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## Don't Tease Me, I'm Working: Examining Humor in a Midwestern Organization Using Ethnography of Communication

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### Abstract

Within organizations, the communicative phenomenon of humor is commonplace. Humorous talk is just as important and frequent to regular discourse that takes place between organizational members. In this inquiry we examine humor as a particular way of communicating between members of a small Midwestern United States organization. Specifically, we examine how three functions of humor (i.e., joking, sarcasm, and teasing) are used amongst members during normal business hours (8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.). Using ethnography of communication, we conduct both fieldwork and interviews discovering that this organization exemplifies humor as a socially constructed phenomenon to complete the typical workday.

### Keywords

Humor, Ethnography, and Communication

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# **Don't Tease Me, I'm Working: Examining Humor in a Midwestern Organization Using Ethnography of Communication**

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*Within organizations, the communicative phenomenon of humor is commonplace. Humorous talk is just as important and frequent to regular discourse that takes place between organizational members. In this inquiry we examine humor as a particular way of communicating between members of a small Midwestern United States organization. Specifically, we examine how three functions of humor (i.e., joking, sarcasm, and teasing) are used amongst members during normal business hours (8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.). Using ethnography of communication, we conduct both fieldwork and interviews discovering that this organization exemplifies humor as a socially constructed phenomenon to complete the typical workday. Key Words: Humor, Ethnography, and Communication*

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## **Introduction**

We use humor to lighten tense moments and to also convey various other messages. Lynch (2002) argues that all humor is communicative activity. As a communicative phenomenon, humor helps people in interpersonal, intercultural, organizational, performative, rhetorical, and small group contexts, but if used with malicious intent, it can hurt people as well. Additionally, humor is a phenomenon that provides tension relief, helps people to integrate socially, and can be used to control people (Miller, 1996; Morreall, 1991). In sum, humor is omnipresent. The psychological construct of humor and its physiological consequent of laughing are a part of humanity.

Because humor is a part of everyday life, it occurs within organizations. Organizational members are diverse individuals who use humor in their everyday jobs. Using humor in the workplace is a common ritual that members share in order to alleviate stress, to improve creative vision, and to bond (Kreps, Herndon, & Arneson, 1993). It is also a way for members to have fun while staying productive. We are interested specifically in humor in organizations and how it forms a particular way of communicating (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Ojha, 2003; Philipsen, 1989; Philipsen & Carbaugh, 1986; Wolcott, 1999). Humor is a communicative phenomenon that members regularly utilize. Moreover, it is a phenomenon that develops over time because members socially construct it. In turn, researchers can examine members' particular humor patterns within a specific organization to see how they conceptualize it. There is a gap between humor research and organizational communication that researchers can fill. Understanding functions of humor (e.g., joking, practical jokes, satire, teasing) and how

they form a particular way of communicating can provide valuable insight into what organizations accept and expect from members (Ullian, 1976). One way to examine this form of communication is by using ethnography of communication. Particularly, researchers can use ethnography of communication to focus on ways of speaking. Ethnography of communication requires researchers to delve into their intended ethnographic site by keenly observing and interviewing. As a result, ethnographers discover important aspects of organizational life and what type of communication members' use. Additionally, understanding functions of humor helps researchers explain how those functions are socially constructed and used between members. There are many studies regarding organizational humor in various contexts using different methods (Bradney, 1957; Duncan, 1984, 1985; Duncan & Fesial, 1989; Graf & Hemmasi, 1995; Holmes, 1999; Lundberg, 1969; Martin & Gayle, 1999; McGuffee-Smith & Powell, 1988; Roy, 1960; Seckman & Couch, 1989; Smith, Harrington, & Neck, 2000; Sykes, 1966; Traylor, 1973; Vinton, 1989). Most of these studies concentrate specifically on the existence of humor within organizations, how humor helps them with stress management, and humor as a bonding agent. However, none concentrate specifically to learn how humor forms a particular way of communicating using ethnography of communication.

It is important to understand humor for future reference as situations previously perceived as humorous such as an attempt at humor that goes awry, a joke that attacks one's character, a practical joke that results in physical harm, or sexual humor that really is sexual harassment, can be avoided. Current and future humor studies of any kind can add to the search for a general definition, list of characteristics, and elaboration of the qualities of humor.

Specifically studying humor in organizations contributes to the overall phenomenon of humor. Moreover, studying humor in organizations is a topic that involves with both humor and organizational communication. In order to learn more about this phenomenon, the effects (both positive and negative), and impact on organization structure and culture, we first explain humor. Second, we review positive and negative effects of humor in the workplace. Third, we explain the method (e.g., ethnography of communication, interviewing procedures, site description, and introduction to the organization's members). Finally, we combine and offer our analysis and interpretation of the organization examined for this study.

## **Humor**

Even though the current line of scholarly research on humor began in the 1960s (Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990), humor has played an important role for humanity from the start of our existence. Humor is a phenomenon that is difficult not only to define, but also to describe. Researchers have made various attempts to define this phenomenon (Cooper, 1922; Goldstein & McGhee, 1972; Grotjahn, 1957; Lefcourt, 2001; Morreall, 1983, 1987; Mulkay, 1988; Ziv, 1984), but they often arrived at conflicting definitions. This makes it nearly impossible to derive one widely acceptable definition on the subject, as researchers and theorists cannot conclude on one widely acceptable explanation (Lowis & Nieuwoudt, 1993). However, humor possesses certain qualities which help us to understand it more clearly. Researchers can abstract these

qualities into categories that include, but are not limited to: the biological, the psychological, and the cross-cultural.

