HUMOUR IN THE CLIENT-CONSULTANT RELATIONSHIP:

WHO IS IN AND OUT?

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This chapter continues the examination of the dynamics of the client-consultant relationship. Drawing on our data from two of the four projects (Darlington Building Society and Eastwood Park Prison) our focus is on the elicitation of laughter within the client-consultant relationship. This contrasts with the current focus on consultants as a common source of jokes within organizational life. Despite the apparent economic and social success of the occupation, or rather, because of it, the activities of consultants appear to raise strong levels of ambivalence and occasionally outright hostility. Often, this is expressed not so much in direct criticism, but through jokes, such as those above. One of the oldest jokes, that has been doing the rounds since the 1960s is that 'a management consultant is someone who will borrow your watch to tell you the time (when you didn't ask to know) and then sell it to someone else (who didn't know that they wanted to buy one)'. Many readers are likely to have heard this joke before or, if not, then others like it. Consulting jokes have become a central part of popular business discourse. It seems that although their services have become indispensable people love to hate them at the same time. These many jokes portray consultants as telling clients what they already know, as expensive (they charge exorbitant fees), as ineffective (their advice rarely works), as reckless destroyers of organizations, as repackaging old ideas and developing empty buzzwords, as undermining the long-term quality of management, as running amok if not tightly controlled, and so forth. Overall, consultancy is presented as a zero-sum game; if consultants are making money someone else must be losing it – inevitably clients and related stakeholders. Consultants are therefore viewed as consuming rather contributing to the wealth and well-being of organizations and nations. They have thus joined a succession of occupational groups, including the clergy, bankers and lawyers, that at different points in time have been portrayed as conmen, prostitutes and parasites in popular jokes. Indeed, a recent study of the law in the USA analysed hundreds of lawyer jokes in terms of broader representations of the law in the mass media, political discourse and public opinion surveys. It identified an underlying

ambivalence associated with belief in the law and increasing reliance on lawyers (Galanter, 2006). Consultants are a further group whose supposed insidious power and apparent lack of accountability creates deep feelings of resentment and distrust that is articulated through the many jokes that are told about them.

However, our focus in this chapter is not on the discourse of consultancy as represented in the jokes about them, rather we examine aspects of humour within the consultancy activity. In conducting our research we were struck by the high incidence of laughter within meetings between clients and consultants. Its occurrence suggested that the different actors may have developed a strong rapport and so were comfortable in each other's presence. In this respect their "playfulness" might be taken as an indicator of the level of closeness of their relationship since, given the situational nature of humour, the development of a range of "common understandings" are required in order to appreciate a joke. Furthermore, since humour requires a high degree of social involvement and careful coordination it can assist in revealing 'the network of relations, cohesion and maintenance of the specific social structure' (Pizzini, 1991: 478) within a group. If we define rapport in the restricted sense of the extent to which the parties in client-consultant meetings engage in reciprocal laughter, an analysis of humour episodes can detail how the parties are included and excluded in relation to particular humorous comments and so reveal the shifting boundaries between the parties. Whether people laugh together, or some laugh and others do not, reveals the extent of their like-mindedness and whether those present constitute themselves as an "in group" that share a common perspective in relation to the matters at hand. Thus the extent to which clients and consultants engage in collective displays of laughter indicates whether they are a unified or divided group. In this way humour and laughter delineate group boundaries and determine who is in and who is out at any one moment. This underpins the broader point that the nature of the client-consultant relationship is not structurally determined at the outset but is

constituted and reconstituted on a moment-by-moment basis. It is the micro interactions between the parties, of which humour is one important aspect, that bring the relationship into being and determines how it is experienced by those present.

The chapter is organised in the following way. Firstly, we selectively explore some of the literature on humour and laughter. We then . We conclude with a short discussion which compares these contexts and the implications for humour and laughter in the context of consultancy and more generally.

LAUGHTER AND RAPPORT

Regardless of their specific emphases, theories of humour all propose that the components of humorous remarks and incidents are 'in mutual clash, conflict or contradiction' (Wilson 1979: 9). Incongruity is therefore a central feature of humour (Berger, 1976; Berlyne, 1968; Cetola, 1988; Fry, 1963; Koestler, 1964; Suls, 1972; Veatch, 1998). It is argued that humour proceeds from a sudden interchange between, or unexpected juxtapositioning of, self-consistent but incompatible interpretative frames. During the unfolding of a joke, the listener / recipient suddenly becomes aware of an implicit meaning which has previously remained dormant. As Fry (1963: 152) puts it 'the body content of each joke is accompanied by innumerable implicit themes, both conscious and unconscious … it is the art of the punch-line to snatch some of this implicit material from the world of Shades and project it into the workaday world or, in other words, into reality'. When a punch line is delivered, an explicit-implicit reversal occurs and new meaning is created. In this way humour is separated from other forms of communication by being situated in a 'play frame' (Bateson, 1955). The implicit message of such a frame is that 'this is not real' and 'this is fantasy'. What is occurring is fun rather than serious.

