

# Putting humour to work: To make sense of and constitute organizations

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## Abstract

How do people use humour to make sense of and constitute organizations? To understand this, I consider humour as a dynamic discursive practice, through which people (re)produce, complicate and potentially transform relations of power in the workplace. To extend the reach of humour research to this end, I have reviewed and synthesized the literature on humour to identify five contextual resources for agentic sensemaking in the use of humour through which discourses are destabilized and critiqued. I then consider six discursive practices, exercised through humour, that generate power and help constitute organizations. To complete my conceptual framework, I identify and discuss five potential avenues for future research on humour and power at work. I aim to inspire researchers to associate, use and analyse the processes in my framework to generate critically orientated evidence of how people use humour to substantiate organizational/workplace realities. I conclude that humour offers rich potential to better understand how people subjectively constitute organizations in practice.

## INTRODUCTION

This review is concerned with how we might organize and refine the literature on humour at work into a new conceptual framework that helps us do more with what we know about the vital role humour plays in substantiating organizational/workplace realities. Research on humour offers rich potential to better understand the relations of power and agentic sensemaking through which people constitute organizations. This is especially the case for humour that comments on aspects of power relations: social values, intersubjective emotions, social identities, normative beliefs, and so forth. In simultaneous acts of constructing, enacting, creating, imagining, discovering and com-

plying with their realities, people are very likely to engage in humour.

Humour is a multifaceted and relatively fluid discursive practice that gives rise to amusement (Holmes, 2000) and permits people (and researchers) to generate critically orientated knowledge. Yet, we have much to learn about how humour ‘works’ in relation to ambiguous, contradictory and subjective discourses that are integral to how people engage relations of power and knowledge. This inspired the question: what part does humour play in how people practice sensemaking and exercise power at work?

This review is further motivated by calls to locate humour at work within interactive and distributed

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discursive processes (Huber & Brown, 2017), and the observation that power is ‘what happens when rationality is not secure’ (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 121), wherein people exercise playful, irrational, contradictory and visceral discourses in localized networks. Through humour, people generate subjective and emotive interpretations of organizational life (Gabriel, 1995; Watson, 1994) and exercise power through the ‘relational effects of social interaction’ (Allen, 2003, p. 3).

Here, power is viewed as a discursive process that generates everyday practices to constitute organizations (Knights, 1990). This perspective differs from French and Raven’s (1959) notion of ‘social power’, because it is power (embodied and exercised through discourse) that brings what they term ‘interpersonal influence’ into being and also constitutes the very possibility for sense-making, agency, resistance and change. Discursive practices encompass the embodied desires, ideals, emotions and imaginaries that surface in people’s gestures and speech. Yet, they are not simply modes of productive discourse; rather, people are subject to, and made subject by, discourse (Foucault, 1980). Thus, discursive practices are never independent of power, yet through humour, people practice sensemaking to give meaning to their ongoing experiences and, in doing so, actively generate, (re)constitute and transform relations of power in their interactions with others.

This generative process is embedded in discursive practices (including embodied forms of humour), through which people – as agents – make sense of and contest meanings within their situations. Such sensemaking is defined as the generation and reconstruction of reality through discourse (Brown et al., 2015). This differs from dominant conceptions of humour as a practice that collides with (or alternatively, serves) power (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Barsoux, 1993; cf. Mumby et al., 2017, p. 1159). By examining how people use humour in the workplace, we might better understand ‘the situated formation of shared understandings’ through which ‘power operates’ (Schildt et al., 2020, p. 242).

The objectives of this paper are, therefore, twofold. First, to provide a framework through which we might integrate and further debate the complex and multifaceted effects of humour in relation to power and sensemaking (Schildt et al., 2020). To this end, the first section interrogates the etymologies and doctrines of humour research, paying particular attention to the implications of humour in workplace relationships. Next, a conceptual framework for research on humour in the workplace is provided, organized into three main parts: (1) an examination of contextual resources for humour, through which people performatively make sense of the complexities of organiza-

tional life, potentially transforming relations of power in practice; (2) marshalling of the extant literature on organizational humour to identify six predominant ways in which people’s humour exercises power, helping to expose the subjective, irrational and contradictory aspects of organizations in which ‘power relations often lie hidden and unexplored’ (Trethewey, 1999, p. 153); (3) Five prominent research streams are identified relating to power at work, which offer rewarding avenues for investigating how people’s humour constitutes organizations. The second objective is consideration of the implications of this conceptualization of humour in respect of subjective processes with consequences for relations of power. This is achieved both implicitly, through the process of framework development, and explicitly through identification of humour-based resources that can promote sensemaking at work, which when combined with the subsequent discussion of six discursive practices that generate power, give rise to five potential avenues for future organizational and management research to complete and consolidate a new conceptual framework for research on humour in the workplace.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: APPROACH

In order to identify relevant output and ensure that the literature review builds on existing organizational and management theory, keyword searches for ‘humour’ and ‘humor’ were carried out in a broad range of organization and management journals (see Tables 1 and 2 below). This established that there is now a substantive body of research on humour within organization studies, and that the subject is no longer under-theorized (cf. Collinson, 2002). A ‘snowballing’ technique (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005) was then adopted, making extensive notes on each work, and reading any in-text citations (including books) that addressed humour in the workplace directly, with particular attention paid to works referenced across multiple texts. This repository was continually extended and reread (over a three-year period). The Web of Science citation index (Clarivate Analytics, Philadelphia, USA) was reviewed intermittently to add newly published papers to the mix, as appropriate. This process was supplemented by the reviewers’ helpful suggestions, which incorporated wider orientations and enriched the emerging conceptual framework. Ultimately, more than 200 books, chapters and articles were drawn upon in developing this paper, most of which are cited herein.

During this process, it became apparent that previous reviews of humour in the workplace have been management-centric (Duncan et al., 1990; Romero, 2005; Wood et al., 2011) and that ‘there is a danger of humour,

TABLE 1 Frequency of humour articles by journals

Journal title	Frequency
<i>Human relations</i>	15
<i>Humour</i>	14
<i>Organization studies</i>	11
<i>Ephemera; Journal of Management Inquiry</i>	7
<i>Management Communication Quarterly; Organization</i>	6
<i>Journal of Pragmatics; Sociology</i>	4
<i>Academy of Management Journal; Academy of Management Review; Culture and Organization; Gender, Work and Organization; Journal of Management; Organization Science; Symbolic Interaction</i>	3
<i>Communication Theory; Discourse Studies; Employee Relations; Journal of Applied Behavioural Science; Lingua; Work, employment and society</i>	2
<i>Academy of Management Perspectives; Annual Review of Anthropology; Africa; Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society; British Journal of Criminology; British Journal of Management; Business Ethics Quarterly; Business Strategy Review; Communication Monographs; Communication Studies; Communication Theory; Contemporary Sociology; Critical Studies in Media Communication; Discourse and Society; Discourse in Society; Ethical Theory and Moral Practice; European Management Journal; European Journal of Industrial Relations; Harvard Business Review; Human Organization; International Journal of Management Reviews; International Journal of Psychoanalysis; International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy; Journal of Applied Communication Research; The Journal of Business Communication; Journal of Business and Psychology; Journal of Contemporary Ethnography; The Journal of Creative Behaviour; Journal of Management Studies; Journal of Medical Humanities; Journal of Organizational Change Management; Journal of Personality; Journal of Personality and Social Psychology; Journal of Work Organization and Emotion; Language and Communication; Leadership; Management Learning; Multilingual; NACTA Journal; Organizational Dynamics; Organizational Psychology Review; Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin; Psychiatry; Psychological Review; The Psychologist-Manager Journal; Qualitative Inquiry; Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management; Qualitative Research Journal; Qualitative Research in Psychology; Small Group Research; Social Behaviour and Personality; Social Research; Social Semiotics; Society; The Sociological Review; Theory, Culture &amp; Society; Western Folklore</i>	1

TABLE 2 Article repository – listed in ABS groupings

CABS rating	Total
4*	12
4	38
3	24
2	22
1	3
0	65
Total	164

as an enormously rich and complex facet of human behaviour, being appropriated by a managerialist discourse’ (Westwood & Rhodes, 2007, p. 4). This perspective informs the new conceptual framework, which highlights the vital role humour plays in substantiating organizational realities, and situating humour within the realm of meaning to construct multiple discursive practices, with implications for organizing and research.

