Limiting the laughter: Organizational culture and humour boundaries

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LIMITING THE LAUGHTER: ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND HUMOUR BOUNDARIES

This paper discusses the idea that within an organization's culture humour enactment is influenced through the creation of boundaries that enable or constrain humour activities. In companies with high levels of formality, boundaries for humour activities were narrower and therefore humour activities were more constrained and careful. Conversely, in companies with lower levels of formality boundaries for humour enactment were wider resulting in a broader range of humour activities. Different organizational members assume contrasting roles that either maintain and reinforce acceptable humour boundaries or challenge and push the boundaries for acceptable humour enactment. These roles involve 'gatekeepers' who attempt to maintain current humour boundaries versus the 'jokers' who constantly challenge humour boundaries.

Key words: organizational culture, humour, boundaries, roles, joker, gatekeeper

Paulsen and Hernes (2003) call for new research into the changing nature of organizational boundaries and suggest that new perspectives on boundaries are required as there is currently little research that is exclusively focused on boundaries. Bureaucratic boundaries have declined in modern organizations, however, while boundaries are still important, they are less visible and more subtle. Boundaries continue to define the external parameters of organizations and their activities, but just as importantly, relate to the 'inner mental structures' of organizations (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003, p. 9). Organizational boundaries are socially constructed and may emerge during the research process as researcher and subjects discuss the significance of particular boundaries. Organizational members relate to socially constructed boundaries and perceive them as real and these constructions determine 'norms of allowable versus deviant behaviours' (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003, p. 9). Linstead (1985) and Davies (1982) both found that humour helps to clarify social and moral boundaries that define acceptable workplace behaviour and Westwood (2004) highlights that the boundaries between funny and serious are ambiguous in organizations. Martin (2002, p. 315) views cultural boundaries as: 'moveable, fluctuating, permeable, blurred and dangerous' and claims that that studying boundaries is useful to view cultural theory via an alternative perspective. Boundaries may constrain workplace behaviour and have a control function while also enabling energy release and action. Boundary setting is important as it is a key element of organising and enables an organization to distinguish itself from other organizations (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003).

Organizational culture is a social construction that becomes a device for accounting for and creating patterns of organizational interaction (Parker, 2000; Smircich, 1983). Hofstede (1978) defined culture as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another' (p. 1). The concept of culture implies that groups of people have different ways of doing things (Smircich, 1983) and therefore the term culture is itself a metaphor used to describe organizations (Morgan, 2006).

The word culture conveys the feeling of a pervasive way of life, or a set of norms (Handy, 1993) and emphasises that organizations have their own social structure that is reflected by actions, language, discourse, roles, rituals, ceremonies, norms, stories, and myths (Morgan, Frost, & Pondy, 1983).

Although theoretical models of culture have been criticised for oversimplifying the concept, they can assist in guiding research and building theory (Hatch, 1993). Schein's (1985) framework is one of the only conceptual models created to analyse culture (Hatch, 1993). Schein (1985) conceptualises culture by proposing three levels that pertain to the degree of visibility of the concept to the observer. The levels range from the obvious and overt manifestations of culture that can be seen and felt, to deeper, more embedded assumptions that describe the essence of culture. The surface level is artifacts and contains visible structures and processes of the organizational culture. The second level comprises espoused values and incorporates organizational strategies, goals and philosophies. Values can gradually be cognitively transformed into deeper level assumptions (the third and deepest level) which are supported by the articulated 'beliefs, norms and operational rules of behaviour' (Schein, 2004, p. 20). A group has a culture when it has enough shared history to have formed a set of basic assumptions and these assumptions guide behaviour perceptions, thoughts and feelings (Schein, 2004, p. 21).

