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'Carry on laughing and I'll punish you as well!': humour, power, and relationship negotiation in a prison workshop

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ABSTRACT
Drawing on a 10-month ethnographic study of a private prison in the UK, this paper examines how humour is used between prisoners and prison staff to negotiate working relationships in prison. We show how both the presence and absence of humour can shape power relations. Three situations are presented to understand the role that humour plays in negotiating relationships: (1) humour is used reciprocally to build relationships, (2) humour is explicitly avoided to maintain formal relationships, and (3) the acceptability of humour is constantly changed by those in positions of power to assert and maintain said power. Whilst theory often assumes management use humour to exercise control, we argue that equally, management can refuse to engage in humour to exercise control. It is not just humour that can embarrass, ridicule or punish, but our responses to humour too.

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Ethnography; humour; power; prison; relationships

Introduction

Humour is pervasive in organisations (Butler 2015; Yam et al. 2018). Due to humours inherent subjective qualities, it is particularly tricky to understand what exactly humour is (Cooper 2008; Holmes 2000; Jarzabkowski and Lê 2017); it is always-already moving away from definition (Kenny and Euchler 2012). But essentially, humour refers to utterances, actions, interactions, and bodily performances intended by the speaker to be amusing and received as such by (at least some) participants (Holmes 2000; Pouthier 2017); thus it is both the speaker and the participants intentions and responses which are central to whether humour is taking place.

Drawing on a 10-month ethnographic study of a private prison in the UK, this paper seeks to provide an understanding of how humour is used to negotiate and manage relationships inside prison between prisoners and prison employees. In doing this, we show the intricate entanglement of humour and power and the influence they have on each other. The power imbalance between prisoners and prison staff provides an interesting basis to understand this connection, and the important role that humour plays in relationships, power negotiation, prison life, and organisational life more generally. Furthermore, we will provide insight into how both the use of humour itself, as well as the response to humour shape relationships and have the potential to assert dominance and/or resistance. Therefore, this paper asks – how is humour used to negotiate relationships between those in positions of authority and their subordinates?

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Previous research has found the prison to be a useful site for developing theoretical understanding of work and organisations more broadly (Brown and Toyoki 2013; Goffman 1961; Pandeli, Marinetto, and Jenkins 2019). Goffman (1961) chose to explore everyday mechanisms of authority and power within the total institution based on the belief that, in these more extreme settings, everyday power would be more visible. Small social interactions are often put under a microscope in more extreme settings and thus they have the potential to tease out and amplify situations that may go unnoted elsewhere (Godfrey 2016). Research has actually illustrated the importance and potential necessity of humour in extreme context (Dangermond et al. 2022; Vivona 2014). And, as Ugelvik (2014, 475) notes, in prison 'the comical and the very serious go hand in hand'. Thus the sociological analysis of humour in prison can tell us much about how existing social relations are reaffirmed and normative social boundaries maintained (Lockyer and Pickering 2008) or challenged.

Manolchev et al. (2023) argue that there is a general absence of studies exploring darker uses of humour in organisational settings. As Huber (2022) suggests, while humour is often associated with elevating and liberating the human condition (i.e. Marsh and Śliwa 2022), such perspectives should be tempered because humour is situated within relations of power that help determine speech and actions (i.e. McCabe 2023). In fact, humour is often used by management and those in authority to oppress and assert power (Holmes 2000), but not enough is known about how this unfolds in everyday interactions. Therefore, we aim to present a nuanced understanding of humour and its power in relationship negotiations. Here we move beyond the positive and also illustrate the more sinister ways that humour can be employed in asserting power in relationship negotiations.

The following section discusses the literature on humour and power in the organisation and its impact on organisational relationships and dynamics. The ethnographic approach will then be presented to provide an insight into the methods and processes of collecting and analysing the data. The findings of the research will break down the complex and multiple approaches to humour used between prison instructors and prisoners focusing on (1) where humour is used reciprocally to build relationships; (2) where humour is not used overtly between both parties to maintain formal relationships; and (3) where the acceptability of humour is constantly changed by those in positions of power to aggressively assert and maintain said power. Our findings show that humour is a powerful tool in negotiating relationships in organisations and whilst it can be used for positive means, with prosocial functions, those in positions of power can also use humour to denigrate subordinates. We find that it is not just the use of humour but also the response to humour, which is significant in that it can assert power, ridicule, embarrass, or even punish. To fully understand the complex dynamics between humour and power in organizational settings, this study adopts a relational view of power. Rather than seeing power as a static resource that individuals simply possess, we conceptualize power as something that is continuously negotiated and co-constructed through social interactions. In this context, humour becomes a key medium through which power relations are both challenged and reinforced.

Humour, power, and relationships in organisations

There are considered to be three primary theories of humour: relief (the release of tension and stress through humour), incongruity (deliberate violation of rational language or behaviour patterns), and superiority (a sense of triumph over another) (Martin et al. 2003). It is suggested that how we understand the social functions of a humorous event depends on our 'theoretical sunglasses' (Meyer 2000, 315) since humorous events are ambiguous, and the same humour event can serve a variety of rhetorical goals. Graham, Papa, and Brooks (1992) also examined humour theory and delineated both prosocial and antisocial functions to understand how humour functions in interpersonal relationships.

When we consider workplace relationships between superiors and subordinates, much of the literature on organisational humour has focused on relief theories and its prosocial functions. Workplace humour is found to be associated with enhanced work performance, satisfaction,

workgroup cohesion, health, and coping effectiveness, as well as decreased burnout, stress, and work withdrawal (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, and Viswesvaran 2012). Supervisor use of humour is associated with enhanced subordinate work performance, satisfaction, positive perception of supervisor performance, satisfaction with supervisor, and workgroup cohesion, affective commitment, organisational pride, and reduced work withdrawal (Mesmer-Magnus et al. 2018; Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, and Viswesvaran 2012). And when used appropriately, it can help develop trust in supervisors (Neves and Karagonlar 2020). Research has explored how humour generates interpersonal and socio-emotional benefits with regard to the relationship between managers and workers (Cooper, Kong, and Crossley 2018). And according to Wieslander (2021, 27), ironic humour helped to promote social harmony and sustain 'conflict- free venues and encounters'. Wijewardena, Härtel, and Samaratunge (2017) found that when those in positions of authority use humour with employees, it has the potential to improve employees' emotions, and this is heightened when employees already have a positive relationship with management (Wijewardena, Härtel, and Samaratunge 2017). This all paints a very positive picture of the use of humour in organisations between superiors and subordinates, essentially it is most often seen as a good thing that helps to build positive organisational relationships.

However, Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, and Viswesvaran (2012) and Mesmer-Magnus et al. (2018) found that there are relatively fewer studies of organisations that concentrate on the negative roles of humour compared with those investigating its positive roles. Huber (2022) argues that humour is too often framed through this positive lens, focusing on positive outcomes (including smiles, mirth, and laughter), and this constrains our understanding of humour's critical potential. Even when research has explored humour from a more critical lens, the focus remains on its prosocial function; examining how humour can be a collective strategy to deal with boredom at work (relief theories) and a vehicle for solidarity and resistance (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Huber and Brown 2017; Kenny 2009; Marsh and Śliwa 2022; McCabe 2023; Rodrigues and Collinson 1995). For example, humour has been found to be a useful tool to enable workers to undermine management control, subvert power structures and construct oppositional identities (Butler 2015). This still frames humour as something positive for organisational members to use. Butler (2015) argues that the organizational literature on humour tends to fall into two opposing camps. It is positioned as something to provide managers with a resource for increasing motivation, stimulating creativity, and boosting overall productivity enable workers, or as something to undermine management control, subvert power structures and construct oppositional identities (Butler 2015). In both of these camps, humour is primarily considered positively. Even when we acknowledge its critical potential as a form of resistance, we see this as something positive that builds solidarity between workers (McCabe 2023).

Wijewardena, Härtel, and Samaratunge (2017) identify a caveat in the use of humour between management and employees; they argue that the positive impact of managerial humour is felt when managers *responsibly* manage humour. But in our experiences of organisations, we know that this is not always the case. Managers do not always manage humour responsibly and yet, there is scant research on how this unfolds. We do see some examples of research that has shown the darker side of humour (Liao and Pandeli 2023); the idea that humour can be used with oppressive and offensive intentions; weaponised in the organisation to reproduce power relations and assert management control (Collinson 2002; Westwood 2004). Specifically, research posit humour can be used to 'do power', to assert and reaffirm power structures and asymmetries (Holmes 2000, 2007; Holmes and Schnurr 2005). Thus, here we need to consider power and control more intimately to better understand how organisational members, particularly those in positions of authority, might use humour for antisocial functions. This study approaches power not merely as a positional asset, held by those in authority, but as a relational dynamic that is enacted and renegotiated in everyday interactions. Drawing on the work of Foucault (1977) and Goffman (1961), we view power as fluid and context-dependent, manifesting in subtle interactions where humour plays a pivotal role.

Research is needed to understand how superiority theory and its antisocial function plays out in organisations. Superiority theory asserts that all humour springs from a longing to feel superior over others. Superiority humour is often conceptualised as demeaning and belittling others, saying negative things, or putting others down, and is frequently used to exert control over subordinates (Duncan 1985; Duncan, Smeltzer, and Leap 1990; Liao and Pandeli 2023; McGuffee-Smith and Powell 1988) and maintain boundaries without suffering negative social effects that often occur when using forceful or critical language (Martineau 1972). The enactment of superiority humour may be related to an individual's organisational status and positional power. In studying the classroom, Wardman (2021) found instances of hostile humour used by teachers to exercise power; she argues that there is a fine line between humour and humiliation. Whether the intentions of humour are honourable or not, the potential to wound, degrade, stereotype, marginalise or control others through humour means that it could also be perceived as a double-edged sword (Fovet 2009; Hay 2000; Mayo 2010; McCann, Plummer, and Minichiello 2010). Disguised in humour, power and violence become normalised and difficult to recognise or resist (Foucault 1977).

According to Billig (2005), laughter is used to communicate meaning to others. It can be used to communicate appreciation and amusement, but equally, laughter can hurt and divide and have victims (Billig 2005). Billig (2005) develops the concept of 'unlaughter' – not laughing at the point when you are expected to laugh – to describe ways of conveying disapproval and unamusement, 'silence and an appropriately forbidding expression can be sufficient on their own to deliver magnified and magnificent unlaughter' (Billig 2005, 193). Humonen and Whittle (2023) in their research on workplace sexual humour identify the power in our responses to humour. We argue that more work is needed to understand our responses to humour, whether this be laughter, unlaughter, or joke disapproval (Humonen and Whittle 2023), and the consequences for those organisational relationships as a result of these responses.

Huber (2022, 15) argues that humour is an intricate, intuitive, and experiential condition of being that may be destroyed through over analysis. Thus he suggests to better understand what it does in the workplace, 'humour is probably best analysed from the bottom up, through the study of people's speech and actions'. It is suggested that we 'should craft convincing stories that emphasise the centrality of power, subjectivity and sensemaking in humour'. In so doing, we might furnish more nuanced, sophisticated, and contextualised accounts of organisations, which focus on struggles, contradictions, ambiguities, and differing experiences (Huber 2022).

Humour and power in the modern prison

Whilst humour persistently features in studies of prison life, it has only occasionally been the primary focus of interest (see Laursen 2017; Manolchev et al. 2023; Nielsen 2011). A small number of studies have explored humour inside prison but much of this is focused upon the way in which prison staff use humour (Nielsen 2011) rather than focusing on the prisoners themselves or the use of humour appears as supplementary rather than focal (Mathiesen 1965; Ugelvik 2014). Generally, studies show that in prison humour is used to cope under the difficult conditions, both by staff members (Nielsen 2011; Nylander, Lindberg, and Bruhn 2011) and prisoners (Geer 2002). It is found to release tensions, avoid aggression, and to create an easier everyday life (Laursen 2017). These findings mirror much research on workplace humour, used to alleviate boredom and build solidarity. Nielsen (2011) focused specifically on the importance of humour for building and managing relationships between prison staff and between prisoners and staff. It was found that despite general relations between prison staff and prisoners being notoriously difficult (Liebling 2011), humour performed an invaluable service in allowing these two groups to develop a rapport, build relationships whilst always operating under the guise of humour and thus being able to deny this relationship. Thus we can see here the important role that humour plays in both work life and prison life and how it is a useful tool to negotiate the complex power dynamics within the prison.

