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Sarah N. Heiss and Heather J. Carmack

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**Sarah N. Heiss¹ and
Heather J. Carmack²**

Abstract

The entry of new members into an organization can be a time of uncertainty and creativity for both newcomers and veterans. This study explored how humor communication was used by members of a human service organization to negotiate the entry of newcomers. Humor was frequently utilized by all members to manage stress and uncertainty while making sense of job expectations, organizational culture, and organizational affiliations. Additionally, many members marked moments of identification with the organization through their ability to use and interpret humor in the organization successfully. Together, newcomers and veterans used humor to co-construct the organizational norms and expectations.

Keywords

organizational entrance, organizational sense making, humor, socialization

From a communicative standpoint, humor is understood to have a variety of uses and functions within organizations. Humor is used by organizational members to negotiate paradoxes of power, structure, agency, or identity

¹University of Vermont, Burlington, VT, USA

²Missouri State University, Springfield, MO, USA

Corresponding Author:

Heather J. Carmack, 901 S. National Ave, Springfield, MO 65897, USA

Email: HeatherCarmack@MissouriState.edu

(Martin, 2004); to facilitate organizational identification and sense making (Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006); to build group cohesiveness (Greatbatch & Clark, 2003); and to manage emotional tension (Shuler & Sypher, 2000). Communication scholars have explored how different organizational members experience humor, ranging from how women negotiate middle management (Martin, 2004) to how workers use humor to deal with the stresses of the workplace (Lynch, 2009; Tracy et al., 2006). These studies demonstrate how humor facilitates the construction and reproduction of organizational culture and identities within a variety of contexts.

Martin (2004) claimed that a communicative exploration of humor could “offer rich potential for understanding everyday experiences in organizational life” (p. 151). Communicative frameworks position humor as a socially negotiated process and product within organizations. However, Lynch (2002) argued that many studies of humorous communication contribute to psychological or managerial theories and, as such, lack a discussion of the interactions between individuals’ motivations and organizational function. In the current study, we situate humor as a communicative event that plays “a role in how discursive meanings are articulated and contested at work, and individuals create and display parts of their organizational identities through humorous performances” (Lynch & Schaefer, 2008, p. 516).

While research has demonstrated that humor contributes to organizational socialization (for review see Lynch, 2002), scholars have not yet explored humor in relation to experiences related to the entry stage of organizational assimilation. Jablin (1987, 2001) referred to individuals’ initial interactions with an organization as the entry phase of assimilation. During this time, people learn about organizational norms, routines, values, and role expectations. It is important to look at humor within this context because the changes related to the assimilation of newcomers can be a particularly uncertain and anxious time for all organizational members. It is possible that humor can be used to negotiate this uncertainty. Further, it is valuable to study humor during times of organizational entry because interpretations of humor require a mutual understanding built on common backgrounds or shared histories (Francis, 1994), which organizational newcomers and veterans are unlikely to possess.

In the current study, we seek to address these gaps in the literature by exploring organizational life as it is co-constructed through humorous discourse. More specifically, we explore how members use and make sense of humor to negotiate and navigate experiences related to organizational entry. We begin with a discussion of how organizational newcomers use humor to make sense of organizational life. After discussing our qualitative methods,

we explore the ways in which both newcomers and veterans use humor to traverse the uncertain terrain of organizational entry. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study, focusing on the nuanced ways in which humor helps and hinders how organizational members make sense of changes accompanying the hiring of new workers.

Humor and Organizational Sense Making

Ambiguity, uncertainty, and disruption are mainstays of organizational life (Weick, 1979): “Change rather than stability is the rule of any organization, and this means that people continually live within streams of ongoing events” (p. 117). The fluid and everchanging nature of organizations calls for members continually to make sense of their work environment. In order to “structure the unknown,” organizational members must coordinate their senses of appropriate behavior and meaning, ideally achieving a shared understanding (Weick, 1995). The hiring of new organizational members is a form of organizational change that brings challenges for both the new and veteran members of the organization. Making sense of organizational life requires organizational members to follow a sense-making “recipe”; they must enact, interpret, and maintain the rules, behaviors, and beliefs of the organization. Newcomers are asked to learn and enact the rules and processes of the organization. Likewise, veterans must simultaneously teach newcomers the rules and processes *and* relearn the rules and processes that might have changed with the entrance of the newcomers. Newcomers and veterans often rely on different communication strategies, such as telling organizational stories or using humor, to reduce equivocality and (re)create “common sense” meanings for both groups.

Entering the Organization

Organizations are socially created and performed through the communicative interactions between members (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). Rather than a fixed set of beliefs shared by all organizational members, an organization’s culture is better understood as being constantly interpreted and reproduced in social relations. Organizational assimilation is concerned with the social processes by which individuals become integrated into and exit from the culture of an organization (Jablin, 1987, 2001). The first phase, anticipatory socialization, includes experiences that help develop an individual’s vocational interests, skills, and organizational knowledge prior to entering a group. Second, the entrance phase is concerned with the initial experiences

that help shape a newcomer's understanding of the organization's culture and his or her role. In the metamorphosis phase, a member begins to individualize his or her role and gains an understanding of organizationally "appropriate" attitudes and behaviors (Jablin, 1987). Finally, the assimilation process ends when an individual disengages or exits his or her role. It is important to note that different persons can move through these four phases at different rates, and the theory does not assume linearity (Jablin, 2001). For example, one newcomer might take months in the entry stage of assimilation before feeling he or she has an adequate understanding of the position and the organization's norms and expectations. For another newcomer in the same organization, the process might take only a matter of weeks. Additionally, the assimilation process is continuous because organizations are constantly changing due to fluctuations in membership, outside influences, technologies, and policies. At any time, members might feel as though they have reverted back to the entrance phase, having to learn new information or adjust to changes in the organization's structure.

