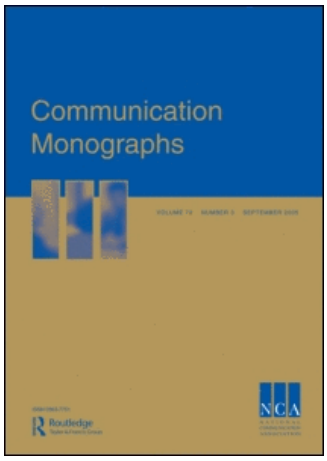

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Cracking Jokes and Crafting Selves: Sensemaking and Identity Management Among Human Service Workers

Sarah J. Tracy, Karen K. Myers & Clifton W. Scott

Using interview and participant-observation data gathered among correctional officers, 911 call-takers, and firefighters, this study explores how humor enables human service workers to manage identity and make sense of their work in relation to preferred notions of self. In the face of trying job duties, humor serves employee identity needs through differentiation, superiority, role distance, and relief. Moreover, humor serves as a sensemaking vehicle through which employees select, maintain, reproduce, and reify preferred interpretations of work. The analysis characterizes humor as an unfolding, collaborative, and interactional practice that can play a key part in socializing newcomers, building knowledge, and constituting the organizing process.

Keywords: Humor; Identity; Organizational Sensemaking; Role Distance; Qualitative Research

> You've got to have a good sense of humor. That's the only way I can deal. (Stephanie, Correctional Officer, Women's Minimum Prison[1])

> You need to laugh up here or you just can't do it. (Tim, 911 Call-taker, Citywest Emergency Communications Center)

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> You see such horrible things that the easiest way to deal with it is with humor. (Michael, Firefighter, Firefighter Central)

Correctional officers, 911 call-takers, and firefighters share the feeling that humor is imperative for survival in their jobs—work that is frequently unpredictable, identity-threatening, tragic, incongruous, and stigmatized. Firefighters must continually be prepared to run into a burning building and treat burn victims, yet a typical day's work could also entail rushing out with sirens blazing just to find a smoking light-bulb, tending to a soiled drug addict at a bus stop, or taking care of passed-out, drunken fans at a baseball game. Likewise, 911 call-takers not only attend to "real" emergencies, but also deal with callers who demand driving directions or weather forecasts and pranksters who repeatedly call from payphones only to swear and yell. And, while correctional officers are hired to watch over alleged and convicted criminals, in the course of one shift they may also have to listen patiently as an inmate cries about a bad dream, strip search an inmate who has not recently bathed, or frantically avoid a well-aimed spray of urine from an inmate cell. Based upon qualitative data drawn from three occupations, this analysis suggests that humor is a central discursive tool that helps employees makes sense of threatening tasks, situations, and clients in ways that affirm identity.

One of the primary ways people define themselves is through their jobs (Collinson, 2003; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Identity has typically been conceptualized as a set of central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics that typify a person or a line of work (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ashforth, 2001). Organizational communication scholarship, in particular, has demonstrated the ways that discourses serve to not only reflect occupational preferences but constitute workers' very selves (see, for example, Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Deetz, 1992; Knights & Willmott, 1999; Trethewey, 1997). Of course, to say that identity is discursively constituted does not mean that individuals are without agency or that organizational discourses fix identity in totalizing ways (Kondo, 1990; Mumby, 1997; Trethewey, 1999). Rather, "identity is constantly open and available to be negotiated and re-negotiated, defined and redefined" (Collinson, 1992, p. 31). In this analysis, we examine how humor enables employees to make sense of work situations through techniques that negotiate preferred notions of identity and resist interpretations that threaten a secure sense of self. Although many studies have demonstrated how organizational discourses shape and are shaped by identity (see Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, pp. 48–55 for a review), this study of humor attempts to demonstrate how identity work is interconnected with the sensemaking practices that human service workers employ in ambiguous and disturbing situations.

The article opens with a review of literature on humor and organizations and a discussion about a communicative approach to humor. This leads to the guiding research question of the study: In what ways does humor assist employees in negotiating and affirming preferred identities? We then introduce the theoretical model of organizational sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001) that was adopted midway

through the data analysis process. The sensemaking framework highlights how humor is not only a short-term individualistic strategy that makes employees feel good but also an interactional process that serves to select, maintain, reproduce, and reify preferred interpretations of work. The analysis explores humor as a vehicle through which employees craft identity and make sense of difficult situations and duties.

Humor in the Workplace

Theoretical examinations of humor in organizations have typically fit into one of two categories: work that explores the individual *motivations* that inspire the use of humor among individuals and explanations that attempt to reveal the *function* of humor in social settings (Lynch, 2002).

Individual Motivations of Humor: Superiority, Relief, and Incongruity

Researchers have analyzed the psychological motivations of humor, theorizing that people engage in joking and/or find certain messages to be funny due to superiority, relief, or incongruity (Lynch, 2002). First, superiority theories specify that individuals are motivated to use humor so that they can feel superior to and distanced from others (Gruner, 1978; Morreall, 1983; Rapp, 1951). As such, employees often target humor toward individuals who are outside their group and lower in status (LaFave, 1972). Furthermore, they may frame outgroup members as inadequate in accordance with group or societal norms (Duncan, 1985). Superiority humor can have a cohesive function and solidify relationships (Coser, 1959, 1960; Francis, 1994; Meyer, 1997; Pogrebin & Poole, 1988). However, joking and especially sarcasm also segregate—in dividing members strategically from the populations they serve (Meyer, 1997), from generalized lower-status "others" (Davies, 1982), and from peers (Collinson, 1988).

A second psychological approach suggests that individuals engage in humor as a type of physical and emotional relief in times of tension and boredom (Collinson, 2002; Freud, 1905/1960; Lynch, 2002; Spencer, 1860). For instance, employees manage emotions associated with tragedy and danger through humor: Medical students laugh about dead bodies (Smith & Kleinman, 1989), high-beam steal workers make fun of colleagues who act cowardly (Haas, 1977), police officers joke about suicide and murder (Pogrebin & Poole, 1988), and 911 call-takers laugh about callers' unusual requests and unlikely situations (Shuler & Sypher, 2000; Tracy & Tracy, 1998). Humor also provides relief through "breaking the ice"; it increases trust between parties and helps employees to save face in negotiation (Goffman, 1955; Rogan & Hammer, 1994). Furthermore, employees joke when they are bored, a phenomenon perhaps most famously illustrated in Roy's (1959) documentation of "banana time"—a humorous ritual during which blue-collar male employees flung fruit on the factory floor. These studies suggest that humor provides a mechanism through which employees can quickly rid or distract themselves from boring or tense situations.

