

# Alienation: A laughing matter

R. KIRK MAULDIN

## *Abstract*

*A previously ignored method of assessing relative levels of alienation is the content analysis of work jokes exchanged in different venues. This study uses quantitative content analysis to code 1,085 joke-texts collected from ten job-sites and from the Internet. Using past measurements of powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement, the author develops a content protocol that is consistent with popular alienation indexes. Past methods for assessing both the functions of humor and the concept of alienation are criticized as tautologies, and null-categories for the social-psychological aspects of alienation (empowerment, understanding, social integration, and self-actualization) are introduced and critically examined. Research expectations are developed, and evaluations of predictions are made by comparing the proportion of jokes between the data sets within each of the conceptual categories. Jokes posted to the Internet are found to have more expressions of alienation in each of the social-psychological aspects except meaninglessness, which was slightly higher for entry-level service workers. The study concludes that the content analysis of jokes may prove to be a more direct way of accessing group sentiment than the study of either individual sentiment or the social structure of work.*

*Keywords: Alienation; humor; jokes; meaninglessness; methodology; workers.*

## **1. Introduction**

To date, the literature of jokelore and humor theory has focused primarily on analyzing joke structure for the purpose of explaining either why a particular utterance is funny, or why it is uttered (and listened to) in the

first place. There have been analyses of various types of humor in many social situations—including work—and many studies have found much that is worthy of serious commentary.

Roy (1959–1960) was one of the first participant-observational researchers to comment on how humor was used by a small group of isolated shop workers as both a social lubricant within the group, as an outlet for creative impulses, and as a way of giving meaning to monotonous work. Collinson (1988) also worked with and listened to humorous exchanges between men on the shop floor of a factory. His conclusions are many: that humor is used as a form of resistance to—and a means of coping with—a tightly controlled environment; that jokes are used to maintain boundaries between blue-collar workers and management; and that humor (in the form of “cutting” remarks) is used to help maintain group boundaries.

Studies reflecting the multiple functions of humor are the rule, rather than the exception. Duncan et al. (1990) begin their study of the applications of joking behavior to management by first stating that people joke with others at work for many reasons. They then proceed to outline dozens of possible functions, some of which include overcoming monotony, increased sense of belonging, and simply making work bearable. Over the last 30 years, similar claims abound: humor can be used to establish social relations and reduce the perception of social distance, thereby increasing the quality of relationships at work (Ziv 1984); it can be used to relieve the boredom of repetitive tasks (Ehrenberg 1995); and it is important in the maintenance of creativity (Rouff 1975). It is also written that humor, inasmuch as it helps people deal with inevitable backslides to their aspiring career, is the ultimate coping, or shielding mechanism (Koller 1988). Duncan (1985) shows exactly how versatile humor can be by giving examples of how workers use humor to gain status, while simultaneously defending against attacks.

Although many hundreds of studies have collected and presented humor as examples of how anger or frustration is expressed, relieved, or used as attacks, they have collectively neither changed nor appreciably modified Freud's (1963 [1905]) original propositions. And the reason they have not is—quite simply—because assumptions about people's psyche and the functions of humor are never questioned in the research design. There is neither a null hypothesis nor an oppositional category with which to classify and assess humor that might not be “doing” what the researcher(s) think.

There are no studies which “attempt to sort out the factors that contribute to the functions of joking” (Boxer and Cortes-Conde 1997: 275) that fail to do so. Neither are there studies of work which posit that humor promotes workers’ physical and mental health (Morreall 1991) that find the opposite to be true, for there is no explicit definition or operationalization of unhealthy humor. Similarly, studies that focus on dysfunctional racist or sexist humor in the workplace fail to allow for the possibility of functional sexist or racist humor. And studies that set out to describe both the functions and dysfunctions of humor do so without testing anything. If jokes are both attacks and defense, functional and dysfunctional in many different ways, then it is time that we start measuring the differences, making predictions, and seeing if we are wrong.

The second major shortcoming of humor analyses is that they do not adequately consider the manifest content of humor (Apter 1982). *What* was communicated is very often ignored in favor of various explanations for *why* or *how* it was communicated. For example, Dwyer’s (1991) study of humor and organizational change looks at humor as a product of power relations by developing a model predicting the probability of joking relationships in a triad stratified by differences in power. He concludes the study by stating that humor itself has no essence and that what is important in monitoring organizational change is awareness of how humor is employed. Throughout, the focus is on the process, reasons, and results of humorous exchanges, rather than on what is communicated (Duncan et al. 1990).

This is not to say that humor researchers have always ignored the text. Incongruity theorists are very much concerned with the content of humor. However, their focus is on the structure of humor, on the resolution of meaning within various conceptual schemes, on the techniques employed in various types of humor, and on such things as joke-emes (the smallest fragments of language within jokes that still possess meaning). In short, Incongruity theorists are more concerned with discerning the essence of humor than with the message (Oring 1992).

Freud himself did not attempt to analyze jokes in the same way as he interpreted dreams. Perhaps he believed (as iterated by Oring 1992) that jokes, unlike the unstructured and chaotic dream world, were structured, interpersonal communications that conveyed meanings readily understood by those exchanging them. Regardless, it is certainly more methodologically sound to conduct a comparative analysis believing that people

understand the communications they exchange rather supposing that they do not (Oring 1992: 28).

Of course, language itself does not have a single meaning. And to compound the problem, it is widely accepted that humor is—well, *humorous*—because of its incongruity. It would thus seem the height of fallacy to suggest measuring an admittedly ambiguous and often misunderstood term (alienation) by looking at the meaning of language in jokes. However, that is exactly what is now proposed.

The research question underlying this investigation is whether jokes with characters or settings involving work can be used as variables that indicate various social-psychological aspects of alienation. If alienation is a central concern of workers, and if individuals and groups do, in fact, use humor in specific contexts as attacks, defense, cathartic release, and so on; then a large, non-purposive collection of work jokes should reveal a substantial number of jokes expressing various aspects of alienation. Likewise, if people relate work jokes with content referencing alienation, and if alienation varies structurally in different settings; then the number and type of references to aspects of alienation in jokes should also vary.

## 2. Literature review

Theorists and researchers alike have adopted various positions reflecting both the multidimensionality and situational specificity of alienation. For example, Rao and Ramana (1986: 59) begin their analysis of alienation among college teachers “by simply taking for granted Seeman’s five-dimensional formulation of the concept of alienation.” Their analysis proceeds by first adapting traditional scaled alienation measures to reflect the specificity of their work setting (a university). They then statistically determine how well each construct holds together and conclude by noting which scales seem to be more significant for college teachers. Similarly constructed studies have appeared examining differences in discrete indicators of alienation between organizational hierarchies (Leviatan 1991), and between the work of women and men (Ross and Wright 1998). By grounding the concept of alienation within specific contexts, researchers have developed operationalizations that—if not consistent in their historical derivation from Marxian perspectives—offer the possibility of falsifiable comparisons of alienation between specific social contexts.

While Clark (1959) was the first to relate alienation (conceived of as powerlessness) to a specific organization, the most influential comparison of various dimensions of alienation within specific settings is Blauner's (1964) study of comparative alienation between workers in different industries. In comparing factory workers in the printing, textile, automobile, and chemical industries along the dimensions of powerlessness, meaninglessness, social alienation, and self-estrangement, Blauner demonstrates that alienation varied by the type of organization and technology found in industrial settings. Different researchers have extended Blauner's (1964) original thesis and found similar variance of alienation within other occupational groups (Kirsch and Lengermann 1972; Leviatan 1991; Shepard 1971).

