequently provide. In this case they both laugh. Now Bob, Cindy, and Pat will reinterpret each other's reactions, which may then result in further shared laughter. This secondary re-interpretive experience can possibly account for the common dynamic that shared laughter is contagious.

The interpretive aspect of perceptions and experiences of humor are also where issues of power, gender, race, and authority come into play. If, for example, Bob is Cindy's boss she has more to gain by laughing and affirming his attempt at humor than she does by not acknowledging or negatively acknowledging it. Doing so is akin to a rebuff. Cooper (2005) describes this very dynamic when exploring employee humor as "ingratiatory behavior." It is quite possible, therefore, that even though she laughs Cindy

is in fact internally annoyed or irritated by the joke, but social convention prevents her from expressing it directly. She may express it indirectly by a non-genuine laugh, which then lends itself to even further ambiguity and interpretation by others.

But even if we assume that the laughter is genuine, and both Pat and Cindy enjoy the quip, Cindy's response adds yet another layer. She enters into an affiliative relationship with Bob by piggybacking on his joke, ironically acknowledging the ambiguities in his joke by saying "yeah, right, health food." Bob can relax. He has not offended Cindy (or Pat) with his quip. In fact they have come closer by sharing a brief snippet of intimacy via their shared laughter. But then Cindy ups the ante. She pulls the joke into the realm of institutional or organizational humor. This is possible because the three participants share the common context of work, but within her joke is an obvious criticism of this common context. Here we have an example of what Holmes and Marra (2002b) label "subversive" humor. Especially if Bob is her boss, it may be very risky to explicitly criticize the health benefit, but the shared social context of joking makes this much safer. Fortunately now for Cindy, Bob (and Pat) both laugh again, the joking ends, and the business aspect of the meeting begins.

The interaction described in this hypothetical example would take no more than 15 total seconds, yet is clearly rich in interpersonal ambiguities and interpretive subtleties. This research endeavored to experience, transcribe, and understand *actual* experiences or attempts at humor in the workplace. As we will see, these actual examples proved to be much more nuanced and complex than the hypothetical, and revealed even more subtle implications regarding workplace interaction.

Grounded Theory

In his introductory text on qualitative research methods, Patton points out that the phrase 'grounded theory' is often used as a general reference to all inductive, qualitative approaches, however, the term more accurately describes specific identifiable methods and procedures within the broad field of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002, p. 127). These methods and procedures have the explicit goal of inductively generating or building theory as part of the ongoing interrelationship between the researcher and the data, and can be contrasted with the theory testing approach of objectivist or quantitative inquiry.

Barny Glasser and Anselm Strauss' landmark text *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* is generally regarded as the pioneering work in grounded theory (Schram, 2003). Since then, varying perspectives regarding appropriate approaches to theory generation and inductive research have arisen, some with differing epistemological and methodological assumptions. After the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, for example, Strauss co-authored a work with Juliet Corbin which detailed a highly systemic and rigorous analytical technique for data analysis. Glasser then countered with a critique of Strauss and Corbin which re-emphasized emergent theory as opposed to theory verification (Schram, 2003). It is not necessary to revisit these epistemological and methodological debates in detail here except to point out that the approach I have adopted, that of Kathy Charmaz, exists in explicit opposition to some of the assumptions of the originators of grounded theory cited above, whom she asserts "endorse a realist ontology and positivist epistemology" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 255). Instead, Charmaz proposes a truly constructivist approach to grounded theory which advocates for the usefulness of varied theoretical and practical approaches to the

collection and analysis of data and theory generation. For Charmaz, "grounded theory creates a sense of reciprocity between participants and the researcher in the construction of meaning and, a theory that is grounded in their experiences" (Chen & Boore, 2009, p. 2253).

Charmaz believes that grounded theory should not necessarily be limited to a specific set of data collection methods, but can be used in a wide variety of settings and methodologies. What differentiates grounded theory from other qualitative methodologies therefore is not *how* data is collected, but what in fact is done *with* the data during and after its collection. Its primary purpose is "to generate explanatory models of human social processes that are grounded in the data" (Eaves, 2001, p. 654). This purpose is solidly in line with the original intention of this research, in spite of the fact that my interest in grounded theory came after I began my data collection.

Similarly, Charmaz's approach is consistent with the interpretive nature of this analysis in general and its subject matter in particular. She states: "Most grounded theorists write as if their data have an objective status. Strauss and Corbin write of the 'reality of the data' and tell us, the data do not lie". Charmaz asserts in contrast that "data are narrative constructions. They are reconstructions of experience; they are not the original experience itself. Whether our respondents ply us with data in interview accounts they recast for our consumption or we record ethnographic stories to reflect experience as best we can recall and narrate, data remain reconstructions' (Charmaz, 2003, p. 258).

The data collection and analysis methodology used here follows Charmaz's explicit hermeneutic, constructivist epistemology. What is presented in the data chapter will be my own narrative retelling of stories based on experiences I had as a participant

ethnographic observer. As I collected these stories, coded, and experienced the data, I

concurrently consulted sociological, hermeneutic, and humor theory. As a result, a broad

based schema related to the meaning of humorous discourse in the workplace emerged.

This schema will be discussed in detail in chapter 6 of this dissertation.

Research Sample

This research employed a purposive sampling strategy designed to uncover

information-rich cases for the in-depth study of workplace humor. Specifically, I

employed what Patton labels "theory-based sampling and operational construct

sampling". (Patton, 2002, p. 238) Such a method is particularly useful since I attempted

to uncover some real world examples of occasions of humor. Theoretical sampling is also

supported by Charmaz, who claims: "theoretical sampling represents a defining property

of grounded theory and relies on the comparative methods within grounded theory. We

use theoretical sampling to develop our emerging categories and to make them more

definitive and useful. Thus the aim of this sampling is to refine ideas, not to increase the

size of the original sample" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 265).

Since I did not explicitly study any one or two organizations, but I was instead

interested in the general construct of humorous interaction as it occurs in organizations,

this sampling strategy is particularly appropriate. Patton quotes Cook, Leviton, and

Shadish as saying:

> For sampling operational instances of constructs, there is no concrete target
> population…Mostly therefore, we are forced to select on a purposive basis those
> particular instances of a construct that past validity studies, conventional practice,
> individual intuition, or consultation with critically minded persons suggest offer
> the closest correspondence to the construct of interest.(Cook, Leviton, & Shadish,
> 1985); cited in (Patton, 2002, p. 238)

My personal experience as well as individual intuition lead me to believe that human service organizations were particularly well suited as sites to engage in the study of workplace humor interactions. Literature suggests that humor is used at work as both a social lubricant and as a stress reducer (Morreall, 2008a). Human services are high stress environments, and also call for close human interaction between clients and staff, as well as between staff and supervisors. As such they are prime targets for collecting real world examples of the general constructs of humor I was interested in. Since I studied multiple manifestations of these constructs, this research is in fact what Patton calls "multiple operationalism." (Patton, 2002, p. 239)

I originally intended to immerse myself in three different human service organizations. I completed IRB paperwork for three agencies, and actually met with staff of all three. Time constraints, however, made it impossible for me to equally immerse myself in three agencies. It turned out that two of the agencies provided enough information-rich cases for data collection, so I do not feel that the time constraint in any way limited the effectiveness of this analysis.

From the outset, I was aware that I could not just walk into any organization and expect to find what I am looking for, or be simply allowed to immerse myself as a researcher. My explicit criteria and strategies for choosing the agencies are outlined next.

Research Design & Data Collection Strategies

This research employed a combination of embedded ethnographic observation, document analysis and key informant interviews to gather data. Since humor is by itself a desirable characteristic (Billig, 2005) I anticipated an initial difficulty in attempting to gather this data. If people know that their humorous interactions are being observed as

the object of research, it is fair to assume that they will behave differently than they would under normal, unobserved circumstances. The act of embedding helped to moderate this dynamic, however, I initially described my work to participants as relating generally to "organizational behavior". Rather than portraying myself as a humor researcher, I intended at first to describe my study as attempting to understand general 'workplace interactions and relationships'. By doing so, I was able to observe and interact with employees without the self consciousness that would have occurred if people felt their humor was being analyzed. We will see in one of my first examples that this deception did not always work, however, the data collection for the most part went very smoothly. Embedding enabled me to establish myself within the agencies and become a more or less familiar figure. I did not deceptively pose as a worker. Instead I became known to staff as a participant/observer.

In a few instances the initial, more general description of my research interest was further clarified in secondary interviews. At one agency in particular, I was able to enlist the support of participants in understanding some of the humorous occasions I experienced. For example, after I collected a number of notable episodes of humor in a specific work group, I solicited feedback regarding the content of the humor, the context in which it occurred, and the accuracy of my analysis from some of the individuals involved via personal interview. This participant check in not only assisted with trustworthiness, but provided an opportunity to fully clarify the nature of the research topic to the participants, and get their reactions.

As stated earlier, it was my intention to focus on nonprofit human services as a locus for the study, however, even this proved to be a very broad category as it can

include all manner of services from mental health programs, crisis services, food banks, child abuse, anti-poverty programs, and even fundraising services. Not all of these were highly conducive to the type of embedding I was interested in. My initial proposal included the following characteristics as initial criteria for determining if an agency is conducive for this type of study:

1) The mission should not be too 'personal', overly stigmatized, or highly confidential. An AIDS service center, for example, or a domestic violence shelter, or a mental health/drug & alcohol clinic would likely present too many barriers regarding confidentiality and client information to be conducive for this type of study.

2) The agency should have enough staff to generate multiple relationships and manifest some of the power dynamics under consideration. A one or two person office is therefore less likely to produce the types of data I am interested in. Initially I envisioned staff sizes of at least 10 or more individuals being important.

3) Similarly, I wanted the workforces I study to be heterogeneous enough to manifest the ethnic, gender, and other social differences that research and intuition tell us are important dynamics when understanding humor. A staff consisting only of middle-aged men would be less helpful in this regard than a staff with mixed ages, genders, and ethnicities. Nonprofit agencies generally are good places to find this type of heterogeneity.

4) The physical space where people work needs to be conducive both to human interaction and to observation. A room full of cubicles therefore would be less helpful for this study than a more open concept workspace. Similarly, workers

that engage in team interaction are more likely to display the type of humorous examples I am interested in studying.

5) The workplaces needed to be located within reasonable distance of my home in Eastern PA. I would also disqualify any agency which I have a preexisting or potential professional relationship with. Since I have been employed in human services in the Lehigh Valley for over 25 years, it is unlikely that I would find such an agency in my home town.

The agencies I ended working in matched all of these criteria, except for number 5. This last criterion proved to be unnecessarily limiting. I simply could not disqualify agencies I knew about in my home town, especially since the embeddedness of ethnographic participant observation required that I spend considerable time within them. I was able to find three agencies, two of which were in my area, that were open to my observing them, and yet were removed enough from my own work so that no preexisting or potential future relationships between them and my agency interfered with the ethnography. It also turned out that one of these two did not materialize as a viable or necessary option, hence the bulk of my observations occurred in 2 agencies – one in my home area and one about an hour drive away.

After the sites were identified I interviewed the local site director or executive director and received permission to visit and assess the workplace, using the criteria described above. Informed consent was solicited from the organization as a whole and sent to the IRB office for documentation. I initially familiarized myself with the agencies by studying published public materials regarding their mission and structure, including pamphlets, websites, tax records (1099's), by-laws, and other promotional materials. I

then spent time meeting with key staff and attending meetings as part of data collection. I maintained a field journal to record my observations and thoughts, and separated these according to agency. I also kept an ongoing chronological log of visits and appointments related to the research. It became apparent that some work groups provided particularly dense and complicated examples of humorous interactions. If I knew this in advance, I used audio tape to record their meetings, which were then transcribed and coded. Subsequent individual interviews with key informants and information rich cases were also recorded for transcription and analysis.

Given that my task was to collect examples of interpersonal interactions, it is not surprising that the bulk of my field work was spent attending meetings. It was simply easier to capture examples of humorous interaction this way. This clearly captured a specific type of interaction which is quite likely different from occasions of humor as it might occur within, for example, a dyad. Some studies have gathered these type of data by providing participants with tape recorders, however, I decided early on that the meetings themselves were often rich enough in data that I would quickly be able to collect multiple examples of humorous interactions for analysis.

Overall, during the 12 months I spent in the field with three separate agencies, I attended 42 meetings at various organizational levels. These meetings averaged over 1.5 hours each and account for 60 plus hours of data. Meetings recorded for in depth analysis revealed that some included fast paced repartee with as many as 5 or 6 humorous utterances a minute, while others included long stretches with few or no examples of humor. I would conservatively estimate that for the purposes of this research I explicitly

experienced and/or examined well over 1000 clear occasions of humor, and an even greater number of ambiguous attempts at irony, satire, or failed humor.

In order to understand the context of my experiences I also spent the time necessary to get to know the organizations themselves. I interviewed each Executive Director, as well as team supervisors. I reviewed organizational charts in order to understand reporting relationships between staff, and also reviewed official agency publications in order to understand their missions and challenges. These included annual reports, audits, tax returns, brochures, minutes, and other promotional materials.

