A Dissertation

Entitled

The Role that Humor Plays in Shaping Organizational Culture

By

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An Abstract of

The Role that Humor Plays in Shaping Organizational Culture

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Workplace humor has not been extensively explored in naturalistic settings to provide insight into organizational culture. The purpose of this study was to explore the role that humor plays in shaping organizational culture. A qualitative study using focus groups and participant observation was conducted to develop an analytic description of humorous interplay as it relates to such topics as identification and cohesion; influence, power and control; and conflict management.

During the participant observation activities, workers of every hierarchical level were surreptitiously observed in small and large groups and their humorous interactions were documented. Focus group participants were randomly selected into one of five
groups based on hierarchical level and job function. Participants were asked to share their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences related to workplace humor.

The use of humor is purposeful and serves a number of psychological and social functions. Workers reported that they use humor mostly to reduce tension and stress; to entertain; to build rapport; to share positive feelings; and to illustrate a point. This was in contrast to what was observed: humor is often used to demean or insult others; to express superiority over others; and to transmit verbally aggressive messages.

In some ways humor was created and experienced similarly by workers in all hierarchical levels, however, most of the time humor is perceived and experienced differently by workers in the various levels of the organization. Likewise, humor was often used to meet different goals depending on the rank of the worker.

Many benefits to humor use were identified and few negative consequences. Humor serves to socialize workers to the beliefs, values, and rules of agency behavior, and once they have been socialized, it functions to maintain these norms. Humor is both a cultural artifact and a culture-encoder that is affected by and effects organizational structure and practices. Observing and interpreting humorous interplay was a fascinating way to explore this agency’s culture; however, humor cannot be used as the sole mechanism to learn about an organization. To obtain a complete picture other artifacts must be noticed and other tools must be used.
This dissertation is dedicated to my supportive family - my husband William and children Stephanie, William, and Charles. Throughout this work they were understanding, helpful, and tolerant of their wife and mother who was, more times than not, preoccupied with this study. Their self-reliant natures and uncomplaining attitudes reassured me that the family would be left unscathed by a missing fulltime wife and mother. Their independence and good humor helped me devote the necessary time and energy that this project and my goals demanded.
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Chapter I. Introduction

Humor and work are generally, in contemporary United States culture, considered mutually exclusive activities; yet, most would acknowledge that workplace humor is pervasive. “Everyday conversation thrives on wordplay, sarcasm, anecdotes, and jokes. These forms of humor enliven conversation, and help break the ice, fill uncomfortable pauses, negotiate requests for favors, and build group solidarity” (Norrick, 1993, p. 1).

At times humorous interplay is disguised and surreptitious, on other occasions it is clearly observable. Duncan, Smeltzer, and Leap (1990) claimed that “Humor has both potentially positive and negative consequences within the context of organizations” (p. 263); however, overall it is a valuable asset because “Humor has the ability to improve quality of life, job satisfaction and performance…” (Consalvo, 1989, p. 185).

Workplace humor is not a topic that has been extensively explored in naturalistic settings, and studies rarely date back earlier than the mid-1950’s (e.g., Bradney, 1957; Coser, 1959; Roy, 1960). Even today, recently published textbooks for business majors and school leaders provide little, if any, information on the use of humor. It is interesting to note that in the business environment there is a growing fascination with the use of humor. Numerous trade journals including Nursing Management, Industry Week, Women in Business, Computerworld, and Health and Social Work have published articles and commentaries that address the importance of humor in the workplace. Several practical or experiential books published in the last decade address humor in business (Barsoux,
There are also continuing education seminars and consultants available to teach line staff and administrators about the importance of humor, especially as it relates to building positive relationships, reducing stress, and improving creativity. Entire journals, such as *Nursing Jocularity* and *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, are devoted to humor and include many articles related to workplace humor. Morreal (1991) stated, “This interest in the value of humor in the workplace represents an important swing away from the traditional assessment of humor as unimportant and unproductive” (p. 359).

Increasingly, organizational culture researchers are writing about workplace humor and the need to understand the patterns of humorous interplay in order to fully appreciate an organization’s culture (Duncan, et al., 1990; Fine, 1977). Berger (1976) stated, "Because humor is intimately connected to culture-codes, it is useful in providing insights into a society's values" (p. 114). This is exactly what Vinton (1989) reported in her study of QRS, a small family owned business. She wrote that the humor shared among the employees of QRS reflected the general characteristics of the organization's culture and could provide insight into other organizational issues, such as employee socialization.

Humor is generally accepted as an artifact of an organization's culture (Ott, 1989; Sackmann, 1991; Schein, 1992). Artifacts include everything that one sees, hears, and feels (Schein). These signals transmit values, norms, and rules of behavior and function as a mechanism of social control in that organizational members can explicitly be manipulated into perceiving, thinking, and feeling in certain ways (Ott; Schein).
In the anthropology literature “many conceptions of ‘culture’ have been advanced” (Jones, 1996, p. 11); yet, there is not a “standard and precise definition of culture” (Barber, 1998, p. 26). In fact, Kroeber and Kluckhohn identified 164 meanings of the term “culture” (Louis, 1985). Culture as a concept remains ambiguous in both the management and communication literature, and the reader will find numerous definitions of organizational culture and approaches to studying culture (e.g., Goffee & Jones, 1998; Goodman, 1998; Linstead & Grafton-Small, 1992; Ott, 1989; Sackmann, 1991; Schein, 1992; 1999). In general, there is agreement among the authors that culture is learned, shared by a group and distinctive to the group, it is passed on to new members, and it is linked to beliefs and values underlying rules of behavior.

Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) wrote, “Whereas the underlying motive of traditional research is coming to an understanding of how to make organizations work better, the underlying motive of the organizational culture approach is coming to understand how organizational life is accomplished communicatively” (p. 121). The study of organizational culture revolves around the communication of organization members because it is corporate communication that encodes corporate culture (Goodman, 1998). It is through communication that an organization’s members coordinate their perceptions and their behavior with others resulting in groups of people with a common understanding of some event (Pepper, 1995, p. 36). “Organization is not merely mediated by communication; it is continually regenerated, and recreated, by communication...” (Taylor, 1993, p. 227).

According to Pepper (1995), “A cultural approach to organizations is a focus on the everyday ordinary and extraordinary communication of organization members” (p. 3).
Ullian (1976) defined humor as an indirect form of communication. It is communication in which

…the joker is protected from being charged with the responsibility for the serious content or the implications of the joke. The use of humor and play act as a defense against blame. In some cases, the target of the joke is certain about the message, but the humorous form makes it inappropriate and futile for him/her to confront the joker by responding seriously. (p. 129)

There have been relatively few studies (e.g., Chapman & Foot, 1976; Duncan & Feisal, 1989; Malone, 1980; Roy, 1960; Vinton, 1989) that investigated the function or purpose of humor in everyday interactions in the workplace. Of the studies completed, many had not been undertaken in actual work settings, rather they were conducted on university campuses via surveys and questionnaires (e.g., Decker, 1987; Fink, 1977; Graham, 1989). These are important studies but should only be used as a foundation for investigations in naturalistic settings. Studies using students as subjects may not generalize well to the workplace because as Duncan and Feisel (1991) explained, “Although joking takes place in virtually all organizations, only part of its meaning is universal. All humor is situation specific, and it can only be interpreted within the context of the group where it occurs” (p. 29). What an individual, group, or organization finds humorous is determined by culture. Likewise, the use of humor by individuals in groups serves to transmit values and norms, define roles of behavior, and in other ways maintain the group’s culture (Coser, 1959; Duncan, et al., 1990; Duncan & Feisel; Fine, 1976).
The purpose of this study was to explore the role that humor plays in shaping organizational culture. This study was conducted at a child welfare agency where I had been employed for nearly four years.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative methodology was the most appropriate procedure to use. Schein (1992) stressed that only through interpretive methods, especially observation and interview, can the researcher reveal culture. Survey research and other quantitative methods will not uncover an organization’s subtle idiosyncratic characteristics (Schein). Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) agreed. They urged organizational communication researchers to gather detailed observations of organizational members in action and detailed interviews of members accounting for their actions. They criticized organizational communication researchers for failing to use actual communication as data; researchers must examine communication rather than rely on “paper and pencil tests that purport to measure attitudes toward, recollections of, or aggregations of communicative activity” (p. 129).

Qualitative methods, including focus groups and participant observation, were used in this investigation. These methods facilitated the ability to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the complex concept of organizational culture and the role that humor plays in shaping the culture. Focus groups were used because they are helpful when insights, perceptions, and explanations are more important than numbers (Krueger, 1994). Schein (1992) stated that the group interview can be used in addition to individual interviews or as the primary data-gathering activity if motivated and interested people are available and willing to discuss their organization. Participant observation activities were
conducted primarily to discover if actual humor use by staff, supervisors, and administrators corroborates reports from the focus groups.

After data collection, two analysis functions were implemented: mechanical analysis and interpretive analysis (Knodel, 1993). Then data from focus groups were compared and contrasted to data obtained by participant observation. The goal of that process was to prepare an analytic description about what emerged from and is supported by available evidence from both data collection processes.

**Statement of the Problem**

To date, researchers have not determined the role that humor plays in shaping organizational culture; yet, because of the pervasiveness of humor in the workplace, Duncan (1985) claimed that it must be assumed that humor performs some social and/or task-oriented function. It is important that research on the use of humor in organizational settings be conducted because as Brooks (1992) claimed, humor is a management tool; however, some managers may not be comfortable using a tool that seems to be unpredictable and that may backfire. He suggested that organizational leaders may be more likely to use humor to their and their organization’s advantage if its functions and consequences were better understood. Furthermore, it is important that organizational culture research be conducted that offers insights to leaders and managers because “Without an understanding of the culture, one does not have a handle on the feelings, attitudes, expectations, values, and assumptions of the workers” (Pepper, 1995, p. 31).

Studying humor, as an artifact and as a culture-encoder, is a novel and meaningful way of viewing aspects of work life such as leadership patterns, power and influence relationships, socialization of new members, and conflict management. A number of
researchers asserted that an exploration of the use of humor in organizations is warranted (e.g., Decker, 1986, 1987; Duncan, et al.; 1990; Vinton, 1989). In fact, Duncan, et al. argued, “the study of humor in management has never really gotten started” (p. 255).

Purpose of the Study

With these problems in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore the role that humor plays in shaping organizational culture. This was accomplished in two ways. First, I interpreted observed humorous interactions in a work setting. Attention was paid to the humor initiator’s strategies of joking, teasing, wisecracks, and pranks in everyday work activities. Attention was also paid to the responses elicited from the target, butt, and audience. Secondly, I interpreted narrative accounts of humor use that resulted from a series of focus groups with employees. Close attention to humor, an ordinary and pervasive communication strategy, lead to an analytic description of humorous interplay as it relates to such topics as identification and cohesion; influence, power, and control; and conflict resolution. Humorous interplay has the potential of providing insight into an organization’s culture because as Young (1989) asserted, "the mundanity of the everyday is an illusion, for it is within these details that the dynamics of organizational culture come into being and use" (p. 201).

This study helps answer questions about the functions of humor in organizations as well as helps formulate more questions about humorous interplay. I supported and verified previously identified functions of humor and searched for functions of humor not yet identified. This may help leaders and managers understand their organizations, become more effective in them, and perhaps know how and when to change them (Goffee & Jones, 1998). “Joking behavior remains a pervasive and important topic and
has the potential of providing significant insights into management and organizational behavior” (Duncan, et al., 1990, p. 255).

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question that guided this exploratory study was, How is humor created and experienced within this organizational culture? Two subordinate questions that guided this study included:

1. How are employees’ perceptions, beliefs, and experiences related to humor similar or different depending on their place in the organizational hierarchy?
2. How do employees at different levels in the organization’s hierarchy use humor to meet similar or different goals?

**Significance of the Study**

Numerous researchers have investigated organizational culture, and several have investigated humor use in the workplace; however, even though humor is generally accepted as an artifact of culture, rarely have researchers examined how humor use shapes culture. This study impacts the research worlds of organizational culture and humor because it ties the two concepts together.

Few researchers have studied humor activities in naturalistic or quasi-naturalistic work settings. Much of the humor research has been completed on university campuses using students as subjects. To learn about the effect that humor has on organizational culture, I used focus groups and participant observation in an actual work setting. This blend of qualitative data collection techniques is appropriate for exploring the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of front line workers, supervisors, and top administrators.
Using focus groups is a novel methodology for culture and humor research. Not one study referenced in my review of the literature reported use of focus groups to gather data; yet, focus groups are ideal for investigating complex behaviors and motivations (Morgan & Krueger, 1993, p. 16). Focus groups are ideal when meanings rather than frequencies are most important (Fielding & Fielding, 1986). Not only are group interviews a potential “source of validation for events observed,” focus groups can “provide a greater depth of understanding about the context and about relations of the members of a particular setting” (Frey & Fontana, 1993, p. 32). Also, focus groups can be useful to learn more about the range of opinions or experiences that people have, and they are useful for distinguishing between similar or different perspectives (Morgan & Krueger). In addition, focus groups are ideal for gathering information about a topic that people do not generally think about or discuss such as motivations, feelings, attitudes, and opinions (Morgan & Krueger). When discussing matters that are not necessarily of conscious importance to participants, at first they may not be able to express all their feelings or motivations on the topic, but as they hear others talk, they can become more explicit about their own views (Morgan & Krueger).

Finally, few studies have investigated organizational culture from the perspective of the front line worker (Smircich, 1985). Most studies were focused on leaders and managers, or studied the concerns of the managers. This qualitative study investigated the role that humor plays in shaping organizational culture from the perspective of the front line workers, middle managers, and top administrators.
Definitions of Terms

• Artifacts - all phenomena that one sees, hears, and feels including architecture, language, technology, products, artistic creations, style of clothing worn, manners of address, emotional displays, myths and stories told about the organization, published lists of values, and observable rituals and ceremonies (Schein, 1992).

• Basic assumptions – implicit, taken-for-granted, non-debatable assumptions that guide behavior and tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things. These assumptions reflect deeper issues about the nature of truth, time, space, human nature, and human relationships (Schein, 1992).

• Climate – “the feeling that is conveyed in a group by the physical layout and the way in which members of the organization interact with each other, with customers, or with other outsiders…” (Schein, 1992, p. 9).

• Culture – The inter-subjective meanings that individuals hold to interpret their experience and guide their action.

• Espoused values – “the articulated, publicly announced principles and values that the group claims to be trying to achieve…” (Schein, 1992, p. 9).

• Focus group – “a qualitative method of gathering in-depth information on a specific topic through a discussion group atmosphere which allows an insight into the behavior and thinking of the individual group members” (Bellenger, et al., 1979, p.).

• Formal philosophy – “the broad policies and ideological principles that guide a group’s actions…” (Schein, 1992, p. 9).

• Group – “social units of all sizes, including organizations and sub-units of organizations…” (Schein, 1992, p. 8).
• Group norms – “the implicit standards and values that evolve in working groups…” (Schein, 1992, p. 8).

• Humor - Good natured, laugh, or smile-provoking stimuli that is likely to be minimally offensive to the target of the laughter or smiling (Gruner, 1996) including pranks, wisecracks, teasing, bantering, riddles, puns, jokes, stories, songs, silly noises, funny faces, and gestures.

• Joke – “any structured communication, with a witty or funny intent, which the teller seemed to know in advance of telling it. It may be a story, riddle, pun, skeptical question, rhyme, hypothetical book title, proverb, slogan, or similar format” (Winick, 1976, p. 124).

• Organizational communication – “the collective and interactive process of generating and interpreting messages” (Stohl, 1995, p. 4).

• Organizational culture - “shared values, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, norms, artifacts, and patterns of behavior. It is the unseen and unobservable force that is always behind organizational activities that can be seen and observed” (Ott, 1989, p. 1).

• Organizational subculture - a “subset of an organization’s members who interact regularly with one another, identify themselves as a distinct group, share a set of problems, and routinely take action on the basis of collective understandings unique to the group” (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985, p. 38).

• Shared meanings – “the emergent understandings that are created by group members as they interact with each other…” (Schein, 1992, p. 9).
Plan of this Report

This report is organized into five distinct chapters. Chapter I introduces the topic of workplace humor and states the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the research, and lists definitions. Chapter II summarizes important findings in the literature on the three key topics: organizational culture, organizational communication, and humor. Chapter III explicates the research methodology. This chapter includes justification for the use of qualitative methods and describes the focus group and participant observation activities. The study site is also described, as well as data collection and data analysis procedures. The third chapter ends with a discussion of validity and reliability, and the means taken to ensure a sound study with trustworthy results. Results from the focus group discussions and participant observation activities are described in Chapter IV. Finally, Chapter V includes a discussion of the study findings. The finding from both data collection methods are compared. Likewise, these study results are compared and contrasted with the results of previous studies. Conclusions are drawn including implications for organizational leaders and workers. The final chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.
Chapter II. Literature Review

Chapter II. provides a literature review of three key topics: organizational culture, organizational communication, and humor. There is a vast amount of information related to each of the three topics, and there is some information in each of the topic areas that spills over into the other topic areas; that is, there are not distinct boundaries between organizational culture, organizational communication, and humor. For example, some aspects of organizational communication are described in organizational culture literature and in humor literature. Likewise, aspects of humor are found in the organizational culture and organizational communication literature, yet humor is a comprehensive topic in and of itself. This literature review will include key findings about organizational culture, organizational communication, and humor, but the focus of this study is on a small area where the three topics converge.

Major Findings in the Literature Regarding Organizational Culture

The study of organizational culture deserves attention because of the subtle, yet powerful ways in which it influences and shapes communication and behavior in the workplace, impacting the success of the organization and employees’ satisfaction with their work lives. The effects of culture are seen in the critical organizational practices of socialization, identity, commitment, influence, power and control, communication, justification of behavior, and decision-making.
Culture Creation and Perpetuation

A review of the organizational culture literature found few researchers, other than Edgar Schein, who explained a theory of culture creation and perpetuation. Schein (1992) claimed that “Culture is the result of a complex group learning process that is only partially influenced by leader behavior” (p. 5). He asserted that “the most useful way to think about culture is to view it as the accumulated shared learning of a given group…” (p. 10). For shared learning to occur, there must be a history of shared experience because “until a group has taken some joint action and have together experienced the outcome of that action, there is not as yet a shared basis for determining what is factual and real” (Schein, p. 19). When values initially proclaimed by founders or leaders are successful in reducing uncertainty in critical areas of the group’s functioning and as they continue to work, they gradually become transformed into non-discussible, taken-for-granted assumptions supported by articulated sets of beliefs, norms, and rules of behavior (Schein).

These values, norms, and rules of behavior remain conscious and are explicitly articulate because they define for group members how to deal with certain critical situations, and they also circumscribe acceptable behavior for new members (Schein, 1992). Schein emphasized that values at this conscious level will predict much of the behavior that can be observed at the artifact level.

Without careful reading, this culture creation and perpetuation process may sound like an attractive promise to business founders and subsequent leaders: that is, a founder can create an ideal culture, reflecting the founder’s own beliefs, values, rules of behavior, and vision of the future. However, when values proclaimed by founders and subsequent
leaders are not based on prior learning, they may only predict what people will say in certain situations, not what they will actually do in those situations where those values should be operating (Schein). This could have been the case in the electronics manufacturing company studied by Martin, Sitkin, and Boehm (1985). They reported numerous disparities between concerns and perceptions of the founder and the employees. Not surprisingly, they reported that common perspectives were significantly more likely to be shared by the founder, members of the top management team, and the marketing team. Interestingly, the authors suggested that perhaps it was the marketing personnel and the top management team that influenced the founder’s perspective, rather than the other way around.

Martin, et al. (1985) asserted that factors in addition to the founder attributes and actions account for differences in interpretations and concerns. Some of these factors may include organizational life cycle stage, characteristics of the product, employee duties and responsibilities, functional division and level in the hierarchy, personal preferences, and value clashes. They warned that culture creation is not a simple process.

Schein (1992) asserted that culture tends to perpetuate itself because change is highly anxiety provoking. He explained that once a set of shared basic assumptions is formed, it functions as a cognitive defense mechanism both for the individual members and for the group as a whole. Individuals and groups seek stability and meaning; therefore, it is easier to distort new data by denial, projection, or rationalization than to change the basic assumptions (Schein).

Another factor that affects cultural perpetuation is specific industry or occupational standards and assumptions. Van Maanen and Barley (1985) suggested that
members of professionalized occupations experience a common socialization process. Assumptions are sustained through education, in-service training, rewards for meeting standards, and consequences failing to meet the standards; consequently, organizations that are populated by the similarly trained exhibit distinct and pervasive cultures. Gordon (1991) agreed that organizational culture is greatly affected by the characteristics of the industry in which the company or agency operates. To illustrate this, Gordon used an example of a power utility within which lies the industry assumption that customers require uninterrupted service. The industry’s assumption will influence the culture of the utility company. Gordon explained that differences in assumptions and values can exist within an organization, as long as they do not conflict with the basic industry-wide assumptions. Competitive environment, customer requirements, and societal expectations are the three industry variables that he claimed have the potential for creating industry-driven cultural elements.

Goodman (1998) who wrote about corporate culture from a managerial perspective listed six ways that organizational culture perpetuates itself. First, organizational cultures are sustained through the pre-selection and hiring process of new employees. Organizations hire individuals based on certain talents and who have the ability to fit in with the other employees. Second, organizations socialize their new members through formal orientation programs, followed by informal means that reinforce the culture. Third, when members do not fit in, they are removed. The performance appraisal is generally used as the tool to document fit. Fourth, the organization defines for the employee appropriate behavior. Appropriate behavior is generally written in a formal employee handbook, and the informal code is transmitted in the company’s day-
to-day activity and traditions. Fifth, the organization will justify behavior that is beyond the norm. When a high performing employee breaks tradition, the company may defend the unconventional behavior, but this may not be the case with less successful employees. Finally, the organization communicates cultural values and beliefs in its everyday and special rituals, such as in presentation of awards, recognition ceremonies, etc.

**Functions of Organizational Culture**

Geertz (1973) stated that one could think of culture as “an ordered system of meaning and of symbols. Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action…” (p. 145). Along this same line of thinking, but more boldly proclaimed, Schein (1992) stated that culture is a means of social control in that it manipulates members to perceive, think, and feel in certain ways. Behavior, he explained, is determined by the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that are patterned, as well as by the situations that arise in the external environment. In other words, organizational culture serves the normative and moral function of guiding members of the group by defining for them what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations (Schein).

Culture plays a key role in the processes of socialization, boundary setting, cohesion and unity, and organizational identification (Linstead & Grafton-Small, 1992; Mohan, 1993; Pepper, 1995). Organizations employ strategic orientation efforts to reproduce itself and to create stable, consistent workforces that demonstrate the characteristics that the organization values. The benefits to the organization and to the members are numerous. Individuals choose to align their personal values and goals with
those of the organization (Mohan) facilitating generation of commitment and enhancing social system stability. In addition, culture serving as a sense-making device, assists member interaction and reduces the anxiety of novel or unstable situations by preventing constant reinterpretation of meanings (Mohan). It also provides a means of coping with and containing contradictions, ambiguity, and opposition (Linstead & Grafton-Small). It is important to note that although group members engage in officially sanctioned, formal orientation programs, individuals are concurrently undergoing an informal socialization process; learning the values and norms that characterize a variety of organizational subcultures (Mohan).

A number of authors gave accounts of their socialization experiences. Mc Donald (1991) described how members of the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee became dedicated and motivated workers through formal orientation and through the myths and rituals that “sprang up surprisingly fast.” She said, “Elaborate plans were laid to make each employee feel a personal stake in the Olympic Movement, encouraging him or her to ‘Play a Part in History’” (p. 26). She claimed that these efforts were important in enlisting and retaining member services.

In discussing the formal orientation process of Disney Land employees, Van Maanen (1991) stated, “incoming identities are … set aside as employees are schooled in the use of new identities…” (p. 73). Rosen (1991) described, in his study of a business breakfast of an advertising agency, how group identity and exclusiveness is signified by the body “breaking bread together” (p. 79).

Group identity is often defined by explicit dress codes. For example, Rosen (1991) explained how the “business staff” (only the men) had a clearly defined dress code
which even included color and type of fabric, whereas the “creative” staff had no written code whatsoever. In Van Maanen’s (1991) study of Disney Land employees, uniforms and costumes provided instant communication to the outsiders of Disney Land employment. He explained that uniforms and costumes also provide instant internal communication of work status – where a person works carries social status and clear group boundaries.

**History of the Study of Organizational Culture**

According to Ott (1989), the study of organizational culture is the newest of the organization theory perspectives, and it is rooted in the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, communication, and business administration. The origin of the concept of culture is “most often traced to Edward B. Tylor’s definition in 1871: culture is ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’” (Rice, 1980, p. 3). Since that time the concepts of culture have multiplied; in fact, Kroeber and Kluckhohn identified 164 meanings of the term “culture” (Louis, 1985, p. 75). Unfortunately, these multiple conceptions of culture present a picture of confusion (Rice, 1980) for the reader, and a lack of standards to guide investigative studies (Smircich, 1985). Even though there is not agreement among theorists on how best to define culture and what aspects of it to emphasize, culture remains valuable as a concept for investigations into the expressive dimensions of social life - including studies of work life (Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen & Kurzweil, 1984).

In the 1940’s and the 1950’s some anthropologists became interested in the study of work life in industrial organizations (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). Schwartzman
(1993) explained that in 1953, Eliot Chapple from the human relations school of industrial research first introduced the term “culture” into the vocabulary of organization studies. It was also the human relations researchers who emphasized the value of studying patterns of interaction and routines in the workplace. The model of the human relations school is a management model, and the focus is on understanding the relationships between workers and between workers and management. The objective is to maintain stability in the workforce and to predict and control day-to-day activities to meet management goals. It is the management bias of the human relations school that has led many researchers to negate this research tradition (Schwartzman).

In the late 1960’s and the 1970’s there was a surge of anthropology of work-studies. Anthropology of work studies, in contrast to the human relations studies, emphasized the importance of examining work and the workplace from a broader perspective (Schwartzman, 1993). Topics such as conflict and alienation, exploitation of workers and worker response, and power differentials between workers and management were explored (Schwartzman).

The current interest in the concept of culture for understanding work life has come not from sociology or anthropology but from the disciplines of psychology and business administration (Schwartzman, 1993). In the early 1980’s Deal and Kennedy (1982) popularized the concept of organizational culture with the publication of their book Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life (Goodman, 1998; Ott, 1989; Schwartzman). In this and other popular management literature the authors, in general, have advised that the concept of culture must be understood in order to assess it for destructive or disruptive forces, and most importantly to change it and control it.
Over the past two decades, a number of organizational culture studies have been published. As one would anticipate, the study of organizational culture is as ambiguous as the study of culture in the anthropological literature. Smircich (1985) claimed that the term culture “does not come from anthropology as an intact structural package ready to serve as a paradigmatic foundation on which to build the analysis of organizations” (p. 57). The numerous variations and interpretations of the word “culture” have lead to logically inconsistent thinking (Rice, 1980) and much criticism. Reece and Siegal (1986) explained that when certain ideas become popular, they are snatched up quickly, then people experiment with them stretching their strict meaning with generalizations and derivatives. Along this same vein, Smircich (1985) stated, “when a ‘new’ idea … comes to our attention, we see it from the standpoint of our own position. If we incorporate it into our world-view, we do so in a way that allows integration with our way of ordering the conceptual universe” (p. 57).

Today, defining and describing the elusive phenomena of organizational culture still remains one of the most time consuming, controversial, and most frustrating problems facing researchers and students (Mohan, 1993). There is not consensus regarding a definition of organizational culture, and there are no clear guidelines on how to identify belief systems in organizations (Dougherty & Kunda, 1990; Mohan; Pepper, 1995).

Organizational culture researchers do not agree about what culture is or why it should be studied. They do not study the same phenomena. They do not approach the phenomena they do study from the same theoretical, epistemological, or methodological points of view. These fundamental
disagreements have impeded the exchange of ideas and the ability to build upon others’ empirical work. It has therefore been difficult to clarify what has been learned or how cultural studies contribute to other traditions of inquiry. (Frost, Moore, Louis, Lundberg, & Martin, 1991, p. 7)

Even though no consensus regarding “this single most powerful force for cohesion” (Goffee & Jones, 1998) exists, attempts to define and describe organizational culture have led to certain areas of general agreement among the authors of management literature. Furnham and Gunter (1993) have listed these areas of agreement:

- It is difficult to define (even a pointless exercise).
- It is multidimensional, with many different components at different levels.
- It is not particularly dynamic and ever changing (being relatively stable over short periods of time).
- It leads to significant misunderstandings (that are unexpected) when cultures meet.
- Culture shock on moving into a different corporate culture is real, painful, and debilitating.
- It represents a group solution to certain problems which may be adaptive or maladaptive; positively or negatively related to productivity.
- It takes time to establish, and therefore change, a corporate ‘culture.’
- It is in many sense intangible but has numerous observable artifacts.
- It is clearly linked to implicit beliefs and values underlying behavioral norms.

(pp. 75–76)
Furnham and Gunter (1993) also listed the aspects of culture where there still remains considerable disagreement:

- What are the exact components or facets of corporate culture: i.e., what makes something part of corporate culture and what not part of culture?
- How to categorize or dimensionalize culture: what typology to use; which dimension to apply; what terminology we should use.
- How national, ethnic, corporate, departmental, gender, (etc.) cultures overlap, interact, and influence each other.
- How, when, or why culture can be changed.
- Whether to celebrate corporate departmental culture differences, or work towards eliminating them.
- Whether it is possible to bridge already established departmental or corporate cultures.
- How organizational corporate culture differs from organizational climate.
- Who, when, and how ‘forms’ or establishes a culture.
- Whether some cultures are adaptive and others maladaptive: what is the healthiest, most optimal, or desirable culture. (pp. 75–76)

**Organizational Subcultures**

The phrase organizational culture suggests that organizations have unitary and homogeneous cultures where all of the members subscribe to the same normative order (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). Unitary organizational cultures evolve when all of the members face roughly the same problems, when everyone communicates with almost everyone else, and when each member adopts a common set of understandings for
enacting proper and consensually approved behavior (Van Maanen & Barley). Many authors warned that it is inappropriate to assume one culture per organization because beliefs, values, and rules of behavior are imperfectly shared among organizational members (Louis, 1985; Martin & Siehl, 1983; Morgan, 1986; Mohan, 1993; Pepper, 1995; Sackman, 1991; Schein, 1992; Van Maanen & Barley). Therefore, “all institutions of any size have subcultures, pockets in which the organizational culture varies to some degree from the culture in other pockets and from the dominant culture” (Ott, 1989, p. 45). Van Maanen and Barley defined organizational subculture as a subset of organizational members who interact regularly with one another, identify themselves as a distinct group, share a set of problems, and routinely take action on the basis of collective understandings unique to the group.

Sackmann (1991) and Schein (1992) claimed that organizational culture is a construct that exhibits both homogeneous and heterogeneous properties. That is, when certain assumptions are shared across all the units of an organization, then one can legitimately speak of an organizational culture, even though at the same time one may find a number of discrete subcultures. These subcultures may overlap (Ott, 1989), yet, members of one subculture are often inattentive to, if not ignorant of, other subcultures. Subcultures are often not recognized until some unexpected event triggers the realization of differences (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). According to Ott, subcultures may exist in a building, on a floor of a building, or in individual departments. They may form in groups that cross horizontal or vertical organizational boundaries. They may be made up of people who work together on a specific program or project or who share ethnic backgrounds. At the Jones and Jones accounting firm, a case study discussed in Ott’s
book, *The Organizational Culture Perspective*, there are several subcultures with overlapping membership. Two of the subcultures had been formed based on rank and age and three by functional work unit.

To determine whether an organization has a unitary culture and/or one or more subcultures, Mohan (1993) suggested that one could trace patterns of shared values among distinctive groups. She asserted that when there is substantial overlap and tight clustering among subcultural belief systems, one may have evidence for the existence of a strong unitary culture. However, she warned, if the overlap among subcultural belief systems is minimal, one must still be cautious about claims that a unitary culture exists; the subcultures may just be well hidden and secretive.

In addition to determining if multiple cultures exist, an organizational culture analysis should attend to the orientation of subcultures (Louis, 1985). Martin and Siehl (1983) identified three orientations of subcultures: enhancing, orthogonal, and counterculture. In “enhancing subcultures” assumptions, beliefs, and values are in accordance with those in the dominant culture. Members of “orthogonal subcultures” accept the basic assumptions of the dominant organizational culture, but also maintain some distinct group values. Members of “countercultures” have basic values that conflict with the dominant culture, and they challenge the dominant organizational norms and attempt to sabotage rather than support management objectives. It is important to note that by joining an enhancing or orthogonal organizational subculture, members do not risk losing their status or offending others in the organization. However, gaining status within a counterculture is accompanied by a loss of status outside the group and a forfeiture of others’ respect (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). In a counterculture, behavior
that is explicitly forbidden or viewed improper by most outsiders is sanctioned within the group; nonconformity is the price of membership in a counterculture (Van Maanen & Barley). Ott (1989) claimed that like the dominant organizational culture, subcultures may be strong, pervasive, and controlling; or they may be weak and hardly affect behavior.

In addition to recognizing the multiple cultures and orientation of cultures within an organization, one should assess the penetration of any one culture. Penetration refers to the pervasiveness or extensiveness of a culture, the consistency in interpretation of shared meanings among group members, and stability over time of a set of shared understandings. Louis (1985) suggested that one would want to ask the following questions: How far down into the organization does the corporate level culture extend? Are top-level prescriptions manifested down to first line staff? Is there significant variation among group members’ translations of shared understandings? Around what issues is there most and least variance in interpretation? How long has a certain practice been the status quo? Louis explained that when managers have knowledge of their organization’s multiple subcultures, the orientation of the subcultures, and the penetration of culture the managers may dedicate resources to improve trouble spots or dysfunctional cultures. Likewise, managers can avoid allocating resources to improve benign cultures or mistakenly disrupt positive or enhancing cultures. This assessment also provides clues to assist in the diagnosis of inertia or a potential resistance to change (Louis).

Martin and Meyerson (1987) developed a three-perspective framework for describing unitary or pluralistic organizational cultures. In organizations exhibiting “integration” the espoused values are consistent with formal practices, and members
share the same values, promoting a shared sense of loyalty and commitment. An organization exhibiting some “differentiation” allows for the coexistence of shared assumptions with inconsistency; that is, within the subcultures, meanings are clear and ambiguities appear only where the subcultures overlap. The “fragmentation” perspective describes organizations exhibiting a lack of clarity and consensus, coupled with an acknowledgement of ambiguity. In fragmented cultures, no clear consensus is evident. Organizational ambiguities emerge when the organization is faced with unsolvable problems. In fragmented cultures relationships among espoused values, formal practices, norms, rituals, stories, and physical arrangements are blurred and open to a myriad of interpretations. The task of researchers is to reflect the multiple experiences and interpretations represented within a culture and to accept diverse ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

**Culture Assessment**

At this time there is not consensus on “how” to assess organizational culture (Frost, et al., 1991; Mohan, 1993; Ott, 1989; Pepper, 1995). Part of the problem surrounds “what” to assess, (a) values, beliefs, unconscious assumptions, attitudes, and expectations; (b) more observable phenomena like products, organizational charts, and environmental layouts; or (c) the interpretation of subjective experiences. The basis of this debate may be grounded in the fundamental differences of two research perspectives: the functionalist and interpretivist orientations. Linda Putnam’s (1983) chapter, *The Interpretive Perspective: An Alternative to Functionalism* provides an excellent account of these two opposing views of organizing. Following a summary of her description of the functionalist and interpretivist perspectives are examples of corresponding cultural
assessment methods. It is important to note that the functionalist and interpretivist paradigms are not polar opposites with mutually exclusive assumptions (Putnam), therefore, in some instances it may be debatable as to which orientation a particular author used to assess culture and into which category a particular study best fits.

Functionalists treat social phenomena, such as organizations, as concrete, materialistic entities. Organizations are viewed as being determined by technology, size, and other environmental factors. They are seen as cooperative systems in pursuit of common interests and goals. Organizations are external to individuals and organizational norms, values, and roles are treated as hard, tangible facts. Ignored is the “creation” of structures, rather individuals are considered products of their environment, responding to external stimuli in mechanically controlled ways. Individuals become instruments of purposeful-rational action aimed at effectiveness and efficiency.

In research conducted with a functionalist orientation, the primary unit of analysis is the organization as a whole, and its social, psychological, and economic characteristics become static properties that rarely change. Functionalist researchers are preoccupied with managerial problems and with executive views of organizational life. Theories and models making up the functionalist orientation include classical management theories, human relations schools, decision making theories, and social systems theory because they all examine operations from the management perspective with a desire to improve organizational effectiveness.

The functionalist perspective supports the use of diagnostic tools, along with quasi-experimental research designs such as survey research to discover cause-effect relationships that may predict patterns of behavior across situations, to compare and
contrast organizations on standard measures, and to generalize results to similar settings. Quantitative methods are not used exclusively; for example, qualitative methods such as participant observation may be used to test for the effects of external stimuli on behavior – but not to study naturally occurring phenomenon as an interpretivist would.

Interpretivists believe that reality is socially constructed through words, symbols, and behaviors of its members. Groups are symbolic processes that evolve through streams of ongoing behavior; thus, organizational structures are treated as sets of complex relationships that originate from human interactions. Organizational members use their actions and interactions to create departments, levels, and procedures that have direct consequences for everyday behavior.

The interpretivist perspective claims that culture is highly subjective, idiosyncratic, and unique; thus research requires non-standardized, sensitive, interactive probing by observation and interview. Interpretivists focus on the everyday interactions and on the members’ accounts of their subjective experiences. The aim is to understand social phenomena rather than to deduce generalizable laws that explain and predict behavior.

The interpretive approach is not unaffected by management bias because often studies center on managerial issues. However, interpretivists incorporate other viewpoints into the examination of these problems. Researchers seek causal explanations primarily to understand the individual’s view of his or her social world. Interpretivists focus on the historically unique situation; they study naturally occurring phenomena; they become immersed or involved in the lives of the people they study; and they approach their task in a flexible manner.
Interpretivists treat the organization as an array of coalitions with diverse purposes, goals, and priorities. Individuals negotiate their goals, actions, and meanings to achieve a common direction; but they never abandon their different aims, they simply subjugate them to the immediate needs of the group. The primary unit of analysis centers on the values, goals, and interactions that create and sustain coalitions. Even though dominant coalitions of powerful members make decisions that have consequences for all participants, lower level coalitions can be politically potent and exert direct influence on managerial actions.

In response to the cultural assessment debate, Louis stated, “One approach to culture analysis is not inherently better than the other. The test is the extent to which an approach yields a description of culture that identifies what is distinctive to a group and that indicates the group to which it is distinctive” (p. 87). Listed below are numerous examples of various approaches to organizational culture analysis. The examples are grouped into one of two categories: those in which the author maintained a functionalist perspective and those in which an interpretivist perspective was maintained.

Historically I have taken a functionalist perspective to organizations, however has developed a recent interest in the naturalistic, interpretivist orientation to organizing. One can be comfortable with two mindsets. Being open to both orientations broadens one’s perspective and helps one develop a deeper appreciation of organizations and the organization’s members. Being of two minds can be likened to being bilingual. In one setting one language is spoken and in another setting the other language is spoken. When people who are bilingual are alone or with certain close others, spoken words may be a
combination of both languages. What is important is that the speaker and the listener understand what is being communicated.

**Functionalist perspective.**

The functionalist perspective dominates the management literature since the overarching purpose is generally focused on controlling work processes and improving efficiencies through people. Many of the culture assessment techniques developed by those who take a functionalist perspective include step-by-step analysis instructions complete with checklists and other self-diagnostic tools that managers can use to assess their own organization’s culture. Four examples of cultural assessment methods developed by researchers with a functionalist orientation are described below.

O’Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell (1991) developed the Organizational Culture Profile (OCP) survey instrument to measure person-organization “fit.” Their method of analysis includes a four-step process: (a) describe organizational values; (b) assess characteristics of the firm; (c) assess individual preferences; and (d) calculate the person-organization fit. To obtain profiles of the cultures, they evaluated the firms against 54 value statements such as risk taking, rule oriented, demanding, socially responsible, etc. According to these authors, “congruency between an individual’s values and those of an organization may be the crux of person-organization fit” (p. 492). They believed a good fit is important because it results in increased commitment, satisfaction, and performance.

Goffee and Jones (1998) developed a method of cultural assessment that leads to the identification of patterns of sociability and solidarity. They reported that in an environment of sociability, people relate to each other in a friendly, caring way. The benefits of high sociability may include high morale, openness to new ideas and
creativity, and teamwork. Goffee and Jones reported that the downside is that the
prevalence of friendships may allow poor performance to be tolerated, and there may be
an exaggerated concern for consensus. Solidaristic relationships are based on common
task, mutual interests, and clearly understood shared goals that benefit all involved
parties, whether they personally like each other or not (Goffee & Jones). They asserted
that members of these groups work together like a well-oiled machine, but there is a
certain ruthlessness and piercing focus. They went on to explain that too much focus on
the group's goals and requirements can be oppressive or hurtful to those individuals who
get in the way.

Cook and Rousseau (1988) used the Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI) to
assess ways that people think and behave relative to task-oriented, interpersonal, and
individual values and behaviors. The OCI is a configuration of individual, interpersonal,
and task-related styles that collectively represent cultural preferences (Cooke &
Rousseau). They claimed that the dominant thinking styles reflected in individual and
organization-wide profiles represent styles perceived to be necessary for success within a
setting. The OCI measures the direction and intensity of perceived organizational norms
and expectations.

A number of authors (e.g., Deetz & Kersten, 1983; Goodman, 1998; Rousseau,
1990; Schein, 1992) proclaimed that appropriate assessment procedures must account for
multiple layers within organizational contexts. The term “level” refers to the degree to
which the cultural phenomenon is visible to the observer. These levels are (a) the very
tangible, overt manifestations that one can see; (b) espoused values, norms, and rules of
behavior that members use as a way of depicting the culture to themselves and others;
and (c) deeply embedded, unconscious basic assumptions (Schein). Schein, one of the more prolific organizational culture authors, described a comprehensive method of cultural assessment that takes into account behavior and language, the formal infrastructure, and worker relationships. Schein emphasized that culture can be studied at any of the levels – artifacts, values, and basic assumptions. However, he warned, if one does not decipher the pattern of basic assumptions that may be operating, one will not know how to interpret artifacts correctly or how much credence to give to the espoused values. Schein asserted that the “essence of a culture” lies in the pattern of the underlying assumptions, and once one understands those, one can understand the other more surface levels of culture. He warned that it is difficult to discover an organization’s basic assumptions because people tend not to examine assumptions once made, but take them for granted, and tend not to discuss them which makes them seemingly unconscious.

**Interpretivist perspective.**

In the management literature there are fewer organizational culture studies based on an interpretivist perspective compared to the functionalist perspective. Flexible, nonstandardized techniques used by interpretivists to understand social behavior and work life do not offer business leaders the prescriptive blueprints that they pursue for implementation in their own organizations. Listed below are a number of examples of cultural assessment techniques with an emphasis on words, symbols, and human interactions, from researchers who hold interpretivist perspectives.

Morgan (1986) emphasized the use of metaphors to analyze the complex nature of organizational life and to solve organizational problems. Some of the metaphors he used
to describe organizations included organizations as machines, organizations as organisms, organizations as brains, and organizations as psychic prisons. In analyzing cultures, he stated that one must “become skilled in the art of ‘reading’ the situations...” (p. 11). This skill, he claimed, develops as an intuitive process and “often occurs at an almost subconscious level” (p. 11). Morgan emphasized that the mode of analysis “rests in a way of thinking rather than in the mechanistic application of a small set of clearly defined analytical frameworks” (p. 16).

Many authors who retain an interpretivist perspective suggested that assessment should focus on symbols that are significant to organizational members (Daft, 1983; Dandridge; 1983; Smircich, 1985). Smircich explained that “people hold culture in their heads, but we cannot really know what is in their heads. All we can see or know are representations or symbols” (p. 23). Symbols provide information about status, power, commitment, motivation, control, values, and norms (Daft). They may be used as a tool to understand organizational congruence and inconsistencies, to gain insight into employees’ values, and to provide a medium for influencing and directing future activity (Dandridge).

Bougon, Weik, and Binkhart (1977), in their report of the Utrecht Jazz Orchestra, suggested that “cause maps” may be used in the process of analyzing culture. They interviewed organization members and compiled a list of factors having particular cultural relevance. Members then ranked the factors according to importance. Finally, the researchers charted causal relationships existing among the variables. The idea was to compare individual “cause maps” for the entire group to identify areas of concurrence and division. Bougon, et al. suggested that values are the basis of action but are not
tightly coupled to action the way goals are. The challenge for organizational members is to find goals that are meaningfully linked to values. The individual determines the value of pursued goals or organizational activity.

Kelly (1955), a psychologist, provided many valuable insights into individual differences in character and personality which paved the way for industrial psychologists and organizational theorists in assessing organizational behavior and culture. Kelly discussed “constructive alternativism” a philosophical position that “there are always some alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing with the world” (p. 15). Wacker (1981) expanded upon Kelly’s philosophy of personal constructs and assessed collective cognitive infrastructures regarding coworkers, jobs, work activities, and parts of the organizational technical system. He defined cognitive infrastructure as, “the constructs by which organizational members imbue organizational events with meaning” (p. 116). He gathered information via a set of grid instruments, questionnaires, interviews, or organizational documents. Wacker stated that “the study of organizations should be as much a study of perceptions as of observable social structure” (p. 127).

**Culture Classification**

Elaborate culture classification systems have been developed by a number of authors, and some of these classification systems will be described below. It is important to note that the idea of classifying cultures is a point of contention among organizational culture theorists. From an anthropological standpoint, it is not possible to claim that one culture is better than another or that one culture is stronger or weaker than another (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). Van Maanen and Barley asserted that cultural meanings differ
from one group to the next, resulting in differences in behavior, and it is the differences in behavior that can be measured, enumerated, and classified – not the culture.

Schein (1992) did not favor the use of distinct and bounded cultural categories. He contended that superficial definitions of culture do not help researchers and practitioners understand the hidden and complex aspects of organizational life. He claimed that when writers describe types of culture,

Implied is the assumption that there are better or worse cultures, stronger or weaker cultures, and the ‘right’ kind of culture will influence how effective organizations are…. [Researchers are encouraged to] …avoid superficial models of culture and build on the deeper, more complex anthropological models. (p. 3)

Still many theorists found it beneficial to define and categorize general types of culture, and their works have remained popular among business leaders for years. This popularity is likely due to the readership of management literature. The search by business leaders for concrete, prescriptive information that can be quickly and easily understood, communicated to others, and implemented in their own organizations, has encouraged writers to bound information succinctly and in user-friendly terms.

Deal and Kennedy (1982) were among the first writers to classify culture. They described four groups of corporate culture based on the degree of risk associated with a company’s activities and the speed at which it obtains feedback regarding the success of decisions and strategies. These cultural groups included the tough guy/macho culture of individualists; work hard/play hard culture of sales; bet-your-company culture of high-stake, long-term investments; and the process culture of bureaucratic organizations (Deal & Kennedy).
Sethia and Von Glinow (1985) also described four cultural classifications. Their categories were characterized by varying levels of concern for people and performance. They claimed that in a culture classified as “apathetic” there is a lack of concern for people, coupled with an indifference to performance. Conversely, an “integrative” culture pairs high “people concern” with strong performance expectations. They asserted that a “caring” culture is more concerned about employee welfare than high performance, while the success-oriented “exacting” culture is dominated by a concern for productivity.

Kilmann (1985) described an “ideal” culture as “adaptive” or a context characterized by risk-taking, trust, and a proactive approach to organizational life. Within an adaptive culture there is a shared feeling of confidence, widespread enthusiasm, and a receptivity to change.

Cooke and Rousseau (1988) isolated attributes comprising an “ideal” culture. The “winning” combination of variables in “ideal” organizational cultures are achievement oriented, affiliative, humanistic, and possessing self-actualizing thinking and behavioral styles. The three factors underlying Cooke and Rousseau’s instrument represent three distinct types of cultures: people/security, satisfaction, and task/security. A bureaucratic, “people/security” cultural context is grounded in conflict avoidance and conformity, with little risk-taking. The “satisfaction” organizational culture values individual goals, creativity, participative management, and constructive workplace relationships. Conversely, a win-lose “task/security” culture rewards confrontation, competition, perfectionism, and persistence. They suggested that an “ideal” culture bears a close resemblance to the satisfaction-oriented context.
Quinn and McGrath (1985) noted that market and clan cultures exhibit competing values in terms of information processing and desirable end-states. They stated that market-oriented environments generate “rational” cultures that value logical judgement, direction setting, and goal clarification within an individual information-processing framework. On the other hand, clan environments promote “consensual” cultures that value cohesion and collective information processing. Competing values are also evident in the control orientation of “hierarchical” cultures that generate formal information processing and in the intuitive methods of an innovative “ideological/developmental” culture (Quinn & McGrath).

Other researchers have classified cultures by human resource orientation. For instance, Kerr and Slocum (1987) suggested that reward systems forge manifestations of clan and market cultures. They explained that a “clan” culture emphasizes strong fraternal relationships and strong identification with the organization; it is fostered by an intense socialization process that inculcates a “rich” normative structure. Whereas, they asserted independence and individual initiative characterize “market” cultures where a “lean” normative structure requires little formal socialization. Kerr and Slocum indicated that reward systems within clan and market environments reinforce the necessary behaviors and values related to conformity or competition.

Goffee and Jones (1998) claimed that four basic cultural forms prevail in an organization: networked, mercenary, fragmented, or communal. The dominant cultural form is determined by varying levels of sociability and solidarity. They asserted that when sociability is high, there is blurring of the line between work lives and personal lives. Conversely, solidaristic relationships are based on mutual tasks and interests, and
the focus of work is on the group’s clearly defined goals. The “networked” culture is characterized by a high degree of sociability and low solidarity. Low sociability and high solidarity characterize the “mercenary” culture. Low sociability and low solidarity characterize “fragmented” cultures. In a “communal” culture there is a high degree of both sociability and solidarity. Goffee and Jones claimed that one cultural form is not necessarily better or worse than the rest, because any form can be functional or dysfunctional.

In summary, the description and classification systems for organizational cultures can assist business leaders in thinking about social interaction and work life. However, a major drawback to the classification systems is that they oversimplify the complex nature of culture and the idea that culture is the process of organizing. In addition, they do not take into account the overlapping subcultures found in most organizations. With this said, it is important to not discount everything that these researchers are saying about organizations. Nord (1985) suggested that the reader should accept the authors’ frames of reference; their findings may be valid, but the concepts used to describe the results may be in question, depending on one’s orientation.

**Management of Culture**

Another point of contention among organizational culture theorists has to do with the idea of culture management. Many business leaders attempt to create new organizational cultures because they have been convinced by reports in the management literature that there are good and bad cultures. They have read, and they believe, that a strong organizational culture is essential for success and that modifications to an existing culture will result in more loyal and committed workers, and greater profitability
Morgan claimed that viewing culture as a set of distinct variables promotes the idea that culture can be manipulated, and it is this kind of thinking that underlies the perspective advocating the management of culture. Anthropologists would claim that they have an incomplete understanding of the culture concept.

There is considerable disagreement regarding the belief that culture can or should be changed (Linstead & Grafton-Small, 1992; Morgan, 1986; Pepper, 1995). There is an entire continuum of perspectives. On one end of the continuum, authors (e.g., Goffee & Jones, 1998; Kilmann, et al. 1985; Lundberg, 1985) enthusiastically announced that culture can and should be managed. Other writers (e.g., Pepper, 1995; Sackman, 1991; Schein, 1992) agreed that organizational culture can be shaped and manipulated, but it is a difficult task to do so. Still others (e.g., Gagliardi, 1986; Goodman, 1998) emphatically claimed that culture cannot be changed. Finally, on the opposite end of the continuum, researchers (e.g., Martin, 1985) warned that it is unethical to even try to manage an organization’s culture.

Disagreement regarding the manageability of culture is due to the authors’ diverse frames of reference regarding this concept. Some authors, especially those who take an anthropological perspective (e.g., Martin, 1985; Smircich, 1985) “emphasize deeply rooted, even unconscious sources of culture, while others emphasize relatively superficial cultural manifestations, such as espoused values, reward structures, and dress code” (Martin, p. 96). It is possible that some of the contention could be eliminated if only the authors made explicit the extent of change they are conceptualizing. Some may have in mind massive cultural recreations caused by planned strategic social engineering, while
others contemplate changes of a limited scope (Martin). Morgan (1986) claimed that in fact, any organizational change implies cultural change.

Those who believe that culture can be accessed, changed, and controlled (e.g., Kilmann, 1985) approach organizational culture as a management tool. They acknowledge the influence of values and norms within organizations, but they tend to regard these factors as problems to be overcome by management. For example, Goffee and Jones (1998) stated that culture is perhaps the single most powerful force for cohesion in the modern organization, and leaders can influence the way cultures evolve. They explained that managers can shape culture by engaging actively in strategic initiatives designed to enhance outcomes such as commitment, productivity, or employee satisfaction. Lundberg (1985) also promoted the idea that cultures can be manipulated. He stressed that managers can achieve an optimum amount of cultural change when their interventions cross all levels (artifacts, values, norms) of cultural meaning and when change interventions are consistently and redundantly applied. According to Lundberg, organizational culture can be managed through the manipulation of such elements as décor changes or the use of new jargon, content of training programs, criteria for personnel selection, changes in work design, new slogans, logos, statements of corporate philosophy, or new leaders.

Many authors believe that culture can be difficult to manipulate, but it can be done if the “pressure to do so is strong enough” (Sackmann, 1991, p. 139). Schein (1992) explained that culture is very difficult to change because basic assumptions tend to be those that are neither confronted nor debated. Change, Schein asserted, would require that the workers resurrect, reexamine, and possibly change some of the more stable
portions of their cognitive structure. Such learning is intrinsically difficult because the
reexamination of basic assumptions temporarily destabilizes our cognitive and
interpersonal world, releasing large quantities of anxiety (Schein). Rather than tolerating
such anxiety levels, workers tend to want to perceive the events around them as
congruent with their assumptions, even if that means distorting, denying, projecting, or in
other ways falsifying the reality (Schein).