The focus on discourse fused together several disciplinary strands on humour, cutting across boundaries to

identify important conceptual linkages (Gatrell & Breslin, 2017, p. 3) and bridge disparate conversations (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). The conceptual framework emerged through a careful evaluation of the literature on humour in relation to critically orientated texts on power, discourse and subjectivity (Knights & Clarke, 2017). The argument that humour ‘always’ involves incongruity, as the ‘violation of expectancy’ and ‘redefining of reality’ (Fry, 1963, p. 153) chimes with sensemaking theory. Thus, the literature was carefully appraised to determine (1) organizational processes that trigger humour, and (2) the effects of humour use, which revealed six dominant modes of humour use with implications for relations of power and knowledge. Having established these, the review developed three related and overlapping main sections: (1) to show how people use humour to make sense of workplace contexts and muddy relations of power; (2) to show how humour is used to generate power; (3) to identify fruitful avenues for future research on humour and power at work. Rather than quantifiable techniques, this process involved practical and qualitative judgements (Hammersley, 2001) settled on a ‘tableau of meaning structures’ (Rosen, 1991,

p. 280) through which humour might be ‘better understood, appreciated and interrogated by those who use it’ (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 168).

## HUMOUR

Humour has attracted many definitions. The Oxford English Dictionary (2021) provides a fairly universal starting point, defining humour as the quality of action or speech that causes amusement, and noting that humour use is a highly sophisticated cerebral process linked to intellect. Humour is a product of acuity and linguistic skill that involves some form of tension, ‘such as the establishment of an incongruent relationship or meaning’ (Holmes, 2000, p. 163). Through humour, people ‘cast light’ on their everyday experiences and aspects of living that might otherwise be taken for granted (Butler et al., 2015, p. 497). While humour can be subtle, delicate and fleeting, it can, nonetheless, render the ordinary extraordinary and the real surreal (Critchley, 2002). Freud (1991) names this process joke-work, a metaphor that, while useful, remains underemployed by writers on organization and management. Such ‘work’ includes analogy, translation, association, abbreviation, word play, indirect representation and fantasy (Martin, 2007). Radical joke-work (including forms of irony and satire) is culturally determined, rich in symbolism and perceptive of organizational structures in questioning their necessity.

Psychologically, humour involves four essential elements: social context, cognitive perception, emotional response, and vocal/behavioural expressions of mirth, including smiling, giggling and laughter (Martin, 2007). Watson (2015, p. 409) notes that ‘as a field of study, humour has been subject to considerable scrutiny’, leading to a number of overlapping and complementary theories as to its function. These include incongruity (de Jongste, 2017), superiority (Mulkay, 1988), relief (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995), ridicule (Billig, 2005) and dramaturgy (Ybema & Horvers, 2017). It is widely recognized that forms of humour are present in most conversations (Fox, 2004) and help people understand what is salient (Watson, 2015). This is particularly true of context-dependent humour, where people must be aware of the context to grasp the meaning (Giddens, 1993, p. 155). Describing something, or someone, in ways that cause laughter (and the emotions that accompany it) demonstrates how people mould humour through the ‘cultural language and conventions of organization’ (Fineman, 2003, p. 17). Thus, close attention to ‘the minutiae of humour use’ is an important means of understanding the subjective nature of human entanglements and the ‘meanings of everyday poetics in the workplace’ (Korczynski, 2011, p. 1438).

People provide verbal and nonverbal clues that allow others to separate humour from non-playful discussion (Wilson, 1979). For example, a facial expression followed by a well-timed pause and altered voice tone might prompt others to anticipate the ‘mental jolt of a sudden leap from one plane of associative context to another’ (Koestler, 1982, p. 328). Within this playful framework (Mulkay, 1988), forms of humour such as banter, teasing, sharp one-liners and witty retorts are understood as a combination of friendliness and antagonism and, perhaps, something that might be accepted with grace (Grugulis, 2002). Humour often takes the form of an ‘in-joke’ (shared exclusively by a small group) or a ‘standing joke’, where something (or someone) becomes the subject of regular jest. In humour, as Radcliffe-Brown suggests, ‘one is *by custom permitted* and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence... so long as it is kept within certain bounds’ (1940, pp. 208–209, emphasis added). Thus, distinctive workplace cultures, social structures and relationships frame how humour is used and received.

However, care needs to be taken not to position humour as a positive force within all social interactions and relationships (Wijewardena et al., 2017). Rather than giving humour a clean bill of health (Billig, 2005) and presenting this complex discourse as a relatively straight-forward form of positive affirmation, it is more constructive to recognize that humour often plays on and reinforces difference, and this has important implications. People sometimes describe humour in ways that hint at darker motives: it is ‘scarcely a vice, and yet all the vices are drawn into its orbit’ (Bergson, 1999, p. 154). Only rhetoric and trust differentiate teasing from ridicule, where the objective is to deride (Billig, 2005). By distinguishing humour from harsher forms of criticism and insult, we risk delimiting meanings and conflating cause (humour) with effect (mirth and laughter). People signal amusement for many reasons, including fear (Titze, 2009), compliance (Butler, 2015), embarrassment (Billig, 2001a) and ingratiation (Cooper, 2005). Humour has many connotations, including being cold, antisocial, anarchic, divisive (Collinson, 1988, 2002) and, potentially, dehumanizing (Billig, 2001b). In addition, forms of humour, including irony, understatement, sarcasm and satire, are often used aggressively to craft humour that belies hostile intent, especially when delivered with a ‘straight face’ or containing references that only a particular audience might understand (Fleming & Sewell, 2002).

Humour touches on emotive issues and often contains an implicit critique (Korczynski, 2011) that can have unintended (or darker) consequences. People’s humour can go wrong (Critchley, 2002); it can create social boundaries (Gregory, 2009), alienating or marginalizing others

(Duncan et al., 1990), or cause certain group members to feel self-conscious or estranged (Fine & Wood, 2010, p. 309). Through humour, people can also breach social conventions (Holmes, 2000) and may act without empathy for the feelings of others (Mulkay, 1988), so that a 'joke can be little more than an insult, but a socially sanctioned one, where the insulted are often expected to take no offence' (Carr & Greeves, 2006, p. 8). For example, people often use non-laughter as a rhetorical response to humour, signalling that a norm or value has been breached, that an utterance is not humorous, or that offence has been taken. Importantly, people often recognize that being seen to laugh at humour can have implications for themselves and others, and may, therefore, exercise restraint over their own responses and/or feelings (Bolton & Houlihan, 2009) so as not to appear complicit (de Sousa, 1987, p. 290). These 'endless tasks of resolution' (Deetz, 2005, p. 103) make humour both engaging and powerful in human affairs. Through humour, people construct social reality, exercising control, resisting authority, emancipating understandings, and arguing and bonding with others, each person capable of redefining the meanings reflexively attached to organization for both themselves and others (Gabriel, 1999).

