



‘Take it like a man!’: Performing hegemonic masculinity through organizational humour

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abstract

This paper examines the effects of humour studied within one organization where physical, misogynistic and homophobic humour is highly emphasized and encouraged. Using the theoretical framework of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, this paper explains how an idealized masculinity is enacted, promoted and valued through humour performances. The paper details how using humour can protect the power holders and proponents of an hyper-masculine culture. Drawing on Butler’s (1990) gender performativity theory, the paper outlines how hegemonic masculinity is performed through humour. Furthermore, women in this organization perform and validate hegemonic masculinity to gain acceptance in an overtly masculine culture. This raises questions about the role of women, marginalised male identities, sexual harassment and coercive organizational culture.

Introduction

According to Freud (1905/1991) joking brings forth our unconscious desires and unsayable thoughts while saving us from hostile reactions through using the joke-form. Humour can be a powerful way of expressing taboo feelings and impulses, and this is true both in social and work contexts. This empirical paper offers rich examples from one idiosyncratic organization described as having a ‘fun culture’ where humour is the most important cultural element. Employees and managers constantly perform humour that is sexual, sexist and aggressive, which raises questions about the role of women, marginalized male identities, sexual harassment and coercive organizational culture.

Using the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity', I argue that workplace humour is used to establish a hyper-masculine culture in this organization. The humour displayed by the dominant CEO and adopted by most others in the organization includes performances that emphasize hegemonic masculinity while rejecting and mocking alternative expressions of masculinity and, in particular, homosexuality. Additionally, I argue that the women in this organization also use humour to perform hegemonic masculinity in order to be accepted into the dominant masculine culture. Furthermore, the women in this organization validate the masculinized humour performances by emphasizing that they are mere 'jokes' and thus not harmful or contentious. Therefore they find safety in interpreting performances as humour, which frees them from any obligation to protest, complain or raise issues of sexual harassment, bullying or intimidation that may have consequences for their employment.

This paper offers contributions to the current literature in three ways. Firstly, it shows the role of humour in protecting an overtly masculine culture; secondly, it details how hegemonic masculinity is performed and validated through humour; and finally, it examines how women perform and endorse hegemonic masculinity in order to be accepted in an overtly masculine culture.

Humour and organizations

Humour is a 'complex and paradoxical phenomenon' (Linstead, 1985: 741). Conceptually, it can be viewed in different ways: a stimulus that causes laughter; a response to a stimulus; or a disposition towards viewing things in a humorous light (Chapman and Foot, 1976). Psychological humour research maintains that humour is a *process* initiated by a *stimulus* (such as a joke) resulting in a *response* (such as laughter) indicating pleasure (Godkewitsch, 1976). However, even this popular definition is problematic and, as this paper will show, laughter may arise not from pleasure in humour but through other dynamics such as power, coercion and control. Some forms of humour, such as parody, can reveal the 'flimsy ground' on which power is founded (Pullen and Rhodes, 2013: 527). Other forms of humour, meanwhile, may 'perpetuate oppressive and patriarchal cultural norms and structures' (Pullen and Rhodes, 2013: 514). To this extent, humour can play a 'socially normative role' (Butler, 2015: 43) by conveying ridicule and creating embarrassment when humour targets an individual's identity or behaviour.

As organization scholars have pointed out, jokes and humour are pervasive in organizations (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Much of the early organizational humour research was undertaken in industrial shop-floor contexts (Burawoy,

1979; Collinson, 1988; Linstead, 1985; Roy, 1959) and thus has an overtly male emphasis. Roy (1959), for example, shows how mock-aggressive and mocking humour is used by men to stave off boredom on the factory floor. Collinson (1988), meanwhile, examines humour and the creation of gender identity in the context of shop-floor relations. The men in Collinson’s study have to both *take* the jokes and pranks as well as *dish it out* in order to be included in the masculine, anti-management culture that is created.

More recently, Plester and Sayers (2007) have shown that workplace banter is shared between those who know each other well and that contentious topics such as racial differences, gender and sexuality can be the subject of jokes and signal inclusiveness in a joking culture. Joking allows mutual disrespect between participants and is thus a safety valve for expressing social frustrations which allows social order to be maintained (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940; Wilson, 1979). Joking from a higher hierarchical position is paternalistic and gives subordinates a sense of belonging (Zijderveld, 1983) while joking between workers creates an alternative reality that is beyond management’s control (Linstead, 1985). Humour can therefore be an important component in creating solidarity, and jocular abuse can emphasize collegial workplace relationships. However, physical forms of humour such as horseplay and pranks have the potential to disrupt work, damage people and/or property, and can have malicious intent. Although workplace horseplay is intended to create humour, it can have ‘disastrous results’ (Duncan, Smeltzer and Leap, 1990: 274) and even verbal banter or teasing can move from an inclusive collegial perspective to become mocking and derisive (Billig, 2005).