Unfortunately there has been little consistency in either the social-psychological factors selected to represent the fullness of what it means to be "alienated," or in findings of what, exactly, is the most important aspect of alienation (that is, the aspect having the highest level) for various occupational groups. While many authors adapt various pieces of past measurements to their own studies, most operationalizations of alienation are in some way unique.

An exhaustive review of the different conceptualizations of social-psychological indicators of alienation is outside the scope of this review. For the sake of coherence, the differing "types" of alienation will be grouped within the same categories outlined by Blauner (1964) in his well-known work *Alienation and Freedom*.

### 3. Operationalization of research concepts

According to Blauner, workers experience alienation in work when they are used like objects (i.e., when they are acted upon rather than initiating action themselves). Blauner goes on to note that people are likely to be used as objects by their employers when they experience powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement (1964: 20–36).

The content analysis of the joke-texts was the work of two coders, conducted over a period of approximately five months. First, the author subjectively assessed the meaning of a random sample of 200 joke-texts and then attempted to assign the texts to categories using the definitions specified in the preceding section. Joke-texts coded as aspects of alienation were examined and compared with qualitative comments. A list of

indicators was then developed for each aspect of alienation using descriptions and wording from the joke-texts themselves. Further refinements were arrived at after each of a series of three pretests using both coders. All pretests of the material involved a random selection of 200 joke-texts from the data set and were conducted in quiet settings during a single day. Each session began with a review of both the protocol and the coding instructions, and coders were encouraged to check their coding with a standing folder, which held operationalizations of the terms for easy viewing. Each participant independently coded joke-texts as being reflective of powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, self-estrangement or general humor, defined below.

- *Powerlessness*: if workers are controlled by the system of work (policy, guidelines, bureaucracy, technology) or by a supervisor; if workers have no control over, or input on, the conditions of employment (time, compensation, environment) or over the pace and quality of work; if workers are treated or referred to as objects (sack of grain, human calculator); if workers have no control over basic bodily functions (eating, drinking, going to the bathroom, sex).

One example of a joke that reflects this aspect of alienation is the following:

Our office was always on the cutting edge of technology. Not only did we have computers, which spoke as well as listened. Hell, some of us even got ulcers.

In this joke, humor is derived through the incongruous juxtaposition of machinery and humanity. Workers have been completely dehumanized and are seen to act and process information with the predictable and interchangeable uniformity of computer processing. In fact, the incongruity of the above is such that we are left unsure whether, in the condition of “thingness,” the tools are becoming more human or if the workers have become indistinguishable from the machine. The joke also seems to illustrate that those within the office (whether humans or computers) are overworked, as evinced in the punch line about ulcers.

This next text is coded as powerlessness, because the workers it portrays lack control over the pace of their work:

One day the Boss asked an employee to submit a status report to him concerning a project he was working on. The new employee, anxious to please, immediately

asked if tomorrow morning would be soon enough. “Tomorrow morning?” the Boss replies. “If I wanted it done tomorrow, I would have waited until then to ask for it!”

While the above illustrates lack of control over the process and timeliness of production, other texts more generally reflect the worker’s lack of power. This “laughter of the powerless” (Speier 1998) is directly articulated in jokes such as this:

A crusty old man walks into a bank and says to the teller at the window, “I want to open a damn checking account.”

To which the astonished woman replies, “I beg your pardon, sir; I must have misunderstood you. What did you say?”

“Listen up, damn it. I said I want to open a damn checking account right now!”

“I’m very sorry sir, but we do not tolerate that kind of language in this bank.” So saying, the teller leaves the window and goes over to the bank manager to tell him about her situation. They both return and the manager asks the old geezer, “What seems to be the problem here?”

“There’s no fucking problem, damn it!” the man says, “I just won \$50 million bucks in the damn lottery and I want to open a damn checking account in this damn bank!”

“I see,” says the manager, “and this bitch is giving you a hard time?”

- *Meaninglessness*: if workers fail to understand the interconnectedness of their tasks with those around them; if they fail to comprehend what they are doing, what they are supposed to do, or if other workers have no understanding of their position; if business decisions or policy seem to be made by chance or in an arbitrary manner; if there is overt reference to insanity, chaos, or stupidity in the workplace.

Workers are often unable to understand their place within modern office systems. Consequently, jokes reflective of this ambiguity may have arisen as a type of running social commentary that workers use both as a means of making sense of their plight and of reassuring one another that meaning is elusive for all. Such jokes are best characterized as cynical (borrowing from Speier’s typology of political humor) and, as such, are “general expression[s] of moral alienation” (Speier 1998: 1359).

An intern sitting at her desk noticed a man walk over to the copy machine and open the lid. After waiting around a few minutes he left, and another man came by, shut the lid, and started setting out paper clips on a nearby table. After a few

minutes he, too, left and was replaced by the first man who opened the lid to the copy machine. This process was repeated for over an hour before the intern stood up and asked them what they were doing.

“We’re from the mail room,” the man setting paper clips on the table said, “and the guy who puts the paper in the machine is home sick today.”

Statement: “Our business is going through a paradigm shift”

Translation: “We have no idea what we’ve been doing, but in the future we shall do something completely different!”

The above jokes reflect worker views of meaninglessness by directly addressing the “substantial rationality” referenced by Mannheim (1940). In the first, the actions of opening the copier and putting paper clips on the table are performed without, it seems, understanding the task’s purpose or, ultimately, the project’s goals. The second joke extends the supposition of meaninglessness into the supposedly “functionally rational” level of the corporation by “translating” ill-understood but often used corporate jargon into an admission of ignorance. The concept of meaninglessness is also evinced in the following:

One day a man walked into his local pet store and asked to see the parrots. I have three,” said the owner, “but they are all different prices. This one here is \$500; that blue one right there is \$1000; and the one over yonder is \$5000.”

“Why the big price difference?”

“Well, the \$500 parrot can say 20 words and clean his own cage.”

“Wow! That’s impressive,” the customer says. “What does the \$1000 parrot do?”

“That blue one there can say 50 words, and clean the cage of all other birds in the room.”

“Incredible!” the customer replies. “What does the \$5000 parrot do?”

The owner thinks for a minute and then replies, “I’ll be honest with ya. I ain’t never seen that bird up yonder do a thing, but the other parrots call him Boss.”

- *Social isolation*: if workers are separated from coworkers or humanity in general either physically—in the form of barriers—or emotionally because of distance, lack of communication or interaction; if workers dislike their coworkers or are themselves disliked; if workers do not feel a sense of belonging to the organization.

Jokes of social isolation describe many common practices and policies of today’s bureaucratic, fragmentary workplace. Two examples follow:

Q: What's the difference between prison and work?

A: Prison "cubicles" are larger

Q: What's the difference between prison and work?

A: Prisoners get to visit family and friends once a month, but workers can't even speak to them.

Such jokes, presented in easily exchanged question and answer format, comment directly on the physical isolation of the worker and reflect awareness that the average employee is treated as a dehumanized thing without rights or opportunity for furthering feelings of belonging. Cubicles are prisons, and within them the worker is assumed to function outside of all social bonds. The joke-text below was also coded "social isolation."

Early one morning, a mother went in to wake up her son. "Wake up, son. It's time to go to school!"

"But why, Mom? I don't want to go."

"Give me two reasons why you don't want to go."

