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# Investigating Humor Within a Context of Death and Tragedy: The Narratives of Contrasting Realities

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### Abstract

Crime scene investigators (CSIs) are subjected to many complexities of working in a context of death, trauma and tragedy. They experience this context in a more intimate manner than any other member of the criminal justice community. Within these challenging work settings in which human lives have ended, humor can emerge as crime scene investigators attend to their tasks. The research question this study addressed is “How is humor used to negotiate work experiences and make meaning from working in a context that includes death, trauma and tragedy?” CSIs were interviewed and provided narratives from their lived experiences regarding humor during their challenging work. Humans often use storytelling to frame and construct meaning of their lived experiences. For the CSI, the telling and retelling of stories of laughter and stories of tears has several individual and organizational outcomes, including group socialization, negotiating the stresses of the work and meaning making.

### Keywords

Joking, Humor, Death Work, Insider Positionality

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## Investigating Humor Within a Context of Death and Tragedy: The Narratives of Contrasting Realities

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*Crime scene investigators (CSIs) are subjected to many complexities of working in a context of death, trauma and tragedy. They experience this context in a more intimate manner than any other member of the criminal justice community. Within these challenging work settings in which human lives have ended, humor can emerge as crime scene investigators attend to their tasks. The research question this study addressed is “How is humor used to negotiate work experiences and make meaning from working in a context that includes death, trauma and tragedy?” CSIs were interviewed and provided narratives from their lived experiences regarding humor during their challenging work. Humans often use story telling to frame and construct meaning of their lived experiences. For the CSI, the telling and retelling of stories of laughter and stories of tears has several individual and organizational outcomes, including group socialization, negotiating the stresses of the work and meaning making. Keywords: Joking, Humor, Death Work, Insider Positionality*

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According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in the United States during the 2011 calendar year 14,612 individuals were victims of murder and non-negligent manslaughter (FBI, 2013), while the Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2013) reported that 38,364 people committed suicide, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration advised that 4,693 fatal work related injuries occurred (United States Department of Labor, 2013). In each of these cases, a criminal and/or medical examiner/coroner investigation was completed. The work of the men and woman who perform these investigations, crime scene investigators (CSIs), exposes them to a variety of work experiences from the incongruent to the psychologically (and even physically) threatening. Henry (2004) described how law enforcement in general and the CSI specifically are frequently exposed to sights, smells, and human tragedy that most people rarely encounter in their lifetimes; he labeled these experiences as *death work*.

These investigators are human beings, subject to the emotions, stresses, and high and low points that we all collectively share during the human experience. As with other people, humor and shared laughter are basic and fundamental parts of their lives and humor often exists side by side with human tragedy. They encounter a variety of circumstances that provide a backdrop for joking behavior and laughter. “Sense of humour is a unique capacity of human beings that is highly valued in many, if not all cultures” (Carbalo & Jáuregui, 2006, p.18). Martin (2007) contended that most people laugh at jokes and comedy many times in any given day and that humor is a form of communication that can occur in a multitude of contexts, including several situations that on the surface would not be considered appropriate forums.

A vital construct regarding the understanding of humor is its inextricable link to context. The phenomenon of joking in the workplace has been examined in settings as varied as a factory shop floor (Collinson, 1988), a Sardinian fish market, (Porcu, 2005), New Zealand information technology workers (Plester & Sayers, 2007), human service employees

(Tracy & Scott, 2006), and kitchen workers (Lynch, 2010). These studies indicate that humor's functions vary widely and are context dependent. Because of this link to context and humor's importance in the workplace, further investigation is needed for a greater understanding of how humor functions in various workplace situations (Cooper, 2008).

### **Problem and research question**

The juxtaposition of joking and laughter within a context that is clearly not funny fed my desire to understand why the phenomenon occurs. This study focused on the human experiences of CSIs and the functional uses of humor and joking behavior in a work context that can be described as psychologically threatening. The research question this study addressed is "How is humor used to negotiate work experiences and make meaning from working in a context that includes death, trauma and tragedy?" Extensive literature searches have revealed a number of pieces of research on psychologically threatening work settings; however, most of these studies focus on the cognitive and emotional affects of such work settings. In many cases humor is discussed as part of the overall negotiation of the psychological effects of such work however it is not the primary research focus (for example see Alexander & Wells, 1991; McCarroll, Ursano, Wright, & Fullerton, 1993; Scott, 2007).

The importance of context to the construction, meaning, and understanding of individuals' life stories has been established in the literature (Zibler, Tuval-Mashiach & Lieblich, 2008); however, since the CSIs' work context is unique and relatively unexamined their life stories have yet to be heard. Circumstances that CSIs experience can challenge their abilities to make sense of what has happened. These unique workers face tragic situations on a routine basis, yet within these troubling circumstances they commonly find incongruity that causes laughter and mirth. This study was needed to help researchers and practitioners better understand how humor can coincide with the investigation of tragic occurrences.

### **Literature review: Humor and a context of death work**

A brief literature review is offered in this section to help the reader understand foundational connections between humor and the work context of the CSI. Humor is a remarkable phenomenon and its definition is complex and often debated. Although the exact number of humor theories is contested in the literature, Haig (1988) places the estimate at over one hundred. Theories and definitions relating to humor arise from multiple scholarly perspectives such as linguistics, psychology, sociology, physiology, philosophy, and communications. This section begins with a discussion of humor theories, and then describes a delineation of humor styles. Next, an overview of characteristics of humor in stressful work contexts is provided, and then a narrower focus is on humor and death work.

### **Humor theories**

The most pervasive humor theories are the tripartite classifications of humor: incongruity, superiority or hostility, and tension release (Lynch, 2002; Carrell, 2008). Incongruity comes from the juxtaposition of the expected versus the unexpected that is common to many jokes. For the joke to be considered funny, the audience and the joke teller must have some common understanding of a situation or topic. When a joke is told there is an expectation of how the course of events should proceed within the joke's context (Attardo, 1994; Robert & Yan, 2007). But, the joke teller flips the expectation and provides an unexpected punch line. The unexpected deviation (the incongruity of the punch line) from what would be anticipated as normal is what gives pleasure or what is found funny. Haig

(1988, p. 10) further explains, “Incongruity theories regard the rapid resolution of incongruity as crucial to the generation of laughter.”