Men’s sexuality is pervasive and privileged in many organizational contexts, leading to workplace cultures that ‘derogate and undermine women’ (Collinson and Collinson, 1996: 30). In Collinson and Collinson’s (1996) study of sexual harassment in insurance companies, men perpetuating or supporting sexual harassment framed it as ‘just a bit of fun’ and so used the notion of ‘harmless’ joking to excuse sexually inappropriate behaviour. Moreover, the ambiguity of humour can be exploited in men’s sexual joking in order to conceal true motives and can reveal unconscious sexual or aggressive viewpoints that are normally kept concealed (see Freud, 1905/1991).

The risks of such humour are most prevalent in ‘cultures of fun’ where employees are encouraged by management to draw on their internal thoughts and feelings (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). Management rhetoric that emphasizes employee ‘authenticity’ emboldens employees to display unique aspects of themselves in the attempt to increase commitment, motivation and productivity. In these neo-normative cultures, ‘fun, sexuality, and consumption are not

formally barred' but actively supported (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009: 572). Cederström and Grassman (2008) go further and suggest that modern corporations aim to engage the subversive elements of employees' personalities and harness their 'imp of perversity' (Žižek, 1999: 368-9). This leads them to introduce the term 'masochistic reflexive organization' to describe workplace cultures where 'transgressions and perversions are encouraged' (Cederström and Grassman, 2008: 41). Employees in masochistic cultures are encouraged to enjoy their difference and oppose normative control through disdain and despising their occupation. The perverse elements of work are celebrated and employees obtain pleasure from their scepticism, which they cynically acknowledge with a kind of masochistic pride.

The turn to neo-normative and masochistic reflexive cultures raises a series of questions. If employees reveal their authentic selves with regards to sexist, sexualized and aggressive urges, would this really be tolerated by organizations? Would some moderating device (such as joking or irony) need to be used to shield such authentic impulses from managerial and societal censure? What are the consequences of revealing authentic sentiments such as masculine dominance, homophobia, sexual discrimination and misogyny? To further probe these questions, the paper now turns to discuss gender dynamics specifically in relation to the performance of masculinity.

Gender performance and hegemonic masculinity

Gender is argued to be a socially constructed process rather than a biological occurrence. Gender formation is therefore highly contextual as the self is in constant flux, fragmented and re-forming itself. Although gendered behaviours tend to be *ascribed* to either sex, there is nothing inherent about the behaviours that may be considered to be 'male' or 'female'. Context, discourses and norms can all influence how gender is performed and perceived (Alsop et al., 2002).

Judith Butler's work is central to the theory of gender performativity. According to Butler (1990: 2), gender performativity is not a singular act but a reiterative practice of discourse 'to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains'. A performance of masculinity or femininity is contextual and can also vary within the same person at different stages throughout their life. Gendered identities are formed from our own performances as well as from those of other people towards us. Gendered performances have a 'script' that can provide us with the ideals of masculinity or femininity and this script guides us to which behaviours are appropriate and which are not.

Butler (1990) relates gendered performances to power, which is pervasive in everyday interactions as well as within institutional frameworks. Gender can be performed in a variety of ways but there are dominant ideals that reinforce power or specific privileged groups (for example, heterosexuals in Western society). In Western cultures, patriarchal and heterosexist ideals are dominant and opposition to them are constructed as marginal and may be socially forbidden or discouraged. Masculinity is a social construct that does not belong exclusively to male bodies, and it can inhibit and repress men as well as women (Alsop et al., 2002).

The term ‘hegemonic masculinity’ was first introduced in an Australian study of social inequality (Kessler et al., 1982). It is seen as a fantasy of masculinity and is not embodied by all men. Hegemonic masculinity is not assumed to be *normal* but it is *normative* insofar as it embodies ‘the currently most honoured way of being a man’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832), which inevitably changes from one cultural context to another. Alsop et al. (2002) identify two key ideas that emerge in critical studies of masculinity: first, that hegemonic masculinity is a cultural ideal and therefore unattainable for most men; and second, that hegemonic masculinity rejects both femininity and homosexuality. Consequently, for men to conform to hegemonic masculinity they must distance themselves from both femininity and homosexuality, which can be achieved through displaying overtly heterosexual and/or homophobic behaviour (Alsop et al, 2002). Therefore, homosexuality becomes ‘the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity hence from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily assimilated to femininity’ (Connell, 1995: 78).

Although hegemony does not necessarily legitimate violence, it implies ‘ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions and persuasion’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). Thus, different forms of masculinity can be achieved by all individuals regardless of their biologically sexed body. In other words, the performance of masculine gender is linked to the accrual of status and power regardless of whether the body is male or female (Alsop et al, 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity may include expressions of fantasies, desires and norms, and humour may be one way of articulating these.