In addition to learning the tasks required of the position, the successful entry of newcomers is critical because during this time, newcomers learn information that will eventually seem mundane (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), including ways to address others (Morand, 1996), the uses and functions of humor (Meyer, 1997), and formal and informal rules of communication (Gilsdorf, 1997). People acquire this information through intentional or unintentional organizational endeavors to socialize the newcomer and employee information seeking (Jablin, 2001). Orientation programs, employee handbooks, videotapes, and mentoring systems are some of the formal communications thought to help socialize new employees (Jablin, 2001). Although almost all organizations have some sort of formal orientation to the job, the length of time an organization spends formally training newcomers can vary (Jerris, 1993).

While organizations have formal orientation activities, members also interact informally to exchange information. Newcomers can seek information through observation or explicit questioning. Besides learning about the organizational culture, power structure, history, and job duties, coworkers communicate information not related to work, such as interests, goals, and families, which can provide newcomers with psychosocial support and reduce veterans' uncertainty regarding newcomer entry (Jablin, 2001). Because the collective nature of an organization is affected by newcomers, the process of entering into a new organization is usually one of surprise and uncertainty for both newcomers and veterans (Louis, 1980). Organizational members must

find ways of managing uncertainty and stabilizing change. Humorous communication is one way to reach these goals.

Humorous Communication and Organizing

We approach humor as an interactive, discursive practice that shapes and is shaped by everyday organizational life (Lynch & Schaefer, 2008; Tracy et al., 2006). Although commonly associated with laughter, humor is more than communicative events that happen to be amusing (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Humorous discourse is also a “communicative process that constructs new shared meaning out of ambiguity” (Lynch, 2002, p. 443). With humor, “organizational members can frame and enact their situation, select a preferred interpretation, and then affirm and retain the reorganization through memorable laughter” (Tracy et al., 2006, p. 301). From this standpoint, humor is understood as discursive moments that serve to identify and make sense of the ambiguities and paradoxes associated with organizational life (Lynch, 2002, 2009).

While humor can punctuate instances of paradox, it is also often deliberately ambiguous itself (Collinson, 2002). For example, jokes, puns, sarcasm, stories, fantasies, and spontaneous humor are rarely intended to have only a single meaning; instead, they have multiple meanings and limit preferred interpretations to particular audiences. Although multiple interpretations can arise from any communicative event, even greater distortions occur in the context of ambiguous communication (Eisenberg, 1984). While ambiguity is typically situated as problematic because shared meanings are not attained, Eisenberg (1984) argued that there are many reasons why one might want to be ambiguous and, in these cases, a lack of clarity would be considered competent. Ambiguity provides space for organizations to promote unified diversity, facilitate change, and reify power structures. Indeed, humor contributes to the negotiation of power, affiliation, and sense making in organizations (Lynch, 2002, 2009).

As a rhetorical device, humor can help members make sense of organizational life (Morreall, 1983; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Humor can mark random, ironic, incongruent aspects of organizational life and makes sense of these moments by playing with the intersection between “the normal, expected, real situation and the abnormal, unexpected, and often contrasting paradoxes of organizational life” (Deetz, 2005, p. 204). Tracy et al. (2006) found that 911 operators, firefighters, and correctional officers used humor to develop positive interpretation of incongruent or emotionally laden situations.

These interpretations helped members make sense of the current experience and provided common grounds for enacting their roles in similar future events. Deetz (2005) summarized for researchers that “good humor smiles at the human contradictions, the mistakes, and the best plans gone astray” (p. 103).

In this study, Deetz’s description of “good humor” was extended to all organizational members.

Using jokes to develop a shared understanding of the incongruence, however, can potentially lead to more confusion because jokes can have multiple interpretations or encompass information an outsider might not understand (Tracey et al., 2006). Conversely, humor can aid individuals in seeking information or providing feedback because its ambiguity curtails negative interpersonal effects (Grugulis, 2002; Rogan & Hammer, 1994). Regardless of motivation, the interpretation of humor affects organizational members’ shared understandings and symbolic systems of meaning.

In addition to contributing to the construction of shared interpretations of organizational life, humor is used to negotiate power structures and affiliation (Morreall, 1983). Individuals can use humor to demonstrate their beliefs about the power dynamics in the relationship or organization (Gruner, 1978; Morreall, 1983). LaFave (1972) found that organizational members target humor toward others lower in status so as to demonstrate their superiority. Humor can also be used to identify undesirable behavior (Meyer, 1997). The humor ascribed to a newcomer’s folly can be indicative of veterans’ perceptions of the newcomer’s inferiority (Duncan, 1985). When hearers laugh at a joke about the folly, they demonstrate mutual feelings of superiority. Organizational members use humor to assert control while teaching a lesson, maintaining norms, and resisting change (Janes & Olsen, 2000; Lynch, 2009; Martineau, 1972). For example, Lynch (2009) found that food service professionals used humor in attempts to control new workers during training. These communication patterns shaped newcomer’s perceptions of the kitchen environment and empowered veterans because it reaffirmed their professional norms. Similarly, Meyer (1997) revealed that humor provided a means of acknowledging disagreements, which helped to maintain or save the face(s) of the interactants.