## A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Humorous resources for sensemaking in relation to power

As the preceding section makes clear, people sense, interpret and use humour in multiple ways, intermittently, and within various contexts through working lives that are full of 'non-sense' (Introna, 2019), contradictions (Hatch, 1997) and disruptive ambiguities (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). How then might we organize this 'inescapable ambiguity' (Kenny & Euchler, 2012, p. 307) into a set of contextual resources that generate forms of humour?

Weick describes sensemaking as 'a developing set of ideas with explanatory possibilities... in ways that enrich and develop the conversation' (1995, p. 11). The following framework is constructed to reveal five principal contextual resources that emerged from the literature for why people use humour at work. It aims to show how people exercise the performative potential of sensemaking through humour to potentially disturb relations of power. This is in keeping with a critical and contextual approach to humour that seeks to interrogate how humour unfolds in different circumstances, to understand what people's humour *does* in practice.

Research on organizational sensemaking has typically focused on the *outcomes* of sensemaking, through peo-

ple's retrospective accounts of how they deal with uncertainty, rather than on the *processes* for sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Yet it is 'the present that is most often ambiguous and confusing' (Brown et al., 2015, p. 268), reflecting the space in which people exercise humour on the fly, and in interaction with others, to performatively make sense of their situation. Through humour, people comprehend organizational contradiction, flux, ambiguity, and so forth, to produce interpretations that become a constitutive element of ongoing power relations.

The humour that emerges from contestations, incongruities and social heterogeneities produces a kind of agency through which people can (de)construct, animate and problematize their workplace situations (Butler, 2010). By confronting and emphasizing complexities and incongruities to comic effect, people 'make sense of them in some kind of parsimonious way' (Cloutier & Langley, 2020, p. 6). These actions, through which people engage others in emancipatory, non-instrumental and emotive forms of reason, can give rise to new emergent meanings that have practical import, and which 'sensemaking theory has typically struggled to explain' (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014, p. 527).

Through humour, people in organizations make sense of, and contest, meanings to generate 'episodic power' (Schildt et al., 2020), in which established discourses are rendered fragile by humour deriving from five key resources: *ambiguity*, *incongruity*, *multiplicity*, *imagination* and *play* – each of which are described in more detail below. The humour that is generated by these means may shift others from their habitual actions and stances by prompting generative modes of *sense-breaking*, whereby orthodox/official meanings are made fragile and possibly transformed, *sense-giving*, whereby people, through persuasive or evocative language, guide other actors' perspectives, and *sense-taking*, whereby people accept and use discourses to which they are receptive (Scarduzio & Tracy, 2015). Such processes are ongoing, interrelated and made possible through these five resources that, although established in the literature on humour, remain underutilized within studies of power and sensemaking in organizations.

### Ambiguity

Ambiguity is an inevitable part of people's transitory, fractured and (dis)ordered experiences of organizational life, characterized by muddy agreements, equivocality, ceaseless negotiations, and the indeterminacy of everyday interactions (de Sousa, 1987). These tensions give rise to forms of humour that have been likened to a 'divining rod' for finding ambiguity in discourse (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). People construct highly subjective and irrational interpreta-

tions of managerial discourse through humour that fuel their sense of ambiguity (Gabriel, 1995). Nuanced forms of humour that deconstruct organizational discourse question ‘the very possibility of unambiguous communication’ (Munro & Huber, 2012, p. 536), and engender doubt where there was once certainty. Such transgressions, through which people embody and articulate desires and emotions, expose the limits of power relations and highlight equivocality in discourse (Gabriel, 1995).

Ambiguity both surrounds and penetrates humour, forming a complex interplay that allows people to construct nuanced and idiosyncratic perspectives (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017), while simultaneously providing ‘a level of abstraction at which agreement can occur’ (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 9). As a result, out of ambiguity, humorous discourse often constructs and establishes shared meanings (Lynch, 2002). For example, in explicating the importance of humour to sensemaking and identity work, Tracy et al. note that ‘organizational members can frame and enact their situation, select a preferred interpretation, and then affirm and retain the reorganization through memorable laughter’ (2006, p. 301). We need to better understand how people cope with ambiguity through humour by reflexively producing meanings that resonate with their preferred identities (Westwood & Johnston, 2012). For example, research might profitably examine how humour binds people together during ambiguous events by emphasizing community, commonality and complementary perspectives.

## Incongruity

Incongruity is a necessary condition in humour (Morrell, 1991), and a key means of recognizing manifold social forces and their relation to the vicissitudes of organizational life. This is important because paradox and contradiction are prevalent themes in organization studies. Yet, within academic case studies, humour remains underutilized in exposing incongruity (Jemielniak et al., 2018), even though it has long been understood that people’s humour highlights tensions between ‘the normal, expected, real situation and the abnormal, unexpected, and often contrasting paradoxes of organizational life’ (Deetz, 2005, p. 204). People subvert established discourses by pulling apart the disparate threads in order to make contradictions vivid (Davis, 1993, p. 313); for example, where ironic forms of humour reveal incongruities between officially sanctioned discourses, carefully constructed for specific ends, and shared experiences to the contrary.

Through humour, people become adept at taking ‘events of low incongruity or surprise and by their communication skills and affective control’ (Turner, 1980, p. 164) exaggerate contradictions to the point of absurdity. Deliberately infus-

ing discourse with incongruity is provocative and, potentially, emancipatory, because such actions cultivate richer qualitative knowledge that helps shift people’s perspectives. Hence, the incongruity embedded in humour can unlock (and reveal) the struggles and tensions in the enactment of workplace organization (Azevedo, 2020). Hatch and Ehrlich observe that people use spontaneous humour to face up to everyday contradictions in organizational discourse without feeling any ‘loss of social balance’ (1993, p. 524). Thus, we might ask what paradoxes in organizational discourse does such humour reveal, and how do people reconcile the underlying contradictions of their experiences as a result?

## Multiplicity

Organizations are complex and multifaceted environments that require people to perceive their work as both constrained and open, as both habitual and temporary, and as both meaningful and trivial; this multiple experience of reality is ‘the basis of comic perception’ (Berger, 1997, p. 48). Humour is a complex facet of organizational behaviour that draws on multiple forms, relies on multiple realities (Kahn, 1989), and can perform several functions simultaneously. For example, Taylor and Bain note that their research on humour ‘uncovered manifold and vigorous forms of individual, quasi-collective and collective’ sentiment and expression (2003, p. 1488). Humour is often a highly equivocal form of expression, offering a fuller understanding of the multiple, coinciding, ‘occasionally consonant’ but often contradictory discourses within workplaces (Brown et al., 2005, p. 314; Trethewey, 1999).

Importantly, when concepts and/or practices appear to overlap and blend, a reflexive researcher may discover something novel (Van Maanen, 1979). For example, Ybema and Horvers note that ‘researchers have yet to systematically explore and describe the different forms and effects of organizational actors’ situated use of compliance and resistance’ (2017, p. 1234). Humour is often implicated in such blurring because it can perform several functions at once: it is a form of communication (and analytic scheme) that courts multiplicity and complexity, such that people, to varying degrees, become proficient in using humour to recognize and experiment with discourses within ‘organized patterns of social action’ (Mulkay, 1988, p. 214). What discursive practices are present in humour use, and what do they help people to see?

