When is a joke not a joke? The dark side of organizational humour

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the dark side of organizational humour is unpopular and can cause one to be considered a misogelast (laughter hater). Although people are reluctant to acknowledge the darker side of humour, this empirical paper investigates humour from one unusual company displaying a dark side. Drawing on humour theories of superiority (Hobbes 1640) and sexual and aggressive release (Freud, 1905), this paper argues that humour in one specific company revealed control, power and masculine dominance. Humour was both controlled and controlling and masculine hegemonic power was reinforced through extreme and offensive humour. Because humour was the device of control, employees were even more powerless to object for fear of ridicule. Humour differentiated this small company through constructing outsiders as 'other'.

Key words: *humour, control, ridicule, relief, superiority, incongruity*

This paper attempts to examine the effects of some extreme and offensive humour that was studied within one male-dominated organization. The key questions are: what effects does sexual, sexist and physical humour create within an organization and how does this impact upon individual organization members exposed to such *dark* forms of humour. Humour is universal, transcends culture and helps people to understand serious social life (Berger, 1997; Billig, 2005; Mulkay, 1988; Zigderveld, 1982). Historically, mediaeval carnivals were opportunities for the common people to mock officials, religion and philosophy. 'Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, norms and prohibitions' (Bakhtin, 1981, p.10). In modern organizations it is not necessary to await carnival to exhibit a variety of forms of humour but these are usually governed by organizational and societal boundaries (see Plester, 2009). It is not easy to understand humour as it is paradoxical and complex (Billig, 2005) and before discussing effects specific to organizational humour it is useful to understand the origins and premises of the widely accepted humour theories, Researchers agree that there are three key categories for humour theories: superiority theories, incongruity theories and Freudian release theories.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Superiority

The *superiority* theory of humour -sometimes referred to as degradation theory- is credited to seventeenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1640), and is the oldest of the humour theories (Billig, 2005). This theory is basically a theory relating to mockery as it suggests that laughter is created from degrading or disparaging others, rejoicing in the misfortune that befalls others. Although what we laugh at must be new or unexpected Hobbes claimed:

> Men laugh at mischances and indecencies wherein there lieth no wit nor jest at all…also men laugh at the *infirmities* of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated…for what is else the recommending of ourselves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmity or absurdity? (Hobbes, 1640, p. 45, emphasis in original).

This perspective is firmly linked to mockery and ridicule as it suggests that laughter is created from degrading or disparaging others by rejoicing in the misfortune that befalls

them. Provine (2000) suggests that superiority theory came from times when standards were different from today's, humour was much cruder, and people took delight in the suffering of others.

Relief

Relief or *release* theories of humour originated with Sigmund Freud (1905) and this theoretical perspective contends that jokes often reflect taboo subjects such as sexual, racial or lavatorial themes. Freud (1905) suggests that laughter is a socially acceptable release and outlet for pent-up aggression or sexual feelings. A release of psychic energy occurs when jokes free us from our inhibitions and this release through laughter is an acceptable outlet for sex or aggression because people generally try to control as these two impulses (Raskin, 1985).

Freud analysed the structure of verbal jokes and called the delivery of jokes -'joke-work'. He asserts that 'innocent' jokes serve no particular purpose and although they create some pleasure they are not especially funny, but aggressive and sexual jokes are *tendentious* (have an aim) and thus create more mirth. Relief theories contend that humour is a device for releasing aggression and sexuality which is seen as useful because more humour results in less anger. Freud further contends people delude themselves that they are laughing at the cleverness and skill of the joke-work when they are laughing at the intent in the joke. He claims that people want to avoid the knowledge of why they laugh at certain jokes and hope to escape the reality of their motives by claiming: 'it's just a joke'.

