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ARTICLE

Interpersonal Relations or Jokes of Social Structure?

Laughter in Social Work

Nanna Mik-Meyer
Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

ABSTRACT

The article is based on qualitative fieldwork in Danish rehabilitation centres. It uses an interactionist perspective in focusing on the role of humour and laughter in social work. As the article's analysis shows, laughter divides staff members (who laugh) from clients (who don't laugh). This finding can be related to the many inherent contradictions and paradoxes that define social work and which occasion laughter. The role of humour and laughter in the interaction between staff members and clients can be linked to sociological categories like inequality, tension, control, informality and group affiliations. The author therefore suggests that sociological literature on laughter, where laughter is viewed as closely related to what Douglas has termed 'jokes of social structure', be brought to bear on the analysis of central characteristics of the interaction between social workers and clients. For the purposes of this article, the sociological perspective on humour and laughter is systematically distinguished from a more traditional psychological perspective that links humour and the corresponding laughter with inner psychological states of individuals.

KEY WORDS:

humour

interaction between clients and staff

joking

laughter

power issues

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The topic of social work does not normally inspire laughter. So it is perhaps not surprising that research into the culture of social work rarely pursues its humorous aspect – the role of humour and laughter, for example. But if Michael Mulkay (1988) is right in suggesting that the domain of humour allows contradictory worlds to coexist, then this topic warrants a closer look. After all, social work involves a great measure of contradiction (Loseke, 1999; Miller and Holstein, 1996) and public organizations seem to be constitutively paradoxical (Czarniawska, 1997). Humour might well be a concrete manifestation of contradiction and paradox in the daily routines of social work.

During my fieldwork in two rehabilitation organizations I was struck by how often social workers laugh. Perhaps more importantly, I was struck by the fact that clients persistently refrain from laughing when a social worker tells a joke or offers a humorous remark. The social workers' giggling and the clients' silence in situations that 'demanded' joint laughter indicated a genuine puzzle. Laughter seemed to divide the staff (who laughed) from the clients (who didn't). Although I expected conflicting interests between social workers and clients, I did not expect that the opposing interests would materialize in relation to who laughed, with whom, and how much. I decided to approach the problem like any other empirical mystery (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2005); that is, I would focus my attention on situations involving laughter while reviewing past research into laughter, humour and irony.

While humour is widely discussed in philosophy, literary studies and psychology, it remains overlooked in sociology (Mulkay, 1988) and organization studies (Johansson and Woodilla, 2005). In psychology, which relates directly to social work, the literature deals with 'therapeutic humour', i.e. how humour, and the laughter that results, can function within a treatment strategy (e.g. Dossey, 1996; Klein, 1989; Metcalf and Felible, 1992; Robinson, 1991; Salameh and Fry, 2001). The dominant idea here is that humour and laughter will support the positive development of a person with problems, whether these are of a psychological or physical nature (for a critique of this literature see Kuiper and Nicholl, 2004; Martin, 2001, 2002). In the case of social work, however, humour and laughter seem to have a different function. There is a widely held view in the sociological literature that humour and laughter are closely connected to either interactional features like formality or social features like inequality and contradiction (Adelswärd, 1989; Coser, 1959, 1960; Douglas, 1968, 1999; Haakana, 2001; Mulkay, 1988).

Even though some of these sociological studies proceed empirically from interactions between clients and social workers (like my own material), none of their analyses concentrate on whether these 'fun' activities help the clients or not. Neither does mine. This article develops the virtually unexplored relation between laughter and social work and views laughter as a material manifestation through which it is possible to observe a series of different interactions.