While humor can be used to exert control, it can also be used to resist the status quo. Humor can identify a need for and elicit change because it helps individuals to reframe, imagine, and discuss alternative possibilities (Weick & Westley, 1996). Tracy (2000) found that cruise ship employees used humor to demonstrate a shared dislike for organizational policies concerning emotional labor. Through humor, the employees denied submission to management and were able to manage their emotions regarding policies that required

them to engage in emotional labor; however, this discourse had little change on the organizational policies. Another means of resisting dominance during humorous interactions is not to acknowledge another's communication as humorous. Martin (2004) found that women in middle management ignored jokes made at their expense by males. By refusing to acknowledge the efforts at humor, women reframed the discourse as not funny and established that humor was not an acceptable means of expressing disrespect.

As humorous discourses make sense of incongruencies and power structures, they simultaneously navigate issues of affiliation and unity. Because humor is ambiguous, its meanings and sense-making capabilities require some amount of shared knowledge or history. As a result, humor can serve as a basis for bonding and setting boundaries. Humor can differentiate newcomers from veterans within organizations (Collinson, 1988) and contribute to greater feelings of group cohesiveness, bonding, and identification among veterans (Lynch, 2009; Meyer, 1997; Pogrebin & Poole, 1988). Organizational members develop a feeling of affiliation once they attribute a shared symbolic meaning to their work (Lynch, 2009; Meyer, 1997). Working together provides space and experiences for humorous discourse to emerge and for groups to further develop. Those not privy to a group's shared understandings are not able to participate in its development.

Humorous discourses "do not merely reflect organizational structures and member intentions, but serve to fundamentally constitute the organizing process and the construction of member identities" (Tracy et al., 2006, p. 287). The extant literature suggests that humor plays multiple roles in how individuals make sense of organizational life through the navigation of incongruities and the negotiation of power structures and affiliation. However, Holmes and Marra (2002) argued that "each workplace has its own distinctive mix of features. Each workplace team creates its own particular combination from the discursive resources available, within the parameters acceptable at that workplace" (p. 1707). It is, then, useful to conduct more research on humor and organizational experiences.

The previous research on humorous communication tended to focus on specific organizational members or certain types of organizations; by extension, we argue that the study of humor used during certain organizational experiences, such as organizational entrance, offers a glimpse into everyday organizational life and allows researchers to continue to explore how multiple organizational members negotiate ambiguity and uncertainty. In order to examine the ways in which humor helps or hinders sense making during organizational entrance, this study is guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do organizational newcomers make sense of and use humor during organizational entrance?

Research Question 2: How do organizational veterans make sense of and use humor during organizational entrance?

Method

We utilize interpretive sensibilities and qualitative methodologies in order to explore the ways in which new and experienced organizational members use and make sense of humor during organizational entrance. Interpretive standpoints are particularly salient to this study as they provide researchers with a lens through which to explore meaningful social action and interrogate the meaning behind the action (Schwandt, 2005). In this study, we seek to capture organizational members' experiences through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Data collection began once the first author received IRB approval.

Organizational Context

This study began as an examination of communication in service-based organizations, with the first author examining the communication experiences at the Vocational Counseling Center (VCC). Serving students, alumni, faculty, and staff at a large Midwestern university, the VCC provides basic vocational resources, skills training, interview opportunities, and counseling. The VCC also assists employers with their human resources and college relations needs.

The VCC employs 13 employees: a director, an office manager, three career counselors, four office assistants, and four interns. The director, office manager, career counselors, and office assistants are full-time employees, while the interns work at the VCC part-time. Because of the variety of services provided by the VCC, the VCC director and career counselors are in charge of coordinating career workshops and job fairs and counseling students on job employment, while the office manager and office assistants are in charge of coordinating job interviews, processing résumés, maintaining job and internship opportunities, and performing other office functions. The interns meet with students, teach workshops, and assist the career counselors.

The office space occupied by the organization is divided into three main areas: a reception area, a "common" area, and an interview area. One employee is seated in the reception area, off of which are two long hallways. At the end of one hall is a "common" area. Six of the staff members have desks in that

common area. These desks face the walls and are separated by filing cabinets. Although they are in one room, the arrangement of the room means that to converse at a normal volume individuals have to walk to each other's desk. Despite the number of people sharing the area, the space does not seem congested because the part-time interns who occupy four of the six desks are often away from their desks. The director and career counselors have private offices adjoining this area. The second hallway stemming from the reception area is lined with interview rooms. There is an office at the end of this hall for an assistant who manages on-campus interviews. Due to the spatial arrangement, staff members tend to keep to themselves; however, throughout the day, workers will sporadically gather in the common area and have conversations.

The events surrounding organizational entry became relevant to the study because, while observing the organization, the first author witnessed the events that surrounded the turnover of a position. The receptionist exited the organization and a temporary receptionist was hired. Additionally, 6 of the other 12 employees had been in the organization for less than 18 months. Many of the memories associated with entry phase experiences were fresh for the newcomers and the veterans.