Incongruity

Incongruity occurs when an expectation is created in some way, such as in a joke format, and is then transformed into a different resolution than was expected (Raskin, 1985). This abrupt change, known as the 'punch line' in a joke format, surprises the audience into the explosive expression of laughter. The discrepancy between what is expected to happen and what actually happens is a feature of much humour and that the bigger the discrepancy, the funnier the joke (Duncan et al., 1990; McGhee, 1979; Ritchie, 1999; Wilson, 1979). Incongruity comes from 'the violation of expectations' (Duncan et al., 1990, p. 259) and the surprise, unexpectedness and incompatibility provide the humour (Fry & Allen, 1976). Bergson (1911) describes facets of humour that occur when something unexpected happens, such as a person missing the chair as he tries to sit, or the runner who falls. He suggests that humour arises from their '*mechanical elasticity*' (p. 10) which is both accidental and unexpected and therefore laughable. Absurdity and nonsense also fit into this theoretical category as some incongruous humour has absurd conclusions (Raskin, 1985).

Of course assigning every aspect of humour to one of the three theoretical perspectives is no simple task and some humorous incidents include elements of all three categories but each perspective offers us different insights into analysing humour in modern contexts. In particular *superiority* and *relief* theories offer the potential to analyse elements of humour that may not have such positive or admirable qualities and thus the literature now approaches this darker perspective which is often ignored and neglected in humour studies.

The dark power of humour

Modern life contains dilemmas of equality in 'conditions of inequality' (Billig, 2005, p.46) and Critchley (2002) claims that 'true jokes' promote certain viewpoints and challenge order and power in a society. Building on insights from all three perspectives (Berger, 1997, Bergson,

1911, Freud, 1905, Hobbes , 1640), Billig (2005) critiques the overwhelmingly positive emphasis assigned to humour activities and suggests that humour also has a darker, 'more shameful' side. Locating humour in the 'operations of social power' (p.3), Billig recommends a critical approach to the positive assumptions about humour and contends that ridicule plays an important part in humour use in general social life; therefore humour may be used to gain social power.

Barbed or 'tendentious' jokes (Freud, 1905) are linked to moral judgements and evoke either strong laughter or disapproval. Such jokes are often delivered in the form of 'teasing' and people who tease others delude themselves that the recipients enjoy this. Teasing can become a form of social control when teasers insist that their actions are funny not mocking or bullying. People who jokingly mock others delude themselves that the recipients enjoy the teasing and these jokers convince themselves that their humour is innocent. Jocular insults and teasing can become coercive when jokers insist that their actions are funny when they may equally be perceived as mocking or bullying. Thus the teaser controls the behaviour of their targets who are powerless to object in case they are exposed to further ridicule about their reaction (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997). Social constraints and empathy are side-lined when someone becomes the target of hilarity (Billig, 2005). Significantly, Freud claims that people delude themselves that they are laughing at the cleverness and skill of the joke-work when they are laughing at the intent in the joke and tendentious jokes are never 'just a joke'. Socially unacceptable notions can be hidden within jokes and it is important to recognise that humour does not always create pleasure, fellowship and benevolence but is often rife with barbs, derision, transgression and jeering (Billig, 2005).

Disciplinary and malicious motives behind humour are not often consciously considered and the cruelty and lack of sympathy inherent in laughter at others may not be acknowledged even to oneself. Humour offers a vehicle to safely express socially inhibited thoughts and instincts and the resulting laughter can be very pleasurable therefore jokers may deceive themselves about the sadistic and cruel nature of some humour. When we laugh we temporarily put aside our empathy and social restrictions as someone becomes the target of our hilarity (Billig). Bergson, (1900) claimed that ridicule may be at the heart of humour and fulfils a disciplinary function as laughter discourages 'non-adaptive behaviour' (Billig p.128) because people do not like being laughed at. Laughter is humiliating for the person who it is directed at, and therefore the ridicule experienced from the laughter prevents repetition of the behaviour that caused the laughter (Bergson, 1900, Billig, 2005). Therefore laughter is 'the mechanism of discipline' (Billig, p128) and the threat of ridicule through humour can create conformity. This suggests that there are unconscious motivations behind the pleasure of laughter and that even when disreputable intentions are recognised, the allure of pleasure and happiness of laughter allows us to deceive ourselves about the sadistic and cruel nature of much laughter and humour.