From accounts of sexual harassment, joking is presented as a way to articulate aggression and sexism because it can express taboo impulses while offering the joker a ‘safety shield’ from reprimand and critique. Humour may thus be used to display, perform and validate heterosexual masculinities (Kehily and Nayak, 1997). Joking may be competitive, profane, sexualized and/or aggressive, and those who do not participate may find themselves the butt of the jokes.

According to Lyman (1987), joking allows a symbolic breaking of the rules, which can create excitement and strengthen bonding in masculine cultures. Masculine workplaces are associated with competitiveness, focus more on organisational outcomes than on relationships, and use more jocular abuse and competitive banter (Hay, 1994). Women who want to become part of a masculine group must 'decode male behaviour patterns' and participate in teasing and coarse joking to become 'one of the boys' (Fine and De Soucey, 2005: 131). Women's humour is often exhibited more privately (Hay, 2000) and feminine workplaces, by contrast, are often more concerned with supportive relationships, collaboration and interpersonal dimensions (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003).

Although gender does influence humour styles and usage (Holmes, Marra and Burns, 2001), there are only a few studies that examine the gendered aspects of humour in organizational settings (Johnston, Mumby and Westwood, 2007). However, it is not necessarily helpful to perceive organisations as either masculine or feminine but preferable to consider social practices and the ways in which gender is *performed* inside organisations (Crompton, 2006). Therefore, gender and humour performances are analyzed in the empirical material presented after the method section.

Method

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

Analysis was an iterative process with interviews transcripts, documents and observations repeatedly coded and re-coded into a variety of themes and categories. Early categories included: humour boundaries; types of fun; organizational formality; organizational identity; humour function; and transgressive humour. These themes have been addressed elsewhere (see e.g. Plester, 2009a, 2009b; Plester and Sayers, 2007; Plester and Orams, 2008). In a later reading of the data, gendered aspects were identified while examining the theme of 'transgression' in humour. This theme includes categories of sexual, sexist and aggressive humour and thus gives rise to this investigation into gendered joking and the performance of masculinity.

The data collected from Adare includes detailed observations of fun, humour and cultural events and thirteen semi-structured interviews of 30-60 minutes duration. Interviews were conducted with organizational members with different roles and from all levels of hierarchy, including the CEO and senior managers. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Documentary data was collected and included cartoons, posters, photographs and printed jokes. The source is noted beside the title in each empirical example.

On a personal note, I arrived at Adare as a naïve researcher excited by their reputation as a fun-filled, humour-loving company. I left rather battle-weary, worn down by being constantly on my guard, and somewhat shell-shocked by the constant battle for joking supremacy. Although I did not feel truly victimised, I was uncomfortable for the duration of this project and relieved to have survived this site and the pranks that were also played on me. I learned to laugh good-naturedly at all of the offensive jokes and was, in retrospect, alarmed to feel a weird female pride that I could ‘take it like a man’. It did, however, take me quite some time and reflexive distance from this overwhelming experience to be able to reflect more critically on the dynamics at play in this company. I am somewhat chagrined to admit that for some of my time here, I had bought into the ardent exhortations that this was all ‘just joking’. Latterly, I was able to apply greater reflexivity and recognize that my complicity was a protection device to ensure that I coped as a female researcher in an overtly masculine culture.

Empirical material

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

In order to keep track of the different actors in the following examples Table 1.1 lists the named participants, relevant demographic details and their role in the humour.

Pseudonym	Role	Age / Sex	Tenure/Ethnicity	Humour role
Jake	CEO/ owner	38 - male	10 years, European	Joker, instigator of most humour
Adrian	Engineer	24 - male	3 years, European	Butt of many jokes, retaliates using profanity/vulgarity
Sean	Sales consultant	25 - male	14 months, European	Criticized company humour and became target of jokes
Karen	Sales rep	31 - female	One month, European	Newest employee, trying to fit in
Rachel	Admin manager	36 - female	3 years, European	CEO's sister, thus some immunity to being target of jokes
Ann	Administrator	50s - female	9 years, European	Friends with Rachel, target of some jokes
Pete	Engineer/team manager	35 - male	5 years, European	Senior figure, quieter but joins in with most humour
Dylan	Sales consultant	34 - male	5 years, European	Enjoys the humour, joins in
Chad	Engineer	26 - male	4 years, Korean	Quiet - laughs at joking by others, contributes occasionally

Table 1.1: *The protagonists (all names have been changed)*

In this owner-operated, small company a variety of humour enactments and printed displays were observed, experienced and discussed in interviews. It was notable that the incidents described below were not observed in any other companies within the larger study. This suggests something different and unusual was operating within Adare. In the thirteen interviews, participants were asked to describe the organizational culture and every participant used the terms 'humour' and 'fun' in their descriptions. This is important to the later analysis as it illustrates that the participants consider the culture and activities to be both fun and funny.