Power in prison is significant here and paved the way for the importance of humour between prisoners and staff. As Crewe (2009) argues, organizational power in the prison he studied did not reside with officers; the staff made the prison run but they did not run the prison (as they often had historically). They implemented the system of power, but they did not embody it – power flowed through officers. However, this does not mean that officers were powerless or simply vessels of institutional power. In the modern prison, low-level staff power has become discretionary, which is a 'mixed bonus' for prisoners because whilst staff could use their discretionary power to help, they can also use it to enforce rules unfairly, and inconsistently. Crewe (2009) argues that uncertainty and ambiguity are intrinsic features of the 'sticky' relationships between prison staff and prisoners that modern prison policies encourage. Here, we adopt Crewe's (2009) conceptual understanding of power in prison. By acknowledging the positions of authority that prison staff hold, alongside adopting a relational view of power, we explore how humour functions as a tool through which both prison instructors and prisoners negotiate their positions within the social hierarchy. Instructors may use humour to assert authority and reinforce boundaries, while prisoners may engage in humour as a form of resistance, subtly challenging these power structures.

Methodology

Research context

Like many studies on humour, the intention of this research was not initially to focus on humour as a topic in and of itself (Grugulis 2002), instead the data presented in this article is drawn from a wider study exploring prison labour. The purpose of the research was to study prisoners experiences of conducting privately contracted prison work and for this, the researcher was granted access to an all-male private prison in the UK. The research was ethnographic and was conducted by the first author over a 10-month period, which involved observations, participation, and interviews. Data collection primarily focused on the prison industries department where most of the prison work took place (this will be explained more thoroughly in the next section). Over the research period, it became clear that humour played an integral role in prison life.

Research setting

Access to the prison was a lengthy process which took over a year to negotiate. Prison management acted as gatekeeper and after several meetings, checks, and even self-defence training, extensive access was granted. The researcher was provided with her set of prison keys during the 10-month field work period which gave her access to all areas of the prison with the exception of prisoners' cells. There are two sections that make-up the adult's prison – the vulnerable prisoners' unit (VPU) which holds prisoners who are not considered safe to remain in the main prison (primarily sex offenders and prisoners who have acquired debt in the main prison) and the main prison itself. Several weeks were spent observing the VPU but the majority of the ten months of data collection took place in the main prison where the general population of prisoners reside. Most of the data collection took place in the Prison Industries Department, a separate building inside the prison where prison work and vocational courses took place. Here we focus on five workshops in the main prison and one workshop in the VPU. The research was conducted in a 'working prison' meaning that work was an essential part of day-to-day life. For most, the working day started at 8.30 am and finished at 5 pm. Prisoners returned to their wings from 12 until 2.30 pm for lunch. Obviously, the working day is still very different from a normal work environment due to additional layers of security and checks to ensure no tools are taken back to wings, but effort is made to recreate a real work setting.

The work completed in the prison industries was work that was contracted out by private companies, primarily unskilled manual work. The work pace in the workshops was often casual and allowed for chatting, interactions and as suggested by the focus of this paper, provides opportunities

for joking and humour. The workshops included a computer recycling workshop (Workshop 1), a book packing workshop (Workshop 2), a car part packing and industrial trolley strap workshop (Workshop 3), a household plumbing assembly workshop (Workshop 4), a recycling and waste section (Workshop 5), and repackaging dry products for airlines (Workshop 6). Greater detail of each of these is provided in Table 1.

Data collection

The aim of ethnography is to uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular work settings come to understand, account for, act, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation (Van Maanen 1979). Ugelvik (2014) argues that 'ethnography should be the method of choice if one is interested in the situated social reproduction of meaning, of selves and in describing events and processes as they are understood and negotiated by the people actually living them (Ugelvik 2014, 471). Visits took place to the prison approximately 3 days a week for much of the 10-month period, with a few weeks of absence to work with the data and perform other academic duties outside of the research. The researcher undertook both participant and non-participant observations; participation involved completing the prison work alongside prisoners as well as joining in with workshop discussion and activities.

Audio-recording was only allowed inside prison for the purpose of the interviews, therefore, in-situ humorous interactions could not be recorded as has been done in previous studies of humour (e.g. Holmes and Marra 2002; Humonen and Whittle 2023). Instead, a fieldwork diary was kept throughout the process and was updated each lunch time when prisoners returned to their cells and at the end of each day. The fieldwork diary was used to note as much as possible about what happened in the workshops including conversations, interactions, observations, reflections, and early analysis as well as thoughts, feeling, emotions, and difficulties (Punch 2012). Within several weeks, it became clear that humour was an integral part of prison life and became an important part of the fieldwork diary observations. Instances of humour (as well as attempts at humour) were written in the fieldwork diary; they were described in great detail as well as thoughts, ideas, and interpretations based on the observations of these instances. Instances included pranks that took place, jokes that were heard as well as interactions and conversations. Prisoner-to-Prisoner humour was identified as well as Prisoner–Instructor humour.

Interviewees were selected after several months of fieldwork and an attempt was made to pick a comparable number of prisoners from each workshop that the researcher studied. Forty semi-structured interviews were conducted with prisoners. The researcher had built a good relationship with participants at this stage and as such, most were willing to participate in interviews, however, two prisoners were excluded from participating in an interview due to sexually suggestive remarks

Table 1. Workshops details.