Organizational culture is a complex and comprehensive area of research. It is concerned with workplace experiences and people's behaviour (Alvesson & Berg, 1992), yet few studies even mention humour as an element of this concept that has a key focus on people and their work-related behaviour (Linstead, 1985). Humour is a part of every culture (Berger, 1997) and reflects the values and assumptions of that culture. Therefore, in order to truly understand the culture in an organization, one must investigate key cultural components such as shared humour and joking patterns (Barsoux, 1996; Fine & De Soucey, 2005).Every organization exhibits different amounts, styles and types of humour and humour is an essential component of organizational culture (Holmes, 2007). Corporate values and assumptions may be reflected through organizational humour use and may offer insights into nature of the organization (Barsoux, 1996). Humour is also used in boundary setting to establish acceptable behaviour within an organizational culture (Linstead, 1985) and Duncan, Smeltzer and Leap(1990) assert that it is important to understand joking patterns within an organization in order to understand an organization's culture. Researchers recognise that there is a mutual relationship between humour and organizational culture and that while humour is a feature of organizational culture it can also help maintain and even change organizational culture (Linstead, 1985; Kahn, 1989; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003).

METHODS

One month was spent inside each of four New Zealand companies collecting data investigating the influence of organizational culture upon workplace humour enactment. Three qualitative methods were used to elicit rich, descriptive data: semi-structured interviews; participant observation; and documentary data collection. Observation notes were detailed and wherever possible exchanges of humour were recorded verbatim while they were occurring to capture the event as authentically as possible. In total fifty nine interviews were conducted with people from all levels of each organization and these were recorded (handwritten notes and audio tapes) and transcribed. Documents were collected that reflected company culture and examples of humour and brochures, emails, cartoons, posters, and web material were collected. A report was written for each company and these served as member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) where findings are taken back to the respondents for them to check. After the report had been circulated within the company, managers were contacted for feedback .Their reactions to the reports were a useful validation of the findings.

This research was exploratory and interpretive with a constructivist approach that assumed there would be multiple realities within research. Such a position encourages exploratory research and multivoiced texts and may include a "passionate participant as a facilitator of multivoice reconstruction" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p.196). Interpretive research aims to understand meaningful social action through precise descriptions of people's actions and words in a particular research context.The mixed methods appeared valuable for accessing rich, contextual data and gathering multiple perspectives offers the ability to explore complex phenomena in different ways. Lockyer (2006) supports this mixed-method approach to humour research and believes that multiple data collections give more precise and complex results than mono-method approaches. A single method may work well in one context but not as well in others and so this data collection was designed to offer methods for several possible situations. By using a variety of methods, biases and flaws renowned in mono- methods were mitigated. Relying totally on data collected from structured interviews can be problematic due to social desirability influences which means a respondent may give socially acceptable answers to questions in the bid to be highly thought of by their interviewer (Stőber, Dette & Musch, 2002). Therefore, observation was useful to see if interview responses describing organizational events were supported. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) claim that combining methodological practices and perspectives within a single study adds richness, complexity, depth and rigour. Bryman (2006) emphasises that although mixed-method research is not a new idea there is growing interest in the research potential offered by adopting multiple strategies and a variety of approaches.

Data analysis was an iterative process and NVivo7 software was used to manage the large quantity of data collected from the different methods. All of the data was transcribed

and stored in electronic files which were imported into the NVivo7 software. Qualitative data programmes are useful in this kind of data analysis because they facilitate traditional processes of coding and categorising large amounts of data (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). One of the key advantages in NVivo7 is that the researcher can easily and swiftly move between coded segments and the original source documents. Initially, the data set from each company in the study was analysed separately to explore the specific contextual effects in each individual company. In later analysis a thematic approach was used and all of the data were combined, coded and recoded into different categories. The final analysis stages involved combining data categories to create themes that were linked together.

The literature had suggested that formality and organizational culture influence humour enactment (Beetham, 1996; Handy, 1993; Morand, 1995). It was hypothesised that the formality levels in an organization would influence the organizational culture and therefore influence humour activities. As Beetham (1996) emphasises, organizations are generally a combination of formal and informal relations, and factors such as bureaucracy are often a matter of degree. During interviews each participant completed an assessment of their workplace formality using the continuum tool. The formality/informality continuum (see Figure 1) assessed formality levels at each company along six strands: hierarchy, continuity, impersonality, expertise, environment and structure. Each of the strands uses scales divided into five sections with each section assigned a numerical symbol from one through to five. The lower numeric values denotes the degrees of informality in each category and the higher numeric values depict the opposite position - degrees of formality. Therefore, number one in the continuum denotes very low degrees of formality (extreme informality); two denotes low formality; three denotes the mid-way point; four represents high formality; and five a very high degree of formality. After each organization was assessed on each strand, the numbers for each strand were added together and then that total was divided by six to determine an average degree of formality/informality. This average score then determined the organization's overall assessment in respect of informality/formality.