Third, psychological theories suggest that humor allows individuals to forge consistency between internal cognitive frameworks and the focal environment (Lynch, 2002; Morreall, 1983; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Humor may indicate ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox in the environment (Hatch & Ehrlich-Sanford, 1993). Through making a joke, employees connect seemingly unrelated issues together in unexpected ways (Weick & Westley, 1996) and enable members to cope (Hatch, 1997; Martin, 2004). Through playfulness, employees clarify ambiguous messages (Meyer, 2000), but also limit and normalize certain ways of thinking and speaking in organizations (Collinson, 1988).

These three lenses of superiority, incongruity, and relief continue to dominate theoretical understandings of humor origin and motivation. However, a communication-based theory of humor would suggest that, in addition to understanding the psychological motivations as to why individuals laugh at particular messages, we should also examine the functions and effects of humor in social settings (Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000).

Functions of Humor

Whereas the humor motivation literature revolves around three primary theories, research on the functions of humor in organizations is much less tidy. Researchers have found that humor may enhance job satisfaction (Roy, 1959), provide ingroup solidarity, approval, and attention removal (Giles, Bourhis, Gadfield, Davies, & Davies, 1976), manage the emotions of others (Francis, 1994), assist workers to cope with the deskilled and dangerous nature of their work (Collinson, 2002), construct and maintain organizational culture (Collinson, 2002; Meyer, 1997; Seckman & Couch, 1989), provide an opportunity to strategically avoid certain topics, issues, or people (Tracy, 2000), assist employees in discussing difficult or taboo topics in strategically ambiguous ways (Freud, 1905; Hatch & Ehrlich-Sanford, 1993; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995), affect burnout and job stress (Avtgis & Taber, 2006), reveal organizational values and beliefs (Kahn, 1989), and help employees as they adjust to change or a new role (Hatch & Ehrlich-Sanford, 1993; Vinton, 1989).

Moreover, humor can emerge within and sustain paradoxical situations (Martin, 2004). It can simultaneously resist and bolster current positions and norms (Bell & Forbes, 1994; Lynch, 2002; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Humor may reduce the appearance of power inequalities yet be employed to challenge or exert control over others (Holmes, 2000). Collinson (1988) concluded that while joking assisted shop-room employees in resisting boredom, it also pressured them to conform to working-class structures of masculinity and drew attention away from stress-inducing organizational norms. Likewise, through making fun of emotion labor rules, cruise ship employees could "deny that management was controlling them" (Tracy, 2000, p. 115), but doing so did little to change the company's panoptic control structures. At the same time, management may use humor as a weapon to claim control, but doing so can often backfire. When managers attempt to repress humor, they may actually reproduce it, and when they attempt to inject humor, the results are often humorless (Collinson, 2002; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Still, humor can be a catalyst for

change when it forces individuals to see connections (Weick & Westley, 1996) or have a new appreciation for contradiction (Taylor & Bain, 2003).

Toward a Communicative, Sense-Making Approach to Humor

This study moves beyond subjective psychological motivations and objective sociological functions of humor, a dichotomous classification system that not only has framed much of the humor research but, as Deetz (1996) argues, is sedimented in paradigmatic theoretical frameworks (e.g., Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Indeed, Lynch (2002) argues that communication scholars can fruitfully enter the conversation about humor by addressing the current lack of interaction between the individual (motivation) and societal (function) levels of humor common in the extant literature.

A communicative approach to humor would emphasize the fluidity of motivations and functions by situating language and discourse as central. It would emphasize how discourse and everyday talk do not merely reflect organizational structures and member intentions, but serve to fundamentally constitute the organizing process and the construction of member identities (Deetz, 1996; Weedon, 1997; Weick, 1995). From this perspective, humor shapes the meaning of events, situations, and tasks. In particular, we believe that Weick's (1995, 2001) conceptualization of organizational sensemaking, with its emphasis on ambiguity, intersubjectivity, and identity, highlights how humor can serve as an emergent and interactional means of selecting desired interpretations and affirming desired identities.

According to Weick (2001), people learn about and make sense of their environments retrospectively by taking account of their actions—a theory often summed up in the question, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (p. 189). Sensemaking can very simply be described as "meaning making" (Schwandt, 2005, p. 182). While Weick's (1979) initial conceptualization of sensemaking was somewhat individual and cognitive, his later elaborations emphasize the "sense-maker" as a discursive construction, constituted in the process of interaction (1995, p. 20). "The word sensemaking tempts people to think in terms of an individual level of analysis" (p. 38); however, sensemaking emerges *inter*subjectively in the collective and chaotic situations that cause members to lose and regain sense at the group or organizational level (Weick, 2001). Indeed, the actual, implied, or imagined presence of others is imperative for sensemaking to occur (2001, p. 461).

As such, sensemaking "can be conceptualized at the collective level as an interface process between what is happening in the organization and its environment" (Schwandt, 2005, p. 182) and is social because even individual cognitive behaviors are based on social relationships (Weick, 1995). In addition, and especially relevant for this analysis, Weick (1995) argues that sensemaking is grounded in identity construction involving the interdependent relationships of members and the organization. He claims that "maintenance of identity is a core preoccupation in sensemaking" (p. 20) and that it is through making sense of the environment collaboratively that identity can be constructed. He also makes the case that "the direction of causality flows just as often from the situation to a definition of self as it

does the other way. . . . Depending on who I am, my definition of what is 'out there' will also change" (p. 20).

Sensemaking emerged as an appropriate model for framing the current study after initial analyses indicated that humor was often tied to the identity-threatening parts of the job. Weick (1995) suggests that sensemaking is most necessary in moments of tension, paradox, and ambiguity—moments when not only a sense of the environment is disrupted but also a sense of self. Thus, when the environment is more ambiguous and less predictable, as is often the case for human service workers, the self is also threatened and made less secure (Eisenberg, 2001). While some organizational communication research has linked identity and issues of emotion (Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Scott & Myers, 2005; Tracy, 2000; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), as well as identity and sensemaking (e.g., Eisenberg, 2001; Murphy, 2001), we have little empirical evidence that specifically examines humor, identity, and sensemaking. In this study we use qualitative field data to explore humor as an interactional process that assists human service employees in affirming their identities and making sense of clients, tasks, and situations in preferred ways.