Workshop	Instructors	Work
1 (approx. 35 prisoners)	Mark, Harry	Breaking apart computer items such as desktop computers, printers, scanners, separating these parts to be recycled
2 (approx. 35)	Dennis, Greg	Packing books, stickering books, shrink wrapping books and quality checking them to make sure the pages are all written in the same language
3 (approx. 35)	Allen, Glen	Wrapping straps through a plastic case, rolling them, and packing them. The product is then sold to supermarkets and other companies and is used to pull large warehouse trolleys. Repackaging small car parts and stickering them.
4 (approx. 35)	Ray, Karen	Puttting together different components of household plumbing parts such as toilet flushes and repackaging these parts
5 (approx. 12)	Sarah, Amanda	Waste Management Workshop – Workers collect the bins from all over the prison and separate the waste into recyclable groups
6 (approx. 35) Vulnerable Prisoners Unit (VPU)	Stevie	There were several workshops in the VPU; this paper only refers to 1 of those workshops. This workshop involved repackaging dry products (tea bags, sugar, and coffee sachets) for an airline company

made when asked. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 1 hour and 30 minutes and all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Participants were all male, their ages ranged from 18 to 56 and their sentence lengths ranged from 1 to 8 years. An interview schedule was used to explore prisoners' experiences of work. During these discussions, when prisoners talked about daily life in the workshop, their relationships with instructors as well as pranks and conversations of humorous activity emerged.

Reflexivity, positionality, and ethics

It is important to reflect on the researcher's role and situate their experiences inside the research findings and analysis as they will influence the research end result (Liebling 1999). We acknowledge that the research is based on the subjective understandings and interpretations of the researcher, and, for better or worse, the ethnographer will shape the research outcomes (Pandeli, Sutherland, and Gaggiotti 2022), particularly given the relational nature of humour. As explained, the research was conducted by the first author, a young cis female, from a working-class background. In reflecting on her positionality, her experiences in the field were riddled with privilege and disadvantage (Rodriguez and Ridgway 2023).

In terms of disadvantage, given that the researcher was female in a male prison, and an outsider, this inevitably limited her full immersion into the field. Furthermore, wearing keys, a symbol of power in prison, showed that she could leave at any time, and this further cemented her 'outsider' status, which limited her ability to build rapport with participants. Paradoxically, in terms of positional privilege, as a young, small cis woman, she was viewed as non-threatening. And as she was most often the sole female in an all-male prison workshop, this novelty often meant that she was a person of interest. Participants were interested to talk to her and find out why there was an outsider in their workshop. Furthermore, as the researcher was from a similar area to a lot of the prisoners, they shared commonalities which helped to develop rapport. Like Haddow (2022) the men in this research had gendered expectations of a female researcher which in fact facilitated data collection. Previous research has found that women are well suited to ethnography as they are often considered to hold female strengths of empathy and human concern (Haddow 2022). Women are often considered to be good listeners (Haddow 2022), which can lead to participants opening up to the female researcher. Therefore, whilst there are inevitable limitations to the research, we also acknowledge the privilege held by the researcher that accelerated in depth data collection. We present this here to acknowledge the importance of the personal attributes of the researcher to the research process and how the researcher co-creates the research dialogue with participants (Lumsden 2009).

Given the research setting, ethical considerations were a high priority for this research[1]; protecting the participants who as a result of their incarceration would be considered vulnerable, as well as protecting the safety of the researcher were important aspects of the research. All participants were provided with pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Whilst consent can be complex in ethnographic research (Atkinson 2009; Tarrabain 2022), the researcher spent several weeks at the beginning of the research explaining its purpose and focus and what participation involved (and reiterating this throughout the fieldwork). Therefore, when participants were asked to participate in interviews, they had a clear understanding of what this meant for them. Participation information sheets and consent forms were provided in advance of each interview and participants were explicitly informed that participation was voluntary. Many were keen to participate simply to break the monotony of their day up. In terms of observational consent, the researchers presence in the workshops was overt and everyone was made aware of the research focus, and it was explained that if they did not want to be included in the fieldwork diary, there would be no consequences. Nobody objected to this, particularly given that their participation was anonymous.

In terms of researcher safety, precautions were taken to ensure the welfare of the researcher in the prison setting. She was provided with basic self-defence training by the prison and used her initiative to reduce danger (such as avoiding interviews with participants who made sexually

suggestive or uncomfortable comments). Most importantly, the researcher treated all participants with respect and empathy; an underacknowledged practise to help the research run smoothly and reduce hostility.

Data analysis

The data analysis process for this research began in the field. Humour, as a topic of interest and importance began during the data collection. One focus became the humorous interactions between workshop instructors and prisoners. We became interested in how carefully humour was navigated between these two groups, how prisoners had different relationships with different instructors, and it was actually humour that helped tell us about this. We felt that humour told us about relational power between these two groups.

As Locke (1996) suggests, it is important to ensure that the emerging perspectives are empirically grounded; as such, an iterative approach was adopted where we travelled between the data, the literature on humour and power, discussions between ourselves (the authors), and participants to analyse the data. The fieldwork diaries and interview transcripts were the data sets used for this research. Familiarisation with the data involved reading and rereading through field notes and transcripts, assigning codes to varying sized chunks of data to develop overarching themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Within the data we identified any interactions that took place between instructors and prisoners where humour was used as well as identifying all interview data where prisoners discussed their instructors. Several codes were identified through the analysis, and this led to three final theoretical categories – reciprocal humour, the absence of humour, and the moving of goal posts where the rules of humour were shaped and changed by those in power.

