Ironing out the differences: The role of humour in workplace relationships.

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ABSTRACT: Humour is a universal phenomenon that is experienced by people of all cultures (Apte, 1987) and organizations. This conceptual paper seeks to illustrate both the benefits and the neglected dark side of humour, by analysing humour as a social process that affects the quality of interpersonal relationships within the organization (Cooper, 2008). By combining Cooper’s (2008) relational process model and the relational demographics approach (Tsui, Porter, & Egan, 2002), we propose that humour helps to smooth hierarchical, age, role, and cultural differences, thus assisting individuals who are demographically different to develop relationships further. On the other hand, humour can extend to damage workplace relationships, when employed for the purpose of group division and control through mockery and ridicule (Billig, 2005).

Keywords: Critical perspectives on organisational communication, collectives and communities

INTRODUCTION

Organizations have become much more heterogeneous in modern times, which create difficulties for the variety of people who must interact and create purposeful workplace relationships. Humour is a historical phenomenon that is found amongst people of all cultures (Berger, 1987). Although humour is universal (Apte, 1985) it is complex to understand as it is a highly relational and inconsistent phenomenon. The construct of humour may include a feeling of amusement, a response of laughter, and a disposition to engage in a humorous or good-humoured manner. Therefore, conceptually humour can be viewed in the forms of a stimulus, response, or a disposition (Plester, 2007). As organizations are sites where multiple relationships must be formed and sustained, humour use can assist with relational development because the universal nature of humour sharing can allow people who are demographically different to bond and connect as they form workplace relationships (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Cooper, 2008). It is this ability of humour to transcend demographic differences and play a part in workplace relationship development, which is the focus of this conceptual paper.
Of course humour does not have superpowers, and may even achieve the opposite effect when it causes outrage, discomfort and upset. We therefore attempt to answer the research question: “what is the role of humour in workplace relationships, particularly among those people who are demographically diverse?” In our attempt to answer this question, we critically review current humour literature through the theoretical lens of relational demography and discuss the implications for organizational relationships.

UNIVERSAL HUMOUR

A sense of humour is a feature embedded in all cultures and contemporary societies (Berger, 1987), and the basic cognitive structures of humour appreciation create a commonality across all people around the world (Alden, Hoyer & Lee, 1993). From a functional perspective humour performs important cultural roles such as enforcing social norms and defining cultural identity (Bricker, 1980; Duncan, 1985). Relationships can be built between individuals using humour as a medium of connection, as humour itself can create positive affect between different people. People may identify similarities to others through laughing at the same jokes or events, and this can be viewed as a type of disclosing behaviour important to establish familiarity between disparate people (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Additionally when hierarchical distinctions are involved -as is typical in corporate organizations- shared humour can bridge the hierarchical gap and foster a collegial working climate (Cooper, 2008). Although humour can have these positive workplace impacts and is part of most collegial communication, the inverse can also be created when humour is inappropriate, misunderstood or even deliberately offensive (Plester, 2014) and we turn now to the key humour theories to further explicate the role of humour in organizations.

Theories of humour: Superiority

Superiority theories are one of the oldest perspectives in humour and this theoretical perspective posits that people experience humour when they feel momentarily superior to someone who may be amusing through mishap, mistake or through being the ‘butt’ of the joke. (Lynch, 2002). In superiority
theories humour relies on making fun of a perceived weakness of the target, but within a play frame where people know it is only a joke (Gruner, 1997). However, Raskin (1985) cautions that there is a boundary to superiority humour and incidents involving serious harm are not considered suitable for amusement. Although the existence of this boundary is not questionable, its limits and acceptances are still ambiguous and factors such as age, gender and culture influence individual tolerances and the resulting boundary (Plester, 2009) because humour boundaries are socially constructed.

The first superiority theory of humour originates from the works of Hobbes (1640), who suggested that the feeling of superiority is gained momentarily when people see another person’s misfortune, stupidity, or clumsiness, because they are not going through that unfortunate experience and this can provoke laughter at the victim. Furthermore, some sexist or ethnic humour can be theorised as ‘superiority humour’ as uncommon forms of behaviour are targeted for mockery, in order to enforce the social mainstream’s norms (Fine, 1976). Billig (2005) suggests that according to the works of Hobbes (1640) and Freud (1905), laughter is a rebellious activity as they propose that humour may be used negatively for ridiculing others. This perspective contrasts with the common perception of humour as a form of positive enjoyment and Billig (2005) highlights that the darker side of humour is often neglected in research. Similarly, Feinberg (1978) stated that humour expressed negatively is a form of aggression customized to be nonviolent for social acceptability, and Gruner (1978), likens humour sharing to a competitive game although he also concedes that aggression can be avoided in humour when an individual makes oneself the subject of laughter.