First, on its most basic level, a sense of humor is a capacity that one possesses biologically (i.e., it has been found that humans and animals have humor; du Pre, 1998; Fry, 1994). Fry defines humor generally as a “genetic, biologic characteristic of the human race” (p. 112) that continues to develop in complexity as one gets older and learns more through her/his life. Though every human possesses this characteristic, it varies in degree. For example, we perceive some people as more humorous than others. We also perceive some people as less humorous than others. Additionally, humor has meaning. When an individual finds a situation humorous, s/he has given it meaning. The person creates and gives the humorous situation significance in some sense of her/his life. The person finds some sort of relationship between her/himself and the situation humorous. The relationship may vary in degree, but the person has given some kind of meaning to the situation.

Second, humor is psychological. Veatch (1998) argues that “humor is an inherently mysterious and interesting phenomenon which pervades human life” (p. 161). Because of humor’s elusive uncertainty, it plays on people’s minds. For example, we may interpret some individuals’ content and the talk as humorous and funny or hurtful, depending on a speaker’s perceived intent. We can use humor to feel superior to another person. Additionally, we can use humor in a current moment to feel superior as compared to a previous moment (Freud, 1960). That is, humor can change the dynamics of situational experiences. Humor can come at the expense of someone else or at the expense of a group. In turn, the person(s) on the receiving end or other individuals affected may take the humor as offensive. Also, humor may impact individuals in other parts or all parts of their everyday lives (e.g., creative/leisure time, family, play, religion, work). Everyday occurrences create a larger psychological meaning for incidents of humor.

Third, humor is a phenomenon present in all cultures (including organizations; Chapman & Foot, 1976; Feinberg, 1978; Kreps et al., 1993). Researchers have yet to discover a culture to have a lack of humor (McGhee, 1979) except on a temporary basis for a particular reason (e.g., personal tragedy, national tragedy; Fry, 1994). All cultures laugh and smile at humorous incidents. Nonetheless, cultural preferences affect specific content and the perception of what is humorous. Cultures have their own sets of norms, rules, and values that determine the acceptable contents, styles, and targets of humor (Hertzler, 1970). Hence, there is no such thing as a universal joke or humorous incident; its specific content varies according to social situations and cultural influences (Nevo, Nevo, & Yin, 2001).

### **Positive and Negative Effects of Humor Use within Organizations**

Several functions of humor (e.g., joking, practical jokes, satire, teasing) play significant roles in organizations. Humor can be a positive factor for members within an organization. “The role of humor in organizations demonstrates how talk unites subcultures, relieves tension, and orders the social world” (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001, p. 93). That is, the role of humor in social interaction between organizational members helps to construct a positive working environment.

According to Morreall (1991), there are three specific functions for humor within organizations: combating stress, improving mental flexibility, and developing social relations. First, “the most obvious benefit of humor at work is its ability to help minimize the effects of stress” (Trumfio, 1994, p. 95). For example, many organizations use biofeedback training, exercise, meditating, and yoga for their executives to reduce stress (Morreall). But, humor is significantly easier to use because it is more cost efficient than paying for a specialist to help relieve members’ stress. Humor helps alleviate stress through the physiological response of laughter because when one laughs, it lowers three chemical levels commonly associated with stress: epinephrine, plasma cortisol, and dihydroxyphenylacetic acid (DOPAC; Berk, Tan, Fry, Napier, Lee, Hubbard, et al., 1989). For example, if someone is angry in the workplace, humor can reduce the anger and stress and also reduce the level of fear commonly associated with that moment (Smith et al., 2000).

Second, mental flexibility is a concern for members in the workplace. Morreall (1991) defines mental flexibility as “getting to see ourselves more objectively, more from the outside” (pp. 365-366). For example, if a member trips and falls while walking in a public area, s/he may look at herself/himself like others do who are in the area. S/he may start to laugh at herself/himself and perceive it as someone else laughing. Mental flexibility also involves admiring “leaders of all kinds, especially in the times of trouble” (Morreall, 1991, p. 366). Leaders are often looked to when a crisis occurs. In this moment, leaders have to become authoritative figures for the organization and also show that they are human. When leaders use humor to alleviate stressful situations, they may also combat negative criticism for the actions present in that moment.

Moreover, “whenever someone has to review an old skill or learn a new one, there is a fear of making mistakes; using humor in training can reduce that fear and promote openness” (Morreall, 1991, p. 367). To help alleviate tension in any moment, be it awkward or not, humor is a useful strategy that can make that particular moment less apprehensive and more open for new experiences (Kaupins, 1989). In addition, humor promotes creativity. Safferstone (1999) argues that “humor, when used wisely, is likely to enhance the work performance of both individuals and work units” (p. 103). This cognitive aspect of humor helps members to think more creatively when answering questions and solving problems.

Third, social relations improve when using humor within organizations. Sharing “humor, like sharing food and sharing music, is an ancient social gesture which brings people together” (Morreall, 1991, p. 370). Using humor in a moment where someone may not know another person can “break the ice,” and relieve awkward tension. That is, humor helps to create intimacy and coming togetherness (Fine, 1983; Meyer, 2000; Morreall, 1991). Humor also helps members to work more effectively (Barsoux, 1996; Consalvo, 1989). If members have a choice of those they would like to work with on a project, they will probably select people who come close to their sense of humor. This helps members, as there are rarely any awkward moments, which can lead to working more effectively. In turn, humor reduces feelings of hostility and increases morale between the members.