Findings

The complexity of staff–prisoner relationships

Staff–Prisoner relationships are complex. Historically, there has been immense division between prisoners and prison staff (particularly officers), with staff being viewed as 'the enemy' or 'callous zookeepers' (McDermott and King 1988, 361). This coincides with a time when prison officers' authority was seen as absolute (Crewe 2009), whereas, in the modern jail, Crewe (2009, 103) argues that prison officers are the conduits rather than the controllers of organizational power. They still yield power, but the divisions are diminished. There is certainly softening and thus, we see relationship negotiations between these groups often. But, given the history of division as well as the authority staff have over prisoners, there is still a lot of caution in terms of relationship development between these groups. Negotiating relationships between prisoner and prison staff must be done very carefully and delicately. Both parties know this.[2]

Building relationships with prison staff is often beneficial if not essential for prisoners, who they rely on for privilege decisions (Crewe 2009). This is illustrated by Nelson, who explains the importance of having positive relationships with prison staff:

> The Govs [prison staff] here are doing a job basically, they didn't ask you to go out and burgle a house. When you come in here, you've got to play the system. What's the point in being cheeky to the govs and then there's one gym space and the kid who's good as gold says, 'can I go to gym?' and I asked before him and he's [prison staff] thinking, 'but that one was cheeky yesterday, I'll give it to the other kid' … it helps you get through your sentence. (Nelson, 27, Workshop 4)

The benefits could be small such as time at the gym as illustrated in the example above or other benefits such as a pay increase or even positive feedback which could have implications for prisoners' standard of living or even prison release date.

However, whilst it was essential to build these relationships, this could be tricky given the divisions. Prisoners who worked too closely with prison staff were seen as traitors and conspirators

and were often given the name 'screw boy'. This was a derogatory term used to describe someone considered to be untrustworthy who might 'snitch' to prison staff. Bill explains this by highlighting how working too closely with prison staff in the workshop might lead to them being beaten up by prisoners when they returned to their cells in the evening:

> [there can be] resentment, because he's a screw boy … The thing is, what the instructors don't realise is at 5 o'clock when they go home, you've [the screw boy] got to go back to the wing with me, so you've given me some grief for 4 hours, you're coming back to the wing 'I'm not having this, I've had 3 days of this' so I start turning you up (Beating you up). (Bill, 44, Workshop 3)

Some were ostracised by other prisoners for working too closely with prison staff. For example, Carl was awarded the role of 'technician' in his workshop which came with additional work responsibilities and a small pay increase. In observing the workshop, it was clear he worked closely with staff and that other prisoners in his workshop did not like this. They would regularly make fun of him, and he was often alone in the workshop. During time spent in the workshop the researcher asked him if he had ever been called a 'screw boy':

> All the time, all the time. Yeah, because they turn around and say 'you're a screw boy, where's your keys? What do you think you are? You're not an instructor, you're just a bleeding, the same as us, you're another con'. (Carl, 51, Workshop 4)

This highlights the complexity of building these relationships. They were so important to prisoners standard of living, but if managed poorly, could also deeply affect how they were treated by other prisoners. The following sections will outline the different ways that humour was used between prisoner and instructor to navigate the complexity of these relationships.

Reciprocal humour for relationship building

Humour was used by some instructors to build relationships with the prisoners in their workshop. Here we observed the positive function of humour; a powerful tool in building relationships, camaraderie and creating a friendlier work environment and a 'safe' place for prisoners.

While observing Workshop 5, both instructors Amanda and Sarah joked with the prisoners in their workshop. This humour was reciprocal and mainly involved 'banter' and 'piss taking'. Instructors would make fun of prisoners and prisoners would do the same back to the instructors. Even though they were making fun of each other, the humour was light-hearted and endearing rather than insulting; humour that did not cause embarrassment, but instead created familiarity. For example, Amanda had a short stature, and the prisoners in her workshop would often make fun of her height, laughing that she couldn't reach the doors to lock them:

> I go out on the runs, collect the bins with Amanda (the instructor), I laugh about how short she is, because she tries to open the gate, and she can't open it. (Anthony, 25, Workshop 5)

Amanda's small stature was a running joke in the workshop, but it was never said offensively, prisoners in this workshop were very fond of Amanda, they appreciated that she took their jokes well and retaliated in jest, and treated them like human beings:

> Even though Amanda and Sarah are in the office and that, they come out and have a laugh with you, they don't treat you like any lower than anyone else, whereas the other lot, because you're in jail and you're convicts, you're [they see you as] shit really. (Lewis, 48, Workshop 5)

When we asked Amanda about the 'banter' in her workshop, she explained that, because she understood the difficult environment that prisoners were trapped in and the stress that some of the men in her workshop were feeling, she did not want to contribute to this and as such she wanted to create a friendly and informal environment for prisoners to work in. She told us that she attempted to provide a more jovial work setting which subsequently diminished the boundaries between herself and the prisoners. Despite instructors' power to sanction prisoners if necessary and despite the fact that formal, professional relationships were expected between prison staff and prisoners, some

instructors such as Amanda allowed for reciprocal humour, meaning that she allowed prisoners to make fun of her and she also made fun of them, overcoming barriers, and subtly building relationships whilst still being able to deny that this was happening due to the magic of humour.

Another instructor, Harry, also encouraged joking and banter in the workshop. Harry would often approach a table of prisoners who were working quietly, tell them a joke, usually something risqué and indecent, and then quietly walk away leaving the table to erupt into laughter or if only one or two of the table heard the joke, he would leave them to re-tell it. The jokes were usually dirty jokes or sexual innuendos. The workshop loved Harry, everyone had something nice to say about him and the majority of the workshop communicated with Harry via humour.

> I get on great with them, I think they're cool, especially Harry, he's funny, he's so funny. (Joe, 39, Workshop 1)

> You don't have to suck up to them and be their best mate, you just say morning to them and have a conversation, if they tell you to do something you do it and you just have a laugh back with them, cos they will have a joke with you, they will have a laugh and a joke with you. Harry's the worst, he'll come up to you and tell you jokes. (Kane, 22, Workshop 2)

Here we see relief humour in action. Despite the power these instructors hold in the prison setting, they facilitate reciprocal, dyadic humour that has prosocial functions in terms of interpersonal and socioemotional benefits; it builds relationships and improves prisoners everyday lives at work. Both parties engaged in the humour which allowed for the delicate and careful building of relationships in an informal way, allowing prisoners to be able to deny these relationships and avoid backlash from other prisoners in the process. However, not all workshop instructors engaged in humour in this way, as is evident in the following section.