**Theories of humour: Relief**

Relief theory focuses on the feeling that a person experiences when engaging in humour. Derived from the psychoanalytical group of theories, the relief theory has developed primarily from the works of Freud (1905). Freud (1905) claims that the human condition is marked by self-deception. Although people have the knowledge about the dangerous psychological forces which guide our daily conduct, we still wish to conceal this from ourselves. He argued that despite our effort to recognize a joke as simply ‘a joke’-it actually has hidden meanings and desires veiled behind the joking
framework. This hidden meaning is created from the conflict between individual desire to express
forbidden sentiments and the strictures created by social order. Relief theory suggests that humour
reduces psychological tension, which is often caused by fears of the individual (Boeree, 1998).
Nervous energy is released through laughter, where the suppressed desires (that individuals fear to
express out in the open) are indirectly revealed to relieve the tension. Freud (1905) argues that these
suppressed desires are embedded in all human beings, and we inherit the instincts of sexuality and
aggression that promise to afford us the most intense of pleasures. However, these instincts are
dangerous, as they are fundamentally anti-social. Therefore, individuals fear to reveal these thoughts
in order to bear a collective life, and must learn to repress such desires. Freud (1905) based his theory
on the person’s unconscious conflict in the process of unflavoured desire repression, where laughter
shows how unconscious motives might be at play.

Under the relief or release perspective of humour, the experience of humour and laughter is caused
from the sensing of reduction in stress (Berlyne, 1972; Morreall, 1983; Shurcliff, 1968). Inappropriate impulses such as sexuality and aggression are released using laughter as a disguise, in
order to elude guilt. Therefore humour functions as a type of defence mechanism that enables a person
to avoid acknowledging the real motivations behind jokes, and laughter can help people to save face
(Freud, 1905). Similarly, Douglas (1999) argues that although people usually control their actions
according to social expectations, freedom can be achieved by using humour as method of unleashing
unconscious impulses. This is a complex process as humour cannot be understood using just a single
perspective, and the theoretical perspectives overlap in many ways. For example, a racial joke may
provide a feeling of superiority to the joker, and at the same time the person may release aggression
towards a certain ethnic group in a (seemingly) safe manner. However, although expressing racial
discrimination through humour may avoid an immediate clash between associated groups, it is not
entirely safe and can easily result in offence and conflict.
Theories of humour: Incongruity

Unlike superiority and relief theories of humour, incongruity theory focuses on absurdity or inappropriateness which creates humour and there is an element of surprise, when perceptions are altered in some way (Alden, Hoyer & Lee, 1993). Raskin (1985) argues that when cognitive or structural contrasts between expected and unexpected situations are included in a joke, then enjoyment can be felt by the recipients and this may be expressed through laughter. An important aspect of this process is that this violation should not be too distant from the commonly accepted norm so that it becomes threatening (McGhee, 1979) thus, the context for the humour is highly relevant. When incongruity is cognitively resolved by the participants (for example, when they ‘get’ the punch line in a joke), humour can be achieved. However, this also means that when the problem is not solved by the participants, only confusion remains and the humour fails (Suls, 1983). Therefore successful humour considers the people who are sharing the humour as well as the context for the humour and this highlights the highly social nature of the humour process.

HUMOUR AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

Relational processes and humour

Classic humour theories emphasize motivations for humour and determinants of humour enjoyment, but they primarily adopt an individual-level analysis, and do not fully address humour as a social process. Therefore, Cooper (2008) presents a model which depicts the social processes that function in conjunction with the individual-level mechanisms in humour. She proposes that interpersonal humour operates through four related processes of affect-reinforcement, similarity-attraction, self-disclosure, and hierarchical salience.