Additionally, Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) argue that members’ identities can correlate with humor and improve societal relationships. For example, if a member develops a reputation for being humorous, more often than not, s/he will be remembered

for a being a humorous person by her/his peers. Furthermore, depending on what kind of humor s/he uses (i.e., acceptable humor or not acceptable humor), that person's identity will correlate with her/his humor. For instance, if Brad is known in his organization for using crude humor (i.e., humor that is unappreciated by the organization's members), then Brad's reputation will be projected as "the crude one." This characteristic is one of many factors (e.g., job productivity, neatness, professionalism, timeliness) that can comprise a person's work identity. Buhler (1995) contends,

A sense of humor is a critical part of the positive image and personal style....that draws others in. Used properly, it contributes to the positivism by adding levity. The humor should be directed towards ourselves and general events....Someone who can laugh and see the lighter side of life is more optimistic and appears more positive. (p. 27)

If a member in an organization has a sense of humor that is acceptable by most, then this positive factor may contribute to the person's identity.

While humor has positive effects in organizations, there are some negative effects of using it too. First, if members continually use unacceptable or unappreciated humor (i.e., humor deemed unacceptable by the organization and/or its members), the humor use may cause serious problems for both the member and the organization (Meyer, 1997). To illustrate, existing members may condemn their organizational peers and try to isolate them from intraorganizational activity. Second, humor potentially creates stress because of its ambiguity (Grugulis, 2002). For example, Pogrebin and Poole (1988) discovered that lower-ranking police officers test the limits of their humor and poke fun at sergeants. This can be problematic as "poking fun" requires flexibility in understanding the language used, as well as patience, while at the same time maintaining a level of expected work among organizational members (Boland & Hoffman, 1986). In addition, members may use humor to sometimes trivialize sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is a very serious problem within organizations. Organizational members may sometimes use humor to cope with sexual harassment issues because it is a strategy to help mitigate the potential stress of a difficult situation (Berryman-Fink, 2001). However, using humor to ease existing sexual harassment issues does not solve organizational sexual harassment occurrences.

Third, humor can divide employees between upper personnel with power and lower personnel without power (Coser, 1959, 1960; Dwyer, 1991; Linstead, 1985; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001). Certain humor functions may be exclusive to those in power. These humor functions may not be told, be accessible, and be of significance to those who are low-status personnel. The reverse may also be the case.

As stated, there are multiple effects for humor use within organizations. Humor can positively affect an organization's infrastructure and help members communicate with relative ease. However, humor is not a fool-proof mode of communication with only positive effects. Based on daily experience, it would be easy to classify humor as a uni-dimensional mode of communication with only positive or negative effects. However, the literature illustrates that humor is a complicated and sophisticated form of communication that can better be understood according the various dimensions/aspects that comprise what we call humor. One way to better understand humor and its effects is

to use ethnography of communication as a systematic means for study. This type of qualitative inquiry can help us more comprehensively examine how organizational members use humor as a way of communicating in the workplace.

To further add to knowledge on the communicative practices specific to the use of humor, we studied one small business organization and the functions of humor within their organization, using the following research questions:

- (1) Which function of humor is most common within this unique organization (e.g., joking, sarcasm, teasing), and how is it accomplished?
- (2) When is humor used within this particular organization (i.e., is it commonplace or does it even exist)?

As qualitative researchers, we continually strive to find meaning within our fieldwork. We learned the significance of qualitative research and its impact during our Master's program. More importantly, as academicians, we have built our existing research on the importance of humor in multiple settings (i.e., bonding purposes, ethnic cultures, and organizations). With this particular study, we grounded our intentions in discovering a particular way of communicating for a small Midwestern organization. Fortunately, we accomplished our goal and uncovered office politics and the importance of hierarchy as well. However, this study helped us to discover the importance of communication and how it successfully impacts organizations and their respective goals. We intentionally chose this site because we had established a relationship with the CEO. We would see him around town and at various cultural functions. In continuing our relationship, we asked if we could conduct a study and he agreed. Upon approval from all organizational members, we proceeded.

## **Method**

### *Ethnography of communication*

Ethnography of communication (EOC) is a qualitative method used to discover and analyze “socially constructed and historically transmitted patterns of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules” (Philipsen, 1992, p. 7). Through interviews and observation, researchers collect meaningful culturally specific data. The results from EOC reveal patterns of knowledge and behaviors, role-relationships, systems of social organization, and values and beliefs, which are historically transmitted within cultures (Carbaugh, 1991; Carbaugh & Hastings, 1992; Goodall, 2000).

Fitch (1994) contends that EOC “can position culture in one of two ways vis-à-vis communicative practice” (p. 51). That is, researchers can use communicative practices observed to inform us about beliefs and values of that culture. The meaning and systems help unpack beliefs and values practiced within that particular culture. Researchers using EOC can discover the practices through three sequential steps. The first step is observation (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). This involves recording with a focus on locally situated activities (Fitch). The second step is selection. This entails narrowing the focus to one or more communicative practices within the culture (Fitch). The third step is



reflection. It requires developing a representation of communal understandings based on analysis and members' insights (Fitch; Wolcott, 1994). Utilizing these three steps helps to explore in great detail and offer analysis of instances of a particular phenomenon on a broader level of communication.