"Well, the kids all hate me, and all of the teachers hate me, too!"

"Oh, that's no reason not to go to school. Come on now and get ready."

"Give me two reasons why I should go to school."

"Well, for one, you're 52 years old. And for another, you have a class to teach!"

In the above, humor is derived from the incongruity of a teacher not wanting to attend school. Social isolation is addressed when the teacher notes that social ties with both peers (other teachers) and subordinates (students) are strained. He does not want to go to work, therefore, because he has no informal work group from which to derive satisfaction, encouragement, and meaning. His position is untenable, as the mother points out, for both his age and his position require his attendance.

- *Self-estrangement*: if workers are engaged in activities that are not rewarding in and of themselves (... not paid enough for this...); if they wish they were doing something different (can't wait to get home, to the club, go sailing); if they lack self-expression or creativity; if they seek to avoid work; if they fall asleep or daydream while at work; if workers lose touch of their individuality and become the work role.

Note the similarity of the following jokes with those of the preceding section:

Q: Why is prison better than work?

A: In prison, you don't have to wait to get out to watch TV and play games.

Q: What's the difference between prison and work?

A: In prison you spend most of your life looking through bars from the inside wanting to get out, while at work you want to get out and inside bars.

Q: Two men are on the opposite sides of the world. One is getting an inept blow-job, and the other is frantically editing a business proposal. What are they both thinking?

A: When do I get off?

These jokes are not subtle. Workers would rather be elsewhere and yet they are not. The exchange of such jokes is facilitated by the abbreviated question and answer format, and questions necessitate at least minimal interaction.

#### 4. Oppositional categories

The preceding definitions and operationalizations are for coding jokes on aspects of alienation. However, while coding for the presence or absence of operationalized phenomena is reflective of the vast majority of content analyses and of alienation research in general (consider scales that ask people to rate their level of agreement with statements such as "I am not at my best when I am at work for my livelihood"; Rao and Ramana 1986: 47), findings from such studies are invariably slanted toward anticipated outcomes. When items are coded as zero on a scale, or as Other, what is left by the process of quantification—in all but the most unusual of circumstances—is a sum that is greater than zero. If zero is considered to reflect the absence of a social construct, and all else is considered to be evidence of various amounts of its presence, then there is little wonder that what we think we will find is always present. Studies of alienation always find *some* degree of alienation, because they are not looking for an opposite.<sup>1</sup> There is, in effect, no null hypotheses. This criticism is similarly true for most functional analyses of humor. Humor theorists have long posited that jokes can express many sentiments, and can be used in many ways. Jokes can vary in their content from resignation (the "laughter of the powerless") to defiance. They might also, as previously

reviewed, be a means of coping with a tightly controlled environment (Collinson 1988). However, they may have no such function.

Recognizing, then, (1) the methodological weakness of coding solely for alienation, and (2) suggestions within studies of humor that jokes can express many sentiments and serve a wide array of possible functions, categories were formed for anti-alienation by reversing the operationalization of powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement. By adding these categories to the design, this study strengthens the claim of subsequent findings by allowing for the possibility—not of less alienation—but of opposition to it. It allows for the possibility that what might be found is anti-alienation, in general, or the opposite of any or all of the social-psychological aspects of alienation.

After reversing the operationalization for each of the indicators (i.e., powerlessness, and so on), four new categories were named and added to the protocol: empowerment, understanding, social integration, and self-actualization. Subsequent testing of the new design (using the same parameters as other pretests) revealed its usefulness, as reliability among aspects of alienation increased while simultaneously decreasing the number of joke-texts placed in the general category. Basing these categories on the operationalizations of the assumed aspects of alienation eliminated the need for refinement, as no patterns of discrepancy were discovered between the coders on the pretest. Examples of coded joke-texts follow the operationalization of each category.

- *Empowerment*: if workers refuse to be controlled by the system of work (policies, guidelines, bureaucracy) or by a supervisor; if workers assert control over conditions of employment (time, compensation, environment) or over the pace (speed of production, length of day or work week) and quality of work; if workers assert control over the product or material goods of the company; if workers assert control over movement within the physical workplace, the organization, or between companies.

Office Poster: “When the going gets tuff, the tuff take a coffee break!”

- *Understanding*: if workers understand how work-tasks fit in with those around them; if workers comprehend the work task, what they are supposed to do in order for the business to succeed, or if other workers understand their job when owners and business leaders do not; if

workers recognize that the business is engaged in nonsensical activity or has self-contradictory policy.

After a dinner speech, the speaker scolded his secretary.

“Why did you write such a long speech for me? You saw how those people were feeling bored!”

The secretary replied, “Sir, it wasn’t a lengthy speech at all; but you could say I made one mistake—I gave you all three copies of the speech.”

- *Social integration*: if workers are united with humanity in general or with coworkers either physically (purposely exchanging gossip, wandering into another’s office space) or emotionally through technology such as the telephone or e-mail; if workers like coworkers or are themselves liked; if workers feel that they are part of the work organization.

#### The Corporate Zodiac

Marketing: You are ambitious yet stupid. You chose a marketing degree to avoid having to study in college, concentrating instead on drinking and socializing—which is pretty much what your job responsibilities are now.

- *Self-actualization*: If workers are engaged in activities that are rewarding for their own sake; if they are doing what they want or make opportunities for self-expression or creativity.

Applicant Speak: “I’M BALANCED AND CENTERED.”

Translation: I’ll keep crystals at my desk and do Tai Chi in the lunchroom.

In order to make the categories exhaustive, joke-texts that did not seem to fit in any of the above categories are coded as *general humor* in the protocol.

- *General humor*: any joke-text not readily amenable to the above categories.

According to Fromm (1961: 57), in the postindustrial world it is not the skilled manual laborer who is the most alienated, but, “if anything, the clerk, the sales man, and the executive.” This study compares and contrasts the relative alienation of entry-level service workers, such as grocery stockers, receptionists, and fast food workers, with that of Internet

joke postings. While there was invariably overlap between entry-level service workers and those posting jokes about corporate America to Internet sites in the year 2000 (during which data for this study was collected), demographic analyses repeatedly showed that the average Internet user was better educated and wealthier than the average American and less likely to be engaged in entry-level service work (Newbery 2000). Work jokes found posted to Internet sites then are used as a proxy for jokes exchanged between those engaged in work for which some specialized training, education, or experience was required.

There are three reasons for settling for this problematic comparative: first, it is much more difficult to convince professional and technical workers, managers and administrators, to spend time collecting jokes; second, a preliminary review of work places by the author indicates that jokes are not as openly exchanged in office settings as they were among the employees of restaurants and grocery stores; and third, research indicates that people in skilled service jobs are much more sensitive to the possibility that their humor may be inappropriate. For example, Graham (2000: 121–122) found that workers in skilled jobs found the climate “overly sensitive and unnecessarily stifling,” and that this has changed the way people joke with one another. Due to the lack of mutually exclusive comparative categories, the data is very much open to critique and should be taken as suggestive rather than conclusive. The work jokes in this study are, however, collected from groups statistically different on key indicators, such as education, job-type, and income, and are collected from two entirely different venues—the Internet and in-person by participants at specific job sites. Consequently, the research design adequately addresses the central research question of whether jokes with characters or settings involving work can be used as variables indicating various aspects of alienation. Further insight as to the possible nature of humor and worker concern with various aspects of alienation may also be gleaned from research expectations of differences between Internet joke-texts and those exchanged by entry-level service workers.

