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"It only hurts when I laugh": Tolerating bullying humour in order to belong at work

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Abstract

Our study examines the impacts on workers when organisational humour is repeated, sustained, dominating, and potentially harmful, and thus can be considered to be bullying. In an ethnographic study of an idiosyncratic New Zealand IT company, we observed humour that was sexualised, dominating, and perpetrated by the most powerful organizational members. We argue that the compelling need for belonging in this extreme organizational culture influenced workers to accept bullying humour as just a joke and therefore acceptable and harmless even when it contravened societal workplace norms. Our contribution is in identifying and extending the significant theoretical relationship between workplace humour and bullying that, to date, is not well-explored in organizational research.

Keywords: bullying, dark side, organisation, belonging, joking

1. Introduction

What are the impacts when humour in the workplace becomes bullying or harassment? This is the overarching research question guiding our study that examines organisational humour and bullying. Although we did not set out to investigate this specific aspect of humour at work, our data on bullying humour emerged from an earlier study that investigated workplace humour and organisational culture in New Zealand companies. Within the initial study, one idiosyncratic organization stood out from all the others as it prioritised humour, fun, pranks, and wild antics to such a degree that they gained notoriety in their wider industry. Therefore,

we explore the dark side to such unbounded hilarity (see Billig 2005, Plester 2016a 2016b) and argue that sustained, repeated, and extreme teasing at work may become workplace bullying – justified and downplayed as "just a joke" by workplace powerholders. Much of the data from this small organization was categorized into humour we identified as sexist, sexual, and homophobic. It is difficult for employees to complain or 'call out' bullying wrapped in a joke frame (see Freud 1905), as this immediately distances them from those involved in the humour and defines them as 'other' within their organisational culture.

Current research on bullying is extensive and investigations into workplace humour are increasing, but there is little examination of situations where these two phenomena are intertwined. The notion of humour is rarely theorised as a contributing factor in workplace bullying and/or harassment. Although we do not claim generalisability, our study makes a theoretical and practical contribution by clearly showing how on-going, repeated jokes may cause physical, emotional, or psychological harm to targets. Our emergent contribution prompts us to call for a wider research agenda investigating humour's dark side in workplace bullying and harassment. We identify important implications for employee wellbeing and contend that humour is a significant element in some forms of workplace bullying and, as yet, this is not fully recognized or theorized.

Workplace humour is typically linked to wellbeing and happiness (Robert & Wilbanks 2012) but is also highly subject to contextual differences (Critchley 2002; Bergson 1911) which can be dependent on the nature of work, the people in the organization, leadership, levels of formality and hierarchy, and a variety of organisational relationship factors (Burawoy 1982; Collinson 1988; Coser 1959; Linstead 1985; Roy 1959; Plester 2009, 2016a). There is an expectation in modern workplaces that humour is relevant, positive, and that laughter and mirth are important and desirable at work (Romero & Pescosolido 2008). However, people tend to underestimate the power of humour and a complex range of emotions can be conveyed and generated through humour (Plester 2016b). Humour is a complex construct because what can be experienced as hilarious by one person or group can be highly offensive, tragic, or even heart-breaking to someone else *(Plester 2016a)*.

Bullying represents the dark side of organisational behaviour and has become an emerging research phenomenon since the 1990s. Subsequently, preventing and managing bullying at work has become increasingly important within modern organizations. Negative effects of workplace bullying are well established and include increased psychological and physical distress (Leymann 1996), trauma (Bentley et al. 2012), and reduced organisational performance (Einarsen 2000). Bullying may target personal characteristics such as cultural differences (Gardner et al. 2013) and gender features (Plester 2015). There is a growing substantial body of work on workplace bullying and this research has stressed the importance of developing organisational strategies to reduce bullying (O'Driscoll et al. 2011).

Although workplace humour and bullying are both well-researched topics in their own right, there is very little research that investigates a connection between the two concepts. There is only a little recognition within the extant literature that humour that goes too far, is very offensive or targeted, involves ridicule and putdowns, might constitute a specific form of bullying.

We contend that bullying through humour can generate just as many problematic, traumatic emotions for victims as more overt, obvious forms of bullying. Indeed, some humour behaviours often fit with the formal criteria for workplace bullying employed by government agencies, organisations, and researchers. Our paper investigates the relationship between the dark side of humour and bullying and suggests that this type of bullying (that may also constitute harassment – see Collinson & Collinson 1996; Plester 2015) can be even more

insidious and difficult to address because the use of humour creates a smokescreen and illusion of safety (see Freud 1905) which to some extent protects the perpetrator from censure. "*Just joking*" is commonly used to excuse humour that belittles, ridicules, or makes a barbed point (Plester 2016a). Some forms of jocular abuse or banter are accepted by workplace colleagues as they can signify *belonging* in an organisational culture (see Plester & Sayers 2007). Victims of this type of jocular bullying may feel pressured to accept it because they risk being labelled a humourless spoilsport who cannot take a joke if they challenge the intent in aimed humour, thus signalling them as an 'outsider' in workplace humour groups. We align this form of jocular bullying with already established bullying frameworks. Bullying through joking can be sustained, repetitive, and involve significant power imbalances that make it unavoidable and risky to confront.