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In the interest of establishing an interactionist perspective, however, this must be done *without* linking laughter to the inner psychological states of individuals, as is too often done in the area of social work and psychology. I am thus following the tradition that stems from Goffman's work on interaction and face work: 'Interaction (that is face-to-face-interaction) may be roughly defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's action when in one another's immediate physical presence' (Goffman, 1959/1990: 26). The concepts 'interaction' and 'face work' thus direct attention away from the inner selves of individuals and towards the situation in which the interaction occurs. To understand an interaction one has to have an understanding of the available roles and how they relate to the 'the region' or 'frame' (Goffman, 1959/1990, 1977) in which the interaction occurs. Goffman highlights that one has to include a range of different conditions – like which participants are involved in the interactions, where does the interaction take place and how do organizational features influence the interaction – in order to analyse the interacting persons' reactions and the development of the interaction. Participants in an interaction can, as Goffman puts it, be 'in face' (acting in accordance with the situations roles/lines and organizational features) or in 'wrong face' (contradicting the situations roles/lines and organizational features) (Goffman, 1959/1990, 1967). I adopt this interactionist perspective in the article. In order to understand the laughing/non-laughing interaction between clients and staff, I include in my analysis a range of different conditions that frames the interaction between clients and staff, taking particular note of the facework accomplished by staff and clients.

THE EMPIRICAL MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The empirical material presented in this analysis is part of a larger study of the meeting between clients and staff members in two rehabilitation organizations (Mik-Meyer, 2004, 2006). The rehabilitation organizations are situated in 14 administrative districts in Denmark, serving between 5 and 32 municipalities each. The goal of Danish rehabilitation organizations is to assist clients whose status is ambiguous. This results from not fitting into the habitual organizational categories of the welfare state, often because there is a discrepancy between their medical assessments and their wish to work. In many cases, clients complain of considerable pains that make them unable to work while their official diagnosis provides insufficient grounds to grant them a social pension. Conversely, there are cases of people who would like to work but are unable to imagine a job they can handle when taking their present capabilities into consideration. A central aim of social workers in these organizations is therefore to produce an accurate evaluation of the situation their clients are in. Are they really sick, and if so, how does their illness prevent them from participating in the labour

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market? In order to perform this task it is crucial that clients are trustworthy and cooperative in the evaluation process, as has been shown elsewhere (Hasenfeld, 1983; Loseke, 1989, 1999; Margolin, 1997).

The technology employed in these organizations is 'fuzzy', typically including assignments to work in assembly plants as well as leisure oriented activities like sewing baby clothes, playing computer games, working-out in the gym, silkscreen painting, and cooking. These are augmented by a range of cognitive activities like group discussions on personal themes, communication training, or talks given by psychologists. The staff members consist of various professionals, e.g. caseworkers, psychologists, doctors, physiotherapists and 'contact persons' that run the various workshops and also act as personal supervisors.

I have used two criteria for making selections from my empirical material for the analysis in this article. (1) Laughter had to occur, and (2) it had to occur in regard to 'an everyday life event', i.e. not in an extreme situation. Interestingly, the behaviour of the social workers alone made almost all of my material satisfy the first criterion.

I draw on observations from various meetings and workshop activities as well as interviews. I will present material from the daily morning gatherings held in the organizations, where social workers attempt to establish a comfortable, informal atmosphere, as well as material from the various activities during which clients are expected to display and develop their personal selves, and, finally, material extracted from social workers' discussions of clients. In my observations I either used stenography or I recorded the interactions on a mini-disk.

My choice of two organizations is in accordance with my wish to explore the 'reality' of organizations from different perspectives. In organization A, where the length of my fieldwork was three and a half months, I participated on the same terms as the clients. I carried out the activities they did and participated in the various meetings they attended. I spent a month and a half in organization B, where I followed the daily rounds of the staff and attended various meetings, workshop activities etc.[1] In addition to the wish to explore their activities from different perspectives, the choice of two rehabilitation centres was motivated by a desire to compare my observations between two organizations and this way be able to sort everyday interactions from interactions in the organizations that were more atypical. I also spoke with clients and social workers (typically when I had them to myself) about my observations in order to get an idea of how the particular observation could be seen as a result of my presence. At one staff meeting, for example, it was clear to me (and the staff members) that my presence at the meeting had a large effect on their discussions, and we decided that I should not participate in this specific staff group's meeting in the future.[2] In some situations – typically when it was clients who had invited me to a meeting – it was obvious that my presence influenced especially the social workers, I normally adjusted

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to this by excluding the particular observations from the large body of empirical material I ended up with.