## **5. Research expectations**

The first two research expectations are derived from assumptions previously outlined. These include: (1) alienation is a central concern of workers; (2) people employ humor for a variety of different reasons, including

communication, attacks on the social system and other individuals, venting pent-up emotions, and so on; (3) humor varies between groups and different social settings; and, (4) alienation varies between workgroups. If these assumptions are true, then we can expect that:

- RE1: Much of the humor exchanged about work will include references to or descriptions of alienation.  
 RE2: There will be a substantial difference between the alienative content of work jokes collected from the Internet and those collected from entry-level service occupations.

### 5.1. *Powerlessness*

Powerlessness has commonly been put forth as the “core” of alienation (Bean et al. 1973). Many studies have found powerlessness to be the dimension of greatest alienation in their sampling frames (for example, Leiter 1985). The first research expectation, then, for powerlessness is:

- RE3: Powerlessness will account for a greater percentage of joke-texts than will other dimensions of alienation.

Powerlessness has been the focus of most research and can be divided into two categories: control over the rhythms of work and control over the quality produced and techniques employed. Control over the “rhythms of work” refers to the pace of production and freedom of physical movement. Some authors have found a curvilinear relationship between alienation and technology that controls the pace of work (Blauner 1964; Shepard 1971), while others have found the relationship to be negatively linear (Hull et al. 1982). Control over quality and technique refers to controlling how one goes about producing the product and to what level of workmanship (Blauner 1964). Kohn (1976), for example, in his study of occupational structure and alienation found that alienation increases with both increased supervision and the lack of ability to exercise independent judgment in task completion.

As the literature suggests that more highly educated workers have more control over the rhythms of work, over the quality of products produced and techniques employed, the second research expectation for powerlessness is as follows:

RE4: Internet joke-texts will express less powerlessness than those exchanged by entry-level service workers.

## 5.2. *Meaninglessness*

According to Blauner (1964), meaning in work depends upon the worker's relationship to the product, process, and organization of work. Work on a unique, individuated product is meaningful, whereas contributions toward the completion of a standardized product are not. It is generally accepted that entry-level workers are more likely to work on standardized products. This is because individuated products require more generalized skills, and thus more training (Sable 1982). Likewise, it is generally accepted that work is more meaningful when workers' jobs allow them responsibility for a large part of the production process, rather than a small, restricted sphere (Blauner 1964). Entry-level service workers are much more likely than better educated workers to be responsible for a small part of the work process, because they are typically hired and trained for a specific, immediate task and are rarely given more responsibility (Hodson and Sullivan 1995). This suggests the following:

RE5: Internet joke-texts will express less meaninglessness than those exchanged by entry-level service workers.

## 5.3. *Social isolation*

Early studies indicate that industrial workers conceive of the factory as a community or a center of belongingness, and that the human contacts of such a community are very important in making work less alienated (Blauner 1964). It has been further posited that increasingly stratified bureaucratic organizations reduce worker capacity for socialization. Past studies of alienation note that workers more directly involved in production prefer the social aspects of their job (to which they are believed to have increased access), while those in office jobs attach greater importance to other aspects, such as promotional opportunities (Herzberg et al. 1957). A combination of the above points gives us:

RE6: The joke-texts of entry-level service workers will express less social isolation than Internet joke-texts.

#### 5.4. *Self-estrangement*

As stated above, some research raises questions about the link between sentiments and structure in the context of work. While many studies have substantiated connections between aspects of work and self-concept—for example, the higher the level of workers in the organizational hierarchy, the more positive their indicators on psychological outcomes such as self-estrangement (Geshwender 1968; Parker and Kleiner 1966; Tannenbaum et al. 1974)—other research has raised doubts as to the centrality of work to workers' self-concept (Blauner 1964; Leviatan 1991; Seeman 1991).

While there is some evidence that education and self-estrangement are negatively correlated (Kessler 1954), the general argument behind most studies is that the more education a person receives, the greater the possibility that work will be self-estranging. Rosner and Putterman (1992: 126) posit that the demand for jobs that are less self-estranging “increases with income or standard of living, because satisfaction from work is a ‘higher-order need’ that gains increasing primacy as more basic needs have been fulfilled.” Entry-level service jobs pay less than skilled service jobs and so, according to perspectives embracing an intrinsic hierarchy of needs (such as Tausky 1970), entry-level workers are more concerned with meeting basic needs such as safety and security than with becoming self-actualized. This perspective is in line with Blauner's (1964) findings, as he found comparatively low levels of self-estrangement among low-skilled factory jobs. Thus, this study posits that:

RE7: The joke-texts of entry-level service workers will express less self-estrangement than Internet joke-texts.

#### 5.5. *Total alienation*

Since Blauner, there have been many studies demonstrating the sensitivity of self-report measures of alienation to worker evaluations of the importance or centrality of work in their lives (Cherns 1976; Seeman and Anderson 1983; Seeman 1991). As workers in the poorest jobs usually evaluate themselves using criteria from outside the work setting (Agassi 1991; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Seeman et al. 1988), it is likely that the jokes of unskilled service workers will reflect less alienation than Internet joke-texts. This brings us to our final research statement:

RE8: The joke-texts of entry-level service workers will express less alienation than Internet joke-texts.

## 6. Methods and data

Research assistants (N = 10) were selected from acquaintances and undergraduate student volunteers already working in entry-level service jobs. Thus, joke-texts representing entry-level service industries were collected from participant observers already working in these environments. Assistants were evenly divided on gender and ranged in age from 19–52, with a mean age of 28.5. Entry-level service positions are defined as jobs requiring one year or less of specialized training or experience that require some level of interaction between the worker and the recipient of the service. Types of jobs that preclude interactions with customers are, therefore, outside the realm of this study. Occupations represented by research participants include department store sales clerks (3), business secretaries (2), fast food workers (2), a dental assistant, grocery stocker, and a bank teller (N = 10). The mean number of workers at each site was 76 (range 6–310).

Coding for this study was accomplished by one male and one female sociologist. A gender mix on coding was important because of research showing difference in both perceptions of humor (Graham 2000) and understandings of communication (Ehrenber 1995).

### 6.1. *Unit of analysis*

Unlike less structured types of humor (teasing, silliness, and so on), jokes are easily recognizable as humor, refer to general character-types and situations, are often set apart from the rest of the conversation, and have a beginning and an end. However, in collecting the data it became obvious that some “jokes,” when transcribed, extended for many paragraphs and expressed a wide range of ideas. Krippendorff (1980) introduces the concept of thematic units in his discussion of content analysis. It is used to refer to concepts of interest within the text that are identified as structurally separate. For this study, thematic units are defined as complete narratives that are structurally separate from other, coded items, and which are set apart by such devices as numbers, lines, pictures, or the repetition

of a question. It is the thematic unit, and not necessarily the entire joke (which may, or may not consist of multiple thematic units), which is the unit of analysis for this study.

As the unit of analysis for this study is the thematic unit, which could be either all or part of the joke, subsequent discussion of content and coding will refer to the unit of analysis as a “joke-text.” A *joke-text* is any complete, fictional narrative (pictorial, textual, or any combination of the two)—either posted in a public forum or exchanged between people—that is judged by the teller or receiver to be humorous.

## 6.2. Data collection

The data used in this study were collected in two different ways. Research assistants collected joke-texts representing entry-level service sector jobs from jobs for which no minimum level of experience or education was specified. This was accomplished over a period of three months (February 1, 2000–May 1, 2000) by writing down or copying all observed joke-text exchanges or postings as shortly after being exposed to the material as convenient.

