

Send in the clowns: The role of the joker in three New Zealand IT companies*

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Abstract

Since mediaeval times the joker, jester, fool, or clown has been a privileged individual able to comment upon social structure, and parody rules, and authority while remaining immune from repercussions. Similar functions are fulfilled by their modern counterparts, and a study of workplace humor functions revealed the existence of jokers who created and instigated many of the humor 'events' in the studied companies. The joker expresses alternative possibilities and can question authority without subverting it. Although not officially appointed to the role, the modern organizational joker negotiates within his workgroup in order to assume this social position. The role evolves through the joker's involvement and participation in a community of practice using shared history and practices. The jokers were considered to be important organizational members by both their peers and managers, and their joking skills were highly valued.

Although instances of humor are often multifunctional, the jokers use humor to fulfill some key functions in their workplaces. Four key functions of the jokers were identified and discussed and form the focus of this paper: challenging management; pushing the boundaries; developing the culture; and providing relief. The functions are explored using the community of practice framework (Wenger 1998) and also drawing on both organizational and humor literature.

Keywords: Clown; culture; humor; joker; management; organization.

1. Introduction

In an organizational context, humor is influential (Barsoux 1993; Duncan et al. 1990; Palmer 1994) and multifunctional (Holmes and Stubbe 2003). It can shape attitudes, assist in defining situations and creating normative expectations, release tension, and is used to negotiate shared realities in organizations (Barsoux 1993; Duncan et al. 1990; Fine and De Soucey 2005; Palmer 1994; Terrion and Ashforth 2002). Conversely, it can also be counter-productive, offensive, and result in major challenges for managers—some of which can even end in formal employment dispute processes (Brookers 2003). Thus, humor in the workplace is an important and interesting area of study. Greater understanding of its role and functions can contribute to more effective, efficient, and enjoyable workplaces (Barsoux 1993; Collinson 2002). It is in the context of this overall area of study that the research presented in this paper was conducted.

Within any group or organization, there are individuals who are more likely to initiate and perpetuate amusement and humor. “Jokers,” “clowns,” “jesters,” or “fools” are just some of the labels that have been given to these individuals (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Duncan and Feisal 1990; Kahn 1989). In this research project, the term “joker” was introduced to organizational respondents in order to discuss and identify individuals who were key humor instigators in the workplace. An assumption was made that interview respondents would understand that this term referred to “funny people,” and no respondent asked for further clarification of the term—indicating that this common use was appropriate and understood by these participants. Throughout the paper, the joker is referred to as “he” which does not assume that all organizational jokers are male but reflects the findings in these particular companies where the studied jokers were in fact male.

This paper examines the role of these ‘jokers’ in three New Zealand Information Technology (IT) companies and reflects upon the importance of this role to organizational members. Humor comes in many forms and fulfils many purposes that reach beyond the boundaries of this paper. There is no singular encompassing definition of humor, although one popular definition suggests that key components of the construct include a humor stimulus, being amused, and laughter (La Fave et al. 1976). For the specific objectives of this paper, “humor” refers to the stimulus created and enacted by the jokers, such as verbal and physical joking and (apparently) funny activities. Several types of humor are exemplified in

the paper, but in each instance humor was instigated and created by the identified workplace jokers. The examples were defined as “amusing” by the jokers themselves or by other participants in the event. Interview questions directly asked participants to recount any workplace incidents that they considered to be humorous. Although laughter does not always signify humor, in the observed examples humor was assumed from *obvious* physical indicators of amusement, such as hearty (genuine) laughter and smiling. The (amused) reaction of the researcher was also considered in defining an incident as humor. Therefore, if most people present (including the researcher) appeared to find an incident funny, it was included in the data collection as an example of humor.

The paper considers the function of these modern jokers in light of the role of the jester, or clown, in historic times when they were an important part of festivals and the mediaeval European carnival. Functions of the historical joker role are mirrored in the modern IT organizations. We also draw on literature from the “Community of Practice” theoretical stance (Wenger 1998), as well as organizational and humor literature. The IT organizations are considered to be the “community of practice” (Wenger et al. 2002) within which the joker negotiates and enacts his role, and some functions of this role are identified and discussed. As a consequence, the research presented in this paper seeks to improve understanding of the role and importance of key influences on humor in the workplace.

2. Historical jokers

The formal role of a joker, or clown, has a long history dating back to the first half of the sixteenth century when the stage role of the fool was developed (Charles 1945; Fisher and Fisher 1983). Many of these fools’ activities took place in the courts and houses of nobility and were well documented (Happé 1996). Fools also participated in religious and royal processions as well as theatrical performances and were accepted by all social classes. They were not considered subversive, but they did challenge and parody rules and behavioral norms of the time (Happé 1996). During these times, there was often an established period for “carnival”—a celebration where common values were reversed and accepted rules of behavior were temporarily overturned in favor of the spirit of the carnival (Danow 1995). Throughout these carnivals, jesters,

clowns, and fools satirized and parodied authority figures as well as the rules and strictures of the times (Bakhtin 1965). During carnival, the fool, or clown, became the short-lived “regent” (Danow 1995). They were able to violate customs and conventions and were expected to behave differently than others (Evans 1996). In his role as “herald of the truth,” the mediaeval joker articulated truths and social commentaries using laughter and jokes that mocked and degraded those in power (Bakhtin 1965).