Ethical Considerations

Any research endeavor that includes the participation of other humans should seriously consider the ethical implications inherent in its design and implementation. This research was no exception. On the surface, it would seem that research about humor would have minimal risks of causing harm or distress. Humor, after all, is generally considered a positive experience. But as we have already discussed, humor can have a dark side and certainly also includes the sensitive areas of power, authority, race, gender, and "difference". Concern for safeguarding individual autonomy, providing informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and in general minimizing any potential harm therefore permeated this research, in both its purpose and procedure. For example, one workgroup I studied extensively ended up, during the course of my observation, experiencing a pretty significant downsizing. Some of their meetings were highly emotionally charged and included agendas related to making decisions about peoples' livelihoods. On two occasions I became concerned that my presence as an observer might impede the effectiveness of their task. In both instances I voluntarily excluded myself

from the meetings, and left early so that the group could do its job without any possible concern about being observed.

The purpose of this research included the illumination of a misunderstood and powerful dynamic. Doing so could potentially contribute to better understanding of interpersonal relationships and with better understanding comes the possibility of improvement. The work also is located within the important social arena of the workplace. It is hoped that if in some small way this research can contribute to an improvement in workplace relationships it will concurrently contribute to a general improvement in social relations. The research therefore had a beneficent motivation. It was also done as part of doctoral education. My own personal goals and aspirations were inherently intertwined with its completion. It was imperative, therefore, that a self-critical stance be maintained. The reflexivity required of good qualitative research helped to facilitate this ongoing self-examination.

Guillemin & Gillam (2004) differentiate between procedural ethics, which are generally closely considered and examined in an IRB process, and 'ethics in practice', which include the everyday type of issues that most likely occur when conducting qualitative research. As stated above, the inherent reflexivity of qualitative inquiry can be seen as an important tool in addressing the ethical issues that arise as part of an interviewing or ethnographic study. My own background as a clinician and nonprofit administrator served me well in this regard. I am an experienced interviewer, and I am aware of the verbal and nonverbal cues that signal distress or discomfort on the part of participants. As a 25 year veteran of nonprofit human services I am also inherently aware of the dynamics of power as they play out within workplaces. These personal experiences

and skills served to minimize, but not eliminate, the risks of emotional harm that may have occured as part of the ethnographic study of workplace relationships.

This research design required an initial deliberate omission on the part of the researcher. Because humor is generally understood as a desirable interpersonal characteristic it was probable that if workgroups knew up front that I was interested in their humorous interactions they would be self-conscious about them. I wanted to be able to experience genuine humorous interaction as it naturally occurred within workplaces, and felt therefore that it was necessary, initially, to withhold the specific nature of the research subject from participants. In some cases, this initial omission was revealed to participants later in the research and their assistance as participants in understanding humorous interactions was solicited.

In order to address the ethical implications of this omission, a two-tiered procedure of informed consent was employed. Initially, the chief executive officer was approached regarding the research. This person was fully informed as to the nature of the research, including the subject of humor. The CEO then provided fully informed consent for the organization as a whole to participate. Once permission to embed myself in the organization was received, I proceeded to attend meetings and work groups within the organization. Anyone who participated in these meetings provided informed consent. I presented myself as a researcher interested in studying organizational interpersonal dynamics and workgroup effectiveness. Identities of all participants have been kept anonymous, known only to the researcher. Pseudonyms have been used in all transcripts and descriptions which follow. After completion of the final project, all recordings will be erased and destroyed. Field notes exclude identifying information as much as possible,

and have been disguised as part of the final research. Additionally, the specific

organizations involved in the research have not been identified. Locations are provided in

generalities, and fictitious names are used in descriptions.

<div align="center">Issues of Trustworthiness</div>

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) divide the issue of trustworthiness in qualitative

research into three distinct categories: credibility, dependability, and transferability. I will

address each of these categories in the following section.

<div align="center">*Credibility*</div>

The credibility of this research has been enhanced in general by the researcher

maintaining a constant stance of deliberate self-reflexivity. I include descriptions of my

own positionality regarding the research and interpretations of the humorous occasions I

experienced. This positionality includes my being a white, middle-class male in a

position of authority at a nonprofit human service organization. As such I am beset with

personal biases and preconceptions, only some of which I am aware of. Whenever

possible I examined my interpretations, field notes, and observations with an awareness

of this positionality.

Credibility was further enhanced by my resolve to remain in the field as long as is

necessary to gather enough data. This study was partially time-limited, in that I wanted

the data collection to occur within a reasonable time frame. I initially envisioned the data

collection process to last 6 months, however, it ended up taking a full year. I also

approached more than one institution in order to gather data from multiple sources that

are rich enough for analysis and understanding. The data collection also included use of

multiple methods. In addition to general observation of meeting and work groups I

<div align="center">64</div>

conducted individual interviews with information rich participants, as well as document
analysis of agency materials.

As with much qualitative inquiry, the concept of theoretical saturation also helped
to determine the length of data collection. Put simply, I gathered data for as much time as
it took to generate multiple examples of workplace humor that were revealing and
analyzable within their context. In a recent article in the journal *Qualitative Research*,
Glen Bowen (2008) made the case for more specificity regarding the use of the concept
of theoretical saturation in research, which he claims is rooted in grounded theory. Rather
than merely stating that data collection will conclude once saturation is achieved, Bowen
calls for more explicit evidence of saturation, and an explanation of what that means
within the specific context of the research. In this study, saturation became apparent as
part of the concurrent data analysis process. As I began to consider the theory, via
constant comparison with the data, I experienced multiple examples of the importance of
context and power when attempting to uncover meaning in humorous discourse. Since I
would clearly never be able to exhaust every humorous instance, saturation for me came
to mean being assured that I have a sufficient understanding of the individuals, their
relationships, and the organization where they worked to be able to also truly understand
the meaning of their humorous communications.

I did not approach this topic with a well defined preconception of exactly how
humor functions within workplaces. The research was exploratory. I believed it to be true
that dynamics of power, authority, gender, race, and other differences are important
aspects of workplace humor, and intended to describe these instances, yet I also remained
open to potentially divergent understandings of humor as well. This openness is what led

me to continue to consider various theories about humor as I collected the data, which in turn helped to give rise to the grounded theory I ended up with.

Dependability

Field notes, observations, recordings, and transcriptions were maintained as part of this research. This was used to track my field experiences. As it became clear that my research interest extended beyond pure ethnographic description to include grounded theory, consultation with my dissertation advisor regarding the role of timing and preexisting theoretical formulations proved to be extremely helpful. Put simply, in order to be sure that the data were driving the theory and not my own preconceptions, I needed to check in with others at strategic points along the way.

Transferability

Because this research studies humor in the context of nonprofit human services it has multiple potential audiences. I do not presume that my analysis will be immediately applicable to other settings. On the other hand it is my hope that the thick description and detail I provide will serve to illuminate this complex dynamic, and perhaps generate some insight into how context and relationships mediate interpersonal humorous communication. Humor is an experience shared by most human beings. Similarly, the workplace setting is an important aspect of human social experience. Understanding and describing specific instances of humorous interaction within the workplace will hopefully provide occasions for others to potentially apply what I uncover to similar contexts, perhaps in a way that enhances their interpersonal effectiveness.

Data Analysis

The micro-sociological theory of symbolic interactionism places the human endeavor to construct meaning within the realm of the social experience of discourse. This research rests on the assumption that humorous communications are particularly powerful and revealing examples of this symbolic discourse. To capture these examples a qualitative research methodology was employed, utilizing ethnographic observation of human service workers. This embedded observation was an attempt, as Blumer (2002) calls it, to "catch the interpretive process" and understand the context in which people at work construct meaning via humorous interaction.

A constructivist research paradigm is well suited for this task. I immersed myself in several non profit agencies, in order to know their staff, their leadership, their mission, and their culture. I observed them in meetings, at events, in conversations with each other, and interviewed them individually. I recorded my observations using field notes as well as audio recordings. I then organized my data using categories and codes, and began to develop the outlines of a broad theory of humorous interpretation that attempts to account for the contexts in which humor occurs. As has been previously stated, my unit of analysis here is the humorous interaction itself. It would have been easy to become distracted by the interesting stories of the individuals I got to know in this research, or the compelling missions of the respective agencies where they worked and the clients they served. However, my goal was to observe and collect specific examples of humorous interactions in hopes that they might inform the development of a grounded theory.

What follows in chapter 4 are what I have labeled *pericopes* (pronounced 'pə-`rik-ə-pi') – brief descriptions of some of the humorous circumstances I encountered in my

research. I have borrowed the term 'pericope' from biblical scholarship. The word comes originally from the Greek, meaning 'a cutting out' and is generally used to delineate a specific passage or story, usually from scripture, that is set aside for translation or analysis. Similarly, the units of analysis for this research are specific occasions of humorous interaction. It is necessary for me to cut them out of their context, describe them via a textual representation which explains their content and context, in order to further analyze them. Space and time limitations would not allow me to retell all of the occasions of humor that I experienced. I will present here the most illustrative examples in order to provide a foundation for the analysis in chapter 5 and theory in chapter 6.

As soon as I began gathering data, I also began analyzing the data. I had developed some initial sensitizing concepts and codes related to the earlier work I had done in workplace humor. I was highly aware of issues of gender and authority as well as relational trust. As time wore on I also developed an interest in the specific types of humor that I saw, and found myself asking: was this joke more in line with incongruity or superiority theories? I also became interested in the structure of the humorous narrative itself, which took me to the various semantic and conversational based humor theories described earlier. Thus, the more humor and sociological theory I read as I collected and analyzed data, the more interesting and informative the data became. I took care, however, to always attempt to let the data lead me first. When I saw something in a workplace that reminded me of something in the literature, I sought out the literature to reinforce it.

Describing and transcribing jokes and laughter

It is extremely difficult to recapture the context and spirit of conversational joking via direct transcription. Intonation, body language and timing, for example, play an important role in the effectiveness of jokes and story telling. Additionally, within everyday workgroup conversation people typically interrupt, talk over each other, and display a wide variety of laughter styles, from the simple small chuckle to the uproarious belly laugh. In spite of these difficulties, for some of the pericopes that follow in chapter 4 I felt it would be helpful to provide explicit examples of actual transcribed conversations to illustrate exactly what was uttered. The fields of discourse analysis and linguistic pragmatics provide helpful conventions for capturing this. I have chosen here to use the conventions provided by Neil Norrick (1993) in his very insightful text *Conversational Joking*. These are similar to those found in other works by pragmatic linguists who transcribe and study everyday conversation.

Norrick's (1993)Transcription Conventions

She's out.	Period shows falling tone in preceding element.
Oh yeah?	Question mark shows rising tone in preceding element.
Nine, ten.	Comma indicates a level, continuing intonation.
damn	Italics show heavy stress.
bu- but	A single dash indicates a cutoff.
so, (2.0)	numbers in parentheses show length of timed pauses
o(ho)kay	parentheses also enclose word-internal laughter
[at all.] [I just]	Aligned brackets enclose simultaneous speech by two or more participants.
Says "Oh"	Double quotes mark speech set off from the regular voice of the speaker.

Finally, it was never my intent to set myself apart and attempt to remain a completely objective observer of the workplace interactions described here. I am not simply a tape recorder or video machine who gathers images and sounds for playback later. I am myself an interpreting individual. Being aware of myself as part of the interpretive interplay of ethnographic observation and humor was an important aspect of staying true to the constructivist paradigm, as well as honoring the theoretical traditions at the base of this project. Therefore my own voice is often, although not always, present in the data. What follows are not just detailed thick descriptions of the workplace interactions I will analyze. Some pericopes also include in the narratives a distinct sense of how I felt as the researcher, and what my position was in relation to the data.

Limitations of the Study

This study provides a few brief snapshots of workplace humor for analysis and understanding. It is not intended to be a comprehensive, exhaustive, or definitive work on all workplace humor. It is limited, therefore by its own scope and aspirations.

The study also takes place in a particular time and location. It is therefore mediated by its own specific horizon. Just as the author has his own individual perspective, so also does this study have its own specific locus. It occurs within the confines of early 21st century America, with participants and in workplaces immersed in all the assumptions and cultural realities of that time and place. It would be ontologically and epistemologically impossible to presume that these assumptions and realities can be fully transcended, bracketed, and accounted for.

The research was also limited by some practical realities. I could not conduct a long-term ethnography of multiple institutions. The research was limited, therefore, by the data I could collect within a reasonable period of time. As a full-time executive director and a part-time doctoral student, I was also limited to specific locations.

Finally, even though I accounted for it by my research design, participant reactivity will always be an issue with humor research. Once people know their humor is under analysis, the humor itself becomes suspect. Again, researcher self-reflexivity as well as participant involvement minimized, but did not eliminate, this limitation.

Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the research methods used for understanding occasions of humor in nonprofit human service settings. My very general research question of "what happens when people use humor at work?" was addressed via the gathering of ethnographic data for description and analysis. I presented a theoretical justification of this approach based on the symbolic interaction theories of Herbert Blummer (2002) and the anthropological analysis of Clifford Geertz (1973). Additionally, the approach to grounded theory as developed by Kathy Charmaz was used as a basis for the theory development that came from this research. I described the theory-based/operational construct sampling strategy as being suited to a qualitative study of humor in the workplace. My specific research design and data collection strategies were then described. These include the general construct of becoming 'embedded' within one or more nonprofit organizations for sufficient lengths of time in order to experience and record specific instances of humorous interactions. This embedding required an initial omission of disclosure of my research topic, since people would naturally become self-

conscious if they know up front that humor is the subject of the research. The ethical

implications of this omission as well as a two-tiered method of informed consent were

described. Finally the issues of trustworthiness and limitations of this research were

presented, in an attempt to account for the overall context in which the study will occur.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to understand the interpersonal dynamics of humor as it manifests in the workplace. To this end an ethnographic participant observer methodology was employed. Data were gathered at two nonprofit human service agencies, and are represented here in what I have labeled pericopes. Pericope (pə-`rik-ə-pi) comes from the Greek root meaning to cut out, and is often used in biblical scholarship to describe a specific delineated passage or text that has a coherent, unified meaning and can be interpreted as a single unit.

Similarly, what follows are individual encapsulated narratives that describe the content and context of some of my fieldwork experiences. These are textual recreations of some of the interactions I observed and experienced during the course of the research. In every case names have been changed to pseudonyms in order to protect anonymity. I have also deliberately omitted agency names or references to location that may reveal any actual identities of the people described here.

Pericope 1: And So it Begins

I knew it would be impossible to accomplish an immersion in multiple different agencies at once. I still had my own agency to run, and a family to stay present for, so I needed to do this one at a time. The very first formal meeting I attended was at a community based youth serving agency. I had met the director earlier in the previous year, explained what I was doing, and he expressed a willingness to let me in. This agency solidly fit the criteria I had developed as part of my proposal. I got off to a rough

start. Several of the meetings I initially scheduled were cancelled at the last minute, often after I drove almost an hour to get there. Finally, Mark, the Executive Director (ED), assured me that his golf tournament committee group would be meeting for sure in the office of the committee chair, and that it would definitely not be cancelled.

I drove to the meeting, pulled into the lot, sat in the car and realized I haven't been this nervous for years. Even though I was familiar with the location, I got to the site – a real estate office - about 20 minutes early. Over the years I've been to hundreds of meetings like this. The next hour and a half would be spent discussing particulars of a charity golf tournament: board members, community volunteers, and the Executive Director would talk about sponsorships, prizes, auctions, foursomes, and tee signs. The main difference today was that this was my first meeting as a researcher. I was there to collect data, not to be a member of the committee, but as an observer. Armed with forms, a tablet and pen, and the hope that what I was doing would make sense, I walked into the Real Estate office and waited for the room to fill.

My IRB called for all participants to sign informed consent and my collection methods included a deception. In order to avoid reactivity, the plan was to tell participants that I was there to observe 'organizational communication' and omit any explicit reference to humor. As the meeting started, I reached for my forms and even consulted a script I had prepared. Only three people attended the meeting – the Executive Director, the committee chair, and a retired professional hockey player. Just as I am about to launch into my script, Mark, the Executive Director with whom I had arranged the research, announces to the committee: "OK everyone – this is Bill. He's going to sit in on our meetings for a while. He's doing research about humor."

So much for avoiding reactivity.

The hockey player looked up and said "No shit, really?!" You're not gonna tape what I say about these bozos are you?"

So there I was - my first official experience as a researcher, a little scared, but prepared. And within no less than 30 seconds my preparations are dashed and I am being confronted by a large, outspoken, marginally famous athlete from a violent sport.

I just said – "no, don't worry, I'm not taping anything today, but I *do* need you to sign these forms, if you don't mind."

The meeting continued, and in spite of my concerns about reactivity, I gathered some compelling data. It was an all male group, planning a sports event that caters mostly to male businessmen featuring other male sports celebrities, so it did not surprise me that some of the humor was a little on the rough side – almost akin to 'locker room' humor, even though we were sitting in a sunny, somewhat elegantly decorated modern meeting room and everyone, except the hockey player, was wearing jackets and ties.

For example, the hockey player looked at me and said of himself: "You'll see – I provide all the escape. If it weren't for me all these guys would be zombies." A few minutes later the group was brainstorming some sports personalities that might be able to play in the tournament. The name of an outspoken Philadelphia area sports news reporter came up. The hockey player said "I'd like to check that jerk into the boards, he's a royal asshole." Everyone else around the table laughed (including me).

Soon thereafter the name of Lawrence Taylor, a hall of fame linebacker for the New York Giants, was mentioned. The executive director was clearly torn. Attracting a sports personality of that stature would certainly help with the bottom line, but Taylor

had recently been arrested for statutory rape, and this is a youth serving organization. The idea was dismissed as untenable, but not without some wry smiles being exchanged in the room. No overt jokes about Taylor were shared, but the prospect of doing so was palpable.

Finally, on the heels of the Taylor discussion, the conversation turned to women. In a stab at self-deprecating humor, the hockey player remarked: "my standards are pretty low, girls just need to have more than one tooth and be smaller than me." There were some subdued giggles at this remark, and then the Executive Director turned to me and said, apologetically, "men will be men."

A few minutes later, when discussing the golfing abilities of some of the hockey player's teammates who would play in the tournament, the ED tapped the volunteer committee chair's shoulder and said: "stupid hockey players who don't play golf." No one laughed, except the ED who made the jest. This was an example of the strategic withholding of laughter in a social situation where there was a clear choice to do so. Mark was following up on the self-deprecating humor that had come earlier. The hockey player had already made fun of himself, which Mark took as an opening to reply in turn. Mark's jest was not even about the specific hockey player in the room, but about hockey players in general. However, he crossed an unspoken, fluid, changeable line. He made fun of the person in the room with the most authority and power, and even though he tried to engage everyone else in the jest by laughing at his own joke, no one responded.

Of critical importance, however, is that the meeting continued, and within seconds the group was on to the next item for discussion. There were no *immediate* ramifications of Mark's transgression. It was just one, small, moment in the total

accumulation of circumstances that contributed to the overall creation of meaning and communication that occurred within this group over the period of 1 ½ hours. Within minutes, Karl, the volunteer chair of the meeting, a wealthy businessman described earlier as "knowing all the rich people in this town" was listening to the hockey player tell the story about his "best round of golf ever." Karl interrupted him with the question: "Did you cheat?" This time everyone laughed, revealing that the power dynamics were totally different. It was socially acceptable for Karl to playfully make fun of the hockey player, in contrast to Mark, who could not. On paper, one would assume that the Executive Director of the organization for whom the event was being planned would for all intents and purposes be the acknowledged leader of the group. After examining their humorous interactions, however, it was clear that the power relationships were in fact inverted, and Mark, the ED, was at the bottom.

<div align="center">Pericope 2 – Mad Props</div>

Nine women are seated around a white conference room table. The women constitute the bulk of a staff that runs a shelter for homeless families, and the conference room is inside the main building of the shelter. The room has no windows and is just barely big enough for all of us. It is cluttered with random donated items – toys, clothing, and stuffed animals. As an observer I sit outside of the circle that constitutes the team, as does the secretary who takes the minutes. The group meets every Monday. Although the general agenda is often the same, the content of their meetings varies greatly according to what is going on with their clients, with the building, and also with the agency as a whole, since this shelter is one of several different programs that fall under a larger corporate umbrella. Over the course of time I noticed that staff members tend to sit in the

same seats week after week, and that these seating arrangements reflect power relationships. The program director who leads the meeting, for example, always sat at the head of the table, and the secretary never sat within the circle, even though she was an active participant in discussions. The staff around the table has been working with the program for varying lengths of time, some for as much as 10 years, others for only a few months.

Early on in my research I noticed that there is a definite sense of camaraderie among this team, in spite also of some very clearly delineated power relationships. One of my first memos regarding this team included the observation: "the staff members are very involved in the intimate details of their client's lives, almost like housemates, yet they don't live there, they work there. In spite of the fact that Maggie (the program director) is a very outspoken and strong leader there was not an overwhelming feeling of power differential in this meeting, especially when they talked about the clients. It is almost like they could be a group of friends sitting around the table in a restaurant somewhere telling stories, except instead they are professionals discussing the case management of homeless clients."

On this particular day the meeting began with a discussion of the 'strengths-based' approach to case management. Simply put, rather than focusing on working to try to fix clients' problems, this approach attempts to amplify their strengths. Some staff had just been trained on this technique and they were reporting about implementing it to the team. In general it was regarded as successful, so much so that some clients were brought to tears when the case managers pointed out their strengths. Someone joked: "Yay, Jeanney, you made your client cry"!! This was met with a large outburst of laughter from

the whole room. With the mood thus elevated, a separate caseworker said, "finding strengths in some of these people is pretty tough. Remember, I got the *Alex* family on *my* caseload." This comment was followed by some supportive groans and new bouts of laughter. Maggie, the program director, follows up and points out that perhaps persistence could be one of this family's strengths, since "they seem to be persistently fighting with us." Everyone chuckled at this, and the meeting moved on to the next agenda item which included the need for people to pitch in to help run a play group for the kids in the shelter. This is not a job people enjoy, since the kids are pretty rowdy. The week prior Maggie had staffed it, which was not something she normally does as the program director. One of the newer, younger caseworkers who accompanied Maggie in this duty then told the rest of the team about the experience. She included in the story a description of how Maggie "laid the smack down on the kids – they all wanted Mr. Pete" – in other words Maggie was pretty strict, especially compared to the gentler person (Mr. Pete) who usually staffs the program. The team laughed consistently and loudly throughout the whole narrative. The young caseworker telling the story was essentially making fun of her superior who struggled to control the group just like everyone else did. The caseworker smoothed it all over at the end of the story, however, by saying Maggie deserves "mad props" for how she dealt with the kids group. Maggie looked up and said "mad props?" and the caseworker replied "yeah, mad props, you know, good job." This brought even more laughter. The incongruity of a very young, new employee using street language to compliment a person several rungs above her in the organizational hierarchy was clearly hilarious to this group, especially since Maggie had no real clue what the term "mad props" actually meant.

In street vernacular, the term 'mad' is often used to mean 'a lot' or 'very', as in 'that sandwich was mad good' or 'he has mad money'. The word 'props' is short for 'proper' and means respect. So when you give someone 'mad props' you are giving them a lot of respect, and acknowledging something you think was well done. After the caseworker's story, for the rest of the meeting the term 'mad props' came up repeatedly as a joke. When Sandy, a caseworker who struggles with computer literacy, reported that she actually opened an attachment successfully, one of her coworkers said "mad props". Similarly, the caseworker supervisor gave Dora "mad props" for completing paperwork on time. Each time it was mentioned it got a hearty chuckle from the rest of the group, but the real laughs came toward the end of the meeting when Maggie (the boss) tried to use the term, but blew it. She said, when clearly trying to compliment someone, "yeah, mojo." The rest of the team just howled with laughter, and Catherine said, "*No* Maggie! Its *mad props,* not *yeah mojo*!" Maggie just shrugged, accepted the laughter the group was having at her expense, acknowledged her ignorance of the street vernacular, and went on with the meeting.

Pericope 3 – A pen provides diversion and release

About 12 managers are meeting with the administrative vice president, their immediate supervisor in most cases, for a regular management team meeting. The meeting has been going on for about 20 minutes, and there has been little said of much interest to anyone. The first part of the meeting concerned minutia regarding the agency medical benefit which is beyond most of the participant's control. This second part was about performance evaluations and job descriptions. Put simply, it is clear that most people in the room are bored. The leader of the meeting has a very flat affect, and unlike

many other meetings I attended, there were lengths of time without any humorous

interchanges at all. We are in a windowless, somewhat drab conference room. The leader

(K) has been talking for about 10 minutes about job descriptions when the committee's

attention suddenly turns to two people at the table. One (B) is trying to help another (A)

with something on the side of her face. Suddenly, almost everyone in the room ends up

talking, and laughing, at once, and the team leader gets completely usurped by an absurd

circumstance.

K -	…All job descriptions went to the personnel committee and then if they were significant and even sometimes if they weren't then they would go to the board for approval. Well there have been so many lately that it's just been - …
G -	[Oh my God – I've been watching you guys and its just hysterical, sorry]
A	[How the hell did you do that?]
C,D,E,F	[loud, deep laughter]
B-	[What were you doing?]
A -	I didn't!
G-	I know you did and I've been watching you for like the last 10 minutes trying to get that *pen* out of her ear!
A	[laughing so hard she can't talk, just barely breathe]
B	Is the back on it?
A	No (ha) no
B	No, OK
A	Sorry (more deep hysterical laughter)
B	[Are you OK?]

C   [She got her (ha) pen stuck in her (ha) ear!]

D   [Her pen was in her ear?]

G   Is that procedure covered by the medical?

All (except K) [loud laughter]

A   [that was good]

K   Anyway – going back to the subject, new job descriptions would have to be approved…..