Data Collection Procedures

Participant observations. Observations across various times, groups, and locations are productive techniques and provide a useful method for learning about the many enactments of organizational values and norms (Hirschmann, 1999). After obtaining permission from the director and employees, the first author observed the office for 2-hour periods three times a week for 8 weeks and volunteered at a career fair for 10 hours, resulting in 58 hours of observation. The first author observed in all three office areas, often sitting at an absent employee's desk or in a seat designated for clients. Occasionally, the observations became participatory in nature as the first author would assist in filing papers, participate in brainstorming sessions for events, attend organizational parties, or work at the career fair.

During these interactions, the first author observed employees speaking with clients as well as with each other. In addition to observing daily activities, the first author also observed weekly staff meetings, which Consalvo (1989) believed are productive sites of humor investigation because employees are gathered and humor often arises through these moments of reflection and problem solving. When the first author witnessed events she felt were forceful or reoccurring, such as issues related to informative exchanges or joke telling, she would ask informants to make sense of the situation. Scratch

notes recorded in the field were elaborated on immediately following observation sessions, resulting in 75 handwritten pages of theoretical field notes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Semistructured interviews. Individual interviews served as a secondary source of data collection. After 2 months in the field, the first author reviewed the field notes and found humorous acts associated with organizational entrance to be a recurring pattern. A tentative interview protocol was developed to explore these patterns. The protocol included inquiries about personal entry experiences, interactions with newcomers, the role of humor in the office, and interpretations of specific observations involving humor and organizational entrance (see appendix for protocol).

Because the interview situation is a fluid, co-constructed interaction (Heyl, 2001), the first author allowed the dialogue to emerge and shift from the original open-ended questions. Of the 13 VCC employees, eight individuals were interviewed: the VCC director (Barry), two career counselors (Eric and Susan), the office manager (Jackie), two office assistants (Janet and Michelle), and two interns (Ryan and Nikki). Interviews were conducted in the private rooms in the VCC and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were transcribed, resulting in 103 pages of data. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the organization and the participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

To identify recurring themes, a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 1983) was used to analyze the field observations and interviews, starting with data reduction and interpretation. This method utilizes simultaneous comparison of all social incidents as they are observed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first stage of this method calls for assigning data-text incidents to categories. Initially determining which events were humorous for organizational members was difficult because it requires historical and relational knowledge not immediately available to the researchers (Francis, 1994). The first author relied on Lynch's (2002) operationalization of humor as communicative acts that elicit laughter and smirks from participants to identify patterns in the field notes. The operational definition of humorous events was extended also to include situations the members labeled as humorous in the interviews.

The first author read and reread transcripts and field notes in their entirety to develop a sense of the discourse as a whole. Multiple readings of transcripts and field notes were completed to ensure that identified themes were grounded in the data. This process continued until readings ceased to bring

new categories to light. Representative or significant comments and field observations are showcased in the analysis to support the emergent themes (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001).

Analysis

The hiring and integrating of new organizational members intensifies the activity of organizational sense making, requiring both old and new organizational members to address organizational values, beliefs, and traditions (Weick, 2001). During organizational entry, newcomers and veterans are engaged in the processes of (re)learning, teaching, and enacting organizational rules and expectations. Humor emerged as a primary communication strategy used by both newcomers and veterans during organizational entry to teach and make sense of the VCC's rules and expectations. Veterans and newcomers used humor to communicate (1) job expectations, (2) organizational culture, and (3) organizational affiliation.

Humor to Communicate Job Expectations

When a person enters a new workplace there are many things to learn, including the expectations surrounding job duties. Learning can take place through formal or informal communication between newcomers and veterans (Jablin, 2001). Employees described receiving different amounts of formal job training. The classified staff members who fulfill most of the administrative functions of the organization claimed to have received most of their training from their predecessor. They also had written job manuals that explain the appropriate procedures for each of their job responsibilities. However, the counselors and interns described receiving very limited formal job training. Eric, a counselor who had been with the VCC for approximately 1 year, said, "Most of us either went to school or already had a job like this. It's assumed that we know how to help and we are given the space from the very beginning to do things our way." Members commonly attributed the lack of job description and/or training to the organization's respect for the newcomer's anticipatory socialization and training (Jablin, 2001).

Without formal training, newcomers and veterans both expressed not only the need to share information but also the associated stress of doing so. Both groups mentioned using humor to negotiate expectations without conflict and to manage stress levels. For example, Barry, the director of the VCC for approximately 10 years, said, "Teasing is a way to say 'you're doing something wrong' without just saying it. This is a polite office—very, very polite

office.” For example, explaining group efforts to train the new receptionist, Jackie, who had served as the office manager for approximately 3 years, said, “I’ve heard people joke [with] her to let her know what she was doing wasn’t appropriate—to tell her that’s not how *we* do it here.” When asked if she thought this was the best way to change the behaviors, she replied, “Perhaps a more assertive, informative piece would be more effective, but she’s new and we’re stressed. It’s better not to get in someone’s face too soon.”