In our study of four New Zealand companies, one company stood out because their humour was riskier, more contentious, and seemed to contravene the societal and organizational boundaries that constrained humour in the other three companies (see Plester 2009). Using (so-called) humour examples from this idiosyncratic Information Technology (IT) organization, we explore the imposition of extreme, sexualized, aggressive forms of humour upon subordinate workers by a powerful CEO and his senior staff. To alleviate potential concerns, we note that this organization does not exist any longer.

Although the interactions are unanimously identified as humour by all staff members, our reflexive interpretation and construction suggests that these joking social behaviours can be perceived as bullying. We argue that they are constitutive of flagrant power and masculinity performances designed to control workers' behaviour, attitudes, and everyday interactions. Thus, our paper makes an original contribution in theoretically aligning the constructs of bullying and humour while our empirical examples illustrate the potential harm and exploitation that may be caused when bullying is perpetuated through joking.

Proceeding from this introduction, we review literature on workplace humour and then move into a critical discussion of the dark side of organisational life before turning to a comprehensive review of current bullying literature. Our method section outlines our critical incident approach (CIT) and data collection processes before detailing the research context and presenting four critical incidents with analysis. Our discussion brings the extant literature and our own data together as we outline our contribution and the implications for both practice and theoretical development. We contend that the bullying humour evidenced in our data is tolerated by employees as it constitutes a type of 'belonging' in the culture of jocular abuse that permeates the studied organization. We conclude by reasserting our claim that some humour belongs to the dark side of organisational life and is in fact bullying, and thus we call for further explorations into these two related constructs.

2. Humour at work

Humour is an important social construct usually associated with pleasure, happiness, and positive psychology (Martin 2007; Morreall 2009). From this positive perspective, organisational humour has been found to improve workplace relationships (Cooper 2005, 2008; Coser 1959) relieve boredom and dilute some racial hostility (Burawoy 1982; Roy 1959); create solidarity and identity (Collinson 1988); and mitigate hierarchical differences (Bradney 1957). Humour also helps to raise difficult subjects (Linstead 1985), helps both managers and subordinates save face (Holmes 2000; Holmes & Stubbe 2003), assists people to make sense of organisational life (Tracy et al. 2006a), offers some relief from tension (Plester

2009), and facilitates group processes (Romero & Pescosolido 2008). However, there is an overwhelming tendency to ascribe these positive attributions to all forms and enactments of humour because laughter is held to be a good thing and thus the more problematic elements of humour are often overlooked or ignored (see Billig 2005; Plester 2015). While Dwyer (1991) revealed that humour can unmask power relations and Grugulis (2002) explored alternative organisational realities exposed through humour, there are still very few studies that investigate critical workplace dynamics through humour. More recently, a study of Australian employees argued that workplace humour must be managed responsibly due to both long- and short-term psychological impacts on employees (Wijewardena et al. 2017).

Humour sharing at work can be paradoxical and a study of banter showed that even when humour can be targeted towards personal foibles and characteristics, it can signify belonging to the work group (Plester & Sayers 2007). Banter reinforces relationships through social acceptance, denoting group membership, solidarity, and belongingness (Hay 1994; Plester & Sayers 2007). Inclusion in a workgroup is significant in workplace cultures (Holmes & Marra 2002a) and joking can be a symbol of group identity even when the joking may seem shocking to outsiders (Zigderveld 1983). Indeed, being left out of workgroup or workplace banter excludes people denoting them as 'outsiders' which can cause isolation and distress, and a sense of not belonging (see Plester & Sayers 2007).

Although humour is central to social life and an inescapable part of work life, it can be dark and rebellious, and ridicule may be a key component of targeted humour (Bergson 1911; Billig 2005; Freud 1905). There are even times when humour can go beyond merely being inappropriate and it can be highly detrimental to social relations and people's identities (Lockyer & Pickering 2005). The line between humour and offensiveness can be a fine one and is highly contextual (Lockyer & Pickering 2005). When humour crosses the line (Plester 2009), it can become a much darker construct and therefore we next discuss problematic aspects in organisational life and research.

3. The dark side

Traditionally, issues that deal with the dark side of organisational life have been "overlooked, ignored or supressed" (Linstead et al. 2014: 166). There has been an emerging recognition that dark-side issues occur both outside and within organisational boundaries and such issues consist of situations where people are hurt, injustices occur, and behaviours may be illegal, unethical, or simply reprehensible (Griffin & O'Leary 2004). Dark-side behaviours are multi-levelled and thus can be investigated at the individual, group, or organisational level. There is a substantial body of studies of problematic behaviours (see Linstead et al. 2014 for an analysis of these studies). Dark-side studies include counterproductive behaviours that may harm the organization or those that may be injurious to people as in the case of workplace deviance, violence, aggression, (Griffin & O'Leary-Kelly 2004) and specifically for this current study, bullying.