## Imagination

People’s humour is often imaginative, disjointed and irrational but, nevertheless, it contributes to the enlargement

of discourse through the ‘enduring pursuit of double and triple meanings’ (Gabriel, 1995, p. 498). Through humour, people stir others’ emotions, values and beliefs by reframing organizational discourses in ways that allow people to imagine alternative possibilities (Heiss & Carmack, 2012). Affective humour can make the ordinary feel extraordinary, and reality appear surreal (Critchley, 2002). For example, vividly reimagining one’s workplace as ‘a sinking ship’ to make others laugh is also a form of sensemaking that has implications for power relations. Where people ‘surrealize’ authoritative discourses, managerial statements may be reduced to outlandish rhetoric (Critchley, 2002, p. 35). In short, surreal forms of satire can disrupt settled meanings and conjure images that take root in people’s talk (Cunliffe, 2002).

By engaging in humorous activities for arbitrary purposes and in unauthorized ways, people generate discourses for sensemaking, constructing extra-ordinary ways of looking at things, and generating ‘disciplined imagination’ (in relation to others) to go beyond ‘what they currently think’ (Bruner, 1983, p. 183); for example, constructing novel metaphors that bring alternative philosophies and values into focus (Fleming, 2005). As Holt and Cornelissen note, people’s lives feel ‘most real when experienced in the raw’, when people become finely attuned to engaging critically with discrepancies in discourse (2014, p. 527). People confound and disrupt stable and rational discourses by ‘surfacing the absurdities that are part of what is accepted as normal’ (Vince, 2019, p. 1). In so doing, people question and politicize discourses by (re)asserting unpredictability and plurality in language (Gabriel, 1995), perhaps taking pleasure in disrupting settled meanings by embracing ‘the ensuing confusion as a critique’ (Vince, 2019, p. 1). Thus, future research might ask exactly what ‘dust’ do surreal, imaginative and critical forms of humour stir up, who and what is stirring it up, and what does this allow people to see (or not see) differently (Weick, 2011, p. 142)?

## Play

A rich vein of research has focused on people at play in the workplace, engaging in humorous activities such as clowning (Strömberg & Karlsson, 2009), carnival (Islam et al., 2008), satire (Westwood, 2004), rites of passage (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940), intrigue (Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999), and anecdote (Gabriel, 1995). Humour often constitutes a ‘return to the fantastic, liberated and playful realm’ (Westwood, 2004, p. 787), through which employees can disrupt hegemonic silences. Yet, research has focused almost exclusively on functional and positivist outcomes rather than on resistance and struggle, has tended to generalize

rather than explicate local and contextual conditions for play, and has largely failed to uncover underlying mechanisms or long-term consequences in terms of social change (Petelczyc et al., 2018).

By focusing on its humorous context, we might better understand how play, which is unregimented, dysfunctional and pleasurable, prevails in organizational life. Humour that crosses into the province of art, aesthetics and/or ethics might ‘expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible’ (Butler, 1990, p. 29). Hence, further research might examine how people instigate ‘creative play with and against repetitive structures’ (Korczyński, 2011, p. 1425) and, in so doing, promote informal norms through which innovative practices emerge. This could be particularly true where play involves ironic antics that employ facetious rhetorical techniques – such as sarcasm, mimicry or satire – that draw ‘a fine line between the forces of reality and those of wishful thinking’ (Kets de Vries, 1990, p. 767). Through forms of humour, people play with provisional notions of identity for pleasure and thereby generate resources for sensemaking through which new habits can emerge.

## Summary

While there are a small number of case studies that have established humour as a form of sensemaking (e.g. Heiss & Carmack, 2012; Blanchard et al., 2014), these tend to analyse sensemaking without exploring the discourses through which such sensemaking is performatively exercised (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Power is, in all actuality, relational and generative. While the discourses that constitute organizations are governed, to some extent, through asymmetrical power relations, social realities remain open to interpretation and critique. Researchers who focus on humour at work might deepen the literature on sensemaking by examining how people recursively constitute organization through the indeterminate potentials of ambiguity, incongruity, multiplicity, imagination and play. How do people use these resources to accept, take up, reject, ignore and rework the discourses available to them?

Working lives, like humour, are complicated, contextual and intricate, such that paradoxes arise, particularly if we assume that discourses constitute finite provinces of meaning (Bakhtin, 1981; Schutz, 1945). Readings of organizational behaviour that overemphasize people’s passivity underplay practices that expose, critique and muddy power relations (Rhodes, 2001). In depicting workplaces as static, predictable and controllable, we diminish the importance of people’s agency, vitality and spontaneity. In particular, we largely ignore the capacity of humour to generate, refine and evolve shared understandings. This is

important because sensemaking involves comprehending one's circumstances explicitly through discourse, such that the meanings that materialize might become critically performative.

The five contextual resources for humour discussed above provide novel ways to understand how humorous sensemaking intersects with power at work. How then, do people generate power through humour to help constitute organizations?

## Humour and power in organizations

This section organizes forms of humour use into a predominant set of discursive practices through which people generate knowledge and exercise power in their (working) situations. People exercise power by 'grappling with' (Rhodes & Badham, 2018, p. 92), interacting through, and reflexively using discourses in context to affect their situation. This includes *forms of humour* that are ubiquitous to organizations and exercised by skilled actors within their social interactions. Thus, an ironic joke at a manager's expense might trigger similar feelings in others. Within such workplace networks, people may propagate such sentiments, bond through humour, and engender a shared feeling of resistance to management prerogatives. In this way, people's humour generates power but also exposes it and 'renders it fragile' (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). Thereby, even seemingly powerless people can employ humour within their networks to generate knowledge that affects others' conceptions and practices (Sewell & Barker, 2006).

Taking the view that power is relational and reflexively exercised in everyday interactions, the literature on humour was carefully evaluated for discursive practices, from which six categories emerged, described below, through which people manoeuvre in their interactions (and indeterminate struggles) with others (Foucault, 1982, p. 222). The promise of this conceptualization lies in its focus on the pervasive forms of humour involved in generating, reproducing and transforming knowledge, central to organizations. The aim is to identify divergent, but complementary, discursive practices that might be usefully employed in research on workplace humour to emphasize diverse acts of meaning production, each of which is considered in turn.

### Social construction

How does humour play a pivotal role in people's interpretations and the social construction of organizations? As Critchley notes, humour encourages 'us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives' (2007, p. 28) and, in so

doing, render the familiar strange by enhancing awareness of normalized and complacently held beliefs. This reflective attitude towards one's experiences, which we often perceive as humour, has been characterized as social construction (Hatch, 1997), in that people foreground social values, emotions, normative practices and so forth 'as a precursor to taking exception' (Weick & Browning, 1986, p. 253). Thereby, humour constitutes an 'other space' (Loacker & Peters, 2015), imbued with contestation and contradiction, through which people interpret, engage and order their social realities (Foucault, 1986; Hatch, 1997).

Through humour, people construct, reproduce and transform power relations by signifying objects of mirth and legitimizing certain discourses. When an individual jokes that someone is acting outside widely held norms or beliefs or, alternatively, that someone spoke in a naïve and/or officious manner, they are actively constructing social reality and producing meanings that may discipline others' perceptions (Huber & Brown, 2017). Humorous discourse, grounded in the richness of lived experience, and reciprocated in others' gestures of amusement, produce and reify social meanings, which individuals reflexively attach to themselves and their situation. From this position, affective humour has a disciplining effect in the formation of knowledge. For example, people frequently share humour in order to make sense of complex and/or shifting social contexts. In doing so, they form social identities that embody shared sentiments (Johnston et al., 2007) and concomitantly produce forms of self-discipline (Godfrey, 2016).