Joking avoids 'social censorship' and allows people to express repressed instincts which can be pleasurable. Joking allows people to criticise, flirt and give orders without offending, and humour can become coercive as recipients must take the joke or risk being judged humourless (Billig, 2005). The key points made by Hobbes' early theory and then again two and half centuries later in Freud's release theories, was that humour should arouse some 'suspicion' as it may often be 'fuelled by less than worthy feelings' (Billig, p. 55) and motives. Hobbes and Freud both suggested that humour may exert a disciplinary force over others and laughter may contain hidden and even rebellious elements. Joking allows people to release aggression and sexuality, make points, and challenge order and power in a society (Critchley, 2002). Aimed or barbed jokes tend to evoke either strong laughter or disapproval

as they are linked to moral judgements and Billig summarises: 'laughter at an aggressive joke … validates the mocking of a particular target' (p.159).

In workplace contexts, humour may offer managers a way of dealing with subordinates and may assist in accomplishing discipline. Commands may be phrased ironically and formal instructions given using the informal language of humour. In workplace situations subordinate workers may feel obliged to laugh and humour may be an indirect disciplinary device that actually reinforces workplace hierarchies of power (Holmes, 2000). Therefore according to Billig (2005), humour should arouse some 'suspicion' as it may be a convenient vehicle to express socially questionable viewpoints at work by safely hiding behind 'joke-work'. Critical analysis of the humour theories strongly suggests that humour is concerned with more than mere pleasure, camaraderie and goodwill but is often rife with underlying opinions, ridicule, offence and mockery. In Billig's words: 'we like to believe in the innocence of our laughter- that our jokes are 'just' jokes, or 'just' a clever play of form, and not the expression of problematic motives' (p.160). People enjoy joking and being playful as it detaches them from the usual restrictions of life and this is particularly useful in high pressured work environments. Joking at work allows people to momentarily overcome their usual inhibitions and this reveals aspects of the joker's psyche (Freud, 1905). Although primary motivation for joke-work is pleasure, only some people have the 'aptitudes and psychical determinants' for delivering humour (Freud, 1905, p.135). Other motivations for joking are, according to Freud, to show off one's cleverness, display oneself and 'a drive to be equated with exhibitionism in the field of sexuality' (p.138). Joke-work overcomes inhibitions and creating a great number of obscene jokes suggests exhibitionism in the joker.

In most modern settings, lacking a sense of humour is deemed to be undesirable, suggesting that an individual may lack human qualities and be boring company (Wickberg, 1998) and newspaper advertisements reinforce the desirability of possessing a sense of humour in personal columns and employment advertisements (Billig, 2005). Although humour can be subversive 'laughter and parody provide the opportunity for a compelling critique of modern organizations' (Rhodes, 2001, p.375). It is not a popular standpoint to assert that humour can easily have negative connotations or outcomes and exploring the dark side of humour carries the risk of being considered grim, dour and lacking a sense of humour. However, Billig contends that 'misogelasts' (haters of laughter), do not simply hate laughter but offer a useful perspective in that they distrust the seductive and sentimentalist assumption that humour is overwhelmingly positive and optimistic . Pullen and Rhodes (2013) assert that humour, and parody in particular, can be transgressive. Patriarchal power can be undermined by humour as it reveals the 'flimsy ground' on which power is founded (p.527) while some humour may 'perpetuate oppressive and patriarchal cultural norms and structures' (p.514). Therefore analysing organizational humour offers the potential to critically examine aspects of organizations and management in a unique way that allows an investigation into the less attractive elements of organizational life- laid bare through joking patterns and displays. With Billig's darker critique of humour at the forefront, this paper presents research from a specific organization that uses humour in contentious ways not encountered in most organizations.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was part of an in-depth ethnographic study of four organizations. The overarching research objective was to examine the relationship between humour and organizational culture. Data showed that humour and fun practices at the company code-named 'Adare' differed greatly from those observed at the three other organizations. Therefore further analysis of the data from this specific company was undertaken. Analysis was an iterative

process with transcript, documents and recorded observations repeatedly coded and re-coded into a variety of themes and categories including: humour boundaries; types of fun; organizational formality; organizational identity; humour function; and transgressive humour. These themes are addressed in other published papers (some forthcoming). The data used in this current paper emerges from the theme of 'transgression' that includes potentially offensive humor and thus gives rise to this investigation into the 'dark' aspects of humour and fun.