Additionally, all participants noted that this company is very different to other corporate organizations. Many declared that humour and fun at Adare were extreme and risky compared to other companies; that humour was 'free' at Adare; that there were no limits or constraints to humour; and that all forms of

humour and fun were encouraged and initiated by the CEO and senior managers.

Five examples have been selected to represent the differentiated forms of contentious humour that were observed in this company. The selections of these specific examples were made due to their uniqueness in the context of the wider study. Many sexualized, homophobic, violent and misogynistic humour incidents were experienced at Adare, and these were openly enacted and valued. A wide array of sexual, sexist and racially-oriented emails were also displayed on computer screens throughout the office.

It is difficult to display such an array within a short paper so the five selected examples offer a cross-section representative of the humour experienced. Accompanying the incidents are segments from the transcribed interviews in which employees comment on the humour practices, followed by analytical comments and my interpretation of the humour. It is important to note that there were also many mild, non-offensive, everyday humour interactions but these are not the focus of this particular paper. I also acknowledge that to some readers these incidents may not appear humorous and may in fact be interpreted as bullying or harassment. However, the participants from Adare all categorised these as ‘humour’ and thus they serve as examples of humour and fun for this specific company.

Five humour incidents

1. *Practical joke: Falling through the chair (Source: Observations)*

Jake and male staff members remove the screws that holds the seat of an office chair to the wheeled base. An unsuspecting computer vendor visits the company and is offered this chair and when he sits he falls to the ground, inciting the whole-hearted mirth of the expectant Adare team. The vendor appears flushed and embarrassed but takes the prank in good spirit and laughs with the others.

Two administration workers reflect on humour that might ‘hurt’ others:

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

They have gone too far at times and damaged property and hurt and offended people – they don’t mean to. You can replace property. Kent went through the

window, they were playing soccer [in the office] and he went through the window.
(Ann)

Although Rachel firmly asserts that humour at Adare does not hurt anyone, the chair prank definitely had the potential for physical harm. This prank had been attempted earlier (on me) but as I had been warned by the women in the company to 'always check your chair', I had not fallen victim to this prank. (At the time I was recovering from knee surgery and a fall could have been quite injurious – this was known to the CEO).

Rachel wants to believe that the jokes will be harmless but the Adare jokers appear to consider the potential for physical harm part of their masculine performance and injury will be risked in the quest for a big laugh. This points to a tough, masculine culture dismissive of harm, which requires those who wish to be included to 'take it'. The visiting vendor understands this dynamic and is instantly included as one of the lads when he laughs at his own fall.

There is some solidarity between the women in this instance as the chair gag was an old favourite and thus they warned me to 'take care'. This is the only instance where the potential for harm is actually acknowledged and it is only by the women. They seem conflicted, because in interviews they firmly assert that the jokes do not hurt anyone but then Ann alludes to the story about Kent being hospitalized. Their warning about the chair gag was given quietly and discretely away from the mocking comments of the jokers, protecting me but also themselves. Openly acknowledging that the humour could cause harm might preclude them from being accepted in the culture and may even rebound in further mocking, jeering and pranks played upon them.

2. *Humping employee (Source: Recounted during interview)*

Sean had been out on a sales visit and returned to the office with his clients, which included the Managing Director of the client company. Upon entering the office, they found Jake in the middle of the office holding Adrian from behind and simulating a sexual act with him amid catcalls and laughter from the assembled staff. The clients were outraged and left the premises. Jake and his staff all laughed at the clients' reaction. Sean reflects on the incident:

They [the customers] are really good security consultants, very straight-laced, white shirts, nice clothes, very nice quiet people, so I decided the best thing to do was to set up a partnership with them...so we brought them in – two very quiet, well-mannered men came in and we brought them in and showed them some of the products that we are trying to bring to the market – and there is Jake humping Adrian from behind over the desk...and these two guys were like 'Ooo-kay' and they left. I got a phone call later on saying 'what in the hell is wrong with your

boss?’...The culture is definitely what I call the benevolent dictatorship, there is a king – Jake – and in many respects he can be very fair and reasonable...and then from a behavioural perspective we dance very close to impropriety at times. We love humour, we love laughter, Jake is probably the industry’s biggest practical joker, he once couriered a sack of rubbish over to somebody. Some humour is puerile and toilet humour – and some of the humour is very, very funny. (Sean)

Dylan and Karen discuss the humour:

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

The humour here is very crude, crass, rude, toilet humour. I don’t know anywhere else the humour is that much in the gutter – it’s better than no humour though. Whatever skeletons someone has – we will dig it all out. (Karen)