For humour to be perceived people must be able to understand the shifting relationship between the incongruous elements. Thus, humour researchers have sought to account for the fact that humour is situationally dependent and subjective (Carrell 1992; Raskin 1985; Winick 1976). People's ability to perceive humour in a given message has been shown to be dependent on their familiarity with social scripts and patterns of communication, which enable them to recognize humorous deviations from expected patterns of behaviour. If the relationship between the incongruous elements that underpin a joke are either already known, or completely unknown, humour may not be generated because the sudden shift in perception is lost with the consequence that the audience fail to "get" the joke. The success of humour has also been shown to depend on the willingness of specific audiences to appreciate humour, and not to regard it as irrelevant, unacceptable or inane (Raskin 1992). As Meyer (2000: 316) observes, 'attempts at humour that meet with success depend directly on the specific audience and the situation in question'.

Building on these general notions of humour, early work suggests that laughter helps generate a 'common definition of a situation' (Coser, 1959: 172). Laughter is therefore an invitation to those present to engage in a communal act that displays a momentary common bond. More recently Glenn (1989, 1991-1992, 1995) has similarly argued that the production of collective laughter involves displays of consensus and like-mindedness. In this way a group of people can constitute themselves as an 'in group' which shares a common perspective in relation to the circumstances and events that form the subject of the humour. Norrick (1993, 1994) shows how different forms of joking activities (e.g., punning, word play, personal anecdotes etc.) can enhance conversation involvement and in the process establish rapport. Lennox Terrion and Ashforth (2002) studied the use of putdown humour in fostering group cohesion among attendees on a leadership training programme for police officers. This type of humour was defined as that which 'relies on making fun of a perceived

weakness of the target (whether a person, thing or institution) for its success' (p. 58). They conclude that 'putdowns served to enact the community by making it clear to all candidates that they were a group by virtue of their apparently shared humour and social exchanges' (p. 70). This literature therefore emphasizes the way in which reciprocal laughter ties participants to one another by expressing a common definition of a situation.

Within the management and organization literature there is a rich vein of research which highlights how people at work use collective laughter to create and sustain group cohesion and at the same time manage their relationship with their immediate work environment and the broader structures of managerial authority within the organization. For example, whether it be Roy's (1959) machinists, Bradney's (1957) department store workers or Linstead's (1985) builders and bakers, their humorous exchanges are seen as a expressions of group consensus that challenge, contradict and occasionally invert the formal mechanisms of organization control and management. Similarly, Rodrigues and Collinson (1995) showed how a union newspaper used satirical cartoons to present a powerful and influential 'alternative definition of reality to that offered by management, one that was designed to appeal to and be compatible with workers' everyday experience' (p. 755). Finally, Collinson (1988) research of shop-floor workers in a lorry factory shows how jokes and pranks perpetrated in this workplace situation reinforced group identities through creating notions of "us and them". Humorous events therefore acted as way of assessing the strength and limit of group boundaries since 'Exposure to the joking culture, not only instructed new members on how to act and react, but also constituted a test of the willingness of initiates to be part of the male group and to accept the rules' (p. 188).

This group of studies reveals that a great deal of humour at work represents a comment on and challenge to the validity of managerial authority and the actions and motives of managers. As Rodrigues and Collinson's (19995: 755) write, such humour 'seeks to

demystify and debunk the discourses and practices of authority'. However, the extent to which such satirical comment has the potential to destabilize the organization is viewed as limited since humour primarily acts as a safety-valve for the employees as they "let off steam". In this respect humour reduces tension and conflict between those with competing interests but who must co-operate to accomplish certain common tasks. In such circumstances humour is very similar to Radcliffe-Brown's (1965) joking relationship which he defined as a 'peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism … the relationship is one of permitted disrespect' (pp. 90-1).

Given that this research indicates that much of the humour in workplaces is an acknowledgement and comment on the asymmetry of power and the contradictions inherent in organizational practices that this engenders, it both unites and divides groups. Jokes are often tests of group membership and literally used as a way of teasing-out differing opinions and loyalties to organizational issues. Participation in the humour is seen as evidence of being "one of us" and so delineates group boundaries. Clearly, not everyone within these organizations, in particular management, would subscribe to the point of view being expressed in the humour. Nor were they expected to. Their failure to be included in the joke in the first place or to be seen to be able to see the "funny side" of the organization (see, Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995: 756) is verification that they are a separate group and so not "one of us". This research therefore emphasizes the point that humour and laughter has the ability to both unite and divide groups. As Meyer (2000, p. 328) writes, humour 'can be a kind, human, friendly, pleasant means of communication … or it can be wry cynical, cutting, and even mean … Thus does the duality paradox of humour allow rhetorical unification or division – or both at the same time'. In this respect humour cuts both ways. For those in on the joke it creates a collective expression of enjoyment and mirth. In contrast, for those

selected as the target of the joke, particularly if present at its telling, it can be seen as an aggressive, malicious and excluding act.

This general characteristic of humour has important implications for our over-arching analysis of the boundaries within the client-consultant relationship. The extent to which clients and consultants laugh together can be seen as indicative of different degrees of intimacy and cohesion between those present. Collective laughter shows affiliation and a strong alliance between clients and consultants. In contrast as Lavin and Maynard (2001:456) note, '*Non*-reciprocal laughter can create relational distance, negate the formation of an alliance between parties and undermine rapport'. Displays of non-laughter or minimal laughing may therefore be seen as indications that there is no or less agreement between the parties. In this respect, the differing types of laughter displays in the meetings between clients and consultants indicate varying levels of rapport and like-mindedness amongst those present. Thus, through the displays and non-displays of laughter in the meetings we are able to see the shifting alignments and affiliations between clients and consultants as they are at one moment constituted as an in-group and, in the next moment as a fragmented group with different orientations to the preceding comments.