Besides my constant engagement in trying to rule out behaviour exclusively caused by my presence (from interviews/conversations and from my comparative method) I also tried to follow Silverman's (1994: 39–41) recommendation of ideally separating 'descriptions' from 'impressions' in one's field notes,[3] i.e. trying to note down 'unadorned and flat' descriptions of what happens and not theoretically interpretive impressions of what was going on. To give an example of this separation concerning laughter I would note when laughter occurred, what was being said before and after the occurrence of the laughter and only later in the analytical process, having returned from the field, I would analyse what laughter 'did' in the specific context (e.g. created frustration, irritation, happiness). I did, of course, also make theoretically loaded observations (e.g. 'laughter probably occurred in this situation because of the paradoxical nature of the situation'). After all, many ideas and analytical connections occur to one during fieldwork, and therefore need to be noted down on site. Looking at my notes/recordings of staff members meetings, where clients were discussed, it is my clear impression that my presence did not have a significant impact on the social workers' discussions. In these meetings I was almost embarrassed when I noted down their discussions, because the social workers' discussions of the clients' personalities were, in my view, humiliating. According to clients and their behaviour it was clear to me that they accepted the neutrality that I had tried to communicate to them (i.e. I had made it clear that I could not influence their specific case and that I would not forward information I got from them to the staff members) because most of the clients shared stories of how they 'tricked the system' with me. These stories could also result in laughter among the clients (and me) and as such helped portray clients as resourceful persons in sharp contrast to the roles they were assigned in most other situations in the organizations.[4]

Finally, my general experience with fieldwork will no doubt be familiar to others: people you observe quickly 'forget' your presence and go about their daily activities as they have always done. This also happened in this study; in the first one or two weeks I did feel a general interest in my person, and my research, but I quickly simply became someone who could help out with specific tasks (like making photocopies) or someone who could listen to the complaints of clients (and actually often also staff members) about the welfare system. Applying an interactionist perspective it would be nonsense to claim that I did not have *any* effect on the situations that I was observing. My general impression, however, is that in most situations I did not have a very big effect on the behaviour of either staff members or clients, which emphasizes the importance of anonymity in research, and of persistent assurances to both clients and staff members that their anonymity in this specific project would be respected.

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INFORMALITY AND LAUGHTER

Case Illustration 1: A Morning Gathering

In both organizations, a day of workshops begins with a morning gathering that is attended by clients and social workers. The gathering lasts half an hour, bringing social workers and clients together while they drink coffee and chat. Many jokes and humorous remarks are exchanged between the social workers, which result in much laughter among this group. The clients typically remain more passive. They participate in the conversations only when the social workers approach them directly. Social workers talk about news from the media, popular television programmes, and issues concerning their personal life, upcoming activities and other easily understood events. The following account is a typical representation of a morning gathering with – as we shall see – reluctantly participating clients. According to the social workers, the clients' passive, reluctant participation demonstrates this group's difficult situation. The clients, by contrast, explain in interviews that they find this morning gathering a 'waste of time'. This group never focuses on their psychological situation when they talk about their behaviour.

It is a client's 53rd birthday and she has therefore brought breakfast rolls to the meeting. Seven clients and three social workers participate in the meeting. Social worker A opens the meeting by asking, 'When you were young, you wanted to be older. Back then you wanted to be sixteen. How old do you wish you were now?'. The social workers immediately laugh loudly but the client doesn't join in the laughter before a substantial period of time has elapsed. When she does join in, it is soft and brief. There is then a long moment of silence. Then social worker A asks a client what she is going to do during the upcoming weekend. The client explains in few words that she has to prepare dinner for a family event. Another period of silence follows. Social worker B breaks the silence by beginning a story about English beef and rickets (called 'English Disease' in Danish). The social workers laugh at this story, while folding their napkins over and over again. A minor friendly exchange of words occurs between social worker A and C. Social worker B informs the participants about his wife's upcoming birthday and engages in a series of jokes with social worker A about his boat, which he implicitly compares to his wife. The clients remain silent. The situation becomes tense, and most participants look down at the table. When the social workers address the clients directly either with jokes or direct questions about their social life, the clients answer in soft voices with short answers. For a long while, the social workers do little more than fold and refold their napkins, doing this with great precision. Both social workers and clients often consult the wall clock in the meeting's final phase.