Although Linstead and colleagues note that behaviours such as bullying may be "rooted in an *inner darkness* of the individual psyche" (2014: 170, emphasis original), the impacts of bullying may be experienced throughout groups and even the organization. Thus, bullying may affect individuals, groups, and the organization simultaneously. Therefore, outcomes from bullying are suboptimal for both individual actors and the organization (Linstead et al. 2014). Citing Deetz (1996), Linstead and colleagues also make the point that dark-side activities (such as bullying) may be "masked" to legitimate them and "facilitate exploitation"

(2014: 171). Extending their argument about legitimation and masking, and drawing upon the work of Michel Foucault, they suggest that hegemonic discourse can help to "naturalize particular social arrangements" that privilege the interests of the powerful and suppress "alternative discourses" (Linstead et al. 2014: 172). Furthermore, processes of "simulation and seduction" may "bedazzle social actors into enthusiastically colluding in their own disenfranchisement" and this may perpetuate even darker behaviours that "hide in the light" (Linstead et al. 2014: 172; O'Shea 2002; Brewis & Linstead 2000). Bullying can be considered one such dark-side behaviour.

3.1. Bullying

Bullying belongs to the dark side of organisational life and is a difficult topic to research due to the emotional and workplace impacts for targets, witnesses, and perpetrators (Cooper-Thomas et al. 2014). Investigating workplace bullying is even more challenging because both researchers and managers struggle to agree upon a definition that captures the intricacies and nuances of the complex workplace behaviours associated with bullying (Saunders et al. 2007). Researchers agree that a definitive definition of bullying does not currently exist as there is wide range of behaviours that can constitute bullying and it can be difficult to differentiate it from other forms of workplace harassment or interpersonal conflict (Claybourn et al. 2014; Cowie et al. 2002; Zapf & Einarsen 2001). However, impact on the target, frequency and duration, and the presence of a power imbalance, are common in research definitions (Saunders et al. 2007), and these criteria have been consistently used in formal definitions provided in government publications and the like (Safework Australia 2011; Worksafe New Zealand 2014). Claybourn and colleagues (2014) identify that intent, repetition, perceived intent and impact on victim are commonly used in judgments on whether or not workplace bullying has occurred. Salin (2003) defines workplace bullying as persistent, repetitive negative activity that involves targets who perceive themselves as having less power than the bully and who, as a result, experience negative psychological and/or physical repercussions.

A further issue arises because targets of bullying do not always see themselves as having been bullied even when observers or colleagues may consider that bullying has occurred. However, such behaviour need not be labelled by targets as bullying in order for it to be considered by a third party as bullying because it may result in psychological harm regardless. Indeed, the best-known international methodology for measuring bullying (the Negative Acts Questionnaire) is known as the behavioural method, measuring exposure to bullying acts rather than asking targets whether they feel they have been bullied (Einarsen et al. 2009).

Including specific behaviours in a definition of bullying is contentious because an exhaustive list would be too long, and it is unlikely that it could cover every behaviour that could be considered workplace bullying. Therefore, researchers must try to address the sometimes covert and subtle nature of workplace bullying, (Bentley et al. 2009; Claybourn et al. 2014; Einarsen et al. 2003; Saunders et al. 2007; Zapf & Einarsen 2001). Definitions of bullying may also include cases of so-called 'institutional bullying', where the organization's norms, culture or practices allow behaviour that causes offence or undue stress to others without regard for their consequences, or where the structures, policy, practices or requirements unreasonably burden staff (Worksafe New Zealand 2014). Bullying can also include situations when resources are withheld or people are transferred (Bartlett & Bartlett 2011; McCormack et al. 2013) and context is an important consideration in deciding whether or not bullying has occurred (Claybourn et al. 2014; Cooper-Thomas et al. 2013).

Early conceptualizations of bullying behaviours included scapegoating, name calling or teasing, physical abuse, work pressure, and sexual harassment (Brodsky 1976). Bullying

behaviours can be direct or indirect (Einarsen 2000; Einarsen et al. 2003). Direct forms include verbal attacks (Bartlett & Bartlett 2011, Bentley et al. 2009; Hutchinson et al. 2010) or physical attacks (Bartlett & Bartlett 2011; Leymann 1996; McCormack et al. 2013; Tracy et al. 2006b), whilst indirect forms of bullying are more covert and subtle and may include gossip, isolation, or exclusion (Dick & Rayner 2012, 2013; Hutchinson et al. 2010; Keashly & Neuman 2004; Leymann 1996). Bullying behaviours in nurses identified personal attack, erosion of professional competence and reputation (Hutchinson et al. 2010) as significant, while supervisor bullying behaviours were categorized as threatening, dismissive, interpersonal, and concerned with work management (Yamada et al. 2014). It seems that workplace bullying behaviours generally are repetitive, continuous, and may include an attack on either personal or professional attributes or may concern work tasks. The notion of bullying should be treated as distinct from interpersonal workplace conflict because the *ongoing* cumulative nature of workplace bullying is what causes much of the negative harm to targets (Bentley et al. 2009; Einarsen et al. 2003; Hutchinson et al. 2010; Saunders et al. 2007; Samnani & Singh 2012).

McCormack and colleagues (2013) investigated workplace bullying experienced by Australian building and construction apprentices. In one of the few bullying studies that mentions humour, they found that organisational bullying could arise from inappropriate teasing when banter went too far, was personal, and/or was aimed at workers' skills or experience in the industry. The use of humour may have some specific impacts in bullying situations as bullying behaviour can be disguised within the joke frame making it difficult for targets to complain. The inability to defend oneself is a significant aspect of workplace bullying and targets of workplace bullying frequently feel powerless and that they cannot retaliate (Einarsen 2000; Einarsen et al. 2003; O'Driscoll et al. 2011; Saunders et al. 2007).