Data and Methods of Analysis

The data for this study were collected through observations, ethnographic field interviews, and in-depth recorded formal interviews. Together, the data set equaled about 325 research hours (field hours plus 40 interviews) resulting in about 1000 single-spaced pages of typewritten transcripts. Analyzing data from both field observations and semistructured interviews in tandem provided a unique vantage point from which to explore how humorous workplace discourse emerges in often-chaotic human service workgroup settings. In addition to observing humorous episodes naturalistically, semistructured interviews provided access to members' narratives and retrospective accounts of sensemaking and identity management. Empirical work has long noted that humor often appears in narratives (Bormann, 1983; Meyer, 1997; Seibert, 1988). Through narratives "we make sense of the world, of our relationship to that world, and of the relationship between ourselves and other selves . . . it is through such stories that we produce identities" (Lawler, 2002, p. 248). People may lie, exaggerate and forget (Riessman, 1993), but through these narratives, researchers can examine "ways of constructing meaning and analyze how it is accomplished" (Franzosi, 1998, p. 548). As such, narratives reflect and shape the interpretations of self and situations upon which members act (Eisenberg, 2001).

Sites of Study and Data Sources

Data were collected from four different organizations (three different occupations) by three investigators. Over the course of 11 months, the first author collected data at Women's Minimum, a state Department of Corrections facility, and Nouveau Jail, a county jail. Data sources included 22 transcribed formal interviews, field notes from shadowing officers in their daily work (~80 hours), and field notes from officer and volunteer training sessions (~40 hours). Data were collected from 109

participants—two-thirds of whom served as frontline correctional officers—and yielded 722 single-spaced, typewritten pages of raw data.

The second and third authors collected data over an 11-month period from Firefighter Central, a large, Southwestern metropolitan fire department. Using a semistructured format, they interviewed 11 firefighters, ranging in tenure from five months to 22 years, yielding 97 single-spaced transcribed pages. Additionally, the researchers accompanied firefighters on a total of 15 emergency response calls during 32 hours of participant observation, taking note of how firefighters interacted with customers and each other in the field**,** resulting in 82 pages of data**.**

The third data source is derived from a 10-month study among 911 call-takers at Citywest Emergency Communications Center, located in a large Western city.[2] The first author engaged in participant observation with about 20 call-takers, their supervisors, and dispatchers, and conducted seven formal interviews with call-takers. Field observation included 100 hours of participant observation, yielding 200 single-spaced, typed pages. Formal interviews yielded 71 pages of text.

All three data sets were gathered with the general sensitizing concept of examining emotion issues in organizational settings. Using a version of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant-comparative method (see Charmaz, 2001, for a review), the data were read and reread for recurring, emergent, patterns, or categories. In previous analyses, which resulted in papers not focused on humor (e.g., Myers, 2005; Scott & Myers, 2005; Tracy, 2002, 2004, 2005; Tracy & Scott, 2006), the categories of joking, playfulness, sarcasm, and game-playing nevertheless emerged as significant common themes in each of the data sets. Several interview questions elicited data about humor such as: "How do you deal with the stressful parts of your job?" And, "what is the purpose of joking?" However, we did not enter the scene with the a priori notion of examining identity, humor, and sensemaking. It was only through a grounded data analysis process that it became clear that this data provided a potential extension to current notions of humor, sensemaking, and identity management.

Data Analysis Procedures

The first task of the data analysis process was deciding which data were "about humor" and extracting these excerpts from the three large data sets. Humor is not just blatant joking, but is also communication that makes situations "light" and "playful" (Martin, 2004). Furthermore, while humor, "at its most basic level . . . is an intended or unintended message interpreted as funny" (Lynch, 2002, p. 423), events that elicited laughter and smirks from our participants are not necessarily funny to people unfamiliar with the occupational settings. As Francis (1994) points out, humor is "not just a play on words, but a virtuoso cultural performance. Only those with the common cultural understandings that allow them to fully share the definition of the situation can produce and appreciate humor created in any given setting" (p. 156). While pinning down what "counts as" humor is difficult, the data excerpts were categorized as "about humor" if they fulfilled one of the following three criteria: (1) instances that were marked by participants' laughter or smiles; (2) situations that participants themselves described or labeled as humorous, fun, or

related to joking; or (3) issues from the data that we as researchers noted to be funny while we were in the scene. Of the 325 research hours and 1000 single-spaced pages of typewritten text, we extracted 87 incidents related to humor and 42 participant explanations of the purposes of humor. Together, this equaled about 40 pages of single-spaced pages or about 4% of the data.[3]

During the next stage of data analysis, we created a matrix of categories/codes using a two-level analysis scheme of both etic-level categories based on extant literature and more specific emic issues that emerged from the data and participants' voices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each author individually analyzed the same subset of data (20% of the humor excerpts), and then met together to compare and contrast the coded data. The agreement rate was 13/14, or 93%, an intercoder reliability considered to be appropriate for qualitative researchers (Miles & Huberman, 1994).[4] The authors sat together as they coded the remaining data, providing sporadic opportunities to modify codes, discuss analytic memos, and return to the data to further refine categories in an iterative fashion.

During this process, we found that many of the humor episodes were connected to situations that were ambiguous and identity threatening. As we analyzed the data, several key themes emerged as to how our participants used humor to affirm identity. A discussion of these themes—differentiation, tension relief, and ambiguity/lack of control—constitutes part one of the findings. However, we were not satisfied that these categories captured the way that humor was used to manage identity *in relation to making sense of external tasks, clients, and situations*. In other words, the humor was not just about immediate tension release or short-term one-upmanship. It also served as an unfolding and collaborative process that shaped the interpretive practices of employees.

Over multiple sessions, we read and reread the data, pressed the limits of existing humor models, and considered various organizational communication theories that might best help explicate aspects in the data that were not easily captured by current categories of humor motivations or functions. Our data suggested that humor was often a collective activity that served to clarify ambiguous and threatening situations, normalize certain ways of thinking, and socialize others. It was during this "prospective conjecture" (Hallier & Forbes, 2004) stage of data analysis, that we considered the theoretical lens of organizational sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001). After pairing it with our data, we found that it was, indeed, a valuable theoretical lens for underscoring humor as an unfolding and collaborative process that helps employees to affirm identity as they select preferred interpretations of their work and themselves. We conducted a second round of data analysis, and created a matrix of 20 humor exemplars (Atkinson, 1990). These illustrated various themes associated with identity that emerged in our initial analysis, as well as the connections between identity negotiation, humor, and sensemaking. The second section of the findings provides a detailed analysis of this data.

Identity-Affirming Characteristics of Humor

As might be expected given past humor research, we found that humor had a number of effects in the organizational settings. Similar to Roy's (1959) description of "banana time," humor lent itself to amusement and avoidance of boredom. For instance, during the graveyard shift, correctional officers created dirty song lyrics. Humor also was employed to manage and control clients, a technique also identified by Francis (1994). While humor served a variety of discrete functions, it emerged as an especially salient practice in relation to the management of identity and situations when employees faced unpredictable, dirty, and tragic dimensions of their work. Specifically, employees made fun of their roles and themselves, differentiated and distanced themselves from clients and other work groups, and provided relief in identity-challenging and hard-to-control circumstances.