Another role of the traditional court jester was to remind the king of the ‘hubris’ that can come with power (Kets de Vries 1990). The jester was the one person likely to brave telling the truth, usually to prevent excessive pride and arrogance in his leader and possibly prevent foolish behavior. His use of humor prevented unpleasant repercussions, but his position could be described as ambiguous, although the jester may have been “high born” and highly educated, he was never appointed to serious court positions. Jokers used calculated foolishness to cope with this ambiguity (Bakhtin 1965). Historically, jokers were credited with powers to protect the king and the ability to insure against “supernatural chaos” (Fisher and Fisher 1983: 58) but were simultaneously considered foolish and ridiculous. Fools evoked laughter, but some considered them evil, as they had no God, while others considered them almost “holy” and wise (Happé 1996). A fool was an exhibitionist and a show off but one who lived life at variance with conventions. He was gifted at comedy with a taste for the unusual and risqué (Davidson 1996).

Some of these historical functions of jesters, clowns, or fools are adopted by modern individuals in organizational settings, and for the purposes of this paper we use the term “jokers” to describe these characters. The masters they serve, challenge, and mock may not be the regents of old but are present in their organizational communities as senior managers or supervisors.

3. Modern jokers

Modern people belong to many groups through work, leisure activities, families, and places they live. Wenger (1998) contends that within groups, people learn and participate in the *practices* of their social communities in order for these groups to learn and develop. He calls these groups “communities of practice” and emphasizes that everyone belongs to several communities of practice—such as schools, workplaces, or hobby groups.

Workplaces are communities of practice where people can develop their sense of self, have fun and fulfill their task requirements (Wenger 1998).

Wenger cites fourteen categories that indicate that a community of practice has formed. One of his categories includes; “local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter” (Wenger 1998: 125). People in workplace communities of practice gain an understanding of each other in regards to group work habits, social behavior, and humor styles. In order to assume his social role in a community of practice, the joker needs to know and share in the stories, lore, and humor histories. He must also know his target and audience, and the audience and target also need to know the joker. This relationship confers the right to joke and, more importantly, gives the joker the authority to “get away” with jokes. The trust developed in the group relationship allows the joker to achieve “role distance,” and the joker can say things that he does not really mean and is allowed to disrespect others (Fine and De Soucey 2005). Social and work groups develop joking cultures that regulate group interaction.

As members engage and relate with one another within a community of practice, they negotiate their position and identity in the group (Wenger 1998). The workplace joker develops and negotiates his identity inside his community of practice. The joker uses the *repertoire* (Wenger 1998) of practice (such as actions, artifacts, and language) and shared history of past events (Fine and De Soucey 2005) to develop further joking and reinforce his role as the joker. The joker may have an “insider trajectory” (Wenger 1998), which means that each new event or demand creates an opportunity for the joker to interpret the event with humor and renegotiate his identity as the joker. A community of practice has a shared history which becomes part of the present, and community members (such as the joker) engage with this history. The past events are delivered to newcomers by old timers in the forms of stories and through their participation in events; the newcomers can then incorporate these old events into their own experience (Wenger 1998). The joker exemplifies this when he narrates past incidents or pranks and invites the newcomer (or other community members) to laugh along and engage with the event. The newcomer may then even retell the stories to others as their form of participation in the community of practice. The joker often takes responsibility for ensuring that past funny events are retold to as many colleagues as possible, thus encouraging greater participation and creating communal histories.

There are different motivations for joining and participating in a community of practice, such as caring about developing the domain of knowledge and the value of having a community. The key reason for joining and remaining in a community of practice is the emotional connection that people develop to the community (Wenger et al. 2002). Some individuals are keen to interact with peers or to make a social contribution to the community that they know will be valued. The workplace joker may make his contribution through joking, creating funny incidents, and repeating or recounting past funny events. Wenger et al. (2002) identify different levels of participation and interest inside communities from the heart “core” group to peripheral members and outsiders. The joker is likely to be in the core group of the community, having “negotiated” his role as the group joker through developing group practices relating to humor and joking.

In most cultures, the role of joker is an ambiguous one. Jokers achieve high status and acceptance in their social hierarchy or community of practice, and their humor and joking are valued while simultaneously being considered foolish and outside societal norms (Fisher and Fisher 1983). It has been claimed that jokers today continue to operate and function in a similar way to the clowns of old (Fisher and Fisher 1983). Many anthropologists have discussed jokers; the “nature” or culture of a group of people will be reflected by their joker through humor (Charles 1945). They can expose the elements that hold cultures together and highlight elements that have the potential to tear the culture apart. Although no culture is likely to agree on a definition of foolishness, the way in which any culture defines a “fool” reveals its core values. “Like any marginal group, fools highlight (by contrast) a culture’s deepest values, its core assumptions” (Evans 1996: 47). Comments made by the joker are “in a sense the comments of the social group upon itself” (Douglas 1999: 159). The joker expresses a group’s consensus by operating within a “permitted range of attack” (Douglas 1999: 159), lightens social reality, and expresses alternative possibilities (Douglas 1999). Jokers discuss improper matters that may be considered somewhat embarrassing or even shocking and this function appears to be constant over times and places (Charles 1945).

Fisher and Fisher (1983: 58) point to a “striking similarity between the role of the modern comic and earlier roles filled by the fool-priest and the court jester.” The joker is a privileged individual who can say things in a certain way and is granted immunity from repercussions and danger

(Douglas 1999). The joker is permitted some disrespect towards authority; “the joking relationship is a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism” (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 196). Evans (1996) argues that freedom from convention still exists for jokers and clowns in many areas of society, including modern organizations. “They diverge from what is common, whether it be common sense, common judgment or even common morality” (Evans 1996: 47).