Morgan (1986) agreed with this thinking. He said, “When we observe culture we
are observing an evolved form of social practice that has been influenced by many
complex interactions between people, event, situation, actions, and general circumstance”
(p. 139). Morgan asserted that culture pervades activity in a way that is not amenable to
direct control by any group or individual as much of the management literature claims.
After saying this, he softened his statement by explaining that managers can influence the
evolution of culture by being aware of the symbolic consequences of their actions and by
fostering desired values.

According to Gagliardi (1986), cultural change is either superficial or
incremental. He said that “superficial” change occurs when artifacts change, but not
deeper meanings associated with them. He claimed that “incremental” change occurs
when new complementary values and beliefs are added to the existing values and beliefs.
Gagliardi proposed that cultural change is only radical in content when a large number of
organizational members change; but then he questioned whether the same organization is
even being considered.

The authors (Gagliardi, 1986; Morgan, 1986; Sackman 1991; Schein, 1992) who
maintained that culture can be shaped and manipulated with persistent effort are
supported by Kluckhohn and Strodtebeck (1961/1973). These anthropologists wrote, “Cultures do change in direction – that is, change in their basic values. Also, the peoples of one culture often do become assimilated, however painfully and slowly, into the ways of another culture” (p. 9).

Some authors (e.g., Krefting & Frost, 1985; Siehl, 1985; Smircich, 1985) emphatically argued that it is impossible to “manage” a change in culture because culture emerges and is; cultures are representations of our humanity; and cultures are symbolic forms and display the meaning of life (Smircich). Therefore, it is not amenable to direct control by any individual or organization (Morgan, 1986; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998). Goodman (1998) explained that in anthropological terms, all human groups by their nature have a culture -- the system of values and beliefs shaped by the experiences of life, historical tradition, social or class position, political events, ethnicity, and religious forces. In this context, organizational culture can be described, understood, nurtured, and coaxed in new directions, but rarely created, planned, or managed in the same way an organization creates a product or a service (Goodman).

Siehl (1985) stated, “Those researchers who argue that culture is a socially constructed system of shared beliefs and values would find it inconsistent to think of systematically managing or attempting to control the phenomenon” (p. 125). In her study of a microcomputer company, she focused on the unit manager’s attempts to change three well-defined cultural values. She reported that “In spite of constant and persistent efforts, in eight months his attempts to effect cultural change were only partially successful” (p. 139).
Some authors (e.g., Barker, 1998; Jones, 1985; Martin, 1985; Smircich, 1985) asserted that culture is not easily available to management manipulation and to even suggest such manipulation is in itself unethical. Martin wrote,

Cultural purists find it ridiculous to talk of managing culture. Culture cannot be managed; it emerges. Leaders don’t create cultures; members of the culture do. Culture is an expression of people’s deepest needs, a means of endowing their experiences with meaning. Even if culture in this sense could be managed, it shouldn’t be, particularly if it were being managed in the name of increased productivity or for other financial reasons. From this perspective it is naïve and perhaps unethical to speak of managing culture. (p. 95)

Jones (1985) stated that “another reason for objecting to some forms of interventionism, especially those involving organizational development, grows out of an implicit mandate in such fields of study as folkloristics and anthropology for researchers to be champions of the common man” (p. 240). Therefore, the idea of manipulation and exploitation of symbolic behavior for political and commercial ends is inappropriate, if not unethical. Along this same line, Barker (1998) raised a number of ethics-based questions related to symbolic manipulation and exploitation of the workforce. He said that when an organization demands that members incorporate part of the organization’s identity into their own, then one must ask, Whose values are members asked to identify with? What right does any organization have to ask members to identify with it? What pressures can be brought to bear on the individual by the organization? To what extent is any resistance or tolerance allowed? To what extent is there an opportunity to hear marginalized voices and/or a minority point of view?
Major Finding in the Literature Regarding Organizational Communication

This review of organizational communication literature will summarize common organizational communication assessment methods and give examples of studies from both functionalist and interpretivist perspectives. The next section will describe common functions of communication in organizations and discuss the concept of communication networks. Finally, prevalent communication barriers will be listed. These are all topics important to business leaders, as well as front line workers because one of the more common complaints in organizations of any size is related to inadequate and unclear communication. Joking and other humor-laden communication often promotes unclear communication.

Like the study of organizational culture, the study of organizational communication has few clear parameters, and it incorporates a variety of diverse perspectives and methodologies (Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 1998). Grant et al. claimed that this is likely related to its multidisciplinary origins of sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy. In fact, the study of organizational communication can be thought of as a subset of organizational culture. Conrad (1990) stated, “Cultures are communicative creations. They emerge through communication, are maintained through communication, and change through communicative acts of their members. Simultaneously, communication is a cultural creation” (p. 18). Other authors (Bantz, 1993; Bullis, 1991; Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1990; Mohan, 1993; Pepper, 1995; Taylor, 1993) agreed that organizational culture may be revealed in the speech of its members.
Since organizational talk imposes structure (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1990) and encodes corporate culture (Goodman, 1998), by examining the language of organization members, the researcher is able to infer to the level of member beliefs and assumptions (Bantz, 1993). That is, meaning is conveyed through both actions and through linguistic artifacts (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges; Mohan, 1993). “As group members transact with each other, their understanding of the group experience – the reality of the event – is shaped by their language” (Pepper, 1995, p. 19).

**Organizational Communication Assessment**

Like organizational culture, there is not one prescribed organizational communication method of assessment. Woodilla (1998) claimed that most communication research practice can be grouped into one of three perspectives. These are (a) conversation analysis, (b) pragmatic linguistics, and (c) critical language theory. She explained that in conversation analysis researchers focus on ways in which participants use conversations to make sense in a particular organizational setting. Some of the issues studied within this discipline include how turn-taking rules are used in different social settings and how important the wider context is to the social setting (Woodilla). The methodology used generally includes transcript analysis of interviews and oral reports of meetings in which the researcher may identify regularities in the patterning of talk and corresponding meanings ascribed by the participants (Woodilla).

Pragmatic linguistics focuses on speech acts such as a joke, an exact description, a formal request, a demand, or an apology (Woodilla, 1998). Interpretive analysis is the most commonly used method of study. The researcher provides an interpretation of selected instances of interaction, generally transcribed, drawing the reader’s attention to
particular language use and inferring meaning by participants (Woodilla). She explained that depending on the research question, a number of examples may be used to build a “general case” as representative of members’ inferred meaning, or a single “telling case” may provide a particular insight into a particular organizational theory.

The third research perspective is critical language theory. According to Woodilla (1998), critical language theory is concerned with social power. Researchers attempt to determine why “actors make particular language choices when speaking and specific guesses about meaning when listening” (Woodilla, p. 34). Woodilla asserted that analysis usually focuses on problematic moments, a point in a conversation that reveals contested meanings.

In conducting this exploratory study, a combination of the three research perspectives was used to interpret meaning from the workers’ use of humor and discussions about humor. For example, the investigator analyzed turn taking in bantering; demands, apologies, or requests masked by humor; as well as language signifying power, influence, or irresolute meanings. Workplace humor could be investigated from both the fuctionalist and interpretivist orientations using any one of the three research perspectives – conversation analysis, pragmatic linguistics, or critical language theory.

Putnam (1983) discussed the interpretivist and functionalist orientations related to organizational communication analysis. She explained that functionalists treat organizations as concrete structures, like “containers,” and communication becomes a tangible substance that flows upward, downward, and laterally within the container. Functionalists treat messages as physical forms with set spatial and temporal locations.
that exist independent of the sender and the receiver. Functionalists locate the essence of communication in transmission and channel effects. She explained that research on directionality of message flow, message barriers and breakdowns, distortion, information processing, networks, and frequency of communication illustrate this focus. Putnam claimed that the functionalist approach to research generally has a managerial bias and is generally concerned with managerial control and technical efficiency.

Putnam (1993) explained that interpretivists focus on the content and meaning of the messages. Meaning resides in the message and in perceptual filters of the members. She claimed that the interpretivist approach is particularly appealing to organizational communication researchers, “by treating organizations as the social construction of reality, organizing becomes a process of communicating. Communication is not simply another organizational activity; it creates and recreates the social structures that form the crux of organizing” (p. 39).

Following are three examples of communication assessment. In the first and second examples the authors retain a functionalist perspective (Bantz, 1993; Hamilton, 1987). In the third example, the author retains an interpretivist perspective (Pacanowsky & O’Donnel-Trujillo, 1982).

Bantz (1993) described his detailed method of assessing organizational communication in his book, Understanding Organizations. He located communicative events and analyzed them via a specific process called the Organizational Communication Culture (OCC) method. He explained that the first step in using OCC is to locate communicative events, both temporary events such as discussions and permanent displays. Then messages within these communicative events are analyzed.
Bantz explained that the analysis process centers on four message components: (a) vocabulary of the group members; (b) repetitive themes; (c) temporality, the rhythm or frequency; and (d) architecture, the structure of messages and use of space. The analysis process includes the identification of three symbolic forms: metaphors, stories, and fantasy themes (Bantz). From message analysis the researcher should be able to infer organizational expectations that Bantz stated are manifested as the taken-for-granted patterns of members’ coordinated behavior. He discussed five interrelated and reciprocal patterns of expectations including norms, roles, agenda, motives, and style. By understanding each of the patterns of expectations and their interconnections, the researcher may infer organizational meanings in and from analyzing messages and symbolic forms and inferring expectations. The goal of the researcher is to arrive at a verifiable, comprehensive understanding of the everyday experience of organizational members.

Hamilton (1987), also retaining a functionalist perspective to understanding organizational communication patterns, developed an audit method to study face-to-face and written communication, patterns of communication among individuals and groups, and communication content. Hamilton suggested that time should also be spent in looking at the nonverbal communication including physical layout of work areas, norms of dress and manner, and other such elements that impact organizational climate and culture. He emphasized the need for triangulation of audit methods and suggested the use of observation, interviews, focus groups, and network and content analysis.

Interpretivists, Pacanowsky and O’Donnel-Trujillo (1982), analyzed all communication including work ways, folktales, and rituals. They wrote that when people
go about the business of construing their world as sensible, they communicate. They claimed that when people talk, write, sing, dance, or fake an illness, they are communicating, and they are constructing their culture. They went on to explain that given that organizational sense making is accomplished communicatively and displayed communicatively, researchers should attempt to identify key communication activities and the sense members of the group make of their experiences. In order to uncover an organization’s culture, a researcher can begin by focusing on the following set of indicators of organizational sense making: relevant constructs, facts, practices, vocabulary, metaphors, stories, rites, and rituals (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo).

**Functions of Organizational Communication**

Communication in organizations is purposeful and serves a number of functions. Stohl (1995) wrote, “messages are the foundation upon which the meanings of organizational experience are built” (p. 47). It is through messages that “roles are clarified, social support is provided, power is realized, and coordination is made possible” (Stohl, p. 48). The function of a message may be ambiguous or have multiple interpretations. She warned “the interpretation of the function of any given message is directly tied to the relationship between individuals” (p. 67).

Unlike Stohl’s interpretive approach, Lundberg and Brownell (1993) and Daniels and Spiker (1987) described the functions of organizational communication from a functionalist perspective. Lundberg and Brownell described three communicative functions: coordination, maintenance, and change. These are comparable to the three functions discussed by Daniels and Spiker: production, maintenance, and innovation. Daniels and Spiker stated that the “production” function includes communication that
controls and coordinates activities required to produce system outputs; that is, the organization’s products or services. Such communication is work related and includes instructions, procedures, reports on work activity, or problems in the work itself. They explained that the “maintenance” function includes communication that regulates system processes within certain desirable or acceptable limits. Organizational policies, rules, and deviation-correcting negative feedback serve the maintenance function. In addition, conversations that affect human relations are included in this category. Finally, they explained that the “innovation” function includes communication concerned with organizational change and may involve the development of new ideas and practices. Conversations that provide the means for implementing and securing acceptance of change is included in the innovation category. Likewise, suggestions from employees for changes in products, services, or work procedures; recommendations from studies of organizational needs; and long-range planning activities all involve the innovation function (Daniel & Spiker).

In the organizational communication literature, other authors (e.g., Bullis, 1991; Conrad, 1990) described very specific functions of communication. Identification and cohesion; influence, power, and control; and conflict resolution are some of the commonly discussed functions. These are not distinct functions in that they are highly interrelated and they impact one another. Furthermore, Daniels and Spiker (1987) warned that what is functional to one person or group may be dysfunctional to another.

**Identification and cohesion.**

“Communication functions to foster identification with the organization” (Bullis, 1991, p. 257). Whetten and Godfrey (1998) defined organizational identification as “the
process whereby an individual’s beliefs about an organization become self-referential or
self-defining” (p. 175). They claimed that becoming identified with one’s organization
involves either (a) evoking one’s self-concept in the recognition that one shares similar
values with an organization or (b) changing one’s self-concept so that one’s values and
beliefs become more similar to the organization’s. “Organizational members need some
shared interpretation of reality to be able to carry out their collective actions”
(Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1990, p. 349), and a role of organizational leaders
involves maintaining the meanings or realities that members can be persuaded to accept.

Organizational identification is integral to the concepts of internalization,
commitment, and person-organization fit (Whetten & Godfrey, 1998). Whetten and
Godfrey asserted that organizations can greatly benefit from inducing identification
within their members because it has been linked to greater employee compliance, lower
attrition, and lower in-group conflict. They also stated that organizational identification
causes members to think and act in ways that consider organizational values and beliefs,
and when behaviors are congruent with the organization’s identity, decision making is
positively affected; employees will make decisions with organizational interests
uppermost in mind. Finally, organizational identification helps organizations retain
control over members (Whetten & Godfrey, p. 184).

Conrad (1990) defined group cohesion as “the feeling that the group members are
unified about goals, values, and means and are mutually supportive and respectful” (p.
257). He stated that in order to operate as a group, cohesion is necessary, because
without it members are not satisfied with the group, do not participate actively in its
activities, and are not committed to its outcomes.
**Influence, power, and control.**

“The instrumental use of messages to control another’s actions is a fundamental aspect of organizational communication” (Stohl, 1995, p. 68). Stohl claimed that communication efforts are aimed at regulating another’s behavior by influencing ideas and actions or persuading others by affecting their opinion, attitudes, or beliefs.

Conrad (1990) asserted that influence is exercised through communication, and interpersonal communication skills increase an employee’s ability to influence the beliefs and actions of others. Conrad wrote that people are influenced by the content of a message as well as by how the message is delivered; that is, the strength of any message is increased or decreased by the way it is presented. He claimed that certain communication patterns create impressions of weakness, insecurity, passivity, and limited competence, and these are least likely to influence organizational members. Other communication patterns connote power, “People who speak a bit more rapidly and loudly than normal, present organized messages, are fluent, and do not speak in a monotone seem to have more influence than people who do not have these attributes” (Conrad, p. 234). He claimed that in all communication contexts, one may identify the effects of “powerful” and “powerless” speech patterns.

Being able to influence others and control the information that flows through formal communication networks is a potent source of power (Conrad, 1990). “Power in organizations belongs to those who can define reality for others, and who can convince others that things are what they think they are, are like they think they are, and are normal when they think they are normal” (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1990, p. 339).
Politics is the communication of power. “Organizations are political in the sense that they have systems for allocating and using power and resources, as well as ways of maintaining and protecting these systems” (Daniels & Spiker, 1987, p. 76). Many functions of organizational communication are intended to serve the special interests of organizational sub-groups and coalitions. Conrad (1990, p. 233) described three political communication strategies: open persuasion, manipulative persuasion, and manipulation. He stated that in open persuasion influencers make their goals and their methods clear to their target(s). In manipulative persuasion influencers disguise their strategies but not their goals. And, manipulation involves disguising both one’s goals and one’s strategies.

Conrad (1990) explained that, in fact, relatively little day-to-day communication is political; most of the communication that takes place among employees is power neutral. “In organizations in which roles, responsibilities, and formal lines of authority are clear and stable, political game playing is relatively rare; but when communication processes break down and roles and responsibilities become ambiguous or confused, organizational politicians thrive” (Conrad, p. 213).

**Conflict resolution.**

Conflicts are composed of interactive cycles of message, response, and counter-response, and once a cycle begins, participants cannot control its development or outcome (Conrad, 1990). “A conflict tends to have a momentum all its own” (Conrad, p. 297). Conrad (pp. 297-302) described three conflict communication strategies: (a) avoidant strategies, (b) confrontive strategies, and (c) structuring strategies. He stated that “avoidant strategies” allow participants to avoid a divisive issue through the use of regression, commitments to revenge, refusing to admit to the existence of conflict, or
delaying or procrastinating which can be overt or subtle. He described “confrontive strategies” as either coercion with overt displays of power, coercion with threats or promises, or personalization with moral accusations. Finally, Conrad explained that “structuring strategies” do what their name implies, they structure the conflict. Participants may define the issues that will be discussed, establish evaluative criteria, and redefine relationships. He claimed that structuring communication can reduce ambiguity and help the parties move toward a productive solution while avoiding destructive escalation. Escalation, he claimed, is due to expansion of issues, involvement of self and face, and dominance of emotion and symbol. Conrad emphasized that conflicts are not made up of one party using one strategy; rather, they are made of interactions - of patterns of communication, response, and counter-response.

Conrad (1990) described conflicts as being productive or destructive. In productive conflicts, conflict patterns consist of a number of brief episodes during which the participants adopt a wide range of strategies. He stated that coercion, threats, promises, redefinition, relational comments, digressions, joking, and relaxing may be intermixed in a variety of different proportions. In productive conflict, no single strategy takes over; no sustained cycle of threat and counter threat, coercion, and regression is present to distort participants’ perceptions or cloud their analysis of the situation (Conrad).

Conrad (1990) explained that in destructive conflicts a narrow range of communicative strategies is used. Escalating cycles of threat, coercion, expansion of issues, and personalization lock parties into competitive, zero-sum patterns of interaction (Conrad). He suggested that often more powerful employees initiate destructive cycles of
conflict by misperceiving less powerful people as jealous, resentful, or hostile; they overreact and adopt confrontative, competitive strategies when other approaches may be more appropriate. At other times, the more powerful person may inadvertently place weaker people in positions where those people feel that they must either fight or be humiliated. “Conflict cycles are never under any one member’s control. It is the participants’ ability to manage and control tendencies for escalation that determines whether a conflict will be productive or destructive” (Conrad, p. 308).

**Communication Networks**

Stohl (1995) described communication networks as “connectedness in action,” complex, overlapping, communication relationships. People may be joined directly or indirectly, and they “are often joined through multiple relationships, in multiple contexts” (Stohl, p. 23). She explained that “organizational communication is the collective interactive process of generating and interpreting messages. Networks of understandings are created through coordinated acts and relationships” (p. 23).

Communication networks are continually emerging and changing in organizations as employees act in what they perceive to be their self-interests (Conrad, 1990). “Their own needs, emotions … self-interest, prior experiences, and individual perspectives penetrate organizational positions” (Stohl, 1995, p. 25). Conrad asserted that meeting one’s own needs can actually benefit the organization because in meeting their own information requirements, employees often compensate for the communication problems in the organization. (This is further explained in the following section.) Unless powerful members of the organization actively intervene and disrupt naturally emerging communication processes, employees who are trying to meet their needs may establish
systems of communication that indirectly also meet their organization’s needs for coordination and control (Conrad, p. 150).

Conrad (1990) wrote that the formal communication channels and chain of command is only one of an infinite number of possible networks of communication links. Informal networks generally are abundant, strong, and effective in meeting communicative needs of organizational members (Conrad). Conrad stated that, “informal networks consist of employees linked together by consistent patterns of communicating with one another,” and these networks need not be groups of employees “physically in the same place at the same time” (p. 169).

Stohl (1995) wrote that “networks can be described at four levels of analysis: personal, group, organizational, and interorganizational” (p. 27). Personal networks consist of all the linkages an individual has across social systems. Group networks include clusters of individuals who are more intensely connected to one another than they are to others in the organization. Analysis at the organizational level goes beyond individual relationships and is concerned with how communicative, cognitive, and affective processes are embedded in a larger social context. Finally, interorganizational networks are usually based on resource needs and surplus of a system.

Conrad (1990) described organizational networks as being made of cliques, that is five to twenty five employees who communicate more often with one another than with others in the organization. He wrote that the members of a clique tend to have similar kinds of jobs and tend to be relatively close to one another in the formal organizational hierarchy. “Their similar jobs give them something in common to talk about, and their similar ranks provide them with many opportunities to meet and get to know one
another” (Conrad, p. 169). Different cliques are then linked together by liaisons. “Liaisons are employees who connect two cliques but are not members of either” (Conrad, p. 169).

Conrad (1990) described three powerful roles that emerge within cliques: opinion leaders, gatekeepers, and boundary spanners. Opinion leaders are employees who influence the attitudes and behaviors of other employees. Gatekeepers are employees who occupy a position in the network that allows them to control the messages flowing through it. Finally, employees who function as boundary spanners are positioned at the top or bottom of the organizational hierarchy; therefore, they have many opportunities to communicate with the system’s environment. Stohl (1995) asserted that all employees are boundary spanners in that people are members of multiple groups external to the organization. Employees bring those affiliations with them into the workplace, and information is translated and interpreted in a large part based upon these external linkages. Employees enter the organization and influence one another in a complex series of links.

**Communication Barriers**

Conrad (1990) discussed two categories of barriers to communication flow: structural barriers and hierarchical impediments. He subdivided structural barriers into two types: (a) structural distortion and (b) trained communication incapacity. He explained that structural distortion occurs when one person communicates a message to another. The distortion occurs when the message is condensed (made shorter, simpler, and less detailed) or accented (simplified into good or bad, all or none, or other extreme terms). He asserted that messages may be distorted when they are assimilated
(transformed so that they are similar to information the person received in the past and/or expects to receive in the future) or whitewashed (made to fit the interpreter’s frame of reference). Finally, Conrad explained that distortion occurs when the message is reductively coded, that is, when it is combined with other information to form a sensible overall picture.

Conrad (1990) claimed that not all distortion or ambiguity is bad. It can actually be beneficial because

It allows different people to interpret the same message in different ways, helping to maintain a diversity of perspectives…. When the organization faces new or particularly difficult problems, diversity can lead to innovative solutions.

Interpretations differing from what was intended often reveal problems in the organization and can eventually lead to needed organizational change (p. 128).

The second structural barrier to communication flow is trained communication incapacity (Conrad, 1990). Conrad explained that this results when workers occupy progressively more specialized roles. They become increasingly talented at performing their tasks but less capable of performing other tasks. Workers who become more and more accustomed to their roles begin to interpret the messages they receive in a manner relevant to their roles.

Employees become less capable of taking the perspectives of other members of the organization when interpreting or sending messages. As a result of successfully adapting to their roles in the organization, people develop ways of viewing ‘reality’ that keep them from understanding the realities that have been created by others with different tasks, needs, and experiences (Conrad, p. 129).
Conrad (1990) warned that trained communication incapacity is further complicated by intra-group jargon. “As they become literate in the artificial language of their position, they become less capable of translating their ideas into a language that others can understand” (Conrad, p. 130).

In addition to the two structural barriers to communication flow, Conrad (1990) listed barriers to upward information flow and downward information flow. He claimed that upward communication is restricted by the number of levels in the organization’s hierarchy. Workers tend to avoid communicating with those of a different status, and when the organization accentuates the status differences, it further reduces the amount of upward communication. “When communication does take place, it is more ‘formal.’ Messages are communicated in writing instead of face-to-face, and they focus on the job, with little informal or social content” (p. 130). He also related that the accuracy of information is distorted as it is sent up through an organization, and often little negative information flows up through the hierarchy. Conrad claimed that messages are distorted even more when there are great differences in status for one of three reasons: (a) there is a lack of trust, (b) a subordinate wants to be recognized or promoted, or (c) a subordinate does not believe that the supervisor will help him advance. He stated that “distorting effects … seem to be present even when the subordinate and the supervisor generally communicate in a free and open fashion. Those effects are increased when subordinates believe that their supervisors do not pass negative information on to them” (p. 131).

Conrad (1990) stated that the same barriers for upward communication are prevalent in downward communication, and
When supervisors believe that they should give their subordinates only the absolute minimum necessary amount of information, they filter an even higher proportion of downward communication, frequently withholding even crucial information. However, employees often help create the feelings that they are ‘kept in the dark.’ In general, the more information people receive, the more they believe they have to have. Consequently, until they reach a point of extreme information overload, employees may always feel that they are not kept informed, regardless of what their supervisors do (p. 132).

Another barrier to downward communication is clarity. Conrad (1990) stated that clarity is reduced when organizations rely on written instead of face-to-face communication. Written messages include less detail and they rarely explain the rationale underlying instructions or dictates (Conrad). Thus, he claimed, subordinates are left to interpret messages broadly without understanding the full intent, and to make matters worse, when misunderstandings do occur, there is a tendency to increase written communication. Conrad stated that clarity of downward communication is also hampered when supervisors discourage employees from asking for clarification; this problem occurs most often when the message deals with a controversial or sensitive issue.

Clear communication is also hampered because of individual differences that affect meaning. “Meaning is defined as mutual knowledge, in which the sender knows that the hearer knows the sender’s intention of a particular utterance…” (Woodilla, 1998, p. 37). Meaning can be confounded because employees “bring biases and assumptions, feelings and experiences, attitudes and skills into every communicative situation.”
Individual differences will color message reception, taint message sending, and befuddle the best attempts at offering precise, clear statements” (Pepper, 1995, p. 9). In addition, employees “cannot decode the meaning of a statement without knowledge of the circumstances in which it was produced, and assumptions as to the intentions of the person who produced it” (Taylor, 1993, p. 257).

When communication is not clear, or when employees feel that they are not being kept informed, employees take control of their own communicative lives (Conrad, 1990). Conrad explained that generally the same kind of information is withheld or distorted repeatedly by the same people who should have provided clear and accurate information but did not. Once employees find recurring patterns of communication breakdowns, they compensate by building redundancy and counter-biasing into their own communication.

Conrad explained that, before taking action, employees will obtain information about an issue from a number of different people, and they will determine the probable biases of each person who communicates with them and adjust their interpretation of the message to compensate for this bias. Conrad went on to state that this can be an important organizational process. He explained how employees

Build informal communication ties with other members of the organization, especially those in units on which the employee must depend. Unless informal ties are actively suppressed by the organization, they emerge naturally as people try to compensate for problems in formal communication. Employees learn who has the information they need in order to do their jobs, and they discover ways of getting in touch with those people. They also find people with whom they can
form meaningful interpersonal relationships and thereby help compensate for the isolation that often occurs in hierarchical organizations. (p. 149)

**Major Findings in the Literature Regarding Humor**

Just as the study of organizational communication can be thought of as a subset of organizational culture, the study of humor in organizations can be envisioned as a subset of organizational communication. Each concept “organizational culture,” “organizational communication,” and “humor in organizations” is a distinct topic, yet they interrelate and impact one another. For example, although most organizations have formal paths of communication, other less official means of communication, including the use of jokes or other humorous interplay, may be substituted.

Apte (1985) addressed the inter-relatedness of culture, communication, and humor in his book, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*. First, he explained that communication and humor are interdependent in two important ways: (a) language itself becomes the subject matter of humor; and (b) the use and function of language and the cultural attitudes and values associated with it influence the occurrence, comprehension, and appreciation of humor (Apte, 1985). Then Apte explained that three factors reflect the cultural bases of humor and are necessary for humor development: (a) shared cultural knowledge, (b) shared rules for interpreting it, and (c) agreement on the cultural appropriateness of the incongruence and exaggeration involved.

Humor is generally accepted as an artifact of an organization's culture (Dandridge, Mitroff, & Joyce, 1980; Ott 1989), as well as a culture encoder. "Because humor is intimately connected to culture-codes, it is useful in providing insights into a society's values" (Berger, 1976, p. 114), and it can become a significant criterion for measuring
cultural homogeneity (Apte, 1985). Indeed, Linstead’s (1985) findings supported this claim. Linstead found in his examination of the ELS Amalgamated Bakeries that humor plays an important role in both changing organizational cultures and reinforcing existing cultures.

**Humor Research**

Just as the study of organizational culture and organizational communication developed from a diverse disciplinary background, humor researchers come from varied backgrounds including the social sciences, natural sciences, and the humanities (Apte, 1985). Apte declared that psychologists have made the most significant contributions to humor studies, whereas anthropologists have taken only a marginal interest in the topic. He explained that descriptive accounts of humorous interplay are occasionally found in ethnographies but generally only as related to aspects of other cultural systems. Apte stated that the only two manifestations of humor that attracted significant anthropological attention included “joking relationships” studied in the context of kinship systems and “ritual-clowning” studied in the context of religion. More recently, anthropologists have begun to study “play,” a phenomenon closely associated with humor (Apte).

There are three broad categories of humor research: (a) that which involves overarching theories, (b) that which investigates functions or use of humor, and (c) that related to individual differences and antecedent conditions as variables in determining what is considered funny. Each of these categories will be discussed in the sections below because they are relevant to humorous interplay in the work setting.
Theories of Humor

There are a variety of theories of humor that attempt to explain why people use humor and why something is funny. Most authors agree that not one theory adequately explains the multi-faceted phenomenon of humor (Haig, 1988). Three popular categories of theories include (a) superiority and disparagement theories; (b) incongruity theories; and (c) motivational, relief, and arousal theories.

Superiority or disparagement theories.

Superiority theories of humor suggest that humor prevails when feelings of superiority are derived from a display of inferiority in others (Zillmann & Stocking, 1976). “A person feels triumphant when others look bad in comparison” (Duncan, et al., 1990, p. 259). The degree of humor experienced in disparagement situations depends largely on the affective disposition toward the person; the more intense the negative disposition toward the disparaged entity, the greater the magnitude of mirth (Zillmann, 1983). Conversely, the more intense the positive disposition toward the disparaged entity, the smaller the magnitude of mirth (Duncan, et al., 1990).

Sometimes witnesses to disparaging humor find it funny and at other times the humor backfires on the jokester.

The ‘humor’ in disparaging humor depends at least in part on the intentions a witness attributes to the person making the putdown. …If a witness believes the disparaging agent is malicious, he will judge the disparagement as hostile rather than funny. On the other hand, if he cannot possibly consider the agent malicious, he will interpret the putdown as funny… (Gutman & Priest, cited in Zillman & Stocking, 1976, p. 155).
Humor studies related to self-disparagement are discussed in the superiority and disparate ment theory literature. The topic of self-disparagement has received considerable attention. Nevo (1985) conducted a study to determine if people laugh at themselves. Nevo reported that most subjects, most of the time, laugh at the expense of others but some do laugh at themselves. “Self-disparagement may be considered an ego-defense mechanism to ‘save face’” (Duncan, et al., 1990, p. 260). “Individuals poke fun at their own shortcomings, blunders, or humiliations” (Zillmann & Stocking, 1976, p. 154). Zillman and Stocking asserted that, “in the event of an unavoidable pratfall, self-disparagement can serve as a defense measure; by disparaging oneself, others are deprived of the opportunity to make the putdown” (p. 163). Interestingly, they claimed that self-disparagement in general can have an adverse effect on the self-disparager. Results of their study revealed that both males and females judged the self-disparager as significantly less confident, less witty, and less intelligent than the person who disparaged another. In conclusion, their research seems to support that self-disparagement may not increase an individual’s appeal but it may help to minimize deprecation from others.

Smith and Powell (1988) did not confirm Zillmann and Stocking’s (1976) findings. Smith and Powell, using university students as subjects, studied the use of disparaging humor by group leaders. They concluded that the leader who used self-disparaging humor was perceived as more effective at relieving tension and encouraging group participation. This leader also appeared more willing than the other leaders to share opinions.

In his book, The Game of Humor, Gruner (1997) attempted to persuade his readers that the superiority theory can account for all instances of humor. He called the
superiority theory the “laugh/win” theory. He used “winning” in the broadest sense to mean “getting what you want,” and getting what you want “suddenly.” He used the metaphor of “a game” to describe all humorous interplay. He explained that the idea of a game implies not only fun, entertainment, and human interaction, but also “competition,” “keeping score,” and a “winner” and a “loser.” It is important to note that not all humor theorists are convinced that all humor can be accounted for by the superiority and disparagement theories. “The most popular competing theory is the incongruity theory” (Gruner, p. 24).

**Incongruity theory.**

Incongruity theories of humor are cognitive theories requiring analysis and comparison, whereas the superiority theories are primarily affective, in that the jokester leaves with a feeling of triumph. For the incongruity theory, amusement is an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical or inappropriate (Morreal, 1983). Morreal explained that people live in an orderly world, where they come to expect certain patterns among things, properties, and events. Something is found to be humorous when the experience does not fit into the expected pattern. That is, what causes laughter is “a mismatch between conceptual understanding and perception” (Morreal, p. 18).

Kuhlman (1985) explained that the incongruity must be in a modest amount, …Too little incongruity will not divert the normal direction and pace of information processing, and too much incongruity stresses the information processor and leads to curiosity/concentration behaviors or anxiety. When a modest incongruity is quickly resolved, …the accompanying physiological arousal changes are experienced as the amused sense of pleasure. (p. 281)
Morreal (1983) stated that the incongruity theory does not explain all types of laughter, such as tickling, because something like tickling does not involve an intellectual matter. Conversely, he explained that not all incongruity that a person notices triggers laughter; a perception of incongruity can be attended to by some other emotion. He gave the example of finding a snake in the refrigerator and the resulting incongruity would be resolved through fear or distress – not laughter.

Motivational, relief, and arousal theory.

Motivational, relief, or arousal theories involve the psychological and the physiological domains. Laughter is seen as a venting of repressed or unused energy (Morreal, 1983). “Anxious feelings and built up tensions are released through humor responses” (Graham, et al., 1992, p. 166). Morreal explained that there are two ways in which relief might fit into laughter situations. First, the person may have come into the situation with the nervous energy to be released. Second, the laughter situation itself may cause the build-up of the nervous energy, as well as its release.

Morreall (1983) discussed the idea of prohibitions and explained that any prohibition can cause a person to build up an increased desire to do what has been forbidden, and this frustrated desire may manifest itself in pent-up nervous energy. Freud’s psychoanalytic theory has been the most influential theory of this type. Kuhlman (1985) explained that “Freud viewed sexual and aggressive humor as important release valves in the psychic economy. Such tendentious humor functions as a defense mechanism, and the acute, fleeting pleasure of laughter stems from gratifying a drive that otherwise would have remained pent-up” (p. 281). It is important to note that Kuhlman’s study results did not fully support Freud's theory. Kuhlman concluded that the drive-
reduction concept appears to be insufficient in explaining the preference for enjoyment of sexual and aggressive humor.

**Functions of Humor in Work Life**

In addition to exploring over-arching theories of humor, a number of researchers have provided insight into work life by focusing on specific functions of humor. In the following discussion it is important to keep in mind what Apte (1985) said about these theories. He asserted that a major problem with functional theories of humor is that they are educated guesses at best. It is difficult to show that humor actually serves the psychological, educational, physiological or social functions that are described below. Apte explained that the effectiveness of humor is not measured; many functional explanations therefore, are merely hypotheses that cannot be tested. With this in mind, the four main functions of humor: psychological, physical, educational, and sociological (Duncan, et al., 1990) will be described.

**Psychological functions.**

Numerous functional explanations of humor have been proposed that affect the psyche. Roy (1960) provided a descriptive and exploratory analysis of the social interaction that took place within a small work group of factory machine operatives during a two-month period of participant observation. To keep from "going nuts" while engaged in long days of monotonous work activity, a group of operators developed various themes of humorous verbal and behavioral interplay that included "banana time." Day after day, one worker would secretly take a banana from another worker and eat it. Tensions of long hours of relatively meaningless work were released in the mock aggressions of "banana time" and other horseplay. Bradney (1957) reported how sales
assistants in a British department store used jokes to release the competitive tension built by the formal organizational structure. A later study by Malone (1980) also found that humor can minimize anxiety among employees and serve as a possible source of psychic rewards and tension release.

In a report of another workplace study using participant observation, Ullian (1976) claimed that a function served by humor is related to processing “new information.” Ullian observed instances when new information was being transmitted from one worker to another. An apriori assumption was that change of any sort is often accompanied by anxiety, and receiving new information is one way of change occurring. Ullian observed that in twelve instances of new information being transmitted from one worker to another, only two instances did not result in any jokes.

Apte (1985) identified five psychological functions of humor including reduction of hostility, the release of tension – especially the release of strenuous and dangerous work-related tension, emotional catharsis, and the release of sexual and aggressive impulses. Apte also stated that one function, which should not to be forgotten, is that of pure entertainment and drama. In addition, humor is used to show empathy with others’ feelings, to allow for emotional distancing from a topic by normalizing extraordinary situations, to help deal with novel situations, and to promote stability in the face of change (Brooks, 1992). Finally, humor may also serve the psychological function of gaining approval - if others can be made to laugh – that may influence them to evaluate the joker’s character and viewpoints more favorably (Giles, Bourhis, Gadfield, Davies & Davies, 1976).
**Education functions.**

Some authors claimed that the use of humor by instructors improves information retention of learners. Derks (1998) reported that with undergraduate students the use of humor improves memory and sexual material increases recall even further. His findings were contrary to earlier findings by Gruner (1967) and Markiewicz (1974). Gruner reported that humor used in speeches failed to produce greater or less information retention in his small study of 32 college students. Likewise, Markiewicz claimed that memory does not appear to be altered by humor use.

Other researchers and practitioners reported that humor use positively affects other aspects of learning, such as creative thinking. Ziv (1976; 1980; 1983; 1988) extensively studied humor use with high school students. He consistently reported that humor is valuable in education because it improves divergent thinking. A number of authors (e.g., Brightman, 1980; Sanderson, 1979; Van Gundy, 1987) who teach creative problem solving techniques encourage the use of humor because it promotes ambiguity and the unusual combinations of ideas, and it helps stretch thinking for the development of alternative ingenious ideas. Conventional rules are challenged and risk taking is encouraged in an environment that promotes humor. All of these components are essential to creative problem solving. Along the same line, Belanger (1998), using undergraduate students as test subjects, found that humor speeded mental rotation on analogies for men (women’s solution times were relatively unaffected).

In organizations humor use may support and sustain positive emotional patternning. Hoepfl (1997) writing about emotion and learning in organizations asserted that positive emotional patternning in organizations can make learning easier, enhance
creativity, and make changes emergent and organic. He claimed that when this is the case, the work can be a pleasant and growthful experience. Conversely, negative emotional patterning can hamper learning, enforcing the status quo, and making change discontinuous and painful; then the workplace is experienced as oppressive.

In summary, humor fosters divergent thinking, creative problem solving, and a willingness to take risks, thus allowing individuals in the workforce to take innovative action (Morreall, 1991). Novel and quicker solutions to problems assist organizations that must change in order to remain competitive and meet needs and demands of consumers.

**Physiological functions.**

Lynch (1998) reported that American employees consume more than 15 tons of aspirin daily and stress-related illnesses cost industry more than $150 billion yearly in lost time and productivity. Humor in the workplace can help solve these stress-related problems, as well as promote overall improved health and wellbeing (Brilhart & Galanes, 1989; Duncan & Feisal, 1989; Fry & Savin, 1988; Lefcourt, et al. 1990).

“Mirth and mirthful laughter have significant impact on most of the major physiologic systems of the body” (Fry, 1994, p. 114). Nearly every body system: the musculo-skeletal, respiratory, immune and endocrine, cardiovascular, and the central and autonomic nervous systems is positively affected when a person participates in humorous interplay. Fry discussed two phases of humor and the resulting physiological changes. The first phase, he explained, is the stimulation phase. It persists during the period of laughter. The stimulation phase results in many physiological changes including (a) an increase in blood circulation and respiration; (b) contraction of skeletal muscles; (c)
greater electrochemical activity in the brain which enhances alertness; (d) a decrease in pain perception; (e) an increase in skin temperature; (f) stimulation of hormone production; and (g) enhanced circulation of chemical and cellular immune substances (Fry).

Fry (1994) explained that the stimulation phase is followed by the relaxation phase. He explained that during this phase heart rate, respiratory rate, and blood pressure tend to decrease relatively quickly; however, other body systems, such as the immune system tend to remain stimulated for longer periods of time. Fry claimed that after the relaxation phase, people experience greater social and psychological animation that may be manifested as “conviviality, bouts of wit and further laughter, and an elevated level of mental and emotional interactiveness” (p. 115). “It is proverbial that wit and wisdom are intimate associates” (Fry, p. 117).

Fry (1994) assured his readers that the powerful effects of humor upon health are largely to a person’s advantage. The benefits of humorous interplay are similar to any aerobic exercise (Fry). “There have been few instances when the sudden and significant blood pressure elevation accompanying laughter is not desirable, and has contributed to onset of a stroke,” (Fry, p. 115) or heart attack. He claimed that adverse reactions such as mirth-induced heart attacks are so rare that he could not find any medical literature that addressed the topic. Fry suggested that there may be an innate physiological “sparing mechanism” that prevents such adverse consequences.

**Sociological functions.**

The psychological, educational, and physiological functions of humor, discussed above, essentially affect change in the individual person. However, humor is primarily a
social phenomenon (Morreall, 1983) and serves numerous interpersonal and group functions. Many of these social functions such as maintaining status relationships, defining group boundaries, and fostering group cohesion are readily observable in the workplace. Listed below is a summary of important research findings describing many social functions of humor that affect groups.

A number of authors reported that humor provides a vehicle through which people can voice feelings for which there is no socially acceptable or easily accessible outlet (Winick, 1976). Humor allows individuals to disregard social barriers and taboos (Ziv & Gadish, 1990). For example, humor can function as a method of transmitting verbally aggressive and demeaning messages (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). Hostilities hidden in a humorous reply are considered more acceptable for conversation (Graham, Papa & Brooks, 1992), and when humor is used to express resentment and aggressive feelings surreptitiously, it strengthens the teller's morale and undermines the target's morale (Winick). Ziv and Gadish reported that humor is one way of expressing aggressive and sexual impulses in a socially acceptable manner, and because of the understanding that humor is a message “not to be taken seriously,” humor may be used as a disclaimer when people are offended or hurt by it.

Humor can facilitate social interaction (Sherman, 1988) and promote friendships, relationships, and intimacy. In a study, using undergraduate college students as subjects, Derks and Berkowitz (1989) reported that the use of humor can help increase interpersonal liking. This confirmed an earlier study by Mettee, Hrelec, and Wilkens (1971) who reported that employing humor can elicit negative as well as positive responses, depending on the reputation of the communicator. They stated,
When a communicator was reputed to be detached and aloof, reactions toward him tended to increase in positive magnitude with increases in humor. When he was reputed to be ‘clownish,’ reactions toward the communicator were essentially the same regardless of the degree of humor displayed (p. 63).

Cheatwood (1983) reported that in addition to humor functioning as a mechanism for decreasing social distance, it can also be used for maintaining or creating social distance.

Scogin and Pollio (1980) examined humorous interplay in four small groups. They reported that nontargeted humor such as word play or incongruities may provide, at least transient groups, a breathing space and keeps the group away from strong interpersonal interactions. Along this same line, in a more recent study by Warnars-Kleverlaan, Oppenheimer, and Sherman (1996), it was reported that humor is “perceived as a socially acceptable way to dissociate from people; one can safely express negative feelings towards others through humor” (p. 118).

A number of authors (e.g., Apte, 1985; Coser, 1960; Goodchilds, 1959) claimed that the use of humor maintains status differentials, and it can help groups manage problems of role, conflict, and power (Winick, 1976). Goodchilds studied the use of humor in small groups. She reported that a person who uses sarcastic humor is likely to be perceived as powerful and influential, but unpopular. Coser noted in her study of senior and junior medical staff at a mental hospital, that senior staff members joked significantly more than junior staff. In addition, the senior staff rarely used self-disparaging humor in the presence of junior staff. She also found that higher-ranking individuals target individuals lower in the hierarchy, however, lower-ranked individuals
seldom target those above them. The only exception to this pattern concerned high-level female medical staff who rarely made any humorous remarks within this context (Coser).

Other reports relating joking patterns to status relationships have reported varying conclusions. Traylor (1973), in his report of work group humor, discussed how person-focused joking on an oil exploration party in Alaska defined and redefined social groupings, reinforced social rankings, and clarified status relationships among the members. Contrary to the joking patterns described by Coser, Traylor reported that a person’s status was inversely related to the frequency with which he or she was targeted as the focus/butt of jokes. Likewise, Duncan's (1984) study results of nine small task groups did not support the existence of a joking monopoly by those of higher status. His analysis revealed that when managers are accepted as friends and admitted to the humor network, they are frequently over chosen as initiators and foci of work-related joking. Lundberg (1969) also reported on joking patterns after observing person-focused joking in an electric motor repair shop. He asserted that joking performs a social function of defining and reinforcing relationships between people. Interestingly, he observed that peers had more fun at work than their higher status leaders. He also noted, like Coser, that a low status butt of a joke did not joke back to a higher status initiator. In addition, he reported that if the peers of the butt of a joke were present or if the initiator was of lower rank than the butt, then the joke was not considered funny.

Vinton (1989) through a participant observation study at QRS, a small family owned business, discovered that humor can function to help socialize new members into an organization. Specifically, humor appears “to create bonds among employees and facilitate the accomplishment of work tasks” (Vinton, p. 165). Additionally, she wrote
that self-deprecating jokes told by a new member informed other employees that the joke-teller has a sense of humor and is willing to participate in the predominant form of humor in the organization. In her report, teasing examples were sorted into two categories, and the interaction patterns were described. All but one of the "teasing to get things done" examples were between status levels and directional - a higher-status person used it to tell a lower-status person what to do (Vinton). Bantering, a form of teasing, was used to deflate the importance of status and make the job more enjoyable in tight quarters (Vinton). Bantering was status-less; that is, various status levels interacted in a variety of patterns (Vinton).

Other authors also reported that group norms can be reinforced through the use of humor. Linstead (1985) wrote that humor can represent the values and beliefs of an organization’s culture because humor is a form of symbolic activity that reinforces the social structure and the subculture of a group. As such, humor functions to place social pressure on workers to conform to cultural norms and motivate workers who are not meeting work standards (Collinson, 1988). Scogin and Pollio (1980) suggested that “deprecating humor serves as a control mechanism in that it serves to set limits on the behavior of group members, establish hierarchies, and allow for an expression of feelings in a somewhat less threatening manner than direct confrontation” (p. 848).

Humorous interplay serves as a screening procedure for group membership and also helps define the boundaries of different social groups. Apte (1985), in discussing newcomers to social situations stated, “Acceptance of a person’s joking is an indication that he or she is part of the social group” (p. 54). He explained that when a new person is introduced to a social group, the members generally maintain some distance and evaluate
the new person. Humorous interplay may occur among the members, excluding the newcomer, until the newcomer is gradually accepted in the group. Apte asserted that newcomers have a better chance of being included when they make an attempt to join in by engaging in self-deprecatory joking. On the other hand, he claimed, the exclusion of newcomers despite persistent attempts to participate in the group’s humorous interplay may indicate that they are being denied membership and the group identity that comes with it.

Group cohesion and a sense of unity can be fostered through the use of humor (Fine, 1983). Martineau (1972) claimed that the function of a humorous episode depends upon the individual and the group’s perception of the meaning of the humorous episode; that is, when a humorous remark is perceived as esteeming a group, it should solidify individual group members into a more cohesive unit. Conversely, when the remark is perceived as disparaging, it may either normalize and control group behavior or it may foster an increase in intra-group conflict.

Pogrebin and Poole (1988) also studied the relationship between humor and group cohesiveness. They reported three functions of humor that may operate within a subculture to increase group cohesion. First, group members employ humor to share common experiences and to probe the attitudes, perceptions, and feelings of other group members in a non-threatening manner. Humor helps define the group’s beliefs and philosophy, providing examples of informal standards and expectations for behavior. Second, humor promotes social solidarity through mutual teasing that allows group members to realize that they share a common perspective. This humor of inclusion, as
well as humor aimed at people outside the group, helps to define social boundaries.

Third, groups employ humor to cope with a variety of forces beyond their control.

**Negative consequences of humor.**

Most humor functions described thus far relate the positive benefits of humor use. There are few authors who illustrated negative outcomes. Pollio and Bainum (1983) wrote that irrelevant humorous remarks might distract a work group and decrease efficiency. This is especially true, they claimed, when a task requires sustained interest and much attention to detail. They claimed that if a humorous remark is related to the problem, it serves to facilitate task completion. They went on to explain that joking and laughter may be functionally different; joking interrupts and distracts groups, but laughing usually serves to reaffirm common bonds of a group or relieve tensions. Pollio and Bainum reported that humorous behaviors do not necessarily interfere with a group’s task effectiveness.

Duncan, et al. (1990) wrote that horseplay by employees is generally an attempt to be humorous, but it may lead to unfortunate outcomes. They shared that horseplay has resulted in employees being disciplined or discharged, and it has even resulted in civil litigation. Two examples they used of disastrous horseplay included: bringing a live snake into the workplace, then confronting an employee known to be deathly afraid of snakes; and pulling a chair out from under an employee.

Since very few studies reported negative consequences related to humor use, one must question if there really are few negative outcomes related to its use or if negative outcomes are simply not reported. It is also possible that studies with negative outcomes are not considered news worthy, therefore, not accepted for publication. Undoubtedly,
most individuals at one time or another have suffered the negative consequences of humor use, or have at least witnessed hurtful actions shrouded in the guise of humorous interplay. This is not an area of research that should be ignored.

**Individual Differences or Antecedent Conditions**

In addition to research focused on why something is funny and research focused on functions of humor, a group of researchers studied individual differences or antecedent conditions of humor. Two of the most important antecedent conditions that managers and work group members need to be aware of relate to gender and ethnic compositions of the work group (Duncan & Feisal, 1989). What is humorous and what is “good” humor differ not only interculturally but also intraculturally (Apte, 1985). What may be perceived as humorous to one person, or one group, may be considered inappropriate or offensive to another, thus, impacting the quality of work life (Apte; Smeltzer & Leap, 1988).

Apte (1985) reported that even though cultural factors influence the patterning of humor considerably at the group level, at the individual level humor is often more spontaneous and dependent on the mood of the individual. This being the case, successful use of humor in the workplace becomes surprisingly complicated. Jokesters must be careful not to offend others due to antecedent conditions such as gender and ethnicity. They must also be careful not to offend others due to the fact that the group or individual is simply not in a humorous mood. It requires skill to “read” a group or an individual correctly before deciding if humor is or is not appropriate in a certain instance.
**Gender and use of humor.**

Gender is the variable that has received the most attention in the study of humor (Duncan, et al., 1990). In general, research reflects the existing inequality between the sexes (Apte, 1985). Gender differences are reported in humor occurrence, on the techniques used to be humorous, on the social settings in which humor occurs, and on audience appreciation of humor (Apte). According to Apte, gender differences generally stem from the prevalent cultural values that emphasize male superiority and dominance, together with female passivity.

Apte (1985) claimed that certain social factors such as marriage and advanced age may reduce the differences between men and women’s humor. In addition, fewer constraints are put on women when they are not in the presence of men. As an example, Apte reported that in public, women seem generally not to engage in verbal duels, ritual insults, and practical jokes and pranks, all of which reflect the competitive spirit and the aggressive and hostile quality of men’s humor. Interestingly, when women act collectively, these contentious behaviors may be observed.

Most gender related research supported the idea that males tend to prefer aggressive humor more than females do (Decker, 1986; O’Connell, 1976; Zillmann & Stocking, 1976; Ziv & Gadish, 1990). The preference of males for sexual humor was also well documented (Decker, 1989; Decker & Arora, 1993; Mundorf, Bhatia, Zillman, et al., 1988). There are also claims that, in general, males use humor more frequently than females (Ziv & Gadish).

Sykes (1966) studied the joking relationship between men and women in a factory. He concluded that gross obscenity and horseplay in public were related more to
age and marital status than to gender. He found that both men and women engage in public sexual joking, obscenity, and horseplay. In spite of that, he found that public interaction was only between men and women who were not potential sexual partners (old men and young women). Those who could be potential sexual partners (young men and young women) did not engage in sexual banter, horseplay, and obscenity in public. This is in contrast to many studies of societies where it was found that often potential sexual partners openly engage in obscene horseplay, banter, and so forth.

Fine (1976) speculated that there are benefits to sexual or obscene humor. He stated that sexual humor serves to socialize members to the norms of group behavior, and once they have been socialized, to maintain these norms. According to Fine, group members who violate these rules of behavior are subject to teasing or insulting sexual joking. “Joking frequently can enforce norms as effectively as direct threats, and without the negative side-effects of a direct hostile confrontation” (Fine, p. 139). “By describing behavior considered sexually improper (and thus comical), it reveals by implication the correct forms of sexual interaction” (Fine, p. 135).

Zillmann and Stocking (1976) studied gender as it related to other-disparagement. They found that males and females respond quite differently to humorous materials, depending on the target of disparagement. They found that for male subjects, it was significantly funnier to see a male disparage a male enemy than to see a male disparage himself. On the other hand, for female subjects, it was significantly funnier to see a male disparage himself than to see him disparage a male enemy. The only time there were no significant differences between the sexes in their responses to the materials was when the male disparager victimized a male friend – a condition that neither sex found overly
amusing (Zillmann & Stocking). The offense, Zillmann and Stocking reported, is even greater when the friend is not present; put downs, even in jest, are considered bad mouthing and are not humorous.

A number of researchers (e.g. Cantor, 1976; Zillmann & Stocking, 1976; Wilhelm, 1974) studied gender and the use of self-disparaging humor. Zillmann and Stocking reported that females evaluated self-disparaging humor as significantly funnier than did male subjects, regardless of the gender of the person displaying the self-disparagement. Interestingly, males perceived self-disparagement by a woman as significantly less funny than that by a man. Zillman and Stocking interpreted the results of their research to mean, “the female in our society seems to take the mini putdowns in everyday life in her stride, while the male struggles to project a spotless image of dominance and infallibility. He cannot easily laugh at his own expense. The cost in terms of image seems too high” (p. 162).