Affect-reinforcement describes how the feeling of attraction is established with the association to a positive experience. Humour is one form of social communication which reinforces or punishes through the event (Baron, 1984) because using humour can arouse positive emotions in people, and
they may enjoy interactions with the joker which can lead greater affection for the person creating the humour. Perceived similarity is the degree to which an individual believes that s/he is similar to a target individual. The shared attitudes and beliefs create attraction between the individuals (Byrne, 1971), and imply that people who find the same event to be humorous will be attracted to each other. Nevertheless, expressing humour in the workplace is a form of self-disclosure, as it reveals a degree of information about the joking individual (for example, their humour preferences). Humour is not usually a requirement in job descriptions, but by voluntarily displaying humour, people may feel closer to one another (Collins & Miller, 1994). However, humour may have a negative effect if it violates the beliefs and norms of the listener (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). For example, hierarchical factors can influence workplace humour, and this can be complicated as the different organizational positions may be perceived differently to each communicating individual. While using humour can enhance the relationship between individuals, it can have the opposite effect when shared between those at a different level of hierarchy. A manager may use humour to control the behaviour of employees (Martineau, 1972) and this will increase the authoritative distinction between the parties. Conversely, using humour can also break down the interpersonal barriers created by the formal hierarchy of the organization (Vinton, 1989). Subordinates can use the ‘safety shield’ and ambiguous nature of humour to express disagreements or even challenge management (Plester & Orams, 2008).

Analysing humour as a social process helps to understand the contextual factors more, as the classic humour theories do not fully unpick the contextual elements which are so important to the delivery and success (or failure) of humour. Hierarchical salience process depends on the cultural expectation of power distance (Hofstede, 1984), since each individual builds their own unique cultural expectation according to what they experience throughout their lives, and create ‘cultural filters’ of ethnocentrism (Drever, 1952). Therefore, the communicator’s interpersonal relationship quality can be either magnified or diminished according to how each individual perceives the differences created by the hierarchical positions within the organization. For example, a person with a high power distance perception may feel that the humour used by a superior whose intention was to diminish their status
differences, discomfting. This means that although humour is understood and seems to be enjoyed by both parties, in fact it is not achieving the user’s original intention as the culture of communicating parties provide different sets of beliefs. Therefore, it is especially important to understand humour as a social process for organizations, which force individuals with different background to interact on a daily basis. Overall, Cooper’s (2008) model suggests that these four social processes of humour will affect the quality of the relationship between interacting parties. This model shows how the broad functions of humour (see Plester & Orams, 2008) actually impact the individuals and the relationships between work colleagues (including subordinates and superiors).

**Similar or different: Relational demographics approach**

Organizations consist of individuals with different characteristics, and this includes their demographic attributes. Although Cooper’s (2008) relational process model suggest that humour helps to establish (and affect the quality of) relationships between the interacting parties, it is important to realize how the level of similarity or differences between the individuals impact humour usage. Relational demography describes the degree of similarities or differences that organizational members have in terms of their demographic characteristics. Demography is treated as a social relationship between an individual and other members of the organization (Tsui, Porter, & Egan, 2002). The attitudinal and behavioural outcomes of this approach are based upon the similarity attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) and social identity theory (Turner, 1987). Individuals with similar demographics establish positive relationships more easily than with those of different demographic characteristics, as the mutual categorization of identity is perceived as a positive attribute, and invokes attraction towards the similar individual (Tsui et al., 2002). Heterogeneity in age, gender, ethnicity, and to a lesser extent, organizational tenure, are some of the most commonly studied forms of demographic characteristics (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). Researchers such as O’Reilly, Caldwell and Barnett (1989), and Pfeffer (1983) demonstrated that relationships related to demographic similarity can explain the variance in outcomes in much more depth than the simple demographic variables (Tsui et al., 2002), which allow organizational issues to be explored further.
Communication is an important part of organizational life. In general, people prefer communicating with those who are similar to themselves (Kanter, 1977). Sharing the same culture (such as national or organizational culture) allows individuals to interpret a certain situation similarly. This creates efficient communication as there is no need to explain the differing perspectives by the communicators, and encourages frequency of communication (March & Simon, 1958). For example, a professional culture of engineers may have technical terms that are incorporated in the worker’s daily conversation, creating a shared language between the organizational members (Tushman, 1978). The shared language or knowledge reflects similarities in how the communicators understand the information, as individuals who are unfamiliar with this shared language may misinterpret the information, causing difficulties in the communication process amongst the group members (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1971).