Although many participants thought humor was not always the best way to communicate information, it was used frequently because it was an indirect expression of frustration, disappointment, and/or instruction—a less aggressive and more socially acceptable approach (Gruner, 1978). Indeed, Nikki, an intern with the VCC for 2 months, described the dissonance she felt due to the use of humor to instruct: “I could tell they were joking about what they wanted, but sometimes I didn’t know what they wanted. I could have done it better, if they would have just straight-forward told me.” While the newcomer recognized the intentions of the veterans, she also acknowledged her difficulty in interpreting the messages. The ambiguity of their humor protected her feelings because she did not feel judged; however, since she recognized her inability to interpret their messages, humor actually increased her uncertainty.

While humor was used by veterans to teach lessons, newcomers used humor to elicit information and negotiate their roles during times of uncertainty. Many counselors and interns described their uncertainty during entrance experiences as the result of the office atmosphere. Because the office has an extremely large client base, employees were very busy. Many new employees perceived their colleagues as being approachable, yet overwhelmed. Newcomers feared asking others to take on tasks beyond their traditional job duties. For example, it was not uncommon for newcomers to ask the first author if she had observed how others accessed needed documents or programs before going to other employees for help. Susan, a career counselor with the VCC for 1 year, described her experiences and feelings while learning her job expectations on her own:

When I came they were just thankful they didn’t have to pick up the slack anymore, so they left me to do it. If I didn’t get it, I just had to ask. I would try to make my question seem really common . . . joking . . . didn’t feel so incompetent or . . . bothersome.

Susan’s experience reflects not only an additional reason for the lack of formal training, the busy atmosphere, but also the uncertainty employees felt

as they sought informal sources of information. By joking, she could deflect feelings of being a burden and concerns that she would expose weaknesses.

In addition to newcomers describing anxiety and uncertainty during the entry phase, veterans described feeling stress as the result of informal interactions with new employees. Jackie described the emotions during transitions in membership as sad and stressful:

The previous receptionist had been in the office for . . . I think three years—quite a while. Without her, things aren't getting done the way we like. We don't want to have to tell someone how to do a good job, but we have to if we want her back.

Speaking figuratively, this person wanted the old employee back. She felt distressed because she missed the old employee's way of completing her job. However, she also acknowledged that if she ever wanted the group and job expectations to be similar to how it was prior to the departure of the old receptionist, it was up to her to teach the new employee skills. Veteran employees did not want the organization to change; rather, they desired stability through reformation of the newcomer. They hoped the organizational expectations and climate could be restored if they addressed the inconsistencies, often doing so through humorous communication.

Veterans engaged in emotional work to avoid hurting the newcomer's feelings and esteem because they were able to relate to the experience of the newcomer. The ability to empathize with newcomers can be reflected in a veteran's ability to recall easily his or her experiences as a newcomer, regardless of how long she or he had been part of the organization. Leah, an intern with the VCC for 2 months, said, "I've been there. I know how it feels. My supervisor was so mean to me because I didn't know how to fax. No one wants that day one. Just laugh about mishaps." Leah had clearly been affected by an aggressive reprimand early in her work experience. Now she is more sensitive to mistakes and uses humor to make light of them. Other employees mentioned that, with so many new people in the office, if they did not laugh when things went wrong, everyone would be stressed all day. For example, when in private settings during the career fair, the employees joked with each other about the *ridiculous* requests they received during the day, the unprofessional attire of job seekers, or how tired they were from having to start work at 5:00 a.m. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) suggested that this type of behavior establishes an environment where ideas are shared and relationships can form. The VCC employees are able to connect both through the jokes and the experience of working together.

Humor to Communicate Organizational Culture

Understanding organizational culture requires knowledge of organizational values, rules, and philosophies. Newcomers are typically not privy to that information and often have a hard time obtaining the needed information because such knowledge is commonly taken for granted by those who have been involved with the organization for a long time. Similar to learning job expectations, gaining knowledge of organizational culture requires interaction and observation. Employees said that most learning happens in the informal exchanges between members. These interactions can be intentional or unintentional. For example, Tracey, a career counselor with the VCC for 3 years, recalled how the events of her socialization affect how she mentors newcomers,

No one told me that there was a dress code. One day I wore a hat. And my supervisors whispered . . . “take the hat off”—how embarrassing! The next week “stop wearing jeans.” I was new! The other day someone wore jeans. I said “hey let’s get coffee.” Then downstairs [at the coffee shop] I joked about how “professional” we like to think we are up here and had a laugh about how ridiculous my story was. I never said “don’t do that!” That way she didn’t have to feel like crap, you know? It was not our fault; it’s theirs.

Remembering the embarrassment associated with more direct approaches to discipline, Tracey decided to spare the newcomer a similarly emotional situation by sharing a humorous story that was also instructional (Nelson & Campbell Quick, 1991). By reframing the instruction, she engaged in self-promoting humor as she framed “them” as bad and herself as the once “victim” and now “humanitarian.” Her story also warned the newcomer of “unspoken office rules” and the dangers of breaking those rules.

Humor used during staff meetings often made fun of deviants to teach and reinforce unspoken rules (Janes & Olsen, 2000; Martineau, 1972). Cultural lessons concerned respect for time, dealing with workplace stress, and managing tasks. The joking behaviors of individuals when people were late to staff meetings were a recurring theme in the field notes. For instance, shortly before one such meeting was set to begin, three people were missing. To address their absence, Janet, an office assistant with the VCC for 15 years, said, “I didn’t know we could take lunch break during these things. Where is everyone?” A couple of people snickered. “Put lunch on our calendars for next week,” one employee then proclaimed. Interview participants were asked

to recall and make sense of this particular event and similar ones from the field notes to gain insight on their interpretations of the acts. Janet, the employee who voiced the aforementioned comment, said, "I say things like that because it is kinda wishful thinking . . . I'll take lunch over work any-time, right? I have to say something because I know everyone is thinking 'hey I have other things to do too.' Everyone should be here." Janet viewed her comments as reaffirming the cultural expectations that time should be respected and shared time commitments should be participated in equally.