LAUGHTER IN CLIENT-CONSULTANT MEETINGS

Differentiated Understandings to Collective Responses

In the next section we discuss a number of laughter episodes to show the shifting boundaries in the client-consultant relationship. However, before we do this we wish to establish that even apparent collective laughter can hide important differences between the parties present with the consequence that despite appearances recipients are not an undifferentiated group. In part this arises from the inherent ambiguity in laughter. It is not clear whether people laugh because they appreciate some aspect of the joke, find some of the actions or activities

related to its telling funny or wish to support the speaker (Clayman, 1992; Greatbatch and Clark, 2003). A joke can operate on a number of levels. Incongruity implies that uncertainty over the meaning of humorous remarks is central to their creation. Indeed, humour thrives on and celebrates ambiguity. We cannot therefore assume that collective laughter implies that the underlying understanding of the stimulus is shared.

In order to ascertain why people laughed at some of the humorous remarks in the meetings we observed, shortly after some of the meetings we asked the participants why they had laughed at those jokes which appeared to generate the most laughter. One such episode is detailed in Extract 1 and occurred in Imperial Building Society. This follows from an extended discussion of the issues surrounding the interface between the new IT system and the Society's network of Automatic Telling Machines (ATMs). Ensuring that the new system interfaced with the Society's ATMs was a major undertaking that could potentially shutdown the ATM network for a significant period. Given the importance of ATMs to the Society's customers, determined by the size of daily transactions at each machine, this was something Imperial wished to avoid. They had therefore requested an evaluation of the nature and difficulty of the task from Puma. A specialist in ATM systems from Puma - George - had been brought-in to assess the situation and write a report with recommendations.

In the following extract the Managing Director - Peter - evokes laughter after describing his reaction to receiving and reading George's report. He responds to the consultant - Jonathan's - question with a contrast between a report that he did not understand and a report that he did. This is delivered without a smile, laugh and / or the use of other recognizably 'comedic' nonverbal techniques. The absence of immediate laughter at the end of his remarks may index uncertainty on the part of the participants as to whether laughter was a relevant response to his comments. Indeed, the sharpness of his remarks could be understood as a

direct and overt criticism of a particular Puma consultant and by association the consultancy. Peter resolves or transforms this uncertainty by remaining silent and smiling (line 4) thus indicating that laughter is an appropriate response. When he does so the participants immediately start to laugh in unison. As the laughter subsides Peter ceases smiling and adopts a serious stance as he continues the discussion about the ATMs.

Extract 1 – Meeting 4 [English version]

Jonathan: You got Georges's report?

Peter: George sent me something that I didn't have a clue about. Now I've got the English version.

            [Expansive smile

Audience: LLLLLLLLLLL[L-L-L

Peter: [Right uhm Do we take a machine out of Post Office Row and instal some kind of temporary arrangement? It would mean maintaining a limited level of service even if it was limited for a period.

During this brief sequence Peter's remarks move from being potentially construed as a 'serious' direct and open criticism of the consultant / consultancy to being understood as non-serious or, at least, as less serious. By smiling in line 4 he indicates his humorous intent and that he does not regard this issue as fundamental and to be treated as being of critical importance. He further diffuses the notion that he is openly criticizing the individual and / or consultancy by clearly indicating in his subsequent remarks that he intends them not to be taken seriously. Despite this apparent collective response to Peter's remarks, interviews immediately after the meeting revealed that the participants had very different takes on the incident. The six categories into which the responses fell are indicated below with illustrative quotations:

Criticism of Puma: 'I felt Peter was criticizing Puma and the way they can sometimes make things overly technical and complex'. (Imperial employee)

Criticism of George: 'I agree with Peter. I saw that report and the guy just didn't produce a clear report'. (Imperial employee)

Lack of clarity: 'We are all learning fast. Peter was commenting on our frustration at having to make decisions with incomplete information'; 'It was about Puma's communication with us'. (Both Imperial employees)

Peter's preference for information: 'Peter's not technically-minded, I can just imagine his reaction to that report. He likes things in plain English. That's what should have been done'. (Puma consultant)

Incongruity: 'They think of us as techies and often joke that we speak another language'. (Puma consultant)

Not funny: 'I don't really remember the remark. I'm not sure if I laughed'. (Imperial employee)

Several points emanate from these responses. First, for those people who remember laughing at the joke, there is first-order agreement over the nature of topic that is being invoked in the humorous remark. In this respect there is an underlying commonality that the humorous episode involves a joke about communication. However, the participants chose different ways of articulating this common sentiment. They do not necessarily share a common view as to who and what is being criticized. As the responses indicate, at a second-order level there are five possible sources of humour. The first two – criticism of Puma and George – relate to the nature of Peter's remarks prior to his indicating that he intended them to be taken as non-serious. 'Lack of clarity' similarly could also indicate criticism of Puma and

the consultancy process in general. The fourth category suggests that one of the participants was laughing because of their knowledge of the Managing Director's preference for plain language. In this respect they understand the joke to be self-deprecatory in that the target is the teller rather than the consultancy and its employees as indicated by the previous three responses. Finally, someone laughed because of an apparent continuation of a theme in the banter between Imperial and Puma. This joke was indicative of a broader stream of humour – the contrast between people with technical and non-technical skills. So, despite locating his potentially critical remarks within a play frame and obtaining an apparently collective response, those present at the meeting do not share a unified view of the source of the laughter. They appear to have laughed for a variety of reasons.