Four key functions are identified in IT organizations described in this paper: challenging management; pushing the boundaries; developing the culture; and providing relief. These functions are discussed below utilizing aspects from organizational theories (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Douglas 1999; Fine 1988; Kets de Vries 1990; Taylor and Bain 2003; Westwood 2004) and communities of practice literature (Wenger 1998; Wenger et al. 2002).

3.1. *Challenging management*

The historical jokers challenged their regent, other authority figures, and the rules and strictures of the times. Today’s organizational jokers challenge managers and supervisors in their workplaces. Some corporations are even embracing the concept of the corporate clown and going as far as hiring a professional comedian who lampoons authority figures and organizational practices (Westwood 2004). Using humor as a cover, this hired jester is seen as non-threatening, and powerful organizational members cannot take offence “without looking damagingly churlish” (Westwood 2004: 786). In a similar way to carnival jesters of old, corporate jokers have the freedom to “speak the unspeakable” through humor and can criticize behavior and authority through their ridicule of it, protected by their ability to present this ridicule and criticism as “just a joke” (Happé 1996; Kets de Vries 1990). The jokers challenge dominant structures such as the power structure and processes when they confront the organizational leader or manager (Douglas 1999; Kets de Vries 1990). Through this challenge to authority, they may also become heroes to their colleagues and thus achieve important peer support and popularity amongst colleagues (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). Although humor and even misbehavior instigated and enacted by jokers can challenge and undermine management, the jokers are usually tolerated, allowed to take humor and parody to extreme limits, and organizational disciplinary

measures towards these individuals are usually rejected as being counter-productive (Taylor and Bain 2003).

By challenging authority inside organizations, the joker becomes a counter-balance for those in power, forming a safety device to prevent “organizational pathology” (Kets de Vries 1990: 767). The joker may mediate between leaders and followers and can bring up controversial themes so that they might be dealt with by both parties. Through using “aimed” humor towards managers and the organization itself, the joker plays an important role in keeping an organization on track and in touch with reality, thus guarding against potential organizational downfall caused by pride and arrogance (Kets de Vries 1990).

While the historical joker role was often a formally appointed and widely accepted one (such as the “court jester”), modern organizations have no such explicit appointment of the jokers’ role. It appears that someone naturally assumes the role and charges themselves with creating humor at work. Wenger (1998) suggest that roles adopted by participants in a community of practice, such as a work group, would be *negotiated* through the *mutual engagement* between the joker and his community, and his role would be enacted using the *practices* of the group.

3.2. *Pushing the boundaries*

There are some challenges for modern jokers that are specific to the contemporary work context. In an increasingly regulated and litigious world, managers of organizations are expected to control behavior within their organizations so that it is not inappropriate, exploitive, sexist, sexual (Lerum 2004), racist, undermining (Taylor and Bain 2003), hurtful or “bullying” (Quinn 2000). Because humor is so intangible and contextual, and because it often parodies and challenges existing norms and authority, it sometimes conflicts with these organizational objectives. Thus, the modern joker operates in a very difficult environment, constantly exploring the boundaries between what is appropriate and what is not in order to avoid the “when good humor goes bad!” headline for their activities.

Modern organizational jokers bravely deal with taboo themes that are considered off-limits but do so in a way that denies or mitigates the threatening potential of the subject matter. They have immunity from repercussions, as jokes do not carry the same implication as serious communication, therefore more risks can be taken by the joker (Kets de Vries

1990). The jokers are actually responsible for setting the outer limits of acceptable behavior, as they are the ones permitted to go the furthest within the boundaries of humor (Kets de Vries 1990). This function of “pushing the boundaries” assists a workgroup to define its social behavior and establishes accepted social practices within the community of practice (Wenger 1998). Often jokers use self-deprecatory techniques when transgressing taboos, as this is less threatening and more acceptable to others (Kets de Vries 1990). The constant “push” and renegotiation of group norms and practices underpins another function of the joker—developing and sustaining workplace culture.

3.3. *Developing the culture*

Organizational culture is supported by mutual assumptions of its members, and these shared assumptions assist in developing communities of practice through common jokes, discussions, and actions. The practices developed by organizational members create an atmosphere where everyday work tasks are entwined into the rituals, events, and stories of the organization (Wenger 1998).

One who plays the fool, or is the joker, is usually secure in his or her position in the social structure and is well-established in the group hierarchy (Boland and Hoffman 1983; Douglas 1999). The role of the joker is not viewed as either predominantly negative nor overwhelmingly positive, and the effects of assuming the joker role can be dissimilar in different types of organizations (Daniels and Daniels 1964). However, jokers can be very valuable to their social or work group. Their behavior may help in smoothing interactions in a community of practice by using humor to narrow social distance between those in different hierarchical positions. Bringing people together through humor may help develop and sustain organizational culture, and the sharing of laughter and jokes can create social bonds at work. Having a workplace culture that encourages the joker’s use of humor can offer relief from work pressures.

3.4. *Providing relief*

Researchers have emphasized the “relief” function of humor suggesting that humor offers a safe release for feelings preventing anti-social

behavior while fostering social harmony (Douglas 1999; Eastman 1936; Freud 1991 [1905]; Gruner 1997; Morreall 1983; Weick and Westley 1996). Workplace jokers, skilled at using humor, offer a vicarious outlet for their own anti-social feelings and for groups of work colleagues (Happé 1996; Kets de Vries 1990). The joker challenges management and pushes the boundaries through the use of humor. Such activities offer relief for the workplace community, as when the joker satirizes leaders he or she can provide an outlet for antisocial feelings and may verbalize fears and anxieties held by others (Kets de Vries 1990). Jokers may attempt to outdo each other by becoming more and more outrageous, and social norms may be violated; but their joking behavior relieves pressure for the group (Fine 1988).