The example describes a parody of homosexuality and the employees’ quotations highlight some key cultural elements of power, dominance and the performance of hegemonic masculinity at Adare. The humour involves ‘putdowns’ and Adrian is often the unwillingly submissive target. Dylan indicates that this is ‘disturbing’ and mentions Adrian’s innocence, inability to stand up for himself, and the fact that he gets upset – thus suggesting that such humour could even constitute sexual harassment of Adrian. Karen emphasizes the scatological nature of the humour and Sean has to deal with outraged clients who witness the parody of a sexual act between two males. These comments indicate that the employees know that this humour is socially unacceptable but they justify it in their comments that people ‘pull back’ and that ‘gutter humour’ is preferable to no humour. The clients’ reaction is another indication that this humour transgresses workplace norms. However, the CEO and his assembled employees laugh heartily even when they lose the clients as customers – thus reinforcing the fact that, for this group, the heterosexual, masculine, joking culture is highly valued and therefore bravado must be exhibited even in the face of lost business.

3. Buttocks on the screen (Source: Observations)

The office administrator (Ann) left her desk on a Friday afternoon to go and buy beer and wine for the usual Friday afternoon drinks. While she was gone Jake corralled Adrian and, ducking behind a partition, instructed Adrian to take a photograph of his (Jake’s) naked buttocks. This was quickly uploaded to Ann’s desktop and when she returned and switched her computer back on, she was greeted with the photograph filling her screen. She screamed loudly, laughed

loudly and then yelled (jocular) abuse at her boss and other employees who had surrounded her. Her co-worker Rachel commented afterwards:

Nobody is exempt from a joke, and I mean they get played on Jake too – he takes them as well as gives them...so you have to laugh at yourself. I'm lucky – I don't get the practical jokes – Ann cops it. They won't wet my chair. I'm not the victim. It's not intended to hurt someone – so I don't find the humour here offensive – I take the positives...A day doesn't go by that doesn't incorporate something that we can joke about...The humour here is picking on people and exploiting their mishaps – but humour is only negative if it hurts people. (Rachel)

Again, there is reinforcement of the openly masculine culture as Ann is subjected to a photograph of her male boss' buttocks, and after her initial shock she laughs along. Adrian also has to comply in taking the photograph and this is hardly a pleasant or typical workplace task. This prank highlights the masculine and sexualized culture in the display of male buttocks which could be considered 'sexual harassment' (see Collinson and Collinson, 1996). Both subordinates are compelled to play along with, laugh at and 'take the joke' or risk being excluded from the dominant cultural workgroup.

Rachel openly notes that the humour 'exploits' and 'picks on' employees' mishaps yet she does not equate this with 'hurting people'. There is ambiguity in Rachel's narrative as she states that everyone is targeted – even the CEO – but she simultaneously notes that she herself is not targeted in practical jokes. It is significant that no recorded pranks on the CEO were observed during the research time and Rachel enjoys a somewhat privileged position as Jake's sister. Therefore it is not surprising that she claims that humour at Adare is only negative if it 'hurts somebody' and she does not acknowledge any potential damage in the pranks occurring around her on a regular basis. Having his sister's support and approval possibly prevents any challenges to Jake from the few female employees. Ann had closely aligned herself with Rachel, although this did not render her completely immune to being the target of pranks such as the one above.

4. *'Punch her in the face...to prove you're right'* (Source: Document collection and ad hoc discussions)

This offensive phrase is the title of a poster (below) printed out and displayed in A3 size in the staff kitchen. The photographic image and caption had been sent to the CEO from an external contact and he printed it and pinned it up in the staff kitchen.



Figure 1: ‘Punch her in the face...to prove you’re right’

When questioned individually about the poster all staff reiterate that ‘it’s just a joke’ and even the female staff respond with a laugh, a shrug and the comment ‘they’re just being the boys – we just ignore them’. Two senior managers quip: ‘We don’t go there [the kitchen], it’s for women’ and ‘anyway the kitchen’s just a pathway to the beer’. Not one Adare employee criticizes the poster – although one male engineer does laughingly acknowledge: ‘This place is a sexual harassment suit waiting to happen’.

The aggressive misogynistic message of the poster is trivialized by the women’s interpretation that the men are ‘just...boys’. Senior managers support the sentiments of the poster in their quips assigning the kitchen to ‘women’ and ‘beer’. The comment regarding sexual harassment clearly indicates the engineer’s suspicion that this is unacceptable and potentially illegal. Employees defend the poster with a pride in the rebelliousness of it – again reinforcing the

prevailing hegemonic masculine culture. The risk of being considered misogynistic is superseded by the greater risk of individually condemning the poster (it was after all, displayed by the CEO). It is likely that expressing distaste for this poster will invite mocking and ridicule upon the complainer.