The data collected from Adare includes detailed recorded observations of fun, humor and cultural events as well as thirteen semi-structured interviews ranging from 30-60 minutes duration. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Some documentary data was also collected including cartoons, posters, photographs and printed jokes.

EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

Adare is a small Information Technology (IT) company of 25 people. Their core business is providing expert solutions in security and networking. The organizational culture was assessed as being very informal with a team-based structure. The company has competed in the IT industry successfully for ten years and has only recently been sold to a larger organization. The three key operational teams are; engineering; sales consulting; and office administration. Although all employees have direct access to the CEO, the engineering and sales teams are led by senior managers and the administration team reports directly to the CEO. Of the 25 employees, only three are female.

In this extreme and differentiated owner-operated small company (Adare) a variety of humour enactments and printed displays were observed, experienced and discussed in interviews. It was notable that the incidents described below were not observed in any other studied companies within the larger study and thus seemed to suggest something different and unusual was operating within Adare. Thirteen interviews were conducted at Adare and they included the CEO (Jake), senior managers, and lower level employees from all of the different teams (sales, engineering and administration) within the company. All of these participants unanimously stated that humour and fun was the most important component of the organizational culture at this company; that humour and fun at Adare was extreme, risky and different to other companies; that humour and fun was 'free' at this company and was not limited or constrained in any way; and that all forms of humour and fun were encouraged and initiated by the CEO and senior managers.

Four extreme examples have been selected to represent the differentiated forms of contentious humour that were observed in this company. There were also a wide array of sexual, sexist and racially oriented emails distributed among employees and managers and it is difficult to display such an array within a short paper so the four selected represent a cross-section of the more contentious forms that were experienced during the research process. It is important to note that there were also many mild, non-offensive everyday humour interactions that have been analysed and these are not the focus of this particular paper and are discussed in different papers. It is also important to note that to some readers these incidents may not appear humorous and rather may be interpreted as bullying or even harassment, however the participants from Adare all categorised these as 'humour' and thus they have been presented as examples of humour and fun in this specific company.

Four humour incidents
1. 'Punch her in the face to show that you are right'

This offensive phrase is the title of a poster that was printed out and displayed in A3 size in the staff kitchen at Adare (a copy is included in the appendices). The photographic image and caption had been sent to the CEO from an external contact. He printed it and displayed it in the workplace. When questioned individually about the poster *all* staff reiterated 'it's just a joke' and even the female administrative staff responded with a laugh, a shrug and the comment' *'they're just being boys- we just ignore them'*. No single staff member criticised the poster although one male engineer did remark *'this place is a sexual harassment suit waiting to happen'*. The CEO was also questioned about this type of humour at Adare and gave only this pithy response *'If they don't like it they can leave!'* The following interview extract emphasizes the differentiation of humour at Adare and discusses some of the pitfalls of this. Notice that while Pete describes the humour as 'risky' he does not appear to be concerned with humour offending anyone –more that it can distract from business progress.

