

Leader to Leader 'From the Front Lines' questions for Guy Huber 5-11-22

1. For the non-specialist reader, how would you characterize the findings in your article about humour in the workplace in *International Journal of Management Reviews*?

Thank you for your thoughtful questions. My review paper stemmed from my doctoral research into humour in the workplace, in which I analysed organization members talk to interpret the norms that members adhere to when expressing humour within their localized context. This included analysing their talk for identity narratives (how they refer to themselves in relation to others) to better understand the relations of power through which such talk emerges. The simplest way to describe power is to say that power and discourse are inseparable because one produces the other and within this relationship our ways of living and acting emerge. Thus, hierarchies exist only in that certain discourses are exercised in practice that make them possible. People are placed in positions of authority through discourses that make such arrangements viable. For instance, people may desire strong leaders through discourses that they identify with, even if these same individuals may struggle to define what a strong leader is. Understanding this relationship between power (as the emanate forces that constitute our workplace situations) and knowledge (discourses) helps us analyse peoples practices (including forms of talk) to better understand what their humour does in the world.

My paper maps how we might analyse humour practices to better understand how people make sense of their workplace situations and produce discourses that become a constitutive part of their situation. Peoples humour can enlighten people to the problems of organization, help people form bonds through modes of solidarity and can likewise restrain people when exercised as a form of discipline. For instance, one of my and Andrew's (Huber and Brown, 2017) findings was that members talked about informal rules - relating to their perceptions of dominant organizational values - which governed how they expressed humour within the context of their (member owned) food cooperative. These same members often talked about how they liked to push up against the boundaries of what others might find acceptable and this generated a certain degree of commonality with others. Thus, while members tended to be compliant with the norms of organization, they still engaged in subtle forms of resistance.

It was these findings, together with our theorization of power and identity, which inspired my analysis of humour here in *International Journal of Management Reviews*, in which I formulated the question: *how do people express power through humour to make sense of, and potentially transform, their situations at work?* This question helped me organize the extensive literature into sets of discursive practices, which are: 1. various aspects of humour that affect people and their relationships with others; 2. contextual resources that generate humour, which include ambiguity, incongruity, imagination, play and

multiplicity. I explain how people make sense of their situation through these vital, yet often under discussed, aspects of organization; 3. six dominant forms of power that are exercised through humour use: constructing interpretations, exercising control, resisting authority, forging social bonds, enhancing arguments and generating ideas; 4. This framework allowed me to recommend avenues for future research. For instance, we often think of laughter only in relation to peoples humour and yet we are apt to laugh when others do and tend to feel anxious when others are laughing but we do not know why? Thus, laughter is an important discursive practice that effects how we feel and in turn affects our thoughts and practices.

2. It would seem that many, if not most, people in the workplace give much thought to the implications and ramifications of their own displays of humor. Would you say that is the case, and if so, what does that represent given your research into the overall issue of the uses of humor in the workplace?

Humour is such a regular and naturalised aspect of interacting with others and dealing with the world that, while people are aware of its importance, it is probably true to say that, in general, people tend not to consider the accumulative effects of humour on their working lives. Yet, shared jokes, metaphors, social commentaries and the recursive effects of laughter impact how organisational members interpret their circumstances in relation with each other. Humour helps to establish working identities and produces forms of sensemaking that have important implications for organizations. For example, how does peoples humour produce bonds of friendship that become a vital aspect of the culture? Or likewise, how do people air feelings of distrust through humour in those who are charged with governing their lives?

An important problem is whether humour is necessarily the best way to handle these tensions and the often negative emotions that they produce? Our jokes, and sometimes outright criticisms, can unfortunately stand in for more serious discussions on the power dynamics that produce the circumstances through which humour emerges. If our workplace conditions produce humour then perhaps we should think more carefully about what drives people's sentiments. People are more apt to say what they feel through humour because they can claim they were only joking. Thus, we should pay close attention to peoples humour at work as it offers an important barometer for what people find frustrating, upsetting, contradictory, unsettling, and so forth.

3. My sense is that the use of humor in organizations is quite localized, particularly for a large multinational organization: it would be different in offices vs. factories, retail outlets, and so on. Has this figured into your research, and if so, is there any larger sense

of meaning about the different ways humor can play out in organizations, particularly large ones?

My doctoral research was based in a large retail food cooperative, where ethics of responsibility constituted the ways in which members talked about their use of humour in relation to others in the organisation. This research into humour alerted me to ethical principles that then became the focus of my recent paper with David (Huber and Knights, 2022), which examines how members exercise responsibility and care for others in their everyday dealings. We show how members exercise power to produce an ethically orientated organisation. Member's humour use was part of this process by expressing good fellowship, solidarity and care for others, as well as love for the organisation and the diversity of membership. To conclude our study, we ponder the implications of our findings other forms of organisation, including corporations, where people enact different norms in their humour depending on a whole range of factors that constitute their situation.

While there are no two corporations (or organisations) exactly alike, we know that (especially within the same industry) corporations tend to enact similar practices. This process of isomorphism relates, in part, to people moving across organisations, and in so doing, transferring assumptions, norms, values and practices that (over time) can lead to similar patterns of broad behaviour. This indicates that people have agency but that we are not necessarily aware of how we introduce discursive practices into our workplace environments. This was a key motivation for my paper, because I wished to analyse how this might work in practice through people's humour.

4. Your article touches on the influence of culture on this issue. Do you find that there is a relationship between the uses of humor and corporate/organizational culture as a construct?

Corporations are typically authoritarian regimes, replete with hierarchies, divisions, levers of control and forms of discipline that exist for the benefit of shareholders. We might wonder, what kinds of humour do these relations of power produce and how does people's humour become a constitutive part of the culture?

Prior to becoming an academic, I worked for various corporations in the financial industry. While the cultures were often very different, certain dominant discourses prevailed across organizations. For example, people tended to attach importance to working their way up the hierarchy. This was partly because they also complained about the work itself, which many people find dull, stressful, repetitive and ultimately unrewarding. This meant that colleagues typically competed with one another for

promotion to derive meaning and status from their work. These themes emerged through people's humour use. For example, teammates joked at each other's expense as a means of self-promotion; some laughed at our managers jokes to ingratiate themselves; others told anecdotes that revealed their intelligence, and so forth. When people joked at our manager's expense then they might quickly find themselves isolated through non-laughter. Meanwhile, self-deprecating jokes were often interpreted as a sign of weakness. While these dominant modes of humour prevailed, I worked on teams where bonds of friendship and trust altered these dynamics. We might ponder how my team leader's practices helped mitigate prevailing norms of humour use? Or perhaps better, how they helped generate warmer forms of solidarity through which ethically orientated humour emerged between team members? This is important if we consider the escalatory effects of such humour and how, as I explain in my paper, humour produces knowledge creation, vitality and a whole host of positive processes under the right circumstances. Nethertheless, we should remain aware that disciplinary regimes, such as a corporations, tend to individualise to the extent that members act more selfishly than they might otherwise, and that their humour is likely to reflect these power effects in some way.