Investigations of gender differences in response to humor have produced inconsistent results. Cantor (1976) replicated a 1970 study conducted by Zillmann. Both investigations used college students as subjects. The findings in both instances found jokes to be funnier to both males and females when the victim was female, regardless of the aggressor’s sex. Priest and Wilhelm (1974) found that both males and females appreciate humor which puts down the opposite sex more than humor putting down their own sex. However, Losco and Epstein (1975) found that male subjects regarded hostile humor as less funny when a female aggressor victimized a male than in the reverse situation, while female subjects did not differentiate.
**Ethnic humor.**

Apte (1985) defined ethnic humor as “a type of humor in which fun is made of the perceived behavior, customs, personality, or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific sociocultural identity” (p. 108). He explained that ethnic humor over-generalizes in that it portrays a member of a particular group as typical of the entire group. Apte stated that humor results from a creative process that uses exaggeration and distortion; therefore, the portrayal of individuals’ or groups’ actions, personality traits, or physical features is rarely, if ever, true or objective.

Hassett and Houlihan (1979) reported that the most popular type of joke combines sexual and ethnic themes and the second most popular type of joke has ethnic themes. Many theories have been proposed to explain the popularity of ethnic humor and its disparaging and offensive nature. Theories that assign psychological or sociological functions to ethnic humor seem to predominate (Apte, 1985). The psychological functions emphasize the catharsis of some emotions and the strengthening of others (Apte). Apte suggested that the psychological framework is based on the concept of ethnocentrism, which is the treating or thinking of other cultures and people as inferior. He said prejudice reinforces ethnocentrism and negating cultural values of other people nurtures self-esteem and feelings of superiority.

The sociological functions emphasize the relationship of ethnic humor to inter-group interaction and to the survival of the group (Apte, 1985). Intra-group control and inter-group conflict are two important sociological functions of ethnic humor (Apte). Apte explained that humor is used to directly or indirectly express approval of a group’s sociocultural characteristics. It is used to encourage strong identity and positive self-
image for group members. He explained that humor may also be used to ridicule and express disapproval of individuals who do not conform to existing cultural norms or who wish to hide or deny their ethnic identity. Apte stated that in an ethnically pluralistic society, ethnic humor is more likely to be present among minority groups because of their need for social cohesion, than among majority groups who do not need to choose between acculturation and maintenance of a distinct ethnic identity. It is important to note that not all ethnic humor performs the function of social control; sometimes humor is used to promote assimilation (Apte).

Smeltzer and Leap (1988) analyzed the acceptability of joking behavior among Blacks, Whites, men, women, and experienced versus inexperienced employees. Using a questionnaire, subjects were asked to evaluate the appropriateness of three types of jokes (racist, sexist, and neutral) in work settings. They reported a number of interesting findings. Inexperienced employees rated neutral jokes as less appropriate than experienced employees. Women regarded sexist jokes (that were disparaging to females) as being less appropriate than did men. Whites rated sexist jokes as significantly more inappropriate than Blacks. Blacks were less offended by racist jokes than Whites. Women not only rated racist jokes as more inappropriate than men, but women also found racist jokes to be more offensive than sexist jokes.

In summary, individual differences or antecedent conditions such as gender and ethnicity complicate the use of humor in the workplace. Humor use in the workplace may be precarious at best because the potentially positive or negative effects of humor are felt more in some contexts than in others depending on the characteristics of the group and the values of the organization (Apte). In addition, individuals have greater or
lesser tolerance or acceptance for humor sometimes than at other times (Duncan & Feisal, 1989). Although prejudicial, or other-disparaging humor is generally considered inappropriate, it is common place and may actually be inoffensive in certain contexts since putdown jokes told clearly in the absence of hostility are likely to be considered funny - not offensive (Gutman & Priest, 1969).

**Synthesis of Literature Review**

This section synthesizes the most important points of the literature review and describes areas of importance not yet addressed in the literature. From this, conclusions are developed that support the importance of this study.

Culture is shared values, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, norms, and patterns of behavior. It is reflected in all aspects of work life including leadership patterns, power and influence relationships, conflict resolution mechanisms, and identification and cohesion. The study of organizational culture deserves attention because of the subtle, yet powerful ways in which it influences and shapes communication and behavior in the workplace, impacting the success of the organization and employees’ satisfaction with their work lives.

Workers are simultaneously members of multiple groups, each with its own culture. In addition to their work groups, employees may be members of a family, neighborhood, professional organization, and religious community. They also hold state and national citizenship. Each of these groups may be subdivided into subgroups based on member characteristics such as ethnicity, age, and gender. Each group and subgroup exerts force on the individual to produce, maintain, and change in certain ways. Some groups exert more force on individuals than other groups; therefore, people are more
thoroughly assimilated into some groups than into others. These group affiliations shape the personal aspects of life, and work life, including personal feelings and attitudes, expectations, motivations, values, and assumptions.

It is not possible to think about or discuss organizational culture without focusing on communication. Organizational communication is the collective interactive process of generating and interpreting messages. Culture influences and shapes communication, and through communication, culture is created and sustained. Humor as one style of communication delivery and a form of symbolic activity can shape culture, that is, it can be used to produce or construct culture, maintain culture, or change culture.

Organizational culture, organizational communication, and humor have been studied by a variety of disciplines (anthropology, sociology, psychology, and business administration) and from a number of perspectives (functionalists and interpretivists). These multiple perspectives have lead to some of the confusion and contradictions in the literature, especially the literature related to organizational culture. Three of the most contentious areas of conflict include the definition and use of the word “culture;” how to assess culture; and the ability to change an organization’s culture. Before discussing the three points of contention, it is important to mention that this diversity is not all bad. Diversity can lead to innovative ideas and breakthroughs in theory development. People have a tendency to develop ways of viewing “reality” that keep them from understanding the realities created by others who have had different experiences and developed different perspectives. This tendency inhibits creative thought processes. When reading about culture in the management literature, the reader who has an anthropological frame of reference may feel frustrated, bothered by lack of precision. Conversely, the business
manager may be impatient with the ethereal words of the anthropological theorist. To reap benefit from all organizational culture studies, people must be flexible when thinking about culture and not get stuck on the technical discrepancies. It is more helpful to look for meaning and take notice of what is useful. The study results may be valid, but the concepts used to describe the study or results may be debatable.

As mentioned above, the first area of disagreement involves the definition and use of the word “culture.” This dispute could be resolved if only definitions of terms and scope of the issues were communicated more explicitly. For example, culture often means something different to anthropologists and business administrators; there is often only a vague resemblance between the concepts. The management literature borrowed the term “culture” from the field of anthropology and integrated it into the language of organizational leaders and workers alike. Furthermore, when culture is restricted to the workplace it deals with only some aspects of what anthropologists mean by culture. Because its meaning and how it is studied is not the same as in the anthropology literature, the same phenomenon is not studied.

Some authors contribute to the confusion by using “culture” as a metaphor, or figure of speech. Culture is real – even though it is a vague abstraction. Culture is something that an organization has. Using “culture” as a metaphor to discuss organizations is confusing and should be discontinued. There are plenty of other more appropriate metaphors. For example, using the metaphor of climate is not confusing. An organization may be described as “stormy,” “warm,” or “cold.” People understand that these are figures of speech, one does not get wet and wind blown when one enters a
company. Likewise, the metaphor of a machine is appropriate because clearly people are not conveyor belts, gears, or conduits.

The second contested idea involves the method of assessing organizational culture. Researchers have identified multiple methods that can be used to assess culture. The method of choice depends on the personal paradigm of the researcher. Functionalists tend to have a preoccupation with managerial problems such as managerial control and productivity. They are more likely to proffer checklists and rating scales, complete with step-by-step directions. Interpretivists, on the other hand, tend to focus on content and meaning of behaviors and how workers create and recreate the social structures that form the organization. They are more likely to use interviews and participant observation to understand how workers experience their work lives.

Sometimes disagreement is related to data interpretation, not to data collection. When one assesses an organization’s culture, a complete picture is never obtained. In fact, one can only get a snapshot of one moment in time. Assessing culture may be likened to analyzing a cartoon. Each view or snapshot is one frame of a cartoon. Each frame is just slightly different than the previous or subsequent one, but when each frame is photographed, placed on a reel, and projected rapidly in sequence, the cartoon comes to life and frame changes no longer seem subtle. Furthermore, what the researcher sees depends on the lens used for viewing the culture and the focus of the investigation.

The third idea that is highly contested involves culture management. Again, much of the debate could be resolved if only definitions and concepts were made explicit. For example, the words “cultural change” are not synonymous with “cultural influence” and neither expression is synonymous with “culture management.” There are not-so-
subtle differences in the meanings; yet, in the literature these terms are often used interchangeably. It is possible that cultures can be “coaxed” in new directions but rarely created, planned, or managed. The exception would be if monumental changes were made including the replacement of many individuals; but then one should question if indeed the same culture even exists.

The bottom line is that organizational change implies cultural change; therefore, people can influence and shape cultural changes through everyday workplace interactions. Through these interactions, organizational culture is continuously and simultaneously being created and sustained. Organizations and their cultures are not static; workers come and go; new technologies are made available; external forces exert pressures; boundaries change; organizational purpose may change; and competitors may change. At the same time, constraining forces attempt to sustain the status quo because individuals and groups seek stability – until they personally decide that change would benefit them, or at the very least, not threaten them.

There are a great many authors who wrote about organizational culture, fewer who wrote about organizational communication, and fewer yet who wrote about the use of humor in the workplace. What is missing are studies that tie the three topics, organizational culture, organizational communication, and workplace humor together; yet, interpreting episodes of humor is useful in providing insights into a society’s values and rules of behavior; status, power, and control relationships; commitment; and motivation. There are few descriptions of how humor used in a work setting fostered identification, commitment, and person-organization fit, or in other ways created or
sustained the organization’s culture. There is also little exploration of how personal and occupational identities are constituted and revealed through humor.

The topic of humor use, in general, is in desperate need of additional investigation. Besides a scarcity of research that ties workplace humor to organizational culture, much of the available research is dated. In fact, many of the humor articles referenced in this dissertation were published 15-25 years ago. Following is a description of what is available and what is missing in the literature.

Several authors from a number of different perspectives (psychology, education, physiology, and sociology) have described various functions of humor use. Most of the authors stressed the benefits of humorous interplay, but rarely have they described any detriments to the use of humor. This is an important issue that should be explored in future research because most people have experienced or witnessed the negative effects of humor that went awry.

A number of authors reviewed the accepted theories of humor and explored “why” something was evaluated as being funny, ambiguous, illogical, or inappropriate. Others related humor networks to interpersonal relationships and status structures by identifying the target and butt of jokes. Other topics commonly discussed in the humor literature include differences between the genders and the ethnic groups relative to type of humor used and when it was used. Unfortunately, few researchers have tried to identify differences in humor use, and humor appreciation, by age of employee or length of time in a profession.

It is important to note that much of the humor research was not conducted in a naturalistic work setting. Many assumptions about workplace humor have been
generalized from study results that used other participants in other settings. Much of the workplace humor research was actually conducted on college campuses using students as subjects. This is a major weakness in workplace humor studies because generalizing from a classroom of students, who may or may not be employed, to a group of employees in a work setting is a significant leap. I am not confident that students in a classroom setting would answer questions about a hypothetical place of business in the same manner as actual employees would answer questions about their workplace. Another methodological weakness is related to data collection. Many of the studies used rating scales and surveys that limit the type of information available for interpretation. Rarely was participant observation the method used to collect data, and not one study was found which used focus groups.

In summary, humorous interplay in the workplace remains an important topic and has the potential of providing insight into organizational culture. When one thinks about the many humorous occasions that impact workers daily, and the importance that people place on the sense of humor, it is easy to see that the phenomena has not been studied sufficiently or to the degree that such an important and prevalent phenomena deserves. Occasions of humorous interplay need to be explored to answer the following questions:

- How do workers use humor to make sense of their work life?
- How do workers use humor to control their work life?
- What types of misunderstandings develop and how do they develop?
- When, where, how, and why are there differences and similarities in humorous interplay across groups, within groups, and within individuals?
Results of the research may help leaders and workers alike understand if they should engage in humorous interplay; and if so, when, where, and how they should use humor. Finally, they will know when to expect differences and similarities in humor use and humor appreciation across groups, within groups, and within individuals. Once humor is better understood, its use will be more purposeful with more predictable results. It is a skill to be refined, similar to other interpersonal skills. The use of humor can be refined, but probably not mastered because culture offers only a partial explanation of why people think and behave as they do. Meaning is the result of complex communication processes. Workers come to a situation with their own biases, assumptions, feelings, attitudes, experiences, and skills, and these differences affect humorous message reception and interpretation.
Chapter III. Methodology

The first section of Chapter III restates the research question then justifies the use of qualitative methods. The next sections describe the study site, gaining access to the site, and informed consent. A recounting of aspects of the author’s personal world that impacts the study follows. The next section describes the two data collection methods used: focus groups and participant observation. Data analysis activities are then described including mechanical analysis and interpretive analysis. The final section in this chapter addresses concerns of reliability and validity, and limitations of focus group and participant observation research.

Overview of Qualitative Methodology

The one overarching research question that directed this study was: How is humor created and experienced within this organizational culture? The two subordinate questions that guided this study included:

1. How are employees’ perceptions, beliefs, and experiences related to humor similar or different depending on their place in the organizational hierarchy?
2. How do employees at different levels in the organization’s hierarchy use humor to meet similar or different goals?

Given the exploratory nature of this investigation, qualitative methodology was the most appropriate procedure to use. Qualitative research provides in-depth information into fewer cases whereas quantitative procedures typically provide more
breadth of information across a larger number of cases. Qualitative methods, including focus groups and participant observation, helped me gain a deeper and richer understanding of the complex concept of organizational culture and the role that humor plays to shape the culture. Because both focus groups and participant observation share an overlapping interest in group interaction, these methods were appropriate for this qualitative study. Each method contributed something unique to my understanding of the functions of humor in shaping organizational culture. Focus groups provided insights, perceptions, and explanations into the use of humor by organizational members, and participant observation activities were conducted primarily to discover if actual humor use by staff, supervisors, and administrators corresponded to what was reported in the focus groups. Data from focus groups were compared and contrasted to data obtained by participant observation.

Many who study organizational culture, organizational communication, and workplace humor favor qualitative methods (Pepper, 1995; Schein, 1992; Scogin & Pollio, 1980). Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) claimed that in order to interpret how organizational members make sense of their communication interactions, it is necessary to have access to instances of members communicatively making sense and access to the body of knowledge that members draw upon in order to make sense. They asserted that what is required are detailed observations of organizational members “in action” and detailed interviews of organizational members accounting for their actions. “The interpretive researcher tries to discover the experience of organizational members as they understand it without reference to a set of pre-established concepts” (Daniels & Spiker, 1987, p. 251).
Taking an interpretive perspective, knowledge of organizational culture was revealed in humorous communicative activities of workers. I was concerned with (a) the meanings of humorous communication and behavior and (b) the ways in which artifacts; values, norms, and rules of behavior; and basic assumptions were constructed around the use of humor. As Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) claimed, “Culture is amenable not to causal analysis but to interpretation. An account of organizational culture begs not for an assessment of its reliability and validity, but for an assessment of its plausibility and its insight” (p.123).

Qualitative studies may be strengthened by researchers who are members of the workforce. Schein (1992) stated that what is critically important to the study of organizational culture is how deep the researcher is allowed to get into the site. He claimed that much of what is at the heart of a culture will be “revealed to members only as they gain permanent status and are allowed to enter the inner circles of the group, where secrets are shared” (p. 13).

Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) shared this perspective. They recommended that the researcher become part of the workforce in order to become intimately familiar with the organizational life he or she is interpreting. Organizational culture and organizational communication studies should focus on the everyday, ordinary and extraordinary talk and behaviors of the study site (Morgan, 1986; Pepper, 1995). By being part of the workforce, everyday talk and behaviors are made visible and available for investigation. With this said, Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo warned that the researcher must not “go native” and become so physically and psychologically
incorporated in the setting that the issues of the people being studied become the researcher's issues, resulting in a loss of objectivity (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

I was unable to locate any studies of work-based humor published in the English language that used focus groups as a primary data collection method along with participant observation activities. In fact “Few researchers have concerned themselves specifically with the task of describing the nature of humorous interchanges as these occur in naturalistic or quasinaturalistic group settings” (Scogin & Pollio, 1980, p. 832). In Scogin and Pollio’s naturalistic study of humor use within on-going group processes, they used direct observation of different groups and tape recorded each session in order to describe the number, nature, and pattern of humorous events, and to reconstruct the significance of these events for the people involved. Researchers who studied humorous interplay in naturalistic work settings include Ullian (1976) and Vinton (1986). In both instances, participant observation was the primary methodology used. Mulkay, et al. (1993) studied humor in the workplace, however they focused on the interplay between worker and customer. Their case study described how they videotaped interactions in a photographic shop to show how people use humor to negotiate.

**Study Site**

The study was conducted at the child protection agency where I had been employed for nearly four years in a middle management position. The agency is located in an 11-story office building in the downtown area of a mid-size city. The agency serves this city as well as the surrounding suburbs within the county. The agency is a bureaucratic agency with distinct levels of hierarchy well defined in its organizational chart. The child protection agency employs approximately 360 people including top
administration, department managers, unit supervisors, front line staff who work directly with children and their natural parents or foster parents, and support staff.

**Gaining Access and Informed Consent**

Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) advised that “Because organizational research is done in organizations, methods must be devised that intrude as little as possible on organizational efforts to get the job done” (p. 120). Following this advise, I respected the time of the executive director and the staff and conserved the resources of the agency; yet, was open and forthright as to the anticipated resource needs and time commitments necessary to complete the study. To gain access, I made an appointment to meet with the executive director. At this meeting, permission was requested to complete the research project at the agency. The purpose of the research and the procedures for data collection were described including the specifics of participant selection, data gathering tools, and timeframes.

I asked permission to contact employees during work hours and to use agency telephones, e-mail, and interoffice mail for recruitment purposes. A request to use a conference room for the focus group sessions was made. Finally, a request was made to present an overview of the study to agency directors, managers, and supervisors at a regularly scheduled meeting. A primary reason for this meeting was to inform the organizational staff that the executive director supported the project, to assure them that their participation was approved, and that permission to use agency resources had been obtained.

The executive director and others were informed that all data would be kept confidential and anonymous. Anonymity was maintained by refraining from using names
of employees or the agency in the report. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and the agency as necessary. Tapes from the focus groups will not be shared with the executive director or other staff, and the tapes will remain my property and stay in my possession. The tapes will be destroyed six months after this dissertation is submitted in its final form for binding. Verbatim transcription from the taped sessions will also not be shared. The executive director was assured that this study was approved by the Human Subjects Research and Review Committee of the University of Toledo. The executive director was offered a copy of an interpretive report that includes aggregate information with illustrative quotes. Finally, the executive director was encouraged to ask any questions that he had regarding this study or how the results would be used.

**Author’s Lens**

**Justification for Choosing to Study My Place of Employment and Insight into Who I Am and How it Impacts My Perspective**

The request to study my own place of employment was not for pure ease of access because it is likely that I could have gained access to another agency. Rather, conducting the study at another work site would have resulted in a loss of insightful information. Learning how any organization works takes time. It takes time to get past the employees' formal manners that are reserved for new acquaintances. The greater the time one spends with people in their natural environment, the greater the likelihood one will observe the multiple layers of ordinary work life. Fetterman (1991) stated, “Ideally the ethnographer lives and works in the community for six months to a year or more…” (p. 94). In fact, a number of acclaimed authors (e.g., Alvesson, 1993; Roy, 1960; Van Maanen, 1991) have studied their own places of employment and published intriguing results.
I have been employed at the agency for nearly four years. This employment afforded closeness to the objects of study - organizational culture and use of humor; yet, I have not worked at the agency so long that everything was so familiar to me that I might have missed specific details. The position I hold is that of “manager,” a middle management position in a five tier hierarchical bureaucratic organization. The pyramidal organizational chart includes, from top down, the executive director, associate directors, managers, supervisors, and the bottom level includes front line direct service workers and support staff. My position offered ample opportunity to observe and listen to numerous voices in the agency but in hindsight, primarily voices of supervisors, managers, and directors. For one who is fascinated by work life this is a prime position for interacting with many workers and accessing multiple hierarchical perspectives.

Organizational culture demands a particular combination of closeness and distance (Schein, 1992). In many respects I was able simultaneously to occupy outsider and insider positions and not be blinded by conditions within the organization. Even though I work in the agency in which I studied, I was studying subcultures different from my own. These subgroups have different backgrounds and professional affiliations from mine. I am a nurse by profession and am visibly associated with health care in that I work in the agency’s clinic, surrounded by a medical-looking environment complete with stethoscopes, scales, blood pressure cuffs, and exam tables. The environment even smells different than the rest of the organization, like antiseptic or body odors and excrements, depending on the activities of the moment.

My role in the organization is to manage and monitor the health care of children involved with the child protection agency. In addition to managing the clinical activities
of the department’s nurses, my role includes formal and informal education of staff, families, and foster families. Another role is to act as a health care consultant and in that role I attend small and large group meetings with people internal and external to the agency, provide court testimony, and review records and case notes. This role is very distinct from the majority of other agency employees who are caseworkers. In many ways other subgroups are foreign to me. I have never completed their work. I have never shadowed them. I am unfamiliar with the daily problems that they face. Being different in these ways gives me “stranger” value.

In choosing a study site there was also a matter of practicality. I am not a young, full time student. I am established in my career, enjoy my work life, and have no intentions of leaving especially because I am eligible for retirement with full benefits in five years. A dissertation study had to be a good fit with me as a worker, wife, mother, daughter to aging parents, and support to an elderly grandmother. I would jeopardize many of these aspects of my life by engaging in long term ethnography in another agency.

In addition, there were other elements of self-interest in my choice. When I retire in five years, I will have the financial freedom and the additional time necessary to expand this dissertation study. My plans are to study work life in a variety of organizations by gaining employment in them. This dissertation study has allowed me to evaluate first hand the pros and cons of this future work.

Of course, there were problems associated with this effort to engage in "back yard" research. One problem was lack of neutrality due to conscious or unconscious selective perception of data and tendentious interpretation. However, Howard Van
Maanen (1991) said, “neutrality in fieldwork is an illusion” (p. 39). “People make sense of things by seeing a world upon which they have already imposed what they believe. People, in effect, read into things the meanings they wish to see; they vest objects, utterances, actions and so forth with subjective meaning which helps make their world intelligible to themselves” (Frost & Morgan, 1983, p. 207). I reduced excess subjectivity and the risk of being misled by taking systematic observations, and I was sensitive to ways in which my own value system could prejudice observations. My general tactic was to mix with everyone as equally as possible by spending time participating in a wide variety of events and activities.

Another problem associated with “back yard” research has to do with gaining and maintaining access. Employees view me as a fellow employee, not as a researcher. I was concerned that these distinct roles may cause confusion and affect access. I understood from the literature that I would have to continuously negotiate access, first with the executive director and other administrative staff, and then with individual employees as I asked to observe their meetings or invited them to participate in focus groups. My personal attributes may have been a decisive factor in their tolerance of my activities. My work role is generally considered to be that of a helper. Ordinarily, I have a nonthreatening and unobtrusive demeanor, and I am perceived as a sensitive, sincere, and trusting individual. I know this because, among other things, I have been successful in a number of special activities that I have coordinated. For example, two years ago I coordinated holiday gift giving for 1,000 children, and we had a record number of gifts to distribute. Last year I was the agency's United Way Campaign Manager and had a record year for donations. Finally, I received an award at the February 2000 employee
recognition dinner for being “the most sensitive” employee. These personal attributes helped establish rapport, allowing me to probe the thoughts and capture the behavior of workers accurately and in-depth. More important, these traits guided me in the study activities so they were conducted in a productive and humane manner without taking undue advantage of my management position.

According to Alvesson (1993), there are two primary reasons for studying organizational culture. He stated, “The first views organizational culture as a means of promoting more effective managerial action, and the second views culture as a point of entry for a broader understanding of and critical reflection upon organizational life and work” (p. 6). I do not believe that these two reasons are mutually exclusive, nor is one reason good and the other bad. Assessing organizational culture does not have to be with the intent to control it. The intent could be to build positive relationships, reduce stress, and improve creativity. A purpose not subordinated solely to managerial interests.

Managers, in fact, study their organizations all of the time. They study systems, products, and people. The difference between the study conducted by a manager and that conducted by a researcher in academia has to do with the purpose of the study and how the results are reported and used. The term research may not be used to describe the process of studying systems, products, and people; rather, terms such as system analysis, quality control, and performance evaluation are more prevalent. Most research has been conducted by those in academia. Perhaps more ought to be conducted and published by those in industry; the perspective may be enlightening. Those in academia should not be the exclusive spokespersons for business leaders.
My Management Style

Another potential hazard related to a manager conducting “back yard” research has to do with the use of study results. As alluded to above, results may be used to promote a more fulfilling and satisfactory work life. This would be in keeping with my management philosophy. I call my style of management “humanistic management” because of a mutual concern for agency goals and department expectations, along with individual needs, group processes, and interpersonal relationships. I am convinced that workers want to do a good job, and managers have the responsibility to help them develop their full potential and help them meet their needs for recognition, accomplishment, and sense of belonging.

Humanistic managers have confidence in their staff; therefore their ideas are sought, they are encouraged to participate in planning, goal setting, and creative problem solving, and responsibility is delegated with general rather than close supervision. The result is a cohesive team and organizational commitment. Humanistic managers make jobs meaningful because work should be a source of satisfaction. They make working conditions pleasant and encourage the coexistence of organizational goals and personal goals. Humanistic managers stress cooperation between management and labor because superiors and subordinates mutually influence one another. Control is widely shared and problems are confronted directly, with mutual respect in an environment of interdependence. You can control situations through cooperation, not by attempting to control people.

The opposite of the humanistic management style is the “authoritative management” style. I have worked under authoritative supervisors (one does not work
with them) and these individuals promote aggression, apathy, and defensive behavior. Under their leadership there is diminished initiative and little risk taking. Little input is requested from staff and there is limited delegation. Authoritative managers stress close supervision and adherence to policy and rules. Generally they ignore working conditions and discount interpersonal relations. They believe that the average person needs to be directed because workers have little initiative and lack problem solving skills.

Motivation is through fear and threats, or vague promises of status and job security.

Results of this study were reported in a manner that supports a humanistic style of management. Results provide insight into why workers say the humorous things that they do. The findings may help others understand the mystery of social interaction in the workplace. Finally, the findings may help others understand work life for its own inherent fascination.

**Personal Assumptions and Values**

Personal assumptions and values influence my way of being and knowing. Personal assumptions and values shaped the way I chose this study topic, the method of study, and it influenced my interpretation of the data. Accordingly, my assumptions and values that are relative to the use of humor in the workplace must be made explicit to the reader.

First and foremost, I believe that humor is functionally related to culture. Meaning is conveyed through humor, an artifact; and through humor, members control their group experiences and shape their culture. I assume that humorous interplay is associated with everyday work life in that it is routine and taken for granted. I also assume that even though it is purposeful versus random; it is not consciously utilized in
many instances. Humor involves more than one person, and through its use, meaningful structural relationships develop between the participants. For these reasons I assume that appropriate methods for studying organizational culture and humor use are through the group process of focus groups and through participant observation. Therefore, by looking at humorous interplay I was able to infer to the level of member beliefs and assumptions and organizational expectations.

I value a sense of humor and believe that it is an asset to all people in the workforce. I also value an optimistic attitude and caring relationships and believe that these are important attributes for all workers. It makes sense, then, that I would favor the positive outcomes of humor use. For example, humor helps us deal with life stresses and the little annoyances in our work life. It helps build interpersonal relationships which are beneficial in getting the job accomplished and meeting the mission of the organization. Humor also fosters creativity and helps the problem solving process. Just as humor use can lead to positive outcomes, humor use can also lead to negative outcomes. For example, humor can be effectively used in attempts to hurt others’ feelings, or make them feel foolish, or in other ways to deflate their egos. In the workplace, humor can also be disruptive and halt productivity. Attempts at humor may also lead to injury and property damage.

I value education, continuous learning, and the risk-taking that is necessary to experiment with new ways of thinking and being - this includes learning better ways in which to use humor. Employees who are continuous learners tend to have a more positive and energetic outlook on life; they acquire more interests, and engage in varied activities. These characteristics foster creativity and better problem solving and often
make a person more pleasant and appealing to be around. The inquiring attitude can energize others, leading to successful and fun filled work groups.

I admire employees who use a wide range of communicative strategies, including humor. People who become skilled in the proper use of interpersonal or discursive tools find that it benefits their relationships with others and helps meet the goals of their various, daily interactions. They tend to engage in stimulating conversation, they make their needs known, give directions clearly, and they help others to communicate their thoughts or intentions more readily. Interpersonal or discursive skills can be learned by reading or attending workshops, by imitating others considered successful or talented, and by practicing the skills and then evaluating the results.

I have a special interest in the affect that work life has upon employees. Aspects of commitment and work satisfaction especially intrigue me. I am also interested in how people manipulate their work environment to meet their personal or group needs. I am interested in the meaning that work has for people. I try to understand the workers I supervise and see aspects of work life from their perspective. The workplace is a fascinating laboratory for anthropology of work-studies.

I value hard work and honesty. I feel that not working to one’s capacity is very dishonest. I can tolerate honest mistakes and have patience with workers who are learning new tasks and may be slow. But I have little tolerance for purposefully slacking off, or an attitude that the agency owes me more than what I am receiving - which is generally safe working conditions, agreed upon salary, benefits, and other amenities. With this said, it may seem as though I have contradicted myself. On one hand I value humor – a type of playful communication – that is often considered to be an impediment
to getting things done. On the other hand I value a “nose to the grindstone” mentality. This is not a true dichotomy; through humorous interplay relationships are established, and work is made more fun, which in turn promotes more energetic and committed workers and higher quality output.

I value both the functionalist and interpretivist approaches to organizational culture studies. I am sure that this is related to my self as a scholar and my self as a manager. As a scholar, I find the work of the interpretivist thought provoking and intriguing. As a manager, I seek out concrete, recipe-style interventions that can help me and my staff better meet the goals of the organization. I have come to believe that the functionalist perspective makes complete sense, only once one understands the interpretivist perspective. For example, my manager self may want employees to align their personal values and goals with those of the organization to generate commitment and enhance organizational stability. If this is the case, then I may use formal and informal socialization processes, including the use of rites and rituals to communicate agency values and beliefs. However, to successfully carry out these activities, I must first accept the interpretive perspective that culture is highly subjective; that organizational structures are complex relationships; and reality is socially constructed and reflects the experiences and interpretations of its members. The interpretive perspective provides the basis for the functionalist perspective. It is possible that so many organizational initiatives fail because too much attention is paid to the functionalist approach while ignoring the interpretive perspective.
My Interest in Humor and Organizational Culture Analysis

My interest in the use of humor grew when I came to my present place of employment and an employee said, “You are smiling now, but just wait, you won’t be smiling for long.” The comment was not made in reference to the emotional work of helping abused and neglected children, but to the organizational climate that was fraught with tension, distrust, and low employee morale.

Within a year, I prepared a two-hour foster parent training program entitled, “Use of Humor in Caring for Our Children.” The executive director was interested in the topic and suggested, "Why don't you do something like that for the staff?" That was when I first decided to make humor my dissertation topic, along with another great interest - organizational culture analysis. Humorous interplay is an important construct for the illumination of culture. The content and form of humorous behavior may be viewed as a determinant of organizational life through its sense-making, meaning-creating, and norm-setting capacities. Humorous behavior may also be viewed as an organizational outcome.

My interest in organizational culture stemmed from my own experiences as a full time worker and student in Education Administration and Supervision. In school and in on-the-job management workshops, I learned about motivational theory, change theory, decision making, and problem solving. These topics intrigued me, but I was also disheartened when my peers and upper administration demonstrated a surprisingly low appreciation for these theories and techniques. It has been my experience that there is a wide gap between theories and research findings and their application in the workplace.
My Interest in Qualitative Research and Focus Groups

My preference for qualitative methodology originated from my Qualitative Research class. I enjoyed immensely the participant observation and interviewing assignments. Prior to that class I knew little about this research method. Since then I have continued to read ethnographies and have become interested in anthropology, especially anthropology of work studies.

Another one of my favorite Research and Measurement classes was Focus Groups. As partial class credit I completed three focus group assignments. For one assignment, I was the assistant moderator of a group held at a substance abuse treatment center and in the other two instances I was the moderator of groups held at an outpatient clinic. Since that time, I was recruited as a participant in two focus groups. The purpose of the one group was to learn about the health care needs of the community’s citizens, and the second focus group was conducted at my place of employment to evaluate effects of recent changes. I feel that the focus groups in which I was recruited as a participant were poorly organized and improperly led. Perhaps that is just conceit on my part, but I feel that I could have moderated a more effective group discussion. Participating in those two focus groups was frustrating to me because I experienced how powerful focused group discussions could be.

I retained a bias in favor of participant observation and focus groups due to my affirming experiences with my class assignments. In addition, I learned through my literature review that qualitative methods, especially participant observation, are the methods of choice of most researchers of culture, communication, and humor. With all this said, prior to conducting this study, I was not overly confident. I wondered, “Will I
focus my inquiry as needed? Will I effectively probe specific questions or comments? Will I be able to make sense of the data? Will staff be afraid to talk to me, feeling that I may tell their secrets?”

**Data Collection**

Focus group sessions and participant observation activities were used as a means to gather information from workers regarding their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences surrounding humor in the workplace. Data collection occurred over a three and a half-month period. The first participant observation period commenced September 27, 2000 and was completed November 10, 2000. This was followed by five focus group sessions. The second participant observation period began November 20, 2000 and was completed January 11, 2001.

Focus group sessions were tape-recorded and the tapes were transcribed verbatim. In addition, brief jotted field notes, that were later expanded into analytic notes and mental notes, were written to document aspects of the focus groups that audiotapes could not record such as gestures, facial expressions, head nodding, and other nonverbal communication. Likewise, brief jotted field notes were written during the participant observation activities, and again, these notes were expanded into extensive field notes. Following is a detailed description of focus groups, including specifics about recruitment procedures and the questioning route. An overview of participant observation and description about the roles of the investigator and assistant moderator conclude this section.
Overview of Focus Groups

Focus groups are small group discussions of predetermined and sequenced topics, facilitated by a moderator who asks open-ended questions in a permissive atmosphere in which participants are able to choose their manner of response. There are a number of reasons why this study benefited from the use of focus groups as the primary data collection method.

Schein (1992) advocated the use of the group interview to study organizational culture. He stated that the group interview could be used in addition to other methodologies or as the primary data-gathering activity as long as motivated and interested people are available and willing to discuss their organization. “In the group situation one can get at shared assumptions more directly because the group provides the stimulus to bring out what is ordinarily hidden, and the interviewer can observe the behavior of group members from the point of view of the very assumption being analyzed” (Schein, p. 179).

Focus groups are recommended if the goal of a study is to understand the perceptions, feelings, knowledge, attitudes, and practices of individuals because these are developed in part by interaction with others (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997). The point of doing a group interview is to bring a number of different people who have different perspectives into contact with one another so they can provide evidence of similarities and differences in opinions and experiences (Morgan). Also, until people interact with others on a topic, they are often unaware of their own implicit perspectives (Morgan). Focus groups are more powerful than observation when processes (such as attitude formation) are unobservable and when certain behaviors are either too private or habit-
ridden to offer much opportunity for meaningful observation (Morgan). Focus groups are more powerful than individual interviews because they present a more natural environment in which participants are influencing and influenced by others – just as they are in real life. Focus group results have been described as exploratory and illuminating, but Krueger (1994) warned that focus groups should not be used if statistical projections are needed.

**Focus group participants.**

This study used a total of five focus groups in order to identify trends and patterns in perceptions. There was homogeneity within groups in regards to level in the hierarchical structure of the organization; yet, the groups had sufficient variation among participants to allow for contrasting opinions. Morgan (1997) warned that differences in hierarchical status among focus group participants are likely to create problems either due to ethical issues or because of the high probability that the discussion will be uncomfortable and perhaps conflict-ridden. In forming the focus groups, the goal was homogeneity in background, but not homogeneity in attitudes (Morgan). Homogeneity allows for more spontaneous conversations among participants within groups and facilitates analyses that examine differences in perspective between groups (Morgan).

The group dynamics were very different in each group. These differences were likely due in part to power relationships between me and the participants. Focus Group 1 (FG 1) consisted of top administration: the executive director and the six associate directors. All individuals at this level of the organization were invited. There were a total of seven possible recruits. The members of FG 1 were positioned above me in the organization’s hierarchy. One member was even my direct supervisor. Originally, it was
my intention to exclude him from focus group participation; however, I could not think of a polite way to do that since the directors were not volunteers in the same sense as other group participants. Spence, the executive director, piggybacked this focus group onto his mandatory directors meeting, so it would have been very awkward for someone to get out of the commitment especially since it was lunchtime, and I was providing lunch. My boss was not only curious and wanted to see what was going to happen, he also did not want to pass up on lunch.

Focus group 1 was the only group comprised of an established pre-formed group of people. I assumed that they engaged in a lot of humorous interplay since Spence was one of the major humor initiators during the participant observation activities and they met as a group regularly. This assumption was not confirmed; FG 1 was very quiet. They were business-like and as a group they seemed to have a low level of energy. For the most part, the low energy level of FG 1 continued throughout the session. Many of the members told stories as though they were obligated to do so, without much enthusiasm and without going into a lot of detail. Brett and Simon were an exception; they were not as quiet as the other five members and they actually seemed to have fun telling me their stories. I sensed that this group was holding back. I wondered if it was because they are positioned higher in the organizational hierarchy than me and they didn’t trust me with their secrets. It is also possible that they in fact did not share a lot of humor amongst themselves. Perhaps I was intimidating because soon I would have a higher educational degree than any one of them, and masters and doctorate majors are in administration and supervision, yet they are the administrators. Bringing in Pat, the
assistant moderator, who holds a doctorate in Educational Psychology and Human Resource Development may have further intimidated the group.

I was persistent in prodding this group for specifics but often their responses were brief and nonspecific phrases without detail. This could have been a mechanism to keep information confidential and this theme will be discussed later in the report. I felt that they had plenty of stories to tell because they were a very literate group of individuals who had had an established relationship, but perhaps I was wrong. As a group they had little tenure with the agency, and it is possible that their time together was without bantering, teasing, or joking. On the other hand, my intuition was telling me that they just did not want to share; they wanted me to accept a simplified answer, period.

Focus Group 2 (FG 2) consisted of a sample of agency managers, a group of my peers. There were a total of 16 individuals in management level positions. The managers are accustomed to being with me in meetings and interacting as peers. This is the only group that would not have been telling stories “out of school.” FG 2 was a high-energy group. They came into the room talking enthusiastically to me and to each other. There was also a lot of teasing and bantering as they were getting their pizza. I was glad that the assistant moderator was present during FG 2 because I was afraid the managers would not take the research seriously. The assistant moderator legitimized the focus group research. She dressed in a no-nonsense fashion with a dark straight long wool skirt and a white long sleeved blouse that promoted a sense of business. They took a special interest in the assistant moderator, gathering around her and asking her numerous questions.

Focus Group 3 (FG 3) consisted of a sample of individuals at the supervisory level. There were a total of 43 supervisory level employees at the agency. The assistant
moderator was present for this group, but the supervisors did not take as much interest in her as the managers did. On the organizational chart, I was one step higher than the supervisors. I attended some joint meetings with supervisory staff so many were accustomed to interacting with me. I did not anticipate that my position in the organization would hinder their storytelling and in fact I do not think it did. Even though during the pre-session small talk the group was not energized and there was little spontaneous discussion, teasing, or joking; it all changed when Marcia arrived. That was when the group readily allowed me to enter their humor circle. By the second question, FG 3’s energy level was very high.

Focus Group 4 (FG 4) was made up of a group of front line direct service workers. These were workers who come in contact with children and their families on a daily basis. Potential recruits included caseworkers, visitation managers, transportation staff, and security officers. There were a total of 185 individuals who held front line direct service jobs. FG 4 was very quiet during the pre-session discussion, and they hardly took any food, but when asked to help themselves, Roberta replied, “You don’t have to twist our arms.” During the first question they began to warm up a little. Soon after they were engaged and energized.

Focus Group 5 (FG 5) consisted of support staff. Potential recruits included clerical and secretarial staff and people working in the legal department, fiscal department, mailroom, print shop, records department, etc. There were a total of 77 individuals who held support staff positions. This group remained extraordinarily quiet and sedate throughout the session. Each member told a story but the storytelling lacked the energy and enthusiasm of the other groups. The members were pleasant, but for the most
part seemed meek and mild, and they even appeared somewhat sad. They sat up straight in their chairs, leaned slightly forward, attentively maintained eye contact with me but they rarely smiled, giggled, or laughed out loud. For the most part they spoke in soft serious voices. I did not get the sense that they were holding back; they just seemed depressed. I believed them when they explained, “Our department’s so serious.”

According to Morgan (1997), the most important determinant of the number of groups is the variability of the participants both within and across groups. For this reason it was determined that five focus groups would be sufficient. The goal was to recruit approximately six to nine individuals for each group. Authors do not recommend an absolute group size, but most recommendations fall within the range of six to 12 people (Bellenger, et al., 1979; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Wells, 1979). In certain circumstances as few as four or as many as 12 individuals may compose a focus group (Krueger; Morgan; Wells). Krueger suggested that it must be small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights and large enough to provide diversity of perceptions. Very small groups lose mutual stimulation, and when groups are too large, some participants hesitate to speak even though they have something valuable to say (Wells).

The following method was used to obtain the random samples for Focus Groups 2 through 5 (Focus Group 1 included all possible subjects). First, names of all employees were obtained from an up-to-date agency roster. The roster contained 352 names. Twenty-four names of direct service workers were removed from the roster; eight names were eliminated because the workers had a direct reporting relationship to me and 16 of the individuals were temporary employees or employees in training. The remaining
names on the roster were grouped by hierarchical level: managers, supervisors, front-line direct service workers, and front-line non-direct service workers. Depending on the size of the group, each nth number was picked to be in the recruitment pool. For example, if ten names were needed from a list of 50, every 5th person on the list was selected. Randomization, where all participants have an equivalent chance to be involved in the focus group, removed the bias in selection which makes it particularly appropriate when inferences are made to a larger population (Krueger, 1994).

The eight workers who had a direct reporting relationship with me were removed from the population of potential participants prior to the random selection process for a number of reasons. First and foremost, these individuals may have felt obligated to participate, fearing reprisal if they did not. Second, they may have been selective in what they said, afraid that I would react in an unpleasant manner if negative ideas were expressed. Third, the discussion may have had limited spontaneity since I have heard a lot of their humorous stories before. They may have felt reluctant to repeat a story, or if they did retell the story, it may have been with limited detail.

Not only would it have been difficult for my staff if I led the focus group, for numerous reasons, it would have been personally difficult for me to objectively moderate a focus group composed of my staff. First, I was emotionally attached to these individuals and considered myself to be a part of their work group, so it would have been very difficult to not react to unfavorable responses. Even a reaction as slight as a smile, rolling eyes, or raised eyebrows may have inhibited continued open discussion. Second, it would have taken extra discipline to listen and not speak if I was a witness to the humorous interplay that they were describing. Third, I may have judged the quality or
worth of a comment based on who said it. I held special opinions of those I worked with everyday; some were judged as either sensible, senseless, helpful, not helpful, smart, scattered-brained, fun-loving, or boring, etc. Fourth, I may have felt anxious or pressured to perform and this may have limited my ability to think clearly and rapidly. In summary, to collect meaningful information, the participants must feel comfortable in talking, and the moderator must feel comfortable leading the group in discussion.

Rarely will researchers find over 50% of the potential participants agreeing to participate unless the group is held during work hours and they are paid to attend, or if the group is “piggy backed” onto existing events or activities (Krueger, 1994). Participants in this study were not paid to attend, and the time spent in the focus group session was not considered part of their worked hours. For this reason, the focus group sessions were held close to the typical lunch hour, from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. This amount of time was sufficient because the 1½-hour session gave me sufficient time to develop rapport and ask all of the questions on the questioning route without rushing the participants. Lunch including pizza, soft drinks, fruit, and cookies was provided. Information about the free lunch was relayed to the participants in their initial invitation and in their confirmation letter. As another incentive to attend, the participants were told that they would receive a small gift for attending. The gift was a six-inch glass jar filled with “Payday” and “Snickers” snack size candy bars. The gift was valued at less than $7.00 each. The focus groups were held in a convenient location in the agency. This was another incentive for some people to participate in the research because, as Wells (1979) suggested, there is an increased probability that participants will show up if the focus group is held at their home base.
**Recruitment procedures for the focus groups.**

Recruitment of participants entailed a three-part process. First, 10 days before the session a telephone call was made to invite ten randomly selected workers to attend a focus group session (see Appendix A for script of initial invitation). Because the goal for Focus Groups 2 through 5 was to have six to nine participants each, ten people were recruited because it was anticipated that not all who accept the invitation would keep the commitment. Krueger (1994) suggested that usually it is best to over-recruit by 10-25% at this initial stage, depending on the topic and incentive. When a person accepted the invitation, a follow-up confirmation letter (Appendix B) was sent to the worker within two days via the interdepartmental mail. Finally, two days before the session, a reminder telephone call was made to the individual (see Appendix C for the script).

Table 1 lists information about the recruitment process and group member participation. It lists the number of individuals invited to participate in a focus group, the number of commitments to participate, and the number of actual attendees. Twice as many individuals as needed were contacted. Direct care workers were the most difficult to recruit. This was probably due to the fact that they were out of the building frequently and had irregular lunch times. Nearly everyone else had a more typical daily schedule that included a mid day lunch break.
Table 1

Recruitment of Focus Group Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Number of Potential Recruits</th>
<th>Number Contacted</th>
<th>Number Committed</th>
<th>Number Attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 1 Directors</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 2 Managers</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 3 Supervisors</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 4 Direct service workers</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 5 Non direct service workers</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>328</strong></td>
<td><strong>75</strong></td>
<td><strong>44</strong></td>
<td><strong>36</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The group sizes of seven or eight participants were ideal because everyone had enough time to say what they wanted to say. Throughout the transcripts the typed word “pause” indicated a longer pause in the flow of the conversation than would normally occur in typical conversation. The numerous pauses indicated to me that participants had an opportunity to speak if they were waiting to do so.

**Conducting the focus groups.**

Workers were given the option to participate in the focus group or to decline. Those who agreed to participate were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix D). Participants in the focus groups were informed about the possibility of experiencing some discomfort when discussing their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences related to their use of humor and the use of humor of coworkers, supervisors, and subordinates. Participants were also informed that all information obtained would remain confidential.
Pre-session activities included inviting individuals to help themselves to lunch and engaging them in small talk. The purpose of the pre-session small talk was to determine seating arrangements. I was prepared to determine seating arrangements based on each worker’s tendency to dominate a conversation or not participate at all. Only once was a seat assigned to a worker and that was when a tardy member began to take a seat apart from the group.

The focus group sessions proceeded in the following sequence: participants were asked to take their seats, then they were welcomed and provided an overview of the topic, and ground rules were stated (see Appendix E for script of welcome, overview, and ground rules). Next, questions on the questioning route were covered (see Appendix F for questioning route.) At the end of the 1 ½ - hour discussion the participants were thanked and the incentive gifts were passed out.

**Focus group questions.**

When asked the questions on the questioning route, the group participants were encouraged to give concrete and detailed accounts of their experiences. The goal was to avoid a discussion of vague generalities. A discussion of experiences produces a livelier group dynamic than a discussion of opinions, in addition, people are typically more than happy to compare their different experiences, rather than challenge another’s opinion (Morgan, 1997).

A questioning route versus a topic guide was used because it produces more efficient analysis and eliminates subtle differences in language that may alter the intent (Krueger, 1994). The questioning route included 13 questions in the sequence suggested by Krueger. There was one opening question; a ‘round robin’ question that all
participants answered. The purpose of the opening question was to help the focus group members become comfortable, to identify characteristics that the participants had in common (Krueger), and to get every group member to speak at least once to get people talking. There were two introductory questions that introduced the general topic of discussion and provided the participants an opportunity to reflect on past experiences (Krueger) and their connection with the use of humor in the workplace. Next, four transition questions were included to help the participants envision the topic in a broader scope (Krueger). Following the transition questions, there were five key questions. Finally, there was one ending question that brought closure to the topic and enabled participants to reflect on previous comments, clarify responses, and offer additional information (Krueger).

The third key question involved a sentence completion task. This question was designed to elicit information on motivation and feelings regarding inhibitors of humor in the workplace. Participants were asked to write down their answer and then share what they had written. Benefits of this type of question were numerous: it allowed participants to collect their thoughts before responding; it minimized the tendency for participants to automatically agree with one another because everyone completed the question as an individual first; and it encouraged even the quiet group members to participate (Krueger, 1994). I collected their written answers after the participants verbally shared their responses. Two participants failed to submit their answers; one individual was a manager and the other was a supervisor.

Prior to asking the twelfth question, a questionnaire (Appendix G) was distributed to the participants. Participants were asked to place a mark next to the functions of
humor used by them, by their peers, and by their boss. The uncued, open-ended questions were asked before the questionnaire was distributed so that the thinking of the participants would not be restricted. One goal of the questionnaire was to provide a cue to prompt additional discussion; however, little discussion followed the questionnaire completion task. The group members either had nothing else to contribute, they were getting tired, or they had to get back to work on time. Two people failed to submit their completed humor function questionnaire. One individual was a manager and the other individual was a supervisor. In Focus Group 4 seven direct service workers completed the questionnaire, however one questionnaire was discarded because every available space was marked, so it did not look valid.

**Overview of Participant Observation**

The most common method of organizational culture research is the interpretive approach using participant observation (Pepper, 1995). The goal of participant observation is to gain access to the subjective worlds of the participants and to collect as many different perspectives as possible, so as to confirm or disconfirm any piece of information (Pepper). Focus groups cannot replace participant observation as a principal tool for the investigation of organizational culture because some interactions cannot be recreated in group interviews. Morgan (1997) explained that when the interaction of interest does not consist of a “discussion” then more naturalistic participant observation is necessary.

Lundberg’s (1969) and Ullian’s (1976) data collection schemes were pertinent to this study and were adopted and adapted to guide my listening and learning when humorous interplay was witnessed in the participant observation part of this study and
during the focus groups. This helped me pay attention to the content and structure of humorous interaction. I used Lundberg’s four “analytical categories” of individuals involved in joking:

- **Initiator** – the person who told the joke or began the humorous act e.g., boss, subordinate, peer, client, or other.
- **Target** – the person to whom the joke was told or the humorous act was performed e.g., boss, subordinate, peer, client, or other.
- **Butt** – the person at whose expense the humor was directed, e.g., boss, subordinate, peer, client, object, self, or other.
- **Audience** – the individual or group who observed the humorous act or heard the joke, e.g., private very small group, a very large group, small formal group, small informal group, large formal group, or large informal group.

I also used four analytic categories to investigate conditions surrounding humorous interplay:

- **Location** – the site within the agency where the joke was told or the humorous act was performed, e.g., meeting room, break room, elevator, hallway, outdoors, or in an office.
- **Context** – the circumstance surrounding the humorous interplay, e.g., oral presentation, small talk, written communication, or computer communication.
- **Climate** – the feeling that was conveyed by the individual or group, e.g., tense, relaxed, frustrated, bored, anxious, angry, or happy.
- **Humor Type** – the method used to convey humor, e.g., joke, wisecrack, story, prank, cartoon or picture, gesture or funny face, noise, song, or Freudian slip.
The participant observation activities took place approximately one month prior to
and one month after the series of five focus groups. The participant observation part of
the project occurred approximately one hour per day, three to four times per week. The
goal was to complete a total of 24 to 32 noncontinuous hours of participant observation.
Ninety-six humorous episodes were documented during the first participant observation
period, and 128 humorous episodes were documented during the second period.
Participant observation activities were conducted primarily to discover if actual humor
use by staff, supervisors, and administrators corresponded to what was reported in the
focus groups.

Participant observation activities occurred surreptitiously so that I would not draw
attention to myself and to the fact that humorous interplay was being documented. Brief
jotted notes were written during the humorous episode if feasible, or soon afterward.
These field notes were expanded as soon as possible after data collection, at the very least
within 12-hours of the observation, so that details of the episode and surrounding
conditions were less likely to be forgotten. The participant observation occurred
primarily during meetings since I normally attended a number of meetings each week, but
observations also occurred outside of meetings. No occasion of observed humor use was
ignored when it was serendipitously and spontaneously presented such as when walking
in the halls or taking the elevators.

Purposeful sampling was used to select a variety of groups for participant
observation. Purposeful sampling enabled me to study groups that varied in size, purpose
for being together, and mix of workers – specifically it allowed me to study group
interactions of workers from more than one hierarchical level. Groups were also
observed in different locations such as in small meeting rooms and large auditoriums. Some of the scheduled meetings that were attended included Management Team Meetings, Supervisors Meetings, All-Staff Meetings, and Family Case Conferences. Participant observation activities also took place during other meetings and celebrations.

**Roles of the Investigator and Assistant Moderator**

Prior to, and throughout the study period, I built trust and rapport with agency employees by demonstrating genuineness, empathy, and active listening skills. This assisted in developing an open and supportive relationship with the workers. In turn, most workers seemed to freely share their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences regarding the use and function of humor in the work setting.

During the focus groups, I was primarily concerned with moderating, listening, observing, and analyzing. The goal was to blend detachment and interest by prompting discussion and probing answers and at the same time by not expressing my own views openly or subtly. According to Merton et al. (1956), doing so may invite unauthentic comments, defensive remarks, or else inhibits certain discussions altogether. In actuality, even though I attempted to maintain a pleasant facial expression with a soft smile, my expression changed with the context of the joking or storytelling. Many times I laughed out loud when something very funny was said. Conversely, when something sad or negative was related my facial expression became more serious or concerned.