> *This organisation is like nothing you have ever come across. Most people who come in and visit us from suppliers to customers, they are just taken completely aback by how open the place is, how dry and perhaps risky the humour is-I don't think there is anything that is particularly sacred. There would be limits but we haven't seen those limits reached as yet. Some places are so politically correct(PC) that you can't say 'boo!' If you take this place as the anti PC this is exactly what the place is like, which is great… I think it would be really beneficial for some of the staff to know that behind the humour in the office there is a complete seriousness about the (business) driving forward. I think sometimes the humour can be a bit much, it can filter into the professional part of the business that really needs to be distinctly separate, while I think that separation is there, I think sometimes there is a level of humour that leads to lax practicing, I guess, not often, but it does have that ability to….... (Pete, 35, Engineer & Team Manager).*

2. Buttocks on the screen.
One of the office administrators, a woman in her forties (Ann), left her desk on a Friday afternoon to go and buy beer and wine for the usual Friday afternoon drinks. While she was gone the CEO (Jake) corralled a junior staff member (Adrian) and ducking behind a partition instructed Adrian to take a photograph of his naked buttocks. This was quickly uploaded to Ann's desktop and when she returned and switched her computer back on, she was greeted with the photograph filling her screen. She screamed loudly, laughed loudly and then yelled (jocular) abuse at her boss and other employees that by now had surrounded her. Her co-worker Rachel commented afterwards:

> *Nobody is exempt from a joke, and I mean they get played on Jake too- he takes them as well as gives them. .. so you have to laugh at yourself. I'm lucky –I don't get the practical jokes- Ann cops it. They won't wet my chair. I'm not the victim. It's not intended to hurt someone.–so I don't find the humour here offensive- I take the positives… A day doesn't go by that doesn't incorporate something that we can joke about, even a traffic fine or if something serious happens -you get to relieve that tension by coming to work, telling people and jokes are made of it …it's a bit of tension relief as well… The humour is picking on people and exploiting their mishaps- but humour is only negative if it hurts people (Rachel, 36, Office administrator).*

3. Humping employee
During his interview a member of the sales team recounted the following example. He had been out on a business sales visit and returned to the office with his clients including the managing director of the client company. Upon entering the office they found the managing

director in the middle of the office holding a male employee (Adrian) from behind and simulating a sexual act with him amid catcalls and laughter from the assembled staff. The client was outraged and left the premises. The CEO and assembled staff all laughed at the client's reaction. Sean (25) reflects on the incident followed by quotes from other staff members:

> *They are really good security consultants, very straight laced, white shirts, nice clothes, very nice quiet people, so I decided the best thing to do was to set up a partnership with them...so we brought them in -two very quiet well-mannered men came in and we brought them in and showed them some of the products that we are trying to bring to the market- and there is Jake humping Adrian from behind over the desk …and these two guys were like 'Ooo-kay' and they left. I got a phone call later on saying 'what in the hell is wrong with your boss?'…The culture is definitely what I call the benevolent dictatorship, there is a king, Jake, that definitely exists and in many respects he can be very fair and reasonable in a lot of ways, and then from a behavioural perspective we dance very close to propriety at times. We love humour, we love laughter, Jake is probably the industry's biggest practical joker, he once couriered a sack of rubbish over to somebody. Some humour is puerile and toilet humour - and some of the humour is very very funny.*

> *The humour can be a bit disturbing. A lot of the humour that I have seen is about putting someone or something down, Adrian for example, is the butt of a lot of jokes, mainly because he came across as being really innocent and unable to stand up for himself. He gets a little upset every now and then and people pull back (Dylan, 34, sales consultant).*

> *The humour here is very crude, crass, rude, toilet humour. I don't know anywhere else the humour is that much in the gutter –it's better than no humour though. Whatever skeletons someone has-we will dig it all out- I heard someone calling someone else fat the other day. (Karen, 31, Sales Rep)*

4. Practical joke
The managing director (Jake) and some (male) staff members removed the screws that held the seat of the office chairs to the wheeled base. An unsuspecting computer vendor visited the company and was offered this chair and when he sat upon it he fell to the ground inciting the whole-hearted mirth of the expectant Adare team. The vendor appeared flushed and embarrassed but took the prank in good spirit and laughed at being the victim of the joke.

These two administration workers reflect on humour that might 'hurt' others:

> *It's like knock your socks off, do whatever you like, as long as it doesn't hurt someone or ruin someone's day. It's not some sort of company limit, everybody knows how much humour you can actually do to an individual, it is limited by whatever the person feels, not limited by some sort of policy because we don't have one* (Rachel, 36, Office manager).