Self-Deprecating Humor

First, our data suggested that employees used self-deprecating humor ironically to enhance their identity. Self-derision is a special type of superiority humor (Lynch, 2002) in which individuals can raise their position by laughing at themselves. For instance, a 911 call-taker admitted that she and her coworkers often made fun of other people's problems and rationalized the jocularity saying, "Yeah, we're a bunch of sick perverts here." Similarly, the fire battalion chief, a 20-year veteran of Firefighter Central, joked with a coworker that firefighters are uniquely suited for handling ridiculous citizen complaints because firefighters tend to be a little "off balance" themselves. The chief lightheartedly summarized it as, "Our dysfunctional family helping your dysfunctional family." By collectively defining their work group as such, these employees not only admitted but also took ownership of their "diseased" nature, a tactic that serves to deflect "taint" in dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Tracy & Scott, 2006). Furthermore, they were able to characterize themselves and remind each other that they were a special breed of individuals capable of coping with the occupation's stress.

Likewise, during Nouveau Jail's yearly "in-service" training for correctional officers, the head trainer openly discussed coronary risk factors for correctional officers, a population group with an average life expectancy of 59 (Cheek, 1984). The discussion became increasingly tension-filled as the trainer announced that officers are "21 times more likely to die of heart disease than at the hands of a criminal." As the trainer proceeded to explain the deleterious effects of high blood pressure, a young male trainee yelled out, "Just remember that high blood pressure is better than no blood pressure at all!" This comment elicited loud laughter from his peers. Such tactics not only provide temporary relief, but also served identity purposes. Similar to blue-collar employees who are "real men" by laughing at highly insulting nicknames (Collinson, 1988, p. 185), through laughing at themselves in the face of life-threatening work, correctional officers (re)claim themselves as tough and strong in the face of disturbing statistics about their health.

Distancing and Differentiating Humor

While self-deprecating humor was pervasive among these three employee groups, our data suggest that employees also poke fun at clients, thus distancing and differentiating themselves (both individually and as a group) from those they served. Humorous discussions involved regaling coworkers with stories about the ignorance of the people they served. For instance, 911 call-takers would often replay the tapes of "weird" calls to coworkers and, together, laugh and make fun of the caller. The following story, told in an interview with a firefighter, illustrates an instance of what the firefighters derisively referred to as a "social" (rather than emergency) call.

> We got a call at one in the morning and when we get to the house, the people meet us at the door. It was the old man [father] and he said when the son came home, he was in the bathroom . . . masturbating. He called us for help. [The father said], "He normally doesn't do that." We go down the hall and he yells [to the son], "Get out of there!" . . . We said we were going to just leave him alone and not go in there. We don't have a pill for that! [laugh] The police show up and antagonize the [son] and mace him and put handcuffs on him. The guy is in his bathrobe taking care of himself! . . . That's not customer service!

The firefighter clearly relished telling this story, relaying it with laughter and eye-rolls.

The narrative depicts the parents' lack of common sense for calling firefighters to respond to a young man who is privately masturbating, and makes fun of police officers for actually apprehending the poor fellow. The story had reached near folkloric status around the station, and two years later during a subsequent data collection, a different firefighter at another station retold a similar version to the third author. Such narratives illustrate that, while firefighters (as well as correctional officers and 911 call-takers) are often disgusted by having to work with "ignorant" or "silly" members of the community, they can use humor to differentiate and distance themselves from clients and other work groups, and in doing so, construct meanings that affirm their work and identity.

While laughter and differentiation are significant and strengthen past research, the firefighter's final comment—"That's not customer service," uttered in a high-pitched sarcastic tone of voice—also serves as a *role-distancing technique* (Goffman, 1961). Humor as a role-distancing tactic has not specifically been explored. In contrast to superiority humor, which focuses on the ways individuals raise themselves above external individuals or groups, role distancing occurs when individuals deny "the virtual self that is implied in the role" (p. 108) and distance themselves from their own actions. Goffman (1961) provides an example of a child riding a merry-go-round who engages in mocking behavior to indicate that (s)he is certainly "not just someone who can barely manage to stay on a wood horse" (p. 107). We found that through distancing and self-deprecating humor, employees do the equivalent of this child on the merry-go-round: remind themselves and each other that even when their jobs seem ridiculous and "below" them, they need not take seriously their role as they fulfill the identity-threatening performances. The role-distancing effect of humor is further illustrated in the next part of the analysis.

Humor Highlighting Incongruity and Lack of Control

Employees in our data set also used humor to highlight the way their work was incongruous, chaotic, and threatening. Certainly, when an environment or job task is incongruous, there are a number of ways to react ranging from self pity and outrage to disgust and anger. Humor provides a "playful" nonthreatening, yet memorable, way to respond. By using humor, employees were able to classify the identity threat as external rather than intrinsically connected to their very selves. The following field note illustrates how correctional officers joked about the incongruity of celebrating Christmas in prison.

> Over the loud speaker, a correctional officer theatrically announces, "Merry Christmas. At this point in time, the women of floor one may proceed to chow to enjoy their Christmas Meal." The tone of this officer's voice differs greatly from norm, and is almost reminiscent of announcements one might hear on a cruise ship or in a luxury hotel. After the announcement, all the officers laugh and Sgt. Duran exclaims with a smile, "Oh my God!" Throughout the hour, the officer makes multiple similar announcements, culminating with this dramatic low-toned advisory: "This is your last chance to enjoy the fine Christmas meal that has been prepared for you. Please proceed to chow if you have not done so already." Again, the officers respond with giggles.

These Christmas day announcements are funny largely because they point to the incongruity of Christmas and the actual prison environment and inmate situation. As incarcerated criminals, the people for whom these announcements are targeted are about as far away as they can get from a lavish dining room in a luxury environment. Therefore, to suggest a similarity between the two through tone of voice and wording is funny because it is simply so unbelievable. Furthermore, such announcements can remind officers that the dining or entertainment options available to them are unavailable to inmates. Perhaps most importantly for identity management, the joke allows officers to assume the role of agents who are able to play with the meaning of Christmas in prison, rather than victims of an awful job. Such humor can assist employees as they face uncomfortable situations (such as spending Christmas day in prison) and affirm their own position within the incongruous environment.

Humor also revolved around the unwieldy and difficult to control dimensions of work—parts of the job that participants often felt powerless to influence or even understand. Participants regularly joked about the many gory episodes that peppered their work world. For instance, firefighters laughed about body parts "splattered across the pavement." In the following excerpt, a call-taker responds to an interview query about joking in the 911 atmosphere.