Superiority or hostility humor is linked to a sense of superiority coming from the disparagement of another group or individual (Martin, 2007). This form of humor is often found in ethnic and gender humor. Humor of this type can be derisive or mean spirited but it also may be considered playfully aggressive, a humorous tease that takes on many functions (Martin, 2007; Plester, 2007). These forms of humor may also be a method of “tempering the aggression and the aggressive behavior they examine” (Carrell, 2008, p. 313).

Tension relief theory of humor is based on a belief that a release of energy occurs through the physical reactions of laughter. Freud stated that laughter served to release nervous energy that was no longer needed (cited in Martin, 2007). Humor can also be used to diffuse tense and stressful situations; “people who work in stressful occupations, such as law enforcement, nursing and emergency medical technology, have traditionally used private contextual humour that helps them cope with the tension of their work” (Roth, Yapp, & Short, 2006, p. 125). For some people laughter has a cathartic effect (Morreall, 2009); as such, examples of tension relief humor can be found at funerals and other somber events.

## **Humor styles**

Martin’s (2007) delineation of humor styles provides insights about how jokes are used given the different situations people encounter, tasks they must perform, and work conditions that they must endure. When considering the below listed humor styles it must be acknowledged that they can be used in various combinations and degrees, and different styles can be used in various contexts (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

*Affiliative* humor relates to jokes, funny stories, and spontaneous witty banter that may be used to build social cohesion. *Self-enhancing* humor refers to maintaining a humorous outlook on life, to be amused by the numerous incongruities one faces on a daily basis, and to maintain a humorous perspective even in the face of stress. These styles are often associated with a positive personality (Cann & Etzel, 2008).

*Aggressive* humor may be used to criticize others, such as sarcasm and ridicule. This style of humor is in line with superiority theory; it can be used in an attempt to exert power and control over others. *Self-defeating* humor attempts to amuse others by saying funny things at one’s own expense. Distinct from self-deprecating humor, which is actually intended to empower the user (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2000); self-defeating humor can lead to a downward spiral of negative effects for the jokester.

## **The characteristics of humor in stressful work contexts**

Police officers often use humor as a means of relieving stress in situations where control is difficult or not possible (Kuhlman, 1988). It has also been determined that some workers in dangerous occupations such as police officers use stress reducing humor as a method of self-control (Morreall, 2010). For workers in other emotionally stressful work settings such as nursing, Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (2005) determined that joking behavior was used in a manner that helps ease interactions, increases job satisfaction, and assists in communication.

Humor and joking has shown to be one of a variety of strategies to negotiate stressful circumstances. Abel and Maxwell (2002) concluded that individuals who are engaged in stressful tasks benefit more from humorous stimuli than from non-humorous attempts at stress reduction. Humor has also been found to be a sign of resilience in the face of stress

(Lefcourt, 2001). Saroglou and Anciaux (2004) determined the use of humor as a coping strategy often reflects positivity in reframing, as well as active coping and planning.

Tracy, Meyers, and Scott (2006) and Tracy and Scott (2006) researched occupations with substantial stress (i.e., firefighters, 911 call-takers, and correctional officers), and noted an important use of superiority humor. They found that the use of superiority humor and other depersonalization with co-workers may provide immediate relief from the taint coming from working with subjects such as drug addicts, prostitutes, the homeless, and various types of criminals. Although the use of superiority humor is often viewed as a negative humor style, this form of humor may provide relief to workers who face threats to their psychological well being.

### **Humor and death work**

In a study of physicians who routinely deal with dying patients, Schulman-Green (2003) determined that humor helped them deal with the discomfort of such work. Distancing and disassociation from emotionally disturbing experiences allow workers to perform necessary work tasks. For example, gallows humor can serve an adaptive function. Work needs to be performed at a high proficiency level and without mental distraction; successful accomplishment of the work tasks may be at risk due to stressful or threatening conditions.

Within Henry's (2004) consideration of death work, he viewed humor within the context of crime scene investigation and the psychology of working in an environment of death and dying. The task environment and group characteristics shape the expressions of humor used by the CSI. Joking behavior is a way of mastering death images in a way that makes them less threatening, "the understated and somewhat self-effacing humor in which CSI technicians indulge is psychologically linked to death guilt, but in many ways it also reflects their struggles to master the death imprint" (p. 195).

To summarize this literature review section, this research brought together disparate strands of literature that pertained to: (1) humor theory, humor styles, workplace humor; and (2) the contexts of death work and specifically the work context of the CSI. These strands of literature helped me to understand the possible intersections between humor and death work in the role of the CSI. However, I also possessed a work history that affected my role as a qualitative researcher in this study. My insider positionality is described in the next section.

### **Methods**

The central research question of this study was "How is humor used to negotiate work experiences and make meaning from working in a context that includes death, trauma and tragedy?" The question is framed to bring participants' descriptions and understandings to the phenomenon of humor in this unique work setting. Humor is a complex phenomenon, and one of the strengths of the qualitative research approach used in this study is its ability to capture complex textual descriptions of how people experience a particular research problem (Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). During the semi-structured in depth interviews, narratives of the CSIs experiences with joking in non-humorous contexts developed. Stories were told documenting their lived experiences at making meaning of their death work through humor. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990) the story can be a powerful source of data, the participants' narratives were stories of stark contrast, some recalling laughter while others tears.

The main research goal was to understand the CSIs' encounters with humor within experiences that are clearly not funny. Individuals develop different behaviors to cope with the negative conditions created by homicide and unnatural death. "The 'survivors' quest to

make meaning of death at a proximate and ultimate level is certainly a feature of the CSI's experience" (Henry, 2004, p. 198). This research explored how humor fits within such a quest for meaning.

In the following sections I begin by emphasizing my insider status and its relevance to conducting this type of study. Next, I briefly discuss the topics of ethics and representation in a qualitative study. I describe criteria for selecting participants and provide demographic information about participants. Data collection procedures and data analyses are then explained. Integrated in these explanations are strategies for establishing trustworthiness of data.

### **My Research Lens and Insider Positionality**

Work on developing the research problem for this study began in 2008; at that time I was a working police officer and CSI. Approval from the IRB to begin data collection occurred in August of 2011, and I began interviews immediately thereafter. In December of 2011 I retired from police work. Several of the participants were former colleagues; however, I must emphasize I had no supervisory status over any of them. Additionally, at the time of all interviews my status as a working CSI was suspended because of a medical condition.