Other joke-texts were downloaded at the beginning and end of the study from the top five joke and/or humor sites on the World Wide Web. The ranking of joke-sites was determined in two stages. First, a preliminary list of the 20 websites ranked highest in relevancy by a multi-search engine (Profusion) using the Boolean statement “jokes AND humor” was compiled.<sup>2</sup> Second, the traffic was compared on each of the sites as reflected on site counters provided by webmasters that note and display the number of “hits” received to date. Thus, the five “jokes OR humor” websites with the most traffic were selected on two occasions. Between the first and second data collection, one of the sites initially surveyed fell behind in traffic and was replaced by another with a higher hit rate. Thus, data for this study were collected from a total of six websites.

Two major criteria were necessary for material to be included in the analysis. First, joke-texts were included if items were judged by research assistants to have been publicly posted, told, exchanged, or presented as humor. This does not mean that joke-texts needed to elicit a humorous response from receivers. Thus, joke-texts that did not cause a humorous response could have been part of the data set if the person collecting the

item judged the item was being framed as a joke. Judgment on humorous framing or intent was easy for items found pre-labeled as humor, such as when posted to part of a physical or Internet message board titled "Jokes." While on-site collection necessarily relied on the collector's judgment of whether or not an item was meant to be funny, people easily recognize when something is meant to elicit humor (Berger 1997).

The second criterion for selection was that joke-texts contain or reference characters (e.g., boss, secretary, stocker) or settings (e.g., office, business) involving work. This was done in order to limit the analysis to texts most likely be a commentary on reality, rather than instances of slapstick, scatological, or imaginative incongruity humor. This criterion was also necessary in order to provide direction for data collected from Internet humor sites, many of which had numerous categories (Your Momma, Ethnic, and so on) for thousands of different jokes.

## 7. Analysis

The data for this study consist of joke-texts collected over a period of three consecutive months during the year 2000: 404 from entry-level service employees and 681 from Internet joke websites, four of which had specific sections of jokes dedicated to work. The category of general humor was by far the largest within humor type, and accounted for almost 30% of the joke-texts in this data set ( $n = 322$ ). The smallest number of texts was accounted for by the category of Social Isolation at 3.6% ( $n = 39$ ). Inter-rater reliability for coding on humor-type ranged from a low of 80.4% on Social Isolation to a high of 91.7% for the categories of Social Integration and Understanding ( $n = 48$  and  $n = 91$ , respectively). Controlling for both chance agreement and for the increased likelihood of reaching agreement on general humor, Cohen's *Kappa* was computed as .863. Thus, 86.3% of inter-coder agreement on the type of humor in joke-texts is the result of the careful application of category definitions rather than chance (Riffe et al. 1998).

### 7.1. Results

RE1: Much of the humor exchanged about work will include references to or descriptions of alienation.

*Supported.* On the most general level, we can say that jokes about work or people within work roles seem to be strongly related to the theme of alienation; 68.6% ( $n = 744$ ) of the joke-texts in this study focused on aspects of alienation. Of that total, 45.9% ( $n = 498$ ) were coded on alienation as classically conceptualized (i.e., powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, self-estrangement), whereas 22.7% ( $n = 246$ ) were coded as anti-alienation (i.e., empowerment, understanding, social integration, self-actualization).

RE2: There will be a substantial difference between the alienative content of work jokes collected from the Internet, and those collected from entry-level service occupations.

*Supported.* The contingency coefficient for coding on alienation (not assuming a null hypothesis), anti-alienation, and general humor between the two work groups is .322. This can be described as a moderate difference in the frequency for which joke-texts were coded powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, self-estrangement, empowerment, understanding, social integration, self-actualization, and general humor between skilled and entry-level service workers. Of course, because the data were not randomly collected, generalizations on the difference in joke-texts exchanged between various types of workers in the larger population cannot be made.

RE3: Powerlessness will account for a greater proportion of joke-texts than will other dimensions of alienation.

*Supported.* As can be seen in Table 1, besides general humor, powerlessness accounted for the largest percentage of joke-texts at 17.5% ( $n = 190$ ). Directly below powerlessness, we find that empowerment was coded with much less frequency and accounted for 6.9% ( $n = 75$ ) of all joke-texts. A combination of these categories shows that 24.4% ( $n = 265$ ), or approximately one quarter of all joke-texts coded for this study were in some way focused on aspects of power.

RE4: Internet joke-texts will express less powerlessness than those exchanged by entry-level service workers.

*Unsupported.* Of the joke-texts collected from the Internet, 23.1% ( $n = 157$ ) were classified as powerlessness, whereas entry-level service

Table 1. *Frequency distribution of the type of humor found in entry-level and skilled service work*

Humor		Job type			
		Entry-level Service	Skilled Service	Total	
POWER	Powerlessness	Count	33	157	190
		% within HUMOR	17.4%	82.6%	100.0%
		% within JOBTYP	8.2%	23.1%	17.5%
	Empowerment	Count	28	47	75
		% within HUMOR	37.3%	62.7%	100.0%
		% within JOBTYP	6.9%	6.9%	6.9%
MEANING	Meaninglessness	Count	47	62	109
		% within HUMOR	43.1%	56.9%	100.0%
		% within JOBTYP	11.6%	9.1%	10.0%
	Understanding	Count	52	39	91
		% within HUMOR	57.1%	42.9%	100.0%
		% within JOBTYP	12.9%	5.7%	8.4%
SOCIAL	Social Isolation	Count	5	34	39
		% within HUMOR	12.8%	87.2%	100.0%
		% within JOBTYP	1.2%	5.0%	3.6%
	Social Integration	Count	11	37	48
		% within HUMOR	22.9%	77.1%	100.0%
		% within JOBTYP	2.7%	5.4%	4.4%
SELF	Self-Estrangement	Count	32	132	164
		% within HUMOR	19.5%	80.5%	100.0%
		% within JOBTYP	7.9%	19.4%	15.1%
	Self-Actualization	Count	27	20	47
		% within HUMOR	57.4%	42.6%	100.0%
		% within JOBTYP	6.7%	2.9%	4.3%
	General Humor	Count	169	153	322
		% within HUMOR	52.5%	47.5%	100.0%
		% within JOBTYP	41.8%	22.5%	29.7%
Total	Total	Count	404	681	1085
		% within HUMOR	37.2%	62.8%	100.0%
		% within JOBTYP	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

workers had roughly one third as many of their joke-texts (7.9% [n = 32]) classified as powerlessness.

This picture does not change when looking at the total concern of both groups with Power (powerlessness and empowerment). Entry-level service workers have the same proportion of their joke-texts coded as empowerment as those collected from the Internet (6.9%). Combining powerlessness and empowerment, we find that Internet joke-texts have 30% (n = 204) of their humor concerned with Power, compared with 14.8% (n = 61) for those of entry-level service workers. Thus, the Internet joke-texts in this data set are more than twice as likely to be focused on considerations of power.

RE5: Internet joke-texts will express less meaningfulness than those exchanged by entry-level service workers.

*Supported.* 9.1% (n = 62) of Internet joke-texts were coded as meaningfulness, compared to 11.6% of entry-level service workers. Looking at the total concern of workers within the aggregate category of Meaning, we find the difference is compounded, with Internet joke-texts having 14.8% (n = 101) within this category and entry-level service workers having a total of 22.3% (n = 90).

