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**LAUGH OUT LOUD: HOW ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE
INFLUENCES WORKPLACE HUMOUR**



**A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT FOR THE DEGREE
OF
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Abstract

Workplace humour is an important component of organisational culture and social behaviour, yet this topic is under-researched and neglected within the field of organisational studies. This thesis explores the influence of organisational culture on workplace humour enactment.

Key research objectives are to contribute empirical data regarding the influence of organisational culture on humour and to create a model that explains and connects significant aspects of humour and organisational culture. A further aim is to explore the element of formality within organisational culture and its impacts on humour enactment.

Research was undertaken in four New Zealand companies from different industries. A mixed-method approach is used and methods include: interviews; participant observation and document collection. An assessment tool was created to compare levels of formality and/or informality in the studied organisations.

Findings show that the organisational culture and levels of formality and/or informality within the culture influence humour practices through the creation of boundaries that constrain or enable humour activities. A model was created to depict the influence of organisational culture upon humour enactment. The model shows that levels of formality or informality are key cultural elements and that formality/informality levels influence the boundaries that are created for humour enactment. Specific individuals (identified as either jokers or gatekeepers) assume dichotomous roles and within these roles either challenge or constrain the humour boundaries. Organisational members perceive that humour and organisational culture have both positive and negative impacts upon workplace outcomes such as: retention; satisfaction; performance and recruitment.

Humour at work is widespread and a significant component of modern working life. Humour manifests itself within workplace culture and understanding the influence of organisational culture on humour enactment is an important facet of organisational studies.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE PREMISE



Welcome to *Laugh out loud* and I hope that you do! This is empirical, qualitative research that investigates the influence of organisational culture and levels of formality on workplace humour. However, I sincerely hope that, throughout your reading of these serious and complex phenomena you experience a laugh, chuckle, snigger or at least a wry smile.

1.1 Justification for the study

Humour is a multi-disciplinary topic that has been investigated for many years by researchers from fields such as anthropology, psychology, physiology, and linguistics (Raskin, 1985) but significantly less thoroughly by management researchers. Intuitively humour would seem to be a part of most organisational environments but the term *humour* does not even appear in the comprehensive index of *The Handbook of Organization Studies* (Clegg, Hardy, Lawrence & Nord, 2006).

This study is significant because researchers assert that although organisational humour is an important topic and a feature of organisational life (Collinson, 2002) it is under-researched (Fine & De Soucey, 2005; Johnston, Mumby & Westwood, 2007; Peluchette & Karl, 2005). In the last twenty years there has been increasing academic interest in workplace humour (Westwood & Rhodes, 2007) but more empirical research is needed into this fascinating and engaging area of organisational behaviour.

Organisations have become key affiliations in people's lives (Mintzberg, 1989; Morgan, 2006) and people enact much of their social behaviour (such as humour and fun) within these everyday settings (Collinson, 2002). Organisational culture is well-researched by management scholars, particularly from the nineteen-eighties onwards (Martin, Frost & O'Neill, 2006) and research around this time emphasised the association between strong

cultures and performance and this made it a popular concept with managers (Martin et al., 2006). The organisational culture concept holds a respected position within organisational studies as its roots came from attempts to understand successful organisational practices (Clegg et al., 2006). However, organisational culture is difficult to define and there are many disagreements among scholars about the fundamental issues in organisational culture (Martin et al., 2006). Organisations have been described as *minisocieties* that have their own culture (Morgan, 2006) and studying organisational culture offers a way of understanding the complex nature of social reality that influences the way in which people behave at work (Alvesson & Berg, 1992).

Organisational culture is a complex and comprehensive area of research. It is concerned with workplace experiences and people's behaviour (Alvesson & Berg, 1992), yet very few studies even mention humour as an element of this concept that has a key focus on people and their work-related behaviour (Linstead, 1985). Both humour and organisational culture are multifaceted, ambiguous and create argument and dissension among researchers (Martin, Frost & O'Neill, 2006; Smircich, 1983). Although both topics are well-researched individually and seem to offer important implications for workplace behaviour, very few researchers have investigated both simultaneously. Humour is a part of every culture (Berger, 1997) and reflects the values and assumptions of that culture. Therefore, in order to truly understand the culture in an organisation, one must investigate key cultural components such as shared humour and joking patterns (Barsoux, 1996; Fine & De Soucey, 2005).

Humour is highly related to the context in which it occurs (Chapman & Foot, 1976; Wilson, 1979) and offers insights into workplace behaviour and communication (Barsoux, 1993). Humour is an essential element of workplace culture and every organisation includes different amounts and types of humour (Holmes, 2007). The common sense and popular assumption is that using humour is positive and constructive (Billig, 2005) and this assumption has been extended into managerial perspectives that suggest that humour must be created, fostered and cultivated in the workplace. Such assumptions are not well supported by empirical research. However, some recent studies have investigated the concept of *fun cultures* and asked whether these are a useful and a

desirable facet of modern organisations (Fleming 2005; Warren & Fineman, 2007). These studies question the popular assumption that creating and offering humour at work is a useful tool that managers can use to influence organisational culture and organisational outcomes such as performance and satisfaction.

There is dissension between researchers who highlight that humour is erroneously assumed to be overwhelmingly positive (Billig, 2005; Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990) and those who believe that humour can be used as a tool to achieve positive organisational objectives (Arthur, 2001; Barsoux, 1996; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Such dissension highlights the complexity of humour and justifies an investigation into workplace humour and its relationship with the behavioural aspect of working life encapsulated by the organisational culture concept.

1.2 Origins of the study

Humour is important to me and it seems that it is important to most people. I came to study humour via a variety of influences gained from school, work, television and university study. From a childish but impassioned high-school assignment on humour; to a humourless job where laughter was expressly forbidden, and from watching the British television comedy *The Office* (Gervais & Merchant, 2002), I developed a passion for understanding the influences and impacts of humour, and in particular humour at work. I have experience in humour research and completed research that investigated the functions of humour in the workplace and identified many aspects of workplace humour worthy of further research (Plester, 2003).

My prior research into the functions of humour at work (Plester, 2003) identified several research questions related to workplace humour. Key among these was the question about the relationship between humour and organisational culture. As well as wanting to understand the humour/culture relationship, I was interested in managerial implications of the relationship and therefore questioned whether humour and organisational culture influenced the important workplace outcomes of performance, satisfaction, retention and recruitment. This research is positioned in the overlap between the two concepts where there is very little research. This research gap offered an opportunity to contribute to the

two complex theoretical fields of humour and organisational culture by investigating the relationship between them and examining links to workplace outcomes such as performance, satisfaction and recruitment.

1.3 Research objectives

This is an exploratory research project and the primary research question asks: *How does organisational culture influence the enactment of workplace humour?* When designing the research project it was predicted that exploring this research question would offer interesting insights into facets of organisational culture, formality, workplace humour and the relationship between these phenomena. This project was supported by research from the theoretical fields of: organisational studies, organisational culture and humour. The organisational culture concept was explored using a theoretical framework from Edgar Schein (1985, 2004) that considers the concept of organisational culture from three interconnected levels. The cultural element of formality and/or informality was investigated using bureaucracy literature and models. Humour research has philosophical origins dating back to Aristotle, Socrates and Hobbes but more recently has been summarised in three theoretical clusters that offer different explanations for why we laugh. This research specifically investigates the influence of organisational culture on workplace humour enactment. Key cultural elements such as levels of organisational formality are considered and the implications that these influences have upon people and their workplace behaviour are investigated.

The literature highlighted that research was needed in real organisational settings (Allen, Reid & Riemenschneider, 2004) and that real interactions should be observed and recorded (Avolio, Howell & Sosik, 1999). In acknowledgment of this imperative, this research project was undertaken within real organisations and real humour interactions were recorded and analysed. A variety of methods were used to offer a rich, contextual depiction of the humour/culture relationship and how it influences behaviour and is linked to workplace outcomes.

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To investigate the influence that organisational culture has upon workplace humour as this is an under-researched area of organisational studies.
2. To create a model that explains and connects significant elements of organisational culture to the enactment of workplace humour.
3. To compare different types of company by assessing levels of formality and/or informality within the organisational culture and to consider the influence of these formality levels on humour enactment.

A key research goal was to develop a model that explained how organisational culture influences workplace humour enactment. When examining the literature, it appeared that organisational studies was a complex research area with ‘competing authorities’ (Westwood & Clegg, 2003, p.1) and that organisations could be viewed in different ways and from many different perspectives. In order to address this complexity the organisations in the study were investigated from an interpretive position that examined facets of the organisational culture concept that considered the organisation as a social entity and investigated descriptions of organisational life. This perspective considered how organisational members constructed and made sense of their organisation. Arising from an examination of bureaucracy literature (Weber, 1947) organisational processes were investigated and assessed in relation to degrees of formality or informality.

Investigating these complex phenomena required several research methods to fully explore the research question. Research methods were determined by the research question and also influenced by my previous research experiences and abilities. This resulted in a mixed-method research project that aimed to fully explore the complex facets of humour, organisational culture and formality levels in a rich and meaningful way that considered interpretations of humour and the influence of organisational culture.

An assessment tool was used to compare a range of different companies using levels of formality and/or informality as a basis for comparison. Assessing formality/ informality levels created a common basis of comparison which allowed findings from several

companies to be combined and facilitated the analysis and comparison of organisational cultural influences upon workplace humour.