This episode lasted less than 30 seconds, but the atmosphere in the room afterwards was palpably different. For the next 5 minutes the team was much more engaged, different individuals contributed to the conversation, and even though the subject matter was the same, the interaction made it much less boring. It occurred to me that this workgroup really needed that relief, and when it was not available via verbal interaction the group found something else to laugh at. (A) was clearly embarrassed by the attention and her misfortune. The group leader, every one's boss, was clearly annoyed and barely tolerant of the banter, however she was also powerless to do anything about it.

<div align="center">Pericope 4: Ridicule and Social Control – A Nazi salute</div>

This pericope takes us back to the team of 8 women who work at the shelter for homeless families. Positions on the team include the program director, who has the most authority, case managers who work with the clients, and a program supervisor who is in charge of the case managers. A volunteer coordinator and a secretary also sit in on the team meetings. The meetings are generally very lively, and include a considerable amount of jokes and banter. The first 2 minutes of one meeting, for example, included 5 distinct joking episodes.

Some people have been with the program for a long time, including the Director (Maggie) and the program supervisor (Dora). Others have less experience, including Karen, who is brand new with the program and works as a case manager. It is important to bring her up to speed fast, because another of the case managers (Vera) is pregnant and will soon be on leave. One of the very first things I noticed about this team was the special attention Karen received from the others, and it was not until I learned she was new that this attention made sense. The team used humor, or a humorous tone, to send Karen some pretty clear messages about her place in the hierarchy as well as what is acceptable and what is not. This was especially true of Maggie, the Director, as we will see below.

Karen was initially quite willing to use humor to assert herself. In one of the first meetings I attended I noted with surprise that after being given a directive within a meeting from Maggie, Karen made a highly exaggerated saluting gesture, placing her hand on her forehead and extending her arm out toward Maggie as Maggie spoke. Others in the meeting laughed, but nervously, since it seemed that Karen had crossed a line. Maggie responded "Oh, wait, I thought you were going to give me some kind of Heil Hitler sort of thing – like I'm kind of the shelter Nazi." It was clear that Karen was new and hadn't quite figured out all the rules yet. These rules include the fact that although Maggie is approachable, and has a good sense of humor, visibly mocking her authority by an exaggerated salute in this way was risky. Maggie was clearly taken aback somewhat by the gesture, and communicated this with her body language and tone of voice. But she still played along with the joking scenario by amplifying the metaphor and invoking the term 'shelter Nazi'.

Early on in one of their next meetings the following exchange occurred in which the whole group had a pretty hearty laugh at Karen's expense when she got some of the apartments mixed up:

Maggie   There was a mouse problem in that building. Who has people in that building? (Three case managers, including Karen, raise hands)

Maggie   How do three of you have people in that building?

Karen   I do

Jean   I do

Vera   me too

Maggie   OK – but there's only 2 apartments!

Karen   Oh no, I *don't*! (embarrassed laughter)

All   [loud laughter at K for her mistake]

Karen   [Sorry it's my first family]

Vera   She can have my family if she wants

Maggie   Again, remember, mice, they're part of the "Other duties as assigned, right (laughs, alone)

Karen   Do we have to get rid of the mice?

In this exchange Karen clearly had a mental lapse about which apartment her clients were in. This lapse allowed the whole group to literally laugh at her for her mistake. She took it in stride, however, and the meeting continued. The topic of mice was still on Karen's mind, since she was not apparently aware that she was responsible for getting rid of mice. Maggie uses a humorous tone, and the stock phrase "other duties as assigned" to communicate very clearly that she simply cannot be squeamish about mice and still do this job. If Karen wants to be a case manger she had better learn to be able to

deal with getting rid of mice. In fact, it can sometimes get even worse! Maggie

subsequently launches into a humorous narrative about even bigger rodents:

Maggie   We have had that many mice and other things – we had once in the 211
                building where the squirrels chewed in under the eaves

Karen   [laughs]

Maggie   [and but you know]

Karen   If I woke up and there was a little squirrel right there I'd be freaking out!

All   [laughter]

Maggie   [He wasn't right there]

Maggie   (very ironic tone) – There was DRYWALL between the eaves

Vera   We weren't supposed to tell her that!

Maggie   Yes, I guess there's some information we just don't share right away.

        Later in the same meeting an even more explicit example of the use of humor to

moderate a pretty severe message about Karen's place in the hierarchy occurred.

Maggie   (running the meeting) OK – anything else for our agenda, who has items
                for us?

Dora   I do

Maggie   OK – and I know we have some volunteer things, anything you have that
                you want to bring up?

Vera   I do.

Karen   I do too.

Maggie   No, no. You're not next. You're at the bottom of the pile right now.
                (laughs)

        Here the team leader was sending a very clear message about Karen's place on the

team, however, by laughing while she delivers it she makes the message more ambiguous

and therefore possibly more acceptable. Maggie can maintain the appearance of camaraderie and social politeness that is generally expected. On teams of this type an explicit hierarchy of agenda preferences would be condemned as unnecessary and anti-egalitarian. The program director certainly prides herself on the trusting nature of her team and the collaborative ways they work together. This attempt at humor therefore arises from the incongruity of her words 'you're at the bottom of the pile right now' and the reality of the teams experience – that everyone should have an equal say about when and what they discuss at their meetings. The same technique is employed by Maggie just a few minutes after the exchange transcribed above. In fact, she continues with the same joke. After the speaker she had 'allowed' to talk first was done, she called on someone else (not Karen):

Maggie: (pointing to Val) OK, it's your turn, you're next on the seniority list, do you have anything you want to share?

Val: (in a sarcastic tone) No. Maybe if I hear *their* ideas I will come up with one.

In this instance it was clear that Val, who works along side of Karen as a partner, was showing solidarity with her partner. She was defying her boss's boss with that one simple sentence. Maggie could not take overt offense at this, because the group was involved in what Norrick (2003) describes as a jointly held "metalinguistic" understanding that everyone here is only kidding. It would be inappropriate for anyone to take this seriously, and is a telling example of the paradox of power and language characteristic of irony and sarcasm. We can say something very aggressive, like "You're at the bottom of the pile right now", but because of the common social convention that this is supposed to be funny, the hearer is essentially not allowed to take offense, or to manifest this offense if it

is felt. The same dynamic occurred in reverse when Val spoke. She was engaging in a direct form of subversive humor – poking fun at the program director – who was not allowed in this instance to show any feelings about being undermined in this way. The traditional expected reaction to words like this has been reversed. Due to an unspoken common understanding of the context and conventions of the conversation a new employee has been given their place, and a boss has been challenged for pointing it out. I noted in both my field notes and from the transcriptions of this meeting that Karen was much quieter from this point on. The message about her place on the team had gotten through, at least for now.

Pericope 5: The Retard Bus

At a meeting near the holidays of a team that works with children, a workgroup is deciding upon the various options for activities available to them. One local theater troupe has offered to have a special performance that local charities can bring kids to for free. This prompts the following interchange between members of the team:

A   OK – the theater, every year they write to us and say that they are going to have, I always love this, a special performance for the underprivileged and special needs children. I actually think its a little lame that they don't just give out tickets to all different performances instead of 1 special day that they do it. They did this last year and I think it's like a school day.

B   That's like making them sit on the back of the bus

A   Well Yeah, or you know on the little bus

C   [it's the retard bus]

E   [really let's start pointing them out]

C   I wrote my college essay about taking the retard bus to school.

E   That is not politically correct

87

C	That's what the essay was about. My brother was a *retard* and went on the little bus to the special school! He got on at the bus stop and everyone called it the *retard* bus.
A	[hearty laughter]
B	[hearty laughter]
E	[hearty laughter]
C	I got a full scholarship – I'm OK with it.
A,B,C,E	Loud laugh together

My field notes on this interchange included a note to remind myself to look up an article I remembered about ethnic humor. In that article Davies (1982) describes characteristics of ethnic joking across cultures. He asserts that ethnic jokes help to describe social and moral boundaries of a nation or ethnic group. By making fun of outsiders or people who are different, an in-group can make those differences appear less threatening. Davies does not in this way defend the use of ethnic humor as appropriate. He is simply describing its utility within specific cultures. In much the same way speaker C is staking out her territory with regard to special needs children and clarifying some common assumptions. Everyone at the table had the shared experience of seeing special needs kids taking a little yellow bus to school. Speaker C takes this experience further and via a personal story narrative explains a childhood experience of this with her brother.

The story is funny, rather than sad, because the speaker couples it with her use of it to get into college. The risqué nature of the story is acknowledged by speaker E, who says "that is not politically correct." But C is entitled to this transgression precisely because she is sharing a personal experience about herself and her family, not a generally defined outsider. She is an insider, making fun of herself and her brother. The timing of

her delivery of the punch line – "I got a full scholarship – I'm OK with it" - was perfect. It was in effect minimizing the obvious pain and problems that go along with a special needs child in favor of the benefit of getting into college via an essay about it. Anyone who knows speaker C knows this minimization was a joke, an exaggeration used to get a good laugh, and it worked. We all also gained some important and valuable information about C as a person. We now know she has a special needs brother, but also that this is a topic she is comfortable joking about. It portrays a more developed sense of herself. She is beyond the place where this is too tough to talk about, and is now OK with laughing about it, even making a joke at the brother's expense.

Pericope 6 – 'Bored' Meetings

As part of being embedded in the agencies I attended meetings and events at all levels of the organizations. This included high level board meetings as well as front line staff meetings and everything in between. In general it was my observation that the higher I went on the organizational chart the more formal the communications became, and humor became both less frequent and less personal. Formal board meetings often included long lengths of time without so much as a joke or an attempt at humor, as compared with front line staff. The following are typical examples of humor as displayed at board meetings:

When reviewing minutes from a prior meeting the board chair pointed out that the word "funds" had been misspelled. He said "we need to keep track of our *funds*, not our *fuds*." This got a small laugh from a few in attendance. At another meeting the treasurer said, while giving a report, that "if you are passionate about audits I'd be glad to send out

notices for the next meeting. I expect an overwhelming response." Here the speaker was clearly using irony since very few people are actually passionate about audits.

The difference between accepted interactional joking norms from one level of hierarchy to another, even within the same organization, was quite striking. Personal stories, self deprecating humor, and even superiority humor about others was notably lacking in board meetings. Humor in general was conspicuous by its absence at the higher levels, and conspicuous by its presence on the front lines. I found this to be true at both organizations I studied in detail, and when I became aware of it noticed it in my own organization as well. Front line team meetings are often characterized by loud, long spates of laughter, however, our board meetings as a rule tend to be more staid, low key, and humorless.

<center>Pericope 7: Caffeine & Horses</center>

Research about workplace humor would be incomplete without paying some attention to electronic media and non-verbal communications. While this was not the primary focus of my research, during the year I conducted my research I noted a few interesting instances of this type of nonverbal humorous communications, including a facebook exchange and a classic water-cooler style cartoon.

I noticed the following cartoon taped to the wall by the coffee maker at one of the agencies I visited. It struck me because the same cartoon hung for years by the coffee pot at my current workplace.

<center>90</center>

Figure 2. Drawing by Scott Adams (Adams, 2003).
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This cartoon generates its humor by exaggeration, and suggests that Dilbert's dysfunctional office mates are lifeless without caffeine. The image of people passed out on the floor while Wally, the perennial useless caffeine addict, stammers a plea for an antidote as if he was poisoned, is humorous enough in and of itself to create a laugh. But potential ramifications beyond the words and images in the cartoon itself are created when someone takes the time to cut it out and paste it on the wall in a workplace. The actual meaning of such an act is inherently ambiguous, and because no verbal dialogue takes place this ambiguity generally remains unexplored.

For example, in the cartoon the secretary displays decidedly selfish behavior by substituting decaf for all office coffee. The person who posts the carton could conceivably be making a statement not about coffee, but about a similarly selfish secretary or office manager they work with. Similarly, the person could be comparing their own workplace and co-workers to the fictional characters in the strip, a less than favorable comparison. Each of these could be taken exception to by someone reading the strip by themselves in a break room. In all probability the person posting the cartoon just thought it was funny, and wanted to share that humor with others, however, as we have

91

seen in previous examples, humor is commonly used to communicate negative critical messages in a safe, less risky manner. Cartoons can also serve that function.

This particular strip is relatively harmless; however, serious consequences have been suffered by employees who post Dilbert cartoons in workrooms. In October of 2007 Douglas Steward was fired from his job at the Catfish Bend Casino for posting a Dilbert cartoon on the wall in an employee break room. Supervisors took exception to the cartoon's comparison of "bosses" to "drunken lemurs." (Kauffman, 2008) The company challenged Steward's claim for unemployment compensation, but lost the case when the judge decided that Steward's behavior was a good faith error of judgment as opposed to intentional subordination and misbehavior.

The subject matter of the Dilbert cartoon pales in comparison to a Facebook exchange I saw during my research. An article had appeared in the local paper about a man who was charged in court for attempting to have sexual relations with a horse. This prompted the following series of postings:

A: Check out this article (posts link)

B: Unbelievable

C: Very sad.

A: Also funny

B: Guy was definitely twisted – do you think he had a 'hoof fetish'?

C: He might get 'hoof in mouth' disease

A: You guys are awful. Lay off him. He's my 'mane' man

B: I heard he eats 'thoroughbred' every day for breakfast

A: Ouch

C: LMAO!