RESULTS

Formality

The four participating companies have been assigned noms-de-plume to protect their identity and are known as Adare, Kapack, Sigma and Uvicon. The companies were from different industries and these were: Adare- a small Information Technology (IT) company; Sigma- a large financial institution, Kapack- a medium sized law firm; and Uvicon a large utility company. Levels of formality appeared to be an important cultural element at each company. Analysis of formality levels showed that the companies were assessed as: Adare *informal*, Kapack and Uvicon *neither* formal nor informal and Sigma was *formal* (see Figure 2). Although Kapack and Uvicon were assessed in the middle of the continuum the aggregated

results ranked these companies as higher than the midway point (Kapack 3.6 and Uvicon 3.2) and suggested that they were closer to the *formal* end of the continuum. Both of these companies appeared more formal than their mid-way ranking suggested and this was possibly due to the fact that although both companies rated as formal in respect of hierarchy, environmental, continuity, expertise and structure, the average was reduced by a low assessment for *impersonality* which refers to company rules and regulations. Although both companies explicitly stated many rules in company manuals (viewed during data collection), employees still rated the company as informal on impersonality. It is possible that respondents were unaware of the manuals or having viewed them at the start of their tenure, had forgotten their existence and thus perceived their company as having few stated rules. Due to their ranking being above the midway point and closer to that of the Sigma company (4.3) the Kapack and Uvicon companies have been considered as *formal* companies along with Sigma. Adare was the only company assessed with a low formality rating (2.4) and therefore is considered to be an *informal* company

Boundaries

As suggested by Morand (1995), it was assumed that formality levels would have some impact upon the prevailing organizational culture and its relationship with workplace humour. Throughout analysis of the interview transcripts respondents frequently referred to *boundaries* when discussing workplace humour. Using NVivo7 software, a query was generated searching for the words and phrases 'boundaries'; 'cross the line'; 'go too far'; 'limits'; 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' as these descriptions were used in the interview transcripts. In the three formal companies respondents emphasised that there were boundaries and limits when using humour and respondents stated that company members knew what the boundaries were. Many respondents articulated types of humour that were deemed to be 'crossing the line' or overstepping the boundaries. Respondents claimed that sexual or racist humour transgressed appropriate behaviour norms; some suggested that any humour that targeted individuals or personal characteristics was unacceptable; and most respondents stated that humour could go 'too far'. Humour that hurt people's feelings, hurt them physically or damaged property transgressed organizational boundaries. Respondents highlighted email regulations that limited or restricted some types of humour (often pornographic) and thus perceived that management was defining humour boundaries with such policies. A policy restricting video forms of email humour at Kapack was an example of one of these managerially imposed humour boundaries. An IT employee claimed that these files were restricted due to their potential for containing offensive material and also the noise when they were played in the open-plan office space was distracting to others. Many respondents felt that the CEO of their company set the limits of acceptable humour. While some respondents stated that the humour in their workplace was mainly neutral or moderate, others claimed that

using humour actually enabled people to *push* the boundaries at work particularly when the jokers were involved in the humour. This respondent outlines her perception of humour and boundaries:

> I think the humour opens boundaries, it opens the ability to be able to just chat about things and get stuff off your chest and to sound people out, and alert people to issues… so the fact that we can joke with each other and build a relationship with people that I work with, I find it kind of means that you don't have that sort of formal boundary and you are able to push them a bit better than you normally could (Uvicon respondent).

These interviewees emphasise that boundaries must be maintained as part of professionalism even when having fun and enacting humour at work:

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

> We need to have young people and we need to have fun, but I still worry a little bit when they get a little bit too loud and laughing too much that it is not quite professional and it might look like perhaps that they are not doing much to other people that is just in our area (Kapack team leader).