Two assistant moderators were hired to assist with the focus group sessions (see position description, Appendix H). One assistant moderator committed to helping with three of the groups and the other assistant moderator committed to helping with two of the groups. Unfortunately, there was an assistant moderator present for only three focus
group sessions. The two assistant moderators cancelled one time each without enough
advance notice to get a replacement. Once an assistant moderator arrived 20 minutes
late. When the assistant moderators were present they helped by handling refreshments,
arranging the seating, distributing consent forms, taking notes, and operating the
recorder. This was very helpful because it allowed me to focus entirely on the flow of the
conversation. The assistant moderators also provided a degree of validity to the focus
group results by assisting in the post session debriefings (Krueger).

**Data Analysis**

“Data analysis includes selecting, condensing and transforming data; displaying
these data in an organized way and drawing and verifying conclusions from the
condensed, displayed data” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 299). The goal of analysis was
to prepare a report about what emerged from the focus group discussions and participant
observation. Theory emerged from an accumulation of information from both
methodologies.

Two broad analysis functions were undertaken: (a) mechanical analysis and (b)
interpretive analysis (Knodel, 1993). Mechanical analysis consisted of sorting,
organizing, categorizing, and coding information. Interpretive analysis identified trends
and patterns that lead to insights and conclusions.

**Mechanical Analysis**

The method of mechanical analysis was adapted from Knodel and Mason (1996).
It consisted of (a) sorting and ordering, (b) charting, and (c) coding. One step was not
necessarily completed before beginning the subsequent step.
Step 1 – Sorting and ordering activities:

- Audio-tapes were labeled and dated immediately after use by the assistant moderator or myself. I transcribed the tapes into a word processing program, printed the text, and filed it in a separate folder for each focus group session.

- Field notes were jotted in spiral notebooks. Each entry was dated. Daily, I transcribed the brief jotted field notes and the expanded analytic and mental field notes into a word processing program, then printed and filed the notes in a separate folder for each participant observation period.

- I did minor editing to correct grammar and to remove duplicate words or phrases from the same speaker and to eliminate most incomplete sentences. This improved the readability so as not to distract from intentions of the spoken words. According to Krueger (1994), this is appropriate as long as the meaning is not changed. In the transcribed notes verbal meandering including the hems, haws, and when people forgot what they were saying in mid sentence was also eliminated as suggested by Wells (1979). Below is an editing example to show the extent of data reduction and alteration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Text</th>
<th>Edited Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And I guess this is sort of confidential. I have a worker who has had some</td>
<td>This is confidential. I have a worker who has had some issues the past two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>issues the past two years and so we have had to do some corrective action plans</td>
<td>years that resulted in some corrective action plans. The worker’s evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and different things. So what I did was have the… The worker’s evaluation</td>
<td>was due so I had the worker self-evaluate herself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was due so I had the worker to self-evaluate their self.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Each file folder as well as each document was named and labeled. For example, FG 1 was the name assigned to the focus group that consisted of directors. PO 1 was the name for the first participant observation period.
• The transcribed notes of each focus group and each participant observation period were maintained in separate word processing files.

• Copies of the focus group and participant observation computer files were made. The original files were left untouched for use as a backup if necessary. The copies were used for coding and rearranging the documents according to emerging themes.

• To help ensure that data was not lost, the original files were copied to computer disks and the disks were stored in a secure location. On a regular basis, the computer files that were being manipulated were backed up onto computer disks.

• Focus group transcripts were sorted by responses to the questions in the questioning route.

Step 2 – Charting activities

Once data were transcribed, sorted, and ordered, they were charted to provide a visual summary of the data. Tables were very helpful in the analysis of the results because it was easier to see patterns in the summarized charted format than in the straight text.

• For focus group data, charts were developed to display the responses of nearly every question on the questioning route. Charts were also used to show bantering episodes and strings of bantering, and results of the questionnaire associated with question 12. In addition, charts were created to depict the initiator, butt, climate, and humor type associated with the storytelling and joking.

• For participant observation data, charts were created to show the initiator, target, butt, audience, location, context, climate, and humor type associated with the observed humorous interplay.
• Most of the tables were not inserted into this document because after describing the table in the text, the table itself became unnecessary – it was duplicate information – not new information.

**Step 3 – Segmenting and Coding activities**

To search for themes, or ideas, related to organizational culture, statements in the focus group and participant observation transcripts were segmented and coded. First, coding was used to identify the three main subjects: (a) functions of humor, (b) individual differences or antecedent conditions, and (c) structure of humorous interplay. Second, these three main subjects were divided into categories, further divided into subcategories, and finally major emergent themes. The three main subjects, categories, subcategories, and major themes are outlined below. This outline is followed during the reporting of the results and in discussing the conclusions.

**A. Functions of Humor**

**Psychological functions of humor**

Reduce tension, stress, and anxiety

Deny the serious intent of a message

Cope with embarrassment

Entertain or be playful, or reduce boredom

Share positive feelings or express support or sympathy

Cope with horror and emotional pain

Cope with the unexpected and socially inappropriate

**Social functions of humor**

Build rapport and develop friendships
Persuade or get work done
Assimilate or fit in
Control others’ behaviors
Express disapproval
Put others in their place, or demean or insult others
Express superiority over others

Negative Outcomes Related to the Use of Humor
Not intentionally hurtful humor
Intentionally hurtful humor
When the use of humor is inappropriate

Results of the Functions of Humor Questionnaire

B. Individual Differences/Antecedent Conditions

Gender/Sexual Humor

Ethnic Humor

Humor Aimed at Physical Appearance and Personal Traits

Humor Aimed at or about People who are Liked and Disliked

Supportive - disparaging continuum of humor

Care giving

C. Structure of Humorous Interplay

Humor Initiators

Humor initiators identified by focus group participants
Humor initiators observed during focus groups
Humor initiators observed during participant observation
Paybacks

What prevents workers from using humor

Confidentiality

Butt of Humorous Interplay

The butts of humor identified by focus group participants

The butts of humor observed in focus groups

The butts of humor observed in participant observation

Issues of Time

Very Funny Stories

Stories that were Not Funny

Audience of Humorous Interplay

Targets of Humorous Interplay

Location of Humorous Interplay

Climate during Humorous Interplay

Context Surrounding the Humorous Interplay

Type of Humor

Bantering

Speaking Episodes

Story Specificity and Spontaneity

**Interpretive Analysis**

Interpretive analysis was a less structured process than mechanical analysis. Interpretation took into account evidence beyond words and aimed at making sense of the data (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Trends and patterns identified in mechanical analysis
were studied and insights and conclusions were developed in light of the purpose which was to explore the role that humor plays in shaping organizational culture. Through this interpretive analysis process, I attempted to “understand the meanings” that workers assigned to the use of humor in the workplace. Since “authenticity” rather than reliability is often the primary issue in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 1995), the goal was to obtain an authentic understanding of workers’ use of humor.

Unlike the structured, systematic mechanical approach to data analysis, the unstructured, interpretive approach was dependent upon intuition and imagination. Krueger (1994) explained that interpretive analysis is highly dependent upon the mental makeup of the researcher. He said, researchers must be open to new ideas, they must be sufficiently secure with their own feelings to allow and encourage others to offer divergent views, and they must be able to step outside of their personal experience and express ideas from the viewpoint of others. Through a variety of educational experiences, work experiences, and community experiences I have had exposure to multiple ways of thinking and knowing, and this was clearly beneficial when seeking divergent opinions and making sense of observed behaviors.

Even though interpretive analysis is guided by intuition and creative thinking, the process will be explained in the following five concrete steps:

**Step 1**

In interpreting the data from the focus groups and participant observation activities, I thought not only about the spoken words and observed behaviors, but also paid attention to other worker characteristics as suggested by Krueger (1994):
• The energy level, enthusiasm, and degree of spontaneity of workers as they were interacting,
• The extent of involvement in humorous interplay,
• The frequency or extensiveness of comments, that is, how often certain topics were commented on,
• The emotional intensity of comments and actions, and
• The specificity of responses to my inquiries.

Step 2

When studying the results of the mechanical analysis, I sought various meanings and entertained alternative explanations. Interpretation of the data was facilitated by comparing and contrasting accounts from the two study methods. Identifying and reflecting on the themes and patterns that emerged in the focus groups and participant observation also facilitated interpretation. Krueger (1994) emphasized the importance of seeking interpretations that explain a sufficient amount of the cases; finding disconfirming evidence; and explaining the outliers, the unusual cases, or the minority views. However, he explained, it is not an indication of weakness if alternative interpretations emerge or even if no interpretations emerge because there may be no unifying explanations of participant views, except that the participants express differing opinions. The absence of patterns in the data can be a meaningful discovery (Krueger).

Step 3

According to Creswell (1998), the researcher must look at the impact that the researched have on the researcher, and conversely, the impact the researcher has on the researched because their relationship is interrelated. Therefore, I considered the degree to
which my presence influenced the worker’s words or behaviors, and the extent that the
data did or did not accurately reflect the real life experiences of the workers. I was
conscious of my biases, values, and experiences that were brought to the research study
(Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Finally, I relied on the views of the workers and
discussed their views within the context in which they occurred to develop theory
(Creswell).

Step 4

Krueger (1994) explained that when focus groups are used in qualitative research,
certain analysis functions must be performed while participants are still gathered
together. Therefore, during the discussion I listened for inconsistent comments and
nonspecific statements and probed for understanding.

Step 5

Interpretive analysis in which insights were developed and conclusions made did
not take place after data collection activities were completed. Rather, interpretive
analysis was an ongoing process that began day one of the project when permission was
requested from the executive director to study humorous interactions in the agency.
Every observed humorous episode was analyzed to understand the possible meanings it
had to the workers. In addition, explanations and stories from the workers were
compared and contrasted to witnessed behavior. In every case, ideas were adjusted and
revised as new data became available.

Validity

Two important issues in any research project are validity and reliability. Validity
can be referred to as the trustworthiness of the data. Validity is the extent to which an
account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers (Hammersly, 1990). Maxwell (1992) described five types of validity commonly used in qualitative research including descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability, and evaluative validity.

Maxwell (1992) defined descriptive validity as the factual accuracy of the account. That is, the researcher does not make up or distort what was seen or heard. Descriptive validity can also pertain to issues of omission because no account can include everything (Maxwell). The descriptive validity of the study was enhanced by extensive and detailed documentation of what was seen and heard and by analyzing the focus group and participant observation data in a timely manner. According to Krueger (1994), it is important not to delay analysis for several reasons. He explained that although comments may have been captured by recorder or by jotted notes, there are other types of input that affect analysis quality: the sense of the group, the mood of the group, the eagerness with which the participants talk. Over time, memories of these background factors fade and get confused with other incidences. As more focus groups are conducted or observations made, the recent discussions and observations interfere with the recollection of earlier accounts or episodes, and critical information may be lost.

The following steps were taken to help ensure that a delay in analysis did not affect descriptive validity:

- The focus groups and participant observation activities were scheduled so that a reasonable amount of time was allocated between them. Everything in memory was captured before the next experience.
• An assistant moderator was used during three of the five focus groups. Twice the assistant moderator cancelled, but when present the assistant devoted attention to capturing what was said and other factors that influenced the discussion.

• Immediately after the focus groups in which an assistant moderator was present, the assistant moderator and I debriefed to share our perceptions of critical points and notable quotes that emerged from the groups.

• I maintained objectivity by not discussing findings or impressions with anyone until tapes and/or field notes were transcribed and analyzed (Krueger, 1994).

Interpretive validity is concerned with “what objects, events, and behaviors mean to people engaged in and with them” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 288). I sought to comprehend phenomena not on the basis of my perspective, but from the perspective of the workers (Maxwell). Interpretive accounts were grounded in the language of the workers and relied as much as possible on their own words. Interpretive validity also pertains to the unconscious intentions, beliefs, concepts, and values of the participants (Maxwell). Maxwell explained that accounts of participants’ meanings are never a matter of direct access, but are always constructed by the researcher on the basis of the presenting evidence.

Maxwell (1992) asserted that qualitative research almost always involves some sort of inference because it is impossible to observe everything, even in one small setting. “Analysis decisions will be based on fragments of information” (Krueger, 1994, p. 129). The fragment selected may or may not be the one that is relevant to the situation because, “there is a tendency to selectively see or hear only those comments that confirm a particular point of view and to avoid dealing with information that causes us dissonance”
(Krueger, p. 129). “Our training, our background, and our experiences influence what we notice and what we attend to” (Krueger, p. 129).

To help ensure interpretive validity I used randomization in selecting focus group participants, and participant observation activities were conducted at various times and in various locations throughout the agency. Findings were confirmed by the data; they were not based on my personal experience. To enhance objectivity I identified personal biases and presuppositions.

“Theoretical validity … refers to an account’s validity as a theory of some phenomena” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 291). Maxwell explained that theoretical validity addresses the theoretical constructions that the researcher brings to the study, or develops during the study. This theory, he asserted, can refer to physical events or to mental constructions. The theory can include participants’ concepts and theories, but it must not be limited to simply describing the participants’ perspectives (Maxwell). Maxwell defined two aspects of theoretical validity: the validity of the concepts themselves as they are applied to the phenomena, and the validity of the postulated relationships among the concepts. Theoretical validity is concerned with problems that do not disappear once there is agreement on the facts of the situation; it is concerned with the legitimacy of the application of a theory to the facts, or if in fact, agreement can be reached about what the facts are (Maxwell).

Triangulation is a strategy that may be used to enhance theoretical validation. Triangulation involves using multiple data collection methods (focus groups and participant observation) and multiple data sources to corroborate research findings (Rossman & Wilson, 1985). In this study a series of five focus groups were conducted
and many small and large groups of workers were observed during the participant observation activities. Other factors that affected theoretical validity such as, how the study was framed, who was selected to participate in focus groups and participant observation activities, and the nature of the focus group questions, were also addressed.

“Generalizability refers to the extent to which one can extend the account of a particular situation or population to other persons, times, or settings than those directly studied” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 293). Maxwell explained that generalization usually takes place through the development of a theory that not only makes sense of the particular persons or situations studied, but also shows how the same process, in different situations, can lead to different results.

Maxwell defined two aspects of generalizability: internal generalizability which is generalizing within the community, group, or institution studied to persons, events, and settings that were not directly observed or interviewed; and external generalizability, which is generalizing to other communities, groups, or institutions. He asserted that internal generalizability is more important in qualitative research than external generalizability because qualitative researchers rarely make explicit claims about the external generalizability of their findings. In this study sufficient descriptive data was provided to allow others to assess the study’s generalizability internally to individuals not observed and interviewed, or externally to other settings. In addition, detailed accounts of the participants, setting, theoretical constructs, definitions, and research techniques were provided so that others may compare the results of this inquiry with other studies focused on humor and organizational culture.
The fifth type of validity that Maxwell (1992) described is evaluative validity which involves the application of an evaluative framework to the objects of study. He explained that the investigator might assign value to a fact, account, or phenomenon, rather than describe, interpret, or explain it. This activity of attributing a level of worth is unlike most nonjudgmental responses and activities. To enhance evaluative validity I described my background and made explicit my biases, assumptions, and viewpoints.

**Reliability**

Hammersley (1992) wrote, “reliability refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions” (p. 67). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) defined reliability as the interpretation of results with confidence. They stated that internal reliability relies on the logical analysis of the results, and it is enhanced with the use of multiple data sources and participant perspectives, along with extensive description. They explained that the case of external reliability must be argued on a logical basis since it is difficult to replicate qualitative studies. An organized, complete, persuasive presentation of procedures and findings enhances external reliability.

To ensure reliability through replicability, the methodological procedures of this study were well documented, including detailed descriptions of the data collection procedures, the study site, and participants. In addition, focus groups were tape recorded and the tapes were transcribed verbatim, and numerous direct quotes were included in the report. Jotted field notes were made during the participant observation activities, and the jotted field notes were expanded on a daily basis to include mental notes and analytic notes.
Glesne and Peshkin (1992) instructed that certain measures could be taken to help ensure reliability of the study findings. For example, they emphasized the importance of keeping track of direct quotes and stated that the researcher should quote their participants, instead of summarizing or generalizing what was said. Researchers should describe what is seen and heard, but not assign value to, or judge participant’s perspectives. They also encouraged researchers to give specific details and avoid abstractions.

**Limitations of Focus Group and Participant Observation Research**

Morgan (1997) described three limitations of focus group research: first, focus groups are limited to verbal behavior and self-reported behavior; second, focus groups consist only of interaction in discussion groups; and finally, focus groups are created and managed by the researcher. In addition to these general concerns, focus groups used with groups of workers may present two additional challenges. First, workers may not be willing to openly and honestly share their thoughts with their peers. Second, the analysis of results may be difficult because communication within pre-established groups can be complex; that is, words and non-verbal communication can have special meaning.

The limitations of participant observation are related to the natural environment in which it occurs. It may be difficult locating and gaining access to settings in which a substantial set of observations can be collected on the topic of interest (Morgan, 1997). Morgan also claimed that psycho-social studies may be less well-suited for participant observation simply because attitudes, feelings, and perceptions are less well suited to observation.
The limitations of these study methods were addressed in several ways. First and foremost, two research methods were used. Focus groups and participant observation complemented each other. Limitations of one method were combated by the other. Second, I effectively established rapport with the workers in general, and the focus group participants in particular, to foster open and honest communication, including the use of humor, in an atmosphere of trust. Third, focus group participants were randomly selected, and only workers at the same hierarchical level in the organization were recruited for a focus group. Fourth, in the focus groups, when I sensed that there were hidden meanings in the discourse, I probed for clarification and explanation.

**Presentation of Results**

The results of the entire investigation are organized around three main subjects: (a) functions of humor, (b) individual differences or antecedent conditions, and (c) structure of humorous interplay. These three main subjects are divided into categories and then further divided into subcategories. Results are presented in a narrative format that includes descriptive interpretive summaries and selected quotations. Some of the results are summarized in tables.

The goal of analyzing the categories and subcategories of the three main subjects was to identify the resultant themes, or ideas, related to organizational culture that emerged from the entire investigation. Some of these themes become evident when reading the results section of this dissertation, but the themes are discussed in detail in the conclusion.
Chapter IV. Results

Chapter IV is comprised of three major sections that correspond to the three main subjects: (a) functions of humor, (b) individual differences or antecedent conditions, and (c) structure of humorous interplay. These three main subjects are divided into categories, subcategories and major emerging themes. Results are presented in a narrative format that includes descriptive interpretive summaries and selected quotations. Some of the results are summarized in tables.

The first section describes the functions of humor used by the workers as evidenced by the stories told during the focus groups and the humorous interplay observed during the participant observation activities. The subject, functions of humor, is divided into three categories: psychological functions, social functions, and negative outcomes related to the use of humor. The psychological and social functions are further divided into subcategories of specific functions of humor witnessed during the investigation. The category, negative outcomes related to the use of humor, is divided into three subcategories: not intentionally hurtful humor, intentionally hurtful humor, and when the use of humor is inappropriate. Finally, this section shows the results of the questionnaire distributed during the focus groups. The questionnaire asked the workers to identify those functions of humor used by self, peers, and boss.

The second section identifies humor use related to individual differences or antecedent conditions. This subject is divided into four categories including gender/sexual humor, ethnic humor, humor aimed at differences in physical appearance
and traits, and humor directed at or about people who are liked or disliked. The category, humor directed at or about people who are liked or disliked, is subdivided into two subcategories including the supportive - disparaging continuum of humor and care giving.

The third section of this chapter describes the third main subject: structure of humorous interplay. The structure of humorous interplay is divided into eight categories including humor initiators, butts of humorous interplay, audience of humorous interplay, targets of humorous interplay, location of humorous interplay, climate during humorous interplay, context surrounding humorous interplay, and type of humor. The category of humor initiators is subdivided into three subcategories: humor initiators identified by focus group participants, humor initiators observed during focus groups, and humor initiators observed during participant observation. Three additional themes emerged from the data on humor initiators: paybacks, what prevents workers from using humor, and confidentiality. These themes will be discussed under the category of humor initiators. The category of butts of humorous interplay is also subdivided into three subcategories: the butts of humor identified by focus group participants, the butts of humorous interplay observed in focus groups, and the butts of humorous interplay observed in participant observation. Three additional themes emerged from data on the butts of humorous interplay: issues of time, very funny stories, and stories that were not funny. These themes will be discussed under the category of butts of humorous interplay. Finally, this section addresses two additional categories, speaking episodes and story specificity and spontaneity.
Functions of Humor

Functions of humor were determined by three methods. First, functions of humor were identified by listening to responses of focus group participants, especially when they told me about the goals they tried to meet by using humor, the benefits of the use of humor, and the negative outcomes related to humor use. Evidence was also gathered by participant observation, and I intuitively interpreted the meaning of the observed humorous episodes. In addition to listening to the words of the workers and noting behaviors and facial expressions, other characteristics including spontaneity, specificity, and emotional intensity were noted. Third, functions of humor were identified by analyzing the Functions of Humor Questionnaire that was administered to focus group participants.

In this work setting humor functioned primarily to meet psychological and social needs and these two categories of functions of humor are discussed below. Along with a discussion, many examples of humor used to meet psychological and social needs are included. Rarely was humor used to meet educational or physiological needs. In fact, only one focus group participant mentioned that humor might be beneficial in meeting educational needs. Spence said, “I think that humorous illustrations help people remember things better.” Likewise, physiological benefits associated with humor use were described only once by Guy who had a severe headache and after a hearty laugh the headache was gone.

Psychological Function

Witnessed occasions of humor-in-action were interpreted to determine the role that humor plays in this work setting. Consistent with what was reported and observed in
the focus groups, there was plenty of evidence of humor affecting the psyche of the workers in this setting. The psychological function of humor was subdivided into numerous subcategories and portrayed by descriptive narrative accounts and quotations. These subcategories include to: reduce tension, stress, and anxiety; deny the serious intent of a message; cope with embarrassment; entertain or be playful, or reduce boredom; share positive feelings or express support or sympathy; cope with horror and emotional pain; and to cope with the unexpected and socially inappropriate. These psychological functions of humor are outlined below.

**Reduce tension, stress, and anxiety.**

In the focus groups and participant observation activities a number of workers used humor to reduce stress. In fact, according to the results of the questionnaire that are reported at the end of this section, the most frequent role of humor in this work setting was to reduce tension, stress, and anxiety. In Roberta’s focus group introduction she explained why she changed her name. By sharing her concerns with her coworkers, she was attempting to reduce tension, stress, and anxiety.

**Roberta:** I’m Roberta. The name just changed to Guillette, and I’m not used to it. People are already calling me, asking for Roberta Guillette and I go, (pause) ‘Oh yeah, that’s me!’

*Ha ha.*

**Cara:** Can I ask why the name changed?

**Roberta:** Lunatic.

The lunatic that Roberta was referring to was a client. The focus group participants took her concerns seriously. They were quiet, they listened intently, and nodded their heads up and down as though they understood her need to protect herself from this and other mentally unsound clients.
Cullen also felt threatened by a client and used humor to decrease her level of anxiety.

**Cullen**: I had one that we still laugh about. But, it was bizarre. My client was a woman who tried to become a foster parent. As we got to know her we learned she was delusional. My first clue to that was I went to her home and she didn’t actually live there. The home had had a fire and was burned out in parts. There was no electricity. The bathroom was broken. The toilet, everything, was just a shambles. After I went in and I’m seeing all this, I am looking at her, thinking, ‘You’re crazy. You’re going to kill me now, aren’t you?’

**Ha ha ha.**

**Cullen**: No way you’re really in touch here. Humor helped me get through the bizarreness of the home.

In the above accounts workers described how the use of humor helps them cope with stress, tension, and anxiety. In the narrative below Flora described how the use of humor also benefited clients by helping them relax. Throughout the focus group discussions, clients were often the butts of humorous interplay; this was a rare example of humor being used to help a family.

**Flora**: We have conferences and families are coming in either loaded (inaudible but I had the sense she meant very angry) or upset. Or, they are frustrated. We have these long tables and typically we sit at the end of the table and the family sits way at the other end away from me. I do use my humor, I say, ‘I don’t smell. It’s OK, you can sit by me.’ It’s so quiet you can hear a pin drop and I’ll say something funny. You can see their faces relax and their shoulders relax, and I think it warms them up. The family may think, ‘Oh, they’re human. Their not just sitting there being a judge and directing whatever’s going on.’ So, I think humor helps. Certain families you can’t do that with.

In the following account Brooke explained how the use of humor by foster parents benefited children.

**Brooke**: Some of the foster parents are experts at using humor to calm down a situation or redirect a child. They may act silly. Sometimes the kids will say, ‘You’re just nuts.’ The foster parent could go in the other direction and be in their face and bark out orders, when really they just want to deescalate a situation.
**Deny the serious intent of a message.**

When humor is used to communicate a message, the sender or the receiver may deny the serious intent of the message. This is what occurred in FG 3 which happened to fall on “Schmuck’s Day.” A schmuck is a worker who is not a boss, secretary, or other worker honored by a special day celebrated during the year. Prior to the focus group session, Flora, a schmuck, was telling me about Schmuck’s Day and in doing so she made sure to let me know what she was sacrificing to help me out with my study. I interpreted the underlying message of our dialogue as a request for permission to leave the focus group and join in the Schmuck Day celebration. I denied her request to leave by ignoring the underlying serious intent of the message. Instead of giving her permission to leave, I teased that we should all leave the focus group early.

**Flora:** There is secretary’s day and boss’ day, but no Schmuck Day. We said, ‘Where are our cards? We had to buy cards for everyone else. Where’s our card?’ Management bought pizza, and the secretaries made brownies and peanut butter fudge. We said, ‘We deserve this, by God.’

**Me:** Maybe all of us should go at a quarter til one. (The group was scheduled to meet until 1:00 p.m.)

**Cope with embarrassment.**

Following are two examples of humor being used to cope with embarrassment. In the first episode of humor-in-action, Marcia coped with her embarrassment for being tardy by removing attention from herself and taking a jab at me. She alluded that I did not do my job and because of that, she was late to the group session.

**Marcia:** I went to 1103 before I came here.

**Ha ha.**

**Marcia:** I called every one of your nurses to find out where I was supposed to be and nobody was there.

**Me:** Ooooo. (It was my job to ensure that nurses were in the clinic.)
I let her get away with the jab, but when Marcia tried to blame her coworker, Lara, for the tardiness, Lara was not as accommodating and put Marcia in her place.

**Marcia:** Why didn’t you come and get me when it was time to come down here?  
**Lara:** I didn’t know you were coming. (pause)  
**Lara:** You’re a big girl. She needs me and everybody else to take care of her. (This was said in an exaggerated, motherly tone of voice as she looked around the table at the other participants.)  
**Marcia:** Is there anything wrong with that? I’ve gotten by for forty-some years.  
**Lara:** Well, we’re going to stop it today, Marcia.  
*Ha ha.*

In the second example, Spence was discussing the abandoned babies bill. He erred by saying “72 years old” instead of “72 hours old” and this drew a lot of laughs. His quick come back helped him recover from his error and ward off further embarrassment. Once he laughed at himself others could not have much fun at his expense.

**Spence:** A parent can drop off their child under 72 years old.  
*Ha ha ha.*  
**Spence:** Under 72 hours old, without fear of prosecution. We will not be taking any teenagers. (This was an inside joke about parents dropping off their teenagers who have become delinquent.)  
*Ha ha ha.*

**Entertain or be playful, or reduce boredom.**

Surprisingly few occasions of humor used solely for its entertaining and playful value were witnessed in the focus groups and participant observation activities. When humor was used to relieve boredom or to entertain it often took the form of a prank. Following are three examples of workers pulling pranks on one another to reduce the tedium of every day work life and to entertain themselves and others. The prank that Arlene described below took place over a number of weeks.

**Arlene:** I pulled a prank on one of my co-workers, Meghan. She’d always leave a little cup out with all of her markers and pencils. Gradually, I started taking one, or a couple,
and I ended up taking all of them. But she thought it was maintenance people taking
them.

*Ha ha.*

**Arlene:** And, I didn’t say anything for the longest time. Then one day I said something
to Karen. She’s in my department. One day waiting for the elevator, Meghan and I were
talking about who was taking her pens and pencils. ‘My gosh, I have no idea,’ I said.
Then we got in the elevator. We were still talking about it and Karen, who was in the
elevator, said, ‘Oh so you finally told her you were taking them all.’ I said, ‘Oohh,
Karen, I did not tell her.’ I was going to gradually put them back little by little.

**Me:** You didn’t get to finish your prank.

**Arlene:** No.

**Me:** So, what did she say when she found out it was you?

**Arlene:** She just laughed.

*Ha ha ha.*

Below, Bonita explains how she found a cockroach in a cassette. At first this
incongruity elicited fright and screaming, then when it was evident that it was rubber, the
practical joke elicited humor. The intense response would have made it even more
entertaining for the jokesters.

**Bonita:** Somebody in DP likes to play jokes on me in the computer room. They put a
little rubber cockroach inside a cassette tape and when I opened it, it came out, and I
started screaming. And they all thought it was funny. I did too.

*Ha ha ha.*

Bob entertained Linda and me with his prank. When he successfully pulled off
his prank, he was able to brag about his creativity and bravery to defy policy. It all
started when Linda, Bob, and I entered the building at the same time. It was protocol to
sign in with the security officer or show your ID. Linda and I signed in because we did
not have our ID. Bob buzzed by just showing his ID. Linda and I caught up to Bob at
the elevators.

**Bob:** This also works. (In his hand was his Y membership card.)

**Bob:** If you forget your ID, the Y card works, too.

**Linda:** Oh, Bob. (This was said in an exasperated tone of voice as she rolled her eyes,
shook her head back and forth, and smiled.)

**Me:** You’re bad. Bob, you’re bad.
In the narrative below Simon related some fun that he and Brett had with word play.

Simon: We were talking about the football coach at the University and his first name happens to be Urban. We thought that would be an interesting name. We wondered since he’s in the country if he would be changing his name to Rural? We also did little take-offs like, ‘He was seen driving his Chevy Suburban. And if he cheated on his wife would it be an urban affair?’

Ha ha.

Simon: And if he becomes famous he will be an urban legend.

Ha ha.

Simon: Perhaps if he were in India he would change his name to Turban.

(Someone said something about that being derogatory. Then there were a few snickers and the interplay stopped.)

Share positive feelings or express support or sympathy.

In an environment that is autocratic and bureaucratic, the thought that a front line worker’s opinion would be asked, let alone acted upon, prompted humor due to the incongruity of the situation. The short story that follows identifies the clearly defined roles of the organization’s hierarchy: Management makes decisions and others follow directions. At the same time, Stephie was sharing her positive feelings about this unusual situation.

Stephie: Today, I was sitting at my desk and a top ranking official came up and said that somebody started this project, and that person, who was a supervisor, was off. He didn’t know how to do this, so he came up to ask me. And, I told him what I thought and he wrote it down and said, ‘I like that.’ And, he put it in and it’s going to be mailed out today.

Ha ha.

Stephie: So, so much for being the peon.

Cope with horror and emotional pain.

Focus group participants provided many examples of humor used to cope with horror and emotional pain. Workers claimed that the use of humor helped them cope with their roles in caring for abused and neglected children. Some went so far to as to
say, “If you don’t find humor in the stuff we deal with, you’re not going to last in this job… You’ve got to find some kind of an escape mechanism. You can’t constantly be thinking about what it is you’re dealing with.” Many explained that they often used “sick” or “MASH” humor. This was defined as the type of humor that makes fun of disgusting, horrible, and inappropriate topics such as child sexual abuse, delinquent children, and offensive parents.

**Bridgett:** In this field we see really horrible things happen to children and families and if you don’t have humor to release some of that horror….

**Roberta:** It takes away some of the trauma that we feel from the abuse of the kids and the incredible neglect. The trauma that you’re going through, that secondary trauma that you’re feeling from this poor kid who can’t take care of himself… and his mom isn’t doing it at all. Humor gives you a little bit of relief from that. Though, you’re still feeling bad for the kid, at the same time you can get a chuckle out of it and it makes you feel a little bit better.

**Lara:** Sometimes we’re a little sick.

**Dinah:** We’re sick on every floor.

*Ha ha ha, yeah we are.*

**Lara:** Sometimes we laugh about situations that really are serious but do it to keep from crying. We’ve had some terrible things happen…. I probably cried the whole day regarding the foster parent’s death. And, somehow by the end of the day, we found some humor to get us through the rest of the night because we had to go to sleep.

**Brooke:** That’s what I meant by the MASH humor. There’s somebody with blood and guts and Hawk-Eye and BJ would be cracking up. That’s what we end up doing.

**Lara:** …To be able to go home and have some kind of sanity.

**Bridgett:** I have another example. This man had sexually molested a girl and one of the ways we found out about it was because he had taken a picture of himself in bed, naked, with an erection. He wrote at the bottom of the picture the girl’s name and ‘This is for you.’

**Drew:** Oh boy.

**Bridgett:** What we found funny was that he had his socks on and he had a big hole in his sock.

*Ha ha ha.*

**Bridgett:** It was the strangest thing. I’m sure some people would have said, ‘How can you laugh at that?’

*Ha ha ha.*

**Scott:** How can you not?
Drew: We laugh at the people who come up to us and say, ‘Will the fact that I was arrested for indecent exposure prevent me from being a foster parent?’ NOoooo. Ha ha.

Drew: NOoo, of course not. Those are the horror stories.

Dinah and Mike brought up the interesting point that some people inside the agency, especially clerical workers, do not find the “sick” or “MASH” humor funny. This is evidence of inter and intra cultural differences about what is appropriate and inappropriate topics to laugh about.

Dinah: We all have what other people would consider a warped sense of humor. I also think there are people inside the agency that think we are horrible. So, it makes it difficult sometimes. You do have to make fun of some really serious situations sometimes.

Mitch: When I was in the sexual abuse unit I received a manila envelope. All that was on it was my name and the return address of an area Police Department. I opened the envelop and pulled out an 8 by 11 photo of a little boy, naked, with his penis, right there. (He gestures with his hands how big an 8 by 11 picture and penis would be.) I busted out laughing. I didn’t expect it. It just caught me off guard. I know that the clerical assistant was horrified that I was laughing at that. But I did. I busted my gut. I expected a report or something. I pulled it out and there was nothing else in there but an 8 by 11 photo of this little child, ha ha, with a diaper rash. He was butt naked. I am sure people might think, ‘Oohh that was weird.’

Many workers felt that there was not “nearly enough humor” at the agency. In fact, Dena, a supervisor, claimed it is important to “create an environment that says laughter is OK. It is healthy. Laughter does not minimize what you do and what you’re all about.”

Cope with the unexpected and socially inappropriate.

In the focus groups workers reported that the use of humor helps them cope with unexpected and socially inappropriate occurrences. In two of the focus groups the same funny story was told about a man who pulled down his pants at a meeting. That bizarre incident supported the workers’ statements that they often faced circumstances that just
would not occur in other places of business. In the situation described, workers had the option of responding to the incident in a number of ways, such as by being offended, embarrassed, or threatened. Most of the workers just considered it funny and retold the story over and over to get a few laughs.

Lara: How about that guy who dropped his pants to show you all his thing?  
Flora: This caregiver’s been showing up positive for drugs and they were confronting him about it.  
Marcia: You can tell by his pants?  
Flora: No. He said, ‘I had surgery. I had some things done with me.’ Boom, he pulls down his pants. He wanted to show them his scar. So, he just dropped his pants.  
Someone: And, nobody looked at his scar.  
Ha ha ha.  
Flora: Bud, Mr. Calm, said, ‘There was nothing to be seen.’ Now, other people who were there said there was lots to be seen. He dropped his pants because he wanted to show his scar to everyone. Bud said, ‘No, no. That’s not necessary.’

Social Function

Humorous stories and episodes of humor-in-action were interpreted to determine the role that humor plays in this work setting. Data from the focus groups and participant observation were very consistent and there was plenty of evidence of humor affecting the social interactions of the workers. The social function of humor was subdivided into numerous subcategories and portrayed by descriptive narrative accounts and quotations. These subcategories include to: build rapport and develop friendships; persuade or get work done; assimilate or fit in; control others’ behaviors; express disapproval; put others in their place, demean, or insult others; and to express superiority over others. These subcategories of social functions of humor are outlined below.

Build rapport and develop friendships.

A number of individuals across the organization’s hierarchy claimed that they use humor to build rapport or maintain relationships. Humor helps the directors to “engage
subordinates,” it “helps build bonds with people by letting them know that you don’t take yourself so seriously,” and as Rosa explained, “it lets somebody know you empathize with them without getting really mushy about it.”

Arlene explained that if favorable relationships are built upon humor, then when a problem arises, the problem might be easier to address. When a problem is brought to the attention of a friend it is less likely that the friend will display defensive behavior and or ignore the problem. More than likely, the problem will be resolved.

In the following scenario, Spence’s use of humor fostered friendly bantering that helped build rapport with his staff. Spence ended a supervisor’s meeting by reminding staff that there would be a board meeting later in the afternoon. Then he teased about needing a drink after the board meeting. This was a way for Spence to acknowledge that he did not look forward to the board meeting, and that made him appear very much like everyone else; it was never fun to appear before a critical boss. The workers showed their support through their short bantering string.

**Spence:** There will be drinks after the board meeting tonight.

*Ha ha.*

**Spence:** That’s the only thing that gets me through them. (This was said in a loud, exasperated-sounding whisper.)

*Ha ha.*

**Someone in the back:** You’re bad.

**Spence:** Iced tea, lemonade.

**Kenny:** Long Island iced tea.

**Spence:** I’m way too old to drink Long Island iced teas.

**Someone else from the back:** You’re never too old to drink Long Island iced tea.

**Persuade or get work done.**

Administrative staff used humor to get work done, especially to request that an unpleasant task be completed. The following account took place at a managers meeting
where Spence made it perfectly clear, in a humorous way, that holiday presents must be distributed to all children before Christmas.

**Spence:** Anything else about holiday gifts? It will be a big rush those last few days. Your supervisors will be out delivering gifts if you give everyone off. (Two managers, Lynn and Tom, look at each other and snicker.)

**Spence:** What are you laughing about?

**Lynn and Tom:** All of the supervisors are off.

**Spence:** Lynn and Tom will be out delivering gifts. Tom will be out delivering gifts. Can’t you see 1,250 kids?

**Someone:** I can see Tom driving around all day and all night.

**Spence:** We’ll get you a sleigh.

_Ha ha ha._

Interestingly, front line workers, explained how they use humor when they accept a request to complete a task:

**Cara:** We use it [humor] a lot in our unit when something’s forced upon you; when you’re in a situation that you can’t change; for example, when you have to go out and transport, or you have to remove kids, or ‘Here’s a new policy and this is the way it’s going to be done.’ There’s somebody in our unit who’ll always say, ‘Yeah, just tell em we’re not gonna.’ Or, a comment like, ‘Well, too bad.’ You know that you’re gonna do it, but it makes you feel like you don’t have to just take it. It gives you a different perspective - one of, ‘Oh, OK. Well, only if it’s a Sunday.’

**Roberta:** Only if that day ends in Y.

_Ha ha._

**To assimilate or fit in.**

Focus group members explained that humor helps new workers assimilate; it helps them adjust to the new work environment and fit in with their coworkers. Two accounts follow:

**Lee:** Humor is very effective when you are trying to include yourself in a group; you want to feel more accepted. It can be a pretty effective tool in helping someone else in a big group, that you don’t see being accepted, to draw them in.

**Rosa:** When you have a new person in the unit, if you go up to them and say something funny, I think it makes that person feel that he or she is accepted. Whereas if you were to kid around with these two people and these others you ignore, that would put a wall up between the whole unit.
**Control others’ behaviors.**

The following narrative is an excellent example of humor used by peers to control behavior. It all started when Guy made a disparaging remark about Regina’s new car.

Bridgett and I responded to the disparagement. Notice, Guy did not apologize but he did soften the sting by saying his new car will be even more unsightly.

Someone (to Regina): Did you get your new car yet?
Regina: No, it’s still not here. I’ll be making payments on it, before it gets here. That’s how bad it is.
Guy: You’re buying a car?
Regina: Uh huh.
Guy: What kind of car?
Mitch: PT Cruiser.
Guy: Oh, one of those ugly ones.
Ha ha.
Bridgett: Guuuuyyyyy. (This was yelled loudly. At the same time Regina flashed him a dirty look.)
Me: (I look at Guy in surprise.) Turn the recorder on, Nancy.
Guy: (snickering and shrugging his shoulders) It’s just a cultural thing.
Regina: He he he.
Guy: Well, when I tell you which one I like you’ll say, ‘oohh, that’s even uglier.’

**Express disapproval.**

Humor was frequently used to express disapproval of peer behavior. In the first account Drew used humor to express disapproval of Scott’s clerical reorganization in which he changed the reporting relationships of the clerical and management staff.

Instead of reporting to individual managers, all clerical staff began reporting to him through one of four clerical supervisors. It is important to know that Scott was sitting across from Drew and Regina at the focus group session where this discourse took place.

Drew: This is really insignificant, but it’s humorous. Regina’s secretary is now being supervised by someone else, and now Regina is getting these file folders with little stickies on them telling her where to go. I thought that was kind of cute.
Scott (looking at Regina): You’re on time.
Drew: It’s a bone of contention. I said, ‘Oh boy, you have little stickies now.’
Mitch related a story about a supervisor who was considered a sore loser. The use of humor, “Is there going to be a recount?” was used to demean the sore loser and to express disapproval of his actions; thus, encouraging acceptable behavior which is to be a good sport when you lose instead of complaining that the game was not fair.

**Mitch:** Something that I found very humorous today was a take off of the presidential election. I ran the United Way Campaign this year for the agency and one of the games was a football contest. We are now organizing our tailgate party that was the award for the winning football team. Dominic sent me an email saying, ‘Are you inviting Will?’ Will was on the Michigan team, and the Michigan team lost in the last second. Will was real upset and disappointed. So, when I announced the tailgate party today, Dominic replied, ‘Is there going to be a re-count?’

*Ha ha ha.*

Below, Blanche related a practical joke that she and a coworker played on two other workers. Hidden in the playfulness was the message that whining and sulking are not approved behaviors. From this, one may reason that those who do not whine and sulk would be superior.

**Blanche:** We have three workers, two men and a female, down there who are always at each other, jokingly. Two of them are at a training out of town today. Well, the female called me over because she had gotten pictures off the computer and she put one on each of the others’ chairs. One is a picture of a person whining, which he does whine a lot. And the other is a picture of someone sulking because he actually does sulk a lot. When she showed me the pictures we just started cracking up laughing because it’s true and it’s funny. And, I think they’ll get a kick out of it too.

It was very common for workers to camouflage the real intent of a message by using humor. In the narrative that follows, Pearl, a caseworker, transmitted a verbally aggressive message about a foster parent. This message was hidden in an innocent story about a child who said he goes to the “Wayward Y.” (Of course, there is not a Y for wayward children.)

**Pearl:** I picked up a foster child at 8 o’clock this morning to bring him to the downtown Y for daycare because they are off school for parent teacher conference. I took him to the
Y on Main. It was supposed to be the Baymar Wyler Y. But he didn’t know that and the foster mom didn’t get out of bed to tell me that. He finally said, ‘The Wayward Y.’

**Ha ha.**

**Pearl:** I said, ‘What?’ And he said, ‘The Wayward Y’. I brought him into work and Willie Adams was on the elevator and she said, ‘He’s talking about the Baymar Wyler Y, out on Smith Road.’

Pearl was sending a hidden message that the foster parent was too lazy to get out of bed and take the child to the Y herself or at least see the child off properly so that he would be transported to the correct day care program.

**Put others in their place, demean, or insult others.**

The following accounts are noteworthy because they provide evidence of workers insulting their peers and putting them in their place. The interaction took place during a focus group session. The speakers were voicing their opinions about the benefits of using humor at work. What I want to draw the reader’s attention to are the last two lines of each account. In the first account Regina snickered at Kyle who was offering a serious comment, so, Kyle puts Regina in her place with a short quip. In the second account, Regina gets back at Kyle and insinuates that meetings with Kyle are horrible.

**Kyle:** There are tons of benefits. It [humor] relieves tension. It makes your job enjoyable so that you’re willing to come to work the next day because you know its not going to be just 7 hours of pain and tension.

**Regina:** (Snickering.)

**Kyle:** Except for maybe you, Regina.

**Ha ha ha.**

**Regina:** I know that when I’m having meetings with people that I don’t think I can joke with, it makes for a horrible meeting. I can think of at least one person at this agency that I don’t think I can joke with. And every time I’m at a meeting with that person it’s horrible. **Not you, Kyle** (Said in a sarcastic tone of voice with a smirk on her face.)

**Ha ha ha.**

**Drew:** and the initials are...
Express superiority over others.

The following account of humor-in-action clearly transmitted a message of superiority. Spence who felt that the directors should have gotten something, such as home baked cookies, over and above what the other focus group members received, teased me during the group session. The directors were accustomed to being treated with special regard.

Brenda: Thanks for lunch, Barb.
Me: Your welcome.
Brenda: These are good. (She holds up a cookie.) Did you make them?
Me: Um hum.
Spence: You baked cookies for the other groups too, or is that just because we’re special?
Me: Sure, I made them for everybody.
Spence: So, no special treatment?
Me: No.
Spence: Then that’s a problem.
Ha ha ha.

Using humor to express superiority automatically defines boundaries between groups as the following four accounts show. In the first account humor defined the boundaries between supervisory staff and front line staff. The humorous interplay took place at a performance evaluation training program attended by supervisors.

Tina: What do we do with good performance but the attitude is poor?
Bobby: We don’t need to worry about that in our department. (This statement could be taken in one of two ways, first that there are not good performers in his department, and second, there are not bad attitudes in his department. It was said sarcastically so I interpreted it to mean that his staff members were not good performers.)
Ha ha.

In the second account, humor defined boundaries between the workers of the child protection agency and the workers of another agency that occupies the second and third floors of the building. It is important to know that the people who work on floors two and three are often criticized behind their backs for taking the elevator up or down
one floor instead of taking the steps. This humorous episode took place on the elevator when the elevator doors closed before workers from floors two and three could get on.

**Dan:** Should I? (He reaches for the “open door” button but the elevator doors close tight.)

**Karen:** It was s-h-o-u-l-d I? (She says this very slowly and deliberately as her finger slowly moves to the “open door” button and stays poised just above it without pushing it.)

*Ha ha ha.*

The third account defined boundaries between the child protection agency and another agency. A consultant from the accreditation board was presenting information about accreditation denials.

**Mr. Vinton:** The second denial I was involved in was because some organization submitted another agency’s self study.

*Ha ha ha.*

**Mr. Vinton:** They didn’t even change the logo.

*Ha, ha ha.*

**Mr. Vinton:** They didn’t even change the name. They didn’t even change the name. They used the same abbreviation.

*Ha ha ha.*

**Mr. Vinton:** They were in a very White community and submitted a community analysis with something like a 95% Hispanic population. (pause) They were dumb, dumb, dumb. If you are going to submit someone else’s, change the name.

*Ha ha ha.*

The idea is that this agency is superior to the one that submitted the bogus report because this agency would never engage in such a “dumb” or unethical behavior.

The fourth account defined boundaries between casework staff and foster parents.

Rosa expressed superiority over the foster parent for not being able to unlock the door.

**Rosa:** I was in a foster home this morning and we were doing what we call site and safety where you have to go through the house and check things. I locked myself into the bathroom to see if she could unlock the door. Well, she’s putting this thing through the hole and could not open it. It was just a riot. Some of them work up a real good sweat trying to open the doors.
**Negative Outcomes Related to the Use of Humor**

The workers perceived, for the most part, that the use of humor was beneficial; however, there were many reports of negative outcomes related to humor use. The negative outcomes were not necessarily obvious at the time of the humorous interplay; sometimes the harmful or hurtful outcomes only became apparent after the fact. Interestingly, most workers did not tell on themselves, instead they told tales about the negative outcomes related to humor used by other workers. I wondered if workers believed that they always used humor that was beneficial, or perhaps when humor went array the results were so awful that the workers were too embarrassed to tell me of their blunders. Perhaps, too, they did not want to admit that their feelings were ever hurt by what someone said just to be funny.

Sometimes humor that resulted in negative outcomes was used with the intention of being hurtful, but at other times there was no intention to be malicious. The accounts listed below are divided into two groups: those in which the humor used was insensitive at best, but not used with the intent to be hurtful and those in which the humor was intended to hurt someone.

**Not intentionally hurtful humor.**

In the five accounts below humor resulted in negative outcomes, however, the humor initiator did not intend for the humor to be hurtful.

**Vera:** There was a training earlier this year, It was grammar, punctuation, that type of thing. And our supervisor was passing around the information wanting to know if people were interested. I thought that I would be humorous and on the form I wrote, ‘Don’t need this, no how, no way.’ Well, another person in the department got it, and she didn’t think it was so funny. She thought that I was saying, ‘I don’t really need this training and anybody who does…’ I am not sure exactly what the problem was, but I apologized. I said, ‘I didn’t mean it that way. And, I’m sorry.’ And I really did feel bad. And, it made me start to think. Sometimes you do have to be careful about what you say or do because
somebody might take it the wrong way. I had already taken the training and thought it was a good training. But, sometimes you just do things without thinking.

Spence: Sometimes in my attempts to be witty, I tend to be a little sharp and hurt people’s feelings. And I think in my initial time period here I effectively discouraged people from communicating with me. 

Me: Can you think back to just one of those times?

Brenda: Oh, I’ll take a risk here. Remember when we had the exercise where you had to get with your department or unit and come up with slogans? At the very end of the exercise someone said, ‘What about you? What is your slogan?’ That might be an example.

Spence: Yeah, I think I said something to the effect, ‘When a college professor assigns a paper, it doesn’t mean he has to do it himself.’

In the following narrative Brett described how he said something derogatory about those who work on the second and third floors of the building. To understand the derogatory remark, the reader must know that the workers on Floors Two and Three of the office building are notorious for using the elevator to go between even one floor. Taking the elevator instead of the steps between one floor was highly criticized by the agency workers.

Brett: After I said it, I wasn’t too proud that I did. I was going …up the stairs with someone and a person from the second floor was coming down the stairs. And, I said too loudly, ‘The elevators must be down.’

Ha ha ha.

Brett: I got a nasty look.

Ha ha ha.

Brooke’s example is very unique because it involved a child. In general, children were not the focus of humor or wisecracks. In the study they were left pretty much untouched.

Brooke: Patty Ansel and I were caseworkers together in one of the units and we did a lot of teaming. Patty had children who she would transport. Now, you know I love kids and all, but if you would have seen him, he really is not an attractive child. And I really love kids. Patty went to pick up the child and I was in the car. And this child climbs in and Ansel and I just look at each other and kind of laugh. Now, we’re not saying anything but the child in the back seat looked at us as if he could read our minds and started to cry. Ooohh. Oh, gosh. Oooo.
Brooke: You have to know Ansel, because she said something like, ‘Well, he is.’

Ha ha.

Brooke: And he just cried some more. And he cried, quite a bit of the time. Part of it might have been because he was leaving the place. But, OK, you just can’t do that. You never know when kids are reading your mind - probably something in our faces. I mean, he really was a child you could look at and you’d have said, ‘Uummmm.’

Flora: It was a winter day… it was really snowy. So, I called in. I told them it is really bad, we’re not allowed out on the road. I finally got to work later and here I had this memo on my desk. It was from the executive director. It said, I was going to be docked so much time because I wasn’t here. It was a very serious memo and I was ticked. I was calling people up saying, ‘I don’t understand. I called in, I couldn’t help that I couldn’t get on the roads.’ Here, Mitch and Kim had concocted this little memo. They thought it was hilarious but I was very upset about it. Now I can laugh. Now, I can go back and say, ‘You creeps.’ They thought it was hilarious because I went to personnel and to others saying, ‘It wasn’t my fault.’ Then they finally told me that they concocted the whole thing. I didn’t appreciate it.

Intentionally hurtful humor.

The following two accounts describe times when workers used humor to purposefully hurt a coworker. It is important to know that the butts of both of these pranks were disliked coworkers. In the section that follows the differences between humor aimed at liked and disliked people is discussed.

Cullen: I worked with a caseworker who really liked to play practical jokes. For April Fools day she wanted to do the old bucket of water above the door for, a irascible old gentleman we worked with who was just a cranky person. I had to talk her out of that because I was afraid of head injury. So she rigged, instead, the faucet in our kitchen so that when you turned it on you got it in the face. And….

Someone: Geeze.

Cullen: He got it because he was always the first one in. I don’t think he was too happy about it. I still thought it was funny.

Ha ha ha.

Lee: Maybe others can help me out because I wasn’t directly involved in it. I heard it and it was terribly funny but terribly terrible, too. Somebody had gotten hold of letterhead from the Health Clinic.
Cara: It was an April Fools joke and they went the whole gamut of getting some Health Clinic stationary, and wrote her a letter saying you were intimate with this partner and he is positive for HIV/AIDS.

Lee: She was supposed to go in for testing.

Cara: She was very, very upset.

Lee: Yeah, it was meant to be a funny joke. It turned out horrible.

Me: Did anybody think it was funny?

Lee: Well, I think a lot of people thought it was very funny.

Cara: They were laughing when they told me.

Lee: It was told as a very, very funny thing, and it sounded funny at the time, until you think of what this meant.

Cara: The person is, maybe a little more, uumm, oh, I don’t know, what’s a nice word, or even a bad word for it, just a little more snotty about “I’m too good for that. Or, that would never happen to me because…”

Lee: It’s pretty awful.

A couple of people: Yes it is.

Cara: This would be a good way to knock her down a few. It knocked her out.

When the use of humor is inappropriate.

Focus group members talked about the times when it would be inappropriate to use humor. There was agreement amongst all group participants that humor should not be used to maliciously hurt someone or when “the subject of the humor is very, very uncomfortable.”

Along this line, Guy explains in the following account that timing of humor is important. What can be hurtful at one point in time may be humorous later.

Guy: Previously, Bobby made a mistake on the adoption data. He was pretty hurt. His self-esteem was pretty low. Recently, we were talking about the case reading tool… thinking it was too long, and someone jokingly said to Bobby, ‘she probably thinks it’s too long because she’s trying to prevent you from writing the wrong data.’ That humor was appropriate. He was no longer grieving over his previous error.

A number of workers explained that it would be inappropriate to make light of a situation that someone thinks is very serious.

Drew: When somebody is coming to you with something pretty serious to talk about and you make light of it; joke about it. Even if you thought it was minor in the scheme of things, to that person it was pretty important. That would be a very inappropriate use of humor.
Finally, Prima talked about the use of humor as a communication tool and explained that humor should not be used to purposefully give unclear messages.