This exchange manifest characteristics typical of conversational wordplay and punning as described by Norrick (2003), including competitive one-upmanship to show off the wit of the speaker, and an enhancement of rapport, even with potentially aggressive subject matter. It is the same type of verbal joking behavior that might occur anywhere – in a locker room, a barroom, or someone's living room. What is of interest to this study, however, is that the exchange occurred during the day, between people ostensibly at work, via media that mimics verbal communication but differs from it in important ways.

The whole exchange is making fun of a person in serious criminal trouble who allegedly engaged in deviant sexual behavior. Speaker C's initial reaction to the story as 'very sad' did not prevent the trio from making jokes. The jokes were posted after the initiator says 'funny also' – essentially giving permission to others reading the posts that it's OK to make jokes. One important difference between verbal and electronic communication such as this is timing and duration. If this were a verbal conversation it would have taken only a matter of seconds. Depending on the situations of the three speakers, however, this exchange could have occurred over a matter of hours, and yet it follows most of the same rules of conversational humor described by Norrick (2001). This temporal distance, combined with the perception of personal closeness provided by Facebook friendships, may provide tacit permission for individuals to post responses that they would not have otherwise spoken in a face-to-face verbal conversation, especially during work hours.

Conclusion to Findings

The pericopes described above include a representative sample of the humorous interactions I collected over the course of a year as I embedded myself into two separate human service agencies. By doing so I drew on my experiences in these agencies, as well as my own background and experiences as a nonprofit human service administrator. These experiences were documented via field notes and audio tape recordings. I attended multiple meetings and events at these agencies. I also conducted personal interviews, and documented via field notes my miscellaneous interactions with the participants. I familiarized myself with the missions of the agencies via a review of their websites, brochures, and other written materials. Individual conversations with executives and managers at the agencies helped me to accurately discern reporting and power relationships among the people I studied.

These data were collected, transcribed, and compiled into a considerable amount of raw material which, after coding and sorting provided the basis for the humorous interactions provided in this chapter. It was highly important for me to be able not only to understand the content of the humor I experienced, but also the context, so that as a whole I had the basis for attempting to understand the meaning these interactions had for the participants. In some instances I was able, post facto, to triangulate my understanding of these meanings via personal interviews with the participants.

All of these experiences and data provided the material for me to engage in an iterative process. At the same time as I was gathering this data I was also reviewing various theoretical resources. These included academic journals on humor, humor theory text books, micro-sociological theory, texts on qualitative research methodology, literary

criticism, and hermeneutics. These eventually came together to form the basis of a

theoretical perspective that I believe will inform and illuminate the data presented in this

chapter. This theory will be applied in the following chapter on data analysis, and then

described in detail in chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS

This research addresses the general question: what happens when people use humor at work? Using field observations data were collected over the course of a year at two human service organizations. These were presented in the preceding chapter as pericopes, or narrative representations of the humorous episodes I experienced. This chapter will analyze these pericopes in more detail, and attempt to account for multiple dimensions of humorous communications. The analysis will present my own interpretations of what the humorous communications mean, based on my experiences in the agencies and with the people involved. It will therefore attempt to account not just for the content of the communications but also for what the humor might imply regarding the participant's relationships, interpretations, and the context in which they occur. A comprehensive theoretical basis for this analytic approach will then be presented in chapter 6 to follow.

As part of her constructivist grounded theory methodology, Charmaz (2003) recommends the 'constant comparative method' of data analysis, which occurs during and after data collection. Similarly, I approached this research with some overarching sensitizing concepts in mind that were continually refined and focused as time went on. My initial coding of the data included instances related to types of humor (incongruity or superiority), gender and sexual joking, power relationships, negative humor (or humor gone awry), ridicule, ambiguity, context, and trust. As the data were coded and categorized these were refined down to four primary categories: ridicule and non-humor, social lubrication, power and authority, and creation of meaning. This chapter will use

these four categories to shed further light on the data. Each will be explained using examples from the various pericopes presented in chapter 4.

Ridicule and Non-humor

If a workplace supervisor were to point to one of his/her subordinates in a meeting and say, point blank, "you are the least valuable person on this team and I don't want to hear what you have to say until everyone else has had a turn" the person so singled out would quite likely react negatively, and angrily. Others on team might also feel uncomfortable and wonder when their turn will come to be publicly humiliated. If, on the other hand, that exact same message is communicated via the context of a joke, the social conventions regarding joking behavior dictate a very different response from both the subordinate and the team.

This is precisely what happened in pericope 4 (*Ridicule and social control – a Nazi salute*). Maggie, the program director, singled out Karen, the newest member of the team, and explicitly silenced her agenda contributions, saying "No, you're not next, you're at the bottom of the pile right now". But in this instance no one got visibly angry or concerned. In fact, people laughed, because Maggie's words were perceived as a joke. The ambiguity of the joke-telling context softened the message, but in fact, the message was the same. The perception that Maggie was joking did not fully negate the actual content of her words. The message that Karen's input into the meeting was less important than her peers was exactly what people perceived. This was confirmed when Karen's peer was asked to contribute an agenda item, and she sarcastically replied: "no, maybe if I hear *their* ideas I'll come up with one". She was communicating that she didn't like the way Karen was being treated, along with a whole host of resulting implications. Now the

tables have been turned and the supervisor is being derided. Without the joke telling

context such a direct and public criticism of the boss's authority could be labeled

insubordination. Instead, it was a brief, passing moment. The team laughed at both

comments. A tension existed between the actual words people spoke and the joking

intention of the speaker. This joking intention was communicated mostly non-verbally

via tone of voice and via the mutually understood social context of joking. What I find

particularly fascinating about humor in this sense is that the ambiguity serves two

functions. On the one hand it masks her meaning by softening the message, and on the

other it amplifies her message by presenting it in a way that the speaker is more likely to

hear or understand it. Humor allows the speaker to utter her harsh words ("you're at the

bottom of the pile right now") without the ramifications of their literal meaning. And yet,

this *is* what she really meant – the employee she spoke this to was, in fact, the youngest,

newest member of the team. She was at the bottom of the pile, and this is what was

communicated. The ambiguity of the joking context created a tension that revealed a

clear message while at the same time camouflaged the speakers meaning.

This more indirect means of communicating the message about Karen's place on

the team may be softer, and more palatable, but also remains more open to interpretation.

It is also important to note that this whole interaction regarding Karen's place at the

bottom of the pile came after she had crossed the line with her Nazi salute. I believe that

Karen's misguided attempt at humor by saluting her director in an exaggerated way

subsequently necessitated that she be reminded of her true position in the hierarchy.

Maggie was attempting to do just that, but used humor instead of a direct message. I also

do not believe that much of this was conscious to the participants. I do not think that after

the salute Maggie made a decision that Karen needed to be put in her place. Instead, I believe humor was just one important aspect of the everyday communication that occurs within the workgroup. Their use of humor reflected their reality and their relationships. Sometimes it was a conscious decision to tell a joke in a specific way, but more often than not the humorous messages just rolled off of people's tongues as unconsciously as any other verbal sequence.

Michael Billig (2005) asserts that the use of humor to communicate negative messages is all too often overlooked in humor research. He focuses on the notion of ridicule as an important part of the social communicative fabric, without which we would have less social control. Similarly, Karen was clearly ridiculed by her peers when she made a mistake about which building her client lived in. The team literally laughed at her and her mistake. This laughter was then follow-up by a clear lesson regarding her responsibilities for getting rid of mice. The exchange was friendly, in the sense that no one had the explicit intention of hurting Karen's feelings or indiscriminately making fun of her. There is a difference between ridicule and bullying. Nevertheless, Karen was learning about her job, her peers, her bosses, and her clients, but she was being taught via the use of ridicule.

Billig's work also introduces the concept of 'unlaughter', that is, the strategic withholding of laughter in a social situation where it could be expected. Thus, the absence of laughter sends a very clear and powerful message. I witnessed this countless times during the course of my research. In Pericope 3 (*A pen provides diversion and release*) Kay, the supervisor leading the meeting, does not join in with the laughter of the rest of her team as one pulls a pen out of another's earring. She had the option, certainly,

of playing along with the joke. This would possibly have enabled her to connect on an emotional level with the rest of the group. Instead, Kay communicated her annoyance at the diversion by not laughing. Billig's point is that we do Kay an injustice by negatively judging her response. Favoring the camaraderie of the team over her desire to keep up with the agenda would be dishonest. In fact, their diversion by the pen was a symptom of the fact that the team really did not care about what Kay was saying. If Kay joins with them in this perception she is in fact undermining herself.

Another example of un-laughter occurred in pericope 1 (*And So it Begins*) when the executive director made fun of the hockey player. The hockey player had been poking fun at himself and at others throughout the whole meeting, and yet when Mark reciprocated in a clear attempt at a joke, no one laughed. The message sent to Mark by the group was clear: it is simply not Mark's "place" to make a joke like that, especially when, a few minutes later, someone else in the group makes a similar remark that in fact invokes laughter. Unlike the team we analyzed first in this section where the hierarchy was clearly delineated via formal organizational authority, in this instance the formal relationships between the parties is on the surface a little less clear. Mark, the Executive Director, is the only employee in the room. The others, even though they are volunteers, possess an informal authority related to their task of organizing a golf tournament. The hockey player has the star power, and the businessman has the money. In terms of the group they are the ones Mark must defer to. This does not mean Mark cannot participate in their joking. Mark was active in most of the banter that occurred during the meeting. Their choice not to laugh at this particular joke, however, sent a clear message. Of course one could say that perhaps it was just that his joke was not funny, therefore no one

laughed. But the fact of the matter is that people often laugh even if they don't think a joke is funny, as a form of social politeness and communication. When someone chooses not to do so, therefore, they are also communicating something about themselves and about the person they are interacting with.

<center>Social Lubrication</center>

In spite of the fact that there are dark, subversive, and negative aspects to humor, in general humor is considered to be a positive experience. It is enjoyable to laugh, and enjoyable to make others laugh. As explained in Chapter 2, there are multiple examples within the research regarding the positive effect that humor has on the workplace environment, including creativity, team effectiveness, and the perception of effective leadership. All of these factors were clearly visible during the course of my fieldwork. The team that included Maggie and Karen were able to joke about all kinds of experiences, not just their authority relationships. They made jokes about each other, about their agency, about their clothes, and about their clients. It was clear, in fact, that for the most part they trusted each other, and were able to engage in the level of emotional intimacy that laughter facilitates as a result of that trust.

Perhaps the best example of how humor lubricates social interaction was the incident with the pen and the earring. Simply put, that part of the meeting was boring, and no one was listening to a word the team leader was saying. After the laughter, and as a result of the jokes that ensued, the team was re-engaged and focused. This occurred in spite of the fact that Kay did not participate in the banter. This incident also provided some release to a tension the team was acutely feeling at the time. This was in all likelihood Kay's last meeting. She was being laid off as part of an organizational

restructuring. The whole team knew it, but had not yet spoken of it. Soon after the incident with the pen, the person who joked about the health plan explicitly named the fact that Kay was leaving. The team came together and supported her, expressed their sympathy, and from that point on it was as if a veil had been lifted. People were genuinely listening to each other, and communicating more effectively about the rest of the agenda.

Similarly, pericope 5 (*Retard Bus*) detailed a joke narrative told by a member of a team that on the surface uses language that is patently offensive. The single word "retard" connotes highly negative stereotypes of children with intellectual disabilities. Nevertheless a group of socially conscious and dedicated human service workers laughed out loud at the narrative, predominantly because of the way it was told, the person doing the telling, and the context in which it occurred. Change any one of these, and the outcome would likely have been very different. This pericope will be revisited in the following section on creation of meaning, however for our purposes here the story worked to bring the people assembled in the room together as an 'in group.'

The joke teller was allowed to transgress the boundaries of political correctness regarding the stereotypes associated with the word 'retard' because we knew right away that her brother suffered from mental disabilities, and was often given that very label. When someone with a family member uses such a slur, it is perceived and accepted differently than when someone else without this personal experience uses it as a derogatory description. As listeners to her story, we also became insiders to this description. For these few brief moments as we listened to her talk about getting on the 'retard' bus we were all, as a group, in a joke telling space wherein our everyday realities

and beliefs could be suspended for the sake of the story. This is the same dynamic that occurs when someone says something like "Two cows are standing in a pasture and one says to the other…." In jokes, we are given permission to suspend perceptions of reality and allow everyday values and experiences to be temporarily bracketed. This mutual shared space of joke telling brings the people together into a common context. In this particular story the group had just shared mutual consternation over the fact that the theater group wanted to provide just one performance for all the special needs children. Their common perspective that this is somehow wrong also bound them together into a common understanding about the children they serve. So the group was ripe for the joke teller's story about her brother taking the 'retard bus' and how she had used that story as part of the college application process. Her punchline, "I got a full scholarship – I'm OK with it" works so well because it suddenly reverses these roles of outsider and insider. She is not really an insider in allegiance with her special needs brother. Instead her words and tone of voice temporarily implied that instead of caring about him, she simply used him as a convenient sob story as a way to get into college. Everyone around the table knew intuitively that this was not the case, therefore the incongruity of her words and her persona created the highly effective humor, and functioned to bring together everyone in the room into an affiliative relationship with her.