My researcher role as a police officer conducting research on other police officers proved to be a balancing act between the challenges and benefits of insider positionality. Many of my attributes and characteristics intersected with those of the research participants. There are several perspectives regarding insider status found throughout the literature. One of the most general questions regarding insiderness is whether the outcomes and interpretive conclusions would differ significantly if the study were to be conducted by an insider rather than an outsider (Labaree, 2002).

I chose to research a group to which I belong, and the participants chose to allow me to study them. The nature of the work (a criminal investigation) makes accessibility to this research population difficult. Police officers in general are often hesitant to reveal themselves to outsiders, the police culture is very strong, influential, and holds a commitment to law enforcement officers above all else (Woody, 2005). In many research settings insiderness can be advantageous because of the researchers' perceived ability to obtain access by that insiderness. Merton (1972) advised that insiders have privileged access to knowledge about their research population. This knowledge gives insights that are difficult to access by an outsider.

Patton (1999) also has discussed personal connections with the people and topic as being an important aspect of the researcher's credibility. I had great connection to this topic through my lived experiences with it, and a sense of trust existed between the participants and me. Arguments exist that insiderness is crucial in research because being an outsider limits the understanding of hidden meanings and the ability to reach a deep level of trust with the informant (Haniff, 1985). This trust is significant for the sharing of experiences; for example, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated creation of trust can facilitate the story telling urge, and my insider status provided that trust for rich narratives to emerge from the data. From this perspective my insiderness provided access that may not have been given to an outsider.

Although the arguments for the benefits of insiderness are many, some scholars believe that being an outsider can be more advantageous. "Insiders have been accused of being inherently biased and too close to the culture to be curious enough to raise provocative questions" (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 411). Labaree (2002, p. 116) also related that there are "hidden dilemmas related to unintended positioning, shared relationships and disclosure, and the often conflicting negotiations concerning the process of 'entering' and disengagement."

Upon reflection and in retrospect, I did miss opportunities to explore data in greater depth because of my biases and assumptions. I was close to this culture and even though I had been aware of some of the mistakes that insider researchers can make, I made some of them. These assumptions came up during several of the accounts and depictions of joking. I could have probed the participants' account in greater depth instead of taking the joking at face value. As discussed by Merriam et al. (2001), outsiders often possess a greater curiosity with the unfamiliar, they can feel free to ask questions that would be unthinkable to an insider, and their lack of alignment with any particular group often allows them to obtain more information than an insider.

Chavez (2008, p.491) suggested that insider researchers "need to know in which ways they are like their participants and in which ways they are unlike them." This awareness is needed so that the researcher can consider how roles affect observation and the way research is written. Role duality was one of the problematic areas discussed by Unluer (2012) in her discussion on being an insider. I also encountered this problem; separating my CSI lens from my researcher lens was a distinct challenge during my interviews with the participants and during my data analysis.

Vigilant critical reflection is required by the researcher to mitigate the possible negative effects of insiderness (Chavez, 2008). Such self-reflection may be aided by keeping a critically reflective research journal, and this reflective process may allow the researcher to acknowledge assumptions and create transparency in the research process (Otrlipp, 2008). Based on these research guidelines, I kept a research reflective journal in which I documented unique or special occurrences associated with the interviews or observations. Within this journal I tried to capture some of the dynamics associated with my dual role of CSI and qualitative researcher. I tried to surface assumptions that I was making about comments of the participants or decisions that I was making as an interviewer. The reflective journal was used to support findings that emerged from the interviews and observations.

### **Ethics and representation**

As the qualitative researcher, I was the lens through which data were analysed, and that lens led to choices as to what was revealed and how it was interpreted. Weiss, Fine, Weseen, and Wong (2000, p. 53) presented what they refer to as the "triple representation problem." They ask researchers to reflect upon how they present themselves, the narrators, and others. For this research I was required to be sensitive to my own triple representation issue. Firstly, I chose certain accounts and narratives; I presented and selected accounts that only reflect a small portion of these participants' lived experiences. These accounts only represent their experiences with joking in this context. Secondly, CSIs revealed themselves and allowed me to report and interpret how they had constructed certain experiences with joking. Finally, some victims of horrible crimes were presented, and these victims and their families had no opportunity to be heard. I do not wish to victimize these people a second time. My intent throughout this process was not to present an agenda, voyeuristic, or judgmental account of humor; it was to present how CSIs constructed their experiences with joking in their work.

### **Participants**

Law enforcement agencies located in the suburban areas of major cities, such as St. Louis and Chicago, have formed multi-jurisdictional task forces whose mission is to provide experienced and professional investigative and forensic support to member agencies involved in the investigation of a major incident. The federal level has established Evidence Response



Teams (ERTs). These teams are often called upon to assist in major federal investigations such as the September 11 terrorist attacks, mass graves in Kosovo, and the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building bombing.

Several major case squads and Federal ERTs from a major United States metropolitan area were solicited for participation in this research. The selection of professionals from these types of teams was for two reasons. Firstly, humor is primarily a social phenomenon. CSIs who work in a more solitary setting do not have the same opportunity to engage in joking behavior with colleagues as do those who work in a team context. Secondly, these teams are exposed to higher profile and more serious crimes (mainly murders and sometimes mass casualty events) than other CSIs. The juxtaposition of tragic circumstances and joking was the primary focus of the research; therefore, investigators who had such experiences needed to be interviewed.

Solicitation for the study was performed face to face during several task force training sessions as well as a multi-recipient follow up email to the same CSIs. Accounting for some absences from the training sessions, approximately 50 CSIs were contacted via one or both methods. For this study, fourteen CSIs from four separate municipal level major case squads and one federal ERT agreed to participate. The sample included ten males and four females, their ages ranged from 31 to 65, their years of crime scene experience ranged from 6 to 37, and their average of crime scene experience was 13.7 years.

### **Data collection**

The main data source was semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview questions were generated from topics and constructs found in the literature and were designed to be free from bias. Questions such as, Describe your own sense of humor; What are your feelings when someone makes a joke at a scene?; and When joking was going on, how did you feel? were intended to encourage further dialogue and reflection. Although qualitative interviews can produce responses that cannot be predicted in advance and that may lead the interview into extraneous topics, I was prepared to use follow up questions to develop data relevant to the central research question (Wengraf, 2001).