> I guess [we talk about] the most bizarre ones or the funny ones. I got a call about a man chasing an officer with an axe yesterday . . . and this lady called me [who said], "I was riding on a city bus and this lady sitting next to me tried to give me her baby." I said, "She did?" and she said, "Yes, but . . . it was a man dressed like a woman holding this baby and she tried to give me this baby."... We sent a whole lot of officers over there looking for this nut—this he/she—and I don't think they ever did find her. That was pretty good.

By laughing and joking about unwieldy situations, employees remind themselves and each other that the world, their work, and the people they deal with may be unexpected, "bizarre," and beyond their control, but they can laugh rather than try to control it. Even if employees feel that they must deal with lunacy in their work, this does not mean they have to succumb or ascribe to it themselves. Instead, they can just laugh. As such, the humor is not just a relief valve, but a way to (re)construct duties and roles, and thus identities, in affirmed ways.

To review, our initial analysis laid bare several distinct ways humor served to enhance employee identity in the face of threatening work. Humor served as a vehicle through which employees made fun of themselves and their role, differentiated themselves from clients and other employees, and highlighted the way their work was incongruous and often out of their direct control. These characteristics help explain the ways individuals use humor to enhance their identity. However, we found that these tidy categories, similar to past research, did not do justice to what we saw in our data as the unfolding and collaborative *process* of humor, something that Weick's sensemaking model helps to underscore.

Humor, Sensemaking, and Negotiating Preferred Identities

As noted, Weick (2001) sums up his sensemaking theory with the question, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (p. 189). The sensemaking process is made up of three interrelated, fluid phases called enactment, selection, and retention. The *enactment* ("what I say") stage may best be described as the "raw data" (Weick, 2001, p. 192) of action in which actors "construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many 'objective' features of their surroundings" (Weick, 1979, p. 164). Through enactment, actors (e.g., employees) produce loosely coupled talk and activity that can be chaotic, random, ambiguous, and open to numerous, conflicting interpretations (Weick, 2001, p. 194). In doing so, members constrain potential ways reality will be organized. To cope with ambiguity and adapt to equivocal social contexts, employees attend to certain information–environment dimensions while overlooking others. For example, when faced with ambiguity related to the legitimate urgency of a call, 911 call-takers chat with one another and, as such, enact a response that frames and begins to organize the situation.

During the *selection* ("until I see") phase, members perceive and choose plausible interpretations by punctuating, parsing, and making connections of enacted raw data in particular ways. Selection answers the question, "what is the story here?" (Weick, 2001, p. 237) or better put, "what is *a* story here" (p. 461, emphasis in original), since any set of actions is open to numerous (not necessarily true, but rather plausible) interpretations. Relating again to the 911 call, following enactment, in the selection phase, the call-takers may joke with each other about how the caller was a "schizoid" and, in doing so, suggest that the caller was off-balance and, therefore, the situation was not necessarily life-threatening.

In the third phase of sensemaking, the selected interpretation ("what I think") is *retained* for use as knowledge that may be brought to bear upon future equivocal

situations. Emergency 911 call-takers may retain the above script—for instance, that a distraught caller does not necessarily equate with a life-threatening situation. When a similar situation arises in the future, they may call upon and even remind each other of this retained interpretation to reduce uncertainty. While in many ways, retention can be considered the outcome of sensemaking, the three-phase process is circular in nature; knowledge stored in the retention phase can only be witnessed in future enacted activity. For example, retention of the knowledge gathered here is evidenced in how the call-taker deals with or frames future callers.

In the following exemplars we reference Weick's (2001) phases of enactment, selection, and retention to demonstrate the process by which humor can be used by employees to make sense of their work in affirming ways, reflect and reify meaning, and socialize others. Selves are never constructed in isolation, but in relation to other selves and objects (Weedon, 1997). Detailing humor as sensemaking highlights the interpretive nature of humor's identity work in organizations.

The Frequent Flyer

During a period of participant observation at Firefighter Central, the third author found himself with a group of firefighters who had infrequently worked together. In response to an EMS (Emergency Medical Service/nonfire) call, the firefighters arrived at the dilapidated home of a woman who presented a series of conflicting and ambiguous symptoms and behaviors. She complained of neck pain, yet she had not allowed a new medication (that she had just been prescribed) to take effect. Within the course of the visit, the patient said she was schizophrenic and juggling 18 prescriptions. She appeared angry and agitated, flexing her neck. Inexplicably, she also described various injustices surrounding her brother's death and repeatedly mentioned the frequency of her bowel movements.

How did the firefighters make sense of this situation and their role in it? A variety of interpretations could have followed: she required further medical attention; she needed to wait for her prescription to begin working; or she was just a lonely, mentally ill patient who desired attention. Indeed, it was unclear whether this was a legitimate request for assistance or what the firefighters' often called a "bullshit" call. At the scene, the firefighters told the patient that she should remain at home and wait for her medication to take effect. However, their conversation on the fire truck as they returned to the station demonstrated sensemaking following the incident. As illustrated in the following field note, the firefighters negotiated a collective interpretation of the experience that ultimately implicated the use of humor.

> Barbara, the fire captain, jokes, "Well, at least her bowels were OK!" We laugh, and engineer Paul responds, "She sure seems like a frequent flyer," [a term firefighters use for indigent community members who rely on the department for medical care]. In disagreement, Barbara insists that they don't really see many "frequent flyers" in this particular neighborhood. Paul continues and directly addresses Kim, the probationary firefighter, "Now Kim, did you see what she was doing with her neck? For a woman presenting severe neck pain, she sure was flexing it a lot when

> she was talking about that brother." For some reason, we all laugh uproariously at this.

This situation exemplifies many of the identity-enhancing aspects of humor laid out in the initial analysis. For instance, Paul's comment served to distance the client and provide firefighters with feelings of superiority over the indigents served. Furthermore, it provided relief in a situation marked by various issues—poverty, mental illness, lack of adequate health care—that were beyond the firefighters' control. However, this situation also provides a window into the communicative process through which employees use humor to collectively make sense of the situation and feel good about themselves. Immediately upon leaving the patient's house, firefighters discuss multiple understandings of the situation and, in doing so, engage in *enactment*. The participants vacillated among conflicting interpretations until Paul noted the inconsistency between the pain the patient presented and her neck movements. Paul's joking comment not only served as release, but simplified the environment through the *selection* of a potential conclusion—this was just another "bullshit" call in a bad neighborhood. They need not feel bad for being unable to pinpoint the exact cause of the client's problem nor feel guilty that they left the scene without specific action. This interpretation was also *retained*, providing a map and potential script for interpreting future calls. For probationary firefighter Kim and the third author (both newcomers to the scene), this experience provided a useful socialization lesson. For the veterans, this knowledge not only bolstered extant knowledge but encouraged similar interpretations of future "bullshit" calls (which emerged throughout the data set). The process allowed firefighters to achieve distance from "bullshit work" and absolved them from claiming responsibility in either causing or resolving the problem.