> *They have gone too far at times and damaged property and hurt and offended people- they don't mean to. You can replace property. Kent went through the window, they were playing soccer (in the office) and he went through the window* (Ann, 46, office administrator)

The managers just work under the assumption of what you see is what you get and if you don't like it then you can jump. I want to be able to be part of the humour; I am the kind of person who would like to be player in all that. I just need a little bit of time to settle in and I will be right there with them. It's the nature of humour- the Koreans are the butt of jokes and get the piss taken out of them and ragged on but they love it. Jake initiates it –so it's top down. Jake definitely creates the humour. I think within the next few weeks, I'm going to have to pull out some tricks from my own sleeve. Everyone has limits-girls more than guys- the senior guys don't take shit-and the other two women are safe. Giving a 'wedgie' was crossing the line- Jake must know the lines. (Karen, 31, Sales Rep)

DISCUSSION

Although Adare managers, employees and CEO enthusiastically proclaim that humour and fun is totally free at Adare-'without limits' -there is a dark underbelly to such unconstraint. Specifically, there are two ominous aspects to much of the humour at Adare. 1. Humour is controlled by the CEO who sets the standards for outrageous and extreme forms and simultaneously humour is also used to control employees' behaviour. 2. Humour is used to promote the status of the CEO as the ultimate joker and create a sense of 'otherness' or differentiation from other more conservative companies.

Controlling humour

As evidenced by Karen's comment, humour has been interpreted as positive at Adare even when it targets specific people or groups ('the Koreans get ragged on but they love it'). The darker underside to her comment reveals the more sinister element that if you don't like it you can 'jump' meaning that you would have to leave the company. Jake (CEO) reiterates this position in his straightforward earlier quote *'If they don't like it they can leave'.* This implies if employees such as the 'Koreans' do not accept jokes about their race they will not be accepted in this company. In another recorded example the Korean employees were exhorted to '*do kung fu on him*!' by the CEO. Therefore there is an uncompromising and controlling aspect to the humour at Adare-get involved, or at least tolerate it, because the alternative is to leave your job! Even the visiting vendor had to at least appear to take the humour in good spirit, even though he may have been hurt or felt undignified.

Interview sessions revealed that two Adare employees plan on leaving the company (which they subsequently did after the research period). Both employees stated that they were tired of the imperative to joke and participate in outlandish antics and their only recourse was to further their careers in more formal settings elsewhere. Contrastingly, Karen is a relatively new employee who asserts that she is keen to socialise by participating in the humour and she shows her intention to increase her participation in the humour-sensing that this is key to organizational success at Adare. Women who want to become part of a male-dominated group must 'decode male behaviour patterns' and participate in teasing and coarse joking to become 'one of the boys' (Fine and De Soucey, 2005, p. 131). Although Hay (2000) asserts that women are more likely to share their humour privately than publicly, Karen has realised that her survival at Adare will require whole-hearted, obvious joking participation in order to please her managers and CEO.

Subversive elements can be released through using humour (Taylor and Bain, 2003)and power can be reinforced through humour (Holmes, 2000). The male-dominated culture at Adare is controlling and controlled through explicit modelling by the CEO and senior managers who use profane, explicit humour on a daily basis. Although Freud highlighted the

release obtained through sexually explicit or aggressive humour, Collinson (2002) cautions that managers who allow men's aggressive joking as a safety valve to let off steam are facilitating oppressive joking and this may backfire and create resistance that could lead to lawsuits. Employees at this company readily admitted that a sexual harassment lawsuit could easily be enacted against senior management here and that the humour and fun here was not typical of most corporate work environments.