In addition, one participant provided photographs of cartoons and drawings he produced during investigations. These cartoons were spontaneously created during various investigations. I possessed prior knowledge about these drawings and had seen several examples during my experience as a CSI.

I had planned to use participant observation as an additional source of data. However, after a full review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), two major difficulties of participant observation were noted. Firstly, the IRB concluded that the nature of the task force model would cause tremendous obstacles in receiving permission for observation. The multi-jurisdictional task forces I planned to use involved a number of agencies (an average of 20 agencies each). The IRB questioned whether or not I would require permission for observation from task force leadership, the administrations of the task forces (which are made up of boards of directors), or the individual officers involved. Secondly, the IRB believed that participant observation during an ongoing criminal investigation could compromise the due process of law. This issue was contentious for the IRB, despite my promise to enact measures to redact data to prevent anyone from determining what criminal case was being viewed. These two issues were simply too difficult to resolve; therefore, I decided to recant my request for participant observation.

## **Data analysis**

I used Boeije's (2002) suggestions for a purposeful and practical approach to Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant-comparative method of qualitative analysis of the data. Interview transcripts were analyzed multiple times. After transcription each interview was reviewed, comparing semantic similarity of words, ideas, and phrases within the interview.

I was aware of theoretical and practical arguments regarding the transcription of interview data. McLellan, MacQueen, and Neidig (2003) presented a list of transcription protocols that included: suggestions for titling, source labeling, how to deal with content issues such as inaudible and nonverbal sounds, fillers, and word repetitions. They also suggested guidelines for reviewing accuracy and storing and backing up transcriptions. These guidelines were followed to ensure accuracy of information, respondent privacy, and appropriate data analysis. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and photos were redacted to ensure confidentiality.

Immediately after each interview the digital recording was loaded into password protected Olympus DSS transcription software. After listening to the interview the digital file was erased from the recorder and the MP3 file from the transcription software was used to transcribe each interview verbatim into a Microsoft word document. I made every effort to be sensitive to tonal qualities of the informants' voices and inflections, documenting pauses within the transcripts as either short (SP for short pause, less than 5 seconds), long (LP for long pause, 5-10 seconds) or very long (VLP for very long pause, over 10 seconds). I also used my field notes to help document laughs and smiles within the transcriptions. Upon completion of the transcription, the word document was loaded into NVivo9 software.

NVivo9 serves as a repository to store data, provides a way to index and sort using coding categories (nodes and trees), and helps to develop a theory about how the data are related. Each passage of each interview was studied to determine exactly what was said and to label each passage (Boeije, 2002). I followed the stance that, "Coding, in the final analysis is an act of selective attention. When we code, we mark those things in our data that we need to revisit" (Shank, 2006, p. 147). The goal was to prepare a central message (Boeije, 2002) for each interview by identifying, naming, and categorizing initial themes.

After I had completed several interviews, I began comparing them. The categories and transcripts were combed over, rearranging, combining, and renaming my initial themes. The comparison displayed whether concepts were common across interviews. This process revealed clusters of similar codes that confirmed or disconfirmed initial assertions; I was then able to reframe those original assertions. Through this iterative process I categorized and developed a set of major themes that characterized the perspectives and accounts of humor within this work context. Throughout the analysis relevance of data was determined by keeping a focus on the study's central research question.

Determining the point at which to stop scheduling interviews was a great challenge for me. I was aware of the possibility that additional perspectives and information could be uncovered. Although I sought data saturation, I was aware that the term was contested in the literature: "claims of saturation are often made without an explanation of what saturation means in the context of the study" (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003, p. 6).

According to Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) saturation of data involves replication in categories and this replication verifies and ensures "comprehension and completeness" (p. 18). During my ongoing and continual review of the data, I found that thirteen categories replicated by interview ten. I continued and interviewed an additional four participants; with these four participants the data did not reveal any additional new categories related to the research questions.

This section provided an overview of method used to conduct this study, including a discussion of my insider status and issues of ethics and representation. The following section discusses findings of the study.

### **In the words of the CSI: Humor and death work**

The CSIs in this study related their experiences with joking and working in a context of trauma and tragedy. Their voices spoke of two contrasting narratives, firstly humorous stories and accounts of laughing that helped in the negotiation of the job's challenges. The second narrative was one of sadness and difficulty in making sense of their experiences with horrible crimes. These stories provided a view into how the participants were experiencing this phenomenon and what it meant to them.

#### **Humorous narratives**

Being able to laugh at yourself is valued in this work. It is a form of affiliative humor (Martin, 2007) that is commonly linked to positive interactions. Humorous circumstances do not simply exist and stand alone; they are part of the entire narrative of that crime scene, the stories are almost universally prefaced with the case type. Before the story of the CSI in the dumpster, it is introduced as "double homicide in a parking lot."

Although the humorous event is circumstantial, the telling and retelling of the event accounts are purposeful and functional. Whether physically present and a witness to these events, or a team member who is told the story, the event and/or the shared narrative has several functions: (a) it is a method to solidify team membership and socialize new members; (b) it relieves stress and tension; and (c) it acts as an overt display of the joking culture of this group, the merging of murder and mirth.

Narratives emerged from circumstances related to the investigation of violent crime that became humorous. Crime scene investigators are human and are subject to the foibles of man, and some of these stories revealed situations that are funny and often embarrassing. In other stories incongruities arose that allowed these workers a brief respite from the emotional challenges of the task at hand.

Consistent with incongruity theory, many of the humorous circumstances described by participants have incongruity within them, such as one that Steve recalled:

...it was a stucco ceiling that was covered in dust bunnies, it was obvious it hadn't been cleaned in years; the ceiling fan hadn't been cleaned in years either. We go in there and someone turned on the fan because we had moisture issues and all that did was create a snowstorm of dust bunnies, they were huge, when they hit you they left a little cloud.

Steve found humor in this circumstance; however, a critical component of this situation was the gruesome nature of the scene – two people were murdered with a high-powered assault rifle that left an exit wound in the victim's face large enough to insert a 12-inch softball. This example represents the juxtaposition of mirth and horrific death experiences within the same context. It displays the uniqueness of the CSI culture and provides insight into how humor can emerge from the work.