1.4 Thesis structure

The thesis is arranged into seven chapters, beginning with this introduction which outlines the purpose of each chapter and describes its contents, as well as offering justification for the study, origins of the project and research objectives.

Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature from the fields of organisational studies, organisational culture and humour. The review is divided into three sections. The first section investigates organisational culture and formality and informality. The second section presents humour literature and the final section examines both humour and organisational culture literature together. The literature review highlights that organisational culture, formality and humour are vast and highly complex phenomena and have been researched from many perspectives. The organisational culture and formality review examines two key theoretical frameworks as well as significant aspects of the culture phenomenon and bureaucracy literature related to formality. Humour is a multi-disciplined field and the three main groups of humour theories are explored. The review concentrates upon humour research that has an organisational focus. The final section of the chapter investigates research that considers organisational culture, formality and looks at influences and impacts upon humour at work. In this overlap section, a gap in the literature was discovered as there are relatively few studies that explore the relationship between these workplace phenomena. It was this apparent research dearth that offered a strong justification for the key objectives of this thesis exploring the influence of organisational culture and formality on workplace humour.

Chapter Three explains the methods used in the research and the methodological philosophy, influences, goals and justification are discussed. Three different methods were used to collect the data. Four different companies participated in the project and were the subjects of the data collection. A continuum was developed using factors of bureaucracy to assess each individual company's degrees of formality and/or informality. The analysis strategy is presented in this chapter and includes techniques of coding,

categorising and theme identification. The chapter concludes with an outline of the ethics approval and ethical stance adopted during the research.

The results are presented in two separate chapters (Chapters Four and Five). Chapter Four presents the results from each company individually to provide the background that contextualises the collated results presented in Chapter Five. Humour, organisational culture and formality are influenced by contextual factors and contextual information is important to help explain humour occurrences and to identify factors that influence organisational culture. Therefore it was decided that the first results chapter would set the scene by describing each company individually and depicting its culture, style and humour activities. This contextual information offered depth, detail and rich background data which helped to explain the collated findings. The collated results presented in Chapter Five are supported by the contextual descriptions in Chapter Four and allow a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the companies and the associated findings.

Chapter Six is the nexus of this thesis as it presents the discussion of results and links them to the reviewed literature as well as suggesting new insights from the data. A model was developed to explain the relationship between humour and organisational culture at the studied companies. Key findings are examined in regard to prior literature and significant aspects of the humour/ culture relationship are highlighted. The chapter concludes by discussing perceptions of the links between humour use and the organisational outcomes of retention, recruitment, satisfaction and performance.

The thesis is concluded in Chapter Seven, which revisits the key research question. The main thesis argument regarding the relationship between humour and organisational culture is emphasised. The contribution to organisational culture and humour literature and theory is discussed, and potential implications for managers are outlined. The limitations of the thesis are indicated and future research possibilities are suggested. The concluding paragraph reiterates the importance of humour at work.

The thesis structure follows conventional protocols and comprises chapters containing introduction, literature review, results, discussion and conclusions. However, the chapter

titles reflect the structure (or different stages) of a formal joke which requires a set-up, delivery or execution, and a punch line to close the joke which is (hopefully) greeted with applause or appreciation in the form of laughter (Norrick, 2001). The diagram below (Figure 1.1) presents a view of the entire thesis and its components and was designed to help the reader locate the different sections and chapters of the thesis. To help readers identify their location within the thesis, a segment of the chapter diagram is presented at the start of each chapter in order to give an overview for each chapter.

Let the fun begin!



Figure 1.1: Thesis map

CHAPTER TWO: THE SET-UP



Outline of the literature review

Both organisational culture and humour are vast, highly complex, multi-disciplined topics and have both concepts have proved immensely difficult for scholars to define. This literature review is divided into three sections which explore theoretical frameworks and perspectives relevant to organisational culture and humour. The first section addresses the concept of organisational culture, attempts to define and encapsulate the concept and utilises Schein's theoretical framework to investigate this complex and broad topic.

The literature relating to the concept of organisational culture is extensive, ambiguous and has its roots in several different academic disciplines. Therefore, although a general overview is presented, the reviewed literature is that which appeared to offer the most effective framework and valuable perspectives for exploring the main research question relating to organisational culture and humour at work. The theories recognise both internal and external influences on culture as well as identifying that the notion of one unified 'whole culture' may be supplanted or supported by the existence of several 'sub' cultures within organisations.

The second section of the review investigates the literature that relates to the topic of humour. The humour construct is widespread and multi-disciplined with research spanning anthropological issues, linguistics, psychology and physiology, sociology and even zoology where researchers claim that monkeys and dogs laugh (Kivy, 2003). Although research from the contributing disciplines is not ignored, the humour literature that is reviewed primarily relates to organisational humour and workplace influences.

However, it was not possible to present a totally workplace-specific review without investigating some of the major theories that underpin concepts of humour use, form and function. Therefore the humour section begins with an outline of broad theories of why people laugh, the function of humour, and a brief view of psychological, philosophical, anthropological and sociological aspects important when exploring humour at work.

The third strand of the review concentrates on the intersection of the two concepts and highlights literature that discusses the importance of humour in organisational culture and the impact of organisational culture on workplace humour. It is significant that there is a relatively small amount of literature that addresses the overlap between these two important constructs. The research *gap* evident in theoretical frameworks and empirical research relating to organisational culture and humour forms the founding premise for this research project and thesis. Finally, this elemental section presents literature that justifies the need for research in this under-investigated area, validates the approach taken in the research and firmly highlights the research scarcity apparent when linking the two key workplace phenomena of humour and culture.

2.1 Organisational culture

Organisations

Exploring humour inside organisations has implications for the people that expend much of their time, energy, creativity and physical actions in these establishments. It has been suggested that in current times the organisation that one works for may have become one of the central affiliations in people's lives (Mintzberg, 1989; Morgan, 2006). An organisation may be compared to a family group to suggest unity and kinship, or conversely, an organisation may be perceived as a system or a machine developed to achieve targets and economic gain (Ainsworth & Wolfram Cox, 2003; Czarniawska, 2003; Trompenaars, 1994). Organisational studies have a relatively short history and are fragmented, diverse, multi-disciplinary and adopt widely diverse theoretical and methodological stances (Westwood & Clegg, 2003).

Organisations have the potential to improve well-being for people, particularly for less powerful organisational members (Clegg et al., 2006) and they are emotional arenas

where feelings shape events and events shape feelings. Although organisations can generate fun, pride and exhilaration they can also create boredom, stress, anxiety and depression in the people that work within them (Fineman, 2003). Westwood and Clegg (2003) suggest that organisational theorists with a social constructionist viewpoint use the term *organisation* as a noun and perceive an organisation as an entity created (or constructed) by the people involved. Conversely, some theorists perceive *organisation* as a verb and consider it a process for creating order and reality in the work environment (Chia, 1996). Understanding organisations is therefore about exploring what is important to the people that comprise them as well as the workplace tasks and external environmental conditions that shape their activities and priorities. Weick (2001) views organisations as ‘collections of people trying to make sense of what is happening around them’ (p. 5).

Organisations are complex, multifaceted and paradoxical, and the fact that they are many things at once creates challenges for managers and academics. Organisation theory and practice is based on images and metaphors which lead to an understanding of workplace situations (Morgan, 2006). Morgan (2006) defines metaphor as ‘a comparative figure of speech’ (p. 4) that is a ‘primal force’ (p. 4) by which humans create their meanings by using elements of earlier experiences to understand new situations. Metaphors involve calling an entity another name and are part of the symbolic reality inside an organisation (Pondy, 1983). As there can be multiple interpretations of any situation, metaphors help organisational members to give meaning to experiences, resolve paradoxes and help bind organisational parts into a meaningful whole (Morgan, 2006; Pondy, Frost, Morgan & Dandridge, 1983). Metaphors offer a useful tool to describe formal workplace processes and to articulate the informal, social, and values-based ideals and practices found inside modern corporations.

Handy (1993) uses the metaphor of a vine to describe organisations and suggests that the best way to nurture them is through the use of the ‘human hand’ (p. 181). Modern corporations have been described as evolved tribes that provide people with the means for food-collecting (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). The metaphor is extended by relating the corporate profit motive to tribal hunting and gathering instincts that represent tribal

survival (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). These metaphors are soundly criticised by Parker (2000) who accuses such writers of using ‘quasi-anthropological terminology’ (p. 12) and suggests that these were techniques used by eighties’ management gurus to promote and sell books offering quick-fix corporate culture solutions. Morgan (2006) explores several different metaphors to explain organisations, such as: the organisation as a brain; a political system; an organism; and significantly for this project, the organisation as a culture. He asserts that viewing an organisation as a culture creates social reality and today’s organisations are *minisocieties* with their own values, rituals beliefs and ideologies. However, dissension again comes from Parker (2000), who cautions against viewing organisations as societies in miniature, warning that this perspective can ignore external influences such as politics, the economy and the culture of the organisation’s geographical location.