The discussion above questions whether we can treat the recipients (i.e., non speakers) as a homogenous audience. Partly their different recollections as to why they laughed to their particular structural position in the client-consultant system. A second important feature of these comments therefore relates to the identity of those making them. In the main those subscribing to a critical understanding of the source of humour come from the client (Imperial). Interestingly, the two representatives of Puma identify different second-order sources of humour. The Client Manager, who visits Imperial primarily for the regular Change Board meetings, is critical of the report (point 4). They indicate that the report was too technical and should have been written in a clearer style and format. They are therefore critical of the actions of one of their colleagues. On the other hand his colleague, the Project Manager, who is based at Imperial's head office for the duration of the assignment, viewed this incident as part of a continuing theme in the banter between client and consultant (point 5). Whilst they laughed, and admit to laughing, they nevertheless did not view that action as affirming the unity of the group. Rather they laughed because it confirmed the clients' view of their separate identity and special skills. This suggests that the consultants responded to

the operation of a normative pressure within the group to laugh along and in the process to celebrate and solidify a sense of sharing and togetherness.

Differences between the client and consultant within Imperial Building Society are shown more starkly in the next extract. At each meeting the project manager from Puma presented a Technical Issues Log that detailed every software problem since the last meeting. Typically between twenty and thirty issues were listed. These were in turn designated low, medium or high priority. In addition, a risk log for the whole project was presented which identified key resourcing issues that may impact on the project as a whole (e.g., staffing, training, staff morale, other IT projects etc.). The discussion in the extract below occurred in the meeting where the Society had to decide whether to 'go live' with the new mortgage system in the next three weeks. One of the Society's directors (David) expresses concerns at the number of software problems in the technical issues log (lines 1 and 2). The project manager responds that there are no 'high priority' issues and so no 'show stoppers'. However, he recognizes that the volume of issues is itself a problem and so asks if a member of the Puma project team can be seconded - at an extra cost to Imperial - for a further period to help with the issues surrounding the production of accurate monthly and quarterly financial statements (lines 5-7). The Special Projects Manager (Beverley) at Imperial immediately intervenes and accuses him of wanting his red badge. This refers to the security badge warn by everyone in the head office building. Imperial staff wear badges with red neck bands, visitors and Puma staff have either green or yellow bands. Ostensibly the humour is initially signaled by Beverley's use of a playful rhythmical tone of voice combined with the waving of her own security badge. In addition, she laughs at the end of her turn. As the laughter dies away Beverley uses a laughing voice to make a further comment that she intends to be taken as jocular and additional laughter ensues. The Managing Director, and chair of the meeting, then moves the discussion onto a more serious footing.

Extract 2 – Meeting 3 [Red badge]

David: These seem a large number of problems to fix before the next conversion. We only have one more meeting after that. Can you be confident that we can go live?

Jonathan: Sure. But if you look at the incident report most of the problems are cleared-up on average in less than a day. Many of the active issues are not high priority and so show stoppers. But it would be helpful if we could have more of Sarah's time. I know she's pressed on other jobs but her input would help in fixing Summit to produce the new format MFS's and QFS's.

Beverley: He's after his red ba-hh-dge.

[waves her security badge]

Audience: LLLLLLLlllllll[lll

Beverley   [She's our-h Sarah-h now-h not your Sarah-hh.

Audience: LLLLLLLllll

Peter: If we have Sarah for a few days can you be confident that you can fix the problem before next week? This is getting close. We then only have one more conversion before we decide to go live.

Jonathan: Doing it this way is the favoured option, the fastest option and the cheapest option. Its an irritant but not a showstopper.

When asked why they laughed during this episode subsequent to the meeting, the Imperial staff gave similar reasons. These related to an understanding of the jocular remarks as referring to the consultant as 'going native'. Typical explanations included: 'it was about them (Puma) going native'; 'they've become part of the furniture … they bring our mugs to the meetings'; 'Sarah's become part of the team. She wants to stay because she likes it here'; 'she's just recognizing that the longer they stay with us the more they want to be us'. Again, the Puma staff interpreted the remarks differently. The Project Manager regarded them as an

attack on the extent of his commitment to the client: 'look they want me to be committed and I am, but to the project and them as a client, not as a future employer'. In this respect the Imperial staff indicate that Puma, in the form of Sarah, has already or wishes to "convert" to them. Jonathan realizes this is an important issue for Imperial and recognizes that they want to see him and his team as one of them. But as he indicates, his primary commitment is to the project rather than Imperial as an organization. In contrast, Graham the client manager views these remarks primarily as a resourcing issue rather than one of attitudinal commitment. As he states 'They're just having a go at our commitment. But leaving Sarah in Imperial for a couple more weeks has implications elsewhere … I did feel that we need to talk about this a bit more but probably outside of the meeting'.