An event occurred to Stanley that became a humorous situation. The event was shared with group members who were working the scene but who had not observed the event, and it was also shared with other team members who were not present. Stanley recounted his defining moment:

It was outdoors, snowy, we were doing a blood trail, there was a five or six foot incline by the side of an apartment building, we were measuring different points. I scrambled up there to take the measurement and I turned around to say make sure you watch your step because it's... right then my feet flew up... I came off the ledge a full five foot drop, hard on my keester, man it was not gracefully (laughs). You don't recover from that well, other team members, a hundred yards away saw this, it was not a subtle thing (grinning), clip board one way, ruler the other, the tape measure. I'm probably blushing right now, I feel myself.... I'm still a little embarrassed, I was collecting myself and my phone is chirping, I think I dropped the phone, someone who saw it from the truck, "Are you ok? Good, because I'm laughing." What are you going to do? But it happens, we are human, but that is part of it. "Hey, remember the time you fell on your ass?" Yes I do.

The embarrassing situation in which Stanley found himself became part of the whole narrative of this murder. The murder and the slip and fall are linked together, one is not thought of without the other. A significant aspect of this and other stories is that the CSI needs to have thick skin and be able to self deprecate. Superiority humor (Martin, 2007) exists in situations such as these because there are clear winners and losers; however, each CSI knows that the shoe can be on the other foot at any moment. Although the butt of the joke can be rotated from one CSI to the next, the humor exists as laughter with each other and not at each other (Goodman, 1983).

Several other stories were recounted to me about the various humorous circumstances and situations in which the participants were involved. I was told about Tyvek® suits, inappropriate content on a computer, a prank, and an embarrassing misunderstanding. Following is a selection of some of these accounts that have been told and retold to members of the various groups. These narratives help workers understand the history of the group and the people within it, and they are a part of the joking culture established by the group (Fine, 2006).

### **Tyvek®**

The CSI often must wear bio-hazardous protective suits and these suits can often be a source of humor. These protective outfits are difficult to get on and off without tearing them or losing one's balance. Emily and Roger each share a story about the wonderful world of Tyvek® suits. Roger explained the humor involved in some of these incidents:

...guys will do really dumb things under stress. You know how you use duct tape around your booties? [Tyvek® shoe covers used in conjunction with the Tyvek® suits] All of a sudden you realize your hand or glove is caught taped up in it and you don't want to ask for help but literally you have to be cut out. The group will be laughing. It removes the tension for that little bit of time, just enough for a short mental break.

In another example, Emily's story emphasizes the occupational identity of CSIs. Her story is aligned with literature that examines humor and group identity (Romero & Pescosolido, 2008), people without the same shared experience would probably not recognize the humor:

We have a guy on the team who is fairly large and of course everybody had to suit up. So I go into the back yard, it was cold and raining; so we had a tent set up where we kept the equipment and I see some movement in there. It looks like two people are fighting. I was like who's in the tent? And they tell me who it is. I open the tent flap to see what's going on and he can't get his suit on, it's too tight and he's fighting with the suit to get it on. If you're not an ET you can't even describe how funny it is.

This story is an example of how humor is critically reliant on context and having a frame of reference. She is clearly stating that this incident is a funny moment to her and people who share her work, and it does not matter to her whether or not outsiders consider it to be amusing or not.

### **The laptop, the frog, and the CSI in the dumpster**

Although countless stories of humorous circumstances and joking behavior were shared with me, three stories were repeated by several CSIs from the same team. Of particular interest is the fact that some of these stories were told to me not only by those present for the incident but also by those not present, reinforcing the significance in the narrative passed from team member to team member.

#### **The laptop**

On numerous occasions participants stated that the humor of CSIs can be "raw". Co-workers make circumstantial choices to be critical, judging, or offended; or they make choices to be tolerant and/or laugh. They see, smell, and share all sorts of experiences. The laptop incident was one in which people in other work settings could have been greatly offended. But for CSIs who see the horrors that one human can inflict upon another, the threshold for being offended is much greater. Eric was not present for this event, but he shared the sequence of events:

...one of the guys had inappropriate stuff on his computer. He had received an email with some pornographic material and when he closed it the screen shut down, but when he came back into the truck, he opened it and the volume was on, there was a girl sitting next to him and thank God she knows how to joke and go with things, very embarrassing for him, the moaning and groaning, she looks at him and he couldn't shut it off fast enough.

The female officer that witnessed this event laughed, not at the pornographic video, but at the embarrassment of the laptop's owner, who is a very respected and skilled CSI. Of the three participants who each told me versions of this story, not one was actually present for the incident. It is clear that the story had been related from one CSI to the next. It is an example to those who are unfamiliar to CSI work that everyone on the team is a target of humor at one point or another. CSI workers of this study were not singled out as targets of humor based on their experience, gender, race, or other area of difference, as described by these participants most of the targeting is a result of their own doing. The participants acknowledged that they understood that when it comes to being a humor target, what goes around comes around.

## The frog

Kelli tells a story that was simply referred to as *the frog*. This story emphasizes that humor as a functionalist construct does not have clear borders; however, for those present during this incident, the humor was a much appreciated tension reducer. It is a good example of the culture of humor that exists within this work setting. For the people who experienced it, their recollection of this incident continues to make them smile. It represents a sign of the treasured experience of being part of a special group, and Kelli explained how it unfolded:

...we had been there like 20 hours.... at the start it was horrible and everybody was tired, it was near the end, typing reports, lots of paperwork. Dan had found a frog and put the frog in the command van, things like that are funny. Most people wouldn't think something like that was very funny but that's how we got through the day, everyone was wide awake again and ready to go.

When Eric also told me the story he couldn't stop grinning:

One of our people was typing away at the computer and one of the guys found a frog, Southern boy, used to giggin for frogs, just comes in and put it on her computer just to freak her out. Nothing to do with anything, but there was a lot of laughter.

It was Kelli's perception that Dan saw the group was fatigued from the long hours of work. Both she and Eric felt his action was purposeful in that the team needed a mental break. If this had been early in the case with the team fresh and occupied in various important tasks, Dan would have ignored the frog. Instead his understanding of the team's need and his own sense of play combined to capture the frog and drop it on a co-worker's computer.