RE6: The joke-texts of entry-level service workers will express less social isolation than Internet joke-texts.

*Supported.* This category was hardly employed for entry-level service workers and accounted for only 1.2% (n = 5) of the total. While still a comparatively low percentage (5% [n = 39]), Internet joke-texts were much more frequently coded as being reflective of social isolation. As this category of humor had a much smaller total than other aspects of alienation, it is, perhaps, even more important to look at the numbers for the oppositional category. Social integration was coded for 2.7% (n = 11) of the joke-texts exchanged in entry-level service jobs, whereas it was referenced in 5.4% (n = 37) of Internet joke-texts. In both instances, the proportion of joke-texts coded as being centered on Social elements was at least twice as great for joke-texts posted to the Internet.

Looking at the total concern of workers within the aggregate category of Social, we find the percentage difference remains similar, with

entry-level service joke-texts at 3.9% (n = 16) and Internet joke-texts at 10.4% (n = 71).

RE7: The joke-texts of entry-level service workers will express less self-estrangement than Internet joke-texts.

*Supported.* Entry-level service workers were less than half as likely to have texts coded as self-estrangement: 8.2% (n = 33) compared to 19.4% (n = 132) for Internet joke-texts.

Looking at the total concern of workers within the aggregate category of Self, we find the between-group difference closes somewhat with entry-level workers having 14.9% (n = 60) of their humor centered on Self, compared with 23.3% (n = 159) for those on the Internet.

RE8: The joke-texts of entry-level service workers will express less alienation than Internet joketexts.

*Supported.* In order to assess this expectation, units of analysis coded as powerlessness, meaningfulness, social isolation, and self-estrangement were added together and then divided by the total number of joke-texts in the data set. Joke-texts coded as aspects of alienation, then, accounted for 28.2% (n = 114) of the total for entry-level service sector jobs. While this is a sizable percentage of the total for entry-level joke-texts, alienation was reflected in a majority of Internet joke-texts (56.4% [n = 384]). This is twice the percentage of alienation humor found among entry-level service sector workers.

Looking only at humor coded as anti-alienative (i.e., empowerment, understanding, social integration, and self actualization), 27.2% (n = 110) of the joke-texts for entry-level service workers were coded as anti-alienative, compared to 20% (n = 136) of the joke-texts in the Internet data set. Put another way, entry-level service workers, in this data set, were about 40% more likely to exchange anti-alienative humor than those who, on average, were more highly educated, more experienced, and better-paid.

Another way of addressing the previous research expectation is to look at the total amount of humor that reflects all aspects of alienation and its oppositional categories. Summing the coding totals on aspects of alienation and anti-alienation, we find that the difference between the work groups remains: 55.4% (n = 224) for entry-level service compared to

76.4% (n = 520) for Internet jokes. Regardless of the method employed, then, joke-texts exchanged on the Internet contained more references to aspects of alienation than those of entry-level service workers.

## 8. Discussion

Past studies of humor and work have found humor to be both functional and dysfunctional for various settings, groups, and individual workers. Those studies which suggest that humor at work is useful for such things as overcoming monotony (Duncan et al. 1990), relieving the boredom of repetitive tasks (Ehrenberg 1995), and maintaining creativity (Rouff 1975) all seem to suggest that humor helps to increase the worker's sense of self-actualization. Likewise, research showing how humor is used to increase a sense of belonging (Duncan et al. 1990) or to establish social relations and increase the quality of relationships at work (Ziv 1984) suggests that humor functions to increase the social integration of people in the workplace. Studies suggesting that humor is an aid to better communication between managers and employees are conceptually related to this study's definition of *Understanding* (Gibson 1994), while those framing humor as attacks upon management or the system of work itself (Dwyer 1991) can be tied to *Empowerment*. On the most basic of levels, then, the content analysis of jokes seems to reflect many of the "functions" posited by researchers employing the affective perspective.

Unfortunately, this study does little to clarify the intent or motivation behind the telling of a joke. Based on the results of the content analysis, we can conclude that work jokes often have oppositional content: that is to say, the manifest meaning of work-jokes—removed as they are from their social settings and interpreted through a protocol—seems to express both powerlessness and empowerment, both meaninglessness and understanding, and so on. Given the ambiguity of past findings, there is no precedent for how to account for the polarity of humor. How, then, do we interpret alienation and anti-alienation?

The previous section avoided the problem of interpretation by presenting the findings in a conventional manner (that is to say, in terms of comparative levels of alienation) and by evaluating the research expectations solely in terms of expressions of powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement. However, the picture presented to us by the data is much more complex. This study included oppositional catego-

ries in order to avoid assuming the presence of various aspects of alienation. Given that discriminate reliability between conceptualizations of alienation and anti-alienation is high, it seems unlikely that opposing categories of each social-psychological aspect would have the same meaning as the original. If this is so, and if humor can be both functional and dysfunctional, then summing positive and negative aspects of the same term (one measure of self-actualization ought to cancel out one unit of self-estrangement) might yield a “truer” picture of worker alienation. If the meaning of each of these dichotomies (i.e., powerlessness vs. empowerment) is, in fact, oppositional, the work group with more anti-alienation than alienation content would be less alienated. Perhaps anti-alienative humor “empowers” workers by allowing them to resist the estranging demands of the work environment, or perhaps anti-alienative humor provides a cathartic release to both tellers and receivers, and thus reflects a healthier, more “human” work place.

There are, however, other interpretations. Anti-alienative humor could simply be a way of coping with the conditions of work, helping to make work bearable by sharing the suffering with comrades; it could be communicating a shared fantasy of how work should be, or it could provide both tellers and receivers with a temporary escape into an alternate perceptual world where meaning and power can be obtained by all. Then again, perhaps anti-alienation jokes are exchanged in the most alienating work environments because the incongruity of texts where workers experience self-actualization while still at work is all the more funny when compared to a reality where everyone is estranged. Lastly, (although hardly exhaustively), it is possible that work humor represents the displacement of various class-related or home-based stressors that are independent of the work environment.

Finally, the meaning of aspects of alienation themselves can be questioned. Just as we struggled to identify the purpose, or “true” meaning of anti-alienative content, so too must we question the meaning of expressions of alienation. Jokes coded as revolving around the concept of meaninglessness could, for example, reflect individual or group sentiment, but they could also be evidence of cathartic release. If jokes provided cathartic release, workers who expressed meaninglessness in their humor, having found an outlet for pent-up situational aggression, would actually claim to “feel” less alienated. Do we discount their reported feelings, or do we code this as an expression of structural alienation? If we believe that they have found a release, of sorts, and are thus more effectively

Table 2. *Comparison of alienation between entry-level and skilled service workers according to the method of computation*

Composite of alienation	Entry-level service workers (%)	Skilled service workers (%)
Summed aspects of alienation	28.2	56.4
Summed alienation and anti-alienation	55.4	76.4
Subtracted alienation and anti-alienation	1.0	36.4

venting their alienative feelings, then jokes of, say, meaninglessness should be interpreted as a decrease in the subjective level of alienation experienced by workers. Discounting this theory, however (as was implicitly done in this study), leads us to provisionally accept each expression as a concomitant increase in alienation.