This example illustrates how social workers at the two rehabilitation organizations try to establish an informal, comfortable contact with clients. When clients decline to laugh, which is viewed as a normal response to humorous statements (Mulkay, 1988), a tense situation develops. In the example,

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we see how social workers (that are exposed to this offensive silence) start to fold their napkins over and over again, interrupted only by new jokes, again resulting in little or no laughter among the clients.

The clients' silence can thus be viewed as a powerful presence in the interaction, because silence works against the goal of the meeting (and the structure of humour itself), which is to create an informal situation that aims to minimize the difference in status between the two groups. By being silent, the clients signal that social workers and clients are not part of the same group, that the clients are not the social workers' equals (Coser, 1959), that they are not having a good time, and that the gathering is not relevant for them. Their silence thus confirms that the gathering cannot be equalized, or thereby become a gathering among people of the same status (Adelswärd, 1989). As a consequence, the clients' silence confirms the formality of the interaction, despite the social workers' attempt to establish a comfortable atmosphere. This finding supports Adelswärd's (1989) analysis, which found that unilateral laughter was very common in interactions in welfare organizations, because of the status differences between social workers and clients.

The social workers' continuous jokes and laughter can, in this way, be viewed as a 'face saving practice' (Goffman, 1967) caused by the clients' rejection. As long as the clients keep up a passive, silent and, thereby, unresponsive attitude in a situation that 'demands' positive active participation, e.g. laughing, the situation will demonstrate an inherent contradiction and the social workers will have to repair the situation by joking and laughing. Humour and laughter, however, also give the social workers a powerful position. I have never observed a client responding to a humorous remark with silence if the joke is directed to a particular person (exactly as the client in the meeting also reluctantly laughs). Humour and the responding laughter can thus also be viewed as a common rule of interaction, which both parties automatically follow. It thus serves as a mechanism of social control, which social workers can exercise over clients (Mulkay and Howe, 1994). Here we see an example of the fluidity of power. Both silence (among clients) and humour (among social workers) can be viewed as demonstrating power/control over the situation.

According to Mulkay, humour has a disorganizing effect on the available structure of authority. Despite an authority figure's attempt to establish an informal situation through jokes and laughter, the humoristic remarks themselves typically take over the structure of the very authority they are hoping to neutralize. Characteristically, the teller of the joke addresses it to subordinates (Mulkay, 1988). It is thus to be expected that it is the social worker (as in the example) that directs a joke toward a client, and not the other way round. As Coser (1959) puts it:

> To laugh, or to occasion laughter through humour and wit, is to invite those present to come closer. Laughter and humour are indeed like an invitation, be it an invitation for dinner, or an invitation to start a conversation: it aims at decreasing social distance. (Coser, 1959: 172)

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That is, humour seeks to foster an informal situation. This goal cannot be reached, however, when – as in the illustration above – humour instead reinforces the difference between social workers and clients, i.e. when jokes are told only *to* subordinates. Humour and laughter can thus be viewed *both* as a device that social workers use in order to create a comfortable, friendly, informal atmosphere *and* as a symbol of the contradictory conditions implicit in the work. It is both a strategy that is used to deal with the situation and an automatic response created by the situation. It is an example of how interactions can be viewed both as generated by acting persons and as a context that people automatically fit into and adjust their 'line' towards. It is comparable to the thesis that a 'performance' is created by both the context and the audience (Goffman, 1959, 1990).

SITUATIONAL AMBIGUITY AND LAUGHTER

Case Illustration 2: Recreational Group Activities

Both rehabilitation organizations carry out a series of different group activities to encourage the development of the clients' personal situation, e.g. to become happier people, better parents or kinder spouses. The group activities include playing cards (that picture different job activities), making posters ('drawing the week'), discussing personal characteristics ('what am I good at?'), discussing patterns of illness, receiving instruction in how to deal with stress or watching movies about unemployment. In the following analysis, I will present examples from two different 'fun' exercises and analyse what they do to the participating individuals. We are dealing with what Warren (2005) calls 'structured fun', i.e. actions that perhaps are 'not fun at all'.

The following account stems from an exercise where clients are to introduce themselves in the light of what they believe they are good at. During the exercise the clients stand up one by one and talk about themselves in front of the other clients and two social workers, while they or a social worker write cues on the blackboard. In the coming extract we shall see how client A's story is being stimulated by social worker A and B.