From the opposite side of the situation, in an informal interview, Tracey, a regularly tardy veteran, explained the events that surround coming into a meeting late: "When you're late, some people will smile real big. Some even say 'glad you made it!' No one is really glad you're late. No one is smirking because you're so funny . . . they're making a point." Similarly, Leah, an intern, explained that she was often a few minutes late to staff meetings because she had class, but even so, coworkers would tease, "You have the slowest coffee maker in the city." These discursive rituals let employees know that their tardiness did not go unnoticed. Additionally, these rituals reify the organizational values for veterans. For example, multiple employees said that these rituals were helpful because they were too busy to delay meetings. However, they also said that they did not like jokes as a form of reprimand when they were late themselves.

Although employees experience stress associated with serving clients, it is assumed that they will conduct themselves in ways that do not reveal their true emotions. This expectation was an apparently unspoken rule because, Susan, a career counselor, said, "No one says be nice and not get frustrated. We're professionals; we already know it." While it might be assumed that employees should know how to act professionally, lessons are still informally taught through humorous stories. Concerning emotional work, Jackie, the veteran office manager, said that "to cope after stressful interactions, sometimes people have to joke not to cry. But when they do, we all know—wow . . . we learn from their mistakes . . . we just think about how we would handle the situation differently." Indeed, for weeks after the career fair, which was Susan's first time directing the event, members praised Susan for what she did well and talked about areas for improvement. Both praise and constructive criticism were cushioned by humor. For example, at a staff meeting, people laughed about how embarrassed they were by some of their job seekers' casual or sexy attire and vowed to conduct professional-dress workshops before the next career fair. Not only does humorous storytelling serve as a release of tension for those involved but it is also interpreted as a significant learning lesson by those who listen.

Humor to Communicate Organizational Affiliation

In addition to learning about their job duties and culture, for newcomers to have a successful integration into the group, they must also identify with the organization and form relationships. This process is inherently ambiguous. Organizational members use humor to negotiate the ambiguity associated with identification and differentiation. Though employees are linked through their work, they have very diverse backgrounds. During interviews, employees mentioned the need to be politically correct because their workplace is comprised of a variety of races, genders, ages, religions, and sexual orientations. The group's diversity was perceived by many as a barrier to initial identification with the organization. Eric, a career counselor, said, "We're diverse, but we spend most of our time here, so it's important that we get along. That's why humor is so important; I guess . . . if everyone can laugh at the same time, we have something in common." Humor joined organizational members who have a shared history or knowledge of culture, but newcomers are often not privy to this information. Humor was used by veterans to emphasize both newcomer inclusion in and exclusion from the group. Simultaneously, newcomers had to interpret the humor in order to determine their relational roles.

When a new person entered the organization, he or she was welcomed, but met with hesitation from the group for many reasons, such as resistance to change, loyalty to the employee who exited, or the simple fact that the new person was a stranger. The first step to entering the organization is a successful interview. Interviewing with the VCC is a daylong process that includes interviews with each group member. The employees took pride in this tradition because it represented their voice in the hiring process. Janet, an administrative assistant, explained, "It's our way of saying who we want to work with . . . For me, if they ain't funny, I'm going to say no." Evaluating humor during interviews serves a gatekeeping function, but this process continues after a member is brought into the group (Romero & Cruthird, 2006). Efforts are also made by veterans to maintain their solidarity before they let the newcomer feel as though they are accepted. Jackie, the office manager, described an instance when humor was used to alienate a newcomer:

Sometimes we talked about funny stories from before they [newcomers] got here. Then they told a joke about it. We got all protective and told them "no, that's not your story to joke about." They weren't here for it, why should they get to joke it up?

As this example illustrates, jokes serve to increase the cohesiveness of those who have the shared history and differentiate those who do not.

Jackie also described how humor was used against her when she entered the VCC because, she believed, veterans feared for the organization's best interests. Since all members participate in hiring decisions, everyone knew that she had negotiated for a higher salary. Jackie recounted how humor was used to communicate members' dissatisfaction with her pay rate:

One day we were talking about how if all the new hires had negotiated their pay they could have been paid differently for the same job. I said, "You have nothing to lose. I did it." She said, "Well you made too much to start with. Definitely couldn't hurt you." Then I didn't say anything; didn't laugh; that's for sure. She was already upset. She knew I didn't think it was funny . . . then, I guess everyone else figured it out soon.

In this instance, the veteran used sarcastic humor to communicate her displeasure with the newcomer's decisions and her connection to the group. Jackie interpreted this event as meaning, "I wasn't wanted here, and I wasn't worth my pay." Serving to alienate Jackie from the group, this transaction appeared to promote feelings of superiority for the veteran and perpetuate the distance between the newcomer and the organization. Jackie did not laugh, though, so accordingly, the veteran was stripped of power or superiority because the joke was not fulfilled. The newcomer held the power and affected the group through her resistance.