**Prima**: [Humor is inappropriate] when it is used to be passive aggressive, rather than stating specifically what it is that you want, or you need, or you feel.

**Results of the Functions of Humor Questionnaire**

During the focus group sessions, participants were asked to complete a three-part questionnaire about the functions of humor used by self, peers, and boss. Analysis of the returned questionnaires was a multi-step procedure. Each step looked at the data from another angle. To easily visualize within group responses, responses from each focus group were tallied and charted. Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 show the responses from FG 1, FG 2, FG 3, FG 4, and FG 5 respectively. These five tables show how many respondents in a focus group felt that a particular function of humor was used by them, used by peers, and used by their boss. For example in Table 2, six of the seven directors claimed that humor is used by them and their peers to develop friendships. Only five of the directors claimed that their boss uses humor to develop friendships. The number in the last column, “Used by all,” was obtained by summing the first three columns.

Table 2 shows that directors, their peers, and their bosses use humor for many of the same reasons. There was only one exception: four of the seven directors claimed that they use humor to cope with fear or embarrassment; yet, all seven claimed that their peers use humor to cope with fear or embarrassment. This leads me to believe that the use of humor is not always easy to interpret.
### Table 2
Responses From Focus Group 1 - Directors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions of Humor</th>
<th>Used by you</th>
<th>Used by peers</th>
<th>Used by boss</th>
<th>Used by all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop friendships</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build rapport</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce tension, stress, anxiety</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid discussing a topic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deny the serious intent of a message</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss socially inappropriate topics</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe about others’ thoughts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cope with fear or embarrassment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remove attention from oneself</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertain or be playful</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get work done</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express a need for approval</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express support or sympathy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express agreement</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show appreciation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share positive feelings</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain attention or to maintain interest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change the topic of conversation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuade</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid telling personal information</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclose difficult information</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause conflict</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disarm aggressive people</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow others insight into one’s state of mind</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce boredom</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrate a point, provide an example</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulate imagination and creativity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express approval of others’ actions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express disapproval of others’ actions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop and perpetuate stereotypes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate group cohesiveness</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between individuals</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between groups</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put others in their place</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmit verbally aggressive messages</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control others’ behaviors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express superiority over others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack others, demean or insult others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>147</strong></td>
<td><strong>157</strong></td>
<td><strong>124</strong></td>
<td><strong>428</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(n = 7)*
Table 3 shows that managers, their peers, and their bosses (who are the directors) use humor for many of the same reasons. There were two exceptions: first, five managers claimed that they and their peers use humor to cope with fear or embarrassment; yet, only two claimed that their boss uses humor to cope with fear or embarrassment. Second, six managers claimed that they use humor to express support or sympathy; yet only three claimed that their boss uses humor to express support or sympathy. Again, it appears that humor is not always easy to interpret.
### Table 3
**Responses From Focus Group 2 - Managers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions of Humor</th>
<th>Used by you</th>
<th>Used by peers</th>
<th>Used by boss</th>
<th>Used by all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop friendships</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build rapport</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce tension, stress, anxiety</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid discussing a topic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deny the serious intent of a message</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss socially inappropriate topics</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe about others’ thoughts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cope with fear or embarrassment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remove attention from oneself</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertain or be playful</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get work done</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express a need for approval</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express support or sympathy</td>
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<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share positive feelings</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain attention or to maintain interest</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change the topic of conversation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persuade</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid telling personal information</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause conflict</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop and perpetuate stereotypes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate group cohesiveness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between individuals</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Put others in their place</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transmit verbally aggressive messages</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control others’ behaviors</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express superiority over others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack others, demean or insult others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>131</strong></td>
<td><strong>120</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>351</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(n = 6)
Table 4 shows that supervisors, their peers, and their bosses (who are the managers) use humor only part of the time for the same reasons. There are many exceptions; the areas where there are the greatest discrepancies are listed below.

- Three supervisors claimed that they use humor to avoid discussing a topic; yet, six claimed that their peers use humor to avoid discussing a topic, and only one claimed that their boss uses humor to avoid discussing a topic.

- Three supervisors claimed that they use humor to discuss socially inappropriate topics; five supervisors claimed that their peers use humor to discuss socially inappropriate topics; only two claimed that their boss uses humor to discuss socially inappropriate topics.

- Six supervisors claimed that they use humor to probe about others’ thoughts; yet only three claimed that their boss uses humor to probe about others’ thoughts.

- Seven supervisors claimed that they use humor to cope with fear or embarrassment; yet, only four claimed that their boss uses humor to cope with fear or embarrassment.

- Six supervisors claimed that they and their peers use humor to get work done; yet only two claimed that their boss uses humor to get work done.

- Three supervisors claimed that they and their boss use humor to gain attention or to maintain interest; yet six claimed that their peers use humor to gain attention or to maintain interest.

- Five supervisors claimed that they use humor to avoid telling personal information; yet, only two claimed that their peers use humor to avoid telling personal information.

- Four supervisors claimed that their peers use humor to disclose difficult information; yet, only one claimed that their boss uses humor to disclose difficult information.
• Five supervisors claimed that their peers use humor to express disapproval of others’ actions; yet only two claimed that their boss uses humor to express disapproval of others’ actions.

• Only two supervisors claimed that they use humor to develop and perpetuate stereotypes and only one supervisor claimed that their boss uses humor to develop and perpetuate stereotypes; however, five supervisors claimed that their peers use humor to develop and perpetuate stereotypes.

• Only one supervisor claimed that they use humor to transmit verbally aggressive messages, and not one supervisor claimed that their boss uses humor to transmit verbally aggressive messages; however, three supervisors claimed that their peers use humor to transmit verbally aggressive messages.
Table 4
Responses From Focus Group 3 - Supervisors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions of Humor</th>
<th>Used by you</th>
<th>Used by peers</th>
<th>Used by boss</th>
<th>Used by all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop friendships</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build rapport</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce tension, stress, anxiety</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoid discussing a topic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deny the serious intent of a message</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss socially inappropriate topics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe about others’ thoughts</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cope with fear or embarrassment</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remove attention from oneself</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertain or be playful</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get work done</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express a need for approval</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express support or sympathy</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express agreement</td>
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<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show appreciation</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share positive feelings</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain attention or to maintain interest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change the topic of conversation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>Persuade</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid telling personal information</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclose difficult information</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause conflict</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disarm aggressive people</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow others insight into one’s state of mind</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce boredom</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrate a point, provide an example</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stimulate imagination and creativity</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express approval of others’ actions</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express disapproval of others’ actions</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop and perpetuate stereotypes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate group cohesiveness</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between individuals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between groups</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put others in their place</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmit verbally aggressive messages</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control others’ behaviors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express superiority over others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack others, demean or insult others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>158</strong></td>
<td><strong>182</strong></td>
<td><strong>131</strong></td>
<td><strong>471</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(n = 7)
Table 5 shows that direct service workers, their peers, and their bosses (who are the supervisors) use humor most of the time for many of the same reasons, but there are numerous exceptions. Listed below are where the greatest discrepancies lie.

- Six direct service workers claimed that they and their peers use humor to develop friendships; yet, only two claimed that their boss uses humor to develop friendships.
- Five direct service workers claimed that they use humor to remove attention from oneself; yet, only two claimed that their peers use humor for that reason, and only one claimed that their boss uses humor to remove attention from oneself.
- Four direct service workers claimed that they use humor to express support or sympathy; yet, only one claimed that their boss uses humor to express support or sympathy.
- Five direct service workers claimed that they use humor to show appreciation; yet, only two claimed that their boss uses humor to show appreciation.
- Five direct service workers claimed that they use humor to disclose difficult information; yet, only two claimed that their boss uses humor to disclose difficult information.
- Six direct service workers claimed that their peers use humor to reduce boredom; yet, only two claimed that their boss uses humor to reduce boredom.
### Table 5

**Responses From Focus Group 4 – Direct Service Workers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions of Humor</th>
<th>Used by you</th>
<th>Used by peers</th>
<th>Used by boss</th>
<th>Used by all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop friendships</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build rapport</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce tension, stress, anxiety</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid discussing a topic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deny the serious intent of a message</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss socially inappropriate topics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe about others’ thoughts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cope with fear or embarrassment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remove attention from oneself</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertain or be playful</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get work done</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express a need for approval</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express support or sympathy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express agreement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show appreciation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share positive feelings</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain attention or to maintain interest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change the topic of conversation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuade</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid telling personal information</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclose difficult information</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause conflict</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disarm aggressive people</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow others insight into one’s state of mind</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce boredom</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrate a point, provide an example</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulate imagination and creativity</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express approval of others’ actions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express disapproval of others’ actions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop and perpetuate stereotypes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate group cohesiveness</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between individuals</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between groups</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put others in their place</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmit verbally aggressive messages</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control others’ behaviors</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express superiority over others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack others, demean or insult others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>132</strong></td>
<td><strong>113</strong></td>
<td><strong>94</strong></td>
<td><strong>339</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(n = 6)*
Table 6 shows that non-direct service workers, their peers, and their bosses (who are their supervisors) use humor much of the time for many of the same reasons, but there are numerous exceptions. Listed below are where the biggest discrepancies lie.

- Seven non-direct service workers claimed that they use humor to develop friendships; yet, only one claimed that their boss uses humor to develop friendships.
- Not one non-direct service worker claimed that they use humor to probe others’ thoughts; yet, three claimed that their peers use humor to probe others’ thoughts.
- Seven non-direct service workers claimed that they use humor to cope with fear or embarrassment; yet only three claimed that their peers use humor to cope with fear or embarrassment; and only one claimed that their boss uses humor to cope with fear or embarrassment.
- Seven non-direct service workers claimed that their peers use humor to entertain or be playful; yet, only four claimed that their boss uses humor to entertain or be playful.
- Six non-direct service workers claimed that they use humor to share positive feelings; yet, only three claimed that their boss uses humor to share positive feelings.
- Six non-direct service workers claimed that their peers use humor to gain attention or maintain interest; yet, only two claimed that their boss uses humor to gain attention or maintain interest.
- Six non-direct service workers claimed that they use humor to reduce boredom; yet, only three claimed that their boss uses humor to reduce boredom.
- Five non-direct service workers claimed that they use humor to stimulate imagination; yet, only two claimed that their boss uses humor to stimulate imagination.
• Three non-direct service workers claimed that their peers use humor to put others in their place; yet, not one claimed that their boss uses humor to put others in their place.
### Table 6
Responses From Focus Group 5 – Non Direct Service Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions of Humor</th>
<th>Used by you</th>
<th>Used by peers</th>
<th>Used by boss</th>
<th>Used by all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop friendships</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build rapport</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce tension, stress, anxiety</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid discussing a topic</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deny the serious intent of a message</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss socially inappropriate topics</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe about others’ thoughts</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cope with fear or embarrassment</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remove attention from oneself</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertain or be playful</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get work done</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express a need for approval</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express support or sympathy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express agreement</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show appreciation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share positive feelings</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain attention or to maintain interest</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change the topic of conversation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuade</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid telling personal information</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclose difficult information</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause conflict</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disarm aggressive people</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow others insight into one’s state of mind</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce boredom</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrate a point, provide an example</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulate imagination and creativity</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express approval of others’ actions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express disapproval of others’ actions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop and perpetuate stereotypes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate group cohesiveness</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between individuals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between groups</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put others in their place</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmit verbally aggressive messages</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control others’ behaviors</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express superiority over others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack others, demean or insult others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>105</strong></td>
<td><strong>108</strong></td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
<td><strong>267</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(n = 7)
Table 7 shows the combined responses from all members in every group. In general, focus group members perceived themselves as using humor to meet more functions than their peers, and especially their bosses. In three of the five focus groups, peers were perceived as using fewer functions of humor than self. In all five focus groups, bosses were perceived as using fewer functions of humor than self. In the three groups where peers were rated lower than self, the difference between peer and self was much less than the difference between boss and self. The ratings for peers were much closer to the ratings for self. The ratings for bosses were considerably lower.

I interpret this to mean that in general peers are seen as being similar to self, whereas bosses are seen as much different, especially to those front line non-direct service workers who are lowest on the hierarchical ladder. Either bosses are perceived as not using humor as often or not using it to meet multiple needs. It is important to keep in mind that the questionnaire results tell us why people use humor. It doesn’t tell us how often they use it. For example, a person could joke around many, many times during the day, but their joking could be used to meet very few functions. This person, if scoring himself or herself would have a very low score. Likewise, an individual may rarely use humor, yet when they do use humor they may use it to meet a wide range of social, educational, or psychological needs. If that were the case, the person may actually have a very high rating.
Table 7
Frequency Of Use Of Different Roles Of Humor – Responses From All Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions of Humor</th>
<th>Used by you</th>
<th>Used by peers</th>
<th>Used by boss</th>
<th>Used by all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop friendships</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build rapport</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce tension, stress, anxiety</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid discussing a topic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deny the serious intent of a message</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss socially inappropriate topics</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe about others’ thoughts</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cope with fear or embarrassment</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remove attention from oneself</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertain or be playful</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get work done</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express a need for approval</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express support or sympathy</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express agreement</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show appreciation</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share positive feelings</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain attention or to maintain interest</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change the topic of conversation</td>
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<td>21</td>
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<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persuade</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid telling personal information</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclose difficult information</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause conflict</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disarm aggressive people</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow others insight into one’s state of mind</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce boredom</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrate a point, provide an example</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulate imagination and creativity</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express approval of others’ actions</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express disapproval of others’ actions</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop and perpetuate stereotypes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate group cohesiveness</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between individuals</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between groups</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put others in their place</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmit verbally aggressive messages</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control others’ behaviors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express superiority over others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack others, demean or insult others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>673</strong></td>
<td><strong>680</strong></td>
<td><strong>503</strong></td>
<td><strong>1856</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(n = 33)
The aggregate data displayed in Tables 2 – 7 are interesting but do not enable one to compare responses across individual group members to determine if a pattern emerges such as those who indicated that they use few functions of humor also indicated that their peers and bosses used few functions of humor or vice versa. Table 8 was developed to allow such comparisons. Since the questionnaires were handed in anonymously, they were coded with an identifier. The questionnaires from FG 1 were coded 1a, 1b, 1c, etc. The questionnaires from FG 2 were coded 2a, 2b, 2c, and so on for each group. Table 8 shows the cumulative responses from each group member’s questionnaire for each of the three columns: “Used by You,” “Used by Peers,” and “Used by Boss.” The last column on Table 8 was obtained by summing the numbers in the first three columns. For example, questionnaire 2a had 25 functions marked under the “Used by You” column, 17 functions marked under the “Used by Peers” column, and 21 functions marked under the “Used by Boss” column. When the numbers 25, 17 and 21 are added together the sum is 63, the total number of functions used.

Table 8 shows that three of the seven directors in FG 1 (1a, 1c, 1e) indicated that peers used more functions of humor than self and only one director (1c) indicated that the boss used more functions of humor. Overall, directors indicated that peers used 10 more functions of humor than self and bosses used 23 fewer functions of humor than self.

Table 8 shows that overall managers indicated that peers used 11 fewer functions of humor than self and bosses used 21 fewer functions than self. Overall, supervisors indicated that their peers used 24 more functions of humor than self and their bosses used 27 fewer functions of humor than self. The supervisors indicated that they, their peers, and their bosses used many more functions of humor than any other group. Interestingly,
the self in FG 3 would be representative of the boss in FG 4 and 5, and yet, both groups 4 and 5 indicated that their bosses used few functions of humor; therefore, there appears to be a discrepancy between perceived uses of humor by others and by self.

Table 8 shows that overall, direct service workers indicated that their peers used 19 fewer functions of humor than self and their bosses used 38 fewer functions of humor than self. Non-direct service workers indicated that their peers used only 3 fewer functions of humor than self, however, their bosses used 51 fewer functions of humor than self. The ratings for FG 5 were interesting because they indicated that they used a lot fewer functions of humor and they indicated that their bosses used even fewer. These numbers should not be surprising because when conducting FG 5 the mood was subdued compared to the other groups. During the conversation individuals mentioned few instances about sharing humor with their bosses. In fact, some hid their casual moments for fear of being given more work, “because they think if you have time to socialize, then you are not busy enough.”

When looking at the data across all five groups, Table 8 shows 12 of the 33 respondents indicated that their peers used more functions of humor than self and only five respondents indicated that their bosses used more functions of humor than self. This does not mean that bosses necessarily use humor less often. It means that individuals perceive their boss as using humor to meet fewer functions, but in all likelihood, they are probably perceived as using humor less often. The directors’, managers’, and supervisors’ ratings of self do not support the notion that bosses meet fewer needs through the use of humor, or use humor less often.
If the interpretation of humor was straightforward and error free, and humor was out in the open instead of behind closed doors, then one would think that the ratings bosses gave themselves and their peers would be similar to the ratings given them by subordinates. That is generally not the case. Directors, managers, and supervisors see themselves as using humor to meet more functions than their subordinates see them using with one exception. Supervisors in FG 3 indicated that their bosses who are the managers in FG 2 use a similar number of functions of humor as the managers indicated themselves. In all other cases bosses indicated that they and their peers used more functions of humor than their subordinates indicated that they used. It is important to remember that the bosses of FG 4 and FG 5 are the self and peers in FG 3. The bosses of FG 3 are the self and peers in FG 2. The bosses of FG 2 are the self and peers in FG 1.
Table 8  
Response To Focus Group Questionnaire – Number Of Functions Of Humor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Used by You</th>
<th>Used by Peer</th>
<th>Used by Boss</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 a</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 b</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 c</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 d</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 e</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 f</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 g</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total for FG 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>147</strong></td>
<td><strong>157</strong></td>
<td><strong>124</strong></td>
<td><strong>428</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 a</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 b</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 c</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 d</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 e</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 f</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total for FG 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>131</strong></td>
<td><strong>120</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>351</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 a</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 b</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 c</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 d</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 e</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 f</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 g</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total for FG 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>158</strong></td>
<td><strong>182</strong></td>
<td><strong>131</strong></td>
<td><strong>471</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 a</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 b</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 c</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 d</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 f</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 g</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total for FG 4</strong></td>
<td><strong>132</strong></td>
<td><strong>113</strong></td>
<td><strong>94</strong></td>
<td><strong>339</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 a</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 b</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 c</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 d</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 e</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 f</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 g</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total for FG 5</strong></td>
<td><strong>105</strong></td>
<td><strong>108</strong></td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
<td><strong>267</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>673</strong></td>
<td><strong>680</strong></td>
<td><strong>503</strong></td>
<td><strong>1856</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9 summarizes the data displayed in table 8. Table 9 shows that overall peers used 7 fewer functions of humor than self, and bosses used 170 fewer functions of humor than self. As mentioned previously, according to the raters, bosses used dramatically fewer functions of humor than either peers or self. In addition, workers likely perceive that bosses use humor less often than peers or self. Furthermore, the lower one is in the hierarchy, the less they perceive their boss as using humor to meet certain needs. The function of humor is ambiguous. It has multiple interpretations and the interpretation of the function of any humorous episode is directly tied to the formal and informal relationships between workers.

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Difference between ratings of self and peers</th>
<th>Difference between ratings of self and boss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FG 1</td>
<td>&gt; 10</td>
<td>&lt; 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 2</td>
<td>&lt; 11</td>
<td>&lt; 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 3</td>
<td>&gt; 24</td>
<td>&lt; 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 4</td>
<td>&lt; 19</td>
<td>&lt; 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 5</td>
<td>&gt; 3</td>
<td>&lt; 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>&lt; 7</td>
<td>&lt; 170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next step in analyzing the questionnaire data involved examination of the frequency of use of particular functions of humor by self, peers, boss, and across all groups. The purpose was (a) to determine if there was one function of humor used by all, (b) to determine if there was one function that was never used, and then (c) to determine which functions were used most and least frequently. The list of functions of humor was divided into 5 nearly equal categories to represent frequency of use. The categories were labeled: Always, Very Often, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Very Rarely, and Never.
Table 10 shows the frequency of use of particular functions of humor by self. There was not one function of humor that was never used. Likewise, there was not one function of humor that was used consistently in every case. The functions that humor played most often by self are to: reduce tension, stress and anxiety; share positive feelings; develop friendships; entertain or be playful; build rapport; reduce boredom; illustrate a point, provide an example; facilitate group cohesiveness; express agreement; and cope with fear or embarrassment. The functions that humor played least often by self are to: develop and perpetuate stereotypes; control others’ behaviors; transmit verbally aggressive messages; attack others, demean or insult others; cause conflict; and express superiority over others.
Table 10

**Frequency Of Use Of Roles Of Humor By Self**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Used by all 33 responders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Often</td>
<td>32 – 27 responders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduce tension, stress and anxiety (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Share positive feelings (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop friendships (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entertain or be playful (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Build rapport (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduce boredom (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Illustrate a point, provide an example (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitate group cohesiveness (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express agreement (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cope with fear or embarrassment (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>26 – 21 responders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Show appreciation (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express support or sympathy (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stimulate imagination and creativity (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disarm aggressive people (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To get work done (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>20 – 14 responders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoid telling personal information (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express approval of others’ actions (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disclose difficult information (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Probe about others thoughts (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To gain attention or to maintain interest (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change the topic of conversation (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persuade (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remove attention from oneself (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>13 – 7 responders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allow others insight into one’s state of mind (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express disapproval of others’ actions (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express a need for approval (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Define boundaries between groups (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Define boundaries between individuals (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss socially inappropriate topics (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoid discussing a topic (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deny the serious intent of a message (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Put others in their place (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Rarely</td>
<td>6 – 1 responders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop and perpetuate stereotypes (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control others’ behaviors (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transmit verbally aggressive messages (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attack others, demean or insult others (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cause conflict (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express superiority over others (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Used by no one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 11 shows the frequency of use of particular functions of humor by peers. There was not one function of humor that was never used. Likewise, there was not one function of humor that was used consistently in every case. The functions that humor played most often by peers are to: entertain or be playful; reduce tension, stress and anxiety; develop friendships; reduce boredom; build rapport; illustrate a point, provide an example; express agreement; and cope with fear or embarrassment. The functions that humor played least often by peers are to attack others, demean or insult others; and cause conflict.
Table 11

**Frequency Of Use Of Roles Of Humor By Peers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>Used by all 33 responders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Very Often</strong></td>
<td>32 – 27 responders</td>
<td>Entertain or be playful (32)  &lt;br&gt; Reduce tension, stress and anxiety (30)  &lt;br&gt; Develop friendships (29)  &lt;br&gt; Reduce boredom (29)  &lt;br&gt; Build rapport (28)  &lt;br&gt; Illustrate a point, provide an example (27)  &lt;br&gt; Express agreement (27)  &lt;br&gt; Cope with fear or embarrassment (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>26 – 21 responders</td>
<td>Share positive feelings (26)  &lt;br&gt; Show appreciation (23)  &lt;br&gt; To gain attention or to maintain interest (23)  &lt;br&gt; Facilitate group cohesiveness (23)  &lt;br&gt; Change the topic of conversation (21)  &lt;br&gt; To get work done (21)  &lt;br&gt; Express support or sympathy (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>20 – 14 responders</td>
<td>Stimulate imagination and creativity (18)  &lt;br&gt; Express approval of others’ actions (18)  &lt;br&gt; Probe about others thoughts (17)  &lt;br&gt; Discuss socially inappropriate topics (17)  &lt;br&gt; Express a need for approval (17)  &lt;br&gt; Allow others insight into one’s state of mind (17)  &lt;br&gt; Express disapproval of others’ actions (16)  &lt;br&gt; Avoid discussing a topic (16)  &lt;br&gt; Deny the serious intent of a message (15)  &lt;br&gt; Disarm aggressive people (15)  &lt;br&gt; Persuade (15)  &lt;br&gt; Disclose difficult information (14)  &lt;br&gt; Remove attention from oneself (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>13 – 7 responders</td>
<td>Avoid telling personal information (12)  &lt;br&gt; Define boundaries between groups (11)  &lt;br&gt; Put others in their place (10)  &lt;br&gt; Develop and perpetuate stereotypes (10)  &lt;br&gt; Define boundaries between individuals (10)  &lt;br&gt; Control others’ behaviors (9)  &lt;br&gt; Transmit verbally aggressive messages (8)  &lt;br&gt; Express superiority over others (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Rarely</td>
<td>6 – 1 responders</td>
<td>Attack others, demean or insult others (5)  &lt;br&gt; Cause conflict (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Used by no one</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 12 shows the frequency of use of particular functions of humor by bosses. There was not one function of humor that was never used. Likewise, there was not one function of humor that was used consistently in every case. The functions that humor played most often by bosses are to reduce tension, stress and anxiety; and build rapport. The functions that humor played least often by bosses are to: avoid discussing a topic; remove attention from oneself; express a need for approval; develop and perpetuate stereotypes; express superiority over others; deny the serious intent of a message; cause conflict; transmit verbally aggressive messages; and attack others, demean or insult others.
### Table 12

**Frequency Of Use Of Roles Of Humor By Boss**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Used by</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>all 33 responders</td>
<td>Reduce tension, stress and anxiety (29) Build rapport (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Often</td>
<td>32 – 27 responders</td>
<td>Entertain or be playful (25) Share positive feelings (25) Illustrate a point, provide an example (24) Facilitate group cohesiveness (23) Express agreement (22) Show appreciation (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>26 – 21 responders</td>
<td>Develop friendships (19) Stimulate imagination and creativity (19) Reduce boredom (18) Persuade (16) Express approval of others’ actions (16) Disarm aggressive people (15) To gain attention or to maintain interest (15) To get work done (14) Express support or sympathy (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>20 – 14 responders</td>
<td>Cope with fear or embarrassment (13) Change the topic of conversation (13) Express disapproval of others’ actions (11) Allow others insight into one’s state of mind (11) Define boundaries between groups (10) Discuss socially inappropriate topics (9) Probe about others’ thoughts (9) Put others in their place (9) Control others’ behaviors (9) Avoid telling personal information (8) Disclose difficult information (8) Define boundaries between individuals (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>13 – 7 responders</td>
<td>Avoid discussing a topic (6) Remove attention from oneself (6) Express a need for approval (6) Develop and perpetuate stereotypes (5) Express superiority over others (5) Deny the serious intent of a message (5) Cause conflict (4) Transmit verbally aggressive messages (4) Attack others, demean or insult others (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Rarely</td>
<td>6 – 1 responders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Used by no one</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 13 shows the frequency of use of particular functions of humor across all groups. There was not one function of humor that was never used. Likewise, there was not one function of humor that was used consistently in every case. Across the three groups: self, peers, and bosses, the functions that humor played most often are to: reduce tension, stress and anxiety; entertain or be playful; build rapport; share positive feelings; and illustrate a point or provide an example. Across the three groups: self, peers, and bosses, the functions that humor played least often are to: transmit verbally aggressive messages; express superiority over others; attack others, demean or insult others; and cause conflict.
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<th>Frequency Of Use Of Roles Of Humor By All</th>
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In summary, more functions of humor were used Very Often by self than by peers or bosses, however, peers used only two fewer functions, whereas bosses used eight fewer functions. The functions of humor listed for self and peer are the same with only two exceptions. The peer list does not include to “share positive feelings” and “facilitate group cohesiveness.” The only similarity between the lists of humor functions used by self and used by boss are to “reduce tension, stress and anxiety” and to “build rapport.”

The functions of humor used Very Rarely by self and peers are those functions that most people would consider negative in nature, whereas only four of the functions used Very Rarely by bosses would be considered negative. This finding could mean that communication by bosses is more direct. Bosses may be less likely to use humor to avoid discussing a topic, removing attention from oneself, or expressing a need for approval, etc. It could also mean that humor is being misinterpreted. Bosses may be using humor but the message is not being perceived as humorous.

When looking at the functions of humor across the three groups, the more negative functions are used Rarely or Very Rarely by self, peers, and bosses. One may conclude that humor in the workplace is used most often to meet positive or healthier social, psychological, or educational needs.

**Individual Differences/Antecedent Conditions**

This section identifies humor use related to individual differences or antecedent conditions. This main subject is divided into four categories including gender/sexual humor, ethnic humor, humor aimed at differences in physical appearance and personal traits, and humor aimed at or about people who are liked or disliked. The category of
liking and disliking is subdivided into two subcategories including the supportive –
disparaging continuum of humor and care giving.

Two of the individual differences or antecedent conditions that I was especially
attuned to during the focus groups and participant observation were gender and ethnicity.
Interestingly, I rarely heard or witnessed humor disparaging men or women in general or
ethnic groups. I surmised that either these subjects were strictly taboo and were in fact
not the topic of much humor or that these topics were joked about in private. Lee’s
comment seemed to sum up what was occurring. Lee said in a serious tone of voice,
“When somebody’s religion or nationality would be offended, I would draw the line
there.” Then after a significant pause she quipped, “Unless, they’re not there to hear it
and you are pretty sure it won’t get back.” Humor aimed at individual differences was
secretive and confidentiality was of utmost importance; so, it is likely that I was just not
privy to most of that sort of joking and teasing.

Since I was not hearing too much joking about ethnic and gender issues, or
hearing sexual innuendoes, I strayed from the focus group questioning route and asked
FG 2 and FG 4 if that type of humor was prevalent. The managers’ responses follow and
the direct service workers reply is later in this section.

Kyle: I don’t hear it.
Mitch: Those are taboo subjects for me. Recently, so much attention has been given to
those subjects that we’re hyper sensitive to those issues. A lot of my humor does not
occur in a verbal context, it’s through email. With email, I can look at what I’m saying
and ask, “Is that appropriate? Is it really funny? Is it going to offend anybody?” Then I
can send it off. That is somewhat of a safety factor because there’s greater risk joking
with people here, than with people outside the agency. A nonworking peer would
understand that you can tell an unacceptable joke, and know it is not necessarily a
viewpoint you maintain. I’m cautious when using humor at the agency because people
who don’t know me may take offense to something that I say just simply to be
humorous....
**Scott:** Managers are more familiar with the policies and practices of the agency and they know that misplaced comments can place you or the agency in a difficult position, although unintended.

**Gender/Sexual Humor**

Consistent with what the managers mentioned, gender or sex related humor was rarely heard or witnessed. Only once did sex related bantering occur between participants in a focus group. Likewise, only a few occasions of gender or sex related humor was witnessed during participant observation. Focus group participants told most of the gender or sex related stories. Interestingly, even though humor related to gender or sexual issues was rarely heard in the focus groups or during participant observation, when it did occur the resulting laughter was loud, intense, and long. Also, during the storytelling the narrators had the full attention of the group participants and in the third story the participants eagerly prodded the narrator for more details.

In the focus groups, some gender or sex related stories were told. The supervisors told four of the most descriptive stories. The first story made fun of a client who was dressed provocatively and who acted bizarrely. This account also made fun of the male supervisor who was apparently embarrassed by the client. The second story also made fun of a client but the narrator made fun of herself, too, because she was left speechless by the client’s reply. In the third story the butt of the joking was a male subordinate. In the final account, a female coworker was the butt of the humorous episode.

**Brooke:** We had this client, and I won’t say her name but a lot of you will know who I’m talking about. She would make me look like a small person. (Brooke is about 5’7” and about 185#.) She had a history of doing bizarre things. We had this meeting scheduled and she came in. She came in with hot, hot pants on. And, she comes into the office, and instead of coming in and sitting down at the table, she sits on top of the table, crosses her legs and then she said, ‘Now, don’t you think I look cute today?’ The next thing she does is, flip off her wig. She was bald-headed. Everybody in the hallway was trying not to look, but they looked and cracked up. Luke was the supervisor at the time. He was
trying not to look at her, kind of swallowing, not knowing what to do. And, we’re looking at her thinking, ‘Ookay.’ (I believe they were making fun of the client, but also making fun of Luke, the supervisor who was very uncomfortable around this woman.)

**Lara**: I think everybody probably knows my client, too. She was mentally challenged, but she always had a man. Always had several of them, in fact. I worked with her because I really wanted to give her her child back. So I worked with her and worked with her. I called her in one day because it just wasn’t working. She was switching men, and doing this and that. I was so frustrated with her. So, I had a conversation with her. I said, ‘I don’t know what to do with you. You’re prostituting, you’re whoring around.’ And, she just stopped me in my tracks. She said, ‘I am not whoring or prostituting I give it away.’ And a room full of people heard her.

_Ha ha ha._

**Lara**: ‘I give it away. I’m not prostituting.’ Excuse me. OK. So, at that point, I just shut up.

**Prima**: Several years ago, I was doing a case conference with one of my staff, male staff who generally wore his pants a little tight. On this particular day, he came in….

_Ha ha._

**Someone**: This is funny already. This man thing…

**Prima**: He walks in for his case conference, and there was a big hole right below the zipper.

_Oohh, ha ha._

**Prima**: And, he was semi-exposed.

_Oh oh. Ha ha ha._

**Prima**: I had to make the decision of inviting him to come on in…

_Ha ha ha._

**Prima**: Or, (There is a lot of loud laughing and giggling from everyone around the table.)

**Someone**: So what did you do?

**Marcia**: Tell us. Don’t just tell us part of the story.

**Someone**: How did it end?

**Prima**: I took a deep breath (pause) and asked him to go to the bathroom.

_Hee hee hee._

**Brooke**: Check out yourself.

**Someone**: Did he come back?

**Prima**: Not for a while.

_Ha ha ha._

**Marcia**: Did he have underwear on?

**Prima**: Yeah, but…

**Marcia**: Never mind.

_Ha ha ha._

**Marcia**: Now we’re all thinking, ‘Who was that?’

**Flora**: This was funny. Marcia will die as soon as I say it. It is at the expense of a coworker and she would kill me if I told it, but I have to.

**Marcia**: Why, you told everybody else.
Flora: Marcia, Belle, and I went to Jake’s for lunch. It was busy and all these construction guys were there.
Marcia: That’s probably why we went.
Flora: Past the bar, there was another eating area. You had to step up to it. Well, for some reason they put us up in the step-up eating area. We finished eating and…
Marcia: Ha ha. It’s funny.
Flora: Belle pulled her chair back. Ha ha ha.

Ha ha ha.
Flora: She had a dress on, mind you. She falls back. Marcia and I go, ‘OOOHHHH’ (look of surprise or horror on her face).
Marcia: We made sure she was OK.
Flora: Marcia, Belle’s right, we did chuckle when she fell back. Poor baby. All of the construction guys… Oh god.

Ha ha ha. (almost uncontrollable laughing in the group now.)
Flora: We go, ‘Belle, Belle, are you OK?’ She said, ‘You guys are laughing at me.’ We replied, ‘No, Belle, we made sure you were ok first.’ ‘You guys are laughing at me.’ It’s true, Marcia. We did laugh.
Marcia: Yeah, but what makes it funnier… Belle is so prim and…

Ha ha.
Flora: She would be so mad if she knew we told the story. She doesn’t think it’s funny.
Marcia: We’re so bad sometimes. I’ll get on the elevator with Flora and…. (Marcia puts her hands up and pantomimes that she is falling backwards)

Ha ha ha.
Flora: And we know exactly what it is. Her dress, it just went a flying. (Flora’s moves her hands up and over her head.) All those construction guys, ooohhh. Poor baby.
Someone: Sick.

A woman manager provided the most derogatory example of sexual humor and the humor targeted Monica Lewinsky who had a recent affair with the president of the United States. Interestingly, Bridgett prefaced her comment by explaining that they probably have more sex related humor in her unit because they work with sexual abuse. I had the feeling that this was said because she did not want the listeners to think that she is lewd; it was a statement to justify this taboo behavior. Unlike the other sex related stories this one did not promote laughter.

Bridgett: Due to the nature of our work, we probably tend to joke about sexual things more than other departments. On the silly board… someone… put a picture of Monica Lewinski and next to it [a pickle] and said, ‘Are you going to eat that?’

Ha ha ha.
A manager was the target of a gender related story told by a front line worker. The story prompted a lot of loud laughter and hand clapping. Comments from the listeners encouraged the storyteller to provide details. It is important to note that the manager in the story was the butt of quite a bit of joking by the front line workers.

Lee: I was thinking of that anal person.  
Ha ha ha.  
Cara: That’s OK, my supervisor even calls him that.  
Roberta: So does mine.  
Ha ha ha  
Lee: Anyway, I have a client and she has one of our children.  And, it’s a little boy, he’s two years old and she’s very concerned that his circumcision wasn’t done right and she wants it redone.  One day my supervisor and I were in there talking about it and the anal person walks in.  It was just too good to pass up because we started discussing it, consulting with him on how he thought we should deal with that.  It made him very, very uncomfortable.  He was shifting around.  (She was shifting in her seat and looking down.)  
Ha ha ha  
(Someone began clapping)  
Roberta: I would have liked to have been there for that.  
Someone: You could have sold tickets to that.  
Roberta: He’s very easily embarrassed.  
Lee: He was very embarrassed about this.  We were trying to describe the botched job on the circumcision and asked how he thought we might rectify this.  
Ha ha ha.  
Rosa: Turned all red, did he?  
Lee: Oh yes.  He was doing a lot of shifting and squirming.  It was really funny.  
Ha ha ha.

The six stories related above were all told by women.  Only once did I witness a man tell a gender related story and that story is discussed in a later section. Below, Bonita describes a male coworker’s joking pattern.

Bonita: Ernie Henson … Everyday he says something to try to push my buttons, and, it is usually humorous.  For example, he makes fun of my hot flashes all the time.  
Ha ha.  
Bonita: A lot of women might not like it, but I think it’s funny.

Even though sex or gender related stories generated intense laughter during the focus group responses, sexual bantering between participants occurred only one time during the focus groups.  In fact, this bantering was the longest string of bantering
documented during the series of five focus groups. The topic that triggered the bantering was related to the use of humor in the restroom. What began as a serious response to a question, ended up being humor-in-action. The bantering demonstrated the nature of peer teasing. The peers were unsympathetic to Howard’s uneasiness and inhibitions, and in fact, delighted in poking fun at his perceived weakness which is to urinate in front of others. It is also interesting to note that in the beginning of the narrative, Howard is criticizing other males. In the end he is the one being criticized. Most of the conversation is recorded below:

Howard: [Humor] can be inappropriate to me in informal settings. The most informal one to me…. I hate this when this happens, and it happens almost everyday… I go to the restroom. I am standing there trying to take a leak and somebody comes in and then wants to try and talk to me.  
Ha ha ha. (The ladies are laughing louder than the men.)
Howard: Trying to be humorous would be worse.
Ha ha ha.
Howard: ‘I am trying to piss, can you leave me alone?’ Someone will say, ‘Heh, heh, how you doing? Or, What do you think about…?’ Man.
Ooooohhh.
Howard: ‘Let me alone. I’m trying to take a piss.’
Howard: When I first went up there (to the seventh floor) I was so uncomfortable that I would still come down here (to the 5th floor) to take a leak.
Ha ha ha.
Brandy: You came down here from 7, to use the bathroom?
Howard: Then I stopped. So, now, I just ignore people. Now I put them on my list.
Ha ha ha.
Simon: Howard, is it just a conversation or is it…
Howard: And you can imagine the males up there that are the most talkative. The ones that like to talk the most, have the most outgoing personality. You know.
Simon: What if somebody walks in there and just says, ‘How’s it going?’ Period. Does that bother you?
Ha ha ha.
Simon: I agree if somebody want to have a lengthy conversation. But if somebody says, ‘How’s it going?’ It’s going. You just look down and say, ‘Apparently pretty good.’
Ha ha ha.
Brett: You know a way to put an end to that Howard, is to use…
Howard: Use what?
Brett: Use humor. As soon as they sidle up next to you, just laugh.
Ha ha ha.
Brett: And, I don’t think they will probably engage in conversation. (More giggling and humorous suggestions, but mostly inaudible because of the multiple voices.)

Only two sex-related comments were witnessed during the participant observation periods. Both comments were relatively innocent, but it is important to know that they were made in groups comprised of both men and women. A woman at an All Staff meeting made the first comment:

Spence: The board mandated that if staff don’t know how to use their computers then I must get them a tutor.

Ha ha ha.

Marcia: Is he cute?

Ha ha.

Spence: Anybody here need a tutor, raise your hand. (After saying this, Spence realized what Marcia just said.) Is he cute?? (Said very loudly, in a surprised tone of voice as he snickered.)

Ha ha.

Marcia: Just a thought.

The second sex-related comment witnessed during participant observation was made by a man during a private meeting attended by three male coworkers and me, a female. One male was disparaging his new coworker:

Cal: I wanted the chick in the bikini.

Me: The chick in the bikini?

Me (to Bill the new worker): Bill, do you feel wanted?

Jesse: It’s one of those things where people do so well in interviews.

I was left wondering why there was not more gender or sex related joking occurring in the agency. No one seemed offended by the gender or sex related joking and when it did occur it was enjoyed immensely. It is likely that gender or sex related issues are the topic of humor in this work setting, but this type of humor is reserved for those who are very trusted. During FG 3 Flora told me:
Flora: We talk about sex in our own unit, with people we know, our friends. The guys, they get included in that, too. They act like they don’t listen, but pretty soon you see their chairs slide out from behind their cubicle as they join in.

*Ha ha ha.*

Flora: They listen.

**Ethnic Humor**

Ethnic humor was no more prevalent than gender or sex related humor. Unlike sex related humor, few detailed stories related to ethnicity were told; rather, short quips or innuendos were more common. For example, Jesse, a Latino male explained why he did something then retorted, “It’s probably culturally different from the way you think.” Furthermore, contrary to sex related humor, ethnic humor did not promote laughter. In fact, peers reprimanded their coworkers for ethnic related comments.

Following are four rare examples of ethnic humor discussed in the focus groups.

In the first account the initiator was a Caucasian male and the butt of the humor was a Latino peer. In the second account the initiator was a Latino male and the butt was an Appalachian White subordinate. In the third account the initiator was a Caucasian female and the butt was a Jewish family. In the final account the speaker targeted himself and he is a Latino male.

**Rosa:** We had a Mexican-American caseworker. And, this one guy who doesn’t work here anymore would put little tomato plants on her desk.

*Ooooh.*

**Rosa:** And, he would put up little signs. He’d write, ‘Wet-back’ on them. So, she was trying to laugh, yet getting really angry. It hurt her feelings, even though she didn’t want him to know that.

**Guy:** You know Denise. She’s funny. She came in, took off her shoes and put her bare feet on my desk.

*Ha ha ha.*

**Guy:** And, I called her my Appalachian White employee.

*Ha ha ha.*

**Me:** You called her what? (I said this in a surprised tone of voice. I couldn’t believe what my ears heard.)
Guy: Appalachian White employee.

**Ha ha ha.**

Guy: We joked about stuff like that. We were ok with it because we didn’t personalize it.

In this account, it is important to note my surprised response. Throughout this investigation, I purposefully tried not to influence the words of the workers. This is one time when I might have effectively halted further discussion because my reply was likely heard as a reprimand.

I was not the only one to reprimand a peer for ethnic related joking. Interestingly, Scott reprimanded Guy, also. I was not happy that Scott scolded Guy because that likely prevented anymore off-colored humor to be shared.

**Guy:** It just depends on the relationship you have; for example the relationship that Denise and I had. I would say, ‘Go off with your hillbilly self and get those shoes on.’ Or, I’ll say something like, ‘Geeze, you’d have thought I fell off the tomato truck yesterday.’ I would say something about my culture, something stereotypical.

**Scott:** You know, Guy, we’ve gotten complaints. People over hear those types of comments and even though the comments aren’t directed toward them, they hear them and they are offended.

**Guy:** That doesn’t happen. (He went on to explain that the teasing with Denise occurs privately.) I think people get too anal with stuff like that. I’m more cautious with sexual harassment type of comments than I am with the ethnic ones.

The following story did not seem very funny to me and it did not prompt laughter from others. I believe the point Cara was trying to make was that the family is smart and well-connected in the community, but playing dumb, and because they were playing dumb the family was seen as foolish. In the account below Cara is criticizing the family for not being open and honest. I was not sure how to take her remark about them being Jewish. At first I thought there was cultural significance about being Jewish and infertile, but then I thought she was stereotyping the family as being mercenary and pushy.

**Cara:** How about our family? What’s funny is that anytime anything has to be done on this case, it happens immediately. For example we were scheduling, the PC trial and
getting the JE, it was a joke because it was done in a week. I got the JE for the PC hearing before I got the JE for my original emergency shelter care. It happens because of who they know. Also, whenever we talk about this family it’s always, well…. They’re Jewish, and they’re infertile so here are some guidelines on what you can’t say. Then they’d try and trip you up. ‘Oh, we’re going to get money for him?’ No, like they didn’t know. Or, ‘There’s vouchers?’ It’s like, ‘You knew that.’ So, then we always come back and laugh, ‘What did they ask?’

Ha ha ha.

During participant observation, ethnicity was generally not a topic of humorous interplay, but two occasions are described below. The first incident occurred during a board meeting. The board approved an employee recognition dinner and the board members were talking about places where the dinner could be held. Two board members who were African-American bantered back and forth:

**Mr. Rogers:** I think it should be held at Amelia’s. (Three of the African American members chuckled.) They would be served black-eyed peas, corn bread, collard greens, macaroni, and cobbler. (This was said as he was snickering and I had the feeling that he was making fun of White people.)

**Mr. Peters:** Bickmore Avenue. They would assure your safety. (This is one of the most crime-ridden areas of town.)

**Mr. Rogers:** I said it seriously.

Another occasion of ethnic related humor occurred during a private meeting. It is important to note that this was the only time laughter was prompted by ethnic related humor. In the meeting the participants gave their director the name of Pedro. The following was heard:

**Jesse:** You know Pedro.

**Cal:** Pedro, Pedro is to blame. (This was said in a Mexican accent.)

**Bill:** How’s that Pedro? Pedro, Pedro, do you hear me? (Bill said this as he was leaning over to speak directly into the microphone of the tape recorder.)

Ha ha ha.

**Humor Aimed at Differences in Physical Appearance and Traits**

When discussing joking about individual differences it is common to think about sexual and ethnic joking. It is important to be aware of joking about other individual
differences and antecedent conditions such as appearance. Workers joked about the way people look and behave. In the following two accounts workers were making fun of their clients physical appearance.

**Roberta:** I have one lady; she has no top teeth, and only four bottom teeth. (Roberta hides her upper teeth with her upper lip and juts out her lower jaw.) She reminds me of that bulldog.

**Oh geeze. Hee hee.**

**Cara:** A lot of us have nicknames for our clients. I had one that we called Baby Huey. Her social skills were very immature and she just kind of did this (waddles back and forth in her seat).

**Ha ha ha.**

**Cara:** She was a Black woman with big lips and wore a lot of makeup. She just became Baby Huey.

**Ha ha ha.**

**Cara:** ‘Baby Huey’s downstairs for you.’

**Ha ha ha.**

**Rosa:** We had these kids come in. They were left alone and their mothers came in, and the mothers were very weird acting. They were two sisters, one had three kids and the other one had one. You could tell something was wrong with them, they were just really wacko. One of them had what we used to call a horse face. (She attempts to make a “horse face” by relaxing her facial muscles and pulls the skin downward with her fingers.) This is really bad, but we found out later that she had a stroke. So she talked funny, and her mouth was funny when she talked.

Interestingly, three focus group participants told stories about humor directed at coworkers who were short in stature. In each situation, as described in the following three accounts, the humor resulted in a negative outcome.

**Prima:** I have a friend who works here and she happens to be a little short. An individual, in the midst of an audience, proceeded to comment about how short she was. And, she [my friend] went off. Needless to say, that other person was in shock. The “short” comments didn’t go over so well.

**Marcia:** I have one, but don’t repeat this. I was in the office with a caseworker, and Mr. DeWitt came in. We were talking about how he almost got hit in the parking lot. Ha ha. The worker said, ‘Well, they can’t see you cause you’re so short.’

**Ha ha.**

**Marcia:** She said it just to be funny, but his face went. (She made an expressionless face.) He probably has a problem with that. It was really funny what she said, but not to
him. ‘Oh, they probably just didn’t see you because you are such a little guy,’ or something like that.

_Oohoo hoo._

Marcia: The worker was trying to make a joke of it, but it wasn’t funny. He was good about it though. But you knew by his face that it was not funny. Don’t make short jokes.

Stanlee: When we were on Elm Street the mailboxes in the Administration Building were very high, and I’m short. Sometimes I would do the mail and put it in the pigeon holes including those clear up on top. So, a group of friends thought they would be funny and had a stool built, and labeled it “Stanlee’s stool.” When I went in I was supposed to stand on that stool to do the mail. Well, they thought it was funny. Well, I’ll tell you, I didn’t. _Ha ha._

**Humor Directed at or about People Who are Liked or Disliked**

Another antecedent condition that impacted humor in both the focus groups and participant observation was personal liking or disliking of others. It became very apparent that humor directed at or about people differed depending on magnitude of personal regard and respect. A trait that I termed care giving was also apparent. Care giving was not a type of humor; rather care giving was encompassed by humor. These two concepts: the supportive – disparaging continuum of humor and care giving are discussed below.

**The supportive – disparaging continuum of humor.**

In both the focus groups and the participant observation periods humorous episodes ranged from harmless kidding to malicious mocking. This range of humor coincided with a similar range of liking and respect. On one end of the continuum, workers were very much liked and respected. On the opposite end of the continuum workers were not liked at all and not respected. Humor aimed at individuals who were very much liked and highly regarded was more supportive in nature. Whereas humor aimed at those who were pretentious and very much disliked was vicious in nature.
Listed below are three examples of humor: supportive, unsupportive, and malicious.

Each episode was witnessed during participant observation.

This first example of supportive humor was observed at a large meeting of supervisory and management staff. It is important for the reader to know that Felicity is generally well liked by most of the agency workers. The episode began when a worker asked if there were other funds to be accessed for hardship cases.

Many people: Felicity’s funds! (Felicity was recently put in charge of new monies for hardship cases.)

Ha ha.

Spence: There are more monies now than ever before, including Felicity’s monies. (He emphasized “Felicity,” yet we all knew they were not her own monies.)

Ha ha.

Spence: Felicity will tell us about these family incentives.

Many people: Felicity’s money! Felicity’s money! Felicity’s money! (This was yelled out in a chant-like fashion.)

The second example represents unsupportive humor in the midrange of the supportive to malicious continuum. Kathleen is liked but also perceived by many as opinionated and pretentious. When she was teased, the teasing was not as harmless as supportive teasing, but it was not as vicious as the teasing aimed at the truly disliked person. This episode took place at a meeting with five peers.

Guy: Then he [the director] threw a curve ball.

Kathleen: What was the curve ball?

Felicity: That you get Candy. (Candy is an incompetent secretary.)

Ha ha. (Everyone except Kathleen laughed.)

Kathleen: My opinion is…

Mitch: You have an opinion?

Ha ha. (Everyone except Kathleen laughed again. This was particularly funny because Mitch rarely joked and he was usually extraordinarily polite.)

Kathleen: Sure I do. (This was said in a very indignant tone of voice.)

Ha ha.
When Kathleen continued to question something that Mitch was explaining, Guy said something that I could not hear distinctly, but it was derogatory by the way Kathleen looked at him and said, “I’ve been around here a little longer than you at this agency.”

During a small group meeting there was a display of malicious humor. Managers and non-direct service workers were referring to a worker perceived by most to be an irascible individual.

**Jim:** These are the kinds of questions that Pedro’s going to be asking.  
**Rob:** Oh, Pedro. You know what to do with Pedro? You hand him a lollipop and tell him to shut up.  
**Jim:** Slap him about the head and face.  
*Ha ha ha.*

Howard, a director, was the butt of intense, malevolent joking witnessed in both the focus groups and in participant observation. What I found interesting were Howard’s statements in which he tells when he jokes and who he jokes with.

**Howard:** I rarely joke. It doesn’t matter how well I know them. I have to really, really, really know you well to joke with you. If somebody asked, ‘Does Howard joke with you?’ They’d say, ‘Howard doesn’t joke.’  
**Howard:** I probably use humor with Brandy more than with anybody at the agency, and the types of things that I talk to her about and joke about are way different than the types of things I would use at some other level.  
**Me:** Tell me just a little bit about what that difference is going to be.  
**Howard:** Anything with Brandy. And it has to be much more role and position oriented with someone else or if it’s not and it is just in general then it’s going to be politically correct. Whereas I may deviate from being politically correct with Brandy.  
**Brandy:** Frequently.  
*Ha ha.*

**Care giving.**

During the focus group interviews and during participant observation it became apparent that “care giving” was an acceptable and expected type of interpersonal behavior. Care giving took place when one worker physically helped another. Care giving required personal liking, however it was different from supportive humor in that
care giving required a greater time and energy commitment. Care giving was generally accompanied by humor. Workers who wanted help or support used humor to make their request. When care giving was not forthcoming, peers were rebuked through humor. Humor often occurred while care giving when help or support was provided.

Workers in every hierarchical level, other than the directors, showed evidence of care giving. Interestingly, care giving was rarely a behavior that was observed crossing hierarchical ranks. All but two of the care giving accounts related below involve staff positioned in the same hierarchical level.

I first noticed this care giving activity at an All Staff meeting. The room was very chilly. Megan asked out loud if anyone has a jacket she can borrow. Craig, who was sitting three rows back, replied that she could have his jacket. He took his jacket that was hanging on the back of his chair and gave it to Megan.

At a management meeting, managers were told what months they will be presenting their departmental updates. Jesse asked in an anxious tone of voice if his department presentation could be switched to after the New Year. Frances leaned over and whispered, “Somebody will switch with you.” With that said Jesse gave Frances a small slap on the arm and smiled. They made eye contact and smiled back and forth but did not say anymore because his problem was solved.

The direct service workers were most supportive of each other and attended to each other’s needs – physically and emotionally - by feeding each other and entertaining each other in a variety of ways. Some examples follow.

Roberta: We laugh almost regularly in unit meeting. We have Walter Dennis. 
Someone: Ha ha. That’d do it. 
Roberta: He is so hilarious … all you’ve got to say is, ‘It was Walter Dennis,’ and everybody understands.
**Pearl:** He was making waffles one morning…. He had the batter, and he started pouring the batter, and it started overflowing everywhere. We were just cracking up instead of helping him.