Similarly, organizational members who share the same demographic attribute are likely to experience an ease of communication in comparison to those who are demographically dissimilar. For example, work colleagues from the same ethnic background are likely use the same language and expectations, derived from the particular national culture. Nevertheless, individuals belonging to a similar age group would have experienced a particular historical timeline (Ryder, 1965), such as sharing memories of a popular band in that generation. A study by Zenger and Lawrence (1989) found that age and tenure both influenced the frequency of communication, while age similarities between the members had a greater influence on communication than tenure. However, tenure can be as influential, as it indicates the level of organizational experience and knowledge a person has acquired, and it is more likely that a person of a longer tenure is more embedded in the organizational culture than a new employee (March & Simon, 1958). The complexity lies in the fact that most of the demographic categories will influence organizational communication, and no single demographic attribute can be generalized as the most influential factor in organizational communication process.

Friendship relations are more likely to be formed between similar individuals, such as those from the same racial groups (Thomas, 1990). This means that the initial stages of forming in-groups and out-groups are based on demographic similarities (Brewer, 1979). However, general attraction towards a
member of the wider group can be different from the process of creating personal friendships (Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998). Humour can influence the relationship quality by creating a feeling of togetherness to bind the group, or extend further to develop deeper relationships (Cooper, 2008). Since multiple demographic categories influence the communication process of humour, it is likely that similarity in one of the categories is sufficient to trigger interest. This means that organizational members who seemingly have different demographic attributes can still experience a pleasant feeling through humour, leading to attraction (affect-reinforcement) and developing favourable interpersonal relationship. Laughing at the same matter creates the perception of being similar to one another (similarity-attraction), which can then surpass the demographic differences which were more obvious prior to establishing a relationship between the communicators. Furthermore, friendships are more likely to be developed as sharing humour exposes the communicating individual’s character more than which is required at work, creating a feeling of exclusiveness to the sharing party (self-disclosure). These experiences may also assist in developing interpersonal relationships between individuals of different organizational hierarchy, to diminish the hierarchical gap between organizational members (hierarchical salience) (Cooper, 2008).

All four of these social processes focus on how humour mitigates differences between individuals to create a feeling to similarity. However, these same processes may highlight the differences between the communicating individuals to widen the relational gap. It may even develop negative relationships if the humour shared does not work, or offend the other party due to the differing cultural expectations. It is only when the humour works, and the cultural similarity are confirmed by the communicators, the communicators would perceive each other favourably, and are likely to develop a positive relationship.

Humour often acts as a communication medium between individuals, where differing perspectives are shared through laughter, and this works as a disclosing behaviour to help parties become more familiar to one another. The psychological gap between the individuals is reduced as humour blurs the layers within a social construct, such as organizational hierarchy (Cooper, 2008). Brown and Levinson (1978) identify this function of humour in relation to the notion of ‘positive face’ where the
exchange of humour eases the process of communication and individuals may express solidarity towards others. Furthermore, a positive environment can be sustained by sharing a joke that may identify common ground amongst a group of people. Conversely, humour can also divide a group and create bad feeling and ill-will (Meyer, 2000). However, those with some demographic similarities are likely to enjoy humour that incorporates this similarity and acts as a uniting element in humour appreciation. For example a group of senior citizens may enjoy a stereotypical joke about the computer-crazy younger generation. Thus, the unity created by their age demographic, is further enhanced through shared humour. Similarly, the same group may be offended by a joke about senior citizens and dementia, whereas a group of teenagers may enjoy collectively poking fun at senior citizens. Just to add to the complexity of humour experiences, the senior citizens might enjoy the joke about dementia if told to them by ‘one of their own’ (their in-group – see Terrion & Ashforth, 2002) and may enjoy collective laughter about the perils of aging. The joke is acceptable and affiliative if told in a self-deprecating way by one of the affected group- but should a teenager narrate the same joke to the senior group, it is more likely to cause offence and displeasure (Boskin & Dorinson, 1985; Plester & Sayers, 2007). Therefore, demographic factors play a significant role in the collective experience of humour, and our example above could be similarly based on any other demographic factors such as gender, ethnicity or race. However, jokers must tread carefully as humour does not always create positive outcomes as discussed in the next section.

