

Book review

Plester, Barbara (2016). *The Complexity of Workplace Humour: Laughter, Jokers and the Dark Side of Humour*. London & New York: Springer, 164 pp.

Barbara Plester's book very engagingly explores workplace humour while identifying some serious issues for contemplation, reflection, and possible action. As Martin Parker notes in his well-crafted Foreword, this book demonstrates how "formal institutions are wonderful examples of the sinuous way in which structures become inhabited by meanings, places in which the trivial and the serious are always pushing up against one another" (p. vii). To this end, Plester explicitly adopts an eclectic approach (her word is "holistic") using a functionalist instrumental framework in some chapters and adopting a critical perspective investigating power and control in others. She also acknowledges the possibility of multiple interpretations of meaning, including the readers'. This sophisticated position serves remarkably well in permitting her to explore the many facets and complexities of workplace humour.

Using the stages of a joke in structuring her book, Plester provides the "set-up" in chapter 1, defining humour, laughter and play, and carefully describing how she performed her role as an ethnographic researcher in different workplaces. She considered that she needed to "be there" (p. 8) to thoroughly understand and interpret the meaning of the humour in different contexts, and she rightly observes that "member checks" were also crucial to confirm her interpretations (pp. 10–11). Of course (as she recognises) her presence as an observer, no matter how skilled at integration, will inevitably have affected the behaviour of others, but as the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) team has found when recording workplace interaction (Holmes & Stubbe 2003, Holmes et al. 2011), people tend to become desensitised after a few days, and revert to their "normal" behaviour patterns most of the time.

Chapter 2 reviews the key philosophical theories that have been used to explain the concept of humour as well as specific theories relevant to the analysis of organisational humour. She discusses theories of humour from Socrates through Hobbes to Freud, about whom she tells us disarmingly in the last chapter she first thought "oh Freud huh, I'm not reading him!" before recognising the richness of his "words and wisdom on the underlying emotions and expressions at play when people express humour" (p. 151). In this process, she discusses and illustrates the three most widely known theoretical approaches (incongruity/cognitive, superiority/social, relief/psychological). This chapter ends with a brief outline of a tripartite model of workplace fun, a contested concept by critical researchers, and though it seems a bit of an add-on in this chapter, its relevance emerges as the book proceeds.

The seven organisations with whom Plester worked over a period of twelve years are described in chapter 3. They encompass IT companies, a law firm, a finance company, and a utility provider. Different types of humour are described: verbal (e.g. quips), visual (e.g. email, cartoons), and physical (e.g. practical jokes and horseplay) as well as various functions of workplace humour including humour enacting power and control. The crucial importance

of context (“you had to be there”), workplace culture, and relationships are emphasised here as throughout the book, very important points which our LWP research strongly supports. The chapter is richly illustrated with examples from Plester’s data.

Chapter 4 explores the different roles individuals adopt when enacting humour and relates these to organisational rituals and practices. Particularly interesting in this analysis is the identification of the complementary roles of the organisational joker who instigates humour and the gatekeeper who takes responsibility for maintaining humour boundaries and protecting the organisation’s reputation. The joker is usually popular and privileged but rarely senior (there is one notable exception in her data whose unusual behaviour is well explored in chapter 6). He (typically) tests behavioural boundaries and challenges management in ways others dare not risk, though of course this brings with it some costs which Plester also perceptively identifies.

This chapter includes some impressive analyses of quips with convincing support for her interpretations based on observation of the responses of others. The interesting concept of “unlaughter” (from Billig 2005) is introduced with a discussion of the consequences of not laughing at the jokes of a statusful employer. By contrast to the typically male joker, the gatekeepers in Plester’s data are typically female and gatekeeping seems to be increasingly regarded as a HR responsibility because of the potential implications of bad judgement concerning acceptable humour for an organisation’s reputation.

Chapter 5 shifts to a social constructionist approach (not explicitly discussed in the summary of theoretical approaches but implied as integral to the critical approach) in order to examine the ways in which boundaries are socially constructed to constrain workplace humour. The influence of different organisational cultures on the way that humour develops and is enacted are explored, with size and relative formality identified as key components in this process. The contribution of humour to the enactment of power and control is also well analyzed in this chapter.

Plester notes that most humour research focuses on the positive aspects of humour (as did her own early research, a point she acknowledges in the final chapter). Recognising that this is only part of the story, chapter 6 adopts a critical stance to analyse the “dark side” of humour which Plester argues may involve dominance, control, masculinity, and even violence. Following a theoretical discussion of the concept of “carnavalesque” humour, she explores the ways in which humour can be used to create and reinforce power and control in the workplace. This kind of humour tends to victimise specific people, which Plester illustrates with the analysis of sometimes distressing examples of humour involving sexism, homophobia, and misogynistic aggression. This chapter paints a grim but convincing picture of the ways in which humour can be used to bully, victimise, and demean.