The relief function may also be one of offering relief from boredom. The joker's funny antics may punctuate the serious and even monotonous work tasks performed repeatedly in the workplace, as exemplified by "banana time" in Roy's (1958) research into job satisfaction.

Understanding of the role of the modern day joker offers an important contribution to more effective management, and this research examined their behavior and activities and their role and function inside these IT organizations.

4. Methods

Two key methods were used in the data collection phase of this research: semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Alongside these two methods, a critical incident approach was used to analyze narrated instances and when significant examples of humor were observed. By combining participant observation and interviews, the results reflected the researcher's and participants' perceptions of workplace jokers, their role, and their functions in these companies, thus creating a holistic reflection of the culture of an organization. Grugulis (2002) combined methods and studied humor in three private sector organizations, which used participant observation supported with interviews in order to elicit "rich" data and explore related themes. Similarly, observation and semi-structured interviews were used over a period of six weeks to study an executive program for insights into put-down humor and groups (Terrior and Ashforth 2002), and both techniques were used in the investigation of an engineering management team's humor (Hatch and Ehrlich 1993).

In a study of humor and organizational culture in a manufacturing bakery, participant observation was used to collect data, and the researcher was well known to the staff (Linstead 1985). One researcher even became a staff member of a London department store in order to achieve total immersion and research joking relationships at work (Bradney 1957).

4.1. *The IT organizations*

For the purposes of this study, three similar organizations were chosen inside the Information Technology (IT) industry. Initial meetings with management personnel suggested that all three companies had a lively culture where humor and workplace fun was tolerated and even actively encouraged. The core business activity of each organization was to sell and distribute computer hardware, software, and technical Internet products.

IT companies seek different types of employees and, thus, have a different organizational culture. In the IT industry, having a “fun” culture is considered to be particularly important (Leinfuss 1999; Prager 1999) in order to attract and retain IT employees accustomed to using computer technology with its inbuilt fun and games style and expecting to find enjoyment in their workplace (Buckley et al. 2001; Kets de Vries 2001).

4.2. *Interviews*

A key purpose of the interviews in this study was to identify those characters considered to be “jokers” by their colleagues and managers and to further explore the activities and function of these jokers. The interviews were semi-structured, and the questions were intended to provide a “springboard” to further discussion on points that were relevant to either the participant or the researcher. Interview questions included asking respondents who the jokers (or creators of amusement) at work were and asked for examples of their antics. The interview questions also asked participants *why* certain individuals had become the joker at work. Respondents were asked to recount specific funny events or organizational “legends” and to describe the context, the people involved, and the instigator of the funny event or declaration.

Overall, thirty-nine interviews were conducted across the three companies. In addition, three months of participant observation was undertaken and numerous additional ad hoc discussions and interactions with the IT employees and managers occurred. One senior level manager was interviewed in each company.

4.3. *Participant observation*

To offset the potential issue of social desirability bias in the interviews (when the interviewee is keen to “please” the interviewer), participant observation was also conducted inside the three organizations. Observing *actual* behavior alongside responses to questions helps to overcome “social desirability effect” and offers another perspective of workplace behavior. Careful researchers strive not to alter interactions during the experience and allow normal behavior to continue (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2000). The data collection used in this IT project is defined as “focused observation” (Simon 1969) that promotes insight into the “native” experience by concentrating on well-defined activities.

An observation journal was kept, and incidents of different types of humor were recorded as well as contextual details regarding the workplace setting, people involved in the humor, and descriptions of the words and actions. Examples of humor were recorded with details of who instigated it and interpretations of the perceived purpose of the humor. At times, these observations were enriched by further discussions with the participants about the observed events and clarification of historical details that were relevant to the humor, such as in long-term running jokes and sequences.

4.4. *Critical incidents*

Critical incidents were identified as incidents that appeared to be “significant” (Gundry and Rousseau 1994) to organizational members and/or the researcher, those that were recounted by more than one participant (ad hoc and interview narratives), and those that had referential and historical elements for organizational members. Some incidents were observed (by the researcher) and also described by participants as in example 10 (see results in Section 5). Obviously, not all humorous incidents

could be included. Half of those that are described below were selected for their apparent *significance* to participants and these incidents appeared to have an obvious outcome or importance in the workplace context. However the danger in adopting a focus on “critical” incidents is in representing only significant events and focusing on the *extraordinary*, which is then presented as the every-day normality of the company. Therefore, the other half of the incidents were selected for their low-key, every-day qualities (examples 4, 6, 7, 8, 9) in the attempt to offer a balanced organizational picture comprising significant humor examples as well as normal every-day instances. All of the included instances were instigated by the jokers.

4.5. *Limitations*

Although it was expected that becoming a participant observer would negate some social desirability effects in the interview process, it is not possible to entirely eradicate potential researcher effect on the results.

Organizational participants were told from the outset about the project and were aware that their “humor” behavior was being studied. Therefore, it is possible that the presence of the researcher has affected the results, and the jokers may have “performed” for the research project. This researcher effect is a widely recognized factor in participant observation and is, therefore, acknowledged here as a possible limitation in this study. However, it is not considered significant, because the interviews, and further ad hoc questions of staff and managers, affirmed that the observed joker behavior was “normal,” and some of the interviews conducted *before* observation of the jokers described certain types of behaviors which were then subsequently observed.