You Are My Sunshine

Humor as a vehicle for sensemaking is also evident in the following incident. The first author trailed Officers Mike Gonzalez and Luke Gollett as they conducted inmate "count," dropped off food, delivered drinks, picked up food platters, and gathered laundry from inmates in the segregation unit of Women's Minimum Prison. These duties are considered by correctional officers to be among the most degrading of their work, because they cast them as "glorified maids" to convicted criminals. Throughout the four-hour observation, the officers largely tuned out inmate requests, complaints, and general clatter. For instance, when one inmate screamed indecipherable requests to Officer Gonzalez, he chanted, "Coo-coo, coo-coo"—softly enough that it was audible to the first author but not the inmate. This ongoing pattern of officers' tuning out inmate requests also is evident in the following field note:

> We return to pick up the food platters and the inmates are extremely vocal, yelling that they want milk and different food. Without comment, the officers just pick up the used food trays. They are done delivering food for the night. As Gollett refills the mop bucket, an inmate hollers something about making sure the water is clean.
>
> At first, I try to make out voices and requests, but it's nearly impossible—myriad female voices echo through the unit. When we pass an inmate who I learned earlier

> does not eat pork for religious reasons, she complains that she *also* cannot eat pork sauce and grease that spilled all over her tortilla. Gonzalez says, "Okay, we'll let them know." Then he looks at me and says under his breath, "I have no idea what she just said."

The first author initially found it disturbing that the officers did not attend to inmate requests or complaints, or even seem to care if they heard them in the first place. After about two hours of delivering and picking up food, Officer Gonzalez began heartily singing over the cacophony, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. . . . You make me happy when skies are gray!" causing the first author and partnering officer to stifle their laughter.

Of course, Gonzalez's singing about sunshine is funny in part because it is so incongruous to the locked-down prison setting. Furthermore, the sunshine "joke" serves as temporary relief from the relentless echoing noise in the segregation unit and provides an avenue for differentiation and superiority, as it ironically emphasizes the officers' ability to see and enjoy sunshine while inmates cannot.

However, singing about sunshine does more than provide the immediate identity-affirming functions of relief and superiority. As Gonzalez and Gollett *enact* their roles as "glorified maids" in the dreary, claustrophobic lock-down unit, their humor serves to *select* and reify one of many possible interpretations of the situation. For instance, the officers could have chosen to focus upon the noisy conditions that make it difficult to hear inmates, or how their job is quite depressing. Rather, through humor, they *retain* and pass along an interpretation that inmates' requests are trivial and that officers do not and should not be required to attend to them, an interpretation that reappears throughout the data. The comment is funny because it is ironic, indicating that officers should not worry too much about inmates' complaints. While officers must *do* the work of glorified maids, they need not *be* glorified maids—they can be somewhere else, where singing about sunshine makes sense. This situation illustrates that humor as sensemaking services the identity dynamics of the officers, especially when they must engage in identity-threatening work, such as serving dinner to and collecting laundry from convicted criminals.

Furthermore, in making such jokes, officers socialize each other and the researcher. Indeed, *in situ* field notes illustrate how the first author quickly "learned" that she need not pay close attention to inmate requests. Near the end of the four-hour segregation unit observation, she made the following note.

> The noise is starting to bug me. I no longer try to decipher meanings through the sea of muffled voices and clanging little doors. I'm beginning to realize that I am not supposed to feel guilty or irritated for not understanding voices through the clatter.

This lesson is not only about how to make sense of inmates, but how the first author should make sense of herself in relation to them; the lesson does not merely communicate that it is acceptable to ignore inmate requests, but that she can and probably *should* ignore them because she is different and they are the "others." This lesson, which could have a number of problematic effects, was memorably

communicated through mirth-producing "coo coo" signs and a song about sunshine. It could have been taught in a number of other, less subtle and less effective ways. Through humor, an interpretation was made easy, even fun, to select, and the contradictions and problems with the lesson were made easy to ignore.

Fried Felines and More

Correctional officers, 911 call-takers, and firefighters all endured significant "down time" during which they often told and retold humorous stories. Certainly, doing so served as an effective boredom management tool. However, the narratives, especially as one was layered upon the next, served a sensemaking function as they suggested ongoing organizational themes. Through linking stories together, employees also linked together particular interpretations, communicating how a certain case or story was to be classified and understood. One might consider an especially poignant layering of stories that occurred as the first author hung out with call-takers at Citywest 911. The call-takers discussed how, the night earlier, a woman had called 911 about retrieving her cat after a dog had chased it into a tree. A response was dispatched, but the same citizen called back just minutes later asking for animal control because the cat had walked across an electrical line and been electrocuted. As the following field note demonstrates, the story touched off a series of laughter-infused narratives.

> We are all laughing about the "fried feline," even though it seems kind of sad. This leads to a conversation about running over dogs and cats. Call-taker Erika says she recently ran over a dog that was already dead. Later, her boyfriend found doggy fur and a collar up under the car. She also mentions that she and her boyfriend almost hit a deer. Then Tim asks if I heard about call-taker Tiffany's fiasco. I say no. Apparently, Tiffany and her husband had just bought a new car and they ran over what they thought, at the time, was a rug. They later learned it was a man who had fallen off his motorcycle. When they ran over him, he was already dead and torn to pieces. Tiffany thinks they ran over his leg. Tim adds, "They found all this gray matter on their car."

To 911 outsiders, these stories may be anything but funny; however, similar to other tragic stories told and retold among our participants, the call-takers relayed these instances with tears of laughter and loud guffaws. By linking the fried feline event to the well-worn stories of the doggie fur and dead motorcyclist, the call-takers not only released discomfort regarding the immediate circumstances. By juxtaposing the stories, the participants indicated that they all should share a common interpretive framework: Just as employees had learned to laugh about past "tragedies," even those which occurred outside the organization, the proper way to interpret the current fried feline situation was to consider it "funny." By collectively selecting this interpretation, the seriousness of the event is downplayed, thereby diminishing the opportunity for employees to feel sadness or guilt; they place the event in the same category of other tragic, yet "completely unavoidable" events for which they need not take responsibility. By joking, the call-takers emphasize their identities as tough and able to effectively deal with tragedy.