## The CSI in the dumpster.

Here is an account of an incident from an eyewitness. In Dan's account of the event, he introduced the humorous anecdote by referring to the case. As Dan told his story, one can see how the crime and the humor are linked together:

One of my favorite ones is a double homicide in a parking lot, they were in a vehicle, and we thought someone might have thrown some evidence away in a dumpster, so one of us had to go in the dumpster. To go in a dumpster it's disgusting, it was a huge apartment complex, so he's in a Tyvek® suit, he's climbing around in there and digging around so we are making jokes about rats and cockroaches about what must be in this dumpster, when at some point somehow his pager starts going off, it's on vibrate and it had fallen down his leg without him knowing and in his mind all he thinking about is rats. He starts screaming and jumping up and down convinced he's got a rat inside his pants somehow. We yanked him out and found his pager.

Tracy and Scott (2006) related that humor plays a role in how workers remember events selectively. The CSIs recall the event, such as a murder; however, they often retain the memories of that event in the humorous situations and joking behavior in which they engage. Recalling someone screaming over thinking a rat was in his pant leg is a more pleasant memory than recalling the horror and tragedy of two people being murdered.

As with the above laptop owner, the CSI in the dumpster is one of the more respected members of his team. These group members are well accomplished and skillful CSIs, yet they still are targets of joking. The above examples provide some evidence of the leveling factor of humor; in these situations group members who had been previous instigators of joking are now the targets. Despite their higher status within the group they are teased. Stories such as these inform newer CSIs that everyone pays their dues, through hard and often disgusting work that they are all human and can all laugh at themselves.

Steve's dust bunnies, Emily's Tyvek, and Stanley's slip and fall are just a few of the examples of circumstantial humor that are later converted into purposeful joking. The humor within the event itself can be considered debatable. The joking becomes purposeful when these stories are retold to members of the team; these stories are clear examples of the banter between the workers. The CSIs I spoke to often use these stories within a framework of superiority humor to keep their co-workers' egos and group status in check, and to reaffirm that no one member of the team is more important than another.

## **Cartoons**

As discussed above the unusual situations in which CSIs become involved are a source of humor. One of the participants takes some situations and portrays them in the form of witty cartoons. Bob takes liberty with some of the strangeness that his team encounters during their investigations, and oftentimes draws a cartoon relating to these incongruities on the white board in the command vehicle. The link between cartoons and incongruities is well established in humor literature, as exemplified by Hempelmann and Samson (2008, p. 614): "Cartoons are understood as a humor carrying visual/visual-verbal picture containing at least on incongruity that is playfully resolvable."

I asked him about his motivations for his drawings, and he told me that his first requirement is that "there has to be something to laugh about, it needs to be preserved somehow." When Bob sees a circumstance that in his mind is incongruent, strange, or absurd, he decides to draw. Bob's cartoons call attention to some of the absurdities of the CSI work setting. His cartoons are visual versions of other events and narratives that I have presented previously from the interviews -- they are his interpretations and representations of events. He pokes fun at circumstances, other team members, and himself. His work group prizes these cartoons; they were mentioned by several of Bob's team as being fond memories and many have taken their own photos of them as keepsakes. He was kind enough to provide me with two photos of his work.

Photo 1 comes from a case in a basement apartment where a despondent man elected to shoot and kill his wife, stepson, and then himself, in fact it is the same case that Steve referred to in his account of dust bunnies. The offender used a high-powered assault rifle at close range; such a weapon results in large exit wounds, so big that a man's fist could fit in the wound. This scene was very bloody and gruesome. One of the rounds went through one victim and into a wall, piercing the radiator line, and water then flooded one of the bedrooms. Bob (the shorter CSI) and the tallest team member were assigned the scene diagram. The tall one is using a laser ruler to record measurements. To add to the mayhem of three dead people, a cat was in the apartment and its capture was time consuming. The function of this cartoon was to point out the strange circumstances CSIs must face; no case is routine, and each case has its unique twists and turns. Instead of complaining about harsh working conditions; performing, persevering, and still having the ability to laugh under adverse environments is revered.

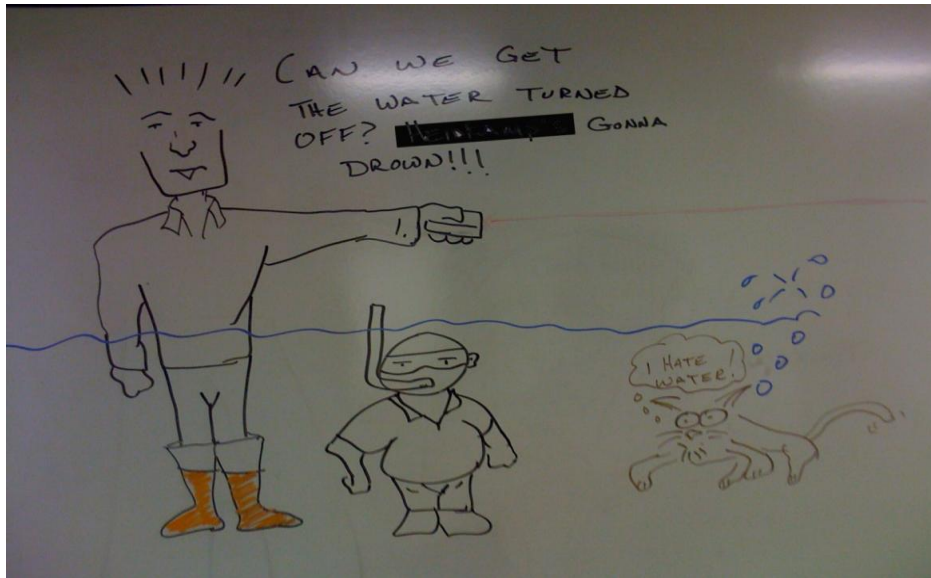


Photo 1

For the case of Photo 2, the team was assigned a murder and as part of the normal protocol one of the group supervisors responded to pick up the command truck. Although the supervisor assigned to getting the truck was a very experienced CSI, this case was his first as a supervisor. Bob was also responding to the call in his department vehicle when he saw the command truck racing to the scene, with the new supervisor having a slight maniacal look on his face. Bob found this funny because CSIs almost never need to respond in an emergency manner. By the time they are called all the urgency is normally gone. Bob told me that he found the new supervisor's behavior "strange", especially because of his lengthy experience and normally calm demeanor at working crime scenes. The intent of this cartoon is aligned with humor literature that depicts the purposeful nature of workplace humor (Collinson, 2002; Porcu, 2005) and using humor to challenge or criticize those in power in a somewhat covert manner (Barsoux, 1996). The supervisor who was the target of the joking needed to accept (or at least tolerate) the humor. If he had not willingly accepted being the target of the humor his position within the work group and his ability to lead could have been compromised (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