In summary, this section has shown that treating collective laughter as reflecting shared group meanings or "common understandings" is misleading. While laughter may serve this function in some specific instances it is clear from the participants' accounts after these two particular episodes that multiple second-order interpretations of the nature of the humour are made. We cannot therefore assume that collective displays of laughter represent a consensual understanding of the factors that stimulated the laughter in the first place. This problematises the notion of recipients as a single audience. What these episodes reveal is that they are not an undifferentiated entity but are comprised of individuals who may vary in terms of their levels of familiarity, affiliation and attention to the messages being conveyed through humorous remarks. These, and other factors, mean that audience members might significantly differ from one another in ways that are relevant to the speech that is being witnessed. We therefore need to develop a more nuanced and differentiated analysis of the recipients responses to invitations to laugh if we are to better understand how laughter constitutes clients and consultants as a single or differentiated group.

Shifting Boundaries in Humour and Laughter

Having established that people may orient themselves differently even to remarks that generate apparently collective laughter we now turn to examine the way in which different alignments to humorous remarks construct clients and consultants as insiders and / or outsiders. For this part of our analysis we draw on the work of a number of authors who study naturally occurring interactions to identify when and how speakers signal that laughter is expected (Jefferson, 1979; Glenn, 1989, 1991/1992; Greatbatch and Clark, 2003. 2005). Unlike many of the studies reviewed above, these authors do not view laughter as a spontaneously response to remarks that are manifestly funny. Rather laughter is a co-ordinated activity that involves the speakers indicating that and when it is appropriate and then recipients displaying their understanding of this. They may do this by using a number of relevant cues which include laughter, smiling, other comic facial expressions and gestures (see Greatbatch and Clark, 2003, 2005). Other co-present parties may accept or decline the invitation by laughing depending on their understanding of these cues. Silence does not necessarily mean that recipients are declining the invitation to laugh. Rather it may display that they are unsure about whether the remarks are intended as funny, that their status as laughable is equivocal, or they 'may specifically be *awaiting* an invitation to laugh' (Jefferson, 1979: 83). As Jefferson (1979) observes, the declination of a laughter invitation involves more than refraining to laugh. The recipient must act to 'terminate the relevance of laughter'. One way to do this is to talk since talk replaces either laughter of silence as a response to a laughter invitation.

Extract 3 occurred at the beginning of the first meeting of the Imperial Building Society Change Board attended by the researcher. Several weeks before this meeting, the Managing Director of Imperial - Peter - had agreed that the researcher could attend and observe meetings. To what extent this arrangement had been discussed with the members of the

Change Board prior to the meeting is not known. The attendance at the meetings of someone not directly involved in the project, furthermore someone who was observing the dynamics and inter-personal relationships of the group without contributing to the issues that underpinned discussions, could be perceived as a relevant issue for debate. In this respect the researcher presents a potential threat to the group.

In the following extract Peter begins by introducing the researcher - Adrian - and then asking him to explain his research project. Once he has done this he offers to answer any questions in relation to the research. This could represent an opportunity for the other participants to discuss his status in the meetings or ask for clarification with respect to his purpose in relation to the project before the meeting. Before any other person present takes up this offer, and without a pause, Peter makes a joke. It concerns one of his colleagues - Janice - being played by Gwyneth Paltrow in a film based on the research Adrian has just described. Once again, as the laughter dies away Peter announces the formal start of the meeting and so terminates the laughter by moving the focus to more serious issues, in this case the minutes of the last meeting.

Extract 3 – Meeting 1 [Gwyneth Paltrow]

Peter: Welcome everyone. (.) I want to introduce you to Adrian. He works at [University Business School] and is going to be observing our meetings. Adrian would you like to tell us something about your project?

Adrian: Thank you for letting me sit-in on your meetings. I am conducting research into the transfer of knowledge between consultants and their clients with colleagues at two other universities […] and […]. We are sponsored by the ESRC, the main funder of social science research in the UK. It is not intended to be evaluative in any way. I look forward to learning more about your project over the coming months and am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Peter: Great. Janice when the research is finished and the film of the book is made

[turns and looks at person to whom remarks addressed]

you will be played by Gwyneth Pa-h-ltrow-hh.

[turns to look at group as a whole and displays an expansive smile]

Janice: LLLLLLLLLL-L-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l

David: LLLLLLLLLL-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l

Jonathan: l-l-l-L-L-L-L-L-l-l-l-l-l-l-[l

Peter: [h-h-h Right (.) let's follow the agenda. Minutes of the last meeting. Any comments, updates?

In delivering the joke Peter does not rely solely on the content of his remarks to establish the relevance of laughter. Following the completion of the researcher's brief summary of his project and invitation to those present to ask questions, Peter looks at one of his colleagues - Janice - and begins his humorous remark. After a short pause, which permits the others present a little extra time to gear up to respond, he turns to his audience to deliver the punch line in a laughing voice[1] and with a broad smile clearly bearing his teeth. By embedding the talk with particles of laughter the recipients are cued and forewarned prior to the completion of the utterance. They are therefore given an early warning of the appropriate response to the unfolding talk. Everyone then laughs on cue and in the process confirm Peter's remarks as humorous.