Although data from three of the companies suggested definite humour boundaries there was a definite contrast in the data from Adare, the most informal company. It seemed that there were few humour boundaries at Adare and that any form of humour and joking was acceptable and encouraged.

> This organization is like nothing you have ever come across. Most people who come in and visit us they are just taken completely back by how open the place is, how dry and perhaps risky the humour is. Some places are so politically correct that you can't say boo, if you take this as the anti PC, this is exactly what the place is like, which is great... (Adare respondent).

> I don't there is anything that is particularly sacred. There would be limits but we haven't seen those limits reached as yet…(Adare respondent).

Observation notes showed links between culture and humour. For example at Adare where humour was encouraged and treated as an important cultural factor, many practical jokes were observed during the research month. Contrastingly, in the careful professional culture at the formal companies, no practical jokes were observed during data collection. In the informal culture at Adare, humour interchanges were peppered with profanity and sexual and racial insults. Inside the three more formal companies humour was much more constrained and few profane, lewd or racial humour references were observed. In each company, particular individuals were identified as the people that created and instigated humour most often. The term *joker* was introduced to respondents in the attempt to identify those individuals who were most involved in humour activities. The jokers appeared to be well known throughout their entire company. Those identified as jokers from the four companies came from all

different status levels within the organizations. Some held senior management positions, some were junior-level employees and one was the managing director. Observation data supported the respondents' identification of their workplace jokers and these characters featured in more of the observed banter, jokes and horseplay incidents than their colleagues and were often recorded in observation notes as the instigators of pranks and fun.

DISCUSSION

Organizational culture and humour boundaries

During analysis it became apparent that respondents frequently referred to the notion of a boundary in respect of what humour was acceptable in their workplace. Metaphors such as 'cross the line' were used by respondents to indicate that humour could transgress acceptable workplace boundaries and 'go too far'. Supporting Paulsen & Hernes's (2003) contention that boundaries are socially constructed, respondents at the four studied companies emphasised that boundaries to humour were not always officially defined but were assumed and known by socialised company employees. The careful and comparatively constrained humour behaviour at the three formal companies suggested that boundaries were understood and observed by most of the employees. In his engineering research, Kunda (1992) suggests that in strong organizational cultures 'normative control' guides social behaviour. Paulsen and Hernes (2003) add that boundary creation is an important factor in determining behavioural norms and upholding social power. Although none of the companies had official written rules for humour behaviour, boundaries were developed that reflected the overall company culture and levels of formality. The unofficial humour boundaries were known by all (socialised) employees and exemplify Schein's (1985) deepest level of culture (assumptions) that reflects the unconscious beliefs and may govern organizational actions - such as reprimanding those that transgress the limits. The boundaries that influenced joking behaviour could be considered a cultural assumption adopted by organizational members. Such deepest-level assumptions are not always stated or prescribed but are known and understood by those that are integrated into the organization and must be gradually absorbed by new organizational members.

Marshall (2003) contends that boundaries are the dynamic outcome of contested processes of inclusion and exclusion and must be actively maintained and reproduced. This continuous process was observed and discussed during the research. While some significant incidents directly resulted in reinforcement of acceptable boundaries many seemingly insignificant on-going activities appeared to constantly emphasise, define and construct humour boundaries. At the three formal companies, themes for humour and the types of humour that were used were controlled by boundaries. Sexual and racial humour was rarely shared openly in the three formal workplaces, although some respondents hinted that such forms of humour were shared covertly among certain groups of colleagues. Humour forms

were mainly verbal banter and few practical jokes or physical forms of humour were enacted for fear of managerial reprimands or disapproval from colleagues. Constructed boundaries influenced the times and contexts in which humour was appropriate or inappropriate. Noise level was an important element of boundary creation inside these three companies. Limiting noise created by humorous activities (which could be distracting to working colleagues), was a clear boundary and a key constraint on humour enactment. Email humour was regulated in the three larger companies by verbal disapproval from managers or colleagues, company policies that explicitly discussed offensive email, and in Kapack humorous video and audio files were blocked by the IT department. This boundary was controlled by a young IT professional who viewed these files and deleted those that were sent for humour purposes and only work-related video files were permitted.