Although male dominance, aggression and control is openly displayed in this poster, the female employees laugh the poster off as ‘humour’ and thus protect themselves from any need to challenge these obvious misogynistic sentiments. Through their compliance in framing this as a joke they avoid having to challenge the prevailing hegemonic masculinity underpinning the organizational culture. Their framing of this as a ‘joke’ therefore makes them not only complicit in the joking culture, but reinforces the masculine culture. Their supporting laughter reassures the male proponents that this is all just good fun – after all, the female employees are not offended.

5. *Morphing Adrian into Mr Spock (Source: Observations)*

Adrian is slightly built and has a (mostly) quiet demeanour. This excerpt from the author’s observation notes exemplifies a jibe aimed at Adrian by Karen as she socializes herself into the Adare culture:

Karen uses her computer and morphs a photo of Adrian into Mr Spock with big ears and lips. She prints it and then pins the photo on the company notice board. Several people crowd around to look, including Adrian.

Chad: There’s even room for a caption.

Karen: (smiling at Adrian) He can take it.

Jake comes in and sees the photo.

Jake: That’s a bit gay! It looks funny – hey it’s even better from a distance. Hey Adrian you look like Michael Jackson’s bitch!

Everyone laughs.

Karen: Oh sorry Adrian.

Adrian: No you’re not!

Men may use humour techniques that make each other appear vulnerable and emphasize ‘the power of dominant versions of masculinity’ (Kehily and Nayak, 1997: 73). This power and dominance effect is obvious in the remarks where Jake emphasizes Adrian’s vulnerability and implies that he is a homosexual lackey. However, it is notable that this example of masculine humour is initiated by the

newcomer, Karen – a young female. In her attempt to fit in to the masculine culture, Karen creates a joke targeting Adrian – a 'weaker' male who is often the butt of jokes. Thus Karen is performing hegemonic masculinity by using humour to mock Adrian, copying the humour style that is revered and applauded at Adare.

At the start of the interchange, Karen suggests that Adrian can 'take' the teasing but, realizing that she has set him up as a target for homosexual insults, she apologizes for the joke. Adrian's forceful reply shows annoyance and a dismissal of her ritual apology but he smiles to show that he can take the joke. He is aware that Karen has deliberately used him as a target to ingratiate herself with the dominant males and has opened up new opportunities for them to make him the butt of further homophobic jokes.

Choosing particular individuals for homophobic jibes may be a technique to create group solidarity and reinforce masculine culture. This joke further reinforces the status and dominance of the CEO. By adding to Karen's joke, the CEO once again performs hegemonic masculinity, emphasizing his power through homophobic humour aimed at Adrian which in turn reinforces his low status.

In a later interview, Adrian freely uses strong profanity, and claims that he retaliates or instigates jokes on his colleagues – which he sees as an important achievement. However, observations show that Adrian's attempts at humour are met with even more mocking and derision, again reinforcing the prevailing masculine hierarchy – with Adrian still at the bottom. By making Adrian the butt of many jokes and laughing at his reactions, the Adare staff reinforce the competitive prevailing hierarchy, reaffirm their own dominant masculinity and even Karen achieves higher status as she successfully targets the hapless Adrian yet again.

These final extracts from interview transcripts reflect on humour at Adare:

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

When questioned about humour at Adare, Jake supplies only this pithy, uncompromising response: 'If they don't like it they can leave!'. Karen's comments mirror Jake's quote in her recognition that if you don't like the humour you can 'jump'. This is an uncompromising stance understood by the employees – even the newly-hired Karen. Karen has quickly worked out what she needs to do to survive in this competitive masculine culture and has a strategy for her future organizational development that is predicated as much on performing targeted workplace jokes as it is on her actual work performance. Karen indicates that she intends to become 'one of the boys' (Fine and De Soucey, 2005) as soon as she can.

Discussion

Participating in humour at Adare is mandatory and unavoidable. It could be argued that these examples are not even humour. However, employees at Adare definitely framed these incidents as their own workplace humour that differentiated them from other companies through having no boundaries, being risky and 'anti-PC'. Freud (1905/1991) addressed this notion of expressing anti-societal impulses, such as aggression and sexual urges, through tendentious (aimed) joking which offers a release to the joker. Yet Freud's analysis of why people enjoy contentious jokes more than safe, polite ones, does not seem to fully capture the collective, coercive and power elements of the humour at Adare. The proud assertion that humour here is so anti-establishment requires further theoretical examination to explain why these employees are ardent in their extreme performances of transgressive humour.