Hide and Seek

Perhaps the "dirtiest" aspect of correctional officer work involves dealing with the intimate areas of inmates' bodies. As part of routine duty, officers conduct strip searches in which they inspect inmates' every body cavity, including inside their mouth, between their toes, and around their genitals. Female inmates are required to "squat and cough" while male inmates are required to "squat, cough, and lift." Officers often made sense of their identity in the context of these situations through humor, a phenomenon illustrated in the following exemplar.

On a hot summer evening, the first author hung out as WM Officer Stephanie Jones and another female officer, Sgt. Brankett, discussed an inmate drug bust they had made earlier in the day. The incident included myriad complex activities over the course of four or five hours, including collecting a group of inmates from their cells, conducting strip searches, sorting and coding the confiscated drugs, writing up reports and supervising various inmates' drug urinalysis tests. As part of the urinalysis procedure, Officer Jones was tasked with inspecting the inmates' vaginal area for anything suspicious, during which time she discovered an upside-down urine-filled bottle inside one of the inmates' vaginas. While somewhat disturbed by this unexpected "find," Jones nonetheless seemed proud that she discovered the bottle and was thus able to foil the inmate's plan of passing off someone else's urine as her own. As the first author chatted with the two officers later in the evening, Jones recapped the incident, declaring with an ironic smirk, "I have a brother who's a lawyer, a sister who's a business manager and a brother-in-law who's in medicine, and here I am dealing with things crammed up people's crotches!" In response to this comment, which is clearly about defining identity in the face of dirty and bizarre work, the officers began laughing.

The preceding episode indicates how joking served a sensemaking function as officers *enacted* their role in a multifaceted and disturbing situation. Officers had to deal with the difficult logistics of making a "bust," as well as some uncertainty that the inmate charged with drug possession was not the actual culprit. However, this was not the issue they *selected* as joking fodder. Rather, Jones' "funny" statement was an interpretation that made light of the work of peering into criminals' crotches. This removed the focus from alternate, potentially identity-threatening interpretations (e.g., that officers have a truly awful job or that they should have handled the situation better).

Furthermore, the joke simplified a complex, equivocal situation and provided officers an opportunity to achieve distance from the distasteful dimensions of their job. In laughing about work duties that most people would likely consider disgusting and aberrant, and contrasting such activity with the more professional work of her relatives, Jones took ownership over the grotesque parts of the job. While the episode easily could have suggested that the correctional officer job is disgusting and low-status, by making this joke, the officer instead framed the strip search as an ironic "badge of honor" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Mirthful Shorthand

As discussed earlier, the three-phase sensemaking process is circular in nature; knowledge stored in the retention phase is evidenced in future enacted activity (Weick, 2001). Retention of stored knowledge was often apparent in short jokes or humorous interactions. These episodes served as a type of mirthful shorthand—as summary statements that reminded employees of interpretations they had selected so many times that their meaning has been retained and reified. Examples include the following:

Firefighter Michael described the purpose of joking, saying, "It could be something as simple as comparing [a mangled body] with something we might eat for dinner that night. . . . Humor is necessary to get it out there and feel better about it." Through humor, firefighters connected the tragedy of mangled bodies with harmless and mundane food and, in doing so, communicated to themselves and each other the idea that injured bodies are not to be considered emotionally traumatic, but rather should be interpreted as akin to faceless meat. Doing so served to interpret tragedy in a way that reaffirmed firefighters' preferred sense of themselves as people who are not traumatized by such disturbing sights. Short jokes and humorous episodes such as these memorably evidenced (and recreated) the knowledge constructed as employees made sense of their job.

Nouveau Jail officers repeatedly told the following, question–answer type joke: "How do you know an inmate is lying? His/her lips are moving." This joke reduced the equivocality and ambiguity that surrounds the criminal justice process, eliminating from the sensemaking frame the myriad reasons that land inmates behind bars, and the variety of inmate personality types. Rather, the joke places all inmates in a single category of liars, which in turn validates the correctional officers' role in the incarceration process and justified when they do not believe inmates. This shorthand is retained and then can be used to make sense of future complex or identity-threatening situations.

Implications

Firefighters, 911 call-takers, and correctional officers regularly face work that is dirty incongruous, grotesque, and out of their direct control. Many of our participants explicitly indicated that humor was essential to effectively dealing with these aspects of their job, and our analysis revealed that humor assisted employees in interpreting their organizational duties in identity-affirming ways.

Similar to past studies (e.g., Collinson, 1988, 2002; Pogrebin & Poole, 1988; Smith & Kleinman, 1989), our analysis indicated that, through humor, employees express superiority over and differentiation from clients and other work groups as well as relieve tension associated with tragedy and disgust. By joking about aberrant and shocking duties, our participants sustained the notion that they were not only capable of doing the demanding work, but also were able to cope with its identity-threatening dimensions. Previous research demonstrates workers' efforts to distance themselves from negative perceptions and bolster potentially threatened esteem through

reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing techniques (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). This study provided evidence of several specific methods by which they do so; humorous jokes, asides, and stories served to jointly negotiate self-definitions as members contrasted themselves to clients and other occupational groups.

This analysis also identified characteristics of humor that have not been as clearly recognized in past research. For instance, the data illustrated how humor not only differentiated employees from others, but also assisted them in achieving distance from their very organizational roles (Goffman, 1961). Through sarcastic quips, horrific tales, and songs like "You Are My Sunshine," employees were able to take a discrepant, ironic perspective on their work role, automatically conveying a sense of "looking down" on their own experience from a position with greater perspective. Goffman (1961) noted that "joking and sarcasm" (p. 114) are common manifestations of role distance. However, past workplace humor research has largely overlooked the notable capacity of humor to assist employees in achieving distance from their own disfavored role.

Perhaps most significantly, the article exemplifies a more communication-centered theory of organizational humor by explaining how workers employ humor as a means to punctuate and (re)define identity in the process of selecting, highlighting, and reifying particular interpretations of situations, clients, and tasks (Weick, 1995, 2001)—in other words, through organizing. The analysis extends theory by highlighting humor as an unfolding and collaborative process, fundamentally tied to the context at hand, which helps employees to select preferred interpretations of their work and themselves. Past work has theorized that humor juxtaposes order and disorder, punctuates experience, leads to organizational learning, and serves as a moment when "organizing becomes disorganized, the forgotten is remembered, the invisible becomes visible, the silenced becomes heard" (Weick & Westley, 1996, p. 456). In line with suggestions that humor research should move beyond focus on the causes, motivations, effects, and functions of humor (Collinson, 2002; Lynch, 2002), this analysis empirically explores humor as an interactional practice that not only indicates ambiguity, but also clarifies that equivocality.