Thus, the amount of alienation expressed in Internet and entry-level service sector joke-texts could be evaluated by: (1) counting only those terms or descriptions of situations taken to be indicative of the social-psychological aspects of alienation; (2) subtracting measures of anti-alienation from the oppositional category of alienation; or (ignoring for a moment the problem of tautology) by (3) adding both alienation and anti-alienation together. Table 2 provides a brief comparison of each of the above methods. Note that regardless of how alienation is tallied, skilled service workers express the most alienation.

As previously reviewed, the literature on humor concentrates on why people laugh, or why they utter jokes in the first place. This study can address neither of those questions. Despite high agreement between coders, the texts collected for this analysis could have been told or posted for many different reasons. Consequently, as discussed above, the meaning of many texts varies both situationally and theoretically. While this admission would invalidate many studies, the main findings of the current investigation are hardly changed. Content analysis of entry-level service and Internet joke-texts generally supports the research expectations, regardless of the assumed purpose or intention of the jokes and—as argued above—regardless of whether aspects of alienation and anti-alienation are added together or subtracted from one another. This suggests that, despite arguments over what a joke is doing and on what level (subjective, interpersonal, or organizational), research on work humor may not be doomed to tautology.

## 9. Conclusions

This study described the data set using simple proportions and found that: (1) aspects of alienation were expressed more often than other categories, and (2) powerlessness accounted for the largest percentage of joke-texts. Both of these were in accord with research expectations. It was also discovered that entry-level service workers in this sample expressed, as predicted, less alienation than expressed within Internet postings.

Next, entry-level service workers had more joke-texts concerned with meaninglessness than those of Internet postings. This finding is consistent with past research. As unskilled workers are likely to work on smaller parts of standardized projects, rather than on their own, individuated one (Sable 1982), and as entry-level workers are not likely to be in charge of a large portion of any job (Hodson and Sullivan 1995), they are much less likely to perceive meaning in either their own tasks or in the tasks of the workers around them.

Third, while much of the literature strongly suggests that entry-level workers experience more powerlessness than their better-trained and more-educated counterparts, the Internet joke-texts evinced twice the powerlessness of entry-level service sector humor. While this could be due to a number of factors (a non-representative sample, problems with the conceptual scheme, incorrect assumptions about the nature of humor), it is most likely the result of two things. First, workers at the subsistence level of income may be fulfilling more basic needs than asserting control over work tasks (Al Rashid 1984; Blauner 1964). Argyris (1962), for example, applies the idea of mature personalities (persons wishing to make their own decisions) to an evaluation of feelings of powerlessness within organizations. Etzioni (1968) argues that needs are infinitely expandable, and that worker frustration is related to how much expectations are allowed to expand. Likewise, Tausky (1970) applies Maslow's hierarchy of needs to different levels of workers within organizations, and Rosner and Putterman (1992: 126) argue that expressions of alienation increase when "more basic needs have been fulfilled."

Not surprisingly, the entry-level service workers whose jokes were included in this study may have had instrumental work orientations (Blauner 1964). If work is unimportant in their lives, they either do not notice or do not desire its control (Agassi 1991; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Ross and Wright 1998). Given that the majority of those collecting jokes from entry-level jobs were attending, had attended, or were

planning to attend college, and given that the data were collected from entry-level jobs in a college town, it is very likely that most of these workers had low levels of self-evaluative involvement in the work role (Seeman et al. 1988).

Another interesting finding is that the joke-texts of entry-level service workers not only had less alienated content, but they also evinced the greatest number of anti-alienative themes in their jokes. The only category for which Internet joke-texts had a greater percentage of anti-alienative humor was social integration. The reason for this is unclear. While the data fail to show a clear relationship between the level of alienation and its opposition, it is worth noting that entry-level service workers—who, by definition, perform fairly simple tasks while interacting with other people—very rarely joked about either isolation from, or integration with other people. Unlike aspects of powerlessness or self-estrangement that seem greatly affected by intervening psychological variables, social isolation seems more dependant on the objective conditions of work.

Finally, perhaps the most significant finding is that the joke-texts of entry-level service workers evince less alienative content than Internet joke-texts. This is true regardless of whether alienation is considered alone, combined with anti-alienation, or taken as a base from which to subtract anti-alienation. This finding suggests that: (1) the content of humor reflects the concerns of different social groups, and (2) that the level of alienation experienced by individual workers, while related to the structure of work, is subject to factors which can affect reporting. According to Hall (1969), factors that can influence individual reports of alienation include background, personality, and situational variables. Unlike other measures of alienation (i.e., “self-evaluative involvement”; Seeman 1991), analyzing the jokes exchanged within a workplace or between workgroups allows us to assess group, rather than individual sentiment. Given the debate over whether to measure group alienation at the individual or structural level, this study offers a way of assessing group sentiment more directly.

Much research on the concept of alienation has been done using either structural or subjective variables—or a combination of both. This is due, in part, to confusion over both the concept of alienation and the level at which it is evinced. While structural and subjective approaches to work alienation both assume that objective conditions of the job and the workplace cause alienation, disagreement arises over the extent to which this

is felt (or experienced) by individual workers. The result has been measures that describe the conditions of work and discount subjective reports, studies that accept individual measures as evidence of structurally induced alienation, and research comparing the results of both measures.

What all of these approaches seem to be aimed at is assessing the level of alienation experienced by the group. If this is so, then whatever the group is supposedly experiencing is either induced from individual experience or concluded from objective conditions. Group “experience” is thus indirectly assessed. This study of humor attempts to more directly measure and compare the “feelings” of workers that are statistically different along key indicators of education, job-type, and income. It is thus neither a structural nor a subjective measure of alienation. If humor is indeed all that past studies have suggested and that this study seems to support, and if studies of alienation are concerned with assessments and comparisons of group, rather than individual sentiment, then this content analysis of work humor is, to date, the most direct measure of alienation.

### 9.1. *Directions for future research*

In the future, it would be interesting to assess the strength of the relationship between, say, time spent at work and the level of expressed self-estrangement in order to compare such findings with other research. Likewise, it would be interesting to assess the variance between particular workgroups in terms of which humorous topics seem most related to aspects of alienation. Perhaps, for example, entry-level service workers, when they express isolation, do so in relation to outsiders rather than co-workers, or perhaps expressions of powerlessness are most closely linked with management, machinery, or regulations. Likewise, by combining both alienative measurements and measures of objective conditions, it would be possible to assess the “reality” of expressions about a lack of overtime pay or isolation from people outside of the workplace. Furthermore, without blurring the distinction between alienation and worker satisfaction, it might be possible to manipulate the objective variables (say, control over productivity) in order to assess increases or decreases in associated aspects of alienation and their expression (or lack thereof) in worker joke-texts. If powerlessness remained the same, while humorous references to specific causal factors changed or declined, it would further

our understanding of both the nature of humor and the connection between subjective and objective levels of alienation.

*Lake Superior State University*

## Notes

Correspondence address: rmauldin@lssu.edu

1. While studies of worker satisfaction and alienation contain many similarities, alienation is a much broader social-structural concept that attempts to describe or assess the individual's situated experience (Seeman 1983). As noted by Lefkowitz and Brigando (1980), it is not at all clear that an emotionally satisfied worker is not alienated, or vice versa.
2. The search was not case sensitive and, therefore, ranked the total salience of sites by the number of times the words "jokes OR humor," in whatever context or case, occurred in onsite descriptions, categories, or general text.