Commonly the study of the behavioural components of workplace life has come to be known as *organisational culture*. The organisational culture metaphor offers a theoretical framework in which to understand the complex and ambiguous natures of organisations (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). The organisational culture metaphor has been described as a ‘rich and fun’ metaphor to work with that adds ‘more dimensions of human experience to the organisation equation’ (Alvesson & Berg, 1992, p. 203). This section of the literature review will focus on the organisational culture concept and will outline models and one specific framework that may be used to explore complex social relationships inside organisations. The perspective adopted will be that an organisation has many internal dimensions that liken it to a minisociety (as suggested by Morgan, 2006), but that, at the same time external influences are also significant and impact upon these internal cultural dimensions (as asserted by Parker, 2000).

Defining organisational culture

The concept of organisational culture, though much explored and the subject of many articles, books and discourses, is still difficult to define, analyse and articulate (Schein, 2004). There is little consensus on the meaning of the concept of culture and disagreements about fundamental issues characterise cultural research (Martin, Frost, & O'Neill, 2006). Scholars have attempted to provide encompassing definitions of the

subject but most admit limitations and flaws in such attempts to encapsulate this diverse and complex construct. Theorists usually offer explanations covering key components of the subject that fit with their own theoretical perspective and world-view. Many organisational researchers have borrowed terms and definitions from other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology.

The term *culture* derives from the concept of cultivation – ‘the process of tilling and developing land’ (Morgan, 2006, p. 116). Culture usually refers to society’s development of knowledge systems, ideology, rituals, values and laws. By the eighteenth century, culture was also used to describe degrees of refinement and was associated with class evaluations that were discernable systems of belief and practice (Morgan, 2006; Parker, 2000).

Hofstede (1978a) defined culture as ‘the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another’ (p. 1). The concept of culture implies that groups of people have different ways of doing things and therefore the term *culture* is itself a metaphor used to describe organisations (Morgan, 2006; Smircich, 1983). The word *culture* conveys the feeling of a pervasive way of life or set of norms (Handy, 1993). The cultural metaphor emphasises that organisations have their own social structure that is reflected by actions, language, discourse, roles, rituals, ceremonies, norms, stories, and myths (Morgan, Frost, & Pondy, 1983). Studying organisations as cultures emphasises these cultural manifestations rather than focusing on organisations as merely formal structures that are designed to achieve rational ends. The culture metaphor suggests that organisations are full of social and informal life (Morgan et al., 1983) and culture is a ‘process of reality construction that allows people to see and understand particular events, actions, objects, utterances or situations in distinctive ways’ (Morgan, 2006, p. 134). These ways of understanding help people to cope with situations and to make their own behaviour meaningful.

Organisational culture is a social construction that becomes a device for accounting for and creating patterns of organisational interaction (Parker, 2000). In order to formulate this concept of organisational culture, Parker (2000) makes three general assumptions.

First he assumes that the terms *organisation* and *culture* are processes that bring together history and everyday practice in the organisation (sociologists call this structure and agency). He then assumes that these processes involve a continual shifting of meaning and finally suggests that these meanings can be contested as there are always competing perceptions of people and organisation. Parker (2000) adds that guru-style books have turned the concept of corporate culture into a fad that offers prescriptive solutions suggesting what organisations *should* be like, rather than reflecting what they *are* like. He feels that the concept of organisational culture is an attempt to understand that which is significant about organisations and organising, and that the rise of this concept, although not new, is still underdeveloped. Although organisational culture has been promoted as radically new (from the nineteen eighties onwards), the concept is actually a synthesis of many central concerns arising in twentieth century organisational literature from as far back as Taylorism. Parker (2000) contends that managerially-oriented theories have been repackaged and popularised by eighties' management writers such as Deal and Kennedy (1982); Ouchi (1982); and Peters and Waterman (1982).

Parker (2000) claims that cultural studies viewing organisations as 'minisocieties' consider only the internal components of organisational culture. Culture also relates to an organisation's environment, and external factors should be considered in cultural analyses. However, building on his earlier (1985) exploration of culture, Schein (2004, p. 17), offers this definition encompassing both internal and external workplace influences, asserting that organisational culture is:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to these problems

When attempting to define the concept of organisational culture there appears to be the need to separate the concept of culture, exploring what culture *is*, from the observable manifestations of culture that illustrate the way that culture is enacted (or what culture *has*). Pettigrew (1976) calls such manifestations 'the offspring of culture' (p. 12) and includes symbols, language, ideology, belief, ritual and myth as components of these 'offspring'. During his longitudinal study of organisations Pettigrew (1976) explored the

concepts and processes associated with the creation of organisational cultures. He defines organisational culture as:

The system of such publicly and collectively subscribed to meanings operating for a given group at a given time. The system of terms, forms, categories and images which function to interpret a peoples' own situation to themselves (Pettigrew, 1976, p. 12).

Central to Pettigrew's (1976) definition and the definitions offered by other researchers such as Hatch (1983) and Parker (2000) is the idea that organisational culture is dynamic. This ever-changing component of the concept creates difficulties for those studying culture and its manifestations. Therefore frameworks or theoretical models that investigate the concept of culture should recognise the constant change inherent in the cultural concept and encompass the idea that diversity and change are central to organisational culture.

A second key argument when defining the concept of organisational culture involves the debate over homogeneity of the cultural concept. Martin and Frost (1996) assert that studies which focus on consistency and consensus as the key to organisational culture are *integration* studies and while research asserts that unified cultures are achievable, these studies ignore dissent and ambiguity. More theorists have emphasised homogeneity of culture and cohesiveness than have investigated divisive aspects and differentiation (Gregory, 1983; Martin & Frost, 1996). Theorists that explore culture under the premise that there is an overriding dominant culture apparent inside organisations and that homogeneity of culture exists inside companies attract criticism from those who focus on diversity and differences inside organisational cultures (Parker, 2000; Morgan, 2006). Diversity theorists argue that homogeneity of culture cannot be assumed, and contend that many different subcultures may exist inside one company and that there might not be *one* dominant overriding organisational culture. Consensus only occurs inside 'sub-cultural boundaries' (Martin & Frost, 1996, p. 604) and this outlook is known as the *differentiation* perspective (Martin et al., 2006). Differentiation studies are sensitive to environmental impacts upon organisations as well as accounting for inconsistencies between espoused organisational attitudes and actual behaviour (Martin et al., 2006).

A third key perspective in cultural theories acknowledges ambiguity in culture even at the subcultural level and posits that integration and differentiation studies risk oversimplification of organisational life. This *fragmentation* position suggests that there are multiple interpretations of cultural manifestations and these contain contradiction and confusion (Martin et al., 2006). Martin contends that organisational cultures have elements that are congruent with all three positions (integration, differentiation and fragmentation) and that all three perspectives combine to form a meta-theory of organisational culture that offers a framework for more complex understanding.

Therefore it appears that frameworks and models used to explore the culture concept need to encompass several possibilities – first to identify if an organisational culture has some homogeneity and consensus (integration), while simultaneously allowing for diversity and subcultures (differentiation) and also conceding that multiple interpretations may apply to cultural manifestations (fragmentation).

Theoretical framework

Although critics have suggested that conceptual models and frameworks of organisational culture oversimplify the concept, they are important in guiding research and generating theory (Hatch, 1983). One influential and oft-cited model is Schein's (1985) theoretical framework which is widely acknowledged in organisational culture research and the framework was recently revised (2004). He conceptualises culture by proposing three levels that pertain to the degree of visibility of the concept to the observer. The levels range from the obvious and overt manifestations of culture that can be seen and felt, to deeper, more embedded assumptions that he defines as the *essence* of culture. The surface level is labelled *artifacts* and contains visible structures and processes of the organisational culture. The second level comprises *espoused values* and incorporates organisational strategies, goals and philosophies. Organisational culture manifests itself at these two primary levels. The third and deepest level is that of *underlying assumptions*. This level includes the unconscious and taken-for-granted thoughts, beliefs, feelings and perceptions and it is from this level that values and actions originate inside organisations. These levels proposed by Schein (1985) offer a useful framework for studying organisational culture.

Artifacts

Schein (1985, 2004) considers the artifacts level of culture to be the surface level of culture that is displayed by a group. Artifacts include the visible products of the group or organisation and may include: physical environment, language, technology, art, clothing, manners and style, emotional displays, myths and stories, published values, observable rituals, visible behaviour and organisational processes that influence behaviour. The artifacts level of culture is “easy to observe but difficult to decipher” as many displays, activities and symbols rely on shared basic assumptions that determine their significance and meaning to the group.

Espoused values

Organisational values often originate from founding group members and according to Schein (2004) “All group learning ultimately reflects someone’s original values” (p. 19). Some group values are confirmed and reinforced when the group shares social experiences. Values that are reinforced and guide behaviour are sometimes declared and articulated in organisations because they guide group behaviour. Values that are useful in reducing uncertainty in the groups’ functioning may gradually be transformed into deeper level assumptions which are supported by the articulated “beliefs, norms and operational rules of behaviour” (Schein, 2004, p. 20). If values become embedded in the culture and are congruent with assumptions this can bring the group together and create identity and mission.

Conversely in some groups or organisations values are articulated that have not been confirmed in the group experience and do not influence behaviour. These values at the conscious levels can predict behaviour at the artifact level of culture and may guide what people *say* but not necessarily what they will *do*. Schein calls these *espoused values* and claims that they are the values and principles that are articulated and publicly announced and that the group is trying to achieve. Espoused values are unlikely to become basic assumptions as group experience has not reinforced these and they are not assimilated into the culture as deeper level values and ultimately assumptions. Such espoused values

may be an aspiration for the group or an attempt in rationalisation and image creation (Schein, 2004).