In addition to these cues the speaker signals his humorous intent by using at least using two incongruous images. The first concerns his colleague – Janice. Whilst she has blonde hair, she bears little physical similarity to Gwyneth Paltrow. Janice is also at older than Gwyneth Paltrow. Outside of the humorous frame such a comment may be interpreted as an insult and

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[1]   Jefferson (1979) has referred to this as within-speech laughter.

hurtful. However, within the play frame, clearly established by the Peter in lines 11-14, this comment is more likely to be understood as an 'affectionate poking fun'. The fact that Janice joins in and laughs audibly possibly indexes that she understands this. The laughter is collective. She does not indicate that she feels isolated and the target of the rest of the group. Second, he contrasts academic research with that of a mass medium known for its populist inclinations. The elongation of the phrase 'when the research is finished and the film of the book is made' underscores both the lengthy timeframe in which academic research is produced and the priorities attached to different outputs. In this case, the research is conducted, then a book written and eventually a film made. The very absurdity of this comment - it is highly unlikely that a piece of academic research would be made into a film starring Gwyneth Paltrow - underpins the commonly-held notion that academic research has limited practical relevance, and so represents the antithesis of a film with a popular actor.

Peter could have framed this situation seriously by stating that he fully supported the researchers' presence or through a discussion that led to some degree of consensus. However, the use of the humorous frame offers a multi-dimensional view of reality whereas the 'serious' frame tends to assume a unitary understanding of reality (Boland and Hoffman, 1983; Fox, 1990; Mulkay, 1988). Thus in this episode the recipients are asked to resolve at least two incongruities. Offering several images simultaneously increases the likelihood of generating a collective affiliative response in that people are given more than one reason to laugh. However, it also increases the ambiguity and interpretive diversity that underpins the subsequent response. Although this is a putdown joke it is not clear who is the butt. Is it the researcher or Janice? Consequently, participants are free to constitute one or the other, or both, as an insider or outsider. The fact that everyone laughs, including the targets of the comments, indicates that no one feels they are being positioned as an outsider at this moment.

In Extract 2 there is an exchange about whether a temporary patch to the IT system (line 1) is to be incorporated into the next version of the software (line 8) that will be uploaded onto Imperial's system shortly. The client, represented by David, would like it included. However, in line 5, the consultant Project Manager (Jonathan) says that 'there's a difference of opinion'. What he means by this is that Imperial will have to pay for the inclusion of any additional elements to future versions of the software. From his point of view they cannot assume that it will be included free in the next version since what is being requested is not part of what was agreed to be supplied. It is extra. However, before he can complete his sentence his colleague, the client manager from head office (Graham) interrupts him to express a different view. He indicates that he believes that this upgrade has already been incorporated into the next version of the software and furthermore that this has been loaded and tested. In this respect it will be provided free as part of the next version of the software. David, who is chairing the meeting, exclaims his surprise. Initially, this comes-off as a sharp rebuke and could be understood as a potentially direct criticism of Graham and Jonathan. After a pause he turns to his colleagues sitting either side of him and puts out his hands and mimics a set of scales going up and down. This gesture indicates that he does not know who to believe. At the same time his face shows an incredulous expression and emits a raspberry. In response to these gestures his colleagues laugh. Graham and Jonathan clearly see this as a criticism of them since they do not participate in the laughter. Graham is initially silent and then overlaps the laughter by engaging in serious talk. Also by making this talk "on task" he seeks to redefine this situation as a non-laughing one in which further serious discussion is more appropriate. His actions therefore indicate that he does not see laughter as a relevant response. Although Jonathan remains silent he and Graham exchange eye contact and whilst Graham is talking Jonathan nods his head in agreement. Jonathan silence therefore indicates a clear declination to laugh since Graham is nominated as the speaker for both them.

Jonathan remains silent so that Graham can present a common position and rectify the fact that they have just contradicted one another in front of the client team.

Extract 4 – Meeting 6 [Version 9.1]

David: The workaround is working at the moment. It should be. Is that the case Jonathan?

Jonathan: Mmmm.

David: Right, so it would be better if it was included in the next upgrade. We don't want it to be a workaround for ever.

Jonathan: There's a difference of opinion. You know what I'm going to say David you might have to wa

Graham: I am told that its all in and 9.1 is loaded and tested.

David: <u>IS:: ?IT?</u>

            Holds his hands out like a set of scales and moves them up and down looking at each of his colleagues with an incredulous expression on his face.

            bbbb[bbbbbb

Clients: [L-L-LLLLlllll

Graham: I will check but I am pretty sure its in.

David: That would be helpful.

In summary, this episode represents an example of one of the parties, in this case the client, construing the consultants as outsiders by making them the butt of their humorous remarks. David invites laughter but by restricting his gaze to his colleagues, who reciprocate by looking at him throughout. In this way the consultants are construed as the butt of the joke and so excluded from the subsequent laughing. They indicate their understanding of this by

not laughing and engaging in serious talk seeking to reduce the humorous tone and move it into a more serious one. They succeed in reducing the length of the laughter and David confirms the Graham's realignment of the situation with his final remark delivered in a serious tone. This in this short episode the members of the client team align within one another against the consultants. Neither of them join in the laughter since to do so would be

Whilst these examples each illustrate moments where the client and consultant are momentarily construed as insiders and outsiders, there are a number of occasions where the consultants turn situations in which they are being laughed at to laughed with through a self-deprecatory remark (see Glenn, 1995). In others words they manage to convert a moment of division into one of consensus and like-mindedness. This suggests that the boundaries and divisions evident in the previous episodes of laughter are occasionally more fluid as one definition of a situation turns into another. In the following example, David – the Deputy Managing Director of Imperial – tells a story about a recent conversation he had with a taxi driver. This ends with a barbed comment about the consultants. The story emanates from a conversation about the new software system being unable to write letter which are addressed to a named society member rather than anonymously. This was one of several standard features of the package that had begun to frustrate the client. There was also a broader concern that personalizing the system was costly and that the consultants may be over-charging for these activities.