Power imbalance is created through the formal organisational hierarchies; thus, supervisors are more commonly identified as bullies (Carbo & Hughes 2010; Einarsen et al. 2003; Hoel & Beale 2006). Therefore, bullying is more commonly experienced at lower hierarchical levels (Salin 2001) and it is argued that formal power structures actually create opportunities for supervisors to utilize bullying behaviours (Bartlett & Bartlett 2011; McCormack et al. 2013; Salin 2003). However, power is a complex concept and informal social power (McCormack et al. 2013), knowledge-based power (Carbo & Hughes 2010; Einarsen et al. 2003) or situational power (Carbo & Hughes 2010) can result in upwards or horizontal bullying (Salin 2001) that is not reliant upon hierarchical or formal role-based power. A problem with the inclusion of power imbalance is that it is the targets' perception of the power imbalance that is taken into account (Bentley et al. 2009; Cowie et al. 2002; Einarsen et al. 2003) and the bullying process may create a power imbalance (Einarsen et al. 2003) that may be real or perceived. Feeling powerless and helpless is one of the harmful results of bullying (Saunders et al. 2007).

Although recognizing bullying examines *intent*, there are significant problems in diagnosing intent as it is based on perceptions of the target, the perpetrator and bystanders – all of whom may have different perceptions. Everyday interactions such as workplace banter can be experienced as bullying and create harmful negative impacts but it is very difficult to discern whether the harm was intended (Alexander et al. 2012). The impact on the target may be paramount to identifying whether bullying has occurred (Claybourn et al. 2014; Saunders et al. 2007; Yamada et al. 2014) and although it is difficult to accurately discern what aspect of bullying has caused harm, most researchers agree that workplace bullying has severe negative impacts for targets (Cowie et al. 2002; Einarsen 2000; O'Driscoll et al. 2011). Impacts from bullying may be physical, emotional, psychological or all of these (Saunders et al. 2007). We

note here that it is not necessary for a *target* to label the ill treatment they receive as bullying for it to constitute bullying from a definitional point of view, nor is such labelling necessary for harm to ensue (Einarsen et al. 2011).

Bullying can be many different things, can have different intentions, and can operate from differing positions of power but it is usually ongoing, repeated or enduring. From the literature, we establish our framework for analysis, concluding that to establish that workplace bullying has occurred, interactions are episodic and/or ongoing with the potential to harm the target either physically, emotionally, or psychologically. Furthermore, some sort of power differential is at play and the target feels unable to retaliate or protect themselves. This characterization of bullying is consistent with most international formal definitions, including both Australian and New Zealand government guidelines for the prevention of workplace bullying that define bullying thus: "Workplace bullying is repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety" (Safework Australia 2011).

The ambiguity in the concept makes it easy to frame many activities as bullying but also may allow bullies to escape detection through framing their activities in a different light to evade recognition. This is highly pertinent to our enquiry because we specifically examine the use of humour as a form of bullying and we propose that it may shield some bullying behaviours. We turn now to our research question and our site of interest is an idiosyncratic IT company that openly and proudly displayed humour that contravened societal and workplace norms. Their workplace humour was profane, sexual, sexist, anti-gay, racist, and scatological. When presenting examples of this organization's humour in conference presentations, attending scholars frequently asked the question: *Is this actually humour or is it bullying?* And so, we consider their question and our own as we pose our guiding research question: *What are the impacts when humour in the workplace becomes bullying or harassment?*

4. Methodology

This study arises from a larger research project investigating humour in the workplace. The larger study comprised in-depth ethnographic research in four organizations from different industries. Data were collected in a four-year study of humour and organizational culture. Ethnographic immersion involved participant observation, in-depth interviews, document collection, and ad hoc discussions with organizational participants. Interviews (59 in total) were audio recorded, whilst observations were hand-written as they occurred. The wider study has generated a variety of findings concerning the relationship between humour and organisational culture (Plester 2009, 2015, 2016a) and this current analysis sits within this broader research agenda but has a specific focus on humour that might be theorised as bullying. To address our research question, we focus on four significant interactions observed in one IT organization. In our data collection and analysis, we have employed Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan 1954).

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) has become a widely used qualitative research approach (Breunig & Christoffersen 2016; Butterfield et al. 2005) that is particularly useful when researchers are interested in understanding the details of interactional events (Spencer-Oatey & Harsch 2015). Developed in the 1950s by the psychologist John Flanagan, it was used to identify workplace behaviour and effective/ineffective task performance. It often investigates extreme behaviour (Flanagan 1954) that deviates from normal/expected behaviour.

CIT can, and often does, include a variety of data collection methods. For the purposes of this current study, we draw upon researcher (participant) observations and participant interviews. Observations give researchers a strong contextual understanding of situations and is often used in CIT analysis. Observations are enhanced in combination with other methods such as interviews and follow-up questioning – which offers participants' perspectives and explanations of incidents (Spencer-Oatey & Harsch 2016).