Assumptions

When organisational members have a “common system of communication and a language” they learn together at a conceptual level and “shared concepts become possible” (Schein, 2004, p.11). These deeper levels of conceptual sharing become “shared basic assumptions”. A group has a *culture* when it has enough shared history to have formed a set of basic assumptions (Schein, 2004, p.11). Schein suggests that basic assumptions “have become so taken for granted that one finds little variation within a cultural unit” (p. 21). Basic assumptions can be considered psychological defence mechanisms that keep the group functioning and these are hard to change. Assumptions guide behaviour perceptions, thoughts and feelings. Therefore as a collected set of basic assumptions, organisational culture defines what is important, how to react, what actions to take and what things mean. The power of organisational culture comes from sharing assumptions which means that they become “mutually reinforced” (Schein, 2004, p. 21).

According to Schein (1985, 2004) any group or organisation’s culture can be studied using the three cultural levels of artifacts, values and assumptions but deciphering the basic assumptions is the key to understanding a culture. Understanding this deepest level of culture more readily enables understanding of the surface levels of culture. However Schein (1985, 2004) notes that cultural research should consider elements of culture as it is not possible to describe a whole culture. Understanding enough of the key elements can help to understand the key phenomena of an organisational culture. Researchers need to find ways to investigate culture that allow them to interpret cultural elements from each of Schein’s levels.

Interpreting culture

Organisational culture may be investigated using interpretive positions that consider organisational culture is not something that an organisation *has*, but something that it actually *is*, thus representing the organisation as an ongoing social construction. Such investigative approaches are concerned with understanding the organisational world and

focusing on the meanings that underlie social life and suggest that an organisation's culture is manifested through language formulations such as slang, jargon, and acronyms and can be studied and analysed through decoding these languages and symbols. (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Parker (2000) suggests that qualitative research such as ethnographies or participant observation techniques are the most common interpretive approaches. However, Parker (2000) cautions that in organisational research using interpretative approaches, there is a danger of concentrating on the extraordinary and local and neglecting the commonplace and general aspects. This can then lead to some rich organisational stories that do not lead to any broader implications.

Schein (1985, 2004) asserts that there is no all-encompassing perspective of organisational culture. Investigating the concept of organisational culture will reflect the ideologies, politics and epistemologies of those who use it and researchers must be aware of the assumptions that underpin their own perspectives. Using Schein's framework suggests that a comprehensive study of organisational culture should consider what an organisation *has* and does, as well as interpreting what it *is* and what it believes. Schein's levels are interwoven and suggest that researchers might consider all three levels simultaneously in their analyses of organisational culture.

Manifestations of culture

Researchers also consider manifestations of culture in their studies. Trice and Beyer (1984) provide a list of frequently studied cultural forms that includes: rites, ceremonies, artifacts, myths, sagas, legends, stories, symbols, folktales, language, gestures, physical settings and rituals. There is a vast amount of literature examining these facets of organisational culture and commonly discussed are the cultural manifestations of organisational rituals, rites and artifacts and other symbolic processes (Alvesson, 2002; Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Dandridge, 1986; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Gagliardi, 1990; Hofstede, 1977b; Morgan, 2006; Morgan et al., 1983; Parker, 2000; Pondy et al., 1983; Smircich, 1983; Trice & Beyer, 1984). The manifestations or concepts of culture are interdependent, to varying degrees, and it is through these mechanisms that normative patterns emerge and culture evolves. This fluctuating culture acts as a constraint on the behaviour of organisational members, thus a reciprocal relationship becomes apparent as

culture is created by people but people are in turn shaped by the culture (Pettigrew, 1979).

Artifacts are considered the most tangible forms of culture (Schein, 2004) and these are evident in forms such as organisational rites and rituals and include organisational humour and actual physical objects (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). Rituals whether primitive or not allow society members to continue life when facing uncertainty. They are not rational, nor do they make the future more predictable but they can help relieve stress caused by uncertainty. 'Good' rituals concur with values held by the people involved and do not have negative consequences for the organisation. For example, a meeting is often a mere ritual with no other purpose and it can have its own special language and taboos (Hofstede, 1977a). Although Schein (1985, 2004) does not discuss humour as a key cultural artifact a few other researchers have considered humour as a cultural element. Humour falls within the category of manifestations of culture (Louis, 1985) but there is a scarcity of literature exploring humour and how it manifests itself within culture.

Organisational stories can be interpreted for hidden meanings such as wishes, fantasies and desires and they constitute an emotional coding of an organisation's culture (Fineman, 2003). Employees may symbolise unconscious concerns about themselves and work situations through actions, objects, events, utterances or images. Understanding these symbolic projections can tell researchers much about the organisational situation. Studying rites and rituals provides rich information on organisational culture as these are often re-enacted repeatedly, are elaborate and planned, have an audience and can have social consequences such as enhancing professional roles and forming social identity (Morgan et al., 1983).

Organisational life is rich in various forms of ritual activity, tradition, patterns of humour, story-telling and various kinds of metaphorical imagery which contribute to the development of distinctive kinds of cultural milieux within the organisation' (Morgan et al., 1983, p. 9).

Studying the manifestations of culture links to Schein's (1985) first two levels of culture: artifacts and espoused values. The collection of data regarding cultural manifestations could constitute an entire research project but it is important to also consider Schein's

deeper levels of organisational culture and investigate how the manifestations or artifacts of culture reflect the organisational values and assumptions. Martin and Frost (1996) warn that too often specialist research regarding a single cultural manifestation is presented as evidence of an entire, uniform company culture. Therefore studying multiple manifestations of culture at different levels (Schein, 1985, 2004) and considering what the manifestations symbolise and represent within organisations may offer a richer and more comprehensive view of organisational culture. Once researchers start to ask questions about what these manifestations imply and signify research begins to investigate the interpretation of significant cultural elements which can help create in-depth understanding of organisational culture.

An interpretive perspective of organisational culture

The interpretive perspective can be difficult to use because interpretivism attempts to analyse deep-seated meanings and assumptions held by organisational members. These are not always observable or even immediately recognised by workplace members. The interpretive approach attempts to explore beneath the immediate surface of cultural manifestations and tries to access facets of organisational culture that even organisational members themselves may not be fully aware of, or understand. Using Schein's (1985) levels of culture, this interpretive perspective means working in the deeper assumptions level which attempts to uncover the essence of organisational culture.

Interpretive studies recognise the importance of symbols and symbolic processes in the creation, continuation and ongoing development of organisational culture. Cultural researchers agree that research focusing on symbols in organisations may offer insights into both what comprises a culture, what culture actually *is*, and what it means to organisational members (Morgan et al., 1983; Pettigrew, 1979; Smircich, 1983).

Symbols are signs that call for an association of ideas and they may express more than just their intrinsic content. They convey a conscious or unconscious association with other concepts or meanings. Symbols are part of the subjective meaning of an organisation and can be objects, actions, events, utterances or images (Dandridge, 1986; Hatch, 1983; Morgan et al., 1983). Symbolic processes such as rituals, special

vocabulary and sayings perpetuate shared meaning and suggest that the interpretation of symbols inside organisations is individualised and symbols may have different or contradictory meanings to different people (Smircich, 1983).

The interpretation of symbols inside organisations once again raises the argument of homogeneity of culture, as it is suggested that the symbols may have shared meaning inside organisational cultures but equally may mean different things to different organisational members (Morgan et al., 1983). Meaning is shared to varying degrees and symbolic processes of an organisation perpetuate commonality (Smircich, 1983). Aspects of organisational culture are embedded in everyday practices and these practices are rich in symbolic meaning. Therefore it appears that organisational researchers can study symbols and symbolic processes to investigate components of organisational culture that may be beneath the surface and not immediately obvious (Dandridge, 1986; Morgan et al., 1983). Such investigation may uncover both aspects of consensus in organisational culture while simultaneously pointing out areas of difference and divergence. It would appear that studying organisational symbols and symbolic activities may be a useful technique to explore and analyse organisational culture. Culture may be regarded as a 'family of concepts' (Pettigrew, 1979, p. 574) with the 'offspring' of this culture being symbol. Symbol is a category that includes language and myth, belief, ritual and ideology (Pettigrew, 1979). Hatch (1983) asserts that symbolism links the objective forms of artifacts to meanings and experiences 'that lie beyond the literal domain' (p. 670).

Interpreting organisational events, artifacts and behaviours and making meaning out of these cultural facets by the people involved comes under the *social constructionism* or *interpretive* research approach (Czarniawska, 2003). Scholars who study social constructions assume that people construct their opinions, attitudes and representations usually through conversations with other people (Czarniawska, 2003). It has been suggested that social constructionism is a merely a study of *common sense* but Czarniawska (2003) suggests the opposite: that the social construction of shared meaning becomes what we know and accept as *common sense*. This common sense or assumed knowledge can become a key part of an organisation's culture that is known by most

members and must be learned by newcomers to the group. 'Culture is more appropriately treated as a process of reality construction enabling people to understand and make sense of certain events, actions, things and situations in distinctive ways' (Chan, 2003, p. 319). The most important assumed facets of culture may comprise part of the dominant or overarching culture in an organisation but it is also possible that there are no universally shared factors and that an organisation is a mixture of parallel, nested or even counter-cultures.