The role of humor in lubricating relationships within the agencies I studied also contributed to my general observation that humor occurred with different intensities at differing levels of the organizational hierarchy (Pericope 6: *'Bored' Meetings*). At front line levels staff of human service agencies experience stressors and uncertainties that are extremely challenging. During the course of my year I saw agencies laying off staff,

reducing infrastructure, and experiencing many fewer resources while at the same time the demand for their services increased. I attended meetings where people did not know if they would be back the next week, but were still expected to perform their duties with difficult clients with high demands. Such stress levels and work demands require an ability to rely on each other in a way that is qualitatively different from a team of, for example, board members who meet once a month and make high level decisions. I believe this is the reason humor manifested itself so much more frequently on the front lines. These teams simply needed it to function, and used it as such. These diversions do not necessarily have to take the form of one-on-one conversation. A well placed cartoon, or perhaps a Facebook exchange (Pericope 7: *Caffeine & Horses*), can function just as well to relieve stress and lubricate social interaction as a commonly experienced joke narrative told in a meeting.

Power and Authority

One of my sensitizing concepts going into this project was power and authority. I assumed before I started my fieldwork that issues related to power and authority would feature prominently in the workplace context. This assumption was well founded. I believe this is because lines of power and authority, both explicit and implied, very strongly influence and mediate workplace interactions. Humor reflects and in many cases even amplifies these power dynamics.

The most obvious example in the data presented here was Pericope 4 (*Nazi Salute*) wherein the humor itself was explicitly about power relationships. Maggie said to Karen, albeit in a joking manner, "You're at the bottom of the pile right now." She was asserting her place in the power hierarchy, as well as defining a subordinate's place in

relation to herself. But power and authority relationships were apparent in more subtle ways as well. As a form of subversion, or challenge to authority, Karen used humor in her exaggerated salute. She was in effect communicating that she acknowledges Maggie's place, but only comically. The salute was in response to a specific directive, which Karen obviously felt was beneath her. She had a host of options as a response to her boss's directive which ranged from simple obedience to outright defiance. Instead she communicated with her gesture something along the lines of "I'll do it, but only because you are saying so, and I think it's silly."

Subtle power dynamics were also apparent in Pericope 1 (*And so it begins*) when the participants in the meeting chose not to laugh. As discussed earlier the strategic withholding of laughter sent a message about Mark's place in the meeting. It clarified his status around the table as subordinate to the other two, who could freely joke with each other while Mark could not. It delineated the power boundaries above and beyond job descriptions and reporting relationships. Similarly, when Kay chooses not to participate in the group's response to the pen being stuck in the earring, she was communicating something important about her role in relation to everyone else. To her, the subject matter of the meeting was more important than the diversion. She would rather have continued to cover the agenda uninterrupted. For the rest of the group her response did not matter. This was in all likelihood also mediated by their knowledge that she was leaving her position. I would speculate that a few months earlier, when Kay still held a position of explicit institutional authority over the group that was not going to end by termination, the group might have paid more attention to her annoyance. But Kay was in many ways a lame duck in her job at that point, and the group's need for social lubrication and a

humorous break clearly trumped any deference they may have formally taken to their leader's annoyance.

It is clear within the literature that it is more socially acceptable to make jokes at a subordinate's or colleague's expense, but not a superior's – especially when that superior is present. Jokes about clients are pretty common among the teams I saw, but jokes about each other were even more so. Sometimes, however, superiors chose to joke about themselves, or else their gaffes were so obvious they can't be ignored. Such was the case when Maggie tried to be 'cool' by saying 'mad props' but instead came out with 'yay, mojo'. She was trying to relate to the common joke being shared by her subordinates, but couldn't do it. It was not just the messing up of the word that was comical. The fact that it was the boss who messed up the words added a layer of hilarity. Her attempt to join with the group in this way was incongruous on multiple levels. She clearly misunderstood the language being used, but also, due to her role in the organizational hierarchy, simply shouldn't have tried. The attempt itself was comical, because it was incongruous based on power and authority relationships.

Power relationships also quite naturally appear in jokes and situations related to sexual or ethnic humor. I believe the hockey player felt quite safe about making a joke about his sexual relationships with women, for example, because there were no women present in the room at the time. His remark "as long as they have more teeth and are smaller than me" was an attempt at humor which places no value on any traditionally important aspects of relationships. The joke implies that love, attractiveness, compatibility, or intelligence play no role in his decisions regarding relationships. His only concerns are a woman's size and number of teeth. This exchange had a definite

'locker room' feel about it, an impression supported by Mark's aside to me that "men will be men." Here the assumption was that we were all equals as far as being men, and that we would all implicitly understand and relate to the hockey player's lack of discrimination. All we as men want, in this joke context, are women. Who the women are as people are less important than how they stand up in relation to us, and the mere fact that they are female. The other men in the room were essentially invited to sympathize with the joke teller for having such indiscriminate taste in relationships.

Finally, the Dilbert cartoon addresses workplace power relationships in an indirect way. It is the character of the secretary who replaces the regular coffee with decaf. Secretaries traditionally have less explicit formal power within organizations, yet also often exercise considerable informal authority. They may be among the lowest on the organizational chart, but if you want to get something done you certainly need their cooperation. This is a perennial theme in Dilbert cartoons, and the one posted at the agency and copied here continues that theme. Her decision to replace the coffee affects everyone. The pointy haired boss lies face down on the ground in the last frame, completely neutralized by the secretary's selfish, subversive actions. This inversion of power is in fact a large part of the strip's humor. It points out the incongruity of formal organizational power relationships, and lays bare who really has power in an office setting. The secretary has the real power, not because she is an anointed boss, but because she controls what goes into the coffee pot.

Creation of Meaning

Most tension or incongruity theories of humor recognize that humor is created when the hearer resolves a tension created by distinct or dissonant meanings within the

joke or narrative. Thus, as we saw in chapter two, when the incongruity of a talking cow that can philosophize about the value of pi is juxtaposed with an ordinary cow who just says 'moo' – humor is created. This is most apparent in jokes involving word play or situational twists. The punning string as it occurred on Facebook, for example, manifests multiple uses of words related to horses, but forced them also into a context which was sexual. Now in the context of the joking string, the word 'thoroughbread' has new meaning, as does 'mane man' and having a 'hoof fetish'.

As I witnessed and experienced various episodes of humor over the course of my research I noticed something else. This resolution of the tension that facilitates humor does not always end when the joke is over. The resolution and understanding of the meaning of the joke remains, and is sometimes referred to repeatedly over the course of time. Some of the humorous episodes I highlighted here became recurring themes within the teams. 'Mad Props' was the most obvious of these, but there were others. This observation was one thing that led me to consider revisiting the work of Paul Ricoeur as I developed a grounded theory to explain what I saw. These jokes and experiences took on a meaning that was new to the participants, and that they will now carry with them as they move forward. The 8 people on that shelter team can never again hear the term "mad props" without almost immediately remembering the episode with Maggie, and quite probably smiling.

Similarly, the story about the 'retard bus' functioned to provide new symbolic meaning related to children with disabilities. In one of my follow-up interviews with a participant who was present in that meeting, the person told me: "I laughed so hard at that story, I will never see a school bus the same again." And it is not just our perception of

school busses that has changed. Our understanding of the woman who told the story has changed, not just because we have more direct information about her life and having had a brother with disabilities. We also know a little bit about how it affected her, and her abilities to cope. I am almost 100% certain that the team had a very positive impression of this, which is incongruous with her words. The words themselves implied a lack of care and concern for her brother – she merely used his plight to get into college. As a joke, however, the surface value meaning of these words are turned on their head. Of course she does not mean that, therefore she must mean something else, quite different. We understand her now on a deeper level, in a new and revealing way, which would simply not have been similarly achieved, had she just told us a factual narrative version of her childhood. This pericope, more than the others, signified for me the power of humor to bring a group together. We shared a very common, intimate bond as a result of the story and the laughter, a bond which may not have occurred as strongly had we not been joking about such a risqué topic.

Data Analysis – Conclusion

Thoughts about the efficacy and typology of humor theory were present throughout my work with these agencies and as part of my recurrent interaction with the data I collected. As the analyses above show, one cannot simply analyze what a joke means without referencing some form of theory as to how humor functions, or what in fact humor is. I have attempted in this chapter to provide a few examples of how humorous interactions can be understood and described. But these in turn were based on some theoretical assumptions that have yet to be explored. The following chapter is my attempt to do just that. Having just analyzed some specific examples of humor, I will now

move on to generalize a more theoretical basis for the approach I have taken to this

analysis.

CHAPTER 6

A GROUNDED THEORY

Introduction: Toward a more contextual understanding of workplace humor

This research investigated the experience of workplace humor via a constructivist research paradigm. Specifically, the study involved field observation of select nonprofit human service organizations. Grounded theory is a specific category of constructivist research wherein theoretical observations arise out of an iterative process between the researcher and the data. It became clear to me as I observed these interactions, and then worked through my data, that some of the broad, theoretical insights I experienced might inform my understanding of these data, as well as contribute to the general field of humor research. This chapter will explain a theoretical typology developed as a result of this investigation. The typology arose out of reflection on my field experiences and data, combined with my understanding of related disciplines and theories.

Humor is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that entails aspects of language, relationships, setting, and selfhood. Similarly, the academic study of humor is multi-disciplinary and entails aspects of pragmatic linguistics, sociology, psychology, literature, and philosophy. Any attempt to comprehensively understand and explain this diverse phenomenon will need to draw upon multiple perspectives. Therefore the unified contextual theory I will describe here draws upon multiple theories including hermeneutics, literary criticism, and symbolic interactionism. Each will be described, followed by an explanation of my contextual grounded theory.

The first section of this chapter includes a description of hermeneutics and literary theory. I draw upon the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur and the literary

criticism of M. H. Abrams. The second section describes the micro-sociological theory of symbolic interactionism including the work of Mead, Blumer, and Goffman. In the third section I will describe a broader contextual approach that brings together the various influences previously described into one theoretical understanding. In so doing I will describe relevant aspects of humor theory including those which clearly represent semantic, psychological, and sociological approaches. This theory will more adequately account for the context in which humor occurs. It situates the creation of meaning at the intersection of all of these approaches.

Section 1: Hermeneutics and Literary Theory

> …the self does not know itself immediately, but only indirectly, through the detour of cultural signs of all sorts, which articulate the self in symbolic mediations that already articulate action, among them the narratives of daily life. (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 80)

Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics accounts for human self-understanding via an in-depth analysis of language, narrative, and symbolism. The quotation above encapsulates his approach: we never have direct non-mediated access to the world, or even to ourselves. Instead we have access to our narrative interpretations of the world and ourselves. The cultural signs and symbols provided by our interactions with each other and with texts become the substance of these interpretations. Ricoeur's phenomenology painstakingly breaks down the narratives of everyday life into minute detail. While he never focused specifically on humorous discourse, his analyses of the roles of language and metaphor in the creation of new meaning and human understanding are of particular interest to this discussion.

Ricoeur and metaphor

Ricoeur's theory of metaphor has roots in a critical assessment and extension of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic structuralism. In essence, Ricoeur recognized the fact that words are polysemous and have multiple meanings. Although they can be broken down into constituent parts, these parts themselves are not the appropriate unit of analysis with regards to the generation of meaning in discourse. Instead it is the sentence, which includes aspects of syntax, grammar, and context, that "becomes the minimal unit of discourse" (Pellauer, 2007). Ricoeur also accounts for the fact that while discourse itself is perceived as a temporal event, its meaning lasts. His phenomenology describes how we continue to appropriate and re-appropriate new meanings that arise out of past events of discourse. Ricoeur therefore analyzes differences between spoken acts of discourse and textual representations, which by definition add ever more layers of cultural distance, time, and context that require further interpretation. He turns to specific aspects of discourse, including narrative and metaphor, to uncover instances wherein new meaning is created. He finds these mostly in poetic works but also explains their relevance as used within ordinary language (Gerhart, 1995, p. 216).

For Ricoeur metaphor is much more than a fancy ornamentation of language or description. He argues against traditional substitution theories of metaphor which imply that the metaphor itself could merely be replaced by some other word. Instead he posits a tension theory. By forcing together two meanings which were not previously juxtaposed, metaphor first destroys the constituent meanings of the individual concepts, and then creates a new meaning via the forced juxtaposition. True metaphor creates tension, which is resolved by appropriating a brand new meaning. Both the creation of metaphor and the

understanding of metaphor involve the role of "the creative imagination in apprehending resemblances" (Ricoeur, 1995).

Ricoeur describes this tension theory of metaphor as follows:

> What we have just called the tension in a metaphorical utterance is really not something that occurs between two terms in the utterance, but rather between two opposed interpretations of the utterance. It is the conflict between these two interpretations that sustains the metaphor. In this regard we can even say, in a general fashion, that the strategy of discourse by means of which the metaphoric utterance obtains its result is absurdity. This absurdity is only revealed through the attempt to interpret the utterance literally…Thus a metaphor does not exist in itself, but in and through an interpretation. The metaphorical interpretation presupposes a literal interpretation which self-destructs in a significant contradiction (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 50).