Hymes (1968) presents an argument for why EOC is an important qualitative method that researchers can use to analyze data; EOC helps researchers bring into order specific phenomena (Hymes, 1968, 1972). The "systematic descriptions can give rise to a comparative study of the cross-cultural variations in a major code of human behavior" (Hymes, 1968, p. 102). Additionally, EOC can aid researchers in tying theoretical learning with praxis. That is, new theories can emerge from collected communicative data because researchers can use the particular derived theory and compare it to other ethnographic sites to comprise a more comprehensive generalizable theory.

Ethnography of communication is a useful method for academic research in organizational communication. Ethnography of communication helps researchers obtain real and vivid meanings from participants. That is, it allows for "emic and inductive analysis to preserve the naturally occurring features and discourse of the organizational scene" (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001, p. 183). Ethnography of communication allows researchers to seize meaning moments among organizational members and use those moments for interpretation. Specifically, EOC helps to describe the particular system of communicating through social interaction within an organizational setting. Ethnography of communication also provides "sufficient types and amounts of evidence to warrant the analytic claims being made" (Taylor & Trujillo, p. 183). Researchers can support a specific description of observed interactions. For example, if a researcher documents a specific humorous incident, then that incident is a snapshot into the everyday organizational life of that particular culture. A researcher can capture specific moments within the organization's way of life and make claims by using the data collected as evidence.

### *Interviewing*

Before beginning the interview process, we secured Human Subjects Committee (HSC) approval through Southern Illinois University Carbondale. We completed the necessary HSC paperwork and provided our protocol of questions (see Appendix). Two weeks later, we obtained consent to formally begin. For this study, we observed and interviewed in various blocks of time (one to three hour blocks between normal business hours, 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.) over three months during Fall 2003. We chose working hours because it allowed us to gain the most access and it was also the most convenient time to conduct this project.

For this study, we observed and interviewed all members. This helped us in defining a humor pattern for members within this particular organization. We use the term, co-researcher, to identify those we studied rather than research participant, because ethnography of communication is the study of persons in their own respective environment. Participant can refer to many things (e.g., animals, humans, plants), whereas the term, person, refers to the uniqueness of each human being. But, the term, participant, is not sufficient to mark an interviewee's contribution in a research project. This distinction in language is important because it informs the way co-researchers view

themselves and their relation to the project. That is, we acknowledge the significance of each individual involved in this project as well as their existence in having breadth and depth. We know this because all co-researchers involved contributed to this project and we all share it equally.

We used interviewing as our primary method of data collection. For a most effective interview, both the researcher and the co-researchers need full engagement in the dialogic discussion (Weber, 1986). Many ethnographers utilize dialogic interviewing as a methodology because it provides face-to-face interaction between the co-researcher and the researcher (Patton, 1982, 2002; Weber). During an interview, face-to-face interaction is a good strategy because if questions (or follow-up questions) emerge from the researcher's perspective, the same interview provides an opportunity for further inquiry (Patton, 2002). Prior to beginning each interview, we had co-researchers sign an informed consent that explained the study and their right to withdraw at anytime. It is important for co-researchers to know their right before any study can take place. We then asked co-researchers to fill out a short demographic questionnaire. We used demographic questionnaires to gather background information for each co-researcher and for statistical purposes. Next, we read the verbal script, which emphasized that the interview would take place conversationally. For the interview portion, we used a combination of semi-structured and in-depth interviews. The interview protocol (see Appendix) allowed for each interview to take its own course for different types of data to emerge. This meant that we discussed some questions more in-depth than others, while some questions were asked and not pushed for further explanation. We also offered co-researchers the opportunity to use pseudonyms, which all agreed to use. Pseudonyms do not connect the interviews used to specific co-researchers (Weber).

Additionally, our interviews with co-researchers helped us to generate new data and also allowed the opportunity to conduct member checking. That is, interviewing provides for interaction between the researcher and the co-researchers (Patton, 2002). The interview allows co-researchers to express their worldviews through their own experiences. As a result, it allows the researcher to delve into the perception of the co-researchers. When researchers explore co-researcher's worldviews, they capture the most revealing data.

### *Site description*

For this study, the site chosen was a small construction company in the Midwest that has been operating for over 20 years. We chose this specific site because of our established relationship with the CEO and the willingness of his co-workers to participate. They build banks, churches, gas stations, motels, restaurants, small buildings, smart homes, and structures for various other businesses. On most occasions, organizational members meet clientele at the site that is being constructed. However, the office is home base to members who support the "behind the scenes" work for the construction that occurs in the field. The office building is located just inside the city limits and is fairly large for only four members. There are four main offices inside the building for each employee, and various rooms that include office supplies, copiers, printers, and fax machines. In addition, there is a kitchen, several restrooms, and two

receptionists/welcome areas. The company employs four members in the office itself, who work together to construct various regional projects.

### *Introduction into the organization's members*

The members of this organization have been working together for almost four and a half years. They work hard, but at various times throughout their workday, they also use humor. There are four members. First, there is "Harry" (Owner/Project Manager). Harry oversees all projects and is the main contact person for clientele. Harry has been in the construction business for over 30 years. He is well known for most of the construction in this region. Harry is also the most serious person in the group. He openly admits to being a serious person and it is apparent when observing his interactions with co-workers and clientele. Humor for Harry is something that is allowed for his employees and something he does not participate in very often at the office. He wants to show that he has control and is a serious businessperson. Harry enjoys what he does, and feels he is contributing to the regional community, while also contributing money into his pocket.