Analysing critical incidents can be undertaken thematically and behavioural themes and categories can be coded and developed (Spencer-Oatey & Harsch 2016). However, the biggest challenge in CIT is defining what is *critical* and what is an *incident* (Spencer-Oatey & Harsch 2016). An incident may be critical, which does not necessarily imply that it is dramatic; rather, it has significance to the people involved and/or is capable of being critiqued or analysed (Flanagan 1954). An incident may be a brief sequence which is more frequent in workplace humour, or some may be extended, ongoing interactions (Holmes & Marra 2002b). An incident or interaction can become *critical* in the way that we look at the situation and the meaning that we attach to it (Tripp 1994) and this may emerge from analysis after the incident.

For our purposes, we define critical as incidents/interactions that were observed by the researcher or narrated by participants during the research process and that displayed the following characteristics:

- The incident seemed contrary to behavioural norms usually displayed in workplaces (we were able to make comparisons with our other studied organizations).
- The incident may be either a one-off event **or** a repeated series of events that had significance for participants (exemplified by the megaphone incident below).

A further challenge to CIT is in successfully recalling events; however, we have overcome this through our researcher observation and recording of incidents in the moments that they were occurring, triangulated with interview data that offers participant views of incidents. We observed a great number of humour incidents that appeared contentious in this IT company and many appeared to fit the criteria for bullying established through our literature review. The incidents presented below are typical and representative of our wider data set of similar incidents. To be transparent, we note that our original, broader study did not set out to investigate bullying through humour, but retroactively examining many incidents from this IT company, responses from academics at conferences, and our team of three researchers comprising two specialists in bullying and one in humour, compelled us to analyse these incidents specifically through the lens of workplace bullying. Before the four key incidents, we offer some background on this IT organization.

4.1. Background

This idiosyncratic Information Technology (IT) company was managed by its owner (Jake – all names are pseudonyms), succeeding for ten years in the highly competitive IT industry. A small company comprising 25 employees offered specialised IT services and were known for their IT expertise. Comprising a team of engineers plus a sales team, each team reported to a senior manager. It was a male-dominated environment as only three of the employees were women. As well as these two functional teams, two administrative staff reported directly to Jake. A notable feature of this company was the 'culture of fun' that prevailed and was explicitly recognized by all staff. Thus, jokes, pranks, physical horseplay, banter, and a multitude of so-called fun and humour interactions were constantly enacted and displayed as part of the workplace culture. Some of these interactions appeared supportive of earlier

humour interactions, while many others were contestive and challenged preceding humour exchanges (see Holmes & Marra 2002a) All staff firmly agreed that humour and fun were the most important elements of the organizational culture and joking was particularly highly valued at this company.

The constant humour performances were modelled by Jake and he openly declared that no humour is 'off limits'. In keeping with this value, Jake fervently encouraged displays of sexual, sexist, homophobic, scatological, and racist humour alongside milder, more socially acceptable forms. All staff eagerly endorsed the managerially modelled attitude that if it was *just a joke*, then it was acceptable. Gender imbalance may have helped to create workplace conditions that encouraged risky types of humour – as evidenced in other studies of masculine workplace humour (see Collinson 1988; Collinson & Collinson 1996; Linstead 1985; Plester 2015). On the surface, life in this organization seemed to be a whirlwind of loud laughter and cheerful jocularity. However, in confidential interviews, some subordinate staff admitted that some of the humour "goes too far" and has the potential to cause harm, and that, in some instances, humour and fun had resulted in physical and psychological harm. This context sets the scene for our investigation into an extreme culture where humour is culturally central and is sometimes even prioritised over performance.

Humour was a constant factor in the organization and organisational members prided themselves on their extreme humour culture. The humour created potential issues, recognized by employees and managers, but also a strong sense of belonging was indicated by nearly all of the workers in this organization. Two employees clearly stated (in interviews) that there was too much humour and that much of it was too risky and both employees had resigned from the organization, seeking work elsewhere. In an interview exploring the prevalence and riskiness of workplace humour as well as employee reactions, the CEO simply declared "if they don't like it, they can leave."

5. Results and analysis

5.1 Spanking Adrian

Adrian had made a mistake in his work and this had been brought to the attention of Jake (CEO) via the senior manager of the engineering team. Rather than the usual workplace protocol of a quiet, confidential discussion about his work, Adrian was called out loudly in front of the entire open plan office and his mistake was described followed by this joking interchange:

> Jake mimes a batting action declaring: "Next time, we will bend you over this desk, pull down your trousers, and get the girls to spank you with table tennis paddles".
> The senior manager adds: "And you're not allowed to enjoy it..."
> Jake concludes: "And if that doesn't work, we'll swipe CDs down your arse!"
> (Observation notes)