Client A: 'I am good at cleaning, talking, listening, I am dependable and efficient. I am not so sweaty any longer'. She laughs a little and continues to chuckle while adding that she is not so shy anymore either. Social worker A: 'Now you all have to help her brag'. Social worker A laughs loudly and few people join her laughter although in a much quieter fashion. Social worker B: 'What does it mean to be efficient?'. Client A gives examples of her efficiency. Social worker B then asks what it means to be dependable, and once more client A provides examples. Client A always answers briefly and tersely and as such demonstrates little passion in telling her story. To conclude the exercise, social worker A says, 'You must write that you are responsible,' laughing a little. Client A agrees and social worker B instructs her to write it on the blackboard,

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saying, 'Then put it on the blackboard, sister!'. Social worker B laughs again and social worker A joins her laughter after a while. A few clients finally laugh in low voices. Client B closes the discussion of client A's qualities by noting that it is 'difficult to ask client A about her abilities, because the exercise seems so obvious'.

On the basis of client A's interaction with the social workers, one can see that laughter should not necessarily be viewed as a *reaction* to funny statements. This has been pointed out by Mulkay (1988) and Douglas (1999) in other contexts: the social workers laugh also in situations where nothing funny has been said. In the example, the primary role of laughter seems to be to help especially the social workers to manage the ambiguity and tension that the exercise has caused. The ambiguity of the situation can be viewed as a result of the interaction that places the client in a position where it is no longer obvious that her status is equal to the social workers, i.e. adults (comparable to the example from the morning gathering). This creates a tension between the social workers and the client demonstrated by the client's reluctant participation.

The social workers' praise and engaged listening to client A's qualities can be likened to a parent's praise and engaged listening to a child. The role of laughter thus guides both social worker and client through a 'delicate' situation (Haakana, 2001). Again, it is primarily the social workers that are engaged in this 'apologetic' laughter, which can be seen as a method of leading attention away from the content of the exercise (cf. Mulkay and Howe, 1994). The social workers' friendly remarks and laughter can thus be viewed as a modifying strategy (Adelswärd, 1989): the laughter's aim is to moderate the potentially face-threatening practices that clients could feel because of the childish interaction (Goffman, 1967). Once in a while, clients do laugh with social workers. But when they do so it is typically softly and thus does not indicate joint group membership. It can therefore be interpreted as a form of 'polite laughter' (Adelswärd, 1989), which aims also at repairing the problematic parent–child relation produced by the exercise.

The parent–child model for interaction is not caused only by the actual activities; it also reflects the social workers discussions of clients. Social workers use terms like 'umbilical cord', when they talk about their relation to clients; in a friendly way, social workers explain that they 'keep an eye on the clients'; and they note that on the numerous field trips their job is that of a 'playground supervisor'. A client can be 'all grown up', a 'rascal' or the social workers' 'little helper'. Clients are also attentive to their special relation to the social workers. For example, clients ask the social workers if they are too 'naughty' or they refer to the staff members as 'adults'. Laughter always accompanies the childish rhetoric, probably because the associations that are connected to the role of children by definition do not apply to clients' status as adults (and is thus a contradictory condition, typically leading to laughter).

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ORGANIZATIONAL CONTRADICTIONS AND LAUGHTER

Case Illustration 3: Social Workers Discussing Clients

In this case I have chosen material from the weekly staff meetings that are dominated by giggling, joking and even gossiping about clients.

A staff meeting typically begins with friendly jokes about clients or a social worker's own personal situation. The point of departure for the evaluation of clients is in this way always rooted in personal, informal interaction. The following extract stems from a staff meeting where two clients (A, B) are being evaluated by three social workers (A, B, C):

Social worker A: I have not seen client A since our meeting last week.

Social worker B: (cautious laughing) I just told client A's supervising caseworker in his municipality that it is going *so* well with him. [A series of jokes follows, which present client A as suffering from premenstrual stress, resulting in great laughter].

Social worker C: Client A wanders around downtown.

Social worker B: He can't wander. He has arthritis.

Social worker C: Well, he wanders just fine. He wanders about (joint laughter).