Second, there is "Barry" (Junior Estimator). His organizational role is to estimate the cost, materials, and time it takes to complete projects. He is Harry's brother and has been working at the organization for the least amount of time (four and a half years). Barry is less serious than Harry. Humor for Barry is something needed in order to lighten the mood, but is also an "extra thing." At times, he is very busy with his workday handling phone calls and looking at plans. Other times, he is counting down the days that he has left in America before returning to his homeland, India.

Third, there is "Martha" (Project Cost Accountant). She handles the paperwork (i.e., bills, faxes, letters, memos, paychecks, routine items) that comes with being one of the most recognized businesses in this region. She talks with all members everyday. Martha is the glue that holds the organization together. She knows what is going on at every moment; she also handles her business with great detail. She drinks a lot of coffee and sits in front of her computer for most of the day. Humor for Martha is something needed because it helps her get through each workday.

Fourth, there is "Edwin" (Chief Estimator). He drafts and plans sketches for respective clientele. He is the "class clown" of the group. While he arguably owns the nicest car and works in the biggest office of all the members, he also has that "I don't care, let's have some fun" attitude within his persona. He instigates functions of humor (i.e., jokes and teasing) from time to time. But, we also observed him at various times when he was busy with his regular work routine. He was usually on the phone with a prospective client coordinating a deal or drawing construction plans. Together, this group of four interact everyday and conduct business as a successful team. At the end of the workday, this group uses humor, and also gets the job done.

### *Trustworthiness*

To ensure confidence in this work, we built in the following procedural steps. First, we transcribed all data promptly after the interviews were completed. Rather than waiting and outsourcing the data for transcription, we wanted to tackle it ourselves as it was a learning experience. Additionally, transcribing after capturing data is significant to

accuracy and helps to immediately recall the moments. We conducted interviews in the following order: Harry, Barry, Martha, and Edwin. This order was used because of the availability of the co-researchers.

Second, we had members read an earlier draft of this manuscript to make sure that they felt comfortable in what we reported and analyzed for this project. By performing these two moves, our hope was to make both the reader and the members of the organization feel confident in the descriptions and interpretation that we claim in this study (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Additionally, as participant-observers, we were able to understand functions of humor used within the organization because we watched members “in their own territory...on their own terms” (Kirk & Miller, 1986, p. 9). This helped us to understand the mode of communication utilized within this organization in its truest sense, or as close to as we can get without being inside members’ minds. Additionally, it helped us establish a thorough examination of this work using this particular method and methodology (Flick, 2006; Tanggaard, 2008). We selected EOC because it offers a “comfortable social context” (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000) when interviewing members in their own environment. We initially anticipated that conducting our study in the co-researchers’ setting would allow for an open discussion, fair exchange of information, and observation opportunities. Upon completion of the project, we discovered that our assumption was correct.

#### *How we analyzed collected data*

When beginning our analysis, we had four tapes of interviews and two memo pads containing descriptions collected over three months. While immersed in fieldwork, we wrote our initial descriptions of what we observed. More or less, this constituted notes that we took in designated memo pads for this study. For example, descriptions of office layout, co-researcher’s daily clothing, co-researcher’s moods and attitudes, and co-researcher’s interactions with each other while observing. After each day of observation, we would reflect on those descriptions and derive themes that connected the mode of communication used within the organization to communal understanding. Moreover, we would go line by line on the written descriptions by writing them on a white board. Once we saw commonalities, we would derive themes that would tie them together. At the end of the three months, we had accumulated transcribed tapes resulting in 69 pages of transcription. After transcription, we listened to the tapes while following the typed transcriptions to ensure accuracy. If we missed any of the information, then we would insert those phrases at this time. Afterwards, we went through each transcription locating key words and revelatory phrases relating to communicative practices. During the analysis and interpretation, we adapted Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Krep’s (1991) criteria for good inductively generated results: (a) should be plausible, (b) should account for most of the data, (c) should be tied to the data, and (d) should be applicable and lead to future investigation. By following these criteria, we are providing justice into what we observed for scholarly discussion. That is, these set criteria helped us as researchers to analyze and interpret collected data for this study and also allowed room for future investigation regarding similar topics of interest.

Transcripts were read and bracketed until consistent topological themes emerged. By bracketing, we mean that we grouped common themes together to make it easier for

interpretation. These topics appeared as regular clusters throughout the four transcripts. Initially, 15 topics emerged from the data collected. However, we reviewed and collapsed these 15 topics to three topics which were thematic to all co-researchers and consequently, eliminated redundancy. We accomplished this by grouping topics under headings and crossed off topics that were similar in theme. This was completed by writing topics on a white board and then subsequently grouping. In the next section, we describe the findings from our analysis and interpretation.

### **Humor Analysis and Interpretation**

Humor is very important to this organization's members and we observed this on a repeated basis. But, to support research question one (Which function of humor is most common within this unique organization (e.g., joking, sarcasm, teasing), and how is it accomplished), we observed several notable incidents of humor and communications, which we classify as three different functions and now present: everyday joking, superiority masked as sarcasm, and inclusive teasing. The examples by our co-researchers can be best understood by these different functions of humor. Although these functions may or may not exactly reflect humor experiences of other organizations, we offer them as a way of communicating for this particular organization. Nonetheless, we feel that teasing is the most regularly used function of humor within this organization.