In chapter 7 Plester introduces the notion of the “uncanny” and the “monstrous” as well as “organisational monsters” (p. 129), as she examines the role of humour in dealing with marginalised aspects of organisational life. Humour, she argues, “defamiliarises familiar events and renders them mildly uncanny while also exposing unfamiliar, horror, or taboo organisational elements and can make these less worrisome” (p. 129). In the exploration of this new area of humour, Plester focuses on humour which targets physical attributes and behaviours (e.g. food fights) rather than words and discourse. Perhaps this explains why, as a sociolinguist, I was least convinced by this chapter. Nevertheless, despite my scepticism, I found Plester’s argument for the value of the concept of “uncanny” very interesting.

Finally, chapter 8 provides a succinct summary of the book’s contents, while also exploring the implications of the research for organisational life and practices, and identifying further research issues. Plester helpfully identifies five areas of humour research to which she considers she has made a contribution: demonstrating the dynamic construction of humour boundaries, adopting both functionalist and critical perspectives on humour

analysis, analysing the dark side of humour, exploring uncanny, monstrous and marginalised aspects of humour in the workplace, and drawing on “real world, actual, everyday workplace humour” data collected by her personally (p. 152). These are legitimate claims as the book makes a valuable contribution in all these areas. In this final chapter, she also (perhaps a little defensively) responds to earlier critics’ comments that her analysis ignores the dark side of humour and that humour analysis is just common sense. This book convincingly refutes both accusations, albeit, as she acknowledges, entailing a certain loss of innocence (alternatively conceptualised perhaps as maturity) on her part as analyst.

I have only a couple of reservations. I found the chapters a little repetitious in places; material is extensively paraphrased within chapters and repeated between chapters. However, I am very familiar with Plester’s published work and new readers may find this very helpful, especially if the chapters are read independently of each other rather than in sequence. The second reservation is more complex involving two rather different ethical issues. Though Plester guarantees anonymity to the companies who allow her to observe their interactions for a period, there is at least one company who could be “outed” from her description of a particular incident which hit the national press involving a contentious email which escaped the boundaries of the company.

The second issue relates to her ambiguous attitude to the CEO of the company she pseudonyms Adare. In the early chapters reflecting her initial positive stance on the role of workplace humour, the company Adare and its CEO, pseudonymed Jake, are presented very positively. It is a fun IT company and a good place to work with a high reputation for performance in the industry generally. But when she turns her attention to issues of power and control, a rather different picture gradually emerges. Jake is depicted as a bully: “any behaviour not acceptable to the CEO was punished by intense mocking, derision, and jocular abuse from the CEO and other employees. Anyone who dared to complain about or criticise the humour knew that they would become the target for barbed jibes and jokes and possibly unpleasant pranks” (pp. 77–78). And later Jake is even more strongly condemned in a penetrating analysis of the humour culture at Adare:

My interpretation is that far from being a benign and happily humorous workplace [as she had initially thought] Adare was a site of profound power and control, mostly enacted by the CEO [...] [whose] tastes ran to the scatological, obscene, aggressive and racist forms of humour usually considered unacceptable in modern Western workplaces (p. 124).

This is uncompromising condemnation of the humour in a workplace she had earlier described as fun-loving and collegial. Interestingly, then, the book tracks her intellectual journey from a perception of organisational humour as mainly positive to a realisation that it can be hurtful and destructive. Her careful analysis of how she came to interpret a supposedly amusing poster as aggressively misogynistic provides a detailed and wonderfully clear example of one crucial step in this development.

Overall then this is a very stimulating and enjoyable book. Plester provides a sound scholarly foundation, rich historical context, and attention-catching examples based on her own observations in a range of workplaces. Rather unusually each chapter has an abstract and references, making this material very appropriate for teaching purposes. She makes a strong case for the complexity of humour in workplace interaction and draws very effectively on her own extensive research to support her arguments.

Researchers in the area of humour from many disciplines will find this book stimulating and graduate students interested in humour will find it invaluable. The core theories are presented in a very engaging and user-friendly style and illustrated with authentic data. I am

not aware of undergraduate courses on humour but if there are such courses or sections of courses devoted to humour, I can recommend this book as accessible to senior undergraduates in areas such as psychology, sociology, and sociolinguistics. Barbara Plester's passion for her subject is apparent throughout this excellent book and readers from a range of backgrounds will find it thought-provoking and rewarding.

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References

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