5. **Results**

During the research design, an assumption was made that workplace jokers could be identified, and this was borne out in the interview responses by the respondents’ ability and willingness to classify a colleague as the “joker.” The responses to the question, “*Who are the jokers, the creators of amusement?*” caused laughter among respondents as they

recalled their colleagues' antics. All respondents were willing and able to answer this question, and in each of the three companies, one specific individual was identified by the majority (70 percent) of respondents as the joker. A second individual was also identified in each company with 54 percent of respondents selecting this individual as also being a joker. In each company, all of those identified as jokers (six key individuals in total) were male employees, and none of these men were in senior management positions. The three most frequently named jokers (all of whom consented to interviews) also identified themselves as the workplace joker for their company.

Supporting the data gained from the interviews was the information gathered during participant observation. In over half of all observed incidents and exchanges of humor, the jokers were involved and instigated the joke or humor. Twenty-one examples of practical jokes were recorded, and in fifteen of these (71 percent) the joker was either the instigator or fully involved. More jokes and cartoons were displayed by the jokers, and many of the other displays were aimed at the jokers as retaliation by colleagues. For example, in one company some of the cartoons had the jokers name written on two rotund animal characters suggesting that the joker had an enormous stomach. During observation, several employees that were not interviewed spontaneously approached and pointed out to the researcher that a particular colleague was considered to be very funny, and in each case this selected individual was the joker identified by other staff members in interviews.

An interview question designed to identify the jokers was worded, "*Who are the jokers, the creators of amusement?*" It must be acknowledged that the term "joker" was introduced to respondents in the attempt to investigate whether or not certain individuals took more responsibility for humor creation. The term "joker" appeared to be easily accepted by respondents as referring to one who "joked" frequently, and the second phrase of the question focused respondents on those characters that not only enjoyed humor but actually instigated and created it. The response styles to this question were as interesting as the actual responses. In contrast to other questions, in the interviews where participants had to stop and really think about their responses, this question elicited a laugh and an almost instantaneous response. The certainty of their response and the similarity of replies from respondents in each company supported the assumption that such characters existed and were easily identifiable. Identification of the jokers was not taken solely from this interview question

but was supported with the observational notes and by analyzing the frequency of specific participants' involvement in humor and joking incidents. Analysis of these incidents showed that those individuals identified as the jokers by interviewees also appeared more frequently in observational records and, in particular, were instigators of the key or critical incidents analyzed.

5.1. *Incidents and examples*

Interviewees were asked to describe funny incidents that had taken place at work or in a work context (such as conferences). Many of the same incidents were described by multiple respondents, and 36 key incidents were highlighted by participants. Of these 36 funny incidents, the three key workplace jokers were involved in 24 of them (66 percent). In 71 percent of the 36 key incidents, the joker actually instigated or created the humorous incident. The majority of these incidents (58 percent) were practical jokes involving physical actions, and approximately half of these incidents included some pre-planning and organization. Examples of incidents described in the interviews are:

1. One joker organized a group of employees to steal a plaster penguin from a theme park during a company conference function overseas. The animal returned with the staff members to their work premises and is currently displayed in the company café. This practical joke has since achieved "legend" status in the organization, and other similar animals have been purchased or "gifted" to the staff and are displayed with the stolen creature.
2. Several staff members recounted incidents where the joker had stroked his or her face while wearing surgical gloves. Typically, this prank was enacted while the target was speaking on the phone to a customer.
3. Several people in the same company had the keys from their computer keyboards changed around in their absence, and also invisible Sellotape had been affixed across the mouthpiece of their phone.
4. One joker had created a character called *Barry the Singing Sock* and sang and talked (in a funny voice) to colleagues using this simple sock puppet. He sang or recited nonsense or made general comments about the workplace and targeted individuals.

5. A female staff member described being the “filling” in a “nude sandwich” at one company conference. The two jokers from her company took off their clothes in the pool and “sandwiched” her between them. The young woman pointed out that the jokers could not have “got away” with this prank with many other staff members but asserted that she was amused and not offended. This incident was also described by other interviewees.

5.2. *Observed incidents*

All observed incidents of humor were recorded in a notebook during the study. Examples of key incidents that were instigated by or included the identified jokers are presented below.

6. One company joker referred to himself as “fat boy,” and colleagues then felt free to use this description to, or about, him. Much banter and joking were made about his weight, and this description was frequently used by colleagues.
7. The general manager of the company asks subordinates (quietly and seriously) in the general office area to complete some particular work tasks. He gives several specific instructions finishing:

“Can you guys please get these orders sorted out and send them off before the end of the day. Thanks this is really important” (Jake, managing director).

The response: *“We might do it . . . if we feel like it”* (Mac, company joker). The manager looks startled at first and then laughs as he realizes he is being teased. Everyone laughs and the serious mood changes. A lively discussion about sports replaces the serious work request. On this occasion, the manager has been distracted from the focus on business activities by the joker’s challenging humor (Researcher’s notebook 13/06/03).

8. An incident was observed where the joker crawled under the desks and chatted to the occupants from the floor.
9. The staff was reporting on sales forecasts and actual achievements for the past week. Zac did not have a good sales week and spends some time giving the reasons for this. The CEO looks stern and concerned. He reiterates the sales number that Zac had forecast and the much lower number that was reached. Zac quips *“Oh well, I’m revising*

next week's forecast to zero sales!" Everyone laughs and the meeting moves on to the next topic (Researcher's notebook 25/05/03).