Humor was also used by newcomers and veterans to increase their own organizational affiliation. Many participants marked their contribution and role in the group by the reception of their humor. Ryan, an intern for 2 months, said,

I will say one-liners. I can sit there and be quiet for twenty minutes then spout out a *zinger*. Someone said, "I just love being around you because you are so random. I never know what you are going to say." People in the office like me because I am random.

This employee viewed his status within the group by their response to his humor. Not only did members laugh at the "zingers," but they also told him about their appreciation of his personality. In this context, humor is seen as a skill—one that would be desirable to newcomers looking for a way to join the group. Michelle, the temporary receptionist, described how she used humor to gain recognition:

I saw this super funny *youtube* video. So I said, “hey, come look at this.” Then we watched it, and she died laughing. She came back with four other people. There we were. All laughing at this video I had found. Then we all went to lunch together. I think it’s because now they think I’m funny or something because they didn’t talk to me before.

Others within the group found the humor to be a connective experience because the positive emotional effects increased interpersonal attraction, which can be more influential in forming relationships than attitude similarity (Cann, Calhoun, & Banks, 1997). This interaction demonstrated that humor is not only a communicative skill but also a tool. Once in the organization, newcomers interpret the behaviors and communication between others to learn how to use humor to gain group acceptance and demonstrate communication competence (Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992).

In addition to learning about how to use humor appropriately, newcomers also learn how to interpret humor. Many participants described a specific humorous moment in which they *knew* they were accepted by the group. One such instance, occurring near the end of field work, involved Eric, a career counselor. After an illness, Eric called in to say that he could not return to work yet because he thought he had broken his ankle. News got around the office and the first author observed people joking about his fall: “I bet he was high from his meds and fell down the stairs.” As it turned out, this was the case. Susan recalled the motivations that led to the group’s subsequent reactions. She said, “Probably because we felt guilty [for making fun of Eric] . . . decided we had to do something other than send a card or flowers. We decided to make a door poster.” At first, the poster simply had a “welcome back” message, but then employees started to write on the poster. A variety of quotes were added to the board, including the “top ten reasons we missed you,” such as “because we miss having a blue shirt in the office everyday” and “because we miss hearing about the Colts every day.” Other items poked fun at the accident, such as “I didn’t know it was FALL yet.” Tracey explained, “We decided to put quotes on the board. All day we thought of quotes; if they were funny, we put them on the poster.”

These messages are inherently ambiguous (Lynch, 2002), so they could have been interpreted as relationship building or as further differentiation of the target person because the sentences were centered on attributes of the person. Eric described his experience upon returning to work and seeing the poster:

That was a really cool day for me. That was the first day I felt a part of the office. Not that they had given me any indication that I wasn't, but an outward expression of that really made me feel like I was part of this office. That put a big smile on my face. And I know they took shots at me, but their intentions—I interpreted it was good. I was really part of the group . . . I mean the things they mentioned on there . . . they obviously know me and something about me. Obviously, if they didn't like me, they would know those things.

Eric interpreted this event as a moment of group acceptance because he interpreted the humorous remarks on the poster as well intended and saw them as indicators of the group's knowledge about his likes and dislikes. Other members said that seeing him laugh hard at seeing the poster was a good indicator that they had told him he was special to the group. There were potential multiple interpretations to this situation, but, ultimately, humor served both as a communication tool and a skill. Through this event, all of those involved reinforced the significance of humor to communicate group-oriented messages.

Discussion

The use of humor is an inherent, albeit sometimes ignored, part of organizational life (Wieck, 1979). In this study, we explored how organizational newcomers and veterans made sense of and used humor during organizational entry. This study underscores how humor helped veterans *and* newcomers negotiate organizational entrance, focusing on the interplay between organizational members rather than any particular member or group.

We found that both newcomers and veterans used humor to make sense of job expectations, organizational culture, and organizational affiliation. Consistent with many of the communication studies that examine humor use in organizations (Lynch, 2002), both veterans and newcomers used humor to seek and give information to avoid possible negative ramifications. More importantly, this study contributes to organizational communication research about humor by highlighting how humor both enables and constrains newcomers and veterans during organizational entrance, focusing on how humor is used to relieve stress as well as on how humor serves as a way to overcome in order to "be" an organizational member.

Veterans used humor aggressively and empathetically to socialize newcomers, manage the tensions associated with entrance empathically, and

determine if newcomers could be organizational members. The entrances of newcomers were seen as a disruption to the organization's *way of doing things*. Veterans used humor in more aggressive ways to assert power, maintain cultural stability, and preserve group cohesiveness. At the VCC, aggressive humor helped veterans identify with the organization while distancing the newcomer from the group. In essence, the use of aggressive humor created a "humor gauntlet" that newcomers had to complete in order to be part of the group. While aggressive humor was not "we-oriented," its ambiguity allowed employees to avoid some of the negative consequences of addressing problems. Theoretically, this highlights how incongruity and superiority work together during organizational entrance. This is a departure from communication research, which tends to focus on either incongruity or superiority approaches to humor.