This metaphorical tension is responsible for the creation of a "surplus of meaning" which entails, unlike scientific or descriptive language, "the positive and productive use of ambiguity" (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 47). As such, true metaphor is impossible to translate. It can be replicated, and its meanings can endure over time, but only in the sense that each time a metaphor is understood it does so as a new instance of the creation of new meaning tied to the temporal experience of the resolution of an absurdity within discourse.

If, for example, we encounter a phrase such as "love is a rose", using Ricoeur's phenomenological description of discourse and the creation of meaning the following occurs. A tension is created in the interpreter between the mediated concepts of "love" and "rose". The literal meanings of the terms love, and rose do not match, but the sentence says that they do. The concepts love, and rose are always already our interpretations of the signs or terms. These concepts form out of the linguistic signs as they arise from the terms, but they are not the terms themselves. Even before they are juxtaposed the terms have multiple meanings, but now they are forced together in the

simple phrase "love is a rose." The juxtaposition, Ricoeur points out, occurs at the level

of the sentence, and comprises the actual act of discourse. While the sentence can be

broken down into words, the sentence itself is much more than the sum of its individual

parts (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 7). As a metaphor this specific type of sentence gives rise now to

a surplus of meaning. Perhaps when I encounter this juxtaposition of love and rose I

interpret the term 'love' in a broad very general philosophical sense. At the same time I

interpret the term 'rose' as a living, growing organic thing that needs cultivation and care.

When I force the two together I appropriate a new understanding of each. But there are

multiple alternate meanings conceivable for this juxtaposition. Perhaps I interpret the

term "love" not in a general sense but specific to me such as *my* love, or perhaps *my* life

partner. This could then be juxtaposed with an understanding of 'rose' that includes a

sweet smelling, delicate flower with the propensity to sting. The meaning appropriated in

the second instance is quite different from that of the first, but the signs themselves, that

is, the constituent words "love is a rose" are exactly the same.

There is an obvious similarity between Ricoeur's descriptions of metaphor's role

in the creation of meaning and humor theories that attribute the meaning of jokes to the

resolution of tension. It appears, in fact, that the selfsame dynamic is being described.

What I will suggest here as part of my own theory is a simple extension of Ricoeur.

Metaphor is one of the important mechanisms by which humans create and appropriate

meaning in discourse. Many jokes are, by their nature, metaphorical, in that they require

the resolution of tension created by the forced juxtaposition of disparate concepts. What

completes the syllogism here, then, is that jokes, as metaphor, can create new meanings.

They are not mere ornaments to discourse, or flowery descriptions that might otherwise

be expressed with more ordinary words and phrases. Jokes when embedded in the

dialogical experience of discourse are in fact one of the most effective ways we have to

express new or important information. This is why they occur with such frequency in

everyday discourse.

Abrams' typology

In his introduction to *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the*

Critical Tradition, M.H. Abrams describes the difficulty aesthetic criticism has when

attempting to define or even describe its task. He says:

> The diversity of aesthetic theories, however, makes the task of the historian a very difficult one. It is not only that the answers to such questions as 'What is art?' or 'What is poetry?' disagree. The fact is that many theories of art cannot readily be compared at all, because they lack a common ground on which to meet and clash. They seem incommensurable because they are stated in diverse terms, or in identical terms with diverse signification, or because they are an integral part of larger systems of thought which differ in assumptions and procedure. As a result it is hard to find where they agree, where disagree, or even, what the points at issue are. (Abrams, 1953)

If the words 'humor theories' are inserted into the above in place of 'aesthetic theories'

the quotation would be no less true. The same occasion in fact pertains. As we saw in

chapter 2 of this dissertation, humor theories vary broadly in definition, scope, and focus

depending on the discipline from which they arise and the research to which they are

applied.

Abrams' work on the history of criticism of romantic poetry provides an

insightful way to integrate the disparity he describes in aesthetic theories. Even when

taken out of this context, Abrams theoretical integration is equally well applied to the

field of humor studies. In an attempt to come up with a simple, manageable schema he

can use to understand the broad field of aesthetics, Abrams makes some very helpful

distinctions. He divides literary critical theories into four main groups: the mimetic, the pragmatic, the expressive, and the objective. Mimetic theories are primarily interested in the relationship between the work of art and the world, or Universe. They explain art as "essentially an imitation of aspects of the universe" (Abrams, 1953, p. 8) and represent the earliest and most basic form of art criticism. Pragmatic theories focus on the relationship between the work of art and the audience, and considers the art itself "chiefly as a means to an end, an instrument for getting something done, and tends to judge its value according to its success in achieving that aim." (Abrams, 1953, p. 14)

Expressive theories, in contrast, focus on the relationship between the work of art and the artist. Here poetry is defined as "the imaginative process which modifies and synthesizes the images, thoughts, and feelings of the poet." (Abrams, 1953, p. 22) The poem, painting, sculpture, or novel, therefore, portrays something important about the thoughts and feelings of the poet, painter, sculptor, or author. Expressive theories thus focus on the interpretation of these thoughts and feelings. Lastly, Abrams posits the category of Objective theories which focus primarily on the work of art itself. Although the first three by necessity must account for the poetic text, objective theories "regard the work of art in isolation from all these external points of reference, analyzes it as a self-sufficient entity constituted by its parts in their internal relations, and sets out to judge it solely by criteria intrinsic to its own mode of being." (Abrams, 1953, p. 26)

Abrams arranges these four classifications of theory types into four co-ordinates and places them into a pattern or schema, with the work of art at the center of a triangle surrounded by the artist, the universe, and the audience.
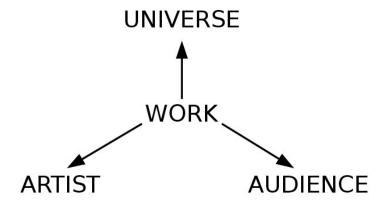
Abrams' classification schema looks like this:

UNIVERSE

WORK

ARTIST   AUDIENCE

Figure 3. Abrams' Classification Schema.

Abrams claims that "although any reasonably adequate theory takes some account of all four elements, almost all theories…exhibit a discernable orientation toward one only. That is, a critic tends to derive from one of these terms his principal categories for defining, classifying, and analyzing a work of art, as well as the major criteria by which he judges its value." (Abrams, 1953, p. 6)

Abrams' schema will be helpful in classifying the various humor theories described in section 3 to follow. Some theorists emphasize the joke itself, and analyze its constituent parts. Others focus on its relation to the world, and to people. Still others focus on the joke teller and the mode of delivery, and finally many theorists focus on a joke's effect on the listener or audience. It will be my attempt to unify these humor theories into a different, yet similar, schema, in order to bring them into a broader focus. With Abrams, I believe that good theories attempt to account for multiple coordinates, however, we will see that most humor research ends up emphasizing one aspect over another when analyzing this diverse phenomenon.

Section 2: Symbolic Interactionism

As has been previously stated, the work of Blumer and Mead provides an appropriate theoretical framework for the constructivist methodological approach of this investigation. Blumer's description of the "methodological position of symbolic interactionism" argues for the importance of "naturalistic inquiry" into the study of "human group life and human conduct."(Blumer, 2002, pp. 66-67) As such, symbolic interactionism is a solid base on which to conduct research that attempts to understand lived experience, especially experience related to the creation of meaning through discourse. But the symbolic interactionist perspective is not just methodological. It can also provide a theoretical basis for expanding Ricoeur's phenomenology of interpretation into the sociological realm. Similar to Ricoeur, for the symbolic interactionists the experience of communicative discourse is the locus of the creation of human meaning wherein a sense of self is derived that then extends outward into the larger sociological world.

George Mead is considered the "founding father' of the school of symbolic interactionism. (Calhoun et al., 2002) His work posits a self that becomes known to itself only through interaction with others and by being involved in a social life. We do not know ourselves as objects in the same way as we understand objects in the external world. We come to know and understand ourselves as selves only through an interactive process whereby we see and experience ourselves through social action that involves others. Mead says: "How can an individual get outside himself (experientially) in such a way as to become an object to himself? This is the essential social-psychological problem of selfhood or of self-consciousness; and its solution is to be found by referring to the

process of social conduct or activity in which the given person or individual is implicated." (Mead, 2002, p. 241) For Mead, the self can only be objectified via social action, and therefore the self can only be known via social action. Put even more succinctly: "The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience." (Mead, 2002, p. 242)

Herbert Blumer draws upon Mead's insights and describes these social interactions upon which we base our sense of self. His focus on the human use of symbols and the meanings we invest in them very closely resembles Ricoeur's analysis of the interpretive role of meaning in discourse. Blumer states:

> …human beings interpret or "define" each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their "response" is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions. This mediation is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation between stimulus and response in the case of human behavior. (Blumer, 2002, p. 69)

Unlike Ricoeur, Blumer extrapolates this insight about the fundamentally interpretive nature of human interaction into the broad social realm and the organization of human society. The social world becomes the framework inside of which we act as social beings. Society does not in this sense determine our social action; rather, society is the context in which our social interaction occurs. This contextual, social embeddedness of the interpretive process wherein we understand ourselves and create meaning via interaction with others is a crucial foundation for the contextual theory I will describe in section 3. The social context of our humorous interactions plays an enormous role in mediating the meaning which we create out of humorous discourse.

120

The dramaturgical approach of Erving Goffman provides one final confluence of symbolic interactionist sociology with the more general field of humor research. His emphasis on the importance of social roles provides even more focus to my concentration on the context of humor in the workplace. Pre-defined roles such as boss, subordinate, program director and case worker, clearly mediate the social interaction which occurs between individuals. The workplace in particular imposes very well defined social expectations with regard to these roles, often even in the form of written descriptions which provide very explicit instructions for on the job behavior. These expectations become an important part of what Goffman calls the "personal front" which he describes as:

> …items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he goes. As part of personal front we may include: insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like. Some of these features for conveying signs, such as racial characteristics, are relatively fixed and over a span of time do not vary for the individual from one situation to another. On the other hand, some of these sign vehicles are relatively mobile or transitory, such as facial expression, and can vary during a performance from one moment to the next. (Goffman, 2002, p. 54)

Beyond just the focus on social roles, however, Goffman describes "the tactical repertoire that actors develop in order to manage their social identities and to defend themselves from unwanted scrutiny and the negative appraisal of others." (Calhoun et al., 2002, p. 29) In my field work I clearly experienced multiple instances of people deploying humor as part of their tactical repertoire, sometimes very deliberately and sometimes without being conscious of it at all. Goffman's dramaturgical sociology employs the analogy of performance wherein we become actors on a stage playing roles reinforced and defined by the symbols of our society. This clearly corresponds with joke

telling, though not just in the sense of an individual playing the role of a stand up comedian on a stage. Sometimes this occurs, however the more common occasions are those, as described by Norrick (2001), wherein conversational tropes provide cues that a joke is about to occur, which give rise to specific expectations as to how we will behave in response to the joke.

<p style="text-align:center">Section 3: A more contextual humor theory</p>

Following Abrams example, this section presents a broad schema of humor theory which accounts for the diverse approaches and emphases found across the many disciplines within humor research. Chapter 2 of this dissertation provided a detailed overview of the literature related to this research, including a summary of humor theory. It is not my intention to duplicate the literature review here. Rather, I will highlight some illustrative examples from within humor research that will explicitly apply and illuminate the grounded theory which follows.

Recalling Abrams' triangle, aesthetic criticism was divided into mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and objective coordinates. These are related respectively to the world (universe), the audience, the author, and the work of art itself. I propose a similar schema here by dividing humor theorists into categories related to humor and social context, humor and the hearer/audience, humor and the speaker/joke teller, and finally humor and the joke itself. The following provides brief examples of each:

<p style="text-align:center">Humor and Jokes</p>

This coordinate corresponds closely with Abrams category of texts, and includes studies and theories which focus on the joke itself. Most prominent here is the ontological semantics of Victor Raskin whose pioneering work in a "script-based theory of verbal

<p style="text-align:center">122</p>

humor"(Raskin, 1985) was later refined into a "General Theory of Verbal Humor"

(Attardo & Raskin, 1991). Such approaches break down the 'scripts' of jokes into

respective structures and analyze meanings of these scripts. According to Raskin, the

discipline of ontological semantics in general strives for the "disambiguation" of

language in order to formulate theory about language rules and usage, however Raskin's

work must also account for the deliberate ambiguity of humor within opposing scripts

(Raskin, 2008b). While the task of unpacking references for various scripts clearly

involves broader social and cultural considerations, Raskin's primary contribution to the

field has been the usefulness of the General Theory of Verbal Humor to help scholars

explain and understand the jokes themselves (Davies, 2004). This coordinate would also

include any analysis that concentrates on the internal structures, cohesiveness, or

effectiveness of the joke itself, regardless of the medium. Studies about cartoons

(Cullather, 1983), film (Vandaele, 2002), or even commercials (Buijzen & Valkenburg,

2004) could be categorized here.