Subcultures and counter-cultures – homogeneity versus differentiation

While Parker (2000) contends that the unity or coherence of an organisation's culture should not be assumed or taken for granted, Smircich (1983) argues that the commonality aspects of culture are necessary for continuous organisational activity and therefore coherence is an integral part of organisational culture. She asserts that this coherence allows organisational interaction to occur without constantly reinterpreting meanings. Alvesson and Berg (1992) agree that the assumption of one culture is still predominant and is useful as it allows an organisation to be seen as a 'collective phenomenon' (p.204).

Morgan (2006) allows for both positions, suggesting that an organisation may have its own unique culture that may be strong and uniform throughout the organisation and that simultaneously, the overall culture may be fragmented by subcultures. Cohesive groups are formed by shared understandings whereas fragmented groups are characterised by multiple realities (Morgan, 2006). Culture develops through social interaction and may be a mosaic of competing value systems affected by gender, ethnicity, race, language, religion, socio-economic factors, friendships and professional groups. Professional groups inside organisations may develop their own concepts, operational language and business priorities and different groups may even have different perspectives than other groups within the same company. Subcultures that develop within the organisation may also be based on social or ethnic groupings. Each group may have different occupational attitudes (Morgan, 2006) and group membership may be entwined with deep-seated personal beliefs that define those involved (Morgan, 2006). One way of defining the culture or subcultures of a group is by identifying things that the group takes for granted

– things that are considered *universal truths* by the group and are generally accepted without discussion (Hofstede, 1978a).

Counter-cultures may develop when people have divided loyalties and may look to advance personal objectives rather than organisational ones. Such counter-cultures sometimes oppose values espoused by company management and can result in control struggles. An obvious workplace example is highlighted by Trade Union groups, and their philosophy and values can have a strong impact on the organisational culture and can create organisational conflict and rifts (Morgan, 2006).

The concept of subculture implies a homogeneity of, and subordination to, a dominant culture (Parker, 2000). Parker (2000) prefers to conceptualise different cultures inside one organisation as *parallel* or *nested* cultures moving from the notion that one group is either subordinate or dominant to another. He suggests that parallel cultures are about both unity and division and that it is possible to belong to several simultaneously. He strongly asserts that what is more relevant is the context in which an individual is operating at a given time that affects which cultural affiliation is relevant. Issues of classification such as similarities or distinctions form cultural boundaries inside, between and across organisations. Therefore, Parker (2000) claims: ‘any formulation of organisational culture needs to theorize it as a process of making multiple claims about membership categories – about *us* and *them*’ (p. 87). This makes cultural identity and identification extremely difficult and complex as people may classify themselves differently at different times and in different contexts. Parker’s (2000) research compared similarities and differences inside three organisations and he found that organisations are unified and divided at the same time, and that classifying these categories of sameness and difference is central to describing organisational culture.

The key types of division that Parker, (2000) identifies are: spatial/functional divisions that are manifested by geographic and/or departmental divides; generational division manifested by age and/or historical divides; and occupational/ professional division that comprise vocational divides between people in the same company. He also cautions that a focus on divisions within a company does not preclude a simultaneous recognition of

the 'collective uniqueness' (p. 214) of the organisational culture. Smircich (1983) and Burrell and Morgan (1979) also emphasise that although organisations are systems of shared meanings, the meanings are shared to varying degrees. Organisational cultures are pluralistic and comprise competing subcultures, each defining the organisation in its own way (Parker, 2000; Smircich, 1983).

It would appear that investigations into organisational culture must seek aspects of homogeneity and consensus in an attempt to define an overriding organisational culture where possible. Simultaneously, subsets of the culture should be identified as should contexts that result in people identifying with that particular subculture. This approach must also allow for the eventuality that no *one* dominant culture exists and that some organisations may consist of a series of subcultures, opposing counter-cultures or even a series of parallel cultures. Research also needs to account for the reality that organisational members are likely to belong to more than one workplace culture at a time, as is often apparent when people belong to different workgroups, teams or professional bodies.

Impacts on culture

Creating and perpetuating organisational culture

Whether the overall culture is integrated or fragmented, beliefs and shared meanings that are supported by operating norms and rituals can exert a strong influence on the ability of an organisation to deal with challenges. Many operating procedures and organisational behaviours are grounded in historical reasons. Rituals become apparent in formal organisational events such as the weekly staff meeting and the fundamental nature of an organisation is reflected as much by its culture as by its formal charts and codes of procedure. Organisational culture can be promoted through stories, myths and legends. For example, in *The HP Way* (Packard, 1995), stories of corporate heroes were circulated and the cultural values of the organisation were identified as the factors that led to its success (Morgan, 2006). Cultures develop and are built over the years by strong dominant people in the organisation but they change over time as what suits one group of people may not suit a different group at a different time (Handy, 1993).

A strong and robust culture pervades an organisation and people exude characteristics that define the organisational ethos (Morgan, 2006). Factors that influence culture and structure in organisations are: history and ownership, size, technology, goals, environment, and the people (Handy, 1993). Although powerful leaders may shape organisational culture, they do not have a monopoly on creating shared meaning and other individuals inside the organisation can influence the culture by their behaviour, by who they are, or by sharing their opinions (Morgan, 2006). Traditional organisations have been dominated by male value systems that are frequently linear in their thoughts and actions and the drive for results has assumed more importance than network and community building. This gender imbalance can lead to female subcultures developing inside an organisation. Organisations such as *The Body Shop* that are shaped around female values tend to emphasise empathetic, intuitive forms of behaviour and are run according to principles of caring, social responsibility and work-life integration. This results in more networked and inclusive organisations (Morgan, 2006).

Parker (2000) criticises Daft (1986) and his assertion that management can influence culture through activities and symbol. Parker (2000) strongly condemns the belief that culture is a tool or a type of *normative glue* to be applied or removed as the situation demands. The ‘explosion of guru writing on organisational culture in the early eighties’ reflects the over-enthusiasm regarding culture as a saleable commodity that permeated the nineteen-eighties (Parker, 2000, p. 9). Parker condemns ‘these breathlessly enthusiastic works which use the term ‘culture’ to suggest a prescriptive analysis of management in organisations’ (p. 9) and suggests that the topic of organisational culture is not new as eighties’ management gurus would have us believe. According to Parker (2000), there is psychological and sociological literature regarding organisational culture throughout the twentieth century.

In Search of Excellence (Peters & Waterman, 1982) was the first in a long line of prescriptive success manuals introducing heroic managers, frontier spirits and the championing of values. The common theme among these pop-culture tomes was that organisational life can be constructed and prescribed (Parker, 2000) and they offer a *how-to* approach towards developing organisational culture. This prescriptive view of

organisational culture reflects a functionalist perspective of culture in its belief that culture is a variable that can be manipulated at will. It does not account for interpretive perspectives or Schein's (1985) deeper level of underlying assumptions. It appears to be a token attempt to understand a complex construct that was expedient for exploitation and for the sale of many management books and seminars. Parker's (2000) cynicism about such prescriptive literature is well founded and there are many further criticisms of such literature, particularly of that which achieved such popularity and commercial success in the eighties and early nineties of the twentieth century. Such criticisms suggest that guru-style management literature lacks concrete back-up (Flaherty, 1999); is poorly researched (Collins, 2000); manipulates myths and symbols (Clark & Salaman, 1998); uses rhetorical devices to reinforce credibility (Jackson, 1999); and is oversimplified (Ackoff, 2001). These simplistic and prescriptive representations of organisational culture are designed to 'attract disciples' and provide 'a life-raft to those managers who are incapable of handling complexity' (Ackoff, 2001, p. 166).

External influences

National culture

In Hofstede's seminal research exploring national culture, analysis showed that value systems within countries can be meaningfully ordered along four main dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity (Hofstede, 1978b). Each of these dimensions was interpreted as 'an integrated values set' (p. i) and each referred to 'a basic problem of humanity' (p. i). Power distance deals with inequality; uncertainty avoidance deals with the one-directionality of time and ignorance of the future; individuality deals with the relationship between an individual and society, and masculinity deals with role distribution between the sexes (Hofstede, 1978b). Although Hofstede (1978b) found differences between indices among people from different countries (which was the focus of his research), he acknowledged that the specific influences of the work environment may also have played a role. These dimensions explain a small part of national cultural differentiation but can offer possibilities for using various practices inside organisations (Hofstede, 1978c). Hofstede (1978a) defines values as 'a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affair over others' (p. 1) and links

values to culture, asserting that ‘culture includes a system of collectively held values’ (p 1). When investigating values (Hofstede, 1978b) analysed ‘organisation-related value systems’ (p. 2) and explored people’s perceptions of their organisational regime and climate. Research also focused on desirable and desired values at work through looking at employee competitiveness and the importance of earnings, security and cooperation in the workplace. Factors of national culture may impact on, and assist in the formation of, organisational culture and Hofstede’s study links aspects of national culture to the concept of organisational culture.