Social worker A: I feel sorry for him; I am not saying he can't be deceiving me.

Social worker B: (laughing) He is. You can be sure of that. He is a real deviant (joint laughter). (. . .) And client B – she has all kinds of illnesses.

Social worker C: Also in reality? (Joint laughter).

Social worker B: She has several diagnoses, but I don't know . . .

Social worker A: I have been listening to her for an hour to an hour and a half every day (little laughter). She is a nut case and simple-minded; you name it, she's got it. [The social workers laugh in a hysterical manner].

It is obvious that it can be problematic to mix an evaluation of a client's situation with ironic statements, as exemplified in the dialogue. In this context, however, I will primarily focus on what the ironic remarks, and the laughter

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that results from them, accomplish in the interaction. In the dialogue, the social workers are talking about two clients that might be lying about their situation, which creates an impossible situation for the social workers, who cannot help or even work with a person that lies about his or her abilities (Hasenfeld, 1983). It is this kind of situation that makes Goffman's (1961) query of the relevance of a service ideal (symbolizing an equal relation where clients recognize social workers as experts) in interaction between client and social worker. Sometimes clients do not want the 'service' presented to them by social workers, and sometimes clients lie in order to improve their situation (as they see it). The relation between the two parties is thus far from being a voluntarily, equal relation. For these reasons an ideal of service 'condemns' the two parties to a false and difficult relationship, as Goffman puts it (1961).

In the example we see how irony and laughter help the social workers through a difficult conversation in awareness of the absurdity of conducting a professional discussion. How can social workers evaluate clients' abilities in these organizations when clients have been dishonest about their capabilities on several occasions (client A walks around despite his arthritis, and client B might not be trustworthy)? This rhetorical question seems to be implicit in the way they talk. Laughter can also be analysed as a way to legitimize the derogatory conversation by signalling that the different statements are meant in jest and therefore should not be taken too seriously. My material shows that irony and sarcasm mostly concern clients that the social workers have a hard time helping, not only because clients might be lying, but also in situations were the clients' skills (or lack thereof) make them ill-suited to the western labour market's demand for educated workers. These situations can be conceptualized by Douglas' term, 'a joke in the social structure', because they consist of inherent contradictions generating laughter.

The irony and sarcastic comments about clients, however, also produce a paradox for the social workers, as they express in various situations a wish for an equal and respectful relation to clients. As they gossip, social workers often show signs of embarrassment, e.g. looking down at the table, barely laughing, etc. Obviously, it is a ritual one cannot escape from, although it is sometimes awkward or painful. When I focused on this practice during interviews, the social workers' typical explanation was that they needed to 'rid themselves' of all the 'emotional shit the clients bombard us with all the time', as one social worker explains. Later in the interview, the social worker explains that they have no way of dealing with 'all that illness, all that despair'. What is interesting about this particular excuse for the sarcastic comment about the clients (that always leads to laughter) is the missing connection between the 'desperate stories' and the derogatory statements. Clients like client A and B are not in a particularly 'desperate' situation when viewed in a wider context of 'illness' or 'problematical background'. Many clients are, however, particularly reluctant to engage in the activities applied by

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the social workers in the 'clarification process', mostly – as the clients explain – because it is not obvious to the clients how the activities can help them. It is understandable that any criticism directed towards organizational and contextual conditions can be difficult, if not downright impossible to deal with for social workers in their daily work. Assuming that humour, irony and laughter connect to contradictory conditions, one can view the derogatory remarks as a sort of 'automatic' (not explicitly 'chosen') action that reflects the impossible work situation, which clients like client A and B from before places the social workers in. This analysis is supported by the social workers' expression of dislike when we discuss this practice.

The following dialogue with a social worker demonstrates the ambivalent situation produced by the derogatory conversations of clients (that always result in much laughter):

Interviewer:	How do you feel about the comments about the clients? You know, all the funny and ironic statements.
Social worker:	*That*, I can tell you . . . *that*, it took me many years to learn how to cope with *that*.
Interviewer:	All right. Why?
Social worker:	Well, that . . . I just felt that it was some sort of transgression of limits I couldn't relate to. And I was actually starting to get shocked by being here. And I was going to quit. Because I thought, either you cope or leave, as social worker B told me. Because if I couldn't stand for *that* . . . It is sick humour sometimes. And you simply have to be able to let *that* out sometimes. Otherwise you simply can't stay here. I just don't think so.