Positive forms of humour produce an atmosphere in which people build upon and extend humorous remarks to keep the conversation going (Holmes, 2000) and, in doing so, propagate discourses that, in becoming common refrains (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995), exercise power in everyday interactions. People share repertoires of humour to establish mutual forms of engagement and, through humour, negotiate 'ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values and power relations' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 464). Within this symbolic emotional space (Collinson, 1994), humour use may be grounded in diverse motives, including empathy (Cooper, 2008), ingratiation (Cooper, 2005), evaluation (Wilson, 2006) and competition (Gruner, 1997). These social processes, evident in humour use, are indicative of social construction (Holmes & Marra, 2002).

### Exercising control

Managers are often required to control the flow of discourse and others' use of humour can sometimes threaten the realities managers seek to perpetuate (Westwood,



2004). Hence, certain forms of humour may be positioned as detrimental to work and, in some cases, be the subject of formal sanctions. However, within the 'glass cage' of post-bureaucratic organizations (Gabriel, 2008), managers are often reluctant to publicly enact their formal authority (Vince, 2001). Humour constitutes a relatively informal discursive practice, through which leaders might symbolize their superiority, stave off mistrust, and exert control over others. From this perspective, when practised in 'appropriate' ways, humour reinforces asymmetrical power relations (Priest & Swain, 2002). Such arguments are partly rooted in Radcliffe-Brown's (1940) view that humour helps reproduce social order, and there is evidence that humour establishes privileged (and coercive) positions within power relations (Holmes, 2000).

When subordinates (including other managers) voice cynicism or sarcasm, it may constitute a 'twisted form of loyalty ... [or] negative homage' (Barsoux, 1993, p. 85), through which people potentially resign themselves to subservience and/or signal their weakness within asymmetrical power relations (Powell, 1988). As Collinson notes, a 'preoccupation with defending and protecting self through humour is a powerful logic' (1988, p. 184), and yet people (across all levels of an organization) are practised in 'letting off steam' through humour without seriously challenging the prerogatives and strategies of senior managers (Duncan et al., 1990; Contu, 2008). There is a sense of safety in co-constructing humour in established ways, such that rather than reflexively engaging with dominant perspectives in ways that effect meaningful change, it becomes easier to stick to structured forms of humour that constrain people. Thus, do people exhibit attributes and understandings that overlap with those of others to constitute 'an almost false sense of autonomy' that 'accommodates them even more profoundly' into systems of control (Fleming & Sewell, 2002, p. 869).

People's workplace humour often has a 'historical, retrospective, and reflexive character' (Fine & de Soucey, 2005, p. 1) that serves as the basis for the reproduction (and possible strengthening) of prevailing discourses (Holmes & Marra, 2002). For example, in emphasizing the dominant discourses that constitute membership of a group, people's humour may pressurize individuals to 'conform to social value' in order to fit in (Pollio & Edgerly, 1976, p. 216). Collinson (1988) demonstrates how humour constitutes and frames tensions between different social groups, simultaneously restricting meaningful dialogue and change, by demarcating strict social boundaries and actions that typify recognizable membership of rival groups. Huber and Brown note that networks of people find mutual security in voicing dominant modes of humour, constituting 'certain ways of talking and acting by instantiating norms' that tightly exercise, license

or prohibit certain forms of humour use (2017, p. 1122). Such disciplinary norms in workplace humour use constitute a shared language that binds people and constricts the boundaries of discursive practice (Greatbatch & Clark, 2003).

## Resisting authority

Workplace humour often has a corrosive content that runs contra to managerial pretensions (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999), perhaps speaking to some disjuncture between people, practice and managerial rhetoric (Warren & Fineman, 2007). Such social comment serves to highlight inconsistent aspects of organizations and generate relations of resistance to managerial culture campaigns (Scott, 1990, p. 45) that seek to promote uniformity and to establish subjective processes as a central management resource (Willmott, 1993). People often attempt to expose authoritative discourse as flawed (misleading or false) by poking fun at directives that seem at odds with everyday experiences and understandings (Kane et al., 1976). Importantly, there is evidence to suggest that humour can elevate perceptual inequalities and protest to levels that challenge the validity of those in authority and the practices they promote (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995).

That said, collective and sustained resistance is rare within contemporary workplaces, where cultural programmes are all-encompassing and those targeted by power are active participants in its production and reproduction. Forms of opposition within such domains, such as sardonic and satirical commentary (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999), are often more 'dislocated, arbitrary and subtle' (Edwards et al., 1995). People establish identity politics through humour, to appreciate ironic reversals and take joy in the 'poetic justice' therein, with those in authority 'hoist on their own petard' and diminished in the eyes of others through humour. Thus, processes of resistance might be located in subtle practices of dissent (Fleming & Sewell, 2002), cynicism (Fleming & Spicer, 2003), subversion (Kenny & Euchler, 2012) and parody, which 'destabilize hegemonic, taken-for-granted institutions' (Kenny, 2009, p. 221). In humour, interpretations are rarely clear-cut, and this ambiguity provides space to generate informal (and irrational) viewpoints, often (essentially) uncolored by authority (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 121). In many cases, opinions might be voiced without the overwhelming fear of formal sanction (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995) through a 'moral smokescreen' that allows people to express deeply felt views (Gabriel et al., 2000, p. 194).

Such activity often occurs at a 'subterranean' level, out of direct sight of management (Taylor & Bain, 2003), within the 'commonplace cracks and crevices of intersubjective

relations and other quiet ... realms of organizational life' (Fleming & Sewell, 2002, p. 863); perhaps next to the coffee machine or 'down the pub' using humour that actively contests (and denigrates) official narratives. Within corporate cultural programmes that celebrate diversity, empowerment and autonomy, it becomes more difficult to control and contain people's humour 'in some sort of enclave' (Berger, 1997, p. 16). When such spaces remain dominated by hierarchical divisions, humour may represent attitudes that stand 'in sharp contrast to managerial values and priorities' by establishing and reproducing 'countercultures, in which alternative values [are] clearly articulated' (Taylor & Bain, 2003, p. 1505). This raises particular dilemmas for middle managers, who act as both agents and supervisors of others' humour, because 'far from always being a source of social cohesion, people's humour may reflect and reinforce, articulate and highlight workplace divisions, tensions, conflicts, power asymmetries and inequalities' (Collinson, 2002, p. 282).

### Social 'glue'

Forms of humour that strengthen cooperation and solidify closer relationships (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Mallett & Wapshott, 2014; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940) exercise power by forming shared understandings: a 'common language' that binds people and 'strengthens the sense of trust for those who share it' (Fineman et al., 2005, p. 215). For example, forms of irony, satire and other tropes become easily understood by those 'in the know' and constitute a kind of 'social glue' (Cooper, 2005) that bolsters meaningful forms of action and talk (Seckman & Couch, 1989). Recursive forms of humour enable individuals to create informal social identities and practise modes of identification (Collinson, 1988), aided by discursive devices such as 'echoing, mirroring and completing another's utterance' (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p. 1689). This decreases social distance (Coser, 1960), facilitating group integration (Strömberg & Karlsson, 2009) and cohesion (McGhee, 1999). Objects of humour creep into people's talk (Hopper & LeBaron, 1998), establishing more nuanced relationships founded on social connection, relatedness and 'the tying together' of feelings that constitute subjective 'lines of force' (Foucault, 1997, p. 136) within organizations 'even as they strive to be rational' (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 118).

Habitual forms of humour promote closer relationships and facilitate relational meanings that connect seemingly shared experiences (Paolucci & Richardson, 2006), through which people form dominant perspectives on 'what is going on'. Such power ties of solidarity and camaraderie affect the everyday negotiations that characterize working arrangements between people, groups and net-

works (Dixon, 2007). People participate in forms of 'consummatory' humour for enjoyment and 'for its own sake', as 'aimless social intercourse' (Roy, 1960, p. 166), but are, nonetheless, apt to agree with and support those they identify with (Westwood & Johnston, 2012). Thus, intimate relations, through which people enact organization, are vital to any analysis of power because they compel individuals, 'with the help of others', to engage in mutual discourses that act on their 'thoughts, conduct, and way[s] ... of being' (Foucault, 1988, p. 18).