This seemingly free and unfettered company encourages and deifies forms of humour that are offensive and unacceptable in most other corporate environments (see Plester 2009). Billig (2005) asserts that while common-sense views assume that humour is inherently positive, humour is often used to ridicule others and this is socially significant. Jake uses the threat of ridicule through humour to ensure that workers conform to behavioural norms that he has created at Adare. No one wants to be (literally) the butt of the joke but at the same time everyone is aware of the implied threat-join in or leave the company. Fear of ridicule means that employees accept and tolerate humour and pranks that would be considered grossly unacceptable in other workplaces. This humour could even be considered to be harassment and bullying. Humour at Adare openly targets specific people (Adrian, the hapless vendor, Ann) and joking is used to ridicule race, sexuality, and societal norms- as exhibited in the contentious poster promoting gendered abuse.

The humping incident (3) is a parody where Jake mocks homosexuality and reasserts his 'hegemonic masculinity' (Tyler & Cohen, 2008, p.124) and power while poor Adrian is forced to participate in this 'joke'. Men may use humour techniques that make others appear vulnerable and emphasise 'the power of dominant versions of masculinity' (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 73). It appears that Jake asserts his dominance through humour and those who choose not to laugh (as shown by the unamused visiting clients) are then derided and mocked by Jake and the group as being unable to 'take a joke'(see Billig, 2005). Such abuse of humour renders employees (such as Adrian) even more powerless as not only do they have to participate, but if they don't laugh along and show amusement, further mocking can ensue. Accusations of conservatism, dullness and humourlessness may be harsh critique in this environment. Although Critchley (2007) and Pullen & Rhodes (2012) argue that patriarchal power can be undermined by parody, this current research shows that humour can be used to insidiously reify and reinforce patriarchal, masculine power and it is *because* humour is used that resistance is even more unlikely and futile.

Joker status and 'otherness'
'Rebellious humour mocks the social rules' (Billig, 2005, p. 202) and Jake uses humour that is 'tendentious' (see Freud, 1905). Openly acting as the workplace 'joker', Jake puts a great deal of effort into creating, displaying and enacting forms of behaviour that he deems funny. While performing extreme acts of humour through parody, physical joking, screen creations and outrageous displays, Jake openly mocks and defies social and workplace conventions customarily respected in 'other' organizations. He encourages his staff to participate and loudly endorses their more outrageous activities. Adare managers and employees are very aware that their antics are not acceptable elsewhere and it is this rebellious defiance that creates 'otherness' through humour participation. The 'other' is constituted by those not part of the joke or those who disapprove. The use of humour to enact such transgressive themes illustrates the Freudian perspective of 'release' and adds weight to the Freudian argument that the more tendentious the humour- the funnier the joke. In Freud's words, 'obscene jokes …have immense success in provoking laughter' (1905, p121). Joking (or joke-work in Freud's terms) may be used to overcome inhibitions and creating a great number of lewd jokes suggests exhibitionism in the joker. The joker supplements his own pleasure in the joke by promoting laughter in others and thus arouses his own laughter in the shared

process. Creating humour that evokes laughter among others gives the joker reassurance that the joke-work has been successful and supplements his own renewed pleasure in the joke (Freud, 1905). Thus, being a successful joker through creating laughter reinforces Jake's status, rewards his exhibitionism and creates group feelings of pleasure through shared laughter and those who do not laugh are outsiders or 'other'.

Jake creates an impression of his own high status and power (Holmes, 2000) as the supreme joker and wit, while also portraying outsiders (those not in on the joke) as conservative, lacking in humour and dull. The notion that Adare is a unique organization that dares to transgress is vehemently displayed through symbols such as the outrageous poster. Because the differentiation is achieved through using 'humour' Jake protects himself and his company through the safety net of asserting 'it's just a joke'.

There are elements of competitiveness in the pranks, displays and verbal jocular abuse displayed so frequently at Adare. The poster described earlier (see appendix A) is shocking to most people and yet this was openly displayed at Adare by the CEO (albeit behind the screen that shields the small staff kitchen). Staff did not seem to believe that Jake was a misogynist seriously advocating violence towards women. Their interpretation or sensemaking (see Weick, 2000) suggests that although they know this is a supremely inappropriate poster it is funny to display it *because* of its shock value. The notion of aggression and violence especially towards a woman is not tolerated in Western society, nor would this poster be tolerated in any other workplaces. Therefore Adare employees and Jake construct this display as a transgressive joke that challenges societal norms, reiterates their differentiation, strengthens the company identity, and positions everyone else as 'other' if they disapprove.