10. Friday afternoon: two of the company jokers do a "tummy bang" — they run into the middle of the open plan area, shouting "*tummy bang!*" to alert all present, pull up their business shirts and bang their respective (rounded) stomachs together. They follow this up with some crawling under desks and then threaten; "*now we'll play 'all boy' nudie leapfrog.*" All present laugh, insult them, and egg them on. I laugh along with everyone else—it is very funny (Researcher's notebook 13/06/03).

6. Discussion

Inside these three IT companies, the jokers became very obvious very quickly. They were louder than others, funnier, more outrageous, and very popular. They stood out from their colleagues, and much of the workplace humor revolved around them. The jokers were consistently identified by their colleagues in the interviews. They featured prominently in the observation notes and descriptions. Their colleagues deemed their antics to be funny and supported this claim by their hearty laughter. Just as the historical joker was gifted at comedy (Davidson 1996), these modern IT jokers displayed similar comedic talents.

It must be emphasized that most humor is multifunctional (Holmes and Stubbe 2003), and many of the examples will highlight these different functional aspects of workplace humor. However, this research primarily adopts an emphasis on four key functions of the workplace joker, and while the examples used have been interpreted to demonstrate one of the four discussed functions, it is acknowledged that other interpretations could be made and several functions may be present within the cited humor examples.

6.1. *Challenging management*

It seemed that the jokers had the task of being the workers' representative and were the ones expected to deliver witty remarks in response to managerial directives and activities. This expectation was observed before and after meetings when colleagues congregated around the jokers to hear

their remarks on the meeting events. Before one meeting, one joker was observed telling colleagues, “hurry up or you’ll have to sit by the boss!” (Mac, company joker). His joke implied that this would be an unpleasant or unwanted experience. A joke can be an outlet to express risky ideas (Gabriel 1999; Rodrigues and Collinson 1995), and the joker may be the individual both brave and skilled enough to express a perilous opinion. After another meeting, one of the jokers jokingly accused a colleague who had agreed with a managerial suggestion, of “sucking up” (Jack, company joker). Many of the jokes made by the jokers were derogatory of managers and their directives but were accepted by colleagues and the managers as “just a joke.”

Holmes and Marra (2002b) found that humor was used by some individuals to reduce the “face threat” (66) of criticism and managerial challenge. Calling himself “fat boy” (example 6) pre-empted other colleagues making this insult and allowed this workplace joker to then make more jokes about colleagues’ physical characteristics without fearing repercussions. From observations of meetings, it was noted that the jokers in this study were skilled at deflecting criticism of him or her self, using clever quips, which distracted managers from the point. Example 9 highlights this use of humor to protect oneself when the joker (Zac) makes a quip about his lack of sales performance—effectively deflecting criticism of his poor performance through making his manager and colleagues laugh. The jokers were more adept at doing this than other staff members, and they used this humor strategy more often and more skillfully than others. It was also observed and noted that on these occasions the point was not further discussed when the laughter stopped; therefore this deflection function of humor appeared to be successful in these situations. Zillman and Stocking, (1976) suggest that a joke becomes a defensive measure that deprives others of the chance to make a putdown or criticism. Senior managers commented that self-disparaging humor, such as making jokes about one’s poor performance, was not always positive, because it implied that the subordinate found this unimportant and the humor was used to hide the failure. “Humor can be used as a shield” (Ben, manager). The joker’s role may incorporate a self-preservation function, using humor to protect him from potentially negative consequences and criticism.

In example 7, the workers did not really have a choice about completing the work activities, and the joker used humor to portray the pretence that they would do the work only if *they* wanted to. He appeared to be testing the risky concept that workers may not do as directed sometimes. The

joke format protected the joker from any negative reaction from the manager. Using a joke to challenge a managerial directive gives an element of safety to jokers—as the joke format can prevent a negative reaction, and the manager cannot react adversely to this challenge without losing face (Holmes and Stubbe 2003). The joker in this example included the group in the joke (using “we” rather than “I”) and acted as a spokesperson. The inclusive “we” and the shared laughter created camaraderie and good feeling in the group but may have also acted as a reminder to the manager that his power should be kept “in check.” The joker may have been recreating the equilibrium balance suggested by Kets de Vries (1990) in his assertion that the power of the “king” (or manager in this example), needs the folly of the fool—or the recklessness of this particular workplace joker.

The jokers were popular among their colleagues but Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) suggest that clowning is very unpopular with management, as it wastes time and resources and distracts people from work tasks. They contend that clowns blight their own promotional chances. Organizational jokers can be very effective in influencing the actions and behavior of managers but do so at the risk of their own career advancement (Kets de Vries 1990). In this study, none of the IT jokers were in senior management roles—which could imply that the joker role is not appropriate in these positions, and that senior managers drop this joking behavior in their higher level roles. Interview respondents clearly stated that, although they enjoyed the antics of their workplace jokers, they would be unsuitable candidates for senior positions, as they would not be taken seriously. For example, who could imagine a company director behaving like the joker in example 8 and crawling underneath colleagues’ desks to chat and laugh? This assertion from one interview candidate clearly suggests that the jokers would be difficult to respect and take seriously in management positions; “Jokers can go too far and cross the line ... managers need to stay on a different level and so can’t be constantly cracking jokes” (Kara, salesperson). Two of the senior managers cautiously implied that the jokers may limit their future opportunities for seniority, but added that they were vital to the organizational culture for the fun and relief that they created in these busy workplaces. Further research is needed to fully explore this possible conflict between the joker role and senior promotion as seniority and status are also significantly affected by several other factors such as tenure, knowledge and expertise.