Where people's humour promotes ties of friendship and fidelity, we would expect emotional investment, attachment and commitment to be positively affected (McCall et al., 2017). In-group-orientated humour is said to facilitate closer rapport (Barsoux, 1996), 'lubricate' interactions (Bradney, 1957), and generate felt accord. Formal forms of stratification and organization can be augmented, but also unsettled, through humour that affects the salience of relationships (Linstead, 1985). These cliques, far from being unproblematic, can reinforce asymmetrical power relations, including inequities of gender (Collinson & Collinson, 1996) and race (Billig, 2001b), and may become consistent aspects of intergroup tensions (Taylor & Bain, 2003).

### Rhetoric

People rhetorically use forms of humour such as anecdote, allegory, parody, and wit – that is, apt, smart and perceptive modes of discourse that include irony, satire and the comic (Gruner, 1965) – to amuse, engage and affect others. Rhetoric exercises and exposes the social/political aspects of organizational life through aesthetic (stylistic) modes of discourse (Fineman & Gabriel, 1994). The art, composition, nuance and 'beauty' of affective humour create 'the impression of truth in language' (Weaver, 2010, p. 541), enhance a speaker's credibility, and constitute an effective form of persuasion (Ge & Gretzel, 2017). The 'essence of rhetoric is in allegory' (Foucault, 1998, p. 190), through which people use symbols in stories, jokes, witty retorts, and so on, to convey (anti)social, political and moral meanings in relation to their situation. Humour becomes rhetorical when people exert, play with, resist, ignore, subvert and juxtapose discourses to comic effect. People reproduce and comment on issues of power, truth and individual conduct by exaggerating aspects of their everyday experience – be it chaos, uncertainty, or anxiety – in order to criticize banal rhetoric(s), including those inscribed in and perpetuated by management (Fineman & Gabriel, 1994).

Rhetorical and witty forms of humour have a directly productive role because they affect the meanings people reflexively attach to themselves. As Meyer (2000) notes,

forms of rhetorical humour exercise power through identification (building rapport), amplification (persuading people in ways they may better remember), enforcement (in articulating norms) and differentiation (demarcating boundaries for knowledge). Thus, 'truth... is not defined by a correspondence to reality but as a force inherent to principles' developed in a discourse (Foucault, 1993, p. 209). For example, by entering their story as the subject, victim, hero or fool (Fineman & Gabriel, 1994), the humourist exercises experiential truths that others might identify with. Used in this way, humour formulates pragmatic, and often nuanced, truths that render reality mutable (Gruner, 1965). Rhetorical humour can have a snowballing effect (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993), stirring people's imaginations and feelings (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006), stimulating a sense of vitality (Roy, 1960), and provoking others to contribute (Greatbatch & Clark, 2003).

Rhetorical humour contrasts with dialectical forms, typically accomplished through audience involvement (Fine & De Soucey, 2005, p. 3) for the reason that dialectic searches for truth; rhetoric makes truth effective' (Jacobs, 2000, p. 261). Power is not simply repressive, but rather is productive and exercised through stimulation, incitement and induction (Burkitt, 2014). Forms of humour constitute common rhetorical modes of discourse: persuasion, anecdote, aesthetics and truth that, in making others laugh, delight and lure people to acquiesce through the power of pleasure (Biesecker, 1992, p. 362). Humorous rhetoric invites people to listen (intently), satirize, and question fractures and failings embedded in organizational discourse (Meddaugh, 2010) by producing a 'kind of magnetic force' (Foucault, 1993, p. 209) that invites others to listen carefully and participate. The more pleasurable and transformative the interaction, the more power flows between people engaged in the discourse (Dixon, 2007).

## Knowledge generation

Management theorists have long argued that people's humour constitutes an important form of creativity (Murdock & Ganim, 1993), promoting a space in which novel ideas emerge (Ziv, 1983) and people play with discourses and practices for pleasure, within and against the strictures of power relations (Kets de Vries, 1990). Through humour, people reflect on their situation and find aspects of what surrounds them strange, odd, wonderful or funny. In doing so, people enrich conversational language and 'snap... the bonds that bind us, if only for a short time' (Orme, 1986, p. 14). This curious and 'sharpened sense of reality' evokes 'care' because it mobilizes (in the individual and in others) a readiness to 'throw off familiar ways of thought and look

at the same thing in a different way' (Foucault, 1997, p. xxi). Rather than being positioned as resistance, such processes can be understood as improvisations within the constraints of power relations (Butler, 2004).

Through creative acts of humour, people generate knowledge (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017) and challenge orthodox practices to comic effect, perhaps sparking tensions between instrumental, aesthetic and practical reason (Habermas, 1987) that foster dialogue and public reflection through the emancipation of subjugated knowledge (Foucault, 1980). Such processes are facilitated and deepened through bouts of humour that produce 'switches in frames of reference' (O'Connell, 1976, p. 327) that generate novel ideas. It is the suddenness and unexpectedness with which this restructuring occurs that stretches (and twists) meanings, penetrating 'the world taken for granted' (Collinson, 1988, p. 182), while simultaneously providing unexpected resolutions. While discourses are never independent of power, the relationship is heterogeneous, often contradictory and subject to transformation through discursive practices.

Humour 'counts' (Mumby et al., 2017) when people denaturalize taken-for-granted discursive practices and explore the potentialities that arise when ideas and viewpoints blend constructively to constitute innovative perspectives. While resistance might be required to change power structures, 'what we can symbolically and interactively imagine and articulate may be fundamental to the ability to make structural change' (Raelin, 2008, p. 534). Through humour, people steer conversations in informal (and unmanaged) directions, providing space to (re)consider viewpoints (Raskin, 1985). Humour based on intimacy and rapport allows people to exercise distinct and complementary perspectives, while simultaneously producing attributes and values that overlap with others, to both reproduce and reflexively engage 'the cultural fabric of the workplace' (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995, p. 740). Where humour emphasizes heterogeneity and solidarity (Terrion & Ashforth, 2002), rather than differentiation and conflict, it has a great capacity to engage people in the kind of meaningful dialogue that can expand and deepen social relationships, practices and discourses (Kets de Vries, 1990).

## Summary

The six discursive practices of workplace humour described above are likely to be present, to some degree, within any environment where humour is exercised. That said, power generates certain forms of discursive practice while silencing others. This is equally true for particular forms of humour and, in some circumstances,

humour itself. Humour use is a complex and paradoxical phenomenon (Linstead, 1985) into which contradictory and effacing discursive practices are inextricably woven. Thus, we might enquire which of these discursive practices are most evident in workplace humour and to what extent, and, by the same token, which are least so? Such questions are likely to reveal a great deal about people's circumstances and the contexts within which workplace humour operates. By focusing on these six dominant discursive practices of workplace humour, and on the generative power that lies within intersecting subjective processes, we might learn something new about the role of humour in generating, reproducing and transforming power relations in the workplace.

### Potential avenues for further research

This section discusses possible avenues that future research on humour might pursue. Framing humour as a discursive practice allows us to consider and explore a number of current conversations within management and organization studies that directly concern issues of power and sensemaking. For reasons of space, the five most prominent associative processes are considered: *performativity*, *laughter*, *values*, *emotions*, and *identity work*. While conversations have been established within each of these, the centrality of humour to sensemaking and the exercise of power remains undertheorized and researched in all of them. Together, these five processes, together with the five resources for sensemaking and six discursive practices of power outlined above, form a new conceptual framework for future research on humour at work, with the aim of leveraging existing knowledge to go beyond what we already know.