Extract 5 – Meeting 3 [Taxi Story]

David: We can only address them to Dear Sir Madam rather than Dear Mr or Mrs
           Smith. This is not exactly personal.

Peter::   Do none of the other users write to their members in a personal way?

Jonathan: If you want this change we could bring it to the user group or create a fix in the next version of software. Its not standard so there will be an extra charge.

David: This is the problem of buying a standard package. Can I ask you a question. It is going to be a serious question. I was in a taxi from Bristol to the airport the other day and I got talking to the taxi driver. He tells me that he is also a builder. But he is really busy with the building work and keeps having to decide whether he should give up the taxi. He has been driving it for a long time and likes it. So, every so often he put in a ridiculous estimate in the hope that it will put-off people. But he says people are idiots. They clearly don't know the value of the work because they ring him up and ask him to do it. How can he turn-down such a lucrative opportunity? Now this is my point, are we like the taxi driver's clients? Are we going to pay for fifteen days what takes ten minutes?

LLLLLLLllll

Jonathan: Look no. It may seem simple a fix but its not just one part of the system. We cannot tweak is here and there. There is the design. We have to do an impact analysis. There are Q and A's, documentation and so on. We use one source code to keep the cost of the system down. We are always trying to keep costs down. At the moment we are as a company reviewing development costs. You can come to head officed and see what we do.

David: I might do that to find out where all these extra days days go and where you were last week.

Jonathan: I've taken a bit of a holiday. Saved you some money at the same time.

LLLLLLLllll

Whilst the punch-line to the story generates laughter this is confined to members of the client team. The consultants decline the invitation to laugh by engaging in a number of practices which indicate that the resolution of the topic at hand is more important than the momentary effort at humour. If they acquiesce and laugh they display agreement with David's insinuation that they are over-charging for additional services. However, remaining silent or "po-faced" could potentially create further distance between the client and consultant. Indeed, they may become accountable for such actions since they may generate comment. Rather then accepting or declining the invitation to laugh the consultants show very minimal levels of affiliation with David's comments. They use, inter alia, minimal smiles and "quasi-laughs" which Lavin and Maynard (2001: 467) define as 'a breathy within word particle that may have purposeful ambivalence'

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that incongruity is central to many humorous episodes. However, most previous studies of humour have tended to use the occurrence of laughter to index the establishment of the play frame. There is the pervasive assumption that humour is generated from the deployment of some incongruous remark which may or may not be delivered as a punch line. Extracts of humorous remarks are quoted implying that laughter was evoked by the words alone. Utterances that solicit laughter are therefore viewed as naturally amusing. They have an inbuilt quality that generates the onset of a humorous episode. Laughter is thus depicted as the spontaneous response to 'humorous' talk. Drawing on the approach and findings of CA this paper shows that laughter is invited through speakers deploying a number of cues singly and combination (Table 2).

Our findings also show that in the context of multi-party interactions within client-consultant meetings laughter is primarily elicited by the speaker. This contrasts with previous CA research which has argued that episodes where the current speaker produces the first laugh are generally confined to two-party interaction. In contrast in multi-party interactions 'some other speaker begins laughing without a specific laugh invitation from the current speaker' (Glenn, 1989: 134). It is argued that to avoid accusations of self-praise speakers choose not to laugh first. Speakers confine first-laughter to those remarks for which they cannot claim ownership. A key problem with Glenn's study, as well as other similar conversation analytic work of laughter (Jefferson, 1979; Gavioli, 1995), is that it focused on one form of eliciting laughter, placing laughter particles either before or after the completion of an utterance. The present study has confirmed Greatbatch and Clark's (2003) finding that laughter is invited from co-present individuals in a number of ways. Embedding talk with laughter is one device; others include facial and bodily gestures and the use of incongruous imagery. In this study only six instances of laughter were solely elicited by speaker laughter. All other cases involved a combination of two or more of the three cues (see Table 2). This suggests that speakers often have to use more than one type of device because when deployed on their own they are not necessarily comedic. For example, Extract 2 shows a speaker using a verbal response combined with gestures that are not immediately recognizable as comedic. Indeed, the verbal comments could potentially be understood as critical. However, when combined with the speaker blowing a raspberry and displaying certain gestures they become recognizably funny. The devices are inextricably intertwined in that the comedic status of each rests on their use in conjunction with the others. Laughter is thus generated from the interaction between a number of cues. It is not possible to determine that one took precedence over others. To be successful they have to work in combination and are mutually self-supporting. What this suggests is that speakers supply their humorous remarks with potentially multiple sources of humour. Listeners are given a number of reasons to laugh.

As Boland and Hoffman (1986) have previously argued, the likelihood of receiving a collectively positive response to a humorous utterance is enhanced if the grounds for laughing are increased.