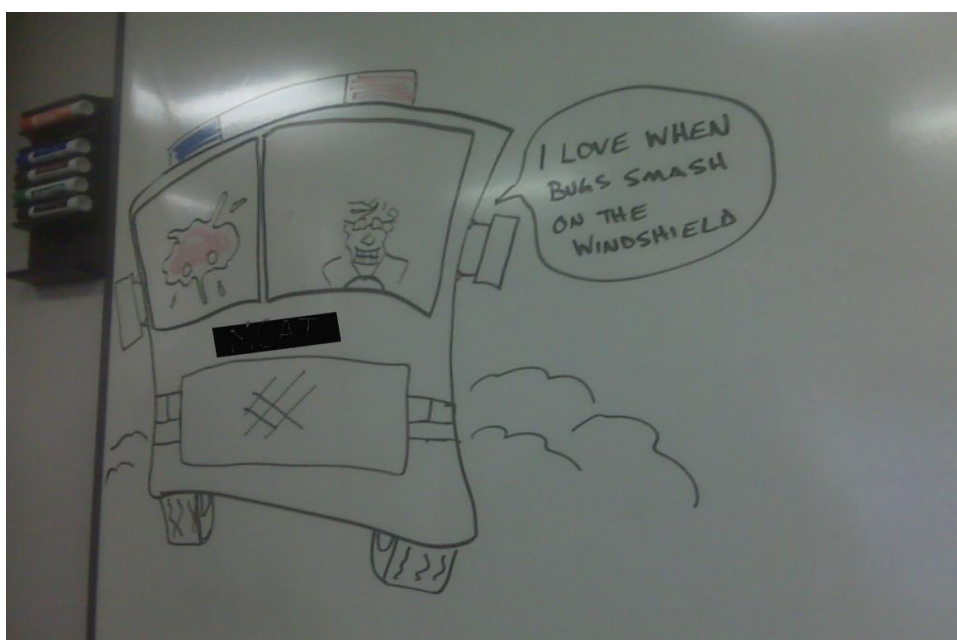


Photo 2



### Narratives of sadness

Within the world of homicide studies there is a common construct of victim precipitation (see Polk, 1997; Block & Block, 1998). The CSI can frequently be involved in investigating the murder of a gang member, drug dealer, or prostitute because these people have high risk lifestyles. Although CSIs have respect and empathy for all victims, they believe that these individuals understood the risks of their life choices.

As discussed earlier, the CSI often finds humor in situations that others may not, simply because CSIs share a collective understanding of the work role and the context. However, there is also a shared understanding among CSIs when humor must never be present, and that is when children are harmed. The jokes and humor always stop, without exception, when the CSI encounters the emotionally challenging circumstances of child victimization. Susan related a case where a mother murdered her two children. The emotional burden was draining, this case was devoid of any joking, “the Mom that stabbed the two kids, there was no joking around in that whole thing...it was quiet, very quiet evidence collection, we did what we needed to do...we wanted to get it done and over with.”

Eric tried to articulate the somber mood and feelings involved in a child victimization case. He also investigated the case to which Susan referred; it is clear that some events are extremely challenging to the CSIs psyche:

I keep bringing up the kids again, it was a difficult scene, it was the longest week of my life. There is, like you draw that line, this is a kid, you can't joke about anything, I don't know maybe it's the innocence of the kids, whereas like an adult, none of us are perfect, depending on the circumstances, none of us has lived a clean perfect pure life...not that it makes it right for someone to die, but with a kid there is nothing they could have done to deserve to die.

Ken also described this heart wrenching work:

...those are scenes where things are so emotional, I mentioned the 3 year old child brutally murdered. I can assure you there is no humor, that is very task oriented, people want to get in, people want to finish their job and go back to where they came from.

My insider status was one of particular significance in this study. Police officers typically do not reveal themselves to outsiders. This status was particularly relevant with Dan's interview. He explained how his perspective was shaken by two cases, and during this description he advised me that he had never discussed his feelings with anyone, including his wife, about these events. He and I had worked one of these cases together, and he elected to talk to me about his feelings. Dan's previously discussed accounts of his humor experiences (recall the frog) demonstrates that he happens to be one of the more jovial team members — one might even consider him to be a jokester. However, for these two events humor was far from his mind:

We had a fire call out, a little boy and two other people died in this fire. And I remember seeing pictures of him and his Dad and I can see that his Dad was his coach. I know it's a kid again but adults died in this fire too, but when something hits home with you, I don't know how to explain it other than to say I always try to find a way to explain, well this is why this could never happen to me or this is why this could never happen to my loved one, they're

not involved in drugs or they're not involved in this kind of relationship. And that's the first defense mechanism you throw up; this goes back to when I was a brand new officer. I hate to say it, a Sikh child had been murdered in their temple and I remember at the time thinking it's a Sikh child; they're different from me. And then I remember we were hanging up the bloody clothes to dry and I saw he had on "underroo" underwear, I can get misty eyed just thinking about it because that's when it dawned on me, he is no different, he's just a little kid. So when you see these pictures of a Dad and you find out the Dad killed the kid, that's the kind of stuff you need to cope with. There's sometimes nothing helps and you need to go out by yourself, you need to have a good cry... then have a good cry.

Dan's experience is an example of how some circumstances challenge the CSI's ability to make sense of the event. Dan is considered one of the more jovial CSIs and examples of his sense of humor and desire to engage in joking are well known. From his perspective humor is a functional strategy to manage the various emotional pressures of his work. However, as this account demonstrates, humor cannot always regulate the emotional burdens of this job, humor has its limitations. Frank poignantly summed up the limits of humor, "Humor is like a tool in a tool bag, it really is, you can't use the same tool for everything."