#### *Everyday joking*

Joking is something that is either said or intentionally/unintentionally done to evoke amusement (Basso, 1979; McGhee, 1979). Joking can be a simple retort, a trick, or how something or someone is viewed. First, we observed one consistent and simple sign of paradoxical humor (Bateson, 1972; Berger, 1987; Bergson, 1956; Hatch, 1993, 1997; Kant, 1961; Suls, 1972) everyday which we initially thought was our own inside joke. We later learned that Martha shared the same joke. The office is incredibly immaculate. This is somewhat ironic as it is the office of a construction company. Before entering the organization for the first time, we imagined that the office would be dirty with various construction tools lying around, dust, dirt, and paperwork. However, from the owner's office to the receptionist area, the carpet smells new and there is always an aroma of pine trees. In addition, each member organizes her/his personal office. Their desks are not cluttered and books and office supplies are arranged in alphabetic order on respective bookshelves. After inquiring, we realized that the organization has a maid service that comes in three times a week after operating hours to clean. This inconsistency fueled us to discuss this topic with some of the members after sometime. We asked why the office is such a clean environment. Harry replied, "Because I can't stand a dirty office!" We also asked Martha, who is at the organization from open to close everyday for her view. "It's simple, when we have clientele come in for whatever reason, we want them to feel comfortable. Plus, I'm here everyday. I need a clean place to work...its funny how you bring this up as I have thought about how funny it is that our place is clean, but I have never talked with the others about it." While Harry answered that he needs a clean work space, Martha told us that it is also ironic that they are a construction company with an immaculate office.

Second, three members stated that they use joking regularly within the organization. For example, Barry answered, "It definitely plays a large part...We use joking to lighten the mood." Martha also replied "Very large, the joking is everyday...We try to be humorous because working here can be stressful. I like to take it easy and joking is just one way of doing that." Edwin reconfirmed other's answers, "Well probably above average...we have a good business relationship, but yet joking can...make everybody feel at ease. It's not like we plan jokes well advance or something. It happens sometimes at the spur of the moment when someone does something funny. Sometimes, we send stuff and tell jokes." While members replied that joking plays a regular part, we observed it on one particular occasion that prompted us to ask questions.

Occasionally, Martha sends emails that include jokes and funny stories. For example, one humorous email she sent discussed doctor-patient charts along with service fees that doctors charge. Over time, we learned that Martha commonly sends humorous emails. Martha said "I like sending the boys some emails you know to give somebody a laugh." We asked Edwin the same day that Martha sent her email if he had any recent examples of something that constitutes joking. He replied, "Martha came in today. Jokes pulled right off the Internet and its stuff that was written on doctor-patient charts, I mean its little excerpts and stuff; we have stuff like that all the time." Later that morning, we observed Harry and Barry joking around in reference to that particular email. They were standing in the main hallway while we were sitting afar, observing, and listening. After reading the printed email out loud, Harry turned to Barry and stated he wanted to become a doctor. He laughed afterwards, as it was amusing to him about how much doctors charge patients. This email primarily demonstrated the importance of joking within the organization as it established an artifact of humor. It also exhibits that email humor is a way of everyday joking for members. Additionally, email jokes are an easy way to help alleviate workday pressures and Martha sends them regularly to accomplish just that. Martha states "Yeah, I like sending the emails. It helps out with that stress thing."

### *Superiority masked as sarcasm*

Sarcasm is generally the opposite of what we mean to say (Katz, 2000; Rinaldi, 2000). Sarcasm can be part of humorous dialogue which can also offend and attack others. During fieldwork, we learned that sarcasm is definitely a part of this organization. To illustrate this, we now discuss a particular example. We asked Harry how many people actually come to the office and he answered, "90% of the time I see the client at the site, the other 10% is for show when they come to the office. We make them feel comfortable, but then again, we can do that really easy." We both laughed, but he laughed hysterically. He paused afterwards for two to three seconds and said "It's not easy like McDonald's." While he found this very amusing, we felt that Harry was describing his affinity for his chosen profession, but also degrading another type of job at the same time. While Harry is a well-respected person in his community and at the office, we feel that he thinks he is better than others. Given this example, Harry made a sarcastic remark about McDonald's employees, by making his chosen career look better. His analogy to McDonald's furthers our impression that humor is used daily to relieve stress, but sometimes to make members feel better. This type of sarcasm directly relates to humor that makes you feel superior to others (Hobbes, 1996; Zillmann, 1983). By making

his analogy, Harry feels that working at McDonald's is easy, while his job is more complex.

### *Inclusive teasing*

Teasing is undoubtedly the most commonly used function of humor within this organization. According to Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, and Heerey (2001), teasing is a playful provocation in which one person comments on something relevant to the intended target. In a simpler manner, Norrick (1994) defines teasing as a form of conversational joking that is designed to elicit laughter. When people are the object of teasing, they may or may not be offended. However, the teaser may have malicious intent behind her/his tease when the teasing is offensive (Bollmer, Harris, Milich, & Georgesen, 2003; Kowalski, 2004; Mills & Barbow, 2003; Tholander & Aronsson, 2002). In organizations, members recurrently use several characteristics of teasing. "There is usually asymmetry, in that some individuals are teased much more frequently than others; but the most outstanding feature of such behavior is that it is ubiquitous. Teasing is not restricted to specific partners" (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999, p. 108). Teasing can help members cope with frustration on the job (e.g., frustration with fellow members, frustration with pay, and frustration with supervisor). But, as in the organization for this study, it can help to foster group cohesiveness and promote solidarity (Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992). On the other hand, teasing provides strong evidence for why subcultures within organizations dissent, and why it may cause problems between members (Ackroyd & Thompson; Heisterkamp, Alberts, Metts, & Cupach, 2000).