Laughter and humorous antics that were noisy were only encouraged at Adare and in this informal company there were few constraining boundaries to humour enactment. At Adare humour was openly shared that had sexual, racist and sexist themes and any form of humorous email was permitted and openly encouraged. Some of the more extreme email humour had been printed out and displayed on the walls. This company contrasted markedly with the others and their wider humour boundaries and acceptance of all forms of humorous content appeared to be part of their carefully cultivated distinct organizational identity (further discussed in another paper). The boundary construct implies a social behavioural norm that was apparent in three of the companies. 'The boundary describes the outer limit of what one sees as allowable, understandable or feasible' (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003, p. 303). Adare operated more informally than the other companies and humour boundaries here were wider and more flexible. In this smaller, less formal company there were fewer boundaries to acceptable humour and only here was humour contentious and potentially offensive in an overt way. The outer limit of permitted humour at Adare was very different from the limits at the other three companies. For example, graffiti-like scribble written in black marker pen on one of the office partitions proclaimed "*Bruce blows goats!" jokingly suggesting that a staff member engages in bestial sexual acts. This example suggests few boundaries to humorous displays at Adare, implies that the outer limit of allowable humour is very broad, and contrasts strongly with humour displays at the other companies. The formal nature of the larger companies resulted in narrower boundaries and similar humour displays would not have been permitted at Sigma, Kapack or Uvicon.

Boundaries in organizational culture are fluid and moveable and boundaries between work and non-work are manipulated in order to create fun cultures. Modern managers strive to create events that are pleasurable and similar to non-work events in order to enhance motivation and innovation (Fleming, 2005). This research supports Fleming's contention and all four companies claimed to have fun cultures and all promoted activities at work for fun

and enjoyment. Activities included parties, drinks occasions, games, dressing up and even playing with toys. At Adare the managing director encouraged staff to play computer games on Friday afternoons and this appeared to exemplify this fluid work/non-work boundary. Fleming (2005) contends that workplace fun and humour blurs boundaries between work and non-work and that people enjoy working in these types of company. Friday games at Adare may have been a way for employees to disassociate from work activities and re-enter their non-work environment at the start of the weekend leaving them with feelings of pleasure. In contemporary organizations, play and toys are becoming common and are not seen as a disruption to work activities. Today's managers are creating new mixtures of play and work and traditional boundaries are being destroyed and a 'spirit of playful transgression' is being encouraged (Costea, Crump, & Holm, 2005, p. 140). Workplace play and fun are becoming widespread and are used to renegotiate boundaries (Costea et al., 2005). 'Management itself has entered into a kind of Dionysian mode, a spirit of playful transgression and destruction of boundaries' (Costea et al., 2005, p. 141). Although boundaries are dynamic and more flexible than in the past, interviewees emphasised that there were still limits and constraints on workplace fun and humour. Although humour activities were enjoyed by most people there were situations where humour challenged boundaries and 'crossed the line' and specific individuals intervened and restated and reinforced the overstepped boundaries.

Boundary roles: gatekeepers versus jokers

The term gatekeeper originated with Lewin (1947) to describe persons that facilitate or impede the flow of information between people in groups or across organizations (Burke, 2005). Although gatekeeping has been defined as a role that involves bringing organizational and non-organizational members together, the gatekeeper role also highlights an organization's boundaries and clarifies informal communication networks and structures. When boundaries appeared to have been transgressed or where a transgression seemed imminent, the gatekeeper would express disapproval and inform the transgressors that they had 'gone too far'. At Kapack when a politically contentious joking email was published in a national publication the CEO of the organization sent out a company-wide email resetting the boundaries and emphasising that humour could be risky particularly when contained in email. In this communication he assumed the role of gatekeeper and redefined the boundaries for workplace humour. He firmly reinforced his expectation that staff would confine their future humour to less contentious forms and not distribute it via email that could be released into the public environment. He also highlighted the perceived negative impact on the company's reputation. This respondent highlights the boundary construct and indicates the managerial gatekeeping role that reinforces boundaries for workplace humour:

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

The gatekeeper role was not always assumed by managerial staff. At Kapack several respondents emphasised that they had assumed the role of gatekeeper and had chastised younger colleagues about forms of humour that they considered inappropriate. The Kapack gatekeepers were mainly older women who had long tenure at the company and felt that it was their responsibility to communicate their perceived company standards to younger staff members. These examples illustrate gatekeeper roles at Kapack assumed by two older secretaries. The first describes her reaction to seeing a sexual joke on a colleague's computer screen. The second had concerns that humour was too loud and therefore unacceptable in the law firm environment. She had expressed her disapproval to colleagues when she considered humour to be inappropriate and her response (below) suggests that she had been successful in her gatekeeping role by limiting unacceptable humour in her work area:

> I said 'now keep the party clean chaps, keep the party clean', because it's not filth but it can be quite, you know. I think some of the emails that are going around now, you know if you are standing by someone and they bring up an email and you think 'oh my goodness I shouldn't have seen that'. I'll just say 'whoo whee' (Kapack respondent).

> I mean personally I don't like practical jokes so I haven't really come across any. We don't have terribly rude jokes here either, I think it is more what is acceptable to me you can do what is acceptable and funny (Kapack respondent).

Younger company employees supported the contention that higher-status colleagues were humour gatekeepers, claiming that they had been 'told off' for inappropriate humour and even chastised for loud humour and laughter. These junior staff members conceded that 'They let us have a little bit of fun' but also asserted that they were reprimanded fairly quickly by the gatekeepers when humour was not appropriate. More individuals assumed the gatekeeper role at Kapack than at the other companies. This suggests a link between the boundary-setting function and the industry in which the company operates. Kapack was a law firm and people here were more serious and less light-hearted in their daily workplace behaviour than those at the other studied companies. Respondents at Kapack suggested that the law was a very serious business and therefore more individuals assumed the role of keeping humour and fun under control and within appropriate boundaries for the legal environment.

Paulsen and Hernes (2003) suggest that reinforcing and resetting the boundaries is a way of upholding social power. Gatekeepers achieved status in this role through knowing and imposing organizational normative control. They were usually individuals that had longevity in the organization and were keen to let newer and younger people know the social protocols

and norms at the company. At Kapack, several of the gatekeepers were older women who had been at the company for a long time and wanted to preserve the traditional mystique and status of belonging to a law firm. They were not lawyers themselves therefore could not achieve partner status, so gained and negotiated some of their personal status by regulating humour and joking. Even at Adare where humour activities were louder, more outrageous and included physical pranks and horseplay, the two female administration managers had also assumed a gatekeeping role. They firmly informed their younger male counterparts that if they were hit by flying missiles during physical humorous activities then they would have to buy them a bottle of wine as compensation. They simultaneously designated their humour boundaries and highlighted their social power over the younger men in the company. An older female manager at Uvicon described how she had reprimanded some younger staff members for humour that transgressed the boundaries. At Sigma there were more official stated rules and policies than the other companies and therefore there seemed to be less need for anyone to assume the gatekeeper's role as boundaries had been defined by management in the form of strict rules and regulations. People at Sigma regulated much of their own humour behaviour in accordance with these rules and their everyday behaviour reflected the formal environment in which they worked. However, on occasions senior staff members (such as the HR team) were observed adopting the gatekeeper's role. In one observation a Sigma employee used a loud profanity "For fuck's sake!" in a manner that made all her colleagues laugh. Her manager gently but publicly reprimanded her saying "Oh, the mouth on you!" to remind her that she had crossed the line and thus he acted as gatekeeper and reinforced the acceptable humour boundaries within this workplace.

In contrast to the gatekeeping function, individuals who assumed the role of the joker enacted humour that challenged normative boundaries. In interviews respondents were asked who the jokers were in their workplace. Jokers were also identified through observations that noted those who instigated and created humour and these supported the identification of jokers made during the interviews. As found in earlier research (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995; Holmes & Marra, 2002) jokers created and instigated more humour than other organizational members. The joker role was assumed by those who were skilled at using humour and had comedic talents. In order to adopt this role, they had to be funny and considered funny by their colleagues. The jokers themselves recognised their role and enjoyed their colleagues' appreciation of their skills. Jokers achieved status through their humour abilities and were socially popular individuals in all of the companies. Joker roles were assumed by individuals from all company levels and being the joker was dependant on their comedic skills and personality rather than their hierarchical position. The jokers' colleagues emphasised that they enjoyed working alongside their comical colleagues and jokers were popular and admired in their companies. As found by earlier researchers (Fine & De Soucey, 2005; Plester & Orams,