The issues inherent in this example can be characterised as sexual parody, domination, control, and subjugation of a junior staff member by the organisational owner and his senior manager. This is both novel and unusual behaviour in modern organizations and capturing such an extreme data incident offers original insights into bullying through humour. It is rare to find examples like this in workplace humour literature and, similarly, this type of behaviour was not observed in any of the other studied companies. We see the joking threat as a *critical incident* due to its allusion to sexual dominance which does not meet societal norms for office

behaviour. What is missing from the dialogue above, however, is the tonality of voice and loud performative aspects of the interchange, indicating to all in the room that this is *just a joke*. And of course, making it clear that at no point did either protagonist intend to actually carry out these extreme actions. What is alarming and concerning is the blatant power display by the two senior men, the sexualisation of the junior employee with the implication that he might enjoy the actions, and the verbal co-opting of female employees as possible punishers. It could feasibly be argued that the intent was to humiliate (Adrian) or at least to control and modify his future workplace actions and the power differential is apparent – with Adrian powerless to object. An even more insidious implication is that because this is framed as a joke, anyone who might object risks being labelled a humourless spoilsport; this renders Adrian even more powerless as he must take the joke. What the isolated example does not show is the repetitive effect of everyday interchanges such as this, often with Adrian as the victim. Therefore, the next two examples will illustrate this, adding weight to our argument that these behaviours can be characterised as bullying. As an isolated incident, this could be interpreted as sexual harassment but in conjunction with our next examples, we contend that it constitutes bullying as it is repeated, sustained, imbued with hierarchical dominance, and has an obvious target (Salin 2003). While it is hard to categorically claim *intention* to harm, it does encompass an obvious intention to dominate, control, and correct Adrian's behaviour (see Butler 2015).

5.2 Mooning

On a quiet Friday afternoon, Ann the administrative assistant leaves her desk and goes out on an errand requested by Jake. As soon as she has left, Jake laughingly beckons Adrian over and grabs the company camera. Ducking behind a cubicle screen, Jake drops his trousers and orders Adrian to take a photo of his bare buttocks. The photo is uploaded to Ann's computer and her desktop background is replaced with this photo. She returns from her errand and reopens her computer display to be confronted by the boss' bare buttocks. She screams loudly in shock and then joins the laughter at her expense when she realizes that she is the target of a prank (Observation notes).

This is a striking and extreme instance unlikely to be replicated or found in studies of other organisations and once again there are elements of both sexual harassment (Collinson & Collinson 1996) and bullying but our focus is the bullying with the two obvious targets being Ann and Adrian. Firstly, Ann is again subject to the organisational culture norms and humour dynamics that demand that even though she might be shocked at the photo, she must join the cultural imperative to laugh at the prank – which she does regardless of how she might actually feel. Potentially, Ann may have been harmed psychologically but she is compelled to participate in the joke in which she is the target. Laughing at the humour is an important signal of belonging in this organization. Secondly, Adrian has been seconded into the prank with no opportunity to resist or complain. He is ordered to view and photograph his boss' bare backside – hardly a reasonable or appropriate workplace request – and is powerless to refuse. It could be argued that there is no specific intent to harm Adrian but, regardless, he may have been upset or angry by such an inappropriate demand and his actions are again controlled and dominated by Jake.

5.3 Humping

Although this interaction was not directly observed as in the two prior examples, the interaction was recounted (in confidence) by Sean, a young sales representative who had been inadvertently caught up in yet another sexualised, dominant display by CEO Jake. Sean had returned to the office from a sales visit bringing with him the two senior executives who were his customers and he was hoping to extend their business dealings. Upon entering the open plan office space, they were astounded to encounter cat-calls and shouts as Jake parodied a sexual act, pretending to 'hump' Adrian. The two visiting executives were shocked and left the office immediately. They later rang Sean asking: "What in the hell is wrong with your boss?" and refused to conduct any further business with the company. Sean felt upset, embarrassed, and had also lost a potentially lucrative sales commission. Although Jake laughed about the customers' response, Sean submitted his resignation after this incident.

In the incident, Adrian is again the target of Jake's outrageous humour display and must meekly submit to a sexualised parody that mocks homosexuality (a common theme in the organisational humour at this company). Harm is again very probable as Adrian is humiliated, sexualised, and dominated in this unpleasant parody. Since this is the second example involving Adrian (our observation records show several similar incidents), a pattern of sexualised domination and targeting is apparent and thus this example meets our identified key criteria for workplace bullying with potential harm to a subordinate employee (Saunders et al. 2007).

Sean is the second victim of this incident and speaks openly of his embarrassment, loss of business, and personal disadvantage, and, ultimately, he felt compelled to leave the organization to avoid further distress. In a frank but sad interview, he admitted that there were aspects of the humour and fun that he completely enjoyed but described Jake as dominating and a "dictator" and decided to seek work in a context that might be "more professional" (Interview with Sean). The personal interview provided a record of Sean's honest reflection and the seriousness of his distress which are rich data not easily obtained in organizational analyses. They support our original insights into humour as bullying behaviour (see discussion below).

5.4 Megaphone mayhem

This example highlights one specific incident but also identifies that this activity was ongoing and repeated frequently in this workplace. The ethnographic nature of the data collection allowed the researcher to experience more than once an 'insiders' experience not easily generated in other forms of research, again offering novel insights into real-life humour and bullying. The following details recorded in observation provide further illustrations.

Jake had a megaphone which he kept in the office and frequently used in pranks (at least four incidents during the researched period). He snuck up behind employees hard at work and suddenly shouted through the megaphone making them jump, swear, or react violently. In this specific instance, he hides behind a screen that conceals the small kitchenette and waits while a young engineer, Minjun, makes himself a large mug of coffee. As Minjun emerges from the kitchen, Jake shrieks through the megaphone causing the engineer to physically jump, shout, and coffee flies around and all over him. Everyone including Minjun, laughs loudly, and work resumes (Observation notes). This was a normal everyday interaction reflecting the prevailing organizational culture in this workplace.