**Lee:** He was fired up when he was cleaning that up. I walked in there after it had cooked onto that waffle iron. He was trying to scrape it off.

*Ha ha.*

**Roberta:** About those waffles, he actually got so disgusted because he didn’t bring any Pam or anything to spray on the waffle iron first. He took off …to Foodliner or somewhere, bought Pam, but was so disgusted with the whole thing that he also bought frozen waffles. He was bound and determined that we were having waffles that day. Ha ha ha ha ha. (There was a lot of laughter interspersed with the story.)

**Rosa:** Do you remember Hahns?

**Someone:** Oh yes.

**Rosa:** Hahns, was in our unit and he was maybe 5’7”, balding, and rather chunky. He … used to entertain us. We’d have unit meetings where we’d be so loud other units would complain about us because of the laughing. He would jump up on the table and he would pretend he was a monkey.

*Ha ha.*

**Rosa:** So he’s doing this (she scratched under her arm and scratched her head) and then he’s picking lint, and picking little animals off himself. Everybody’s laughing so hard, we had tears rolling down our faces. We’d ask him to do it a couple times a year. And, every time, you’d just crack up.

**Cullen:** We had a cookie exchange at work…. And, we all really got into it. We made beautiful cookies. And, everybody got an assortment. I was working in an office with two other women and we were gloating over our assortment, ‘I can’t wait to dig in’. As a matter of fact we already had, and we had our favorites picked out. Then a maintenance man came in and we know that they love goodies. So, Ursula said, ‘Would you like a cookie?’ He said, ‘Yeah.’ And, he started taking cookies and then he started filling his pockets.

*Ha ha ha.*

**Cullen:** We were all… Our eyes were getting bigger. I mean, he cleaned out half of her tray. Nobody said anything, but we really laughed afterwards. We helped her fill in her tray.

*Ha ha ha.*

**Stephie:** Ursula and I were working on the board bill. She’s learning to back my position up. It was like the second time she was trying to do it herself and, we had the biggest problem we could have. … And, here was Ursula, she couldn’t get through the bill, so we had to sit there. We ended up being there till 7:30 at night. And we ordered an extra large pizza, and we ate the whole thing. (This was funny because both Ursula and Stephie are very small women. It seems unlikely that they would be able to eat an extra large pizza.) We were laughing so hard. We were checking off the duplicate list. You have to go down it, and it keeps saying subsidy county, subsidy county, and I couldn’t even talk. It just started to sound like jibberish. And, she was laughing as hard as I was.
You could barely see it and we had to do this huge project. That is one of the biggest belly laughs I ever had because, it just went on and on. 

_Ha ha._

As mentioned previously most of the care giving took place between members of the same hierarchical level. When care giving took place across hierarchical levels it seemed more formal. For example, care giving across hierarchical levels took place when the line staff provided a breakfast buffet for the managers on Boss’ Day and when management staff provided a lunch for “Schmuck Day.”

When workers did not provide the appropriate level of care giving, their peers admonished them. In the following narrative Flora uses humor to request, from the focus group participants, sympathy for the lack of caring that her coworkers demonstrated. In the last line of her narrative Flora admonishes her coworkers who laughed at a time when they should have been concerned about her welfare and lent her a hand.

**Flora:** I have these black shoes. (Some of us looked under the table at her shoes.) Not the ones I have on today. Everyone from the unit was going to lunch and I was getting on the elevator and I fell into the elevator. My heel slipped and I fell into the wall. My coworkers thought that I was playing. I said, ‘No, I almost fell.’ Then we were going across the street and I slip again. I almost fall on my butt in the street. Of course they all cracked up and laughed. They said, ‘You know, we made sure you were ok before we laughed.’ Ha. I said, ‘You guys would have laughed as you helped me up, I know.’

In this last example, Brad who is known for his gentle and considerate ways, participates in a care giving activity, but what ensues is a spoof on care giving.

**Yvonne:** Brad, will you hold this? (Her arms are full of packs of paper.)
**Brad:** Sure, where are you going with the paper? (Yvonne first hands him two packs of paper and then a third.)
**Yvonne:** I am taking it to Linda on the first floor.
**Brad:** Do you want me to take it all?
**Velma:** Here Brad, will you take my purse and my bag? (She takes her huge shoulder bag from her arm and hands it and a book bag to Brad.)
**Bill:** Brad, here, open this pop bottle for me. (He holds his bottle in Brad’s direction.)
**Bob:** Brad, I need you to wipe my nose. (Up until this point Brad was smiling shyly, but not saying a word.)
**Brad**: Whooaa, I don’t do that! (pause) (Brad then picks up the end of his tie and holds it out to Bob as if he is going to wipe Bob’s nose.)  
**Ha ha ha.** (The elevator stops and all get out.)

**Structure of Humorous Interplay**

This section of the chapter describes the third main subject: structure of humorous interplay. The structure of humorous interplay is divided into eight categories including initiator, butt, audience, target, location, climate, context, and type of humor. The category of initiator is subdivided into three subcategories: humor initiators identified by focus group participants, humor initiators observed during focus groups, and humor initiators observed during participant observation. Three additional themes emerged from the data on humor initiators: paybacks, what prevents workers from using humor, and confidentiality and these themes will be discussed under the category of humor initiators. The category of butts of humorous interplay is also subdivided into three subcategories: the butt of humor identified by focus group participants, the butt of humorous interplay observed in focus groups, and the butt of humorous interplay observed in participant observation. Three additional themes emerged from the data on butts of humorous interplay - issues of time, very funny stories, and stories that were not funny. These themes are discussed under the category of butts of humorous interplay. Another theme that emerged and is discussed under the category of types of humor is bantering. Finally, this section addresses speaking episodes, and story specificity and spontaneity.

**Humor Initiators**

To determine whom workers joke with and whom they do they not joke with, I paid special attention to the initiators of humorous episodes. The initiator was the person
who told the joke or began a humorous act. Humor initiators were identified in three ways: First, I listened to the responses of the focus group participants when they were asked, “Who do you joke with?” and “Who jokes with you?” Second, during the focus group sessions I observed occasions of humor-in-action and documented the rank of the initiator. Third, during participant observation I also observed occasions of humor-in-action and documented the rank of the initiator. Results will be described separately in three subcategories. Three major themes emerged from the focus group and participant observation data: paybacks, what prevents workers from using humor, and the importance of confidentiality. These themes will be discussed after the third subcategory which is humor initiators observed during focus groups.

**Humor initiators identified by focus group participants.**

Narrative accounts of FG 1, the directors, deserve some special attention because their responses to two questions were enlightening. When the directors were asked, “Who do you joke with?” Spence, Brett, Simon, Brenda, and Brandy explained that they joke with or share humorous things with everybody – all levels of staff:

**Spence:** I suppose I joke with everybody...
**Brett:** I don’t think there is anyone that I don’t. (very long pause) That would be a much shorter list.
**Simon:** Well, everybody in general. There are some people it is just easier to joke with; it’s how their personality is….
**Brenda:** …I like to think that I joke – not joke – but share humorous things and discussions with all levels of staff.

This perception was not shared across the agency. There was a prevailing sense that the directors were not very humorous people. In fact, the assistant moderator for the Director’s focus group felt that they were cold and rigid. Along this same line, Bridgett claimed that the director’s secretarial staff does not use much humor either.
Bridgett: I find that the secretaries on 2A don’t have much of a sense of humor that they share with anyone. As far as that group goes, it’s a pretty cold place.

It should not be surprising that the director’s secretarial staff is viewed as cold. Just as group norms can be reinforced through the use of humor, the lack of humor can reinforce rules of behavior.

Interestingly, when the question, “Who do you joke with?” was flipped around to “Who jokes with you?” the directors’ answers were much different and more in line with what I was hearing from those at lower levels in the hierarchy. For example, two of the directors stated, “A lot of people don’t” and Spence said, “A lot of people are afraid.” Indeed this is what was reported in the other four focus groups.

Marcia: I can joke with my supervisor. My supervisor’s supervisor, but I don’t think I would joke with Mr. DeWitt. Or, Spencer Tracy as I sometimes call him - without him hearing, of course.
Someone: I wouldn’t joke with him either. I don’t know him well enough and I don’t know how he would interpret it.
Marcia: He may interpret things a little bit differently from where he’s coming from.
Someone: Could be his position.

I was surprised that Bridgett, a manager, actually agonized over a Freudian slip made in the presence of Mr. DeWitt. Her concern clued me into just how formal the hierarchy is in the organization. Bridgett was very serious when she said she would not feel comfortable joking with Spence.

Bridgett: We were downstairs talking with Spence …and somehow we got on the subject of the family that was arrested for running a brothel. …We couldn’t think of their names. We were thinking, and thinking, and thinking, and all of a sudden I said, ‘the last name is DeWitt.’
Ha ha ha.
Bridgett: Actually, the last name was very close to that. Well, Spence screamed, “Bridgett, that’s my name.” We had a laugh, but I agonized over it for days. Had that been with a peer, I’m sure that my concern over that happening would have been less. As it turned out there were no consequences.
Scott: At least not up to this point.
Ha ha ha.
As the following accounts show, there was overwhelming evidence from the focus group participants that peers initiate most humor. This was true across the organization’s hierarchy.

**Lara**: I joke in the supervisor’s meeting. I don’t really joke with the workers too much.

**Pearl**: Usually it’s your co-workers; they are the ones you joke with. They are the ones who understand how you mean it. If your supervisor thinks it is funny, then you may make a joke with them. But I don’t too often get on the elevator with Spence or Brenda and try to use too much humor.  
*Ha ha ha.*

**Someone**: I agree.

**Roberta**: I joke with co-workers, my supervisor, I skip my manager; he’s a little too…

**Lee**: Anal.

**Roberta**: That’s the word.  
*Ha ha ha.*

**Cara**: I feel comfortable joking around with my co-workers and there are a couple of supervisors on the floor that have a real dry sense of humor, so we throw these statements back and forth to each other.

**Stephie**: With our supervisor, the humor is about the same because she comes in with as much or more humorous stories than any of us. She tries to blend in. In some instances she doesn’t.

As the above accounts indicate, even though peers initiate most humor, there are times when humor is initiated by someone one level higher or one level lower in the organization’s hierarchy. Rarely is humor initiated by someone more than one level higher or lower in the organization. Following are some examples of this:

**May**: I have to be honest, I really wouldn’t feel comfortable joking or letting my guard down around upper management. That’s just how I feel.

**Martin**: I joke mostly with the co-workers (pause) and, with most of the supervisors. I don’t go any higher than that.  
*Ha ha ha.*
Along this line, only directors and managers mentioned anything about using humor with board members. The directors mentioned the board members more frequently than the managers and this was not surprising since the board impacts directors more so than members lower in the organization’s hierarchy.

_Kyle_: You’re generally much more cautious across levels, either going up or down. I wouldn’t walk up and joke with Mr. B. or any other board member for that matter. _Ha ha ha._

The narrative examples that follow show that when humor does span the hierarchical levels the initiator is generally higher in the organizations hierarchy. Often those lower in the hierarchy “wait for a cue” or “test the waters” before initiating humor.

_Mitch_: …If somebody jokes with me first, then I know it is open season. …I find that Spence has a pretty good sense of humor, too, but you’ve got to test the waters first to see where you’re at and what’s appropriate and what’s not. _Ha ha._

_Pam_: I’ll wait for a cue. For example, if Spence is in a good mood and he’s joking, I’ll joke. The same thing with a board member or any other professional. If they are feeling jovial and obviously if they started to joke, I wouldn’t be a stick in the mud. But, I would wait for a cue from them.

When the humor initiator is more than one level lower in the organization’s hierarchy the humor is generally at their own expense as Dinah explained:

_Dinah_: If I joke with upper, upper management it is usually at my own expense. It’s probably the only safe way.

The following account told by Bonita is interesting because she is telling about one of the few occasions when a boss joked with a subordinate. It became evident that when a boss targets a subordinate it is generally considered a compliment. Focus group participants explained in detail how they were singled out and teased by their boss. It is important for the reader to know that in the account below Ernie is Bonita’s supervisor.
**Bonita:** I have these little pranksters in DP. Ernie, from the computer room, really likes to pick on me a lot. So, one day I was complaining about something in the computer room, so, he started saying something. And I said, ‘Oh, I don’t even want to hear it anymore. I’m tired of it.’ I went like that (waved him away). Well he snaps my picture with the digital camera. Well, Nancy and I were together. Later on we get this email from Ernie and you open it up and there’s Nancy and I and at the top of the page it says something like, ‘They had way too much coffee this morning.’ Of course, Nancy and I were cracking up laughing, thinking it was so funny. Then we showed everybody else it, and they were all laughing thinking it was hilarious.

One theme that emerged across all groups was that a relationship is a necessary prerequisite for humorous interplay for many workers. There is evidence of this in the narratives that follow.

**Kyle:** [I joke with] the people I supervise and my supervisor. …People I tend to see more frequently.

**Prima:** [I use humor with] a very select few; people with whom I have a personal relationship with.

**Stanlee:** I can joke with some of my staff, but not all of my staff. You really have to know where you’re at with the other relationship to joke comfortably.

**Humor initiators observed during focus groups.**

During the focus groups each humorous episode was recorded and the initiator was determined. Table 14 shows the number of times humor was initiated during the focus group sessions and the rank of the person who initiated the humor. In Table 14 the initiator is the rank of the person compared to me. For example a boss would be a director or the executive director, a peer would be a manager, and a subordinate would be a supervisor, direct service worker, or non-direct service worker. I used myself as the reference point because the focus group members were responding to me, the investigator, and the purpose of this activity was to explore hierarchical humor patterns. In the column labeled FG 3, a boss initiated humor one time; and I was that boss. The
three groups who initiated the most humorous episodes were Focus Groups 4, 2, and 1. They initiated humor 45, 43, and 40 times respectively.

Data for FG 3 in Table 14 is bothersome. The number of times they initiated a humorous episode was surprisingly low. While the group was in session I felt that the members were lively and talkative. In re-reviewing the transcript I noticed that their responses to Questions 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12 were very short. It appears that they started the discussion energized and talkative, but then the energy died out. It is also important to note that when Flora left, about 10 minutes early, the group disengaged. This was an important lesson to learn. It is very detrimental to have a group member leave early. If an early departure cannot be avoided, then it must be carefully planned. On hindsight I should have arranged with the assistant moderator to escort Flora out and give her the gift. While she was doing this, I would have purposefully asked the group the twelfth question. This may have kept the group engaged. Instead, I halted the questioning, gave her the gift, and said good-bye. That was enough to disengage the group.

Table 14

Initiators Of Humorous Episodes During Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiator</th>
<th>FG 1</th>
<th>FG 2</th>
<th>FG 3</th>
<th>FG 4</th>
<th>FG 5</th>
<th>All FG’s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subordinate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Humor initiators observed during participant observation.

During the participant observation periods each humorous episode was recorded and the initiator was determined. Humor initiators are listed in Table 15. This table shows that directors and managers were observed initiating humor much more often than any other group. It is important to keep in mind that this does not necessarily mean that
directors and managers were the primary humor initiators; it only means that when I observed workers during the participant observation activities, these were the workers who initiated humor most often. A number of reasons may account for the disparity between the groups. First, many of the participant observation activities occurred during meetings and directors and managers are the most frequent attendees at meetings. In the meetings attended by line staff, they may have felt inhibited to initiate humor. Second, it is likely that I did not spend enough time in areas where front line workers gather to observe humor-in-action. Third, workers ranked below me in the organizational hierarchy may not have allowed me to enter their humor circles; therefore, even if I was with front line staff, they may not have engaged in humorous interplay in my presence. Fourth, it is possible that humor is not that prevalent in the agency – it is an uncommon occurrence.

During the second participant observation period, non-direct service workers initiated 31 episodes compared to 3 episodes during the first participant observation period. It is important to know that the majority of these episodes were recorded during one lengthy meeting. This meeting was very unusual from the start. The bantering back and forth was both stimulating and funny. Within about five minutes of the start of the meeting, I interrupted to ask permission to tape the interplay.

Not surprising, clients rarely initiated humorous episodes and only one occasion where this occurred was documented. It is important to note that the client who initiated the humor was not the parent of the alleged child victim; rather, he was a relative of the child. He had agreed to care for the child in his home and the humor episode occurred as this plan was being discussed. When the supervisor asked him what else he might need,
the relative said, “I wouldn’t mind if you left a million dollars on my door step.” The supervisor quickly replied, “You have to see Regis about that.” Everyone laughed.

Fourteen times more than one person initiated a humor episode. One of these occasions occurred at an All Staff Meeting. Spence was summarizing the report he received from the accreditation surveyor. Trent who was in charge of daycare was complemented on how well the records were kept in his department. This triggered teasing from the crowd. The meeting was held in a very large room so the following comments were yelled out loud. Other comments were made but they were inaudible.

Spence: The onsite surveyor … repeatedly said that our daycare records are excellent….
Someone: Trent, did you select the records that you let him look at?
Someone: Here, Richard, look at this record. (This was said in a very facetious tone of voice.)
Ooohhh. (Everyone claps.)

During the participant observation activities I purposefully tried to refrain from initiating humorous episodes, but I was the humor initiator on one occasion. It occurred during a small group meeting. We were talking about an unpopular worker who was trying to emulate Guy’s persona including his style of dress.

Jim: Now, you have two people who idolize you. (comment directed to Guy.)
Me: Who is the second?
Jim: Me. (pause) Guy is my idol and mentor.
Me: Guy, do you pay them?

Table 15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiator</th>
<th>PO 1</th>
<th>PO 2</th>
<th>Total PO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Board Member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Direct Service</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Service</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Paybacks.

One theme that emerged from listening and watching the focus group participants and from observing workers during participant observation involved paybacks. Humor was initiated to get back at a coworker for a previous insult, practical joke, or other transgression. Paybacks were a tolerated and expected behavior. Workers who joked with or teased others knew that the butts of their joking would eventually retaliate by directing humor at them. In the story that follows Mitch explained that his prank aimed at Flora was a payback for her earlier practical joke.

**Mitch:** I’ll tell you about a practical joke. I did it to get back at Flora who frequently gave me a hard time. For example, once I went to my room and all the chairs were placed on top of the table and the file cabinet was also on the table. Anyway, I took agency letterhead and wrote a false letter from Security to Flora. I even signed it with the name of the Security Officer. The letter said that Flora’s parking privileges… were being terminated because somebody that she consistently parks next to noticed a series of dents and dings. The letter directed Flora to go down to the parking company and give up her card.

**Drew:** You’re bad.

**Mitch:** I put the letter on Flora’s desk…. When she returned and read the letter, oh, she was so upset. I mean livid. She said, “Who is this person? I want to know.” So, she went to the parking garage and wrote down license plate numbers from the cars parked on either side of hers. Then she went to Security and started talking to the officer. I never thought she would do that. The officer emphatically stated, “I never even wrote this letter.” Then the officer threatened to file charges for impersonating a security officer. It got to be such a big deal by the end of the day I thought I was going to get fired.

**Mitch:** It just set off a series of events of people getting back at each other.
What prevents workers from using humor.

To understand what prevents workers from using humor in the workplace, focus group participants were asked to complete the sentence: “At work, I am prevented from using humor….” To analyze the sentence completion task, answers from the submitted written responses were entered into a table to assist in visually spotting patterns or trends within each focus group and across the groups. Table 16 lists all the responses, but themes or patterns were not readily apparent.
### Table 16
Responses To The Sentence Completion Task. At Work I Am Prevented From Using Humor…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FG 1</th>
<th>FG 2</th>
<th>FG 3</th>
<th>FG 4</th>
<th>FG 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In formal situations</td>
<td>For fear of offending someone.</td>
<td>With few select people.</td>
<td>If I feel someone will be offended.</td>
<td>If being disciplined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never. It is part of my fabric.</td>
<td>When I am not comfortable with the individual(s).</td>
<td>In serious professional situations.</td>
<td>By the presence of upper management or in a committee.</td>
<td>When dealing with a hostile person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the situation doesn’t call for humor</td>
<td>Because I am concerned about how it will be received.</td>
<td>In certain, self imposed, situations with top management.</td>
<td>When the situation or case does not warrant it.</td>
<td>In tense situations, or by people in a bad mood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the board meeting. Inappropriately.</td>
<td>Depending on the nature of the relationship with the person I am talking to.</td>
<td>When in meetings with outside people, not part of the agency</td>
<td>By individuals who appear to be humorless or too uptight to appreciate it.</td>
<td>When it could hurt someone’s feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of my position and the expectations that are placed on it.</td>
<td>By myself when I feel it could be misinterpreted.</td>
<td>By my staff because they misinterpret it, and don’t see the humor.</td>
<td>When someone would be offended - unless they’re not there to hear, and I feel pretty sure it won’t get back.</td>
<td>When I am overwhelmed with too many things to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it might involve language that is very “colorful”</td>
<td>For fear of negative consequences for myself or that I will offend others.</td>
<td>When there are certain people in the room; whether it’s managers, family, etc.</td>
<td>By high level management persons or others I perceive as not having a sense of humor.</td>
<td>During an interview regarding a complaint because this is serious.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I must respond to a crisis. When the board is setting a very serious tone. When it is politically incorrect.</td>
<td>With those I do not have a relationship. I seldom use humor with other managers with the exception of my manager.</td>
<td>When dealing with mandates regarding kids at risk, and accepting policies and procedures pertaining to Jacky’s “pet peaves.”</td>
<td>When someone bids on a job and they are turned down because they didn’t meet the qualifications.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since themes or patterns of what prevents workers from using humor were not readily apparent, the next step in the analysis involved developing categories of responses and then fitting each response into a category. This is shown in Table 17. Since respondents were anonymous each response was coded. Responses from members of FG 1 were coded as 1a, 1b, 1c, etc. Similarly, responses from FG 2 were coded as 2a, 2b, 2c, and so on. Codes assisted in visualizing patterns within focus groups. First the responses were interpreted strictly according to sentence content and then they were reinterpreted more liberally according to how I perceived the intent of the message. This is shown in Table 18.

Table 17 shows that the reasons workers were prevented from using humor are numerous and difficult to categorize.

- Five of seven administrators were prevented from using humor for political reasons.
- Three of the seven non-direct service workers were prevented from using humor because of a need to prevent something bad or unpleasant from affecting someone else.
- Three of the seven non-direct service workers were prevented from using humor because of a need to prevent something bad or unpleasant from affecting them. This was also the case with one administrator.
- Four of the six managers were prevented from using humor because of a need to protect themselves. This was also the case with one supervisor and one direct service worker.
- Two managers, two direct service workers, and one non-direct service worker were prevented from using humor because of a need to protect another.
• Two supervisors and one direct service worker were prevented from using humor because of a need to promote professionalism.

• Two administrators and two supervisors were prevented from using humor because of a need to protect themselves from someone above them in the hierarchy.

• One supervisor was prevented from using humor because of a need to protect herself from a nebulous other.

• One administrator and one direct service worker assigned blame to someone higher in the hierarchy.

• One administrator and one supervisor assigned blame to someone lower in the hierarchy.

• One administrator assigned blamed to a nebulous other.

• One manager and one supervisor were prevented from using humor because of relationships.

Table 17

Reasons Why Workers Were Prevented From Using Humor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To protect self</td>
<td>2b 2c 2e 2f 3f 4e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To protect another</td>
<td>2a 2f 4a 4e 5d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To promote professionalism</td>
<td>3b 3d 4c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To protect self from someone above them in the hierarchy</td>
<td>1d 1g 3c 3f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To protect self from some nebulous other?</td>
<td>3a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned blame to someone higher in the hierarchy</td>
<td>1e 4b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned blame to someone lower in the hierarchy</td>
<td>1e 3e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned blame to some nebulous other</td>
<td>1e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevented by politics</td>
<td>1a 1c 1d 1e 1f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevented due to relationships</td>
<td>2d 3g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To prevent something bad or unpleasant from affecting someone else</td>
<td>5c 5f 5g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To prevent something bad or unpleasant from affecting self</td>
<td>1g 5a 5b 5e</td>
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</table>
When the responses were interpreted more liberally according to how I perceived the intent of the message, meanings became more apparent. Table 18 shows that the most common reason that workers were prevented from using humor was related to a need to protect him or her self. And the most common person they were protecting themselves from was someone above them in the hierarchy, and or a nebulous other. Individuals in all groups were prevented from using humor because of a need to promote professionalism. Only directors and managers felt they were prevented from using humor due to politics. Five of the 34 responses involved not wanting to hurt or offend another person.

**Table 18**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liberal Interpretation of Reasons Workers Were Prevented From Using Humor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To protect self</td>
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<tr>
<td>To protect another</td>
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<tr>
<td>To protect the agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To promote professionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To protect self from the person who was the butt of the joke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To protect self from someone above them in the hierarchy</td>
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<tr>
<td>To protect self from some nebulous other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assigned blame to someone higher in the hierarchy</td>
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<td>Assigned blame to someone lower in the hierarchy</td>
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<td>Prevented by politics</td>
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<td>To prevent something bad or unpleasant from affecting someone else</td>
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<tr>
<td>To prevent something bad or unpleasant from affecting self</td>
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</table>
I was not satisfied with the responses to the sentence completion question. The idea of sentence completion was good, but in the future I would put more boundaries around the question. For example, the question asked was, “At work, what prevents you from using humor?” Some of the respondents told me about times when they would not use humor, but they didn’t tell me what prevented them from doing so. I had to do a lot of interpretation to understand the meaning behind the replies. One sentence without corroborating evidence did not provide enough clues. However, when the responses were looked at in the context of the rest of the focus group discussion then validity of the interpretation increased.

The following narratives provide evidence that some workers feel that they are prevented from using humor and a variety of reasons for this are discussed. Brett explained that he was prevented from using humor because of possible criticism from staff.

**Brett:** We can all sit in here [the conference room] and laugh at something that somebody did at a board meeting or what someone said at a board meeting but I think regardless of how well I know someone who is a line staff member….I wouldn’t share that, and the reason is… that I would be concerned that they would get the wrong idea about what managers do. There’s an expectation that management is supposed to run this agency and not sit around and critique what someone wears to a board meeting.

**Spence:** Even though we do regularly. (He interrupted Brett.)

**Brett:** Yes.

**Ha ha.**

**Brett:** We don’t want them to know what really goes on.

Many front line staff explained that they are prevented from using humor because of their boss. They spoke with a lot of emotion when they told me about bosses “who pile on the work when they think you are not busy.”

**Jan:** If they [the boss] see you having a good time. They think you don’t have enough to do, and they give us more work.
May: She is telling you the truth. I like the work, but I don’t have too much fun at it. You feel like you’re under a watchful eye all the time.

Bonita: There’s a lot of supervisors who think you should be working 24, 7. I mean, you just cannot sit at your desk for 7 hours without getting up and going to talk to somebody, and have a little humor, and break that up.

Blanche: …If I know that someone’s on the floor and somebody else is having a good time. I’ll go over there and say, ‘Be careful there’s people on the floor.’ And, they’ll break it off and go do what they need to do till their gone.

Only once, during a focus group session, did I observe a boss preventing his subordinate from using humor. It began when I asked the group participants to tell the assistant moderator their name, their role, and then tell about one incident that they found humorous that day. I ended the request by saying, “And, if you need a moment, you can think.” In the brief humorous exchange that followed, I was teased for stating an unclear request. The teaser was then reprimanded by his director. After the reprimand the teaser provided a serious response.

Me: And, if you need a moment, you can think.
Brett: About my name?
Me: No!
Ha ha.
Me: I hope not.
Brett: Does that count? Was that funny?
Me: That was funny.
Spence: No. (said in a stern tone of voice)
Brett: Gosh, all right, my name is Brett. I’ve worked here for almost three years. Something that I felt was funny is that I was riding a bike around the hallway about 20 minutes ago and people gave me some odd looks.
Me: I bet.

Confidentiality.

Workers were prevented from using humor to a great extent because of their need to keep the joking or teasing confidential. Confidentiality as a theme was woven in and out of the group discussions. Most of the time the request to keep the information confidential was stated implicitly, “Keep this confidential.” Sometimes after a
disparaging remark was made, I would be reminded, “You said this is confidential.”

Often the remarks regarding confidentiality were made in the form of a wisecrack. For example, Spence said during the sentence completion task, “She’s going to use this to blackmail us.” Notice the confidentiality statement that prefaces Lara’s narrative below.

**Lara:** This is confidential. I have a worker who has had some issues the past two years that resulted in some corrective action plans,…

One way that FG 1 participants kept information confidential was to speak in generalities and provide few details. For example, in the following account, Pam is telling a story about Spence but I had to ask six clarifying questions to understand the point she was trying to make. I figured that she either did not want to tell me the details to keep from embarrassing the director or to keep from implicating the person who wrote the incident report. Interestingly, the story began with a request for permission to tell it and some bantering about the confidentiality of the material.

**Pam:** So we have permission to divulge? (I couldn’t hear what she said, but something about asking permission to tell a story that involved others – not just herself).
**Me:** Definitely. You have to remember that this is confidential.
**Spence:** Oh, sure.
**Me:** In the report there are going to be no names.
**Spence:** Oh, sure. Oh, sure.
**Pam:** Ha ha ha. That’s funny.
**Pam:** I heard there was an incident report regarding a car accident. What I didn’t know is that it was my boss playing with his remote control car.

**Ha ha ha.**

**Pam:** I asked your permission (this was directed at Spence). I laughed half the way home. I just thought it was funny. It wasn’t funny that another person was startled and felt they needed to write an incident report. But, that it was reported as a car accident, that just struck me as funny.
**Me:** I need to understand this. Spence has a remote control car in his office.
**Pam:** It’s sort of a stress reducer.
**Spence:** I have a lot of toys: car, golf game.
**Me:** And there was an actual incident report written?
**Pam:** A real life car accident report, yeah.
**Me:** And Spence wrote the report?
**Pam:** No.
Me: Who wrote the report?
Pam: I really don’t want to go into it. It doesn’t add to the humor.
Someone: It was written by the accident victim. It was a hit and run.
Pam: Nobody was really hurt. I don’t want to go into details, but I really thought it was funny - probably because it was not me that got into the car accident. I am sorry that I’m laughing at you. (Pam said this looking at Spence.)
Spence: No problem.
Pam: I have permission to laugh, right?
Me: I still need to clarify. It was written as a joke?
Multiple voices: (emphatically) NO, no, no. It was serious. That’s why it was so funny.
Spence: It was sent over to county risk management. And the security chief comes up and said, ‘I’m investigating a car accident.’ I said, ‘Oh, did somebody get hurt?’ He said, ‘Well, I don’t know, there was an accident on the 5th floor.’
Ha ha ha.
Spence: ‘What the heck?’
Pam: You didn’t know until then that the report was written?
Spence: No, no, no. I saw a copy of the report.
Pam: I wouldn’t be laughing.
Me: Did you laugh Spence?
Spence: Not initially, but the next day I did.

The need for confidentiality was most prevalent in FG 1. Interestingly, during the post session debriefing of FG 1, the assistant moderator’s first comments were about the group’s lack of humor. She said, “They appear to be very serious, very formal.” Indeed, this was the only group in which individual members asked permission to laugh or to share a story about another. For example, Pam asked Spence, “So we have permission to divulge?” Later, Simon asked the group, “We’re not allowed to use names?” The most telling display regarding their grave concern for confidentiality occurred when Brenda wanted to tell her version of a story that involved Pam. Surprising to me, the permission was denied, so the story was left untold.

Brenda: Will you forgive me for telling my version?
Pam: You can be guaranteed I won’t retaliate if you don’t tell. Was that subtle?
Brenda: No.

Requests for confidentiality were also prevalent in FG 2. When I asked FG 2, the managers, for “stories with plenty of detail,” Guy responded, “Is this confidential?” Then
after telling a particularly funny and disparaging story about his boss, Guy said, “Please do not share this.” Another participant in this group prefaced a story by saying, “I’ll share it but I won’t mention who it is.”

When FG 3 was asked, “What do you joke about?” the immediate reply from Marcia was, “Ha ha, I don’t think we’ll share that.” However in no time at all participants of FG 3 told detailed stories, many of them disparaging, that resulted in a lot of loud laughter. Even though they seemed very willing to allow me access to their stories, they still reminded me to keep things confidential. For example, Lara prefaced a funny story about a front line worker by saying, “This is confidential,” but then she continued her story giving full details. At another time, prior to Marcia telling a story about the executive director and front line staff she said, “I have a story, but don’t repeat it.” The best example explicating the importance of confidentiality was provided when Fonda began sharing an unflattering story about one of her staff. When Fonda accidentally said the worker’s name she appeared mortified and looked carefully around the table at everyone pleading, “Please, you guys.” Everyone laughed at this, and Lara said, “We won’t. We won’t.” Fonda must have trusted the others and me because she continued her storytelling.

I was readily allowed into the joking circle of FG 4, the direct-service workers. In fact, instead of allowing me to enter their humor circle, I felt that they dragged me in. When talking about a notorious supervisor, Rosa said, “See, Barb’s got that look too.” I didn’t know that my facial expression changed when they were talking about that supervisor. I was trying to maintain a consistently pleasant expression with a soft smile. Of course, it benefited them to pull me into their humor circle because by including me –
especially if I laughed - then their secrets would be safe. A partner in crime can hardly
turn in the others without incriminating himself or herself.

Most focus group participants did not share client names, or if they did, they only
gave the first name. However, some clients were so notorious that others often knew
who they were just by the description. For example, Brooke said, “I won’t say her name
but a lot of you will know who I’m talking about.” Later Lara said, “I think everyone
knows my client.” Generally, when a disparaging story was told about a staff member,
names were not shared; for example, Prima wouldn’t tell the name of the male who wore
tight pants even though her peers teasingly prodded her to do so. The direct service
workers seemed the most comfortable using client names and coworker names and not
maintaining strict confidentiality. What was interesting is that FG 4 participants never
mentioned by name the manager who they nicknamed “the anal one” yet, clearly they all
knew whom they were taking about, and I knew also by the description.

Not once did a participant of FG 5 ask me to keep anything confidential, and not
once did they share a disparaging story about a specific person that could possibly make
them feel uncomfortable. Focus Group 5 participants mentioned names of workers and
included them as characters in their stories, but never once was the name of a client
shared. This group had few stories to tell but I did not have the feeling they were
purposefully hiding all of their stories; I just don’t think they had very many humorous
stories to tell. In fact, that is what they told me, “I am just sure we are not having enough
fun.”

During participant observation there were not very many requests to keep
information confidential. I contribute this to the fact that, first, I did not ask workers to
share stories or in some other way ask them for confidential information. The majority of the observation was conducted covertly. Second, confidential information was easily contained behind closed doors or whispered out of earshot of those who should not hear.

**Butts of Humorous Interplay**

The butt of a humorous episode is the person or group at whose expense the humor is directed. The butt may also be an inanimate object. The butts of the workplace humor were identified by listening to the focus group participants and by documenting the structure of the humorous interplay that occurred during the focus groups and participant observation. This category, butts of humorous interplay, is divided into three subcategories: butts of humor identified by focus group participants, butts of humor observed in focus groups, and butts of humor observed in participant observation. Three themes that emerged from this data are discussed including issues of time, funniest stories, and stories that were not funny.

**Butts of humor identified by focus group participants.**

With few exceptions, the remarks and comments support the superiority theories of humor. Ineptness, stupidity, ugliness, and nasty personalities appeared to trigger humorous interplay among people in all hierarchical levels. Workers primarily joked about the shortcomings of others and only once in a while joked at their own expense.

**Brandy:** [We joke about] people, appearances, dumb comments, ridiculous actions...
**Brett:** Vocabulary and grammar.
**Spence:** I usually hear laughter about the different perversions...

All levels of administrative staff used humor to disparage their subordinates.

**Me:** Thinking about humor at work, is humor that is used among peers different than the humor used between people in the different hierarchical levels?

**Yeah, yeah.**

**Spence:** Half the time we’re laughing at them.
Kyle’s comment was more serious, but the same message was being communicated - subordinates are often the butts of humor in the workplace.

**Kyle:** There are some challenging employees on 3B. You try to find the humor in a situation when they’ve gone and done something else to make your life miserable. **Scott:** (in a correcting tone of voice) When they have presented a challenge.

Being the butt of the boss’ joking was not always a bad thing. As described early in this report, there appeared to be two types of joking - supportive and disparaging.

Supportive joking was engaged in when the worker was liked and the teasing showed friendship. The joking and teasing supported the relationship, so being the butt of a joke was often considered a complement especially when Spence was the initiator. In the following narrative Mitch was bragging about his humorous exchange with Spence.

**Mitch:** Spence asked me why I was late and I said, ‘Well, I had to repaint a room because my wife didn’t like the color that I painted it earlier that morning.’ Soon after that … someone asked if I would do something. And I replied, ‘Yeah, I would do that.’ Then Spence called me a wimp. He said, ‘Aw, you would have done that - you’re a wimp.’ My reply was something along the lines of having the opportunity to spend time with my wife – I was recently married.

**Ha ha ha.**

This story was interesting not just because Spence the boss was teasing Mitch the subordinate, but because Mitch won this humor contest – which is highly unusual when joking with the boss. Mitch’s last comment about spending time with his wife stopped Spence in his tracks. Mitch’s wife is very beautiful, young, and sexy. It’s not unlikely that Mitch meant that spending time with his wife meant having sex. Certainly, Spence could not top that.

**Ha ha ha.**

Rarely were bosses the butt of joking - even behind their backs. A few examples of boss-related humor were provided in previous sections of this report, for instance one
boss was referred to as “the anal one” and another was given the title of “polyester queen.” The director who was disliked and disrespected was the butt of most of the vicious joking including the following scenario in which his pronunciation of words and names is being ridiculed.

**Regina:** Can you be more pacific? (instead of specific)

*Ha ha.*

**Guy:** I can’t be more pacific.

*Ha ha ha.*

**Guy:** And Kyle Koppel (purposefully mispronounced her last name), you’d better stop laughing.

*Ha ha ha.*

Only directors and managers made board members the target of their teasing.

This makes sense because workers lower in the hierarchy would rarely have the opportunity to come in contact with the board members. In the following narrative the managers are making fun of a board member.

**Drew:** There was a lot of humor about Mr. Barnes. A lot of imitating. (She makes an exaggerated facial expression by scrunching up her nose and squinting her eyes that results in an outburst of giggles.)

**Drew:** Imitating him. That was survival humor.

*Ha ha ha.*

**Guy:** Bill was mimicking Mr. Barnes the other day. ‘I want to see the data. Where did you get the data?’ (This was said in a tone of voice similar to Mr. Barnes’ and the inflection was similar.) Mr. Barnes says that all the time.

**Drew:** Or, ‘eee aw, eee aw’ did you hear him say that?

Just as coworkers were the most common initiators of humor, peers were often the butt of humorous interplay. The joking could be supportive or disparaging depending on where the coworker falls in the liked – disliked and respected - disrespected continuum.

Two examples of humor aimed at coworkers follows. The first incident targets a specific worker who is at least moderately disliked and disrespected by many. Interestingly, in the scenario one person comes to her defense.
Guy: Do you joke a lot with Lonnie Davis? (Considered to be loud and opinionated by many.)

Kyle: No, about her, not with her.

Drew: Now, Lonnie. I protect Lonnie.

Scott: I have a new worker… She came in and said, ‘I don’t know where this piece of mail goes.’ It was a book… on personality disorders, so I called Lonnie to ask if she had ordered this book.

Ha ha ha.

Scott: Figuring she had to have ordered the book - because she’s in fiscal – not for herself.

Ha ha ha.

Scott: …I ended up talking to Valerie. I said, Valerie did you order this book? And she said, ‘No, but Lonnie probably did.’

Ha ha ha.

The second incident targets coworkers in general who dress poorly.

Drew: Ha ha ha. What do I joke about? What people are wearing - I have to admit that. (It is important to note that Drew is very stylish and most people would agree that she has classic good looks. She is always dressed in expensive, well-made, fashionable clothing. She is tall and thin, and her hair is perfectly groomed.)

Kyle: OOOHHH (This comment from Kyle is humorous because in many ways Kyle is the opposite of Drew. She is of average height and a few pounds overweight. She has a more natural look about her with tousled hair and little if any make up. She seems to dress more for comfort than style in her practical khaki’s, sweater, and flats.)

Drew: I do. I admit it.

Regina: I can give you one [an example].

Ha ha ha.

Guy: OK, present company excluded (Guy is also a very sharp and trendy dresser.)

Drew: Now you’re going to make them think that I’m cruel. (short pause) If I see somebody in tight, tight stretch pants, and they shouldn’t be wearing them, I want to call the fashion police.

Regina: Or, you say, ‘What rack did they buy that from?’

Ha ha ha.

Drew: Bad. Your picture of me is going to go downhill fast.

Humor aimed at children was rare, but it did occur. The narrative that follows is important because it was one of the few times when a specific child was the butt of very disparaging humor. It is unlikely that Drew ever would have shared this story if it were not for her coworker who initiated it.

Drew: My sense of humor is kind of weird. I tend to use humor a lot at work to ease the stress level. I joke quite a bit and I probably go over the line.
Regina (to Drew in a loud whisper): You called the boy stupid in the wheel chair. (Drew and Regina were giggling quietly. Drew was blushing and shaking her head “no”.)

Drew: It’s just the way it came out. (She whispered back to Regina.)

Regina: Yeah. (Said in disbelief.)

Me: Did you think of a good example?

Drew: Too embarrassing. Yeah, I’m sorry. Go ahead (She was telling me to proceed with the discussion, then after a short pause, she blurted out loudly the following sentence, sounding very offended.) She [Regina] said I called a retarded boy in a wheelchair stupid and I didn’t.

Regina: No, you meant he had a stupid look.

Drew: I didn’t say stupid look. I didn’t mean it that way.

Guy: That’s over the line. Just a tad.

Drew: I didn’t say…

Regina: She said, ‘Aaaww…’

Drew: It didn’t come out right.

There were other incidents where children were the butt of humor, however the humor was usually directed at children in general – not one specific child. In the following scenarios front line workers tell stories disparaging to children, however, in each story the point of the joking is to express disapproval of child abuse. They are using humor to communicate what is unacceptable behavior. Following each story are some supportive comments from other members approving this type of humor.

Rosa: One of my foster mothers, Rose Wagner, has a great sense of humor. We were talking about some kid, and she said, ‘You know, I could just wring his neck.’ I said, ‘now if you’re going to tie him up Rose, you want to put cloth around the wrists first because we don’t want to have rope burns.’ And we just started laughing. I said, ‘Geeze, if anybody else hears, they would say, call the police.’ We laugh about real sick things.

A couple of voices: You have to.

Rosa: …If you don’t laugh you crack. You crack up. Humor is therapeutic.

Cara: I was taught that if you use the duct tape the other way, so the sticky part is out and the two sticky parts stick together, you can get a nice tight wrap there (she motions as though she is wrapping tape around her mouth) without leaving that adhesive on their skin.

Ha ha ha.

Lee: How did you do that Cara?

Ha ha ha.

Cara: That’s always the joke. ‘I need a good babysitter.’ ‘You got a roll of duct tape? That’ll take care of it.’

Ha ha ha.
It was more common to disparage adult clients. Generally, the teasing was targeted at their mental stability. Clients were often considered “wacko” or “lunatics.”

In the narrative that follows Roberta is making fun of a client and his wife who are “nuts.”

Roberta: I had a dad who enlisted in the Army in 1972 for Vietnam when he was 12. And he was honorably discharged in 1971. Yeah. And, the Vietcong wrapped a wire around his head and sucked out his brain so when he got home he had to go back to college so he could learn absolutely everything again…. And, he was very serious about this. Just weird, totally crazy. And the woman that he married… they fought on how his last name was pronounced.

Ha

Roberta: He would say one thing and she would say, ‘No it’s not, it’s this.’ And, they would fight in staffings when they were introducing themselves about how his last name was pronounced. I said, ‘It’s his last name. I don’t care if you took it or not. It’s his.’ They were nuts.

On a few occasions workers disparaged themselves. In the accounts that follow workers told about their own shortcomings. First, Pearl told about an error she made in completing a home study.

Pearl: We use humor… in situations that really aren’t funny, but when it works out you laugh about it later. I went and did a home study. I flushed the toilet and made sure there’s running water. But the one thing I failed to do… is… look for a furnace. It turned out they had no furnace.

Ha ha ha.

Pearl: I got a referral after I have this case all of a week, saying there’s no furnace. I had just been there and did the home study. Sure enough, there was no furnace. I mean, not even a broken one to fix.

Ha ha ha.

Pearl: Afterwards I said, ‘Can’t you see me on the front page of the newspaper?’ Now, I sometimes panic after a home study. I’ll remember walking through the kitchen and turning the kitchen faucet on and off. But, later I’ll think, “Did that house have a bathroom?”

Ha ha ha.

Vera’s stories, including the one related below, were almost always self-disparaging. Vera took total blame for what happened and never shifted the blame onto another. This strategy worked to her advantage because it was seen by the other group
participants to be a very positive and healthy attribute. By the end of the group session, Vera spoke longer and more often than the other participants in her group. The others listened to Vera very intently, and looked at her in an admiring manner.

Vera: Like I said, I usually joke about my screw-ups. So, I have a lot of material. It makes me laugh. I think some people wouldn’t think it’s funny when something like that happens to them, and they wouldn’t go around telling everybody else. For example, we have hard copy records and we have film records. I spent time trying to find this record that I thought was on film, and I looked everywhere. Then, I go back to the computer and it was in hard copy. I should have known that but for some reason things weren’t clicking, so I went and I told everybody. I thought it was funny.

May: When you’re able to do that, that’s got to be a great way to relieve stress. Then you don’t feel so bad about the mistake. That’s a good way of relieving the stress and the tension; I never thought about that.

Vera: That’s true but in some departments, or with some supervisors, you might be more afraid to say that you screwed up. They might not think it’s so funny.

Some workers made their work the butt of the joking, as May explained:

May: ‘Is it Friday at 4:30 yet?’ We’ll do a lot of that. We’ll come in Monday, and, ‘Is it Friday, yet?’

Other workers tell humorous stories about their own family members, especially their children.

Dinah: We share a lot of kid stories, our own kid stories.

May: There’s quite a few of us on our floor who have teens, and that can be very hilarious. We talk about the different things that they do….

Butts of humor observed in focus groups.

Table 19 shows the butts of humorous episodes across all focus groups. Most often the butts of FG 1, the directors, humorous episodes were subordinates. In fact, subordinates were the butts of 15 out of their 40 humorous episodes. Five times the executive director was the butt of the director’s humorous remarks. FG 1 was the only group that made the board the butt of their humorous remarks. Moreover, I was not immune to their teasing; they made me the butt of their joking on three occasions. Unlike
the other groups, not once were the butts of their humor a child in care of the agency or a client.

Like the directors, the managers in FG 2 also picked on subordinates frequently; they made subordinates the butts of their joking 29 times. Surprisingly, the opposite was not so prevalent. Together, the direct service workers and the non-direct service workers made their bosses the butts of the joking only 7 times.

In FG 5, the front line nondirect service workers, 11 of their 26 humorous episodes were directed at themselves. That is, 43% of the time they engaged in self-disparagement. This is highly unusual when it is compared to self-disparagement in the other groups. Percentages of self-disparaging remarks by the other groups are FG 1 - 8%, FG 2 - 5%, FG 3 - 21%, and FG 4 – 18%. Group members lower in the organization’s hierarchy picked on themselves at least twice as often as the directors and managers. Aside from themselves, the principle butt of the non-direct service workers joking was a peer. Only once was the butt of a humorous remark a boss or client.

Children in care of the agency were rarely made the butt of humorous remarks. Across all groups it occurred only eight times. Six of those eight times it was direct service workers who joked about the children. Adult clients were the butts of humorous episodes a total of 16 times, and most often this humor was initiated by direct service workers or their supervisors. This is not surprising since the direct service workers or their supervisors come in contact with the clients much more often than directors and non-direct service workers. Across all of the focus groups, adult clients, more than any other group of people were referred to in a disrespectful manner. They were called “lunatic,” “mentally challenged,” “horse faced,” and “ugly.” In general, adult clients
were considered inept. This made them prime targets for the subject of joking, teasing, and name-calling.
Table 19

Butts Of Humorous Episodes During Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Butts</th>
<th>FG 1</th>
<th>FG 2</th>
<th>FG 3</th>
<th>FG 4</th>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
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</table>

The butts of humor observed in participant observation.

Table 20 lists the butts of humorous interplay documented during participant observation. The four most frequent butts were: managers, directors, non-direct service workers, and self. In fact, there were not too many people spared from ridicule or teasing. Legislators, commissioners, and board members were all the butt of some joking. Only on three occasions did I witness humorous episodes in which a client was
the butt of the teasing or storytelling. Likewise, a child was the butt of humorous
interplay only five times. In addition to individuals, groups were also hammered such as
the Republicans, the Union, and the Foster Parent Association. Rarely was an object the
butt of humorous interplay, but on one occasion the focus of joking was the budget and
twice the focus of joking was a very long list of leadership characteristics that had to be
pared down to about six or seven.
Table 20

Butts Of Humorous Episodes During Participant Observation Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Butts</th>
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<th>Total PO</th>
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<td>Director &amp; Supervisor</td>
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<td>Direct Service &amp; Non Direct Service</td>
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</table>
**Issues of time.**

The butt of a humorous episode was often put in that situation because of a problem with time. Time – be it saving time, being on time, or wasting time was a prevalent theme that was weaved throughout the focus group sessions and participant observation. Humor was used as a mechanism to criticize self or others for wasting time. Tardy workers used humor to apologize for their tardiness, and humor was used by workers to reprimand those who were tardy.

The first four narratives below are focused on wasting time. In the first account Brooke disparages herself by telling how she wasted valuable time preparing for a meeting and searching for her staff.

**Brooke:** I had a unit meeting scheduled…. I had some great cookies…. I did coffee. And I’m wondering, ‘Where are the workers?’ If I had looked in my planner, I would have seen it. I sent one to training and gave the other a vacation day. So, that was on me.

In the following narrative Fonda explains how she and Simon avoided telephoning someone who was notorious for wasting their time.

**Fonda:** Simon and I were talking about a new groups of contracts. He kept saying, ‘We’ll need to talk to so and so. We need to talk to so and so.’ All of a sudden he said, ‘We are avoiding this one person.’ We started to laugh. Uhh, we have to get our answers someplace else because this person would just talk, and talk, and talk.

The last two stories about lost keys illustrate how wasting time and energy is considered foolish.

**May:** I keep the keys for the department and the key ring has a clip on it. And, we couldn’t find the keys. We looked, we looked, we looked, we looked everywhere for the keys. I went to the other offices, and looked everywhere. Well, come to find out I have it clipped right here (points to her belt).

**Ha ha ha.**

**May:** Someone said to me, ‘How can you have us go through this, and, you have it clipped right to your belt?’
Blanche: One of the caseworkers ... had to leave. Well, she couldn’t find her keys. And she’s just saying, over and over, ‘I can’t find my keys.’ I said, ‘Did you look at your desk? Did you look in your book? Your case? da da da da da.’ Well, she happened to turn around and I said, “Katy, put your hand on your butt.” She had them sticking out of her back pocket.

*Ha ha ha. Oh, my gosh.*

May: I don’t feel so foolish now.

*Ha ha.*

The last comment made by May was interesting. She felt better knowing that she was not the only person who had misplaced keys on their person.

The next two narratives illustrate the importance of being on time. The first incident occurred at a training program on performance appraisals:

**Jo:** What we need to do is deliver evaluations on time.

*Ha ha.*

**Jo:** We get after our employees for not meeting their deadlines. So we must not be late.

The second incident occurred at a large group meeting where Spence reprimanded a director for being late.

**Spence:** Patty is here, so we can start. (It was 12 minutes after the meeting start time.) Patty smiled at Spence and raised her eyebrows, but did not reply.

In the final scenario Brett brings attention to his own tardiness. This effectively eliminated the need for anyone else to reprimand him.

**Brett:** You can start now. (This was proclaimed as he walked quickly into the packed meeting after the scheduled start time.)

A lot of humor was initiated at a worker’s retirement party. Nanci was retiring after 30 years of service. Longevity was considered very praiseworthy. It was acceptable and even expected that staff would take the time to celebrate her 30 years of service; therefore the party was well attended and a very happy occasion. The room was decorated and there was punch, cake, and candies. Donations were collected from staff to purchase a special gift and Spence presented the gift, a plaque, and a speech.
**Funniest stories.**

Some of the stories told during the focus group sessions were particularly funny and made everyone laugh out loud. I looked at these instances when the laughter was prolonged and loud to see if a pattern emerged regarding some aspect of the humor or storytelling. Most of the extremely funny stories could be categorized under one of four topics: disliked boss or worker, sex, unprofessional or childish act, or mistake.

Guy’s outrageously funny and disparaging story that follows had the entire group, including me, laughing hard. Guy was actually out of his chair during the storytelling, and he wanted the audience to get the story so he even repeated parts of it twice. Guy’s story was disparaging to a boss who had a reputation for being tough, insensitive, unreasonable, and lacking a sense of humor.

**Guy:** Is this confidential?
**Drew:** God.
**Guy:** Can Mitch go first?
**Me:** You must know a story. (I said this because Guy was trying hard not to smile and he was squirming in his seat.)
**Guy:** I do, but I don’t know how to say it.
**Me:** I would like to ask everybody, if something is said here, that could be harmful to the individual, don’t spread it around. (Guy’s body language was telling me that he had a very unflattering story to share. I wanted him to be comfortable telling it. The request just resulted in bantering.)
**Scott:** Do I sign off on that? Or is that a verbal pledge you’re asking for?
**Me:** I’m asking for a verbal pledge. We’ll tape it.
**Guy:** It can be kind of mean.
**Regina:** Go ahead, ha ha.
**Drew:** Go ahead, it’s only a job.
**Kyle:** Well, you’d better tell us, or you’re going to choke. (There was a lot of giggling going on as we watched Guy who could no longer contain his snickers. His face was flushed.)
**Guy:** My staff, I’ll include them so they can get in trouble, too. (Now, Guy was laughing uncontrollably, he was almost all of the way out of his chair.) OK. Bob was walking by Scott’s office...
**Drew:** Oh boy.
**Guy:** And, Scott has these eccentric things that he does. Ok? ...Well, he raises his two fingers, ha, and he talks to himself in his office as he looks upward. Well, Rob came into
my office, where Jan and I were meeting. Bob came in and said, “Oh, Scott’s in his office and I think he’s lost, or has amnesia, or something.” Bob then proceeded to describe to Jan and I how Scott was alone in his office speaking to himself, with his two fingers raised, as he was looking skyward. Then I said, Oh, that reminds me of Fantasy Island and the little man called Tattoo. He he he. And, I got on my knees and… (Guy went down on his knees. He was laughing so hard that he cannot speak. He raised his hand toward the sky with two fingers together like a scout sign, and stared into the distance.) Da plane. Da Plane.