Industry

Organisational culture is traditionally treated as being unique to each company (Gregory, 1983; Smircich 1983). However, more recent studies (Christensen & Gordon, 1999; Nahm, Vonderembse & Koufteros, 2004) suggest that groups of companies can share cultural practices and values and that this commonality of culture arises from experiencing similar industry demands. Many organisations must conform to institutional demands including written and implied organisational rules that reflect the beliefs and values of the industry and environment in which the company operates. Therefore, the nature of a particular industry can influence the cultural environment of an organisation, resulting in industry-type cultures. These cultural values may be a precondition of survival and success inside a particular industry in order to compete and thrive (Christensen & Gordon, 1999). Culture is both an internal and an external variable of an organisation (Nahm et al., 2004). Gregory (1983) investigated Silicon Valley cultures and discusses the *native-view* perspective in relation to occupational cultures and communities. She suggests that subcultures inside organisations can cross-cut several organisations, as can occupational cultures. Gregory (1983) contends that researchers should consider culture within individual organisational boundaries while also scrutinising subdivisions of organisational culture that cross company boundaries and extend into external communities. Therefore, external factors beyond the organisational boundaries and the possibility of industry-related or occupational cultures may have to be considered in investigations and analyses of individual organisational cultures.

Types of culture

Handy (1993) asserts that culture is not rigorously delineated but is 'felt' or 'perceived'. He classifies organisational cultures into four key typologies with orientations towards power, role, task or person. The dominant culture inside an organisation may change over time. While recognising the dynamism inherent in the concept of organisational culture and allowing for this by recognising fluidity between the types of cultures, Handy (1993) does subscribe to the assumption of an overriding dominant culture. His typologies of culture seem also to be connected to structural organisational demands and these typologies focus on the visible components of culture suggested in Schein's (1985) topmost level of culture, while neglecting the underlying assumptions that are typified by Schein's (1985) deeper level of culture. Related to Burrell and Morgan's (1979) model, these types of culture appear to fit only the functionalist paradigm concerned with manifestations of culture and are not connected to subjective interpretive approaches concerned with the essence of an organisation.

Deal and Kennedy (1982) claim that every organisation has a culture, and that people who feel better about their job work harder in companies with strong cultures. They identify different types of culture and classify organisational culture into four typical categories, namely: the tough-guy macho culture; work hard/play hard culture; 'bet your company' culture; and the process culture. Deal and Kennedy recognise the simplicity of such categorisation and allow that companies may have components from more than one cultural type while also suggesting that companies with very strong cultures may not fit one of their moulds. They offer their typification merely as a framework for analysing cultures and as a prescriptive tool to assist with the management of organisational culture. The idea that company cultures are manageable is at the heart of much hot debate because interpretive researchers propose that culture defines what a company *is* rather than what it *has* and do not believe that culture can be 'managed'. Conversely some theorists and management gurus posit that the *components* of culture can be manipulated and changed and this idea supports popular management literature that emerged primarily in the nineteen-eighties, exhorting managers to improve their organisational performance

by changing or 'managing' company culture (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Handy, 1993; Ouchi, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982).

This prescriptive versus descriptive debate is relevant when exploring types of culture because prescriptive theorists attempt to identify cultural types in order to effect organisational change. Meanwhile, interpretive theorists strongly assert that this categorisation assumes homogeneity of culture when, in fact, cultures are differentiated, diversified and cannot be successfully encapsulated in categories (Morgan, 2006; Parker, 2000). As organisational culture is such a complex and ambiguous construct, it would appear that although organisational processes can be changed by management, such deliberate manipulations may only result in changing the managerially espoused culture. Managerial initiatives may be more successful in changing some of the conditions in which culture develops rather than effecting change in the entire organisational culture. It seems to be impossible to completely change an entire organisational culture that may consist of subcultures, counter-cultures and parallel cultures, all operating simultaneously and making up the overall organisational culture. Therefore this review now considers some of the organisational conditions and processes that may influence organisational culture.

Formality and informality

Organisations are distinguished by the fact that they are more than mere groups of people but have some system of authority to bind the group together (Mintzberg, 1989). A common component of organisations is that all require some form of structure and administration in order to function. Organisational systems vary from the highly regulated and controlled formal organisation such as a bureaucratic government department to the laissez faire, informal companies typified by computer start-up companies such as Apple in the early nineteen-eighties. Using the terms *formal* and *informal* is a common distinction made by organisational researchers (Beetham, 1996). Organisations vary considerably in regard to degrees of formality and informality, levels of hierarchy, and overall structure, and it is these elements that offer a tool for inter-organisational comparison. Each organisation must have ways of operating and someone (or some group) leading, controlling or guiding the organisational tasks. The way in

which a company is organised and controlled affects many aspects of company life, including company culture. All companies have some form of structural organisation and there are varying degrees of formality of these processes (Beetham, 1996).

Bureaucracy versus social relations

Highly formal organisations that promote control and efficiency are considered to be bureaucratic (Weber, 1947). Until relatively recently, the theme of bureaucracy was a dominant one in the area of organisation studies (Clegg & Hardy, 1996). Max Weber (1947) wrote extensively about bureaucracy and its usefulness in promoting organisational efficiency and productivity. Monocratic bureaucracy results in purely bureaucratic organisations that attain high degrees of efficiency and is considered to be the most rational method of controlling people at work (Weber, 1947). Bureaucracy is precise, stable, and reliable and uses stringent discipline. It therefore makes results more calculable for organisational leaders and is efficient for all types of administrative tasks. 'Bureaucratic administration means fundamentally the exercise of control on the basis of knowledge' (Weber, 1947, p. 337). However, from this perspective of high efficiency and superiority of organising, bureaucracy has become a process that 'we all love to hate' (Beetham, 1996, p. 1) and many different meanings have been ascribed to the term *bureaucracy*.

The standard usage of the term bureaucracy in the nineteenth century was to indicate a type of political system, literally 'rule by the bureau'. It denoted a system in which ministerial positions were occupied by career officials, usually answerable to a hereditary monarch (Beetham, 1996, p 3).

A definitional model of bureaucracy comprising four key features highlights the criteria which determine bureaucracy (Beetham, 1996), although Beetham (1996) cautions that while such models are useful to understand the concept of bureaucracy, they tend to oversimplify the concept. He also asserts that organisations may not meet all the criteria of a model and vary according to each one's individual context. Weber (1947) originally identified ten or eleven distinguishing features of bureaucracy which Beetham (1996) reduces to these four key features: hierarchy, continuity, impersonality, and expertise.

Hierarchy concerns the division of labour and includes clearly defined responsibility. An official is answerable for an area of competence to a superior. *Continuity* occurs when positions are full-time and salaried, offering a career structure with advancement opportunities. *Impersonality* occurs when work rules are kept without favouritism and written records are kept of transactions. *Expertise* involves managers chosen on merit and qualified personnel trained in functions and who control access to knowledge and information (Beetham, 1996).

The central feature of bureaucracy is the systematic division of labour, whereby complex administrative problems are broken down into manageable and repetitive tasks, each under the province of a particular office, and then coordinated under a centralised hierarchy of command (Beetham, 1996, p. 12).

Although bureaucratic organisational models remain relevant, newer organisational forms have emerged that offer fluidity and focus on inter-organisational relations (Clegg & Hardy, 1996). In contrast to Weber's (bureaucratic) model, alternative organisational models developed by sociologists suggest that organisations are primarily social systems where people seek social intercourse through their work, rather than impersonally just occupying a role. In these social models, negotiation and cooperation are more important than authoritative control when managing people. In models that view organisations as 'systems of interpersonal relations' (Beetham, 1996, p. 16) efficiency is achieved through motivating workers and processes of 'mutual give and take'. In turbulent and uncertain times, organisations may have to react in unconventional or non-routine ways to remain competitive and are therefore more likely to develop informal ways of interaction. They may need to be more adaptive and therefore in order to generate rapid responses, may develop new practices such as faster, less formalised decision-making processes. In this type of environment, more informal behaviour is also likely and is reflected in workplace joking and creativity of ideas. However, in stable environments, companies such as banks maintain constant, predictable, well-established patterns of interaction. Work tasks are pre-ordained and highly scripted with little deviation from procedure (Morand, 1995). Organisations may be combinations of formal and informal relations that may balance their differing requirements (Beetham, 1996).

Bureaucracy and organisational culture

Handy (1993) links bureaucracy and organisational culture when he describes a type of workplace culture he calls *role culture*. Role culture reflects a bureaucratic style and uses senior managers to enforce control that originates from higher levels in the organisation. This type of culture is considered effective in stable economic environments that do not require fast-paced innovation or task flexibility (Handy, 1993). Morand (1995) suggests that when adapting and responding to their environmental demands, organisations develop patterns of behaviour in order to survive. These behaviour patterns become a part of the organisational operations and organisational designers incorporate the behaviour into the organisational structure. This structure affects other organisational behaviour and organisational culture may develop from such practices and understandings. Therefore demands of the specific work environment affect the structure and operation of an organisation which, in turn, influences organisational culture and patterns of behaviour. The working style and company composition can shape the workplace culture due to task requirements and managerial and employee attitudes to task completion and workplace efficiency.

Levels of formality inside organisations may refer to operational processes or organisation social activity, workplace structure, styles of management, control measures and levels of hierarchy.

Formality and informality are two distinct types of broad interactional schemas that are often used to describe dimensions of organisations under the rubric of culture (Morand, 1995, p. 862).

Morand (1995) uses the terms *formal* and *informal* to describe social activity in organisations. Synonyms used for informality include *behavioural spontaneity*, *casualness* and *familiarity*. Workplace behaviour in informal organisations is depicted as relaxed, with ‘feet on the table’, and conversations punctuated with asides, interruptions, animation, joking, and levity. Contrastingly, formal workplaces situations are described as regimented, impersonal and deliberate. Formal organisations are portrayed as consisting of people in business suits, sitting upright, and paying close and serious attention to business matters (Morand, 1995).