### Performativity

Performativity, as understood within critical management studies, relates language use to social actions. How people use language is key to uncovering political discursive effects, through which meanings become reified and practices normalized (Butler, 2010). Yet, the performative potential of humour remains undertheorized and little studied within management and organization studies (for rare examples, see Hodgson, 2005; Tyler & Cohen, 2008). A 'performative utterance' (Austin, 1962) is any discursive act (whether a joke, irony, laughter, mirth etc.) that generates events, harbours meanings and helps constitute relations (of power). Humour is assertive, yet relatively ambiguous; people's laughter is often declarative, but not (necessarily) commissive, and so forth. While humour is a com-

plex speech-act, which requires heightened engagement and interpretation, what is 'said' invariably does something; it affects others. For instance, people reiterate managerial discourses to generate irony and 'profound' forms of ambivalence that go relatively undetected in becoming normalized (Hodgson, 2005, p. 65).

Whether humour switches semantic and syntactical meanings, conveys irony or constitutes a relatively blunt locution, it inevitably reifies/critiques (and, possibly, transforms) meanings, sensitivities and identities 'that evolve in an unmanaged way' (Gabriel, 1995, p. 484). Put simply, where humour thrives, the informal buttresses the formal, providing tensions for sensemaking. For example, in appropriating managerial jargon, images and policies for humorous purposes, perlocutionary referents can pass into the collective memory and constitute 'enormous symbolic power' (Linstead, 1985, p. 762). For example, people may question the performativity of management through comically exaggerated impersonations and parodies of particular cultural norms (Tyler & Cohen, 2008). Of course, such humour can lapse into 'deadening clichés through ... repetition', rather than acting as an emancipatory discourse that flows fluidly through conversations and challenges orthodox practices (Foucault, 1990, p. xxi).

### Laughter

Laughter is a universal phenomenon, present wherever people gather and exercised in many forms. We are subject to the laughter of others (Provine, 1992), prone to chorus laughter, which has an amplifying effect (Dunbar, 2004) and use laughter rhetorically as a mode of communication (de Sousa, 1987). However, a search of the Web of Science database revealed fewer than ten articles within the organizational study literature that address laughter as their main topic (for rare examples, see Butler, 2015; Greatbatch & Clark, 2003). Rather, laughter is used almost entirely descriptively in order to recognize humour. Thus, it is safe to say that we know little about the importance of laughter itself in organizations.

However, laughter (and explicit non-laughter) exercises emotions, which are intimately social and are often symbolic; people laugh to signal solidarity, warmth, respect and association or, alternatively, they withhold laughter to signal resistance, discord, disrespect and offence. In short, laughter constitutes a discursive practice, exercises power, and is an important mechanism through which people create meaning, affect and discipline others, and inspire identity work/regulation. This is Bergson's (1999) fundamental contribution to the theory of humour, made clear through a discursive framework that acknowledges the centrality of sensemaking to agency. Laughter is a

device through which people signal loyalty and camaraderie, irony and cynicism, derision and mockery, mishap and embarrassment, tension and anxiety, and, perhaps most importantly, generate agreement and/or difference. People constitute meaning through the associative force of laughter, which might be viewed as a polyphonic form of accord and discipline through which outlooks are shared and comprehended. For instance, others' laughter can produce acute embarrassment that reproduces forms of control through the social codes of everyday practices (Billig, 2001a).

## Values

Values are morally driven, aesthetic beliefs that are related to norms, but are 'less bound to specific situations', more dynamic and, to a large extent, more informal (Gecas, 2008, p. 345). Although a great deal of humour is value-driven, there are few studies that seek to understand how humour transmits, questions and (possibly) transforms intersubjective value orientations at work. However, humour, in its many forms, is likely to constitute values work (Gehman et al., 2013), possibly because humour, like the values that are exercised through its conception, is intuitive, abstract and emotive. Value-driven humour ascribes meaning to one's circumstances and is a critical orientation through which people evaluate 'conceptions of the desirable' (Vaisey, 2009, p. 1676). For example, as an ethical practice that questions, and perhaps derides, managerial pretensions, as 'a way of not deferring to a set of norms but of questioning them' (Clegg et al., 2021, p. 14).

There is little research addressing the *ethics* of humour at work (e.g. Rhodes & Badham, 2018; Smuts, 2010). Why is the use of certain forms of humour deemed acceptable, how does people's talk generate ethical principles for humour (see Huber & Brown, 2017), and how is humour exercised through people's values work? Or, indeed, who/what is rendered acceptable (or taboo) for laughter? Such ethical concerns are, to some extent, culturally determined (that is, a matter of etiquette), yet are also often breached through humour. Humour may be stymied by political correctness, liberal consensus or organizing principles, to both positive and negative effect. This could be particularly true in organizations that promote a moral vision, in post-bureaucratic organizations, or in entrepreneurial start-ups (Kauppinen & Daskalaki, 2015). Research in such contexts might highlight and deepen our understanding of the centrality of underlying values, moral sentiments and the efficacy of social relationships in the playing out of humour (Charman, 2013; McCall et al., 2017).

## Emotion

Emotions (including mirth, anxiety, embarrassment and dislike) are frequently exercised and transmitted through humour. Rather than being individual phenomena, such emotions can be conceptualized as discursive artefacts, which are co-constituted and intersubjective (Kornberger & Brown, 2007); for example, when people exercise emotional labour through humour to shape their experiences and interactions (Bochantin, 2017; Bolton & Boyd, 2003). However, few humour studies have attended to the constitutive role of emotions. Rather, emotions are almost exclusively used to describe humour. Here, Vance's observations might help unpack the emotive drivers in humour; he is prompted to make a humorous 'visual statement' when he perceives something as 'ridiculously ... out of whack' (White & Vance, 2011, p. 449). First, humorous perceptions are triggered by emotions, constituted 'within socially constructed systems of discourse and practice' that give them meaning (Ahuja et al., 2019, p. 2). Second, sensemaking is triggered by negative emotions, which take precedence in people's accounts of incongruities (and interruptions) in the daily flow of working life (Weick, 1995). Third, it is well established that emotive language, including humour, is highly figurative and 'dominated by metaphorical and metonymic expressions' whereby symbols – including words – stand in for emotions (Kövecses, 2000). Fourth, humour at work is often tendentious; for example, where people exercise and generate negative emotions through ridicule and mockery (Mumby, 2009). Yet, the emotions engendered may trigger collectivism against tyranny and/or authority to positive effect. Finally, people commonly use humour as a 'coping mechanism' and source of 'resilience' (Henman, 2001). Occupational groups such as nurses (Coser, 1966), medical students (Piemonte, 2015) and prison warders (Schmidt, 2017) may come to rely on 'gallows humour' as a source of camaraderie and to cope with the pressures of their working day. Are certain discourses legitimized through such strategies and, if so, are such behaviours problematic (cf. Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Francis, 1994)?

Framing humour only through positive outcomes (including smiles, mirth and laughter) constrains our understanding of humour's critical potential. As Rorty notes, 'irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive' (1989, p. 88). Humour can heighten a range of emotions (including anger and resentment) and exercise negative sentiments even where laughter is present. Indeed, negative emotions, such as anger, can (and often do) produce and energize positive actions, including critique and social change (Fineman, 2006). For instance, Marsh and Śliwa (2021) found that people's laughter produced affective atmospheres, through which power

operates (Ashcraft, 2021), which induced collective practices of resistance.