In addition to using aggressive forms of humor, veterans also used empathetic humor to save the dignity of newcomers when addressing expectancy violations (Rogan & Hammer, 1994; Tracy et al., 2006). Once newcomers were accepted by the group, they were usually met with what they deemed friendly, empathetic humor. Empathetic humor was group oriented and took the form of jokes, stories, and good-natured practical jokes. Based on their seniority, veterans taught lessons, but joking and using empathic, humorous storytelling avoided positioning themselves as superior. This increased veterans' and newcomers' organizational identification, as both groups became further aware of and connected to the organization's values and norms.

Before newcomers were accepted or felt they were accepted, they needed to learn the communicative humor rules in addition to information about the organizational culture and expectations. Employees reported different amounts of formal instruction concerning job duties, so they often had to learn through trial and error, observations, and/or asking questions. Newcomers were encouraged to ask questions. However, because organizational members were busy, newcomers often felt burdensome or incompetent. Newcomers often asked questions in a joking manner so as to make light of their lack of knowledge or reduce others' perceptions of the amount of help needed. Humor facilitated information seeking concerning organizational culture and expectations while maintaining face. Additionally, it is likely that joking about their needs actually helped them to build relationships and increase affiliation because humorous communication competency is considered socially desirable and is often met with interpersonal liking (Cann et al., 1997).

Through information seeking and observation, newcomers not only learned organizational expectations and gained group affiliation but they also developed culturally significant communication skills. As newcomers observed

humorous communication and the respective reactions (to their own and others), they gained the skills and tools needed to use humor in the organization (Gilsdorf, 1997). Identification occurred once they could competently communicate their needs and interpret the humor of others accurately within the organization. Once an individual developed adequate skills to use and interpret humor, he or she reified humor's significance and normality, soon forgetting how unnatural or ineffective the behaviors were at the time of entering the organization. Interestingly, because the VCC veterans used empathic and aggressive humor simultaneously at the beginning, newcomers may learn that aggressive and emphatic humor rather than empathic humor is the appropriate way to use humor in the organization. By using aggressive humor, veterans changed the organizational culture they were trying to control.

This study also draws attention to formal or informal organizational socialization experiences. Humorous communication emerged as a significant communicative experience at the VCC because the organization lacked formal socialization processes. While initially this finding suggests that more formal statements of job expectations would be helpful, we must also remember that humor helps organizational members craft their position within the organization (Tracy et al., 2006). Although frustrated at times, employees in this study seemed grateful for the latitude they have in crafting their position. Instead of deducing that lengthier formal training programs could reduce employees' frustrations, it might be more productive to establish work environments where individuals do not perceive asking for or giving information as risky.

There are several limitations to this study. First, we explored organizational entrance experiences in one relatively small organization situated in a larger university setting. Organizational members in larger organizations may use and make sense of humor differently. Moreover, in the case of the VCC, newcomers entered the organization at different times, whereas in some organizations, groups of newcomers enter organizations and are socialized together. How newcomers make sense of humor use during organizational entrance when they are the only newcomer may be vastly different when there are multiple newcomers to help make sense of the experience. In addition to addressing factors that influence communicative events during the entry phase, future research could also explore the use of formal and informal forms of humorous communication during other phases of organizational assimilation.

Additionally, organizational entrance is often the result of another organizational event: organizational exit. Communication researchers have been relatively silent on this experience (Brockner, 1990; Brockner et al., 2004; Cox, 1999; Cox & Kramer, 1995; Johnson, Bernhagen, Miller, & Allen,

1996), choosing instead to focus on the socialization of new employees. However, in some instances, as in the case of the VCC, veterans used humor to make sense of the newcomers as well as deal with the loss of their coworkers. Future research on humor and assimilation experiences should focus on how employees who are leaving and who are staying use humor to make sense of this organizational experience. Finally, while many organizations have written documents addressing inappropriate humor, including humor as related to sexual harassment and racism, employees develop informal rules about “appropriate” humor. While our analysis underscores how organizations create informal rules regarding humor, more research is needed that looks at these emergent rules and their use in everyday organizational discourse. The hiring and integration of new organizational members can be a trying experience, forcing veterans and newcomers to (re)consider their understandings of organizational beliefs, values, and practices. In order to master the messy terrain that is organizational life, members must learn the organizational language, behaviors, and rules, often with a smile. As evidenced at the VCC, humor helps to bind newcomers to the organization (Weick, 1979), punctuating the moments of uncertainty and ambiguity with levity and life.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

Tell me about how you wound up at the VCC.

Tell me about your daily duties at the VCC.

Probe: How did you learn about your job duties?

Beyond job duties, what do you need to know to be successful at the VCC?

Probe: How do you learn about this information?

How would you describe the interactions between new and old employees?

I have also noticed that people here like to tell jokes and laugh.

What role do you think humor plays in the culture at the VCC?

Are there any rules concerning how to use humor?

Probe: How did you learn about these rules?

Tell me a story about how old and new employees use humor with one another.

In general, do you think humor helps or hurts people at the VCC?

Probe: Can you tell me a story about how you’ve seen humor (help or hurt)?

I would like to ask you for your thoughts about a few of my observations that you were involved in. [Describe observed event. Ask for interpretation and evaluation.]

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Bios

Sarah N. Heiss (PhD, Ohio University) is an assistant professor in the Department of Community Development and Applied Economics at the University of Vermont, USA. She researches the communicative practices surrounding how the public defines, makes sense of, and manages health.

Heather J. Carmack (PhD, Ohio University) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Missouri State University, USA. She researches health organizing and organizational cultures.