Ashcraft (2006) asserts that gendered behaviour can function as a 'pivotal organising mechanism that is actively-even strategically-deployed by founders' (p. 101). In Jake's deliberate displays of masculinity (aggressive poster, mock humping, displaying buttocks) he reasserts his own masculine dominance- using humour as a protective cloak when the criticisms fly. Such criticisms are not likely to originate from his own employees who are wary of further mocking, but potentially come from outsiders or visitors to the organization. Using humour can be a technique to enact masculine identity and validate heterosexual masculinity. Game playing, insults, practical jokes and using profanity can become treasured acts because they transgress social norms and thus reinforce a masculine identity that is enjoyed for its shock value (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). Some men interact by using verbal and physical assaults that encourage male styles and exhibit their masculinity (Kehily & Nayak, 1997).The victim of the practical joke was a visitor to the organization. Although it is likely that he felt physical pain and psychological humiliation when he fell from the chair, he displayed a 'sporting attitude' and a masculine stoicism in a room full of (mostly male) engineers watching his every reaction. Being able to take a barrage of joking insults and endure physical tests may bolster male identity and the resulting laughter may strengthen male bonding and improve group solidarity.

Similarly homophobic humour allows males to 'enact a hyper-masculine identity and so consolidate their heterosexual identity' (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 82). Power in male groups is reinforced in their sexual and sexist joking and therefore male joking can be a form of controlled aggression (Lyman, 1987). 'The joke form itself suggests this ambivalence about rules and acts as a kind of pedagogy about the relationship between rules and aggression in male work culture' (Lyman, 1987, p. 159). Joking that breaks societal rules creates excitement (Lyman, 1987) and offensive and bodily humour (Bergson, 1911) may allow the joker to feel superior (Gruner, 1997; Hobbes, 1640) while the jokes' target may feel

uncomfortable or degraded. The forms of humour seen at Adare all seemed to be designed to showcase Jake as 'king' and the most powerful of the jokers reinforcing the prevailing organizational culture, and Jake, as overwhelmingly male and powerful.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The Adare staff exemplified components of all three major groups of humour theories. The superiority humour theories were apparent as staff laughed at the degradation and debasement of another and experienced momentary superiority (see Hobbes, 1640; Gruner, 1997). Freudian release theories were apparent as sexual and aggressive joking may have offered an outlet for stress, aggression, sexual feelings and emotions (Freud , 1905). Incongruity theories were exemplified by all of the humour enactments because all were non-conservative and unusual displays of humour not often observed in corporate environments.   For all of these jokes there was a target (Adrian, Ann, the visiting vendor, women) and choosing victims for jibes and pranks may temporarily create solidarity and enjoyable group dynamics for those 'in on' the joke . Although managers may even be revered by some for their risky and risqué displays of humour, the dark side of this behaviour is the psychological damage to the subordinates who have limited options for response - either join in and laugh along or simply leave this organization and the job it provides. Although having played along with the humour and the construction of outsiders as 'other' and thus conservative and boring, one might speculate as to future difficulties for Adare staff in successfully joining new organizations - thus perhaps even limiting the leaving option for some.

The contribution this paper makes to current humour research is in exposing the underbelly of some specific humour effects that although openly displayed in one unusual company, may also be more covertly enacted in different corporate settings. The key contribution is in the acknowledgment that not only does the device of using humour protect (to a certain extent) the protagonists of sexual, sexist and aggressive humour, but simultaneously it prevents the victims from challenging such situations for fear of further ridicule or being branded 'humourless'. Therefore this paper contends that a simple joke may not be a joke at all and may in fact be a display of a much darker, more insidious workplace manipulation.

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Appendix A