6.2. *Pushing boundaries*

The jokers' behavior appeared to deviate from that of other organizational members, as exemplified by the "tummy bang" (example 10), the penguin stealing incident (example 1), and the risky and potentially lewd behavior described in the "nude sandwich" incident (example 5). Incidents such as these could be considered outrageous and may have been vilified if performed by different individuals. These IT workplace jokers appeared to "get away" with their behavior in a similar way to their historical counterparts who portrayed lewd acts during carnival celebrations. Conceivably, the corporate conferences that fostered the "stolen penguin" and the "nude sandwich" incidents could be considered a modern form of carnival enacted by today's companies and, as in historical times, the joker's role may become more pronounced during such events.

In another observed example, one of the jokers proclaimed to a roomful of his colleagues that next week there would be "bikini Tuesday and all females must dress accordingly." This potentially sexist comment with sexual undertones may have resulted in workplace disciplinary issues if uttered by other employees, but the joker "got away with it" and all of the women present (and men) laughed; many responded with a retaliatory jibe. Employees and managers were aware that some of this joker's behavior was extreme but conceded that different rules applied for the jokers. These words from one joker summarize this:

I can't afford to be too 'PC' (politically correct). Some of the stuff I do is a bit borderline, but I'm not perverted or lusting after anyone and usually it's not taken the wrong way. Sometimes I say things for shock value (Mac, company joker).

It was observed that the jokers had greater amounts of visual humor displays in their work areas. Several examples contained bad language and sexual innuendo. The displays of humor appeared to reflect the risqué tastes and exhibitionism of the joker and also supported the idea that jokers are able to use more outrageous forms of humor and can transgress social taboos whilst remaining relatively free from repercussions. In the BytesBiz company, there was official written policy warning employees against displaying or sending any forms of humor that could be considered offensive to others. The joker in this organization openly displayed material that was risqué, profane, and potentially contentious. One example portrayed a smiling soldier in military regalia with a speech

bubble asking “How about a cup of shut the fuck up!” The joker’s role appeared to allow him to defy conventions (Davidson 1996), such as the clearly stated company policy warning against potentially offensive material.

6.3. *Developing culture*

Silicon Valley IT companies have been described as having “wild and crazy cultures, with pillow fights around the foosball table the order of the day.” (Hudson 2001: 45). High levels of business performance coexist with these fun cultures and the slogan “work-hard, play-hard” is a common descriptor attached to the culture that exists at these companies (Hudson 2001; Santovec 2001). In corporate cultures, play and fun have been viewed positively, because they assist in releasing tension, fostering innovation, and can create a strong corporate culture (Dandridge 1986; Deal and Kennedy 1982). In this IT study, the amount and quality of humor in all three companies appeared to reflect a lively and vibrant organizational culture, which possibly reflects the norm in the IT industry.

During the interviews, participants were asked, “*Who is teased the most? Why do you think they are?*” Responses in this research supported the assertion of Fine and De Soucey (2005) that the joker must know his target and audience and in turn they must know him. Responses revealed that the individuals that were teased most often were the same people that had been identified as the jokers. This was further supported in the observations made during this study as the joker’s names were frequently recorded as both “teaser” and as the target of teasing. The phrase you have to “give as good as you get” was quoted by eleven of the respondents in their answers to this question highlighting that the jokers who were responsible for instigating much jocular abuse, teasing, and banter also had to be able to take plenty of this in return. Inside his community of practice, the joker negotiates his identity as the joker through ways of engaging with others, and others respond in what Wenger (1998) calls “mutual engagement.” This to and fro (give as good as you get) joking exemplifies mutual engagement, and the joker and his targets both play their parts, using these humor practices and creating relations that form the community.

Bradney (1957), in her study inside a London department store, found that those who joked readily were much more popular with their

colleagues. This was also true in these IT organizations—the jokers were popular with their peers. In interviews with the jokers they identified themselves as the “funny guys” and knew that their colleagues ascribed this role to them. They enjoyed their position as the joker and described a desire to be thought well of by their colleagues. They enjoyed their informal role and one such character stated, “*I want everyone to like me*” (Zac, company joker). This implies a functional use of humor by these individuals in respect to their workplace relationships. Zac’s colleagues did profess their liking for him, and they made comments in the interviews saying that he was a “*great guy*,” and “*fun to have around*.” Interviewees claimed that they enjoyed being around the jokers and were glad of the humor that they created. Wenger (1998) suggests that the things that a community pays attention to (such as joking) defines the participants and allows them to adopt negotiated roles. Participation in communities of practice shapes the community, and the practices of the community also shape the participants. In these IT companies that highly valued humor and fun, the joking participation of the jokers was noted and they were supported and encouraged in adopting this role.

One joker (Mac) remarked on his humor participation, “You share a lot of yourself in joking.” By being heavily involved, sharing themselves and their humor, the jokers appeared to have the biggest impact on humor in their companies. Their involvement in the humor practices has implications for the workplace environment. When asked about the jokers, one senior manager said:

They are the ‘glue’ of the organization and 95 percent of the time they are good for the company. The other 5 percent they overstep the mark and someone gets hurt. Overall the good outweighs the bad (Jake, Managing Director).

Holmes and Marra (2002a) suggest that workplace culture is modified and developed in social interaction by both large and small acts. Becoming a member of a community of practice involves “acquiring the cultural norms of the community . . . and learning involves learning whether and how humor is used in the verbal practices of the community of practice” (Holmes and Marra, 2002: 1685). The jokers in the three IT companies studied here appeared to be key individuals involved in creating and sustaining distinctive organizational cultures. They appeared to take charge of informing new members about past and current humor activities. By reliving or repeating past funny events as well as creating new jokes, the

jokers sustained and added to the “repertoire” (Wenger 1998) of their community of practice.