Our analysis further suggests that outwardly there was consensus in that these episodes were generally incidents of collective laughter. But whether this was more than a veneer of consensus is unclear. It could be argued that the participants demonstrated that they jointly understood the interactional rule structure, or grammar, that was employed to elicit laughter. Those seeking laughter were rewarded as the other participants laughed on cue confirming the appropriateness of humour. However, whether this is enough to establish a sense of shared group identity and cohesion is open to question. By contrast, Lennox Terrion and Ashforth (2002: 81) support this view when they argue that a 'shared rule structure enables individuals to enter a novel situation and collectively perform a social ritual that affirms that they are in becoming a group … In this sense, to laugh on cue is to simply follow the script of group membership'. As we pointed out earlier, speakers invested their messages with a range of cues to elicit laughter. They are not dependent upon a single technique. Consequently, the participants rather than laughing at a common source of humour are responding instead to a variety of cues. Thus the interaction rule structure that elicits an episode is not necessarily shared. People may have laughed in response to different combinations of the cues.

At a deeper level Clayman (1992: 45) has pointed out that, unlike applause, which 'has affiliation as its sole objective and is thus a purified expression of support', laughter, whilst affiliative, indicates that people appreciate the humorous nature of the utterance and the manner in which it is projected rather than support the underlying sentiment. In this respect laughter indicates agreement over the status of the remarks rather than their interpretation. Whilst participants in this study mostly had a common understanding that a joke was

intended, they nevertheless differed in terms of which features and meanings they emphasized. Here, an understanding of the actors' various roles and interests can inform their likely interpretations such as those of clients and consultants. However, this is not sufficient. For example, the status and interpretations of the two consultants who attended the meeting are not identical. Although Jonathan could be seen as more of an insider, in the sense that he worked in the client's head office for over a year, he nevertheless resists the client's attempts to constitute him as having 'gone native'. In contrast, the Client Manager Graham, who only visits the organization once a month, constitutes himself more as an insider. As the analysis shows, he indicates a willingness to take the point of view of the client. Indeed, he is even willing to support the client even if it means criticizing one of his colleagues (see Extract 4).

The tendency for participants to laugh along even if they disagree with the tenor of the remarks, or even the appropriateness of humour, suggests that its enactment has a ritualistic element. Some commentators have argued that this may arise from the pressure to be polite or to conform or from fear of embarrassment (e.g., Norrick, 1993, 1994; Raskin, 1985). Whatever the reason we would suggest that humour is only able to generate a superficial consensus within the group. An important consequence of this is that laughter may obscure important differences and create a false impression of the extent of group cohesion. By placing issues within a play frame they are signaled as non-serious and so not worthy of critical discussion. The elicitation of laughter appears to confirm this view. However, as we have shown, important differences exist with the consequence that laughter may suggest a more equivocal response than is usually claimed.

CONCLUSION

Humour was a critical feature of the meetings between the client and consultant. As such it played a large role in influencing the social dynamics between the participants and in determining the extent to which they melded into a cohesive group. As we have shown, speakers frequently invested their remarks with a range of verbal and non-verbal devices in order to signal that their remarks were intended as funny. The other participants demonstrated their understanding of this by laughing in concert. At this level they demonstrated a felicitiousness with such social conventions and so displayed a common understanding of the nature of the remarks. However, whether this generated a closer relationship between the participants and established group cohesion is less certain. Our findings show that people can laugh for a variety of reasons, many of which relate to the way in which humour is generated and not the remarks themselves. Humour is comprised of a number of paradoxes. One is that laughter can express agreement that the remarks or actions that surround them are funny rather than any support for the underlying sentiment. Collective laughter does not therefore reveal the extent or nature of the affiliation being demonstrated within a group. Indeed, our data show that despite the participants laughing in concert important differences often remained. However, speakers in investing their remarks with multiple sources of humour encourage greater participation in subsequent laughter. At the same time they make any underlying differences undiscussable, or treat them as non-serious, as those present display a collective affiliative response. We therefore suggest that where such differences exist humour may encourage only the illusion of consensus with the consequence that the group may be less unified than it appears. The study therefore highlights the way in which humour may maintain difference rather than unify a group.

APPENDIX 1 – GLOSSARY OF TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS

The transcription symbols are drawn from the transcription notation developed by Gail Jefferson. For details on this notation, see Atkinson and Heritage (1984).

[A left bracket indicates the point at which overlapping talk begins.

]   A right bracket indicates the point at which overlapping talk ends.

=   Equals signs indicate that different speakers' utterances are "latched." They also link continuous talk by a single speaker that has been distributed across nonadjacent because of another speaker's overlapping utterance.

(0.5)   Numbers in parentheses indicate the length of silences in tenths of a second.

(.)   A dot in parentheses indicates a gap of less than two- tenths of a second.

-           A dash indicates a cutoff sound like a guttural stop.

Word   Underlining indicates some form of stress via pitch and/or amplitude.

WORD   Capital letters indicate talk that is spoken louder than the surrounding talk.

Wo::rd Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately preceding sound.

. , ?   Periods, commas, and question marks are used respectively to indicate falling, non-terminal, and rising intonation.

(Word)	Parenthesized words indicate that the transcriber was not sure of what was said.
( )	Empty parentheses indicate that the transcriber could not hear what was said.
(( ))	Double parentheses contain transcriber's comments and/or descriptions.
.hhh	hs preceded by a period represent discernible inhalations.
hhhh	hs without a preceding period represent discernible aspiration.
LLLL	A string of l's are used to indicate laughter
L-L-L	Spasmodic laughter is indicated by a chain punctuated by dashes.
xxxxx	A string of x's are used to indicate applause.