When discussing structure, formal organisations are described as bureaucratic, mechanistic and defined by structural features such as authority hierarchy, centralised decision making and formalisation of work tasks. Formal organisations are typified by more grammatically correct speech patterns; work activities that are more specifically prescribed and regulated; dress that may be more businesslike or even ceremonial (such as military insignia); and even workplace layout that may be more formalised or symmetrical (Morand, 1995). Such organisations are defined as cool and passive (Kanter, 1983). Morand (1995) even suggests that formal organisations produce more goal-oriented activity that is consistent with the organisation's stated objectives. Organisations that foster and develop this type of organisational climate encourage impersonal behaviour that reflects the organisational environment (Morand, 1995).

Informally structured organisations are described as organic or innovative and are defined by decentralised decision making; low levels of formal procedure; less specific job tasks; lateral communication; and fewer levels of authoritative hierarchy. In this type of organisation, friendship relations form between co-workers and there is more joking behaviour and humour. Work is performed in ways not prescribed in official policies, and linguistic elements such as colloquialisms and slang are more common. Organisational informality expects and encourages innovation and role flexibility (Morand, 1995). Such organisations are free, loose and creative (Kanter, 1983) and informality has been linked to excellence and innovation (Kanter, 1983; Peters & Waterman, 1982). These more informal organisations can be found in newer, fast-paced industries such as Information Technology where informal cultures are encouraged and developed (Hudson, 2001).

Organisations appear likely to have a mixture of formal and informal components that influence the way in which people perform their work tasks and enact their social behaviour. It seems likely that organisational members may construct and interpret their own reality within the formal and informal conditions that have been created for them by their organisations. Therefore the degree of formality or informality inside organisations for a variety of factors could play an important role in influencing organisational culture and social behaviour within the culture. Different organisations will create different levels

of formality or informality and factors such as industry and environment may be influential.

A specific culture

One frequently cited research project is Kunda's (1992) work exploring organisational culture in a high-tech American corporation (Tech). Using an interpretive, ethnographic research approach, he studied many components of culture in this company that prominently espoused its cultural perspective and actually sought to continuously create, improve and manage its company culture. Tech was a large corporation that had many creative and independent employees with technical and engineering skills who were difficult to manage. The company sought to achieve desirable organisational outcomes through managing and controlling the culture rather than directly attempting to control the people. Kunda (1992) describes the company as having a *strong* culture that forms 'the context of their work lives' (p. 7). The company was organised in an informal style with a lack of structure, in which ambiguity was an important part of the work environment, as were networking and risk taking. Work was decentralised, ambiguous and chaotic with frequent reorganisation. Office space was open, and having fun and using humour were key facets of the company culture.

Kunda (1992) states that the organisational culture at Tech was researched, engineered, developed and maintained in order to achieve company goals. Kunda (1992) deems such control as being 'normative control' (p. 8) which means that the company controls the employees' 'underlying experiences, thoughts and feelings that guide their actions' (p. 8). Many rituals were apparent at Tech and informal rituals included playful representations of company life and joking references to taboo subjects. Humour was frequently used both to parody organisational initiatives and to deflect attacks and criticism. Many official training and motivational sessions contained a balance of seriousness and humour. Artifacts on display included much formal material with company logos and slogans, personal possessions such as photos, and humorous displays such as comic strips. Many of the humorous displays emphasised the stupidity of organisational life and were 'take-offs' of company slogans and management models. Kunda (1992) suggests that humour was used as a type of dissent but provided a safe outlet for negative feelings.

Kunda's (1992) rich depiction of one specific organisational culture offers insights into research and interpretation of organisational culture that is a valuable model for further research. It also touches on the function of humour in many places throughout the narrative and although not officially investigated as part of the cultural research, it becomes apparent that humour is an important part of the company's cultural make-up. Many of the quotations and narrative excerpts illustrating the book contain much humour and obvious laughter from respondents (referred to in brackets) and it appears that Kunda's data could lead to insights into the relationship between humour and organisation culture. Researchers claim that humour is an intrinsic part of workplace culture (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003) and can assist in reinforcing company norms (Fine, 1976) and even in strengthening company culture particularly when channelling aggression towards outsiders such as competitors (Gabriel, 1995).

2.2 Humour

Humour is a 'complex and paradoxical phenomenon' (Linstead, 1985, p. 741). There are more books written about negative emotions such as fear and anxiety than about more positive phenomena such as laughter and humour. The study of humour used to be treated as a frivolous topic for academic research but understanding humour helps us to understand humanity (Morreall, 1983).

Humour is a form of critical social anthropology, defamiliarizing the familiar, demythologizing the exotic and inverting the world of common sense. Humour views the world awry, bringing us back to the everyday by estranging us from it. Humour then provides an oblique phenomenology of ordinary life (Critchley, 2007, p. 30).

Although there are many studies of the construct of humour, they are not a cohesive group of studies and they span many different academic disciplines and use a variety of differing methods. Scholars have trouble even agreeing on definitions of this complex and ambiguous concept (McGhee, 1979; Mulkay, 1988; Wilson, 1979). Theorists disagree whether a global definition of the humour construct is even possible and it has been suggested that several theories of humour must be developed to account for all the

different and varying dimensions of the complex phenomena (McGhee, 1979). The main agreement found among humour researchers is that one encompassing definition of humour is not possible and humour cannot be firmly located inside any specific academic discipline, since it crosses the boundaries of all and eludes definition by any (Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990; Goldstein, 1976; McGhee, 1979; Palmer, 1994). Definitions may vary, but most contain components of being amused, evoking laughter and a stimulus to initiate the process.

Conceptually, humour can also be viewed in different ways as it can be considered a stimulus (causing laughter), a response (reaction to a stimulus) or a disposition (seeing things in a humorous light) (Chapman & Foot, 1976). The idea of humour being a disposition dates back to mediaeval times when the term *humor* meant fluid or moisture and physiologists at this time claimed that there were four bodily *humors* or fluids. These *humors* determined a person's disposition. A choleric disposition resulted from an excess of choler or yellow bile and this excess caused anger and irascibility. A melancholic disposition came from black bile that caused gloominess, whereas a sanguine disposition comprising confidence and good cheer resulted from having sufficient blood. The fourth (phlegmatic) disposition came from the fluid phlegm and made one sluggish and apathetic. A person of good humour was considered to have all of the four *humors* balanced while one that was 'out of humour' had an imbalance of the fluids or *humors* (McGhee, 1979). From these physiological origins, *humour* eventually became the term to refer to a person's frame of mind and disposition in regard to ludicrous and comical events (McGhee, 1979).

Terminology

Before presenting humour theories it is important to discuss terminology that is used by humour researchers and to highlight terms that will be used throughout this review and subsequent discussions. Raskin (1985), a well-respected humour scholar, uses the term 'terminological chaos' (p. 8) to describe the use of the many related terms that describe humour. Many theorists interchange such terms as *humour*, *laughter*, *fun*, *funny*, *funniness*, *joking*, *wit* and *comic* and most commonly the terms *humour* and *laughter* are confounded. La Fave, Haddad and Maesen (1976) make the accusation that even the

best-known theorists such as Freud (1905), Eastman (1936), Hobbes (1640) and Bergson (1911) perpetuate this fluidity of terminology. Fry (1963), however, emphasises the overlap between laughter, smiling, humour and play. Nerhardt (1976) summarises that most researchers agree that laughing and smiling are part of the same affective states and uses the term ‘funniness’ to denote variables of humour while the term *humour* is used in his research to denote the funniness of stimuli. Confusion abounds regarding the use of these terms and it appears that most researchers adapt the terms at will to reflect the particular cadences and nuances of their own world-view and the needs of the project. The most obvious facet relating to the common terminology is that there are no standardised applications of these terms and this creates challenges for research. One clearer definition of the terminology comes from psychological humour research and maintains that humour is a *process* initiated by a *stimulus* (such as a joke) resulting in a *response* (such as laughter) indicating pleasure (Godkewitsch, 1976).

Theories

Billig (2005) suggests that theories of humour reflect philosophical and political perspectives of the historical times in which they were conceived and he traces original humour theories back to Aristotle, Plato and Socrates. Raskin (1985) highlights that some broad groups of theories can be identified in literature grounded in philosophy, psychology, anthropology and sociology.

Three key theoretical perspectives underly the reasons why people laugh or experience humour. Raskin (1985) labels these categories cognitive-perceptual, social-behavioural, and psychoanalytical theories of humour. The cognitive-perceptual theories relate to elements of incongruity believed to exist in most (if not all) humour and are generally known as ‘incongruity’ theories (Attardo, 1997; Barsoux, 1993; Cohen, 1999; Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990; Fry & Allen, 1976; Mc Ghee, 1979; Ritchie, 1999; Wilson, 1979). Socio-behavioural theories are those that use forms of disparagement and are more commonly referred to as superiority theories (Bergson, 1911; Douglas, 1999; Freud, 1905; Gruner, 1997; Hobbes, 1640). The psychoanalytical group of theories made famous by Freud (1905) are those that deal with elements of suppression and repression. These theories propose that humour offers a function of *relief* or a *release* from tension

and they are commonly called either the release or relief theories (Douglas, 1999; Freud, 1905; Weick & Westley, 1996; Wilson, 1979).