First, Ajay, became victim to teasing from time to time. Regularly, Edwin teased him after the initial introduction about his studies. During the rounds of initial introduction, Harry had a joke at Ajay's expense with Edwin. It occurred because Ajay is a graduate student in Speech Communication. Edwin felt that Ajay should be in class instead of conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Harry introduced Ajay to Edwin by stating, "This is Ajay, and he is a Ph.D. student...in Speech Communication working on a study for a class. Tell him whatever he needs." Edwin replied "Ph.D., Speech Communication? What are you doing here, shouldn't you be in a class?" Ajay started to reply "Yes, but..." and was abruptly interrupted. Edwin next said "Is this your dissertation?" Ajay briefly said, "No, but-." Edwin laughed and followed with "Must be easy." While Ajay was the subject of ridicule, this particular episode exhibited that Edwin was not afraid to tease "the new guy" and to allow him in his organizational social circle. Although Ajay was literally an outsider looking in, this example occurred on the first day Ajay met the organization's members. Light teasing is consistent amongst the members, but we can infer that it is strictly used as good-natured ribbing. That is, the teasing is not malicious in intent. During our fieldwork, we did not observe any incidents of teasing that were offensive within in the organization.

Additionally, Edwin consistently teased Ajay about note taking when he was observing. One time, Ajay just passed his office and he said, "Hi there." Ajay walked back in and he asked, "How are those copious notes?" He was saying this while laughing and in the middle of dialing a phone number. From that moment, Edwin consistently approached Ajay in regards to note taking by always asking, "How are those copious notes?" These random teasing incidents are significant for two specific reasons. First,

Edwin initially told Ajay that he should be in class, and he may have felt that taking notes and doing ethnographic fieldwork was not as important as sitting in class. Second, Edwin knew that Ajay was conducting research on his organization, and by him asking about his notes was a way of checking to see what data was collected. Using the term “copious” implies that Ajay was writing information that was important. He may have felt that Ajay was writing things that he should not be, as it could be problematic for the organization if revealed. That is, organizations are foremost businesses that want to make money. In doing so, most organizations have specific rules, guidelines, and practices that they do not want to reveal to others for fear of losing profits.

Second, a more potentially serious example of teasing involved two members who are non-native English speakers. Harry and Barry are originally from India. From our perspective, their English is quite good, but Barry had some apprehension of his spoken English. He stated that sometimes he gets teased because of his foreign accent. We asked Barry if any of the humor that is used ever made him feel uncomfortable. He replied that it does “sometimes.” He continued with “Yeah, because we are foreigners and because of our pronunciation of things, it becomes humorous for some which is a language problem...It is usually with Americans, any Americans because sometimes you[r] pronunciation is different than theirs.” Although Barry was the only member to bring up this issue, it is significant as targeting his English has offended him to the point where he may think about it constantly. We asked Barry if his feelings were ever hurt because other members tease him about his pronunciation and accent. He told us that he was fine with it as it is “office humor.” Barry stated “It’s typical, I don’t mind it. It’s okay that they do it on occasion. It doesn’t bother me.” We asked him again for clarity and he replied that he does not mind it at all.

Furthermore, Barry has been in the United States for almost five years. Although he learned English in India starting at the age of ten, he is not as fluent as Harry, who has been in the United States for over 30 years. Because there are two people who are non-native English speakers, there are issues with different pronunciations and accents. While Barry feels targeted sometimes, we asked Harry, Martha, and Edwin about teasing Barry. Harry said that “it’s part of working. I don’t get teased that often. I am the boss.” Martha also echoed Harry by stating “We’re not evil or something...It’s good joshing because they are a part of the family.” Edwin also answered “Hey, it’s in good fun. We are not racist. We just do it because it is fun, but we never take it too far to hurt someone. I want to show that I like you and teasing does that.”

Third, teasing is sometimes used when members make trivial mistakes. We asked Edwin how much of a part humor actually plays in the organization. He answered “When something happens, when there’s a problem sometimes you can downplay it with humor to make it where the person doesn’t feel as bad you know. You screw up things you know, everybody makes mistakes.” I asked him to define the word “mistake.” He answered “Something that happens in the office you know or on the jobsite somebody leaves...\$250,000 on the table, that’s a mistake to us.” On occasion, someone’s mistakes become the object of ridicule because the office is fairly intimate. While Edwin did not specifically define what constitutes a mistake and gave an example instead, he did refer to light teasing as fun. From the data collected within this organization, members feel comfortable enough to tease one another because they have known each other for more than four years. Barry also responded that members get teased when an error occurs. We



asked him if he instigates teasing. He replied, "It depends on the time and mood and somebody's mistakes." We felt the members tease each other when somebody makes a small mistake (e.g., a word spelled incorrectly, a typo, when a member does something that is out of character). Teasing someone about a mistake is a way of bonding for members and it shows that they are comfortable with one another. Members also use it to make the atmosphere friendlier. Teasing provides togetherness and shared interaction.

While teasing is the most commonly used function of humor, members only use humor when the timing is appropriate. That is, it depends on whether it is a time to be formal in front of customers or a time to relax and have fun. In answering our second research question (when is humor used within this particular organization (i.e., is it commonplace or does it even exist), we specifically asked members when humor is used. In the organization, humor definitely is commonplace.