Viewing Adare through the new organizational cultural forms presented by Fleming and Sturdy (2009) and Cederström and Grassman (2008) does not go far enough into the problematic elements of coercion, control, dominance and patriarchy operating within Adare. Although it might seem to be a site of neo-normative control, where employees are encouraged to express 'authentic' aspects of their identity through jokes and humour, this does not appear to be the cultural form operating within Adare. The freedom to display a unique identity through humour is an illusion at Adare because the only acceptable identity is that of the hyper-masculine heterosexual. As a result, Adare employees have the misconception of freedom while they are controlled through humour. For example, mocking and derision are used as a 'corrective' (Butler, 2015) to behaviours that do not conform to the masculine ideal prevalent at Adare. This masculine ideal is forcefully displayed by the CEO in his constant performances of sexualized, sexist and aggressive humour. Adare employees are not

encouraged to be authentic at all, but are manipulated into acceptable humour and fun expressions prescribed by the CEO.

Neither can Adare be considered a 'reflexive masochistic organization'. Whereas Cederström and Grassman's (2008) analysis revealed employees who despised their own occupations, Adare employees are proud of their their unique organizational culture. Although both groups of organizational employees take pride in workplace perversions, vulgarity, transgressions and cynicism about work, Cederström and Grassman's participants displayed an awareness of the exploitation and dominance of work itself and a masochistic orientation towards being so subjugated – almost enjoying the process. Adare employees do not appear to recognize, or do not want to acknowledge, the dominance and control being exercised upon them primarily by the CEO. These darker aspects seem to be obscured by the flamboyant and mocking humour performances. Cynicism and mockery have been firmly directed towards outsiders who are derided for being humourless and boring – as shown by the mocking laughter towards the outraged clients in example 2.

Cederström and Grassman argue that transgressions and the obscene underside of organizational culture can be understood and masochistically enjoyed as 'a structure of our time' (2008: 56). Contrastingly, Adare employees despise other 'normal' organizations and exhibit pride in their own superior organization because they are unconventional. Although their humour may be perverse, its unconstrained nature successfully obscures the power and control exercised by the CEO. The masculine, misogynistic and homophobic organizational culture is openly displayed but laughed off as a joke and cultural quirk.

In light of this, the discussion moves from new forms of cultural analysis to theories of hegemonic masculinity to further interpret the humour performances at Adare.

The notion of hegemonic masculinity as a performed practice can offer insight into the enactments and displays of sexualized and aggressive humour at Adare. Two themes arise from the data: 1) humour protects the power holders and the hegemonic masculine organizational culture from censure; and 2) hegemonic masculinity is performed by both men and women.

Humour is the vehicle for expressing hegemonic masculinity at Adare because this offers the performers safety through the 'just joking' defence, while allowing them to express a fantasy or desired version of masculinity. In their meta-analysis of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) discuss social actions and discursive practices that constitute performances of hegemonic

masculinity, but they do not discuss humour. Therefore this paper extends their findings by illustrating how humour can be used to openly perform hegemonic masculinity without risk of reprimand.

Hegemonic masculinity is performed through physical pranks (example 1), exposure to masculine sexuality (example 2), parody and ridicule of homosexuality (examples 3 and 5), and masculine violence towards women (example 4). In both the 'buttocks' (2) and 'humping' examples (3), the CEO physically 'exposes and imposes' (Tyler and Cohen, 2008: 120) his masculinity upon his subordinate employees who must laugh and thus validate his performance. He openly states that the consequence for expressing displeasure is to leave the company, and this blatant sanction highlights his organizational power over anyone who might challenge him in these gender performances.

Tyler and Cohen (2008) assert that the desire for recognition underpins hegemonic gender performances. As we have seen, Jake's performances have achieved recognition in his own company and in the wider IT industry. Because Jake frames his forceful masculine performances as humorous, they are accepted and unchallenged. Without the joking framework to seemingly alleviate his power and control, he could face accusations of dominance and sexual harassment from both male and female employees. At Adare it is not feasible to make a complaint of sexual harassment as the CEO is the main proponent and creator of highly sexualized and aggressive forms of humour. Therefore employees are powerless and must accept the cultural elements or terminate their employment. This shows that sexual harassment is clearly still an issue for women in some industries (as found by Collinson and Collinson, 1996) but my findings also depict how men can be powerless against sexual harassment (seen in examples 2, 3 and 5).

It is significant that the women at Adare both tolerate the masculine humour performances and also create their own humour performances to earn approval from the male power holders. Therefore, this analysis derives from the literature the idea that 'female bodies' may perform hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and extends this notion by clearly showing just how such a female performance occurs. In example 5, Karen claims her place in the masculine hierarchy by deliberately targeting a 'weak' male in her joke. She creates the opportunity for Adrian to be publicly mocked by being depicted as a homosexual minion by the CEO. Thus Karen is performing masculinity by deriding a 'less masculine' male and her performance is validated by the CEO as he builds on her jibe to reinforce his status as the dominant masculine joker – at the expense once again of the hapless Adrian. In initiating humour that created

homophobic vilification, Karen has successfully performed the preferred form of masculinity and cemented her position in the masculine hierarchy.