The absence of reciprocal humour: maintaining boundaries and the use of rebellious humour

Some instructors would not engage in humour with prisoners. In these workshops humour, particularly reciprocal humour as outlined above, was largely absent. These instructors did not initiate humour with prisoners and also did not engage with it. They maintained clear boundaries and did not use humour as a tool to build relationships. As such, most prisoners would avoid the use of humour with these instructors due to the negative sanctions that might take place if a joke went wrong, given the thin line between jokes and insults; a line of which can be drawn by the joke recipient as well as the joke teller.

Prisoners understood what was expected of them, they understood that the relationship they had with these instructors was purely professional and formal. Instructors held formal power and were in charge thus they could not engage in frivolity with prisoners. These instructors were typically regarded as strict but fair, as indicated in the following comments:

> Allen's alright, a bit strict I find Allen though. (Gwilym, 31, Workshop 3)

> Mark is … he's a bit tender like, you've got to watch what you say to him like but he's a good bloke. (Nathan, 26, Workshop 1)

These instructors' refusal to engage in humour helped to cultivate the type of relationship that was to be expected between themselves and the prisoners in their workshops. The relationship was clear; they were not friends, supporters, or guardians, the relationship was very much 'warden-subordinate'. Therefore, the simple act of refusing to engage in humour indicated the expectations for the relationship these two groups would have. This reinforced these instructors as authority figures and thus something the prisoners should be resisting. So, despite not being able to engage in humour with instructors, humour was adopted as a form of resistance against instructors but was used carefully and subtly to avoid punishment. Overt displays of resistance are rare within the prison setting (Crewe 2009); instead, subtle forms of resistance are displayed, humour was found to be fundamental in this subtle resistance.

The following field notes illustrate how prisoners joked about the strictness of this type of instructor; the ones who adopted this formal stance. In the example below, prisoners from workshop 6 used humour to insult their instructor Stevie:

> All workers seemed to get on with Stevie the instructor, but some joked that he was a 'slave driver' and that he whipped them when I wasn't there – all said in jest with a laugh or smile but it simply highlighted the extent to which Steve (who is ex-military) watched over them strictly and kept to the clock stringently – the men would ask how long they had left until break- Stevie answered specifically - '35 minutes'. (Fieldnotes)

It was clear through workshop observations and comments made by prisoners that Stevie worked to maintain a formal relationship with prisoners with clear boundaries. The use of humour displayed here by prisoners 'played down' the remarks made about Stevie's strictness and ensured that they would not be punished for such comments. Thus rebellious humour was used towards these instructors. As the instructors would not build friendly informal relationships with prisoners using humour, divisions were clear, and humour was used to illuminate this division. Using humour as a form of rebellion reduced the risk of being sanctioned as they were able to hide behind humour and deny their ridicule and rebellion as 'just a joke'.

This type of humour was used frequently to subtly express the 'us and them' culture within the prison and this was identified one morning during the researcher observation of Workshop 1:

> I was offered a cup of tea one morning by Sam (a prisoner). I gratefully accepted and Sam went off to get me a mug to borrow from the prison instructor. Prisoners are all issued the same small, light blue plastic mug, whilst prison staff bring in their own mugs from home – therefore prisoner mugs and staff mugs were noticeably different … Sam kindly washed my mug in the sink before he was about to make the coffee but within seconds the whole room began a football style chant of 'Screw boy! Screw boy!' as he had been caught washing an 'instructor's' mug. When I asked about this a couple days later, I was told that because the mug was not a prisoner's mug it did not matter who it was for, if anyone was caught doing something for a member of staff (or non-prisoner) then this is just what happened, and they had to have a laugh and make fun of each other. Dwayne added to this by saying to Sam 'and she still wears keys', suggesting that my symbol of authority was still something that they should resist. (Fieldnotes)

This example illustrates how prisoners use humour to subtly inform others and regulate acceptable behaviour when interacting with staff, demonstrating to prisoners how they should conform to the prison culture. Therefore, in terms of interactions between prisoners and these instructors, reciprocal humour was largely absent. Instead, humour was only used in the presence of these instructors to reinforce the us vs them culture and to demonstrate resistance whilst still being able to deny this as 'just a joke' and avoid punishment. Using humour in this way maintained the formal relationship between these instructors and prisoners in these workshops.

Changing the rules of the game: asserting power through ridicule, embarrassment, and 'unlaughter'

The most problematic use of humour identified in the prison workshop was in situations where instructors used (or refused to use humour) to assert power and humiliate. When observing these instructors, it became clear that whilst they might joke and ridicule prisoners, some rarely tolerated attempts to strike back; and they frequently moved the goal posts. Prisoners were often angered by the inconsistent approach of these instructors. Michael and Lori explain how their instructor, Dennis, could be inconsistent and heavy handed in his response to humour:

> The instructor's a bit of a tit though, Dennis … He gave me a written warning for laughing. Serious. Someone knocked coffee over some leaflets, and I laughed, and he gave me a written warning. (Michael, 22, Workshop 4)

> Yeah, we have a good time and that, we have a laugh. Yeah, with the instructors as well but something's they take to heart, and you get written warnings. They're alright to have a laugh and a joke but when it's at their expense they don't like it, but when it's at your expense they like it. (Lori, 24, Workshop 2)

Both of these individuals found this approach confusing. At times, when observing Workshop 2, a friendly relationship between these prisoners and Dennis was evident, they would be chatting and joking in the same way identified in the earlier examples of Harry and Amanda, where humour was used to build relationships. However, often, just as prisoners felt safe in the use of humour, they would make a joke with the instructor that would not be met with the same level of informality and friendliness. Instead, they were scolded or even formally punished.