2008) the jokers' humour skills allowed these individuals to transgress the humour boundaries more often and more outrageously than their colleagues and they were allowed to get away with more risky humour. Examples included: a joker at Sigma who was observed racing around the office floor on her wheeled chair; a Kapack joker who threw a soft ball at his colleagues; an Uvicon employee who described hiding in a wheelie bin as a joke; and the Adare managing director who crept up behind his employees and shouted through a megaphone causing a startled reaction and much mirth from other staff. Humour activities such as these were generally only enacted by the select few identified as jokers as suggested below:

> I would say there is a huge group of people who have a good sense of humour but I wouldn't say that they are jokers… they (the jokers) are *Brad and *Lance and it doesn't take too much to spot them in the crowd. They are probably the ones that instigate a reasonable amount of (humour) stuff (Sigma respondent).

The dichotomous roles of joker and gatekeeper enhanced each other but in the three formal organizational settings the gatekeeping role appeared to be more dominant. This could be attributed to the higher formality levels in the larger companies that determined the boundaries for acceptable humour. Gatekeepers in the three more formal companies constrained humour and verbally admonished those that transgressed the perceived humour boundaries. Boundaries were formed around types of humour, noise levels for shared humour and amounts of humour activities. In short, humour could not be rude, loud or too frequent. Humour created by the jokers was also monitored and controlled by the gatekeepers. Although jokers transgressed and occasionally challenged the accepted boundaries, their humour success was often short term and therefore it seemed that the gatekeeper was the stronger position and had more success in the more formal organizations. Contrastingly, at Adare where there was more humour and examples of extreme humour, although the gatekeepers achieved some success in moderating physical forms of humour, the joker role was more dominant. Extreme humour enactment was a key cultural element at this company which differentiated it from the other studied companies. In this informal IT company, the lack of hierarchy and the small size had created an environment where humour was enabled and encouraged and physical humour, sexual, sexist and racial humour was openly enacted. Further research may also consider factors such as personality traits or psychological influences that lead people to adopt roles such as those of the joker or the gatekeeper.

CONCLUSIONS

In these organizations formality levels and organizational culture influenced the enactment of workplace humour through the construction of dynamic boundaries for acceptable humour behaviour. In the formal companies the accepted boundaries for humour enactment were narrower and humour activities were careful and constrained. In the informal company

boundaries were wider and humour enactment was more extreme and differed from activities seen in the formal companies. The humour boundaries became an assumed and embedded element of the organizational culture and were understood by organizational members. The socially constructed boundaries were part of a continuous dynamic process and were maintained by organizational gatekeepers that assumed the role of reinforcing the organization's acceptable humour behaviour. Simultaneously the boundaries were contested and challenged by organizational jokers gifted at humorous behaviour. These findings contribute to organizational research suggesting that as traditional bureaucratic boundaries diminish, socio-culturally constructed boundaries such as the humour boundaries in this study, assume greater importance in modern organizations.