_Ha ha ha._ (Everybody roars for a prolonged period of time. Many of those in the group currently report to Scott, or have reported to him in the past. He is reputed to be very serious, authoritarian, and domineering. That could be one reason for the intense laughter)

_Drew:_ You’re bad.

_Guy:_ We laughed for an hour, because, I did the little accent.

_He he he._

_Guy:_ I’m sorry.

Guy’s story was interesting for a number of reasons. First, it began by asking for a pledge of silence, which interestingly was implied by the group encouragement, but never declared. This made the storytelling risky, because Guy knew that if the tale got out he could get in trouble. This element of risk added to the suspense and funniness. Witnessing a person in good standing in the agency do something “bad” was supported, and then once it was supported then those present were also considered to be involved by association. Guy received a lot of group support for telling his story that “can be kind of mean.” The other participants were leaning forward in their chairs and smiling expectantly. Finally, Guy implicated his other staff. I was not sure of the reason for this but I guessed it was to give some of the credit for a funny story to those who were involved, or perhaps to share the blame in case the story was made public. Guy’s apology at the end was said in a serious tone of voice, but with a smirk that made me believe it was disingenuous. I wondered why it was even voiced.

Another very funny story disparaged a worker who thought his car was stolen. This story was actually told in two of the focus groups. One storyteller told a good story,
but the other storyteller told a very funny story. This tells me that subject matter is only part of what makes a story funny. Both stories are printed below for comparison. In the first account, Dinah tells the story without a lot of the particulars; in the second account Simon sets the stage for a good story by prefacing the story with a physical description of Steve and some other unflattering remarks about his nature.

**Dinah:** This I felt was quite humorous, at somebody else’s expense, of course. A coworker of mine was supposed to go to Columbus yesterday. I found out from my boss that he might not have gone because when he went to pick his car up from getting some work done on it, it was not available. And, he indeed, thought it had been stolen. And, he reported it stolen, only come to find out that the dealership did not put it outside as he requested. It never had been stolen, it was still inside the shop. So, obviously it transpired throughout yesterday and today. It was really quite funny when you think about it. You think that your car has been stolen, and it wasn’t, and you report it stolen. You had to have been there.  

*Ha ha ha.*

**Simon:** We can talk about Steve having his car stolen. It probably helps to know Steve. Other than the fact that he looks like Art Garfunkel. We poke fun at Steve because he is a good sport and there’s always… We call his office, “Steve’s World,” because we don’t know what goes on in Steve’s office. But, there are times… Steve will walk into work and he will look groomed and everything, but by about 10 o’clock he walks out and the back of his shirt’s undone and his ties on the outside of the back of his collar, and we wonder, ‘What really goes on in Steve’s office?’ And the fact that Steve’s, to an extent, is kind of caught in the 60’s. Just a little bit. Well, a couple of weeks ago he was getting his car worked on. And, Steve’s pretty thrifty when it comes to spending money and investing in things like cars. He also has two teenage kids. So, he and his wife went out to buy a new car and it was so they could give his daughter their 1988 Ford Taurus station wagon. A car that every teenager would want.  

*Ha ha.*  

**Simon:** So, the kids were all excited and everything and they came back with their new car and it was a 1998 Ford Taurus station wagon.  

*Ha ha.*  

**Simon:** But he got a great deal on it. So his children were very upset to say the least because what teenager wants to ride around in a car like that, or worse yet, drive a car like that? So a couple of weeks ago, he was supposed to go to Columbus. So, he called his supervisor, and said, ‘Elliot, I couldn’t make it to Columbus today because my car was stolen.’ Steve dropped his car off at a place the day before, and he thought he was going to be late picking it up, so they said, ‘Well, if we’re not here, we will just leave it out in the lot with the keys underneath the floor mat.’ So, Elliot comes and says, ‘Well, Steve left a voice mail and says his car was stolen.’ The first question we ask Elliot was,
‘Was Steve in it at the time?’ The second question was, ‘Are you sure he went back to the same place where he dropped it off?’

*Ha ha ha.*

**Simon:** We also said, ‘Well, if it really was stolen then I suspect the kids because they’ve got motive.’

*Ha ha ha.*

**Simon:** So, it turned out that Steve went to the place, didn’t see his car, and called the police. They took the police report. Next morning he goes back to the place and there was his car sitting right inside the service bay. Although he claimed that he looked for the car, it appears he hadn’t done a real good job. Luckily he was in Columbus for the next few days because we were licking our chops at all the cheap shots we could get in at him and just having fun with it. But, by then we lost a lot of momentum with it. So, Steve said, ‘You know, the police were very nice and cooperative when they took the police report, but for some reason that I can’t figure out when I called them back to say, it was sitting in the service station, they weren’t happy at all. They were really rude to me.’

*Ha ha ha.*

**Simon:** It was much funnier at the time. (pause) Except for Steve.

Prima’s very funny story was fascinating because the butt of the humor shifted back and forth between her worker and the executive director. The worker was telling a secret about himself that the director did not think was funny. What was most funny was that the worker continued telling his story even though he was being signaled to stop. He kept getting himself in more trouble.

**Prima:** This morning, in unit meeting we had the pleasure of having the executive director come in. One of my staff, who is a football fanatic and generally very, very funny, shared an experience with us. He explained that this weekend he participated in an adoption telethon. He also explained that as he participated, he had in his ear a radio so that he could keep up with the scores. And, we thought it was quite hilarious, and proceeded to laugh. The executive director did not think it was so funny. But, we did. Apparently he is not a football fan. Another colleague in the room was doing this. (Prima was doing the “cut” sign, that is slashing her throat with her index finger and silently mouthing the word “cut, cut.”).

*Ha ha.*

**Prima:** But the person didn’t catch it and continued with his story. So, we thought it was hilarious.

Table 21 shows that there were 22 very funny stories that drew a lot of laughter. Eight of those stories were about sex, eight were about unprofessional or childish acts, four were aimed at disliked bosses or other worker, and two were related to a mistake or
oversight. Managers told seven of the really funny stories and supervisors and direct
service workers told five each. Focus Groups 1 and 5 told very few. Two stories were
repeated in more than one group; the story about the man who pulled down his pants, and
the story about Steve and his stolen car.

Table 21
Funniest Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Topic</th>
<th>Disliked boss or worker</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Unprofessional or childish act</th>
<th>Mistake or oversight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FG 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Incident report involving Spence’s toy car</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 2</td>
<td>Tattoo, da plane Book on personality disorders</td>
<td>Family Brothel Picture of penis Picture of naked boy</td>
<td>Calling a boy stupid Taking away parking privileges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 3</td>
<td>Client in hotpants Client giving it away Hole in pants Fell and dress flew up</td>
<td>Earphones in ears at adoptathon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 4</td>
<td>Polyester Queen Botched circumcision</td>
<td>Coworker jumping on table Drinking beer and calling in referral</td>
<td></td>
<td>Home study with no furnace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cockroach in cassette Spiders at work area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 &amp; 3</td>
<td>Client pulled pants down</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 &amp; 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Steve lost his car</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to note that only one very funny story was documented during the participant observation periods of this study. That funny episode involved a Barbie Doll. Someone donated a Barbie Doll for a child’s holiday present. At an All Staff meeting Brett showed a group of us the brand new Barbie Doll that was still in its box. What follows was a section of the documented episode:

Brett shows Wendy Jackson, who was sitting catty corner behind me, a Barbie Doll that was still in the box. In the box, along with the Barbie Doll is a little plastic cat and a cat litter box. There was a picture on the box showing that the litter box transforms into a cat carrier. But what is really funny is a picture on the box showing that the cat can drink water from a bottle and then urinate.

Someone: The cat pees? Someone else: You are kidding. Wendy: Isn’t that awful? Ha ha ha. Someone: It’s a riot. Someone: I can’t believe it. Me: Who would have thought of that?

The snickering and guffaws go on and on. The box is handled by each of the four people in the small group including me. We can’t believe that they would sell a Barbie Doll with a cat that urinates. The picture on the box shows water shooting out of the underside of the cat. It looks rather disgusting we all agreed.

**Stories that were not funny.**

Laughing at someone else’s expense seemed to be the most funny, although there were plenty of examples of people telling funny stories about themselves. Responses that did not draw much laughter at all were tales about someone getting or being hurt. For example, the comment said to Fonda by a subordinate, “I wouldn’t help you if your hair were on fire,” did not draw even a snicker.

Roberta told two stories that were notably not funny. Only one is inserted below. It involved the misfortune of a teenage boy going to a residential facility. It was funny to
Roberta; she was snickering, smiling, and speaking in an energetic fashion as she told of her experience, but no one else laughed.

**Roberta:** We transported a boy to Sunrise Residential Facility when we were both pregnant. I had a Shadow with only two doors. This kid was bigger than both of us. He was 200 plus pounds, a huge kid, who had to get in my back seat. And when he would move around, I swear the car would go like this (Roberta wobbled back and forth). He was sicker than a dog and he started snoring in the back seat because he fell asleep. And then he’s drooling all over. And, I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh.’ We had to pull over at one point because he was snorting and snoring so bad. He thought he was going to get sick, and Annette and I thought we were going to get sick, too. I told him, ‘You just have to get out of my car.’ So, we stopped and I made him get out of my car. Then, we had to get out, to get him out, because there was no way he could squeeze through the little seats. It was just a fiasco.

_Ha ha ha._

**Cara:** And do what?

**Roberta:** We just needed a break from him for a little bit. And we got him down to Sunrise and he has that attitude, ‘I don’t like it here.’ It’s like, ‘I don’t care.’ And, if you don’t bring your own clothes to Sunrise they outfit you in these beautiful, very modern, very stylish brown Dickies.

_Ha ha._

**Roberta:** And we told him, ‘Yeah, you’re going to be wearing those Dickies here in a couple of weeks.’ Oh, he just hated it. We were making so much fun. And, he was so mad at us. He was very quiet on the way back because he was quite humbled from the whole situation. He slept most of the way without snoring.

I wondered if listeners fault a storyteller’s character when the listeners sympathize with the butt of the story – in this case, the teen going to the residential facility. I did not think very highly of Roberta as she was relating her not-so-funny stories.

I had an intuitive feeling that Roberta was disappointed or surprised that the tale did not draw some laughs. I surmised that there was some important background information missing that contributed to our lack of understanding. Without sufficient information, instead of drawing laughs, the listeners felt sorry for the teen. I remembered what Duncan and Feisel (1991) wrote, “Although joking takes place in virtually all organizations, only part of its meaning is universal. All humor is situation specific, and it can only be interpreted within the context of the group where it occurs” (p. 29). That
may be why some stories were not funny to the other group members or me. When I
didn’t get the point of the humorous episode or the group didn’t get it, the speaker would
say: “You had to be there.” Perhaps if we were present when Roberta was transporting
the child to Sunrise Residential Facility, we would have seen the humor in her story.

**Audience of Humorous Interplay**

The audience of a humorous episode refers to the size of the group and level of
decorum in which the humor takes place. The audience was documented only during
participant observation activities because for the focus groups the audience would have
always been the same - small and formal. Table 22 shows a list of all of the audiences of
the humorous episodes. The table shows that during the first participant observation
period most of the audiences were very large, or large and formal. During the second
participant observation period most of the audiences were private. Few occurrences of
humor were observed in informal settings. This makes sense since most meetings, where
a lot of the participant observation was carried out, were considered to be formal to some
extent.

**Table 22**

**Audience Of Humorous Episodes During Participant Observation Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>PO 1</th>
<th>PO 2</th>
<th>Total PO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private - 2 to 3 people</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Large - 25 or more people</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Formal - less than 10 people</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Informal - less than 10 people</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Formal - 11 to 24 people</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Informal - 11 to 24 people</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Targets of Humorous Interplay**

The targets of humorous episodes are those people who are in the audience and able to hear the humor. Targets were documented only during participant observation activities because for the focus groups the targets would have always been the same - peers and myself. Table 23 shows a list of all targets of humorous interplay. The four most frequent targets were (a) a group of managers and non-direct service workers, (b) a group of directors, managers and supervisors, (c) a group of directors and managers, and (d) a group of all staff. All staff would include directors, managers, supervisors, direct service workers, and non-direct service workers. When the words “all staff” are used it does not mean that every employee was present, it means that every rank was represented. This group was the target of a total of 32 humorous episodes.

Management including directors, managers, and supervisors, was the target of most of the observed humorous interplay. As mentioned earlier, this is likely due to selective participant observation settings or the fact that I was not allowed to enter certain humor circles. Not every group was observed equally. On hindsight it became evident that direct service workers and non-direct service workers were rarely the targets of humorous interplay. In fact, only once were direct service workers and non direct service workers observed as the targets of humorous interplay when they were not in the company of managers.
Table 23

**Targets Of Humorous Episodes During Participant Observation Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targets</th>
<th>PO 1</th>
<th>PO 2</th>
<th>Total PO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Staff</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board Member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Direct Service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director &amp; Manager</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager &amp; Supervisor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager &amp; Non Direct Service</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board Member, Director, &amp; Manager</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director, Manager, &amp; Supervisor</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director, Manager, &amp; Consultant</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager, Supervisor, &amp; Non Direct Service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director, Manager, Supervisor, &amp; Direct Service</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director, Manager, Direct Service, &amp; Non Direct Service</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager, Supervisor, Direct Service &amp; Non Direct Service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client, Manager, Supervisor, &amp; Direct Service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Location of Humorous Interplay**

The location refers to the site within the agency where the joke was told or the humorous act was performed, e.g., meeting room, break room, elevator, hallway, or in an office. The location of each focus group was a meeting room. Information about the location of other workplace humor was gathered by documenting observed humor during participant observation. Table 24 shows a list of all of the locations. The table shows that during the first participant observation period almost all of the observed humorous interplay took place in meeting rooms. During the second participant observation period most of observed humorous interplay took place in an office, but a number of instances were also observed in meeting rooms and in the annex which is similar to a large unfurnished auditorium.
Table 24 also shows that when combining both participant observation periods, most humorous episodes occurred in meeting rooms, followed by offices, followed by the annex. Only 11 humorous episodes were recorded in break rooms and very rarely were humorous episodes recorded in elevators or hallways. A likely reason for this is because I spent a lot more time in scheduled meetings that do not take place in hallways, elevators, or break rooms. Also this pattern may be due to humor being kept secret.

There was general agreement amongst the focus group participants that a lot of the humor takes place in offices behind closed doors. The following narratives are examples of this:

**Brooke**: Denise may come over, or Regina may come down… Sometimes we will huddle up in Drew’s office or Lara’s. You go past their office with the closed door and think, ‘OK, what’s going on?’ Some of the discussion may be kind of serious but the humor is mixed in with it, too. If you don’t want the humor misinterpreted, you close the door to just keep it amongst us.

**Dinah**: When something is really funny, someone will walk in your office and say, ‘You just got to hear this. You’d never believe what happened.’

### Table 24

**Location Of Humorous Episodes During Participant Observation Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>PO 1</th>
<th>PO 2</th>
<th>Total PO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting Room</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallway</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevator</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break Room</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Climate during Humorous Interplay**

Climate is the feeling that is conveyed by the individual or group, e.g., tense, relaxed, frustrated, bored, anxious, angry, or happy. The climate was noted for each humorous episode that was observed during the focus group sessions and the participant observation periods.
There was general agreement amongst focus group participants that humor is used during stressful times. However, some participants stated they were more likely to use humor during moments of relaxation when everything was going smoothly. Narrative from the focus groups providing evidence of this follows:

**Regina:** We joke about many things in placements, and nothing has really been off limits. It’s been helpful because things can get so stressful. There are times when we probably should have gone over the edge, and then, somebody will say something completely off the wall and bring us back to reality. When I look back, maybe the humor was awful, but at the time it was a lifesaver.

**Pam:** If I’m relaxed, then I’m more likely to be humorous.

**Spence:** When you’re feeling pretty good. Things are going your way.

The climate was noted for each humorous episode observed during the focus group sessions. Table 25 shows that most of the time, the group climate was relaxed. Initially, the atmosphere of FG 1 was tense, and the initial atmosphere of FG 2, 3, 4, and 5 was anxious. Members in FG 1, 2, 3, and 4 were relaxed going into Question 2 on the questioning route. The non-direct service workers in FG 5 never seemed to relax to the same degree as the other groups’ members. This was probably due to the hard time they had thinking of examples of humor. Not being able to respond quickly with funny stories may have made them apprehensive. Participants in FG 5 seemed almost hypervigilant and expectant. Their eyes were on me and they were sitting up straight in their chairs. They reminded me of a classroom of students getting ready to take an exam.

**Table 25**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Climate</th>
<th>FG 1</th>
<th>FG 2</th>
<th>FG 3</th>
<th>FG 4</th>
<th>FG 5</th>
<th>All FGs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Providing a warm lunch on a cold day was beneficial. It helped put people at ease, and I received multiple complements on the pizza. The assortment of homemade cookies also went over very well and was appreciated by most of the group members. The napkins with the big yellow smiley faces communicated the informal nature of the groups. To help the groups relax, I dressed in a casual dress or dress slacks instead of a business suit and I was well prepared for the group members and tried to greet each one by name as they came through the door.

The climate of the environment was also noted for each humorous episode that occurred during participant observation. Table 26 shows that during the first participant observation period the climate of the group was relaxed about one third of the time. There were many occasions when the group was bored, happy, tense, or anxious. During the second participant observation period most of the observed humorous interplay occurred in groups that were relaxed.

Only one participant observation session took place in an environment where the climate was both anxious and angry, and during that session, only two incidences of humor were recorded. Likewise, there was only one session that took place in an environment where the climate was both anxious and bored, and during that session, only two incidences of humorous interplay were observed. Interestingly, in an anxious group and in a tense group there was still joking taking place, therefore, one may assume that climate alone does not promote or inhibit humor.
Table 26

Climate During Humorous Episodes During Participant Observation Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Climate</th>
<th>PO 1</th>
<th>PO 2</th>
<th>Total PO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bored</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious &amp; Bored</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious &amp; Angry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Context Surrounding the Humorous Interplay

The context is the circumstance surrounding the humorous interplay, e.g., oral presentation, small talk, written communication, or computer communication.

Information about the context of the humorous episodes that occurred in the focus groups was not collected because it would have all been the same: discussion. The context of each observed humorous episode during participant observation was noted and categorized. The three categories were: presentations, discussions, and small talk. Presentations were somewhat formal. Most likely they were prepared well in advance and the audience was expected to participate in a limited capacity. Discussions were considered less formal than presentations. Discussions generally allowed for interruptions by questions, comments, joking, or other remarks.

Table 27 shows that during the first participant observation period humor was observed in presentations, discussions, and small talk fairly equally. During the second participant observation period, most of the humor was observed in discussions. Overall, more episodes were observed during discussions, followed by presentations, followed by small talk. These results make sense because it was easier to gain access to larger groups and to groups who were more familiar with me. It was not as easy to observe and record
interactions between workers in areas normally off limits to me or in areas where I would
draw a lot of attention, such as by the cubicles of casework staff or in the attorney’s
offices. Most of the humor that I observed during the participant observation activities
occurred in public places. It is likely that this humor was censored to a greater or lesser
extent depending on the audience and topic.

**Table 27**

**Context Of Humorous Episodes During Participant Observation Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>PO 1</th>
<th>PO 2</th>
<th>Total PO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Talk</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Type of Humor**

Humor type refers to the method used to convey humor, e.g., joke, wisecrack, story, prank, cartoon or picture, gesture or funny face, noise, song, or Freudian slip. The type of humor used was documented for each humorous episode observed during the focus groups and participant observation.

Table 28 shows the types of humor used during the focus groups. Humor was communicated primarily in the context of a story. In fact, stories made up 73% of the humorous episodes. Wisecracks were used 43 times. It is noteworthy that the only group who used wisecracks more than stories was FG 1, the directors. There may be a couple of reasons for this. First, the director’s group was the only pre-formed work team and wisecracks are a prevalent means of communicating in this group. (This is confirmed below.) Second, wisecracks take less time to transmit than a detailed story and this time factor is probably important to this group. They seemed more impatient than the other groups and in fact, this group attempted to disengage before the ending time when there
were still three questions left to discuss. Third, this group seemed most secretive. By sharing wisecracks, the directors were being humorous and having fun, but they could avoid details of events that they wanted to keep hidden.

**Table 28**

**Types Of Humor Used During Focus Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humor Type</th>
<th>FG 1</th>
<th>FG 2</th>
<th>FG 3</th>
<th>FG 4</th>
<th>FG 5</th>
<th>All FGs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisecrack</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prank</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pun</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participant observation data was analyzed by identifying the type of humor used. Table 29 shows that during both the first and second participant observation periods, humor was generally in the form of wisecracks. In fact, 67% of the time, humor was transmitted via wisecracks. To a much less extent humor was transmitted via stories, remarks, and errors. Rarely was humorous interplay observed related to warnings, requests, funny sayings, excuses, Freudian slips, or jokes. Only once did a worker use a picture to transmit humor. It was not my intent to look for pictures in this study, the focus was on verbally communicated humor but it is important to note that in nearly every workspace visited and in some semi-public places there were funny pictures, cartoons, or calendars posted. I do not want to give the reader the impression that the agency is devoid of this common office practice.
Table 29

**Types Of Humor Used During Participant Observation Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humor Type</th>
<th>PO 1</th>
<th>PO 2</th>
<th>Total PO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wisecrack</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remark</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gesture</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prank</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny Saying</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisecrack &amp; Gesture</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freudian Slip</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joke</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Bantering.**

The bantering between focus group members seemed to be such a prevalent activity that the strings of bantering were counted and analyzed. Bantering may be defined as a form of jousting back and forth where the teasee becomes the teaser. Bantering might also be in the form of one-line zingers in which there is no repartee. Bantering episodes associated with each focus group question were documented to help objectify each group’s level of spontaneity, energy, and group interaction. In retrospect, the documentation of bantering was helpful to me as a moderator because even though I purposefully tried to remain nonjudgmental throughout the group discussions, by reviewing the bantering it became evident that I joined in this very common pattern of humorous exchange. I was part of the bantering string in three of the five groups.

Almost every focus group member engaged in bantering. In FG 1 and 2 everyone joined in at least once. In FG 3 neither Dinah nor Stanlee participated. In FG 4 only
Cullen did not join in the bantering. Not surprising, the least spontaneous and energetic group, FG 5, infrequently engaged in this sort of teasing; the sole bantering participants were May and Blanche.

Table 30 shows the number of bantering episodes that were observed in each focus group for each question. Focus Group 1 engaged in 24 bantering episodes throughout the session. This was more than any other group. Focus Groups 2, 3, and 4 also engaged in a lot of bantering. Bantering was not an activity that members of FG 5 employed; their sole bantering episode occurred during the pre-session and it involved only two individuals.

The questions that triggered the most bantering differed across the groups. It is notable that the only occurrence of bantering in Focus Group 5, the front line non direct service workers was during the presession small talk. No bantering occurred in any of the groups during responses to Question 3, about an awful experience related to the use of humor. Indeed, the question seemed to bring a level of seriousness to the groups. In hindsight I probably should have saved this question for later because I believe I lost some momentum by bringing the groups’ emotional levels down.
Table 30

**Bantering Across And Among Focus Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FG 1</th>
<th>FG 2</th>
<th>FG 3</th>
<th>FG 4</th>
<th>FG 5</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Presession</td>
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<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1 (15)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 (11) (23)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 (34)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Question 9</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>1 (14)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 (15)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21 (34)</td>
<td>15 (15)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note*

The number in parenthesis is the number of times speech was initiated during a string of bantering.

**Speaking episodes**

To determine who in each focus group spoke the most and least often, I counted speaking episodes. Each time speech was initiated it was counted as a speaking episode. Some speaking episodes were very short one or two word comments and other speaking episodes were detailed humorous stories. In either case the episode was counted as one speaking episode. This analysis helped me to determine if all participants contributed to the discussion, and it also helped me to objectively comment on the amount of interaction within groups.

Table 31 shows that not all focus group members participated equally. This objective data corresponded to my subjective feelings. The non-direct service workers in FG 5 had very little to say. A total of 134 speaking episodes were noted and 55 of those were from me. The most talkative person only initiated speech 30 times. FG 4, the most
interactive group, had a total of 381 speaking episodes and the most talkative person spoke 67 times and the least talkative person spoke 22 times.

Initially I was surprised to see that FG 3 totaled only 220 speaking episodes because I felt these supervisors were very spontaneous and had a lot to say - much more than FG 1 whose members often had to be prodded for story details. Upon analyzing the speaking episodes in the table my initial feelings were substantiated. Even though FG 3 had fewer speaking episodes (220) than FG 1 (288), once my speaking episodes were removed the groups were more closely aligned; the members of FG 3 initiated speech 187 times compared to FG 1 at 192.

The number of times that I spoke clued me into the amount of encouragement the group required and to the degree that I was included into their humor circle. I spoke to welcome the group, ask the list of questions, prompt answers, ask for specificity, give directions for the two written tasks, and to thank the group. I initiated speaking episodes 33%, 30%, 15%, 18% and 41% of the time in FG 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 respectively. This corresponds to how I rated the groups in spontaneity, energy, and enthusiasm. The least spontaneous and depressed group was FG 5 in which I spoke most often and FG 1 in which I also spoke frequently. Conversely, focus groups 3 and 4 were the most spontaneous, energized, and enthusiastic groups.
### Table 31
Number of Speaking Episodes Initiated by Each Focus Group Member

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Member</th>
<th>Speaking Episodes</th>
<th>Total Episodes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FG 1 Directors</td>
<td>Spence</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brett</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howard</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brandy</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 2 Managers</td>
<td>Guy</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drew</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bridgett</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mitch</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 3 Supervisors</td>
<td>Marcia</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lara</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flora</td>
<td>33</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prima</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fonda</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dinah</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brooke</td>
<td>19</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stanlee</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 4 Direct service workers</td>
<td>Roberta</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cara</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lee</td>
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<td>Martin</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pearl</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cullen</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG 5 Non direct service workers</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>134</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vera</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arlene</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blanche</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stephie</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ursula</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bonita</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Story Specificity and Spontaneity**

After analyzing the content of the focus group discussion, analysis of story specificity was undertaken to help objectify group spontaneity and openness, and levels of energy and enthusiasm. Stories told with plenty of detail best answered the questions who, what, where, when, why, and how. These were the stories that helped me and the focus group participants understand what was being communicated from the speaker’s perspective.

When clarification was required, I would probe for additional information. Sometimes, as in the following example, group participants prodded their peers for more detail:

Howard: The only way that would be funny is if we knew the person.  
Pam: You know the person.  
Brandy: You do.

Interestingly, in this instance the name of the person was never revealed and Howard never laughed. This was customary for FG 1; participant responses were often nebulous, lacking the particulars of the situation. Table 32 shows that throughout the focus group discussion I had to request specifics a total of 43 times - 27 times during the responses to questions one through six and 17 times during the responses to questions seven to 12 of the questioning route.

As mentioned previously, during Pam’s storytelling of the car accident, six clarifying questions had to be asked before I fully understood the story. Following is an example of another story lacking detail. It is important for the reader to know that when Spence began his storytelling he was smiling and snickering. I thought for sure I was going to hear a funny tale, but I was disappointed. His story was not embellished with
any specifics of the situation including the setting, other actors, what led up to the
incident, and finally the listeners had to assume the outcome. I was left wondering what
was so funny? It was gratifying for me to learn that I was not the only one frustrated,
twice a peer also asked for more details. People want to get the punch line.

**Spence**: Ha ha. Two of my counsel members here, about had a fistfight over a sandwich,
at a big conference we were at. (This was said with a big smile and between snickers.)

**Pam**: Ha ha ha. I have no pride.

**Ha ha ha.**

**Me**: I need some specifics here.

**Pam**: Food is very, very important to me. So, when I order something it is very
important to me that I get what I ordered. ...I was somewhere eating with my boss and
the new associate director with a bunch of committee leaders, and damn it, I ordered the
chicken parmesan. Give me the chicken parmesan.

**Brandy**: Somebody tried to take it from you?

**Brandy**: Somebody tried to take it from you?

**Ha ha ha.**

**Me**: Where were you at?

**Pam**: I think we were at a counsel meeting.

Table 32 shows that throughout the FG 2 discussion, I had to request specifics a
total of 39 times. Thirty two times during the responses to questions one through six, but
only seven times during last half of the questioning route. Even though I had to request
specifics only four fewer times than with the directors, I still felt that the managers
actively participated in the discussion. The stories told were very specific and included
names of people and even descriptions of what people looked like or what they wore. It
is important to note that one group member, Kyle, never told one story. She participated
in some bantering and responded to direct questioning, but other than that, she remained
quiet.

Members of FG 3 told stories embellished with the most detail. This resulted in
an abundance of loud laughter. This laughing seemed to energize the group. They often
spoke fast with a lot of inflection in their voice. Prima’s peers pushed for the particulars
when she was telling her story about the male in tight pants. This encouraged her to continue her story. She may have needed the encouragement because Prima is a quiet person by nature, and surprising to me, her storytelling was very effective. She would pause right before the climax of a story and this suspenseful moment heightened people’s interest in the story’s ending. Her peers listened intently and even urged her to hurry. Table 32 shows that throughout the FG 3 discussion, I had to request specifics only 6 times, four times early on and twice towards the middle of the discussion.

Table 32 shows that throughout FG 4, I had to request specifics on only 12 occasions. The storytelling process of the direct service workers was fascinating. Often one member would initiate a response using a very general statement. As the participants continued speaking the story became incrementally clearer because pieces of detail were added. Often this piecing together of a story resulted from multiple storytellers; each adding a bit of knowledge or confirming what the others already said.

FG 5 required a lot of prodding, but the prodding never really improved the storytelling. Table 32 shows that throughout the focus group discussion I had to request specifics a total of 21 times.

Table 32 shows that more clarifying questions were asked during the first half of the focus group discussions. This makes sense since I purposefully urged the groups in the beginning to tell stories with plenty of detail. I wanted them to know that I was not looking for quick one-word responses. I purposefully used the word “story” to give the impression that I wanted to hear an unfolding plot with characters. It is also important to remember that Questions 10 and 12 were focused on a task to complete, therefore less storytelling was expected.
For each group, I compared the requests for specifics listed in Table 32 with the number of speech episodes. The percentage of speech episodes that consisted of prompts for each group are: FG 5 – 16%, FG 1 – 15%, FG 2 – 13%, FG 3 - 3% and FG 4 – 3%. Then I compared the requests for specifics to the number of speech episodes initiated by me. The percentage of speech episodes initiated by me that consisted of prompts are: FG 1 – 45%, FG 2 – 44%, FG 5 – 38%, FG 3 - 18%, and FG 4 – 18%. Clearly, the supervisors and the direct service workers were much more spontaneous than the other three groups.

Table 32

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>FG 1</th>
<th>FG 2</th>
<th>FG 3</th>
<th>FG 4</th>
<th>FG 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Question 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
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</table>
Chapter V. Discussion and Conclusions

Chapter V includes a summary of the findings and conclusions. In the first section focus group data is compared to participant observation data. During the focus group sessions the participants were asked to complete two activities (a) the Functions of Humor Questionnaire and (b) the sentence completion task. The results of these two activities are compared to what was reported in the focus groups and what was observed during participant observation. The first section will be organized according to the three main subjects. First, the functions of humor and the categories of psychological and social functions, and negative outcomes will be discussed. Second, the subject of individual differences and antecedent conditions and the categories of gender/sexual humor, ethnic humor, humor aimed at differences in personal appearance and traits, and humor aimed at people who are liked and disliked is discussed. This is followed by a discussion of the third main subject, structure of humor, and the categories of humor initiators, butt of humorous interplay, audience of humorous interplay, target of humorous interplay, location of humorous interplay, climate during humorous interplay, context surrounding humorous interplay, and type of humor.

The second section of this chapter compares and contrasts these study results with the results of previous studies. Following this comparison is the conclusion. The conclusion explains the role that humor plays in shaping this organization’s culture. The conclusion is divided into 11 cultural aspects including humor used in socialization; humor used to define organizational structure; humor used to identify leadership functions including power and control, and decision making; humor related to
communication and language; humor used to promote organizational identity and
commitment; humor used to define peer relationships and to manage conflict; humor used
to define space; humor used to explain time; humor used to measure success and failure,
and to reward and punish; humor used to explain the unexplainable; and humor used to
describe human nature.

Another section in this chapter discusses the implications of the findings for
organizational leaders and workers. The final sections in this chapter state the limitations
of this particular study and make recommendations for future research.

**Focus Group and Participant Observation Results Compared and Contrasted**

In this section the results of the focus groups, including results of the Functions of
Humor Questionnaire and sentence completion task, are compared and contrasted with
results of the participant observation. First, functions of humor are discussed, followed
by individual differences and antecedent conditions. Next there is a discussion about the
structure of humorous interplay.

It was easier to understand the meaning that the workers assigned to humor by
listening to the focus group participants than by observing workers during participant
observation. In focus groups, participants explained what they wanted me to know
usually through descriptive messages or stories. For example they would tell me what
was funny and not funny, what was appropriate and not, etc. Analyzing the participant
observation data was more of an intuitive process. In either case, I can never be entirely
sure that I accurately reflected each worker’s perspective. Not being a total stranger to
the agency was helpful because I was able to construct inferences not just from the data, I
could also draw on my own work experiences and knowledge.
It is important to note that when reviewing the participant observation transcripts it became apparent that humorous interplay was not pervasive in the agency even though I was very liberal in what I accepted as humor. In many cases I accepted any verbal communication said in a light-hearted manner with a lighter tone of voice, or said with a smile on the speaker’s face. There were a number of hour-long participant observation sessions when not one humorous remark was made. This is in contrast to what was reported in Focus Groups 1, 2, 3, and 4 in which many workers claimed that they use humor all day or whenever they get a chance. Only FG 5 complained that they did not have enough humor in their work life.

**Functions of Humor**

Information about the functions of humor was gathered by listening to the focus group participants, by observing workers engage in humorous interplay during participant observation, and also via the Functions of Humor Questionnaire. Humor was used in this work setting to meet psychological and social needs by communicating a variety of wants, needs, praise, and criticism. Oftentimes humor functioned to meet multiple needs in the psychological and social realms simultaneously; however, one function was generally more predominant than the other.

**Humor used to meet psychological needs.**

These study results show that in this organization humor is used to meet multiple psychological needs including to reduce tension, stress, and anxiety; deny the serious intent of a message; cope with embarrassment; entertain or be playful, or reduce boredom; share positive feelings or express support or sympathy; cope with horror and
emotional pain; and to cope with the unexpected and socially inappropriate. Each of these functions of humor are detailed below.

**To reduce tension, stress, and anxiety** – Across all five focus groups there was consensus that humor is used to reduce tension, stress, and anxiety and many stories were shared by the participants that give credence to their claims. The focus group results are supported by the questionnaire results. Questionnaire respondents reported that humor is used to reduce tension, stress, and anxiety very often by self, peers, and bosses. Interestingly the focus group and questionnaire results are not in line with what was observed during participant observation. Of course, it is difficult for an observer to assess the amount of stress and tension that workers feel at any time, however, the climate during the majority of the observed episodes of humor was relaxed; workers did not appear to be visibly stressed or under undue tension.

**Deny the serious intent of a message** - Questionnaire respondents reported that humor is used rarely by self to deny the serious intent of a message. Humor is sometimes used by their peers and very rarely used by their boss to deny the serious intent of a message. These results are consistent with what was reported in the focus groups. That is, only a few focus group participants explained that they prefer open and honest communication versus serious messages cloaked in humor. These results are also consistent with what was observed in the focus groups and during participant observation. Even though this activity – using humor to deny the serious intent of a message – was not prevalent, it became evident that when a serious message is veiled in humor, the message receiver does not have to take the message as serious.
Cope with embarrassment – Questionnaire results show that self and peers very often use humor to cope with embarrassment, but bosses rarely use humor to cope with embarrassment. This is in contrast to what was observed during participant observation. The executive director, managers, and supervisors used humor a number of times to cope with embarrassment. They also used humor to spare other employees from embarrassment. Coping with embarrassment was not a function of humor described by participants in the focus groups.

Entertain or be playful - Questionnaire results show that humor is used very often by self and peers to entertain or be playful, or to reduce boredom, and bosses use humor often to entertain or be playful, but only sometimes to reduce boredom. These results support what was heard in the focus groups, but they do not support what was observed during participant observation. Humor used for the sole purpose of entertaining or to reduce boredom was uncommon. When it did occur it was often in the form of a prank.

Share positive feelings and express support or sympathy - Questionnaire results show that humor is used often by peers and bosses to share positive feelings, and humor is used very often by self to share positive feelings. Questionnaire results show that humor is used often by peers and self to express support or sympathy and humor is used sometimes by the boss to express support or sympathy. These questionnaire results are consistent with what was reported by the focus group participants. Workers across all hierarchical levels provided many examples of how they use humor to share positive feelings and express support or sympathy. However, during participant observation humor used to insult or demean others was much more common.
Cope with horror or emotional pain – On the Functions of Humor Questionnaire the function to “cope with horror or emotional pain” was not listed. Focus group participants heavily emphasized this function. The front line direct service workers and supervisors were the most graphic in their storytelling about humor used to cope with the horrors of child abuse and the secondary emotional pain. The focus group members had various names for this type of humor such as “MASH” or “sick” humor. This type of joking or storytelling was very unbefitting of a child welfare agency; sometimes it was gruesome or cruel and almost always violated child protection rules. Most workers believed that the only people who could possibly understand that type of sick humor were others in the field; therefore, it was the type of humor that would never be shared with people outside of the agency.

Cope with the unexpected and socially inappropriate - Humor was used by workers across hierarchical levels to cope with the unexpected and socially inappropriate. Although it is important to note that many times the incident was only funny after a period of time.

The Functions of Humor Questionnaire asked about humor used to discuss the socially inappropriate, it did not ask about humor used to cope with the unexpected and socially inappropriate. According to the questionnaire results, humor used to discuss the socially inappropriate is used rarely by self and boss, and it is used sometimes by peers. During focus groups and participant observation, humor, in fact, was only sometimes used to discuss the socially inappropriate. The workers defined the socially inappropriate as gender or sexual issues, ethnicity, and religion.
Humor used to meet social needs.

These study results show that in this organization humor is used to meet multiple social needs including to build rapport and develop friendships; persuade or get work done; assimilate or fit in; control others’ behaviors; express disapproval; put others in their place, demean, or insult others; and to express superiority over others.

Build rapport and develop friendships - Questionnaire respondents reported that self and peers use humor to build rapport and develop friendships very often. Bosses use humor to build rapport very often, but they use humor to develop friendships only sometimes. During the focus group discussion the participants provided many examples of how they used humor to build rapport and develop friendships. This activity was also obvious during participant observation. The sharing of humor – even mildly disparaging humor promoted friendly relations.

Persuade or get work done – In the focus groups participants explained that one goal of their humorous interplay is to diffuse a request to complete a task. Administrators claimed that it is especially good to use humor when requesting that an unpleasant activity be completed. Line staff explained that humor is used when they accept their assignments, especially when the assignment is unpleasant. This is exactly what was seen during participant observation. Those higher in the organization’s hierarchy buffered their demands with humor. Those who were receiving assignments would smile, but also take the assignment seriously. For that reason, it appears that using humor to get work done is appropriate and acceptable. The results from the focus groups and participant observation do not totally support the results from the Functions of Humor Questionnaire. Questionnaire respondents reported that they and their peers use humor to
persuade or get work done often or sometimes. Bosses use humor to persuade or to get work done sometimes.

**Assimilate or fit in** - On the Functions of Humor Questionnaire the function to “assimilate or fit in” was not listed. However a similar function – to “facilitate group cohesion” was listed. Questionnaire results show that humor is used very often by self to facilitate group cohesiveness and by peers and bosses to facilitate group cohesiveness. This is similar to what was heard in the focus groups. Participants explained that they use humor to fit in and to help others fit in. This function of humor was evident to a limited extent during participant observation, but this could be because of the types of settings observed. Focus was not aimed at observing workers new to the agency or new to a group.

**Control others’ behaviors** - Questionnaire results show that humor is used very rarely by self and rarely by peers and bosses to control others’ behaviors. This is contrary to what was observed in the focus groups and during participant observation. It was very common for peers to use humor to control undesirable behavior in their coworkers. It was also a very effective method, in that the point was made without the peer becoming defensive.

**Express disapproval** - Questionnaire results show that humor is used sometimes by peers to express disapproval and humor is used rarely by self or bosses to express disapproval. This is contrary to what was observed in the focus groups and during participant observation. It was very common for peers to use humor to express disapproval. Humor was generally an effective method to communicate disapproval
because the point was made. The downfall is that since the disapproval was cloaked in humor the receiver had the option to ignore the message.

*Put others in their place, demean, or insult others* - Questionnaire results show that humor is used rarely by self, peers, and bosses to put others in their place or to demean or insult others. This function of humor: to put others in their place, demean, or insult others was essentially denied by the focus group participants. Focus group members emphasized the supportive nature of humor. This is contrary to what was observed during participant observation. It was very common to see humor being used to put other in their place, or to demean or insult others. Disparaging remarks were not uncommon, but the most vicious humor was aimed at individuals behind their backs.

*Express superiority over others* - Questionnaire results show that humor is used rarely by peers to express superiority over others and humor is used very rarely by self and boss to express superiority over others. This function of humor: to express superiority over others was denied by the focus group participants. In the focus groups there was a lot of talk about using humor to support others and to help them cope, all functions that seem very positive in nature. This is opposite of what was observed during participant observation. It was very common to see humor being used to express superiority over others. This was one way that the organization maintained its strict hierarchical order.

**Negative outcomes related to use of humor.**

The Functions of Humor Questionnaire results show that humor is used least often to: transmit verbally aggressive messages; express superiority over others; attack others, demean or insult others; and cause conflict. This supports what was reported in the focus
groups. Participant stories explained how humor is used for what most people would consider positive functions, such as to reduce tension or to build rapport. In fact, in the focus group discussions participants actually explained emphatically that humor should never be used to intentionally hurt another. During participant observation humor was observed being used for positive functions, however, there was a preponderance of humor used for what most people would consider negative functions such as to put others down or to express superiority. Perhaps focus group participants denied their use of humor to belittle or control others, or perhaps it was too sensitive to discuss openly.

Many times humor was supportive; and there were when humor was hurtful but the intent was not to be unkind. On the other hand, workers often picked on others maliciously. The most malicious humor was shared amongst coworkers out of earshot of the intended butt. It is important to note that not all aggressive or negative messages were mean-spirited. Some disparaging messages actually communicated liking. Disparaging joking was generally considered a complement when it was initiated by a boss – especially by the executive director.

**Individual Differences and Antecedent Conditions**

This section includes a discussion of gender and sexual humor followed by a discussion of ethnic humor. Other individual differences are also discussed. Focus group participants reported that joking or teasing about sex and ethnicity were taboo. There were some sex and ethnicity related stories and innuendos during the focus groups, but even these were tame; that is, far from vulgar. It is likely, that individuals who choose child protection as a profession may have a propensity to be respectful of all peoples and
not joke about their distinct characteristics. In addition, preservice and inservice training addresses the need to be culturally sensitive.

**Sex or gender related joking.**

Even though sex related humor, even innocent sexual innuendoes, were not commonplace during the focus groups, it was witnessed even less frequently during participant observation. When sex was the topic of conversation, it evoked a great deal of laughter. In this female dominated work setting the women definitely got the best of the men. Men were made fun of more often than women. Of course since I am a women, I don’t know what occurs when the male workers are alone or with just a few select women. There were times when women did tease other women and these instances were also considered very funny.

**Ethnic humor.**

Ethic and racial humor was rarely heard or witnessed in the focus groups or during participant observation. In some of the focus group discussions I even prodded the members to see if they could recall specific instances of its occurrence. In this organization ethnic and racial humor is considered not funny, even when the person initiating the humor is disparaging his or her own minority group. The result of ethnic humor generally resulted in an uncomfortable silence.

**Humor aimed at differences in physical appearance and traits.**

Workers joked about people especially about physical appearance and personality traits. This was apparent during the focus groups and during participant observation.

**Humor directed at or about people who are like or disliked** - One antecedent condition that effected humor was degree of personal liking. It was evident during the
focus groups and participant observation that degree of supportive or disparaging humor mirrored the degree of liking or disliking. One way to think of the nature of humor is as a continuum. Humorous episodes ranged from harmless kidding to malicious mocking. This range of humor coincided with a similar range of liking and respect. On one end of the continuum, workers were very much liked and respected. On the opposite end of the continuum workers were not liked at all and not respected. Humor aimed at individuals who were very much liked and highly regarded was more supportive in nature; whereas humor aimed at those who were pretentious and very much disliked was vicious in nature. Malicious mocking was not a type of humor that group participants admitted to using, in fact, focus group participants only alluded to. Even though this phenomenon was observed in the focus groups, the most disparaging episode was witnessed in a private meeting during participant observation.

Care giving - Care giving, similar to liking and disliking, was not a topic that was explicitly discussed by focus groups participants, but it was quite evident especially during participant observation. Workers physically and emotionally took care of each other. Oftentimes humor was the vehicle used to request assistance or support, or to provide support. Care giving was a phenomenon that was observed primarily among peers, and when peers did not show the proper amount of caring behavior, they were often reprimanded through the use of humor. Care giving rarely occurred between hierarchical levels. In addition, care giving was not evident amongst the directors.

Structure of Humorous Interplay

In addition to subject matter, humorous interplay is dependent upon a number of factors such as the worker’s placement in the organization’s hierarchy, relationships with
the others, the setting, and the worker’s mood. This section includes a discussion of the structure of humorous interplay including the initiators, butts, audience, targets, location, climate, context, and type of humor. Matters related to these topics are also discussed including: the importance of established relationships as a prerequisite for humorous interplay, the idea of paybacks, what prevents workers from using humor, the subject of confidentiality, the importance of time, and the general funniness of the humor.

**Humor initiators.**

In the focus groups, participants reported that peers initiate most humor. Furthermore, participants in all focus groups reported that they are more guarded in their use of humor with non-peers. It became apparent from listening to the participants and observing humorous interplay amongst workers that humor in the workplace maintains status relationships and defines and redefines those boundaries. Across all levels of the organization’s hierarchy, upward joking was especially restricted – more so than downward joking. When humorous interplay occurred vertically between status ranks, it remained mostly in individual units or departments. Even when the humor flowed up or down in a vertical pattern within a work group, rarely did humorous interplay span more than two hierarchical levels.

Most focus group participants reported that a personal relationship with another is a prerequisite to humorous interplay, especially for humor that crosses hierarchical boundaries. They explained that humorous interplay is more likely to occur among those who have the most contact with you: “people I work with a lot,” “my staff,” or “my supervisor.” Additionally, humor across hierarchical lines depends a lot on subject matter. Workers explained that joking does occur between hierarchical levels but what
occurs between the status levels is a more general and innocent type of humor, such as funny stories about the workers’ own families and children.

In the focus group discussions many individuals reiterated how they would not feel comfortable joking with the executive director. In fact, participants reported that the directors are often viewed as cold and rigid, and not surprisingly, the secretarial staff on the administrative floor was also described as cold. Even though Spence was singled out in three of the groups as someone who was not joked with, this was in contrast to what he said, “I suppose I joke with everybody.” It was also fascinating to see that when a director, specifically Spence, initiated humor with a worker, the worker considered it a complement, and in the focus groups the worker would relate such an incident in great detail while others listened intently.

Participant observation results indicate that workers higher in the organization’s hierarchy joke with their peers, and even their non peers, more than workers lower in the organization’s hierarchy. In fact, directors and managers initiated humor much more often than those lower in the organization’s hierarchy. This finding could be a result of sampling and entry into private circles of humor. With this said, it is important to note that focus group results confirm what was observed: the higher one goes in the hierarchy, the radius of the humor circle becomes larger. For example, four of the directors claimed that they joke with everybody or most people. That is a very large circle of humor. When participants in FG 5 were asked, “Who do you joke with?” the participants could only name six individuals, and one group member said she would joke with people on her floor including some supervisors. This is a pretty small circle of humor. Focus group 5, the front line nondirect service workers joked around much less than any other group and
this was very apparent during the focus group sessions, but less so during participant observation.

In participant observation, very few occurrences of upward joking were witnessed, but when it did occur, such as when Marcia asked jokingly if the tutor was cute, it was considered a good joke and evoked considerable laughter. I have full confidence in the focus group and participant observation findings that those higher in the organizational hierarchy joked more in rank-mixed settings than those lower in the hierarchy. For example, a meeting was scheduled to begin at 9:00 a.m. At approximately 9:08, the meeting still was not called to order even though most of the chairs were filled and people were exchanging pleasantries. Brett walked in and proclaimed in a loud matter of fact voice, “You can start now.” This statement brought some smiles and quiet chuckles, and in fact, the meeting was called to order. Most likely if the newest employee at the lowest rank said the same words after walking in late, workers would have thought the person was arrogant and not funny.

Paybacks - Humor was often initiated to get back at a worker for a previous insult, practical joke, or other transgression. This activity was not discussed or explained by focus group participants but it became evident by listening to their storytelling and by witnessing the humorous interplay during participant observation. It was not uncommon to hear a worker say, “You will have to get her back!”

What Prevents Workers from Using Humor - A major reason that bi-directional humor was not common was related to workers’ fears of negative consequences from their boss or the union, whereas, “joking with coworkers would not result in much trouble.” Results of the sentence completion task that was conducted during the focus
groups showed that workers often feel that they are prevented from using humor for a variety of self-imposed reasons. The most common reason was to protect him or herself from someone above them in the hierarchy or some nebulous other. In fact, during one focus group session a boss did prevent a subordinate from using humor, and in another focus group a manager reprimanded a peer for her use of ethnic-related humor. When a director came upon a group of jokesters he criticized the workers for making fun of a certain unfortunate individual. Interestingly, this same director stated that what the group was talking about was very funny, and he even went back to his office to have a good chuckle.

One prevalent theme that emerged from the data is that humor should remain hidden. Directors hide humor for fear that subordinates would get the wrong idea of what managers do. Managers and supervisors hide humor by huddling behind closed doors, and when non-direct service workers see a director on the floor they warn their coworkers so conversations can be broken off and their coworkers can get back to work. So, everybody engages in humorous interplay, but nobody is supposed to know about it.

Because of the worker’s need to protect themselves, confidentiality was very important. The issue of confidentiality emerged as a major concern, and it was discussed or joked about in every focus group, except in FG 5 where nothing disparaging was shared. Confidentiality seemed to be most important to the directors and managers. Focus group participants explained that humor was kept confidential by keeping it behind closed doors. Of course this was easier for management staff who had offices with doors; front line staff worked in cubicles. During participant observation the most disparaging humor witnessed occurred in small groups behind closed doors.
During focus groups, participants often asked for a pledge of confidentiality before or after sharing some humorous stories. The directors in FG 1 kept information confidential by speaking in generalities, that is their stories were generally void of detail. Much probing had to be used to understand who was involved in an incident, where the incident occurred, and what the impact of the incident was on the players.

**Butts of humorous interplay.**

During the focus groups, workers at all levels in the organization’s hierarchy joked about other people. Any flaw, weakness, or mistake could trigger teasing as well as ineptness, stupidity, and ugliness. Directors and managers joked more about agency staff and infrequently about clients, whereas direct service workers joked much more about clients. The managers used humor to discuss a wider range of topics than any other group. They joked about politics, sexual things, their bosses, and subordinates. In addition, only the managers admitted to joking about ethnicity, challenging employees, and board members. The supervisors joked about foster parents more than the others. The front line non direct service workers in FG 5 did not joke about clients, foster parents, bosses or board members; their humor was much less offensive and fairly restricted to talk about their own children, things they have done, work overload, and coworker behavior.

Much of what I observed in the focus groups and during participant observation mirrored what was reported by the focus group participants. Workers joked a lot about their peers, subordinates, themselves, their bosses, clients, and occasionally about the children. On the rare occasions when child-focused humor was reported or witnessed, the humor was more supportive in nature, and the humor was usually related to the
child’s immaturity or behavior. For example, focus group participants smiled when they heard about the child who goes to the “wayward Y.” It was considered very inappropriate to joke about a child because of some innate defect, such as joking about the appearance of the retarded boy in the wheelchair. Likewise, there was not one laugh when the worker was telling the story about the teen going to the residential facility. Unlike child-focused humor, adult client-focused humor was prevalent and not considered offensive amongst workers.

During the focus group discussion there was a preponderance of joking aimed at subordinates. The same held true during the participant observation periods. Bosses were also joked about, but it was admitted to and witnessed much less frequently. As a manager, I was probably not privy to that sort of joking. Most teasing about bosses was indirect and almost always happened when the boss was not present. Joking about or to some bosses was seen as less risky. As Lee explained, it was fun for her to bate her boss because, “He’s not quite high enough up in the administration to be really dangerous, but he’s high enough up that he’s fun to mess with.”

In both focus groups and participant observation, humor was rarely aimed at a board member. When the board or a board member was the butt of a humorous episode the initiator was a director or manager – no one in the lower levels of the hierarchy. Joking was an acceptable way for the executive director to complain about the board to subordinates. This complaining was witnessed on two different occasions in two different meetings in addition to his comment about the board in the focus group session. This bit of good-natured grumbling was fun for the staff. It was fun to see the boss anxious about a meeting with his superiors; usually the directors were the cause of staff
anxiety. Spence acknowledged his uncomfortable feelings and even said that he would need a drink after the meeting. This made him seem very down to Earth and genuine. Spence appeared to be no better or no worse than anyone else.

As mentioned in the discussion about humor initiators, being the butt of the executive director’s teasing was generally considered to be an honor. During observed humorous episodes, the butt would generally smile approvingly at the director. During the focus groups story that involved being the butt of Spence’s humor were shared in great detail.