Jokers were adept at selecting who could “take” a joke and who was best left out of certain joking behavior. In one company (BytesBiz) an individual (Brenda) in her first week of tenure with the company had made it clear by her disapproving and censorious remarks that she disapproved of the joker’s (and other colleagues’) humorous behavior. As outlined by Fine and De Soucey (2005), this new employee did not have the shared experiences to participate in the joking culture of the group. In the joking history of this group, it was usual for the joker to organize a practical joke targeting the newcomer and the ones described in examples 2 and 3 were the usual “practice” of the group. Following Brenda’s expressed disapproval, she was not subsequently targeted in any jokes, banter, or pranks instigated by the joker. This exclusion was adopted by the rest of the work group in regards to joking behavior. Normal work-task interaction was maintained but her refusal to participate in the practices of the community meant that this newcomer only ever became a peripheral participant (Wenger et al. 2002) in her community of practice. The alienation became so extreme that a serious issue evolved inside the company resulting in the employee’s termination. This case is the subject of a future paper and analysis concerning negative humor outcomes.

The jokers themselves highlighted their inclusive perspective that encouraged participation in the humor practices of their community.

“I encourage people to laugh, even the people you wouldn’t think would enjoy it. I try to involve everyone around so I wander around a lot. Everyone without exception gets ragged or ribbed” (Mac, company joker).

Wenger (1998) agrees that sharing humor, stories, and even gossip is an important component of the community of practice. Core participants, such as the joker, are in continuous motion, have an “insider trajectory” (154), and are important community members in evolving the community of practice.

6.4. *Relief*

During interviews, senior managers emphasized that jokers fulfilled a relief function at work by offering a respite from business pressure and

stress by creating fun and laughter. This was often achieved using unusual or even outrageous behavior that was not generally enacted by other employees. Managers in this study were reasonably tolerant of clowning behavior and saw it as a way to offset pressure that staff worked under. Jokers charged themselves with the task of cheering other staff members when they were unhappy or tense and had a good understanding of people and their personalities. They were able to change the style of joke shared with different individuals. It was usually the jokers that decided when work was too dull and boring and so created a situation or incident just for the sake of a “laugh.” Many of their pranks were pre-prepared to target a particular person or highlight an event, but their antics also occurred spontaneously in reaction to workplace events. *Barry the Singing Sock*, invented by one of the jokers, appeared to be a form of play in the IT workplace. At different times *Barry* was brought out to recite messages, speak nonsense, or (as his name suggests) sing funny songs in the office. Playing at work may result in functional benefits in the form of organizational unity and renewed vitality from employees. People play games at work to pass time more quickly, make work more interesting, and to create culture in the workplace environment (Burawoy 1979; Dandridge 1986). *Barry* fulfilled similar functions and generated excitement and humor, as colleagues clustered around to listen and then went back to their tasks smiling and cheerful. The joker appeared to effectively judge just when a break or playful interlude was needed. The “tummy bang” incident also appeared to offer a relief to both the jokers who enacted it and to their workplace colleagues that enjoyed it. It was timed to break up and “relieve” a busy Friday afternoon when the office was quiet and people were focused on finishing their work tasks before the weekend. The incident was also an example of jokers drawing upon the group’s repertoire of practice (Wenger 1998), as this was a joke that they had performed in the past.

Organizational members recounted previous enactments of the “tummy bang” in ad hoc discussions and during interviews, and they laughed as they re-lived the humor that they had felt previously. Realizing that this was a popular joke for this group, the jokers retained the gag as part of the repertoire of practice and re-enacted it at their discretion or when they felt relief was needed. It is unlikely that any other members of the community of practice would bare their bellies and bang them together, and thus this exemplifies once again the special role and functions fulfilled by these characters.

7. Conclusions

The role of jokers has been historically significant dating back to mediaeval times when this character fulfilled specific functions. We contend that this role of the joker still exists today inside modern organizations but is a *negotiated* role within the jokers' community of practice, rather than an officially appointed role. Drawing on organizational literature and community of practice theory, allowed us to suggest that the joker role is negotiated within a work group (community of practice) and the joker utilizes the shared history and group practices to reinforce his role and add to the repertoire of the community, which in turn develops the organizational culture.

The modern IT jokers were popular with their colleagues and fulfilled important functions similar to those fulfilled by traditional court jesters and carnival fools. We highlighted these four functions of the joker exemplified in selected organizational examples: challenging management, pushing the boundaries, developing culture and providing relief. There were implications for those fulfilling the joker roles that suggested that promotion or management advancement opportunities may have been compromised due to workplace perception of their clown status, but further research is required to strengthen such a claim. These jokers took risks in these informal roles but were highly valued by both their colleagues and their superiors for making an important contribution to their organizations.

Future research should involve further exploration of the joker as an insight into organizational culture. In particular, Evans' (1996) premise that the deepest levels and assumptions of a culture, such as what guides behavior, what is permitted, and what its values are can be revealed by its joker, is worthy of more careful consideration. In addition, further research should explore the joker and his or her role and influence with regard to issues as gender, culture, ethnicity, and status. It is likely that the prevailing organizational culture has an impact on what types of behavior are exhibited and permitted by workplace jokers. Different organizations with more formal processes and policies may generate different behaviors. It is also possible that jokers do not exist in all organizations and companies. Further research may investigate the connection between organizational culture and humor and may highlight the conditions necessary for jokers to fulfill their longstanding historical functions

of challenging authority and exploring the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

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Note

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