The social worker emphasizes 'that', – meaning the 'sick humour' – several times, indicating that this way of communicating is not a preferable way of talking; it is a form of communication that she wants to distance herself from. Note that she says 'simply' two times in a row to provide a standardization of this behaviour, and she thereby emphasizes the lack of choice that is presumably connected to irony and sarcasm. It is the *naturalness* of irony and sarcasm that is interesting here, because it directs attention towards organizational contradictions in the work and not towards specific (problematic) characteristics of clients, or, for that matter, towards specific (problematic) characteristics of social workers. These are not *their* jokes (for which they would have to take responsibility) but are, as I have been arguing, the prevailing jokes inherent in the social structure itself.

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JOKES OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The empirical material presented in this article demonstrates many inherent contradictions. First, social workers attempt to create an informal relation to the clients. Second, social workers attempt to engage in relations with these clients as if they are equals. Third, the clients are often poorly suited to the present Danish labour market, which generally demands skilled labour. The first two contradictions – social workers strive for informality and equality – can be viewed as inherent contradictions in the work because these contradictions mirror central organizational goals (to achieve a trusting relationship to clients so they can produce an accurate evaluation of their abilities). When one considers the organizational goal to evaluate the clients' abilities, the interaction between social worker and client must by definition be formal and founded on an unequal relation between the two parties. The third contradiction is also inherent in the work, since an organizational goal is to produce evaluations of clients that indicate the capacity for self-sufficiency despite the fact that many of the clients' skills are in low demand on the present labour market. All these conditions demonstrate what Douglas (1999) has termed 'jokes in the social structure', i.e. inherent contradictions in the social world that often generate humour and laughter.

My empirical material thus supports the thesis that humour and laughter often occur in informal situations that involve contradiction and paradox, and that laughter also seems to relate to sociological categories such as group affiliation and ambiguity in a telling way. For example, as the empirical material shows, laughter can count as an endorsement of the present speech community. Laughter, whether by its absence or its presence, seems to reveal potential, competing group affiliations. In this case, laughter thus gives the researcher knowledge about organizational features of the interaction between social workers and clients. One can argue that the absence of laughter may be owed to the fact that the speech community is comprised of people with different cultural backgrounds (Everts, 2003). On this view, the reason that clients do not laugh with social workers is that they are novices in the organization and therefore do not understand the humorous remarks. Drawing on Coser's (1959) early work, however, I will argue that the absence of laughter in a joking environment is more likely to reflect how a person connects with the existing structure of status than to reflect the different cultural background of the participating persons. Simply put, the listener understands the joke but does not think it very funny. It is also possible that the laughter is part of the way that social workers manage delicate actions where it would not be appropriate for the clients to laugh, because they lack 'ownership' of the action or its nature. In any case, the analysis of laughter in this article has shown that it should not be straightforwardly equated with joy, happiness or fun (emotional well-being). As I have