Throughout our fieldwork, we observed that no one is humorous if more than two members are out of the office. Martha stated there is no humor "if someone is out to lunch or something..." However, when all members are present at the office, humor will be used. We feel that the members have more fun when they are all together. Specifically, humor is used as a social agent to bond. It is a way for all members to communicate. For example, Barry stated "When we are doing some serious work...it is formal...otherwise it is informal. It all depends on the work each person has to do for the day." Edwin supported Barry's answer. He stated "The only time it gets formal around here is when customers are here. It's not like we call everyone Mr. and Ms. You have to create a formal atmosphere when customers are here to be more business-like. It's not that you can't joke with a customer too, but they are here for a business purpose." This is significant, as the members know when they need to work and when they can have fun. In a way, they have socially constructed the appropriate place and the appropriate functions of humor that they can use (i.e., joking, sarcasm, teasing). They know when the timing is right and they know when to be serious. This exhibits consistency among the members about the timing of humor. Although three of the four employees answered similarly, Harry answered the question quite differently. Because he is the owner and boss, we expected him to say something different. After months of observation, we specifically asked Harry why he rarely gets involved with humor in the office. He replied, "No, I am too serious of a business person. It is not appropriate for me as the owner to get involved." It is interesting that Harry does not want to be involved in office humor. It demonstrates what Harry believes is the typical prototype for a businessperson.

He did state later on that he does use humor at places away from the office. "Away from the office, yes on jobsites, we tell dirty jokes. If we met away from the office it is okay. But not in the office." For Harry, it depends on location for when he uses humor. He is more open about humorous times away from the office, while the other three members are more apt to use it in the office when the timing is appropriate.

### **Conclusion**

In the organization examined for this study, humor is an important way of communicating used to alleviate stress and bond the group. The members' humor and shared laughter implicitly contributed to their understanding of one another, "thus strengthening group norms and bonds" (Pogrebin & Poole, 1988, p. 184). We could see

that members respected each other and their organizational roles. They have been accustomed to each other's behavior after working together for several years. The communication between members led us to believe that they socially constructed humor (Zijderveld, 1968). Moreover, teasing is commonplace and it helps the members to relieve tensions that are often present within this organization and to show inclusivity among members. This is very healthy for the group in order to remain successful co-workers. The casual observer may not understand the humor examples chosen for this writing. The humor examples that we include are a small representative of the humor experiences that the members share within the organization. At the beginning of our study, we had no preconceived expectations of what we would find and how members communicated within the organization. Therefore, everything that emerged from this study had an element of surprise and freshness. We did not know if what we found would connect to the literature in some capacity because we had no expectations when entering and exiting the organization. Overall, we found that while joking and sarcasm are ways of communicating, teasing is a regular way of communicating for members. It is used during informal times to keep the atmosphere comfortable.

Although this study is successful on multiple levels, it is not without some limitations. Specifically, there are four main limitations. First, ethnography of communication helps us describe communication patterns for particular cultures. However, it is a challenging method that goes beyond mere observation. In order to contribute to scholarly discussion, researchers have to link data collected with emergent themes. In doing so, involving more than one researcher, as in this case, creates confusion as one researcher's themes may be different than another researcher's themes. We faced this situation several times and do not recommend others to work with more than two researchers using EOC because of interpretive differences.

Second, as humor researchers, we brought our own assumptions about humor to this study. Over the past four years, we have been working on humor research within intercultural and organizational communication settings. However, with this experience, we now view humor, its theories, its functions, and characteristics in a different manner than when we first started to learn more about it. Because of this experience, we had to negotiate how we view humor with the purpose of this study.

Future research in this area must be focused on the functions of humor (e.g., joking, practical jokes, satire, teasing) as a way of communicating. One recommendation for research is to examine members in settings that are away from the organization. Studying members as a group away from work in other settings (e.g., bar, company vacation, restaurant, traveling) would help in understanding backstage identities (Goffman, 1959). Future research must also incorporate diverse methods and methodologies in an attempt to promote better understanding of humor within organizations. The group in this study, if looked at as a whole, has one personality that follows its own motto: "From concept to completion."

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## Appendix

### *Interview schedule, humor in the workplace*

Note: The interviewing that will be conducted takes the form of ethnographic interviewing. This type of interviewing allows the researcher to approach the interview with various themes/general questions; however, the interviewees' responses are probed further in order to get at the intentional meanings. This often results in large unscripted portions of the interview that follow the lead of the individual interviewee. In the following, we provide the general questions we would like to cover over the course of the interview; however, we cannot predetermine the probing questions at this time, as they change for each individual.

1. How long have you been working here?
2. How would you characterize the organization's communication (Formal, Informal)?
3. What role does humor play in the organization everyday?
4. If humor does play a part, who participates?  
Are you an instigator of humor?  
What counts as humor for you?  
Is the humor always appropriate?
5. Please give some examples of excerpts of humor in the workplace.  
Are they inappropriate? If so, please provide some examples.
6. Does any of the humor make you feel uncomfortable?
7. Have you been ever insulted by any of the humor in the workplace?
8. What are the different kinds of humor in the workplace (Practical jokes, teasing, sarcasm, riddles)?
9. If humor plays a part, is it at lunch, social gatherings, in the workplace?
10. What's the funniest thing to happen in the last month in the organization?

We're done at this time with our interview. Is there anything else you want to add or clarify before we stop? Thank you very much for your help, we really appreciate it. Please remember that your comments are confidential.

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