Will from Workshop 4 explained that he did not like Dennis because of the way he shifted boundaries; sometimes Will was able to joke with Dennis and other times this was not the case. Will told a story about a time that an instructor had tried to play a prank on Dennis, incorporating Will into this prank, which resulted in an adverse outcome for Will:

> I don't like Dennis. He's Childish … Last week on the same day I just found out that my nan and grandpa died, and I found out my missus was cheating on me, all in the same day so I was a bit upset so Ray (his instructor) thought [that it would be a good idea to] send me down [to Workshop 2] to wind Dennis up- that would cheer me up a bit. So, I went down there, [and Ray told me to] chuck a load of crates outside his door and Ray said that if he asks, say 'Ray says happy birthday' and walk off. So, I did that, and he [Dennis] was kicking off down there, I walked in another room to get other stuff, and he came behind me and started mouthing off at me and I said 'look, don't speak to me like that' and he came right up to my face and said, 'what are you going to do about it?' I said 'how old are you? Grow up will you, you're supposed to be a grown man'. I said, 'go away' and he said, 'speak to me like that again and I'll give you a written warning'. My mate was taking rubbish down at the same time and he saw it, so he burst out laughing, Dennis turned to him and said, 'carry on laughing by there and I'll nick [punish] you for it as well!'. You can't get any worse than that. (Will, 25, Workshop 4)

Shifting Boundaries as identified in the extract above was common behaviour for one instructor in particular, Dennis, who regularly used humour to tease prisoners but very often the teasing could be quite harsh. The researcher was exposed to this teasing by this same instructor during data collection as identified in fieldnotes:

> Dennis did not like the prisoners answering my questions and talking to me in the workshop and he made this clear by teasing prisoners if they talked to me. On one occasion whilst I was talking to a group of prisoners, Dennis shouted across the workshop 'you're all sat around her like she's on fire and you're toasting marshmallows'. He would shout these comments across the workshop to embarrass individuals in front of me and other prisoners. (Fieldnotes)

We found that this form of social punishment worked successfully for Dennis as several prisoners in Workshop 2 became nervous to talk to the researcher in case they were also teased in this way. But it was not just 'social' punishment, Dennis also handed out official punishments in the form of written warnings which could have serious consequences for prisoners.[3] The inconsistent use of humour used by Dennis meant that prisoners were unclear as to what actions, comments, or behaviours could warrant this punishment, and they had little power to dispute this. Dennis used humour to berate prisoners but was also inconsistent in his response to prisoners' use of humour, sometimes he would join in and laugh and other times he would punish them. His use of humour and his problematic response to prisoners' humour both served to assert Dennis's power over prisoners and remind them of their subordinate position and powerlessness.

Greg, the second instructor in Workshop 2 would also adopt this approach to humour with prisoners in his workshop. He often attempted to joke and tease prisoners but enforced punishment if a joke was made at his expense that he did not like:

> One morning whilst sat with a group of prisoners in Workshop 2 chatting and filling out crossword puzzles (as no work had arrived this day) Greg approached the table and attempted to start a conversation. One of the boys had been given the unfortunate nickname of 'Donkey' so Greg asked, already chortling, 'why do they call you donkey?' The answer was because the other prisoners had suggested that he looked like a donkey. 'Donkey' was a little embarrassed of this nickname and seemed defensive that Greg had brought this up, so he replied, 'why do they call you gay?' at which point all the prisoners on the table erupted into laughter. (Fieldnotes)

Whilst the homophobic nature of this comment may warrant reprimand, comments such as this were frequent in the workshop and most often went unchallenged by prison staff. In this case,

the issue was not the content of the joke but who it was directed towards. 'Donkey' received a written warning for this comment. The ambiguous boundaries set by this type of instructor were therefore difficult for prisoners to accommodate, and contention over such issues served to reinforce the oppositional relationship between many prisoners and instructors.

Here we can see the person in power (i.e. instructor) is not consistent with how humour is deployed and the consequences of using humour. By punishing prisoners who 'take the piss' out of instructors, humour is used to assert authority and create resentment in the workshop. The lack of consistency on how humour is taken and used did not allow a positive relationship to emerge.

In our analysis, we found that the use of humour by prison instructors was not only a means to assert positional power but also a relational strategy to navigate and maintain control over the shifting dynamics of power in the prison workshop. For example, when instructors selectively chose to engage in or withhold humour, they were actively shaping the power relations in the room, either fostering camaraderie or reinforcing their authority.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine humour and its impact on negotiating relationships in situations of power imbalance – we do this using an extreme organisational context. We illustrate three ways that humour is used to negotiate relationships between those in authority and their subordinates, specifically here, prisoners and their workshop instructors. First, we show how humour is used to build those relationships, second, we show how humour is avoided to maintain distance and formality. Third, we show how those in positions of power can manipulate and denigrate subordinates by shifting the socially accepted and agreed upon humorous mode. By viewing power through a relational lens, we can better understand how humour operates as both a tool of oppression and a form of resistance. Instructors' inconsistent engagement with humour – sometimes using it to build rapport, other times to ridicule – illustrates how they continually renegotiate the boundaries of their authority. For prisoners, humour becomes a delicate balancing act, a means to navigate these fluctuating power dynamics without overtly challenging the authority structure.

As Manolchev et al. (2023) argue, research on employee–prisoner interactions has mainly followed the much-used path of 'positive humour' (e.g. Nielsen 2011). Therefore, we contribute to a critical understanding of how prisoners and prison staff use humour and negotiate relationships. We introduce the complexity of humours role in the prison and the multiple ways it is used by prison staff to manage relationships; we move beyond only exploring its positive use to highlight its manipulative and abusive potential.

Like Humonen and Whittle (2023), our study builds on existing theories of humour to show how humour functions in both collaborative and non-collaborative ways. Previous studies have provided insight into how humour is used to build and maintain relationships (e.g. collaborative ways) (Cooper, Kong, and Crossley 2018; Wieslander 2021; Wijewardena, Härtel, and Samaratunge 2017), there is also some research that tells us about how humour is used to assert power through humour (e.g. non-collaborative ways) (Holmes 2000). What we see that is interesting and new here relates specifically to the third approach to humour identified in our findings; the changing of the humour rules by those in authority and the power attached to how we respond to humorous attempts. In this final scenario, where those in authority change the rules of the game as to what is considered humorous, it is the *response* to attempts at humour which are noteworthy and significant. When we do consider humour and power, we most often explore how the use of humour can be powerful, less frequently do we explore how power is asserted in our responses to humour (Humonen and Whittle 2023).