While documenting the butts of the humorous interplay, certain themes emerged that should be mentioned. These themes are the importance of time, very funny stories, and stories that are not funny and considered to be inappropriate. It became apparent through the observation of humorous interplay and listening to what was reported by the focus group participants that timeliness is a value stressed by the agency. Workers valued being on time, they did not want to waste time; they wanted to save time. Through humor workers apologized for being tardy, and their coworkers reprimanded them for their tardiness. Along this same line, length of service time was celebrated. The one celebration that was witnessed was a retirement party. This was an important occasion attended by many junior coworkers.

Some humorous stories that were told, primarily in the focus groups, were very, very funny. The stories that resulted in the most intense laughter could be categorized into one of four categories: disliked boss or worker, sex, unprofessional or childish act, or a mistake. During participant observation, only one very funny story was documented during a small group’s side conversation in an All Staff meeting. The laughter was
prolonged but not loud since loud laughter would have disrupted the entire group. The
topic involved a picture of a toy cat urinating. This topic could be made to fit into the
“unprofessional or childish act” category since children often find body functions to be
very, very funny. Other topics could have drawn intense laughter, but not when I was
present.

In both data collection methods failed attempts at humor were observed. When
the target and, or, butt of the joke did not laugh, it expressed disapproval of the topic,
disagreement, dislike for the speaker, or a lack of understanding because of inexperience
with the context or insufficient details of the context provided by the initiator. Most
failed attempts at humor resulted when a humor initiator spoke about someone being
physically or emotionally harmed or vulnerable. Workers simply did not find accounts of
people being hurt or threatened funny.

**Audience of humorous interplay.**

The audience refers to the size of the group and the level of decorum. The
audience was noted for each humorous episode observed during participant observation.
During the focus groups the audience was not noted because it would have been the same
for each group. Few occurrences of humor were observed in informal groups. This is
likely a result of sampling and length of observation time spent with any one group.
These results are opposite of what I would have predicted based on the other findings. I
would have anticipated seeing more humor in small informal or private groups.

**Targets of humorous interplay.**

Targets were those people in the audience privy to the humor. Targets were only
documented during participant observation because in the focus groups the target of each
humorous episode would have been the same – all participants would have been privy to the humor. The two most frequent targets were the directors and managers. As mentioned above, these results indicate that groups of directors or managers were over sampled. Rarely were front line workers observed when they were not in the presence of their supervisors.

**Location of humorous interplay.**

The location refers to the site where the humorous episode took place, such as in the annex, in the elevator, or in a meeting room. Locations were only documented during participant observation because in the focus groups the location of each humorous episode would have been the same – all humor would have been reported or observed in a meeting room. During participant observation most humorous episodes occurred in meeting rooms or offices. This makes sense since humor was often kept confidential; one would not expect to hear a lot in public places like hallways or elevators. The more innocent humor was observed in these public places or in the annex. One time and setting that was consistently teeming with humor was prior to every large group meeting. The few minutes before the start of the supervisor meetings and All Staff meetings were the liveliest. Conversation was generally loud and it sounded like bees buzzing. I could rarely pick out any words, the sounds just droned on. Loud belly laughs or softer laughing would often be audible over the buzzing.

**Climate during humorous interplay.**

Climate referred to the emotional atmosphere in the group, such as angry, relaxed, happy, or bored. In the focus groups, there was agreement across the organizational hierarchy that humor is used when there is stress and tension in the workplace and when
one is frustrated. This is not what was observed during participant observation. Most humor was observed when workers were relaxed. On a few occasions, humor was observed when workers where bored, happy, tense, or anxious. So, the question that must be asked is, do workers really use humor when stressed and frustrated? It is possible that I did not observe many occasions that were stressful where workers were frustrated. Relaxed groups could have been over sampled. The climates of the focus groups were for the most part relaxed, although they were tense for the first few minutes.

**Context surrounding humorous interplay.**

The context of the humor refers to the circumstance in which it occurred, such as in an oral presentation, small talk, or written communication. The context was only documented during participant observation because in the focus groups the context of each humorous episode would have been the same – all humor would have been reported in the context of small group discussion. During participant observation, most humor episodes were witnessed during discussions. Like many of the other findings these results were probably the result of sampling and lack of full acceptance into each group’s humor circle. Discussions were easier for me to access, much more so than private small talk where a lot of humor likely occurred.

**Type of humor.**

In the focus groups humor was reported and observed through storytelling. There was one exception to this; the directors used half stories and half wisecracks to report and communicate humor. In the focus groups, participants emphasized the supportive aspects and, what most people would consider, the positive functions of humor. During participant observation, the most prevalent type of humor was wisecracks, and almost all
of the wisecracks were put-downs or insults. Wisecracks were interesting because workers were only put-down or insulted if they accepted the put-down or insult; a clever and quick retort canceled out put-downs and insults.

In the focus group discussions a few of the stories involved pranks. Workers seemed to enjoy telling about pranks that were pulled on their coworkers or pranks that were pulled on them. It seems that pranks were especially memorable because of the unanticipated, unrehearsed, and immense reactions – everything from screaming to getting very angry. Examples of pranks included putting a plastic cockroach in a computer cassette, putting plastic spiders around a workstation, and faking formal letters to coworkers. During the focus groups, I actually witnessed only two pranks and during participant observation seven pranks were witnessed. One very funny prank was pulled on the new security officer who was monitoring the door. Dominic got past the security officer by flashing his Y membership card. By paying attention to pranks it became evident that rule breaking is considered very funny when the prankster is well liked, respected, a good worker, and the outcome of the prank is harmless.

In the focus groups, bantering was a type of humor used by the participants. It was used to encourage group participation, to be creative in responses, but mostly just to have fun. In the focus groups the bantering was status less because almost all members were of the same rank in each group. Nearly all participants, except those in FG 5, participated in this form of communication. Bantering appeared to be a valid measure of focus group spontaneity, energy, and group interaction. When I compared bantering episodes to speaking episodes and story specificity it became obvious that the more talkative groups bantered more. For example, FG 4 had 381 speech episodes, they
engaged in 20 bantering episodes, and their stories required only 12 probes for detail. Focus Group 5 initiated only 134 speech episodes, they engaged in 2 bantering episodes, and their stories required 21 probes for clarity and specificity. Focus group 4 was a very spontaneous group, full of energy, while I nicknamed FG 5 my “depressed group.” They were so quiet and reserved that I actually felt sad for them.

This Study’s Results Compared and Contrasted with Results of Previous Studies

In this section the results of the focus groups and participant observation are compared and contrasted with results of previous research related to each of the three main subjects, functions of humor, individual differences and antecedent conditions, and structure of humorous interplay.

Functions of Humor

The finding of this study support and verify previously identified functions of humor. There were only a few functions of humor that were identified by the focus group participants or during participant observation that were not mentioned in the literature review. These are to gather information, to generate enthusiasm, to express sympathy for self (to look for sympathy from others), and to express disapproval of oneself or one’s actions.

Humor in the workplace can help solve stress-related problems, as well as promote overall improved health and well-being (Brilhart & Galanes, 1989; Duncan & Feisal, 1989; Fry & Savin, 1988; Lefcourt, et al. 1990). In this study only one good example was reported of the positive physiological effects of humor. Guy reported that he had a bad headache prior to an occasion of extensive laughter with his staff. He noticed his headache was gone once everybody returned to work. Even though other
employees did not report specific examples of humor meeting their physiological needs, a number of focus group participants explained that they use humor because it “Makes me feel good.” I was not sure if they meant that it made them feel physically well or emotionally well, perhaps both.

In the agency humor functioned primarily to meet the psychological and social needs of the workers. The most common psychological needs met through the use of humor included to release tension and to minimize anxiety. Similar to what Roy (1960) found in his study of "banana time" and what Bradney (1957) and Malone (1980) described; tensions of long hours of tedium or emotionally wearing work were released in the pranks and other joking of the workers. Roy reported that workers used humor to keep from “going nuts.” Similarly, workers in this study reported that they would "go crazy" if humor was not part of their work life. Other workers in this study explained how humor, especially “sick” humor, allowed them to go to sleep at night after atrocities were witnessed and they had cried all day. This supports Apte's (1985) supposition that humor is an effective modality for emotional catharsis. This study also supports the work by Ullian (1976) who reported humor being used in the work setting to process “new information.” The workers in this study reported that they use humor when given new assignments or when accepting new assignments, especially unpleasant tasks.

Brooks (1992) claimed that humor can be used to show empathy with others’ feelings, allow for emotional distancing, to help deal with novel situations, and to promote stability in the face of change. In this study, direct service staff who regularly come in contact with clients engaged in humor to help their clients feel more comfortable. In this study, workers suggested that humor, especially “sick” or “MASH”
humor used by many in the agency, is an effective tool for emotionally distancing oneself from disturbing behavior of clients.

Morreall (1983) theorized that humor is primarily a social phenomenon, and this study supports his viewpoint. The majority of the observed and reported humorous episodes were initiated to meet social functions. Humorous episodes were used to maintain status relationships, define group boundaries, and foster group cohesion, as reported in a number of previous studies (Apte, 1985; Cheatwood, 1983; Coser, 1960; Goodchilds, 1959; Pogrebin & Poole, 1988). Humor also functioned as a method of transmitting verbally aggressive and demeaning messages; it facilitated social interaction; and promoted friendships and relationships. Humor was also used to decrease and maintain social distance. These functions also support the findings of previous research (Derks and Berkowitz, 1989; Graham, Papa & Brooks, 1992; Sherman, 1988; Winick, 1976; and Ziv & Gadish, 1990).

These study results support the work of Scogin and Pollio (1980) who reported that nontargeted humor such as word play or incongruities might provide a breathing space and keep the group away from strong interpersonal interaction and Warnars-Kleverlaan, Oppenheimer, and Sherman (1996) who reported that humor is a socially acceptable way to dissociate from people. Workers in this study used humor to distance themselves from other workers especially those of different hierarchical status, clients, and emotionally taxing or threatening situations.

During the observation part of this study unfriendly or negative humor, primarily in the form of wisecracks, was most prevalent. This deprecating humor was used to maintain the established hierarchy, to tell people what to do and what not to do, and to
complain and criticize. Scogin and Pollio (1980) suggested that “deprecating humor serves as a control mechanism in that it serves to set limits on the behavior of group members, establish hierarchies, and allow for an expression of feelings in a somewhat less threatening manner than direct confrontation” (p. 848). Along this same line, Goodchilds (1959) studied the use of humor in small groups and she reported that a person who used sarcastic humor is likely to be perceived as powerful and influential, but unpopular. This was the case with the one director who reported that her humor is often sarcastic and that was one reason that she did not want to share some of her stories with me. In the agency, this same director is considered influential but not well-liked.

Humor in this study site was used to get work done. At the agency the executive director used joking to encourage the workers to accomplish certain tasks and to do so within certain time frames. This supports Vinton’s (1980) findings; a higher-status person used teasing to tell a lower-status person what to do. Vinton reported that “teasing to get things done” was between status levels and directional. In the Functions of Humor Questionnaire, workers from every hierarchical level reported that they used humor to get work done; however, during participant observation this function was only observed being used by the executive director.

Pollio and Bainum (1983) wrote that irrelevant humorous remarks may distract a work group and decrease efficiency, but humorous behaviors may not necessarily interfere with a group’s task effectiveness. Similarly, Bradford (1976) warned that too much clowning and joking might create an atmosphere of play that interferes with work; comic relief can help lighten a meeting, but persistent joke-telling can disrupt a discussion. During one, highly unusual, humor-packed meeting at the agency there were
so many disruptions from stories and wisecracks that even I became a bit frustrated, and I
know that the other manager became irritated. He made many attempts to refocus the
group when it was off track; however about one third of the time he was the one derailing
the group. The outcome of the meeting was good in that the assigned tasks were
accomplished, however the meeting lasted much longer than necessary and group
members had a hard time sitting still towards the end. The humor probably decreased the
efficiency of the group, but it might have increased the effectiveness of the group. In any
case the meeting was surely a lot of fun.

These study results are similar to the findings of Coser (1960), Lundberg (1969),
and Traylor (1973) who discussed how humor and joking defined and redefined social
groupings, reinforced social rankings, and clarified status relationships among the
members. However, unlike Lundberg, who observed that those lower in the hierarchy
had more fun at work than their higher status leaders, these study results show that the
work lives of those lowest in the organization’s hierarchy are nearly void of fun and
humor. These study results are similar to Coser’s findings: that senior staff members
joked significantly more than junior staff.

Lundberg (1969) noted that a low status butt of a joke did not joke back to a
higher status initiator and similarly, Coser found that higher-ranking individuals target
individuals lower in the hierarchy, however, lower-ranked individuals seldom target those
above them. Comparable behavior was observed and reported in this study; it was very
rare for a lower status person to initiate joking with a higher status worker. Often times
the lower status worker would even wait for a cue before participating in a humorous
episode.
Vinton (1989) discovered that humor can function to help socialize new members into an organization. Specifically, humor appears “to create bonds among employees and facilitate the accomplishment of work tasks”. These study results support her findings. Many workers in the focus groups reported that humor is used to assimilate new workers into their work groups. Along the same lines, many focus group participants mentioned that they do not engage in humorous interplay with those whom they have no relationship.

Giles, Bourhis, Gadfield, Davies, and Davies (1976) explained that humor can be used to gain approval. That is, if others can be made to laugh, that may influence them to evaluate the joker’s character and viewpoints more favorably. Along this line, Arlene said that when good relations with others are fostered through the use of humor, then when problems arise, they can be addressed easier. Problems are more likely to be resolved because others will be less defensive and more open to receiving the concern from someone with whom they have a good relationship. Morreall (1991) affirmed that even when people maintain their conflicting positions, humor can allow them to deal with each other with reduced hostility.

**Individual Differences and Antecedent Conditions**

Hassett and Houlihan (1979) reported that the most popular type of joke combines sexual and ethnic themes and the second most popular type of joke has ethnic themes. Observed and reported humor in this work setting does not support Hassett and Houlihan’s findings. In this study the funniest stories, which could be considered the most popular, were those that focused on disliked bosses or coworkers, sexual issues, unprofessional or childish acts, and mistakes. In this study, stories or wisecracks that
hinted of sex were uncommon but very popular in that they resulted in a lot of laughter. Ethnic joking was taboo. I was surprised that there was even mild laughter following the Baby Huey remark that disparaged an African American client. The speaker was surprised too. She said, “It's that good, huh?” In another focus group session, a Latino gentleman initiated ethnic joking and it was teasing about his own culture. His jokes about the Latino culture were not considered funny by most. In fact, during a focus group session a peer rebuked the Latino for joking about cultural and ethnic topics.

Two of the most important antecedent conditions that managers and work group members need to be aware of, according to Duncan and Feisal (1989), relate to gender and ethnic compositions of the work group. Certainly, these study results support that. There was a report of a caseworker who made fun of a Hispanic peer and the rest of the workers in the unit and the butt of the joking did not find it at all amusing.

To complicate humor further, what is humorous and what is “good” humor differ not only interculturally but also intraculturally (Apte, 1985). What may be perceived as humorous to one person, or one group, may be considered inappropriate or offensive to another, thus, impacting the quality of work life (Apte; Smeltzer & Leap, 1988). These study results support those views that many workers reiterated: some people, even within the agency, might be appalled at the sick things that are laughed about. Other workers explained that “when people are in a bad mood they don’t even want to look at them” let alone try and engage them in humor.

Humor can be used to safely transmit verbally aggressive and demeaning messages and express negative feelings towards others (Warnars-Kleverlaan, Oppenheimer, & Sherman, 1996; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). This was exceedingly
prevalent in the agency. Focus group participants reported how humor was used to disparage certain workers who were not liked and not respected. This phenomenon was even more pronounced during the participant observation activities. Humor directed at workers who were liked and respected was supportive in nature, whereas humor directed at workers who were disliked and not respected was malicious. The malicious humor produced a great deal of laughter, much more than the supportive humor. These findings support the work of Duncan, et al. (1990) and Zillmann (1983), in that the degree of humor experienced in disparagement situations depends largely on the affective disposition (liking – disliking) towards the butt of the humor. That is, the more intense the disliking, the greater the magnitude of mirth, and conversely, the more intense the positive disposition toward the disparaged entity, the smaller the magnitude of mirth. It is important to note that the most malicious messages were never transmitted in the presence of the butt of the joking. Humor may be a safe way to transmit aggressive messages, but even humor could not have protected initiators of the most vicious humor from a severe backlash if it was said directly or within earshot of the butt of the joking.

**Structure of Humorous Interplay**

As mentioned previously, Coser (1960) noted in her study that senior staff members joked significantly more than junior staff. In addition, the senior staff rarely used self-disparaging humor in the presence of junior staff. She also found that higher-ranking individuals target individuals lower in the hierarchy, however, lower-ranked individuals seldom target those above them. Some of the results of this study support Coser’s findings and some do not. In the focus group part of this study, the highest-ranking employees engaged in more bantering than those lower in the hierarchy, but
directors, managers, and direct service workers all initiated about the same number of humorous episodes – 40, 43, and 45 respectively. Only those lowest in the organization’s hierarchy, front line non direct service workers, used humor much less often than the directors in this agency. Subordinates were the butt of the joking more often than bosses, however peers were the butt of joking more often than the subordinates.

Duncan's (1984) study showed that when managers are accepted as friends and admitted to the humor network, they are frequently over chosen as initiators and foci of work-related joking. At this agency, bosses, especially the directors and managers, were not generally seen as friends. This was evident from both focus group responses and what was witnessed in the participant observation. Not being friends could be the reason why directors and managers were not readily admitted to the humor circle of supervisors and especially front line staff. It is also possible that this theory could be turned around on itself: they did not engage in humorous interplay therefore, friendships did not develop.

Results of this study support the work of Nevo (1985) who found that most people, most of the time, laugh at the expense of others but some do laugh at themselves. These results also support Zillmann and Stocking’s (1976) claims that “Individuals poke fun at their own shortcomings, blunders, or humiliations” (p. 154), and, “in the event of an unavoidable pratfall, self-disparagement can serve as a defense measure; by disparaging oneself, others are deprived of the opportunity to make the putdown” (p. 163). Interestingly, Zillmann and Stocking claimed that self-disparagement in general can have an adverse effect on the self-disparager. In this study workers used self-disparagement with mixed results. A direct service worker engaged in self-
disparagement and her tales were not considered funny; in fact, her stories lead some of her coworkers to question her professional judgment. The opposite was true for Vera, a non-direct service worker. In her case, self-disparagement was evidence of being self-assured and confident, witty, and emotionally healthy. Vera was venerated for being able to laugh at herself.

Superiority theories of humor suggest that humor prevails when feelings of superiority are derived from a display of inferiority in others (Zillmann & Stocking, 1976). “A person feels triumphant when others look bad in comparison” (Duncan, et al., 1990, p. 259). The superiority theory of humor is supported by this research. During participant observation, the most prevalent type of humor initiated was wisecracks. Wisecracks were generally putdowns or insults used for the purpose of expressing the jokester’s superiority. Interestingly, the putdown or insult could be easily cancelled out with a quick and witty response from the intended butt. When that occurs, the humor backfires and the initiator is left feeling putdown, and the original butt of the humor is elevated to a superior position.

For the incongruity theory, amusement is an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate (Morreal, 1983). Morreal explained that people live in an orderly world, where they come to expect certain patterns among things, properties, and events. Something is found to be humorous when the experience does not fit into the expected pattern. In this study there were numerous examples of the incongruity theory at work – a plastic cockroach was planted in a cassette and plastic spiders were hidden around a workstation. Both scenarios resulted in screams and the pranksters had a lot more fun than the butts of the humor.
Conclusion

In conclusion, this study helped to answer the research question: How is humor created and experienced within this organizational culture? It also helped to answer the two subordinate questions that guided this study: (a) How are employees’ perceptions, beliefs, and experiences related to humor similar or different depending on their place in the organizational hierarchy? And (b) How do employees at different levels in the organization’s hierarchy use humor to meet similar or different goals?

As explained above and as summarized below, within this organizational culture, humor was created by workers to make sense of their environment. Workers’ perceptions, beliefs, and experiences related to humor are similar in some instances, but not in all instances, across the hierarchical levels. Likewise, workers at different levels in the organization’s hierarchy often, but not always, use humor to meet similar goals.

The Role that Humor Plays in Shaping Organizational Culture

Humor is both a cultural artifact and a culture-encoder that is affected by and effects organizational structure and practices. This section discusses aspects of organizational humor related to socialization, organizational structure, and leadership functions including power and control, and decision-making. This section also discusses aspects of humor related to communication and language, organizational identity and commitment, and peer relationships and conflict management. This is followed by an explanation of how humor is used to define space, to explain time, to measure success and failure and to reward and punishment. This section concludes with a discussion of how humor is used to explain the unexplainable, and to describe human nature.
Humor used in socialization.

Humor is purposeful and serves a number of functions. In this study, culture was created and maintained through communication and social interactions, which included humorous interplay. There were benefits to this workplace humor. Humor served to socialize workers to the beliefs, values, and rules of agency behavior, and once they had been socialized, it functioned to maintain these norms. Workers who violated these rules of behavior were subjected to teasing or insulting joking. Joking frequently enforced rules of behavior and reinforced the beliefs and values of the work group as effectively as formal communication without the negative side effect of defensiveness and hostile confrontation; for example, when a peer jokingly but emphatically confronted rude behavior of another, the offender readily acknowledged her poor behavior and stopped it. On the other hand, when a peer was reprimanded in a serious tone of voice, without smiling, the offender responded by defending the infraction and there were hostile undertones in the response.

Amongst the workers in all hierarchical levels there was a shared understanding that the mission of the agency was to protect and care for children and make sure they are happy and nurtured. This was manifest in the stories told and the humor used. It was also made known by what the workers did not joke about. Rarely was disparaging humor directed at children. Jokes about ethnicity, race, sex, or religion were also off limits.

The idea of leading the community in child protection was a written tenet of the agency, yet this principle was not promoted at any level in the hierarchy through the use of humor. Furthermore, it was evident that the task of protecting children was intimately tied to the family, but working with families was sometimes considered more of a
necessary evil, and families were joked about often. At other times families were the focus of a worker’s sympathy and workers became vested in helping them.

Espoused values were not always consistent with actual behavior. For example, the agency espoused that communication should be open and honest between hierarchical ranks but in fact the underlying assumption was that the expression of ideas, criticism, or disagreement was not to be shared, especially with those above you in the organizational hierarchy. “It is just safer that way.” This assumption is supported by the way that humor was shared and not shared. Directors hide humor for fear that subordinates would get the wrong idea of what managers do. Managers and supervisors hide humor by huddling behind closed doors, and when non-direct service workers see a director on the floor they warn their coworkers so conversations can be broken off and they can get back to work. So, everybody engages in humorous interplay, but nobody is supposed to know about it.

Workers at all levels are more guarded in their use of humor with nonpeers. They are not saying that joking does not occur. Humor that occurs between the status levels is of a more general and innocent nature. The reason for this is because workers are afraid of negative consequences from their boss or the union, but joking with coworkers will not result in much trouble.

Direct service workers see explicitly, on a daily basis, the atrocities dealt to children. That is not to say that the administrative staff of the agency have not also experienced it first hand - those who are social workers, probably have. Surely people in the fiscal department, information systems, and personnel, have not, and most of the board members have not. Since all workers do not face the same problems, humor
should differ across work groups and that is exactly what was evident. All agency staff joked about people; any flaw, weakness, or mistake could trigger teasing. However, directors and managers joked more about agency staff and infrequently about clients, whereas, direct service workers joked much more about clients. The front line non-direct service workers did not joke about clients or bosses. Their humor was restricted almost entirely to talk about their own children, things they have done, work overload, and coworker behavior.

There was evidence of some cultural confusion in the agency, for example, a board member emphasized primacy of work but the majority of others in the agency supported a work life that is integrated with home life. Mr. Miller criticized Mitch at a public meeting for being away from the job. Mitch was one of two United Way campaign managers plus during the campaign he took a two-week vacation to be married and to take a honeymoon. The workers disparaged Mr. Miller for his insensitivity and unreasonableness, and Mitch was supported in his United Way efforts and congratulated on his marriage. There was other evidence of primacy of home life. For example, most agency members supported a life style in which both the women and the men are active participants in home life and work life. So, when I suggested we hold an 8:00 a.m. breakfast meeting, the executive director vetoed the idea and said, “You think I can get them in here by 8 a.m.?” He went on to explain that many have children to get off to school, himself included.

**Humor used to define organizational structure.**

The agency has an autocratic and bureaucratic rule system designed to control its workers, resources, and processes. Much of the agency’s practice was guided by formal
rules including government regulations, child welfare standards, the labor contract, organizational policies and procedures, and the Personnel Handbook. Unwritten informal rules also guided practice and these were often communicated by the use of humor. Some of the informal rules were be on time, be smart, let administrators make the decisions, and take care of your peers.

At the agency there were several subcultures. The subcultures were closely integrated with the dominant culture. There was pretty much a united way of thinking, feeling, and behaving. These subcultures may be considered “enhancing subcultures,” as defined by Martin and Siehl (1983). In “enhancing subcultures” assumptions, beliefs, and values are in accordance with those in the dominant culture, which in this case involves the protection of children. Usually a subculture consisted of a network of about six to seven workers who communicated more often with one another than with others in the agency. Subcultures were prevalent because not all workers faced the same problems; for example, the direct service workers are placed in threatening situations, unlike many of the other employees.

Humor in the workplace is important because it helps workers cope with the awfulness of working in the field of child abuse. Yet, the use of humor can be complicated because humor that is used among workers is culture specific. Individuals from outside of the organization, and even some individuals from within the organization but employed in different departments, may find some workplace humor distasteful – especially “sick” or “MASH” humor.
Humor used to identify leadership functions including power and control, and decision-making.

Humorous interplay maintained status relationships and defined and redefined those boundaries. Humorous interplay occurs horizontally between status ranks in the organizational hierarchy. To a lesser extent humorous interplay occurs vertically between status ranks especially in individual units or departments.

Humor functioned to communicate beliefs about power and status relationships and how to maintain comfortable relationships with others. Workers of all levels emphasized hierarchy and tradition, as the basis of authority and staff appeared to be very accepting of the autocratic and bureaucratic structure and authority system. Humor was used by peers, subordinates, and bosses to control behavior within and between the hierarchical levels.

Humor related to communication and language.

It is not possible to think about or discuss organizational culture without focusing on communication. Culture influences and shapes communication, and through communication, culture is created and sustained. Humor as one style of communication delivery can shape culture, that is, it can be used to produce or construct culture, maintain culture or change culture.

Communicating humor effectively was a very powerful tool for the workers. Humor was used to make demands, apologies, or requests. It was also used to criticize decision-makers. Coworkers could be influenced by the content of a humorous episode as well as by its delivery. For instance Prima and Guy were excellent storytellers and others listened intently when they spoke. As excellent storytellers they looked and
sounded interested and acted as though they really wanted to share their stories. They were also fluent, provided detail, repeated key words, paused properly for effect and suspense, and modified their tone of voice, inflection, and level of enthusiasm. Others were not as effective, and consequently, their stories did not bring laughter, and sometimes it left listeners wondering what was funny or what was the point of the story. The ability to use humor appropriately may actually be a measure of a worker’s behavioral flexibility and interpersonal competence. Likewise, being able to enact a wide variety of humor functions allows workers to make choices about how to communicate effectively in various settings.

A distinguishing feature of the agency was the language of its members. Their vocabulary provided clues as to what were the relevant constructs, facts, and practices of work life, for example, a “lunatic” was a client or family member who threatened one’s well being. Their jargon such as CA, assessments, placements, incident report, risk assessment (not the same as “assessments”), and intake (different than “Intake”), family advocate, unit, board bill, and facilitators complicated communication, especially with outsiders. Even within the agency there was some department-specific language that caused confusion, such as the ILI in the Intake Department. It was considered humorous when the executive director had to ask, “What is the ILI?”

Humor was a structural barrier to communication flow. Structural distortion occurred because humor, especially in the form of wisecracks, sends a message that is condensed (made shorter, simpler, and less detailed) or accented (simplified into good or bad, all or none, or other extreme terms). Hierarchy was also a barrier to the flow of
upward and downward information because workers tend to avoid communicating, including using humor, with those of a different status.

**Humor used to promote organizational identity and commitment.**

Humor functioned in this culture to foster organizational identity and to increase group cohesion. Workers used humor to share common experiences and to probe the attitudes, perceptions, and feelings of others in a non-threatening manner. Humor helped define the agency’s beliefs and philosophy and provided examples of informal standards and expectations for behavior. Humor promoted solidarity through bantering and teasing that allowed group members to realize that they share a common perspective. This humor of inclusion, as well as humor aimed at people outside the agency, helped to define social boundaries.

The espoused values were generally, although not always, consistent with practice which promoted a shared sense of loyalty and commitment. The agency benefited from the employee’s compliance with agency routines, cohesion within individual work units; few internal conflicts; and a high rate of longevity.

**Humor used to define peer relationships and to manage conflict.**

A socialization process fostered strong fraternal relationships among coworkers within individual work units or small departments. For the most part, people engaged in humorous interplay with those they felt they had a relationship with; usually peers in their own work group but sometimes supervisors and subordinates. Peer relations also evolved around meetings such as director’s meetings, manager’s meetings, supervisor’s meetings, and unit meetings where teaming behaviors were noted. Outside of meetings most work was carried out independently. Work life was based on cooperation amongst most peers,
but certainly not always across hierarchical lines, and this was reflected in the agency humor. Bosses were generally not teased - at least when they were present. Conversely, peers openly teased each other, and jokes were also told about them when they were not within earshot.

Many values were transmitted via the use of humor including being polite, nice, and respectful to others, at least to their faces. Workers were very supportive of one another and helped each other in a time of need, for example, Martin went to the store for the secretary, Stephie worked late to help Ursula, May’s coworkers helped her find her keys, Blanche helped a caseworker find her keys. At the agency, workers in most areas are expected to buy Christmas presents for others, bring in food to share, or other tokens of appreciation. Workers were expected to be friends with other agency staff and play together. Play activities included baseball, bowling, golf, cookie exchanges, lunches, birthday and retirement parties, wedding and baby showers, and other celebrations.

At the agency, workers gained the respect of their peers, and they gained status by carrying their share of the load. Status was gained amongst the upper levels of management by being assertive, but assertiveness was not valued as highly amongst those lower in rank. Peers lost power by being naturally “scatter brained” or “air-heads,” but those who were purposefully funny were especially liked.

**Humor used to define space.**

In the agency, each functional department was assigned to a certain area or sometimes to an entire floor. In the agency, office space was allocated depending on the rank of the worker. For example, the fifth floor of the agency housed almost all of the directors. The directors’ offices were nicely furnished with polished wood and veneer
office furniture. The managers and supervisors had similar office arrangements but with steel and laminate furniture. Front line workers were assigned a cubicle. The benefit of an office was that the worker could close the door to keep the humor secret. This provided safety when engaging in humorous interplay. It was nearly impossible to keep joking in a cubicle secret.

Just as there were strict boundaries around the individual departments. There were also strict boundaries that separated the agency from the community. The agency was physically contained by secure entryways that limited access to certain people. Conceptual boundaries were also maintained through policy, procedure, level of interagency collaboration and cooperation, and humor. Humor was aimed at other agencies, commissioners, legislators, clients, and others. No one was exempt from being the butt of a humorous attack.

**Humor used to explain time.**

At the agency, time was a very valuable commodity and people were criticized for wasting time. For example, Steve was criticized when he thought his car was stolen. Many workers talked about wasting time. Brooke was looking for staff for a meeting, and Stanlee was looking for a lost file. Fonda didn’t want to telephone someone because it would be an “hour conversation.” Being on time was also important. Guy thought he should be punished for being tardy to the focus group session, and Marcia wondered if she could still attend the focus group because she came in late. Flora had to leave the focus group session a few minutes early because she had to be on time for her next meeting.
There was a strict dichotomy between work time and non-work time. Work time was Monday through Friday from 8:30 – 4:30. Non work time was any time other than that. Common quips of staff were, “Is it Friday, yet?” or “Is it 4:30?” It was considered very unusual for two non-direct service workers to work until 7:30 p.m. one evening. Corresponding with this dichotomy of work time and non-work time was a dichotomy of a time to joke and a time to not joke. At the agency it was normal to have a lot of work to do and to be overwhelmed, so it was not appropriate to be seen engaging in non-important, non-critical tasks, so when this type of activity occurred, it was kept secret. Fooling around was a punishable offense especially for the non-direct service workers. The punishment was “more work piled on.” This was an effective punishment. Fooling around, storytelling, and joking had all but ceased in some areas. When it did occur it was not done when the boss was around.

**Humor used to measure success and failure, and to reward and punish.**

Most of the workers measured individual success, and agency success, on the placement of children. Keeping a child in his or her own home was considered success; however when a child came into the permanent custody of the agency, that was considered a failure. Humor was used to celebrate the successes, and it was used to criticize, usually the neglectful parents, when there were failures.

For the most part, organizational members agreed upon what was admirable and unsuitable behavior. However, understanding what is a reward and what is a punishment was less clear. Rarely were monetary rewards mentioned. When raises were granted they were small and laughable. One reward granted good caseworkers was a supervisory position. Every supervisor interviewed was a previous caseworker at the agency. Along
with a jump in rank and new title, a promoted worker was provided an office with a door. The ability to close one’s door probably helped foster the more derogatory type of humor directed at subordinates which was prevalent at the upper levels of the hierarchy.

Workers were also rewarded for being nice, especially for being nice to their peers. The reward was generally a reciprocal disposition and caring attitude that resulted in supportive and nurturing behaviors such as sharing food, jackets, work, and time.

Humorous interplay was used to communicate a need for correction. For example, workers were punished, often by their peers, for being derogatory toward other cultures: “That’s over the line – just a tad.” Workers were also punished for being rude. The reprimand consisted of public chiding. In Pearl’s case, when she did not complete her home study appropriately, she was teased many times thereafter. She stated that from now on she would always complete the home study thoroughly. Most mistakes were forgiven if the offender was repentant because it was considered human to make mistakes, however, the same mistake should not be made twice and that is one role played by humor - joking and kidding reminded workers not to repeat a mistake.

Punishments were also doled out by those higher in the organization as a means of maintaining power and control. Punishments were not always uniform for the same or similar offense depending on how well liked the offender was. People in good standing were considered heroes if they did something non traditional or not socially acceptable. Conversely, workers in poor standing were criticized under similar circumstances. This behavior was not limited to those higher in rank. Pranks and jokes were generally rewarded by peers, but only if the worker was in high standing.
Humor used to explain the unexplainable.

Humor was used as a way to explain the unexplainable and to help workers deal with uncertainty and confusion. The atrocities of child abuse and neglect remain an unexplainable event to most workers: “Things like that just happen.” Trying to understand why adults won’t protect their children and/or change in order to keep their children or get them back if they were removed is incomprehensible. Sometimes it could only be explained by the fact that some parents are “wacko.” Whenever the term “mentally challenged” or “lunatic” was used to describe clients, that was all it took to explain why the family was involved with the agency. Not once did another worker ask for an explanation of that term.

Humor used to describe human nature.

Analyzing humorous interplay showed that there was a low level of trust between hierarchical levels. Bosses reported that workers need to be told what to do. They must be kept in line, and watched closely, because they may try to get out of work. In fact, some departments did joke about trying to get out of work or to delay the inevitable. Others joked, “We’re bad” or “This isn’t nice.” Bosses may have felt that they needed to “keep a watchful eye on staff,” however some staff felt that “the boss is in the dark” and did not know what was going on. These beliefs about human nature may have contributed to the fact that workers did not always feel that they were appreciated for their contributions. On one occasion a group of supervisors and secretaries demonstrated their appreciation by celebrating “Schmuck Day” for those who were not honored throughout the year in another fashion, such as for Boss’ Day, Secretary’s Day, or Nurse’s Day.
At the agency there was a genuine concern for people, especially people who may be disadvantaged in some way. It is important to note that concern for people should not be translated into dependency. People, workers and clients alike, were supposed to take responsibility to help themselves, especially once they had been given the resources to do so. There was little patience for those who remained overly dependent on others.

Those lower in rank routinely criticized clients for not taking care of themselves with respect to their appearance and cleanliness. Interestingly, bosses sometimes criticized these same workers for not presenting themselves in a professional manner. Stories were told about disheveled looks, clothing that was unflattering, and hollering at coworkers down the hall instead of getting up and walking to the person to deliver a message.

In summary, humor played a significant and important role in shaping this organization’s culture. However, it is important to emphasize that humor cannot be used as the sole mechanism to learn about an organization’s culture.

**Implications for Organizational Leaders and Workers**

Humor was seen as an important attribute for workers across all hierarchical levels. As Prima stated, “…Individuals who generally have laughter in their life somehow perpetuate some happiness. It shows in how they interact with others and their personalities may be pleasant. On the other hand, individuals who you never see smile, it’s as if they are angry with the world.”

In addition to promoting pleasant personalities, there are other benefits related to the presence of workplace humor. First, humor helps the assimilation process. People want to feel that they are accepted members of their work group, and joking and teasing
are effective means to help newcomers fit in. In addition, once new workers are assimilated in their work units, humor helps to build and maintain relationships. Humor relationships maybe an important antecedent for getting work done. Arlene explained that if favorable relationships are built upon humor, then when a problem arises, the problem could be addressed easier. When a problem is brought to the attention of a friend it is less likely that the friend will display defensive behavior and or ignore the problem. More than likely, the problem will be resolved.

Workers with a keen sense of humor may be better able to cope with stress, frustrations, failure, and child-related atrocities because humor allows them to maintain objectivity and rationality. At the agency, many work groups developed their own kind of humor including MASH humor and sick humor to defuse negative emotions and preserve their sanity. Workers felt that a sense of humor is essential for child protection workers, so much so that without this attribute one may not be successful in this field.

An environment that encourages the use of humor may promote high morale, openness to new ideas and creativity, and teamwork. An environment that squelches the use of humor can be perceived as oppressive. Humorous interplay, especially supportive humor, may improve performance by promoting cohesive work groups. Supportive humor is pleasurable and encourages values such as thoughtfulness, respect, forgiveness, fairness, and honesty. Across the organizational hierarchy, workers agreed that when there is humor, it makes for a better day.

Even disparaging humor plays an important role in organizations. For example, it may be an appropriate way to allow workers to voice their dissent and frustrations. But with this said, it is important to note that disparaging humor also encourages
cautiousness, formality, distrust, and secrecy, so ideally it should be less prevalent in an organization than supportive humor.

Studying humor may be beneficial to organizational leaders. Being cognizant of humorous interplay helps leaders understand the relationships between workers and between workers and management. Being observant of the organization’s use of humor can also provide insight into the feelings, attitudes, expectations, values, and assumptions of the workers. Astute organizational leaders may be able to determine that the teasing, bantering, or joking is serving a worthwhile purpose. Humor is an appropriate vehicle to communicate requests, refusals, apologies, and criticism. Humor is also a suitable medium to use for accepting praise and giving praise. Light hearted kidding may also be a constructive way to defuse defensive behavior and to resolve differences.

Many workers are not comfortable using humor except in close, established relationships. They are especially uncomfortable initiating humor with those higher in the organization’s hierarchy. They hold back until they receive a cue from the higher ranked person that it is all right to joke. This can result in a vicious cycle of non-joking and shallow relationships that restricts upward communication to more formal means of communicating and communication is work related versus being social in nature.

There are detriments to using humor. Humor should be used cautiously in conjunction with, not in place of, clear, open, and honest communication. Jokes and wisecracks include little detail, and listeners are left to interpret messages broadly without understanding the full intent. Successful use of humor in the workplace is also complicated by the fact that humor is influenced by cultural patterning, and at the individual level humor is dependent on the mood of the individual. This being the case,
jokesters must be careful not to offend others due to antecedent conditions such as
gender, ethnicity, work place habits, and simply due to the fact that an individual is not in
a humorous mood. It requires skill to “read” a group or an individual correctly before
deciding if humor is or is not appropriate in a certain instance.

A leader may benefit from intentionally introducing humor into the workplace
because humor may improve emotional well-being and job satisfaction. Humor may also
foster good working relationships. This may facilitate the accomplishment of work tasks
and the organization’s mission. Remembering that the organization’s culture is an
evolved form of social practice that was influenced by many complex interactions
between people and events, leaders should not anticipate quick and monumental changes
when introducing workplace humor. Rather, leaders can coax cultural change by being
aware of the symbolic consequences of their actions. Leaders wanting to infuse more
humor in the work place must be willing to help educate their workers in its use, role
model appropriate humor behavior, and launch humor initiatives. Humor education, role
modeling, and specific initiatives will encourage other organizational members to
become involved in humor use. Bridgett, a manager at the agency, described her
successful intervention; “I started posting humorous material on a bulletin board by the
elevator. Initially, I was the only one putting stuff up. Over time others also started
putting stuff up. Mostly, it’s pretty clean. There’s been one risqué posting.”

**Limitations of this Study**

The focus groups were limited to verbal behavior and self-reported behavior.
Even though most individuals seemed willing to openly and honestly share their
thoughts, I heard only what they felt comfortable telling me. The limitation of participant
observation was related to gaining access to settings in which a substantial number of humorous episodes could be witnessed. This study can be strengthened by getting deeper into all levels of the organization to access the natural humor circles that take place in private settings, including director’s meetings and informal gatherings of front line workers.

Documentation of humorous interplay must be covert with the researcher being more of a participant and less of an observer. I purposefully did not collect data in my own department, but if I were to duplicate this study, I would not eliminate that setting. Instead of me going into workers’ units as an outsider, data would be collected as workers come to me to carry on daily work activities. This would provide many occasions to observe front line workers and some supervisors in a natural setting. I am most comfortable with the data gathered from supervisors and managers, probably because it was collected in an environment in which I was not considered a stranger.

Analysis was based on fragments of information collected during the focus groups and participant observation activities. The fragment selected may or may not have been relevant to the situation because, “there is a tendency to selectively see or hear only those comments that confirm a particular point of view and to avoid dealing with information that causes us dissonance” (Krueger, 1994, p. 129). “Our training, our background, and our experiences influence what we notice and what we attend to” (Krueger, p. 129). With this said, the study would be strengthened if I obtained verification of my interpretations after humorous interplay was documented.

Apte (1985) asserted that a major problem with functional theories of humor is that they are educated guesses at best. It is difficult to show that humor actually served a
This was a study of perceptions as much as it was a study of observable phenomenon, which may be what Morgan (1986) meant when he stated that one must “become skilled in the art of ‘reading’ the situations...” (p. 11). This skill, he claimed, develops as an intuitive process and “often occurs at an almost subconscious level” (p. 11).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study has shown that humorous interplay in the workplace remains an important topic and has the potential of providing insight into organizational culture; therefore, this study should be extended. Additional occasions of humorous interplay, in similar and different work environments, need to be explored to understand how workers use humor to make sense of and control their work life. More studies are also needed that describe differences and similarities in humorous interplay across groups, within groups, and within individuals. This would include investigations into the differences in humor use and humor appreciation by age of employee or length of time in a profession.

Workplace humor studies could benefit from additional research conducted in natural work settings that describe how humor impacts identification and commitment with the organization, the role of humor in effecting worker satisfaction, and the role of humor in effecting individual and group performance. Finally, many authors have stressed the benefits of humorous interplay, but rarely have they described detriments to the use of humor including what types of misunderstandings develop and how they develop. This is an important issue that should be explored in future research. Leaders and workers alike should understand how to prevent the negative effects of humor
without taking drastic measures such as restricting or eliminating the use of humor in the workplace.

It would be interesting to know if the values, norms, and rules of behavior found in this agency are common to other child protection agencies. If that is the case, then one would wonder how specific occupational standards and assumptions affect the socialization process. Van Maanen and Barley (1985) claimed that professionalized occupations experience a common socialization process and assumptions are sustained through education, in-service training, rewards for meeting standards, and consequences for failing to meet the standards.
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Appendix A

Script of Telephone Invitation to Potential Focus Group Participants

( Name ), This is Barbara Gunning. As part of a research project for school, I am conducting a meeting with agency staff to discuss the role that humor plays in shaping the organization’s culture.

I know that people use humor, or see humor, at work everyday. I would like you to join me and a group of other agency staff as we discuss this topic.

This is not an agency committee or meeting, but strictly an educational research project.

It will be held on ( _____ Day _____ ) afternoon, ( _____ Date _____ ) in room ( _____ room number _____ ).

Pizza, soft drinks, fruit and cookies will be served. The meeting will start promptly at 11:30 and it will end promptly at 1:00. Will you be able to attend?

( ) Yes I am glad that you will be able to come. I will be sending you a letter in a few days confirming this meeting. If you need to cancel, please call me at ext. 3343. Thank you and good-bye.

( ) No I am sorry that you won’t be able to come. Thank you for your time. Good-bye.
Appendix B

Confirmation Letter to Potential Focus Group Participants

(Sent to participants two days after they accepted the telephone invitation)

( Date )

(Name ).

Thank you for accepting my invitation to attend the research project discussion on ( Day and Date ). We will be meeting in room ( room number ). The discussion will begin promptly at 11:30 and conclude promptly at 1:00. Lunch, which will be provided, will include pizza, soft drinks, fruit, and cookies.

Since I am talking to a limited number of people, the success and quality of our discussion is based on the cooperation of the people who attend. Because you have accepted the invitation, your attendance at the session is anticipated and will aid in making the research project a success.

Discussion participants will be individuals who work at the agency. We will be discussing the role that humor plays in the workplace. I would like to get your opinions and hear your perspective on this subject. You do not need to prepare anything or bring anything to the meeting. This is strictly an educational research project. At the conclusion of the session I will be giving you a very small gift as a token of my appreciation for attending the meeting.

If for some reason you find you are not able to attend, please call me to let me know as soon as possible. My home phone number is 419-877-2542. My work extension is 3343.

I look forward to seeing you on ( Date ).

Sincerely,

Barbara Gunning
Appendix C

Script for Reminder Telephone Call to Potential Focus Group Participants

(Phone calls were made two days prior to the session.)

(   Name   ),

Hello, this is Barbara Gunning. I am calling to remind you of the discussion meeting about workplace humor. The meeting is this (___Day and Date___) in room (___room number___) from 11:30 – 1:00. I hope you are still planning on attending.

Thank you for your time. Good-bye.
Appendix D

The University of Toledo
Informed Consent for Research

Title of Project: The Role that Humor Plays in Shaping Organizational Culture

Project Investigator: Barbara L. Gunning Telephone Number: 419-877-2542
Project Advisor: Jack Maynard, Ph.D. Telephone Number: 810-766-6878

The purpose of this research project is to explore workers’ perceptions, beliefs and experiences about the use of humor to determine how humor shapes organizational culture.

This study is being conducted as a partial requirement for a doctoral degree in Administration and Supervision at the University of Toledo.

This project investigator hopes to learn more about the use of humor from the different perspectives of administrators, supervisors and front line staff in the organization.

This project investigator believes that an investigation of how workers experience the use of humor may help business leaders in understanding how their organization creates, maintains and changes values, norms and rules of behavior through everyday humorous communication and behavior.

Participants in the focus group part of this study must be employees of the organization for a minimum of six months. A random sample of employees will be asked to participate in one of several focus groups. Participation will be voluntary and all participants must give their written consent. Each focus group will last approximately 90 minutes. The project investigator will moderate the focus group, and a fellow graduate student will attend each focus group as the co-moderator. The focus groups will be tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Follow-up interviews may occur if emerging data must be clarified or verified. The audio-tapes will be destroyed within a reasonable amount of time after the study is completed. All tapes, transcripts, notes and other data will remain the property of the investigator. The agency will receive a copy of the results of the study, if requested.

To protect the identity of the organization and the names of the individual participants, pseudonyms will be used. No one other than the investigator will have access to the specific information provided by the participants.

Participants will be asked to provide demographic data and information about their perceptions, beliefs and experiences with the use of humor in the workplace. Records of this data will be available only to the investigator. Only necessary portions or aggregate data will be shared in the final report in order to insure confidentiality.
The immediate and long-range risks resulting from being a participant in this research is minimal. In fact, participants may find participation in a focus group, or being interviewed an enjoyable and worthwhile experience. Participation in focus groups or interviews may cause some temporary emotional discomfort when disclosing private, personal information. Participants discussing the work environment may experience a wide range of emotions. Participants may at any time withdraw from the study. The investigator may discontinue the involvement of any participant at her discretion.

**Statement of Informed Consent**

I, _____________________________ agree to participate in a focus group and/or interview about my perceptions, beliefs and experiences of humor use in the work setting. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary, and that I may withdraw from the project at any time by contacting the project investigator at the telephone number listed above. The research project has been explained to me, including possible risks and benefits. My questions about the project have been answered, and I understand what I am agreeing to as a participant. If I choose to withdraw from the project, this decision will not affect my current or future relationship with the University of Toledo, the agency, or the project investigator.

Additionally, I have been informed that the focus groups will be tape recorded and transcribed.

Signature ___________________________ Date __________
Participant

Signature ___________________________ Date __________
Project Investigator

I agree to be audiotaped ______

I agree to be quoted anonymously ______
Appendix E

Script for Focus Group Welcome, Introduction and Ground Rules

Welcome, and thank you for agreeing to participate in today’s group discussion.

Today we are going to be talking about a topic that I think you will find interesting and that I’m sure you all know a lot about, and that is humor in the workplace.

First I’d like to find out something about when you use humor, what you use it for, and how you use it and so on. Then I’d like to find out something about what you think of different forms of humor.

First, I have a couple of requests. One is that you speak up and only one person speak at a time. I’m tape recording this, and if someone speaks very softly, or if two or three conversations are going at once, I can’t hear it later. The other thing is, please say exactly what you think. I’m just as interested in negative comments as positive ones, and in fact, the negative comments are sometimes the most useful. As everyone knows, people usually have very different opinions about what is funny and what is not. So if you hear someone telling of his reaction and you have a different slant on it, let’s hear about it. That way we can have everyone’s point of view.

Now, to get started, perhaps it would be best to go around the table, one at a time. I’d like to know something about your work unit.

(Begin using the questioning route here.)

(Adapted from Wells, 1979, p. 7; and Merton, et al, 1956, p. 175)
Appendix F

The Focus Group Questioning Route

Opening Question
1. Going clockwise around the table, I would like each of you to tell me:
   - How long you have worked at the agency,
   - What your role is at the agency, and
   - Tell me about one humorous event – no matter how insignificant - that you saw, heard, or experienced today.

Introductory Questions
1. Think about the last time that you experienced a good laugh at work. What happened? Describe your experience in plenty of detail.
2. Think back to when you had an awful experience at work related to the use of humor. What made it terrible?

Transition Questions
1. Who do you joke with?
   - Do you joke with your (supervisor?) (manager?) (director?) (subordinates?)
2. What do you joke about?
3. When do you use humor?
4. Who jokes with you?

Key Questions
1. Think about humor at work, how is the use of humor among peers similar or different than humor used with non-peers (supervisors or subordinates)?
2. What are the benefits of using humor at work?
3. On the paper in front of you, please complete this sentence:
   - At work, I am prevented from using humor ….
4. When would the use of humor be inappropriate?
5. We are going to take a few minutes and go over a brief questionnaire. (Pass out the questionnaire, explain it, give them about 4 minutes to complete it, then ask the question.)
   - What goals do you try to accomplish through the use of humor?

Ending Question
1. Is there anything that we should have talked about but didn’t?
## Handout for Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions of Humor</th>
<th>Used by you</th>
<th>Used by your peers</th>
<th>Used by your boss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop friendships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Build rapport</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce tension, stress, anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoid discussing a topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deny the serious intent of a message</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss socially inappropriate topics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Probe about others’ thoughts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cope with fear or embarrassment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remove attention from oneself</td>
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<tr>
<td>Entertain or be playful</td>
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<tr>
<td>To get work done</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express a need for approval</td>
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<td>Express support or sympathy</td>
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<td>Express agreement</td>
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<td>Show appreciation</td>
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<td>Share positive feelings</td>
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<td>To gain attention or to maintain interest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change the topic of conversation</td>
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<td>Persuade</td>
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<td>Avoid telling personal information</td>
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<td>Disclose difficult information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cause conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disarm aggressive people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allow others insight into one’s state of mind</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce boredom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illustrate a point, provide an example</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stimulate imagination and creativity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express approval of others’ actions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express disapproval of others’ actions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop and perpetuate stereotypes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitate group cohesiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between individuals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Define boundaries between groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Put others in their place</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transmit verbally aggressive messages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control others’ behaviors</td>
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<td>Express superiority over others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attack others, demean or insult others</td>
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Appendix H

Recruitment for an Assistant Moderator

A doctoral student is in need of an assistant moderator to help conduct a series of approximately five Focus Groups at a child protection agency in downtown Toledo.

**Time commitment:**
The total time commitment will be approximately 12 hours over a two-week period during the month of November 2000. Each focus group will last approximately 90 minutes from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. The assistant moderator will be expected to arrive 20 minutes prior to the start of the focus group session and remain for 30 minutes after the session.

**Responsibilities:**
**Before the Focus Group**
- Set up the tape recorder
- Ensure that participants complete the demographic data sheet

**During the Focus Group**
- Ensure that the tape recorder is working properly throughout the session
- Change tapes as necessary
- Control any possible disturbances such as greeting late or unexpected participants at the door, answering telephone calls, cleaning up spills, etc.
- Distribute any forms, handouts etc.
- Take careful notes during the focus groups
- Control head nodding that may be interpreted as a positive or negative response to a question

**After the Focus Group**
- Meet with the project investigator immediately after the group to conduct a tape recorded debriefing
- Label the tapes with date, time, and focus group identifier

**Stipend:**
A nominal payment of $15 per focus group will be paid to the assistant moderator. In addition, downtown parking fees will be paid.

**Qualifications:**
The Assistant Moderator must have at least basic knowledge of qualitative research methodology. A graduate student or an individual who is in a graduate level program would qualify if they have completed course work in either Qualitative Research, Focus Groups, Basic Research Design or a similar class.

**Contact:**
Please telephone Barbara Gunning at (419) 877-2542 or (419) 213-3343 if you would like additional information, or if you would like to assist in this project.