Again, Jake makes an employee the target for his prank and performs this overtly in front of the rest of the staff. Although Minjun was not visibly hurt by the hot coffee, the potential for harm is apparent and Jake must be aware of this. The payoff from getting a laugh from the entire staff seems more important to Jake than health and safety concerns and the megaphone

pranks were a noted feature in this workplace. The megaphone pranks highlight the repeated, ongoing nature of the joking/bullying, the domination of employees by Jake – the most powerful organisational member and the potential for harm, intended or not (Einarsen et al. 2011).

We have noted in our method section that we also conduced in-depth semi-structured interviews in this company (15 in total, including the CEO and senior managers). Although our analysed examples above are elicited from our participant observations, we also discussed the humour interactions we observed throughout the research period, during the interviews. All interviewees shrugged off the extreme interactions as 'just joking' but also conceded that some of these were extreme and 'crossed the line' at times. Interview participants conceded that some of the events could be considered as harassment and/or confrontational but did not apply the term 'bullying' to the humour exchanges. The interview data gave us insights into the frequency of humour interactions and highlighted other extreme incidents that had been enacted at other times in this company. This data gave us in-depth reflections from company personnel that assisted in our analysis and framing for this paper. Interview data have also been used in other published works (see Plester 2015, 2016a, 2016b).

We conclude this analytical section with the words of one of the organisational workers indicating their awareness of the problematic dynamics of much of the humour: "This place is a sexual harassment suit just waiting to happen".

6. Discussion and implications

This paper draws upon two distinct bodies of research (workplace humour and workplace bullying) in analysing the nature of extreme personal interactions involving humour in the workplace and we argue that such behaviours constitute bullying with potentially harmful impacts on workers. Our contribution arises from allying rich, ethnographic data with direct observation to support a novel insight into the topic under investigation and its impact on workplace participants. As with humour in the workplace, the context in which workplace bullying occurs is an important consideration in understanding the nature of such interactions and how they are experienced by organisational members (Cooper-Thomas et al. 2013; O'Driscoll et al. 2011). Combining an understanding of the complex structural, cultural, and interpersonal factors associated with the use of extreme humour in the examples used in this paper and relating this to what is understood about workplace bullying, this paper has examined four extreme examples of interpersonal interaction in the workplace. Such examples are not commonly seen in other analyses of other organizations and are unusual in workplace humour studies. Thus, this reflects the specific and unusual organizational culture of the studied company. Each incident was framed as humour by all the organisational participants and it appears that the desire to *belong* in this organisational culture superseded their interpretation of this humour as harmful bullying. We argue that it was this desire to belong to the organizational culture that superseded usual behavioural and workplace norms and allowed bullying behaviours to predominate, disguised as (so-called) humour and fun. This nexus is not currently examined in any depth in the extant literature on workplace bullying.

All our four novel humour incidents meet the criteria of bullying and therefore represent the dark side of the experience of work (Linstead et al. 2014). Using widely accepted criteria for bullying as repeated, dominating, negative behaviour (Salin et al. 2003), we contend that bullying in this organisation is perpetrated and disguised as rebellious humour. The examples represent an ongoing pattern of extreme interactions that are sexualised, homophobic,

physically confronting, and highly inappropriate in a modern workplace context. All carry the potential for harm and include an obvious power dynamic as they are often perpetrated by the most powerful organisational member. The frequency of such examples is evidenced by the multiple documented interactions observed, experienced, and narrated in participant interviews at this company. The combination of humour and bullying is a novel conception of bullying and, in this case at least, we contend from our analysis that such an extreme culture of humour has crossed a line to become at times an insidious form of bullying disguised as joking and humour. We argue that humorous bullying may become engrained and accepted as part of organizational culture and employees feel compelled to accept and reinforce this in order to belong at work.

Perhaps most crucially, the bullying can be thought of as a product of the work environment, characterized through its leadership in particular, with forms of dysfunctional and destructive leadership closely associated with bullying in the extant literature (Hoel et al. 2010). In this respect, it can be considered a form of institutional bullying, with the norms, culture, and practices of the organization working together to perpetrate the harm on targets. In characterizing the phenomenon as such, we avoid falling into the trap of seeing these behaviours as purely interpersonal exchanges (Bentley et al. 2012). To do so would belie the true nature of bullying and the extreme difficulties targets and others experience in trying to defend themselves or avoid the bullying.

One of the challenges to our analysis and interpretation is that none of the employees of this organisation perceived that they had been *bullied*, although a senior manager conceded that some of the activities could be perceived as "harassment". Considering the overt power difference observed in the examples, we argue that employees likely felt unable to complain of being bullied and thus that the catchall "it's just a joke" was simply an easier categorization for all to adopt within this idiosyncratic environment. Furthermore, the desire to belong – even to such a problematic workplace culture – encouraged participants to accept and laugh off workplace bullying. The researchers are not qualified to assess what psychological, emotional damage may have occurred, especially to Adrian, a frequent target for workplace humour. But the experience of being exposed to bullying behaviours, regardless of how those behaviours are labelled by the targets, can certainly result in psychological harm (Cooper-Thomas et al. 2014).