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shown, laughter tends to occur in situations that can be very stressful, awkward and tense for the participants, indicating that it is a response to the situation's often uncomfortable ambiguities. The delicacy is caused by the fact that many activities cast clients in the role of children, contradicting their natural status as adults. In these tense situations, humour, irony and the laughter that results also become tools to test the consensus among social workers and clients. The result is that clients often refrain from laughing, while social workers try to create a mutually comfortable and joyful atmosphere by joking and laughing. In these cases, the laughter of the social workers seem to be an interactive device that is primarily intended to help the social worker to be 'in face' (Goffman, 1967), i.e. acting the part of the parent despite the fact that the 'interactional child' is an adult. Laughter thus seems to work at the expense of the client, allowing these tense interactions produced by the parent–child relationship, to continue. In a classic article, Jefferson (1979) has noted that laughter can be viewed as an invitation to be accepted or declined. When clients decline the invitation we saw how it had devastating consequences for the interaction. When clients decline to laugh they challenge an important goal of the organization, namely to develop a homely, informal atmosphere among clients and social workers.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this article I have shown that joking and laughing play diverse roles. They are employed by staff members as (1) a way to create informal settings between staff and clients (a failure as evidenced in these cases); (2) a way to deal with situational tensions/ambiguity in the work (i.e. dealing with the 'muddleness' of power issues); and, (3) a way to deal with organizational contradictions in working with clients. In accordance with an interactionist perspective which states that a person is not 'built up from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without' (Goffman, 1967: 45), I have deliberately left out analysis of clients' and social workers' *intentions* for laughing (e.g. do clients laugh because they are distressed or depressed, or because they want to portray themselves as in pain or in distress, etc.? Do social workers laugh because they actually find things funny, etc.?). Important as these issues might be however, they need to be addressed in an article with a different theoretical grasp. I have instead included a range of different (but everyday) situations that provoke laughter in order to show how they relate to the organizational context, i.e. in this case the many inherent contradictions in social work. Organizational conditions in social work render equality (and casualness) as impossible strategies for social workers in their contact with clients because the clients are ultimately forced to participate (rather than of their own free will) and the social workers do in fact have authority over them (they must evaluate them). Because it is mainly the social workers that make the humorous remarks and ironic statements

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and also mainly them who subsequently participate in the laughter, it is likewise an indication that not everyone can take control of a situation even temporarily. Buttny (2001) has noted this of joking in general.

Joking is far from a neutral act. By directing a joke at a specific person, social workers can 'demand' a response from that person, because of the general interaction rule of humour that requires listeners of jokes to respond with a laugh (Mulkay, 1988). Clients can, however, also control the interaction by being silent and thus, as we saw, disturb the sense of comfort. These results support Mulkay's thesis that in the:

> [D]omain of humour . . . the multiplicity of social worlds does not have to be denied . . . In this alternative mode, these problematic features are humorously exaggerated, creatively contrived and celebrated enthusiastically . . . The various contradictory 'worlds' can coexist. (Mulkay, 1988: 28)

Moreover, it reinforces Coser's (1959, 1960) and Douglas' (1999) ideas about the connection between paradoxes and humour by describing the role of humour and laughter in social work. If humour and laughter reflect the paradoxical reality of the social situations in which they occur then humorous remarks and ironic statements at the two rehabilitation organizations are not only to be expected but also demanded. Throughout the article I have highlighted contradictory conditions in the organizations' practices, related to the goal of the work and related to the social workers' descriptions of the ironic, derogatory statements they often engage in.

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Notes

1 In organization A, I conducted interviews with 10 clients (approximately 3 interviews with each client) and interviewed 11 staff members employed in various capacities. I sought and was granted access to all the journals of participating clients and other documentary material. In organization B, I conducted one interview with each of 8 clients and interviewed 12 staff members employed in positions that were comparable to the employment structure in organization A. In organization B, I was also given access to client journals and other documentary material.

2 Participation in my project was completely voluntarily. Our agreement (both with clients and social workers) was that they could decide at any point that they did not want my presence.

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3 This separation can of course easily be problematized: is there such thing as 'unadorned and flat' descriptions? Even though I agree that the separation theoretically is problematic, I still think the separation is a helpful tool in the actual process of doing fieldwork (for more methodological discussions of the relevance of fieldwork also in more constructivist inspired work like mine, see also Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Holstein, 1992; Miller and Dingwall, 1997).
4 Limits of space have unfortunately demanded a prioritizing that has resulted in excluding empirical material about laughter exclusively among clients. In other work (in Danish) I have analysed clients' laughter (see Mik-Meyer, 2004).

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Nanna Mik-Meyer's main research area is within the field of social work, sociology and qualitative methods. She has a PhD from the Department of Sociology, Copenhagen University, and an MA from the Institute of Anthropology, Copenhagen University. She currently works on a postdoctoral project on obesity and risk discourse, awarded in January 2006 by the Danish Independent Research Council's Young Researcher's Award. From November 2006 to May 2007 she will be a visiting scholar at the Department of Critical and Cultural Studies, Macquarie University (Sydney). For more information, see her personal homepage (http://www.mik-meyer.com). Address: Assistant Professor at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy at the Copenhagen Business School. [email: nmm.lpf@cbs.dk]

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