Although individually most of these employees are warm, kind and inoffensive, the dominant culture forces them to perform a masculine identity – otherwise, they risk being mocked and shunned. The collective identity at Adare includes a shared version of hegemonic masculinity where homosexuality is perceived as a major threat to the group's masculine identity and therefore homosexuality is continuously and brutally mocked through humour. Queer theory emphasizes that manifestations of gender are performed and parodied (see Butler, 1990) and can include fear of the 'other' and, in particular, the homosexual 'other' (Parker, 2002). Gender performances can parody dominant norms through 'subversive and exaggerated repetition of parodic practices' (Butler, 1990: 120) and thus gender is ritualised through repeated acts – which can make it appear natural.

Sean complained about the embarrassment that the mock-humping incident caused him with the clients and he was then openly derided through jocular abuse by the CEO and others. During the research, he submitted his resignation and was preparing to leave the company. Sean's complaint posed a threat to the dominant masculine culture, so his 'aberrant' behaviour was punished through derisive humour. The increased 'jocular' teasing that Sean received while working out his notice period was conspicuous, uncomfortable and possibly even bullying.

The pranks and jokes contain profane or socially taboo elements such as the notion of punching a woman to show dominance. The poster has shock value (Kehily and Nayak, 1997) and in most corporate environments such a poster would be, of course, forbidden (and nothing even remotely similar was observed in the other studied corporate organizations). This rebellious display further accentuates the power of the hegemonic masculinity in allowing such a socially unacceptable sentiment to be exhibited and defended.

Similar to Collinson's (1988; 1992; 2002) shop floor, the Adare office was rife with uninhibited swearing, pranks, pornographic images on screens, slogans scrawled on wall ('Bruce blows goats' being a memorable one). The major differences to Collinson's seminal work is that this was in a 'white-collar' corporate office rather than in a 'blue-collar' factory. This current study took place twenty years after Collinson's study, a time in which equal opportunity organizations are encouraged and sexual harassment and bullying are at least nominally prohibited. This raises the question: if a company like Adare still exists and is able to flourish, what does this imply with regard to gendered workplace practices and sexual equality in organizations?

The foregoing analysis shows how hegemonic masculinity can be openly encouraged and sustained through using humour and how women can successfully perform masculinity in order to be included in the masculine hierarchy. In a rich depiction of one distinctive culture with elements of neo-normative control and masochistic reflexivity, a culture that promotes sexualization, aggression and sexism is examined. Thus this paper demonstrates how a hegemonic masculine culture, which incorporates sexual harassment and intimidation, can be created in a supposedly 'enlightened' Western working environment. In the words of the CEO, 'if they don't like it they can leave' – but with this company on their résumé, where will they go?

Concluding comments

Is this fun? Is this play? Is this even humour anymore? These are the questions asked of this data by myself as researcher, by other scholars who have reviewed this work, but not by the participants themselves. The performances, displays and humour enactments at Adare were ardently defended as 'jokes'. Of course, the jokes and pranks at Adare are by no means representative of most modern organizations and thus this could be considered as an extreme, idiosyncratic case. By no means do I attempt to generalize this contextual research to other organizations but there is still a contribution to be made through analyzing this company. However, it is the organizational context for this group of people and there are likely to be other companies that exhibit some similar dynamics (see e.g. Collinson, 1988; 1992; 2002; Plester and Sayers, 2007).

In both my study and Collinson and Collinson's (1996) earlier one, sexual harassment is enacted through jokes and then justified through the defence of 'just joking'. What is new and specific to the current study is that the women and subjugated men of Adare deny any sexual harassment and collude to reinforce the prevailing culture as a fun and joking culture. No one raises the sexual, sexualized, aggressive and physical joking as an issue – although there is one (laughing) admission that sexual harassment allegations *could* be made. In contrast to Collinson and Collinson's study, the women in this study join and support the masculine culture and perform hegemonic masculinity themselves through humour. Although this may be a protective strategy, it also serves as reinforcement for the dominant masculine culture and thus sexualized and aggressive humour incidents are trivialized as mere jokes.

The specific contribution this paper makes is in depicting how women survive and even flourish within a masculine hegemonic culture. In order to accomplish this they must perform hegemonic masculinity themselves, albeit through the

facade of joking. The analysis shows how humour facilitates and protects protagonists from legal or social consequences but there are victims in the quest for superiority and status through targeted joking. It is significant that victims in such a powerful hegemonic masculine culture are equally likely to be found among the male employees, targeted in joking, embarrassed within their company and wider industry, unable to complain, and afraid of what might happen next. However, no matter how offensive or threatening the joking becomes, the cultural imperative within this organization is to ‘take it like a man!’.

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