## Identity work

Identity work describes the practices that individuals exercise ‘to create, maintain, and display personal and social identities that sustain a coherent and desirable self-concept’ (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 45). Humour can act as a significant determinant of self-understanding and self-discipline and, in so doing, constitutes a central aspect of one’s being: a sense of humour. We might not possess a cutting wit, be able to find our present-self funny, or feel inclined to laugh out loud in all situations, but we are all (constantly) surrounded by, and disciplined through, the phenomenon of humour, so that for many a sense of humour becomes integral to their identity. Each person’s sense of humour is a practical accomplishment that helps provide a degree of continuity from one social space to another as people negotiate the meanings they attach reflexively to themselves. Humour is a critical resource for sensemaking and identity formation because it ‘invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives’ (Critchley, 2002, p. 28). Yet, while personal and collective identities are well established as topics for humour research, there remain few studies on humour as identity work (Huber & Brown, 2017). We need a better understanding of how individuals fluidly constitute aspects of their identities through humour, as they form, repair, maintain, strengthen and revise ‘constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165).

Importantly, others’ humour and their response (or lack thereof) to our own humour can (and often does) generate intense feelings, through which identity work is accomplished (Winkler, 2018). For example, humour can generate relations of camaraderie, fidelity and support that exercise ‘positive forces of self-renewal and self-regeneration’ (Boje et al., 2005, p. 195). Equally, transgressive acts of aggression in humour can challenge one’s dignity (Doherty, 2011), self-efficacy, and so on. Through humour, people discipline others and, perhaps more importantly, exercise self-restraint. That said, one’s sense of humour, constituted through a community of practice, might generate the self as a site for emancipation in which one’s personal philosophies – or personalized ethics – enhance one’s ability to experience moments of self-questioning as pleasurable and rewarding; for instance, where dark humour is experienced as ‘liberating and elevating’ (Critchley, 2013, p. 80). Even wicked problems are perhaps occasions for affording pleasure, critique and possible trans-

formations of ‘the world which seems so dangerous’ (Freud, 1928, p. 6).

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While humour is often associated with elevating and liberating the human condition (Critchley, 2002), such perspectives should be tempered because humour is situated within relations of power that help determine speech and actions. Humour might be more usefully understood as an open text that constitutes and reflects both dominant and alternative claims on reality by interleaving ‘different ways that meaning can be clarified’ (Rhodes, 2000, p. 25). Through humour, people exploit the potential of ambiguity, incongruity, complexity, play and imagination to invoke images of organizations as more or less ‘out of control, irrational, messy, confusing, fragmented and ambiguous’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012, p. 207). This discursive flux constitutes sensemaking and engenders people’s critical capacity to scrutinize situated meanings and reflexively interrogate the constraints that discourses impose upon them (Kmita, 2017; Watson, 2015). I have outlined six key discursive practices in humour that, although they exercise power, do not necessarily curtail people’s agency or reproduce discourses that ‘block’ and frustrate alternative and transformative forms of knowledge (Foucault, 1997, p. 283).

Figure 1 shows how resources for sensemaking and generative modes of power intersect with the five avenues for future research to form a new conceptual framework for humour research. Within the figure, associative processes constitute intersecting forces that produce subjectivities, identities and forms of organizational practice. The figure illustrates the intersectional nature of the processes outlined, because they ‘interact with one another in multiple and complex ways’ (Mercer et al., 2015, p. 435). Researchers might work with the framework for analytical sensibility (Rodriguez et al., 2016), to theorize and analyse how people use humour to subjectively constitute organizations. The term *associative processes* serves to highlight how catalysts and forms of humour (from across and within sections) intersect to generate *constitutive processes*. For example, through forms of play, people might use humour rhetorically to resist managerial authority (Strömberg & Karlsson, 2009). Alternatively, a manager might imagine and use humorous metaphors to generate laughter that reinforces their exercise of control while deflecting attention from it (Greatbatch & Clark, 2002). Researchers might work with the framework to analyse which associative processes constitute people’s humour in any given workplace, to generate rich and critically orientated knowledge on ‘the dynamics of individual and group life in organizations’ (Kahn, 1989, p. 46).

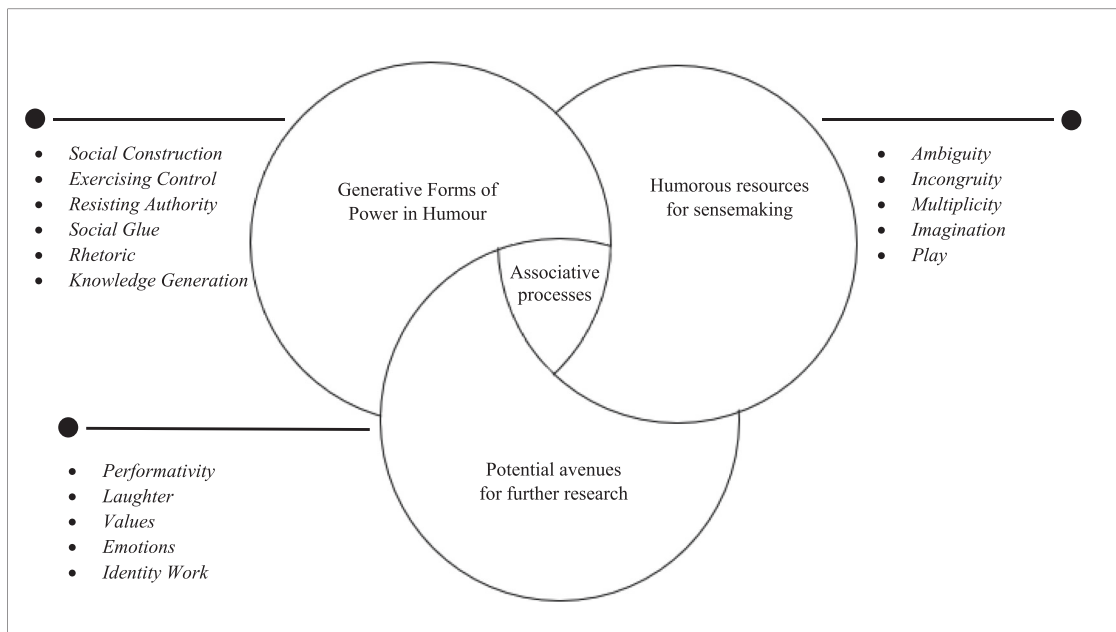


FIGURE 1 A new conceptual framework: to generate critically orientated knowledge

For researchers, humour draws attention to the plurivocal, multifaceted, fragmented, ambiguous, irrational and governing aspects of organizational discourse, through which people make meaning with others to produce, reproduce, contest and transform their social arrangements. Using humour, people exercise and perform values, emotions, rhetoric and identity work that together constitute much of the ongoing flow of organizational life. Therefore, in interpreting and writing about the humour of others, we should craft convincing stories that emphasize the centrality of power, subjectivity and sensemaking in humour. In so doing, we might furnish more nuanced, sophisticated and contextualized accounts of organizations, which focus on struggles, contradictions, ambiguities, and differing experiences, by making use of ‘comedy, parody, satire, travesty, farce, jest and irreverence ... in the service of persuasion and reality construction’ (Van Maanen, 1995, p. 687), always being careful to reflexively ask ourselves where lists end and life begins. Humour is an intricate, intuitive and experiential condition of being, which, perhaps even more than art, may be destroyed through overanalysis. This is why, to better understand what it does in the workplace, humour is probably best analysed from the bottom up, through the study of people’s speech and actions.

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