Humor and the jokester

The discipline of psychology has historically dominated the field of modern

humor studies (Raskin, 2008b). Psychological studies include those which focus on

humor generation, which are included here, as well as those which focus on humor

appreciation, which are included in the next coordinate. One example of the

psychological quantification of humor generation that is widely used is the "Humor

Styles Questionnaire" developed by Martin et al (R. A. Martin et al., 2003). Studies about

humor creation often also blur with studies about humor appreciation. These vary greatly

according to who generates the humor. I found examples that range from humor in

nursing (Struthers, 1999), to the Israeli army (Ben-Ari & Sion, 2005), to a Sardinian fish

market (Porcu, 2005). Some studies also focus on the conversational "performance" of a

joke in everyday discourse (Neal R. Norrick, 2001). Finally, there are examples of

scholarship that focus on individual comedians, their styles, content, and manner of

delivery, all of which would be included here (Philaretou, 2006) (Paolucci & Richardson,

2006).

Humor and the hearer

This coordinate clearly receives the most abundant attention within the field of

humor scholarship. This tendency makes sense. If we are going to study humor, we look

at what makes people laugh, and to figure that out, we study people. The bulk of

psychological studies therefore focus on what people find funny. In his introduction to

the chapter on the psychology of humor in the recent *Primer of Humor Research*, Ruch

states: "As psychology is concerned with people, the view onto humor will be made from

the individual's perspective; e.g. the phenomena associated with responding to or

creating humor and not a description of humor itself." (Ruch, 2008) To this end

psychology has developed scales related humor appreciation including the

multidimensional sense of humor scale (Thorson & Powell, 1993) as well as humor

generation such as the humor styles questionnaire (R. A. Martin et al., 2003). These

scales as well as many others can be applied to multiple situations as well as contexts,

and do not just include verbal humor but non verbal humor such as cartoons (El Refaie,

2011).

Also included in this coordinate are studies that focus on specific characteristics

of people such as women and minority groups. This would also include studies related to

power dynamics, such as those that occur between bosses and subordinates. There are also numerous neurological studies which look closely at what happens in the brain when people experience humor.

Humor and the world

Sociological and ethnographic studies of humor would fall into this category. Alan Dundes, for example, looks at how specific joke genres become apparent within specific cultures and for specific purposes (Dundes, 1987). Mimetic theories might also focus on humor's uses within work groups, and how humor functions as a "social lubricant" as well as anthropological studies of humor within various cultures (Radcliff-Brown, 1952). Finally, cross cultural analyses that consider how joking behaviors differ from one group to another would be classified here. Examples would include Mintz's comparative analysis of ethnic jokes (Mintz, 1992) and the work of Christie Davies (Davies, 1982).

Putting them all together

So far we have merely taken Abrams classification schema and superimposed it upon the world of humor theory, with some important differences. Abrams puts the text at the center of a triangle formed by the other three coordinates. Instead, I would place all four coordinates into equal relationships with each other. The new schema would therefore look like the following:
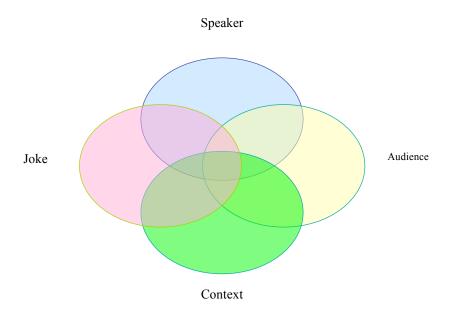
Figure 4. Humor Theory Classification Schema.

For Abrams it is clear that any good theory accounts for all the coordinates, however, most favor one over the others. So far it is still only a typology or schema for depicting relationships among theories, however, when we add the notion of meaning from Ricoeur we gain one more insight. If we really want to dissect the meaning of a humorous utterance we need to account for all four domains. First we start with the text. We need to understand the joke or at least understand the specific signs and symbols which are contained in the text or utterance. We can classify the type of joke as a pun, or a story, or as incongruity humor or superiority or irony or satire. Each of these variables will mediate the jokes meaning. Similarly, we need to understand something about the author, or speaker. What is their role vis-à-vis the utterance? Is he/she a comedian? A boss? A friend? A stranger? Further, we must understand the audience – were they the intended audience? Did they laugh? Did they laugh at the initial joke or something else? Do they manifest any special characteristics that might mediate an understanding of the

joke? Last we need to examine the context. Where did the utterance occur? Are there any special characteristics of the group or context which would mediate the joke's reception or meaning?

The contextual theory proposed here asserts that it is where these four coordinates intersect where the meaning of a joke in fact resides. If one wishes to accurately analyze what a humorous occasion means, you account for all four coordinates, and only then have you begun to capture a description of meaning. The best jokes, like the best metaphors, in fact create new meanings, and expand the boundaries of each circle. The new schema would therefore look like this:
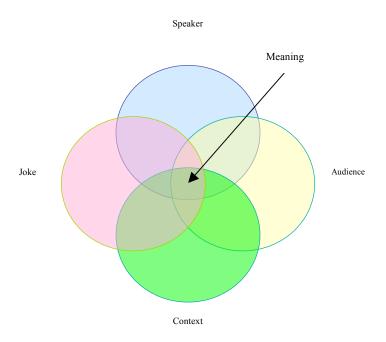

Figure 5. Locus of Meaning Within Classification Schema.

Humor in this schema becomes more than a mere ornament of discourse. It is an integral aspect of the way in which we generate meaning, and therefore is integral not only to how we relate to each other but how we understand ourselves. Taken in this way, humor

becomes an invaluable tool in our symbolic interactions with each other, and includes aspects of mind, personality, relationships, and social culture. To understand this dynamic, one must understand not just the joke itself, or the listener, speaker, and context, but all of them together in a complex interplay of symbolic interaction.

Summary

This chapter outlined a broad schema for understanding the human interactive experience of humor. Drawing on Abram's classification of literary critical theories, I have presented a classificatory schema for approaches to humor which includes the joke, the teller, the speaker, and the context. One of the major differences between the new schema presented here and Abrams' is that my proposed classification supplants Abrams' notion of the "Universe" with the notion of context. Here, context refers not only to the outward referent of the joke text or narrative, but also to the situation in which it occurs. By incorporating Ricoeur's notion of the creation of meaning into the schema, I am also able to account for the situational ambiguity which so often troubles current theoretical explanations of humor.

We have all experienced how a joke or narrative simply 'works' in one context, and doesn't work in another. The notion of context here attempts to account for this common dynamic. Thus context can refer to both the broad social milieu in which the humorous circumstance occurs, and also to the specific social circumstance which surrounds it, such as in a workgroup, in a bar, a locker room, or a classroom.

Similarly, the schema, by accounting for all four coordinates, can more accurately account for occasions of failed humor, as well as successful humor. Just as a joke might succeed related to one or other of the four coordinates, so also the joke might well fail for

reasons related to the joke itself, the way it is told, the person or persons it is told to, as well as the circumstance it is told in. If we want to account for what a joke means, successful or not, we would need to investigate each of these aspects.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This research began with the question: what happens when people use humor at work? It took an ethnographic approach to understanding the context of humor as it was observed and experienced at two nonprofit human service organizations. Representative examples were provided as narrative pericopes and analyzed to account for the general categories of ridicule, social lubrication, power and authority, and new meaning. Finally, a grounded theory which arose from this analysis was presented. This theory accounts for context by calling for a four quadrant schema that includes the joke, speaker, audience, and context as coming together to create meaning in humorous communication. This chapter will summarize this work by presenting some general ramifications of this grounded theory, and positing options for further research.

Conclusions

In his introduction to the *Primer of Humor Research*, Victor Raskin claims that his discipline, ontological semantics, "is the most theoretically advanced discipline among the humanities and social sciences, and it can probably beat quite a few natural sciences on this count"(Raskin, 2008a). While I believe this specific claim may well be debated by practitioners from a number of disciplines within the humanities, Raskin makes it to drive home a point about humor research. Because humor research is so theoretically diverse, it tends to become theoretically uncritical. In spite of the fact that we can agree on what constitutes good research, our theories, according to Raskin, are all too often implicit, taken for granted, and not explicitly characterized by researchers.

In my attempt to understand the original research question: what happens when people use humor at work, I quite naturally came upon the problem of accounting for context. I was surprised by the fact that relatively little work in this area has been undertaken in humor research, given the fact that my personal experience was and is that context remains a fundamental aspect of humorous communication. Simply put, the same joke or narrative experienced in different contexts quite often will have very different outcomes, and therefore very different meanings for the people involved. I therefore attempted to account for context by also accounting for workplace relationships.

I was surprised by several things over the course of this project. I was surprised to find that there were relatively few instances of scripted 'joke telling'. I very rarely heard the common setup line: "did you hear the one about…" Instead the humor arose naturally as part of everyday interaction, and this humor played the expected roles of lubricating peoples' communications, solidifying their boundaries, and even putting others 'in their place'. I was additionally surprised at the relative absence of overtly sexual or ethnic humor. With a few exceptions as noted in chapter 4, most of the humor that I experienced was about authority and relationships that stayed well within the bounds of accepted workplace decorum. I believe this may have to do with the type of workplace settings I studied, however, determining this would entail a new and very different research project that the one described here.

I believe that in spite of the theoretical diversity within the field of humor research, much of what I read in various theories was readily observable in the field. People did indeed engage in humor to ease their stress, alleviate tension, subvert and assert their authority, and think creatively. I also believe, however, that Collinson's

(2002) warnings against the deliberate, functionalist application of humor in the workplace is very well taken. At both agencies I studied the humor that worked was not humor that was premeditated. One agency, in fact, spent quite a bit of time struggling with an orchestrated company 'team building' picnic which ended up being abandoned as causing more problems than it solved. Humor is best when humor is spontaneous, and it achieves its 'goals' not by a planned application of specific jokes in specific circumstances but by arising out of the context of shared trust and appropriate interpersonal intimacy.

<div align="center">Policy implications and suggestions for further research</div>

I had hoped that this study would shed more light on the role of humor specific to nonprofit human service organizations. It did not. I do not believe that what I found at these two organizations is altogether different from what might be found in other workplaces with differing missions, however, I have no data with which to back this up. Further ethnographic comparisons between different organizations might uncover areas of interest in this regard. Similarly, even within the same organization I found that humor occurred with different style and frequency at different hierarchical levels. A quantitative study addressing humor generation and organizational hierarchy may be of interest in investigating this perception further.

Additionally, I found very little research on the relatively new dynamics surrounding the use of humor in electronic communications within the workplace. At least in office settings, computers and the internet have become important tools for many people. This provides a new context for communication which has some significant similarities and differences with everyday workplace discourse. Further research into this

area might uncover some interesting dynamics which could also inform corporate policy regarding electronic communication, especially since what one person considers humorous and appropriate could easily be interpreted by another as patently offensive or hostile.

Finally, I believe that if researchers were to use the four quadrant schema described here the field as a whole would address the deficit in explicit theory described by Raskin above. Just as Abrams claimed that literary critics tend to focus on one aspect of his triangle over another, I believe that humor researchers can clearly fall into one or two of the circles I outlined in chapter 6. By considering this, a researcher would be forced to more closely examine his/her assumptions about the approach their research is taking, and would therefore be more aware of the implicit theoretical approach they take.

Reflections of the role of theory

What is the role of theory, especially in academic research? Does it necessarily have to explain every instance or occasion of its topic? Does it have to include a definition of its area of interest which is always already true for each and every context? Or instead, does it function to generally circumscribe a field of inquiry, and provide a basis from which one can understand an area of interest, and help to separate good research from bad?

Humor theorists have struggled historically to define humor. They simply cannot find a universal definition of what it is, what it is not, how and why it works, and what are the best approaches to its investigation. The contextual theory presented here does little to add to the debate about definitions. It does not present a new way to tell us what is and is not funny. Instead it gives us a tool that can be used to understand the meaning

of a particular joke in a particular context. If an academician, or a layman for that matter, wishes to figure out what a specific humorous occasion means, then he/she must account for all four domains in some way or another.

Certainly the three primary theories of humor (incongruity, superiority, and release theories) provide the best broad basis to work from, and can be applied in all four of the domains. But they also seem to be best placed in the quadrant related to jokes. They tell us something generally about the text or utterance itself, and are less obviously applied in the mimetic arena which addresses the social context in which the humor occurs.

It is my hope that this research in some small way might contribute to help categorize theoretical perspectives within the field of humor research. It is no coincidence that my focus on context arose out of the attempt to understand humor in the workplace. I was interested in context almost before the research began, because I assumed there was something special going on when people use humor in the workplace. By investigating this topic I have come to a greater understanding both of the initial research question: what happens when people use humor at work, as well as a broader question: what happens when people research humor? I believe this is due in large measure to the reflexive nature of qualitative inquiry.

Early on in my research I encountered multiple references to E.B. White's comparison between explaining jokes and dissecting frogs (you may understand it better, but the frog dies). I became a little scared that by undertaking the intensive investigation of humor I would also at the same time destroy its positive effects, at least for me. In fact, the opposite has happened, and I have come away with an even greater appreciation for

the subtle, yet powerful ways in which humor creates new meaning, and contributes to our communications with each other. By improving our understanding of others, we improve our understanding of ourselves, and ultimately our human condition.

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