## References

- Agassi, Judith Buber  
1991 Dignity in the workplace: Can work be de-alienated? In Oldenquist, Andrew and Menachem Rosner (eds.), *Alienation, Community, and Work*. New York: Greenwood Press, 179–197.
- Al-Rashid, Nazih Turki  
1984 Powerlessness and job satisfaction. *Sociology*. Logan, UT: Utah State University, 105.
- Apter, Michael J.  
1982 *The Experience of Motivation: The Theory of Psychological Reversals*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Argyris, Chris  
1962 The integration of the individual and the organization. In Argyris, Chris (ed.), *Social Science Approaches to Business Behavior*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 57–98.
- Bean, Frank D., Charles M. Bonjean, and Michael G. Burton  
1973 Intergenerational occupational mobility and alienation. *Social Forces* 52, 62–73.
- Berger, Peter L.  
1997 *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Blauner, Bob  
1964 *Alienation and Freedom: The Factory Worker and His Industry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Boxer, Diana, and Florencia Cortes-Conde  
1997 From bonding to biting: Conversational joking and identity display. *Journal of Pragmatics* 27, 275–294.

- Cherns, Albert B.  
1976 Work or life. In Geyer, R. Felix and David R. Schweitzer (eds.), *Theories of Alienation: Critical Perspectives in Philosophy and the Social Sciences*. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 228–244.
- Clark, J.  
1959 Measuring alienation within a social system. *American Sociological Review* 24, 849–852.
- Collinson, David L.  
1988 Engineering humour: Masculinity, joking and conflict in shop–floor relations. *Organization Studies* 9, 181–199.
- Duncan, W. Jack  
1985 The superiority theory of humor at work: Joking relationships as indicators of formal and informal status patterns in small, task-oriented groups. *Small Group Behavior* 16, 556–564.
- Duncan, W. Jack, Larry R. Smeltzer, and Terry L. Leap  
1990 Humor and work: Applications of joking behavior to management. *Journal of Management* 16, 255–278.
- Dwyer, Tom  
1991 Humor, power, and change in organizations. *Human Relations* 44, 1–19.
- Ehrenberg, Tamar  
1995 Female differences in creation of humor relating to work. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 8, 349–362.
- Etzioni, Amitai  
1968 Basic human needs, alienation and inauthenticity. *American Sociological Review* 33, 870–884.
- Freud, Sigmund  
1963 [1905] *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Fromm, Erich  
1961 *Marx's Conception of Man*. New York: Frederick Ungar.
- Geshwender, J. A.  
1968 Status inconsistency, social isolation, and individual unrest. *Social Forces* 46, 477–483.
- Gibson, Donald E.  
1994 Humor consulting: Laughs for power and profit in organizations. *Humor* 7, 403–428.
- Graham, Todd  
2000 Inappropriate humor during Interpersonal Interactions: An analysis of contexts and responses. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Sociology, Arizona State University, Mesa, AZ.
- Hall, Douglas T.  
1969 The impact of academic interaction during an academic role transition. *Sociology of Education* 42, 118–140.
- Herzberg, F., B. Mausner, R. O. Peterson, and Dora F. Capwell  
1957 *Job Attitudes: Review of Research and Opinion*. Pittsburgh, PA: Psychological Service of Pittsburgh.
- Hodson, Randy, and Teresa A. Sullivan  
1995 *The Social Organization of Work*. New York: Wadsworth.
- Hull, F. M., N. S. Friedman, and T. F. Rogers  
1982 The effects of technology on alienations from work. *Work and Occupations* 9, 31–57.

- Kessler, Milton S.  
 1954 Job satisfaction of veterans rehabilitated under Public Law 16. *Personal Guidance Journal* 33, 78–81.
- Kirsch, Barbara A., and Joseph J. Lengermann  
 1972 An empirical test of Robert Blauner's ideas on alienation in work as applied to different type jobs in a white-collar setting. *Sociology and Social Research* 56, 180–194.
- Kohn, Melvin L.  
 1976 Occupational structure and alienation. *American Journal of Sociology* 82, 111–130.
- Kohn, Melvin L., and Carmi Schooler  
 1983 *Work and Personality: An Inquiry into the Impact of Social Stratification*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Koller, Marvin R.  
 1988 *Humor and Society: Explorations in the Sociology of Humor*. Houston, TX: Cap and Gown Press.
- Krippendorff, Klaus  
 1980 *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Leiter, Jeffrey  
 1985 Work alienation in the textile industry: Reassessing Blauner. *Work and Occupations* 12, 479–498.
- Lefkowitz, Joel, and Louis Brigando  
 1980 The redundancy of work alienation and job satisfaction: Some evidence of convergent and discriminant validity. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 16, 115–131.
- Leviatan, Uriel  
 1991 Hierarchical differentiation and alienation. In Oldenquist, Andrew and Menachem Rosner (eds.), *Alienation, Community, and Work*. New York: Greenwood Press, 159–178.
- Mannheim, Karl  
 1940 *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co.
- Morreall, John  
 1991 Humor and Work. *Humor* 4, 359–373.
- Nesbary, Dale K.  
 2000 *Survey Research and the World Wide Web*. London: Allyn and Bacon.
- Oring, Elliot  
 1992 *Jokes and their Relations*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Parker, Seymour, and Robert J. Kleiner  
 1966 *Mental Illness in the Urban Negro Community*. New York: Free Press.
- Rao, C. R. Prasad, and V. Venkata Ramana  
 1986 Measuring alienation among college teachers. *Sociological Bulletin* 35, 45–67.
- Riffe, Daniel, Stephen Lacy, and Fred Fico  
 1998 *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Rosner, Menachem, and Louis Putterman  
 1992 Factors behind the supply and demand for less alienating work, and some international illustrations. In Geyer, Felix and Walter R. Heinz (eds.), *Alien-*

- ation, Society, and the Individual: Continuity and Change in Theory and Research*. London: Transaction Publishers, 125–152.
- Ross, Catherine E., and Marylyn P. Wright  
1998 Women's work, men's work, and the sense of control. *Work and Occupations* 25, 333–355.
- Rouff, L. Lynne  
1975 Creativity and sense of humor. *Psychological Reports* 37, 10–22.
- Roy, Donald  
1959–1960 'Banana time': Job satisfaction and informal interaction. *Human Organization* 18, 158–168.
- Sabel, Charles F.  
1982 *Work and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Seeman, Melvin  
1983 Alienation motifs in contemporary theorizing: The hidden continuity of the classic themes. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 46, 171–184.  
1991 Sentiments and structures: Strategies for research in alienation. In Oldenquist, Andrew and Menachem Rosner (eds.), *Alienation, Community, and Work*. New York: Greenwood Press, 17–34.
- Seeman, Melvin, and Carolyn S. Anderson  
1983 Alienation and alcohol: The role of work, mastery and community in drinking behavior. *American Sociological Review* 48, 60–77.
- Seeman, Melvin, Alice Z. Seeman, and Art Budros  
1988 Powerlessness, work, and community: A longitudinal study of alienation and alcohol use. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 29, 185–198.
- Shepard, Jon M.  
1971 *Automation and Alienation: A Study of Office and Factory Workers*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Speier, Hans  
1998 Wit and politics: An essay on laughter and power. *American Journal of Sociology* 103, 1352–1401.
- Tannenbaum, A. S., B. Kavcic, M. Rosner, M. Vianello, and G. Weiser  
1974 *Hierarchy in Organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Tausky, Curt  
1970 *Work Organizations: Major Theoretical Perspectives*. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers.
- Ziv, Avner  
1984 *Humor and Personality*. New York: Springer.

Copyright of Humor: International Journal of Humor Research is the property of Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.