The salesman Sean showed obvious distress and resigned his job, while Minjun and Ann laughed at the pranks in which they were targeted – possibly because this is the expected response in this organization, denoting *belonginess*. Using the bullying criteria (Safe Work Australia 2011; Salin 2003), all these interactions are episodically separate but, we argue, form part of an ongoing pattern of bullying through humour. Each example holds the potential to harm the target either physically, emotionally or psychologically – or all three (Cooper-Thomas 2014). An obvious power differential is at play and the employee targets are unable to retaliate or protect themselves and must produce the expected response of laughter at their boss' jokes. When bullying is perpetrated through humour, it likely leaves the targets even more powerless as they risk further condemnation or mocking through not "taking the joke" (Plester 2015). Risking being accused of overreacting to a so-called joke in a small workplace denies targets the option of making a serious complaint as would be possible within larger organizations with the structures for grievance processes. These employees may have been further victimized by being "bedazzled" into participating laughingly in their own subjugation. This may have allowed the bullying to be both hidden and overt at the same time, or, in the words of Linstead, bullying was allowed to "hide in the light" (Linstead et al. 2014: 172). In depicting how *humour* may constitute bullying, we extend research that has emphasised the

important role that environmental conditions such as leadership, culture, and policies can play in how workplace bullying is both experienced and managed (O'Driscoll et al. 2011; Salin & Hoel 2011).

Modern workplaces mostly recognize that humour is not a defence for obvious misbehaviour and, moreover, that it does not excuse health and safety violations. Larger organizations usually have human resource management (HRM) departments that monitor and manage appropriate behavioural interactions, although research suggests preventive activity even in larger organizations is often inadequate (Bentley et al. 2012; Catley et al. 2013; Harrington et al. 2013). Small organizations do not typically have effective safeguards such as robust policy and anti-bullying practices and a dedicated HRM function, and are largely reliant upon wider workplace legislation and societal norms to influence their workplace behaviours. Therefore, a rogue organization with questionable leadership may be able to flourish and prosper even while perpetuating bullying and harassment from the highest level. While the CEO may not have deliberately intended harm towards his employees, his own love of rebellious humour created an organisational culture seemingly without any proprietary boundaries as long as activities are framed as humour. According to Freud (1905), "joke work" allows people to safely release impulses that may not be socially acceptable, such as sex and aggression. Jokers shield their impulses behind the joking framework and can express confronting ideas and beliefs. Furthermore, what Freud calls contentious (i.e. transgressive) joking can create pleasure and making others laugh may increase this pleasure (Freud 1905) but this has to be well-constructed and clever rather than merely rude and offensive. The CEO was frequently funny and could be very quick-witted – our researcher did laugh at some of his antics. However, he also used his joking skills to control and dominate those in his employ in a unique way. Rather than explicitly exerting his power and control, he used his exuberant joking to influence employees' behaviour, to create enthusiasm, excitement, and perhaps pleasure, and to reinforce his position as "king of the jokers" (employee description).

While none of the examples are necessarily motivated by malice, they indicate a pattern of bullying that is nevertheless insidious and dangerous. Being disguised as humour makes bullying even more difficult to resist or challenge. Hierarchical power is wrapped up in teasing and mocking (Billig 2005) which can be used as corrective for social behaviours (Butler 2015). Unable to resist such behaviours and fearing complaints will result in alienation from the organisational culture or further victimisation, targets of bullying typically leave the organization as a means of escape. Exiting the organisation is a common coping measure of last resort for individuals targeted with bullying (D'Cruz & Noronha 2010).

Currently, the relationship between humour and bullying is not firmly established theoretically in either field and our contribution here has been in pinpointing, developing, and analysing the relationship between the two. Our analysis of the role played by humour in bullying highlights the importance of environmental workplace conditions. Arguing from one extreme case, we contend that when humour becomes such an important aspect of organizational culture, it may escalate too far to allow support for and may even encourage the bullying of vulnerable employees, leaving them feeling powerless to complain. In effect, humour can be a powerful and prevailing form of bullying that is not widely recognized in current conceptions of bullying.

Further explicit research into bullying through humour is required and we suggest that greater recognition should be given to the power of humour as a device that can be used to bully or harass whilst shielding the perpetrator from proper accountability. Future research should consider how humour impedes attempts to manage bullying within workplaces; it could also investigate in detail the impacts over time on bystanders. In this respect, we have

identified implications for HR managers tasked with managing bullying cases and workplace professionals would do well to consider and recognise humour interactions in bullying cases.

7. Conclusions

Humour is not always enjoyable nor kind and can be used to mock, deride, and harm others. This study argues that this type of humour can be considered a dark side of the organisational behaviour. In our proposed inclusion of *humour* in current conceptions of bullying, we contend that when humour targets an individual or group, is ongoing and repeated, and/or enhances control and dominance, it can become a bullying device that is difficult for targets to identify and challenge. Moreover, this difficulty can be characterised as a form of institutional bullying where the structure, norms, culture, and leadership of the organisation all make important contributions to the experience of bullying and inability to avoid its harmful impacts. When left unchallenged and in the hands of those skilled in performance and delivery, such humorous bullying can have devastating consequences and may cause substantial embarrassment, confusion, and harm. In addressing this newly emerging insight into a form of bullying, we invite further explorations into the relationship between humour and bullying and reassert that sometimes "just joking" may not be funny at all.

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