### **Discussion**

Humorous events and narratives play a large role in the acculturation of new CSIs into the work group. The events and narratives become part of the folklore of the group and the stories help to position individual CSIs within the history of the team. In this current study, some team members were present for events like Steve's dust storm, and others were told the stories. Whether physically present and witness to these events or a team member that is told the story, the event and/or the shared narrative has several functions: (a) it is a method to solidify team membership and socialize new members; (b) it relieves stress and tension; and (c) it acts as an overt display of the joking culture of this group, the merging of murder and mirth. The values embedded in these stories can help unite members of the team (Meyer, 1997). A critical value is emphasized through these stories and the teasing in this work; that is, all CSIs must pay their dues through hard and often disgusting work, they are all human, and they can all laugh at themselves.

One of the functional aspects of humor is its ability to help people cope and distance themselves from unpleasant experiences as well as aid in meaning making (Kuipers, 2008). Consistent with Robinson and Smith-Lovin's (2001) work, humor for these CSIs builds cohesion in such a task oriented group. The cohesion built from joking among these workers helps them collectively and individually negotiate the often troubling visual and olfactory images they encounter. These CSIs came to their positions from different paths; however, they now rely on the support of their team membership to negotiate troubling work tasks.

The CSIs of this study used various spiritual, religious, and personal beliefs to navigate emotionally disturbing situations and these internal processes helped give them the permission to joke. The participants had to come to their own understanding of the interplay of tragedy and humor in their work contexts. This finding is consistent with existing humor literature. From a constructivist framework, people negotiate meaning in ways that are as unique as their personal biographies; Neimeyer (2005, p.28) views human beings as "inveterate meaning-makers, weavers of narratives that give thematic significance to the plot structures of their lives". Individual cultural belief systems affect the influence humor has on

their personal meaning making. For example in this study Steve explained that he first says his peace to the victim and then acknowledges to himself and others that humor helps him “be on my game.” He has negotiated a deal between himself and the victim, he is not laughing at the victim’s demise, he engages in joking to navigate the circumstance he faces.

Although findings of this study show that humor can be a functional method of reducing stress and emotional tension, they also indicate humor’s limits for managing emotions. The working conditions of the CSI push the worker to feel emotional extremes – these extremes can involve humor that emerges from absurdity and incongruity, but the extremes can also involve the heartbreak of child victimization. CSIs have to relieve tension some way, and in some cases the release can come from humor. However, as noted by Dan and others, there are situations where no amount of humor can aid in managing the emotional burdens of this work. As Dan said there may be no other relief than crying, and both humor and crying are emotional releases used by both novice and veteran CSIs.

Child victimization causes a sometimes unbearable sadness for CSIs; however, they cannot choose to opt out of their roles, the work must be done. Supervisors have noted that when severe psychological stressors are present the pace of the work quickens. The workplace changes from one where people maintain their social behaviors (such as joking), and turns to one that is very task oriented. Crime scene investigators can use humor to negotiate tension in many crime scenes; however, they simply cannot make sense out of an event where a child is killed.

### **Limitations**

One particular challenge of this study was its homogeneous makeup. All the CSIs I spoke to were Caucasian. Joking can often highlight demographic differences such as race, age, and other areas of diversity. The humor literature notes competing applications of humor directed at areas of difference, an example being Plester and Sayers’ (2007) findings that demographic differences had effects on the banter between workers. In some circumstance superiority humor targeted at racial, ethnic, or gender differences can be used to insult and ridicule (Martin, 2007; Morreall, 2008). On the other hand, humor can be used to demonstrate pride in one’s identity (Rappoport, 2005). One illustration of this is Bing and Heller’s (2003) research on how some lesbian communities engaged in self-deprecating humor to self-define, empower, and confront conflicts and inequities. A more diverse participant group is needed for further research that can examine relationships among humor and diversity in CSI work.

As discussed previously participant observation may have provided additional data that would have added to the trustworthiness of the study. Such is the nature of human subject research

### **Implications**

Humor was also shown to help in meaning making for these CSIs. From a cognitive perspective, a component of organizational learning is shared interpretation of events. Joking can show new group members how to understand the work environment and the new group members can observe how experienced group members negotiate the emotional demands of this job. The group processes events and develops tacit models of understanding. These models are used as frames of reference for future events. Actions, which can include joking behaviors, “provide the opportunity to share a common experience which may aid in the development of shared understanding” (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999, p. 533). For example, if joking had worked in a situation in the past, members may perceive they have permission to use humor again in similar situations; conversely, if joking behavior had proven to be

detrimental to the effectiveness of the team, the group now has a tacit and shared understanding that joking behavior can have ill consequences and is not appropriate for all situations.

Humor and joking appear to be a barometer of how well CSIs are negotiating and processing the troubling circumstances they face. Supervisors of these work groups explained that joking (even joking inappropriate by some standards) by CSIs indicated that their officers were managing their emotional stressors well. When CSIs do not initiate humor or suddenly stop joking, they may be having difficulty negotiating the psychological threat. This lack of humor is most common when children are victimized. Although CSIs may partake in joking when they face particular gruesome or disturbing scenes involving adults as victims, child victimization is so distressing that joking is not an appropriate or effective antidote for the psychological threat. Leaders of this and other work groups that experience trauma and tragedy may consider using humor as one of the barometers for gauging how well the workers are coping with those threats.

This research displays to the supervisors and trainers of the CSI that humor and joking behavior are typically not indications that investigators are not serious about their tasks; on the contrary, all of the participants of this study truly cared about their professionalism and quality of their work. Experienced supervisors acknowledged that they saw joking as an indicator of the mental state of their respective teams. Understanding the appropriate and sometimes inappropriate joking behaviors can assist supervisors in providing support to their workers through more effective time and task management and debriefings.

Organizational narratives serve important purposes — they help workers understand the feelings and perspectives of others (McGregor & Holmes, 1999). The shared narrative is significant to the socialization and organizational culture of these work groups. I would suggest that CSI organizations begin recording some of the more significant narratives. These narratives can be integrated into the history of the organization, and these captured stories may result in strengthening group culture and bonds among workers. These teams have every right to be proud of their work and what they have accomplished, humor is simply part of their history, and it should be recorded.

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