In other words, humor provides an interactional moment when organizational members can frame and enact their situation, select a preferred interpretation, and then affirm and retain the reorganization through memorable laughter. Indeed, when humor is involved in learning, people better retain information (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillmann, 1980; Loomans & Kolberg, 1993; Ulloth, 2002). The memory of humorous messages is more detailed, more easily recalled (Demorest, Siberstein, Gardner, & Winner, 1984; Dixon, Wingham, Strano, & Chandler, 1989; Schmidt, 1994) and considered more relevant (Krishnan & Chakravarti, 2003) than messages that are not funny. Our data indicate that when an organizational action is equivocal, uncertain, threatening or absurd, employees can rely on humor to subtly clarify and select a meaning that affirms one's sense of self. Humor provides a memorable and fun vehicle through which employees learn, select, confirm, challenge, and transform identity.

Understanding the sensemaking characteristics of humor contributes to theory in four ways. First, the sensemaking role of humor explains the social and enduring nature of organizational humor. The data illustrate that micro-level humorous interaction does more than assist individuals in achieving immediate, personal goals (e.g., superiority). By labeling annoying repeat callers "frequent flyers," firefighters categorize these clients as undeserving of typical service, and efficiently and lightheartedly remind themselves that they should not feel personally responsible for assisting such a bothersome type of person. As such, humor does more than help employees feel good in times of tension. Rather, humor serves as an accomplishment that aids employees in maintaining a preferred identity as they make sense of the (oftentimes uncontrollable) people, situations, and tasks that characterize their work.

Second, humor as sensemaking demonstrates the importance of joking in organizational socialization processes. We found that during and following identity-threatening events, incumbents employed humor to collectively construct interpretations that served to assist newcomers in understanding their environments, clients, and organizational roles. Over time, jokes became memorable summary statements for instructing newcomers about how to make sense of their new roles and organizations (Weick & Westley, 1996). For example, by joking about the "fried feline," experienced 911 call-takers pass along an interpretation that the event is not tragic, but funny, and that call-takers should not feel sad or guilty about the situation. Previous research demonstrates that sensemaking is a significant part of acculturating employees, aiding members in learning organizational scripts, and helping workers retain knowledge for use in future equivocal events (e.g., Jablin & Kramer, 1998; Louis, 1980). Past research also indicates the important role of humor for making messages memorable (e.g., Dixon et al., 1989; Schmidt, 1994; Ulloth, 2002), thereby potentially influencing future behaviors (Smith, Ellis, & Yoo, 2001). The empirical analysis here indicates how humor is a communicative process that helps employees learn about their work environment, make sense of their job duties, and clarify their organizational role.

Third, and related to socialization, this study demonstrates why humor can play such a key role in organizational learning and knowledge building processes (Orr, 1990; Starbuck, 1992; Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001). Organizational knowledge is not just cognitive but also social and affected by members' shared sensemaking (Schwandt, 2005). For organizational veterans and newcomers alike, humor can alter or evolve understandings of work roles (Weick & Westley, 1996). Our analysis suggests that by poking fun at certain elements of their job, such as bizarre 911 calls, employees categorized events in ways that helped them build positively-valenced interpretations of their occupational role and reduce equivocality about incongruous duties. Humor allowed members to interpret the situation, develop shared understandings, and build knowledge that could be referenced in future situations. Through retained interpretations, participants were able to develop theories about what it meant to do their type of work. Employees shared and (re)created these theories in humorous jokes, stories, songs, and analogies and, in

doing so, collectively contributed to organizational knowledge (Orr, 1990; Starbuck, 1992; Swap et al., 2001). This ongoing sensemaking process, manifest in everyday practice and talk, generated organizational learning about work duties, clients, other employee groups, and one's very self.

Fourth, this study suggests that humor not only reflects organizing but may also organize. As McPhee and Zaug (2000) observed, the process of negotiating one's identity within and in relation to the organization is one of the most fundamental "flows" of communication that constitutes organizations. As a key means of identity negotiation, we found that employees used humor to develop situated knowledge (e.g., "how do you know an inmate is lying?") that was then referenced as a resource in future interpretations. This suggests that humor not only shapes members' identities and "sense made" in the present but also provides a shorthand through which interpretations of self and situations can be continually (re)shaped and (re)constituted. Such an analysis adds to previous communication research related to organizational sensemaking (Apker, 2001; Eisenberg et al., 2005; Jablin & Kramer, 1998; Mills, 2000; Murphy, 2001) by illustrating the ways that humorous communication produces and reproduces member interpretations as both a medium and outcome of action (McPhee & Zaug, 2000).

Conclusion

This study highlights humor as an emergent, interactive process that affirms identity as members make sense of themselves in the face of difficult, chaotic, and threatening work. As such, humor appears to help employees persist in jobs that might otherwise be insufferably identity threatening. However, we should note that the use of humor in clarifying meaning and affirming identity is not without a potential dark side. When humor is viewed as an interpretive device, it is also evident how it can oversimplify complex situations or (re)produce problematic organizational interpretations—such as the objectification of clients. And, in the case of human-service work, oversimplification of clients' problems can have deadly or dangerous consequences. Likewise, laughing at certain issues as "just part of the job" has the potential to draw attention away from the broader organizational policies and structures that create and maintain dysfunctional, absurd, and stress-inducing situations.

Nevertheless, our analysis indicates that humor plays an important role in assisting members as they cope with difficult and demeaning aspects of their work. Although this study focused upon participants from human service organizations who regularly experience emotionally-challenging situations, the sensemaking role of humor could be applicable in a number of situations. It is difficult to imagine any social role that does not at least occasionally involve unexpected, identity-threatening work. For example, a corporate worker may find herself making sense of questionable actions of her company, a food server may have interpret an ill child who throws up on him, and a teacher may be faced with angry parents who blame her for their daughter's failure. This analysis suggests that humor is a communicative process that helps

employees make sense of such situations by allowing them to subtly select and retain identity-affirming interpretations. Doing so may immediately relieve tension, achieve role distance, and express superiority. However, humor additionally plays a crucial role in the ways employees select and retain certain interpretations and, thus, make sense of organizational identities and work experiences.

Notes

[1] Here and throughout, names of participants and organizations are pseudonyms.

[2] Karen Tracy served as an invaluable resource in negotiating access to the Citywest context and gathering some of this data.

[3] This small percentage helps to illustrate that naturally-occurring humor is just a small part of organizational activity. However, the percentage should also be interpreted cautiously. Data from field participation and interviews do not constitute a mirror of reality, but rather, compose one way of opening up a scene (Denzin, 1997).

[4] Intercoder reliability was computed by taking the number of codes in which the three authors agreed and dividing it by the total number of agreements + disagreements (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 64).

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