There are a myriad of responses we can give to humour, but the one people are most often hoping for is laughter and amusement. So, what happens when the response is 'unlaughter'? In our findings, we see instructors use unlaughter to ridicule, embarrass and even punish, in response to prisoners attempts at humour; they use (or don't use) humour as a tool of oppression; they change

the rules of humorous interaction with the potential of embarrassing prisoners if they get it wrong; thus, they control what is considered to be humorous which means that the fear of embarrassment keeps the prisoners in check. The problem here is that unfortunately what is considered 'appropriate' is regularly changed, making the threat of embarrassment even higher with these instructors. Instructors such as Dennis and Greg not only engaged in joke disapproval (with the consequence of causing embarrassment) but took this further to formally punish prisoners on occasion. Billig (2005, 2) argues the ridicule lies at the core of social life, 'for the possibility of ridicule ensures that members of society routinely comply with the customs and habits of the social milieu'. But he suggests that social theorists have often neglected the disciplinary aspects of humour. For example, he argues that in developing his theories of embarrassment, Goffman overlooked the link between laughter and embarrassment (Billig 2005). Embarrassment can be seen to possess a universal role in supporting the moral order of everyday life, whatever the nature of that moral order; '*Built into the fabric of social life is the mechanism for social embarrassment, threatening social actors with a form of social death each time they forget the codes of appropriateness*' (Billig 2005, 220). When power exists imbalanced in instructor–prisoner relations, humour is controlled by those with power to decide how humour is used: whether to cause laughter, respond to prisoners' attempts at humour, or even as a means of embarrassment and punishment.

Whilst Holmes (2000) engages with the critical study of humour, distinguishing between repressive and contestive humour; she discusses repressive humour only in how superiors use humour, not how they respond to humour; we attempt to contribute to understandings of humour by highlighting here how superiors can oppress by refusing to laugh and more than that, they have the power to reprimand if they don't approve of the joke; they can use their authority to decide what is and what is not funny. For Holmes (2000) repressive humour is used by superiors to maintain their power in the workplace, whilst contestive humour is used by subordinates to challenge that authority. The distinction does not rest upon the intrinsic nature of the humour itself, but upon the social position of the person using the humour and the uses to which the humour is put. The lack of consistency and clarity provided by the instructors in the third scenario is the critical issue here; their authority meant they had the power to change the rules of the game and shift the boundaries of humour.

Our findings show that those in positions of power can use humour to denigrate subordinates; humour responses can assert power, embarrass and ridicule, or most extreme in this setting, formally punish. Thus, it is the very fact that they are in positions of authority which means they need to be more careful when using humour with subordinates as the consequences can be much more than simply unlaughter and embarrassment. The act of unlaughter alone between prisoner and instructor is not noteworthy in itself, on occasion this would have taken place between prisoners too. What is noteworthy is that the consequence of a joke not receiving a laugh from a fellow prisoner is likely to only be embarrassment; fellow prisoners do not hold the formal, organisational power that means that they can impose sanctions. Those in positions of authority can reinforce power by simply choosing whether to engage in humour or not.

Power and control are fortified more so when the individual in the position of power continually changes the rules of the game; at times choosing to engage in humour with subordinates and at other times punishing them for doing so' illustrating the fragility of humour and the humorous mode. The interaction, responses, and use of humour by instructors signals to subordinates what type of relationship they want to have and allows prisoners to respond accordingly. The goal post moving hinders this and confuses subordinates in the type of relationships and responses expected from them. We can demonstrate power not only by using the content of humour to denigrate others or uplift ourselves but also by choosing when to laugh. As humour is relational, choosing not to laugh, choosing not to find something funny or entertaining tells the joke teller that you are the authority on humour. We indicate that the question of 'who can joke and how?' is a central element in establishing power relations in organisations. We assume management use humour to exercise control (Huber 2022), but we indicate here, management can refuse to engage in humour to the same purpose of exercising control.

This research has implications for organisational relationship negotiations and management more generally, beyond the prison gates. This extreme setting puts these minute interactions and negotiations under a microscope, and we argue that the findings presented here are relevant to different organisational settings. The multiple forms of negotiating power in relationships through humour that we see in this paper, could be found in the workplace between manager and employee, in schools between pupils and teachers, in the military between soldier and sergeant and so on. Organisational subordinates in a myriad of settings will have to tread carefully when using humour in the workplace to respond to the approaches of those with power. They will need to ensure they get it 'right' when using humour in negotiating relationships to avoid denigration, punishment, or humiliation. Nevertheless, in prison, crossing boundaries can lead to severe consequences. In other organizational settings, it is (or ideally should be) easier to raise complaints about authority figures. Furthermore, being perceived as a 'screw boy' or sycophant, is less problematic in most work settings as you are able to leave your co-workers at the end of the working day. For those in total institutions, group conformity and 'fitting in' is far more crucial, even from the standpoint of protection and violence. Thus the relationship between power, humour, and authority are clearly heightened in this particular organization.

This paper extends the critical approach of humour, by contributing theoretically to our understanding of the use of humour between those with and without authority; we first show how this can be multifarious and that different people in authority will use humour differently in the context of relationship negotiations, we then focus on the responses to humour, drawing attention to 'unlaughter' and it's potential to oppress and assert power through ridicule, embarrassment and sanctions. Thus humour performs subtle work, in rebalancing or upholding power.

Notes

1. Ethical Approval for this research was granted by Cardiff Business School Ethics Committee.
2. Whilst the research here focuses on prison workshop instructors rather than officers per se, much of this still rings true as instructors still have the authority to punish, and they control a large portion of a prisoners day.
3. For example, several written warnings could lead to a demotion in prison status which could result in a loss of privileges such as what clothing they could wear, television time, family/friends visits and could even impact the length of your prison sentence.

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