**Not so humorous: Control and ignorance**

Humour is often described using positive terms only, but this is misleading and causes the concept to be perceived as a purely ‘good’ phenomenon. Thus it is important to note that humour also has a dark side, which helps us understand humanity (Morreall, 1983). One of these ignored functions of humour is control, where humour controls behaviour by acting as a unifier and divider which lead to defining the in and out groups (Meyer, 2000). The social boundaries between the communicator are outlined through humour, where in-group jokes act as a medium to build group solidarity, while not understanding the same humour would push out the individual from the group (Boskin & Dorinson, 1985). Critical theorists suggest that humour may be used as a corrective device (Butler, 2013)
because when a person behaves in a different way from the norm, laughing at them or ridiculing their behaviour causes them to modify their actions in order to avoid further mockery—thus humour is an instrument of control (Billig, 2005). Meyer (2000) relates this to superiority theory in suggesting that mocking humour is a form of displaying superiority over hapless others and unify the in-group. ‘Put-down’ comments forcefully show the acceptable group norms and suggest that not following the dominant group norms will result in isolation (Meyer, 2000). This type of humour is commonly exemplified in ethnic or racial humour where humiliating a minority group differentiates the dominant group and reinforces the dominant norms and values (Lowe, 1986). Controlling behaviour through humour can be interpreted as aggressive and threatening but this links back to the Freudian release theories that contend that humour is an outlet for such aggressive impulses. Additionally the joker is protected from censure as he/she can claim ‘only joking’ and thus protect themselves using humour as a ‘safety shield’ (Powell, 1988).

Similarly, Martineau (1972) discusses three very broad functions of humour, of consensus, conflict, and control. Humour can assist a group to reach consensus in less-confrontational manner, than addressing an issue directly and a joking atmosphere can help individuals become more open to new ideas. This relates back to the relief theory where the release of tension created by the differing ideas, prevent potential aggression and increase openness. Burawoy’s (1979) study showed that when blacks and whites were required to co-operate regardless of the racial prejudice present between the two groups, humour diluted the aggression and assisted in minimizing the racial hostility. Agreement between the groups could be reached by releasing the social frustration and expressing conflict in a humorous way, in order to maintain social order. However, joking does not always provide a shortcut to consensus and achieve harmony.

Conflict may be conveyed in ‘aimed’ humour (Freud, 1905) and this type of humour used is usually aggressive and has an underlying meaning. Freud (1905) calls such jokes ‘tendentious’ or aimed jokes and claims that jokes made in this way can challenge without creating open conflict. This is commonly observed in organizational context, where employees may use humour to challenge management or unpopular decisions (Plester & Orams, 2008; Taylor & Bain, 2003). Minority groups
may need the group solidarity element of humour, in order to express themselves and survive within mainstream society (Green, 1978). Humour can be used as a form of resistance to a dominant group and in Collinson’s (1988) study of shop floor workers, men from different work divisions exchanged veiled insults, in the form of ambiguous ‘piss-takes’. These actions were a part of the worker strategy to control other work groups through mocking behaviour that was different or peculiar. Such uses of humour are complex and can feel threatening and coercive but the dark side of humour must not be ignored as it is a significant part of humour in the workplace (see Plester, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Humour is a universal phenomenon, which exists in all cultures. However, it is important to understand humour as a social process, as humour requires different individuals to interact. The organization consists of a community of people, with its own distinct culture and environment (Morgan, 2006). A diverse group of individuals from various backgrounds gather and interact, crafting a wide range of experiences and emotions (Plester, 2007). The relational characteristics of humour are a seminal part of relationship creation and maintenance. Combining Cooper’s (2008) relational process model, and adopting relational demographics approach (Tsui, Porter, & Egan, 2002) we argue that humour assists individuals who are demographically different to smooth relational differences between work colleagues. Humour can be a catalyst to span the hierarchical, age, role, and cultural differences, to achieve a more closely knitted workplace community. Adopting a critical approach, we also outline how humour can damage workplace relationships and instead be used to control others through mockery and ridicule. While the relational benefits of workplace are well-documented in the extant literature, it is this dark side of humour that is mostly neglected in the workplace humour literature and such darker elements must be understood more deeply in order to truly explore the role of humour in organizational relationships.
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