*all names were changed

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Figures

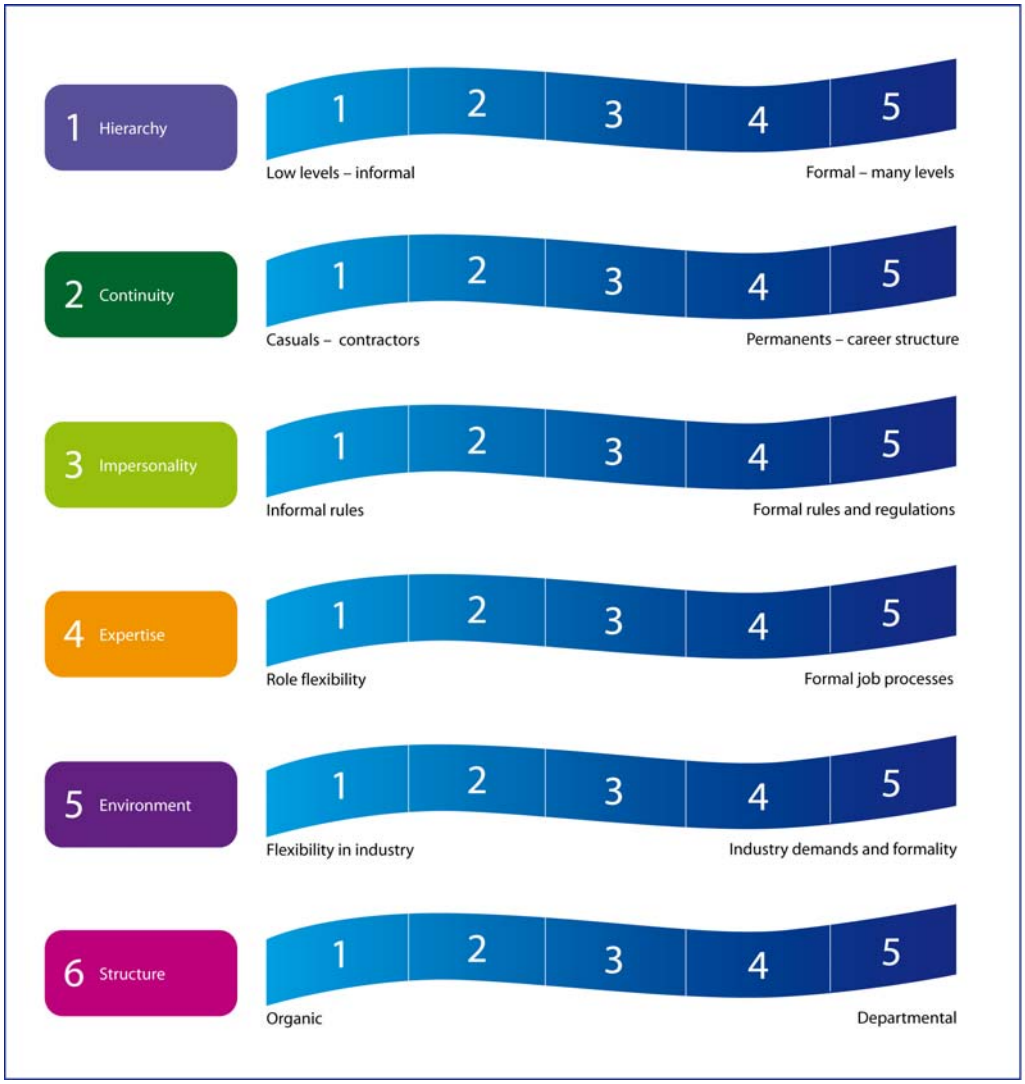


Figure 1: Organizational formality/informality continuum

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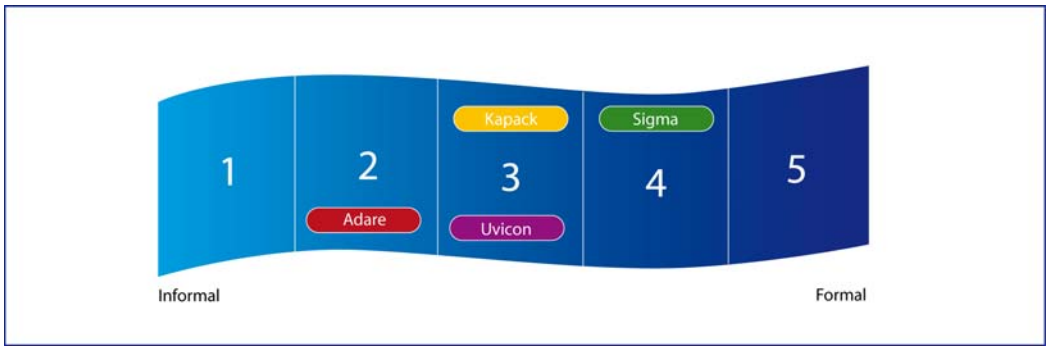


Figure 2: Company position on organizational formality continuum