There is debate and dissension over some of the main tenets of each group of theories, depending on which academic discipline they are more closely associated with and according to each researcher's perspective and world-view. However, there is some identifiable common ground where researchers agree inside the theory categories as well as some overlap between each of the categories of theory. One of the key precepts that researchers have identified is the idea that incongruity is apparent in most forms of humour.

Incongruity theories

Incongruity is the most popular class of humour theories (Raskin, 1985). Prevalent in modern psychological research, incongruity occurs when an expectation is created in some way, such as in a joke format, and is then transformed into a different resolution than was expected. This often abrupt change, known as the 'punch line' in a joke format, surprises the audience into the explosive expression of laughter. The following example illustrates the technique of taking the readers'/listeners' thoughts in one direction and surprising that expectation with the unexpected conclusion.

Question: Do you believe in clubs for young people?

Answer: Only when kindness fails (W. C. Fields cited in Schulz, 1976).

There is ambiguity in the question contained in the double meaning of the word 'clubs' represented as social groups in the question but interpreted as big sticks in the incongruous response, surprising the listener and creating amusement.

There is popular acceptance among humour researchers that this discrepancy between what is expected to happen and what actually happens is a feature of much humour and that the bigger the discrepancy, the funnier the joke (Duncan et al., 1990; McGhee, 1979; Ritchie, 1999; Wilson, 1979). Incongruity comes from 'the violation of expectations' (Duncan et al., 1990, p. 259) and the surprise, unexpectedness and incompatibility

provide the humour (Fry & Allen, 1976). Bergson (1911) describes facets of humour that occur when something unexpected happens, such as a person missing the chair as he tries to sit, or the runner who falls. He suggests that humour arises from their '*mechanical elasticity*' (p. 10) which is both accidental and unexpected and therefore laughable. Absurdity and nonsense also fit into this theoretical category as some incongruous humour has absurd conclusions (Raskin, 1985).

Westwood (2004) emphasises that incongruity must be moderate within joking structures and points out that the humour emerges in the resolution of the conflict which brings relief from the perpetuated confusion within the joke. Tension is built in the early part of a joke but treads a fine line between being too extreme which may create anxiety or too weak which dissolves the comedy. Westwood's (2004) emphasis on the relief and resolution components of incongruous humour highlights the theoretical overlap between this group of humour theories and the relief theories discussed later.

Superiority theories

A far more contentious group of humour theories propose that people laugh at each other out of a feeling of superiority or supremacy. This superiority assertion is largely attributed to Hobbes (1640) who suggested that we laugh at another's misfortune, stupidity or clumsiness because at that instant we are not ourselves unfortunate, clumsy or stupid and thus momentarily feel superior to the person in this situation.

Men laugh at mischances and indecencies wherein there lieth no wit nor jest at all...also men laugh at the *infirmities* of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated...for what is else the recommending of ourselves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmity or absurdity? (Hobbes, 1640, p. 45, emphasis in original).

Koestler (1964) attributes superiority theories to Aristotle, Descartes, Cicero and also Hobbes. He contends that these early philosophers related laughter to debasement, degradation and the deformity of others and superiority arose from comparisons of self with those afflicted with some infirmity. Billig (2005) extensively reviews the history of superiority theories and suggests that philosophers such as Hobbes (1640) and Freud (1905) both saw laughter as a rebellious activity. He uses this contention to suggest that

modern humour scholars are misguided in viewing humour as an overwhelmingly positive activity. These positivist humour exponents neglect the negative aspects of humour. Billig (2005) contends that humour used to ridicule others is a deliberately neglected area of humour research as it is problematic and the common and popular approach portrays humour as 'pure creative enjoyment' (p. 2). When discussing humour theories, Billig (2005) suggests that superiority theories of humour examine the motives of the person who laughs, contrasting with the incongruity theories which identify features that stimulate laughter.

Raskin (1985) agrees that superiority theories offer an explanation of why we laugh but limits the extent of this amusement theory to minor mishaps only, suggesting that serious accidents are not opportunities for laughter. It appears that expressing laughter and amusement at another person's expense or mishap only occurs when it is obviously apparent that they are not seriously harmed. Westwood (2004) concurs that 'genuine tragedy and comedy cannot occupy the same space' (p. 785). Therefore superiority theories have limiting boundaries and conditions, and humour occurs only within a set framework of acceptability. There appears to be little research on the limits and tolerances of such boundaries and this could even offer a potential area for further research posing questions such as: where is the line between funny and not funny?

Gruner (1997) and Hobbes (1640) used metaphors of war and games in explanations of superiority and Douglas (1999) endorses this position suggesting that tickling is funny to both babies and adults and constitutes a type of 'mock attack' that is amusing. Gruner (1997) compares superiority theories to a contest and suggests that laughter in situations where one feels superior is a victorious *release*. In discussing the *release* of laughter as a victory, an apparent overlap in theoretical perspectives becomes evident as it is this *release* function of humour that is discussed in the final category of theories based on psychoanalytical principles.

Bergson (1911) whose explanations of humour have components of both incongruity and superiority, contends that a situation where a man continues dancing after the music has stopped, or when a person stammers, is funny. According to Bergson (1911) this is

because the person behaves like an automaton with no control – like an inanimate object and thus there is humour in his stupidity. Using the phrase ‘something mechanical encrusted upon the living’ (p. 49) Bergson (1911) explains that the humour in these cases comes from the living human body becoming mechanical like a machine, and physical aspects of the body have overtaken the soul. The classic comedy scenario of someone slipping on a banana skin is explained by superiority theories of humour and in particular Bergson’s contention that losing control over one’s body renders one amusing.

Relief theories

The well-known term *comic relief* highlights the premise behind this group of theories that advocate that humour provides relief from boring, everyday reality (Westwood, 2004). Relief or release theories of humour are credited to philosophers such as Kant (1790) and Hartley (1749) who posited that people laugh out of relief when a threat has been removed (cited in Wilson, 1979). In mediaeval times, laughter was related to feasts and carnival times and ‘coincided with the permission for meat, fat and sexual intercourse’ (Bakhtin, 1965, p. 89) which contrasted with the stringencies of the religious Lent period. Freud (1905) suggests that laughter is a release and outlet for pent-up emotions such as aggression or sexual feelings. A release of psychic energy occurs when jokes free us from our inhibitions and the literature often associates this release with sex or aggression as these are two impulses that people generally try to control (Raskin, 1985). Koestler (1964) contends that laughter is used to release adrenalin and therefore operates as an overflow valve for the ‘disposal of redundant emotions’ (p. 62) and in particular aggressive emotions. Modern researchers highlight the safety-valve function of humour as it offers a safe outlet for feelings and thus prevents anti-social behaviour and promotes social harmony (Douglas, 1999; Eastman, 1936; Freud, 1905; Gruner, 1997; Morreall, 1983; Weick & Westley, 1996). Citing Freud’s (1905) theories regarding jokes and the unconscious, Douglas (1999) discusses how people filter and control their everyday actions but jokes allow elements of the unconscious to ‘break through’ and thus create freedom and enjoyment. Many of the relief/release theories contain this key Freudian element that conscious control is relaxed in jokes, offering participants freedom from usual norms and social strictures (Bowers & Smith, 2004). Critics of the

psychoanalytical group of theories based on relief point out that they fail to account for playful and nonsensical humour (Eastman, 1936).

An integrated perspective

Although each of the three categorical perspectives on humour has a different key premise, there is evidence of overlap between the groups as well as between theorists who have a 'boot in each camp' as they identify with some points from each theoretical perspective.

Although Hobbes (1640) is primarily recognised as the originator of superiority theories of humour, it is notable that he also highlights aspects of suddenness in regards to humour which aligns him theoretically with the incongruity proponents of humour.

The passion of laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory* arising from some sudden *conception* of some eminency in ourselves by *comparison* with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the *follies* of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance except they bring with them any present dishonour (Hobbes, 1640, p. 46, emphasis in original).

Modern researchers point to theoretical overlap in the work of Bergson (1911), and he is classified by some theorists as a superiority proponent while others consider his theories to take an incongruity position (La Fave, Haddad, & Maesen, 1976; Prusak, 2004). La Fave et al. (1976, p. 88) articulate this duality of position thus:

Bergsen's 'mechanical encrusted upon the living' means that when one accidentally (i.e. automatically or mechanically) commits a *faux pas* (incongruously non-conforms to a social norm) he becomes the butt, generating laughter (amusement) in others resulting from a feeling of superiority.

It appears that one single theory or group of theories is insufficient to explain the construct of humour and even among theorists subscribing to one particular classification there is apparent overlap, disagreement and opportunities for different interpretation. La Fave et al. (1976) attempt to encapsulate ingredients from multiple perspectives in this oft-cited definition:

The necessary ingredients of an adequate theory of humour would seem to involve a (1) sudden (2) happiness increment (such as a feeling of superiority or

heightened self-esteem) as a consequence of a (3) perceived incongruity (in Chapman & Foot, 1976, p. 89).

Although the definition appears to encapsulate the construct of humour reasonably effectively and offers a useful summary of humour theories, the definition does not offer the relief or release component promulgated by psychoanalytical researchers. Therefore the theoretical position assumed here will consider the construct of humour to be that which may have elements of sudden or unexpected events (incongruity), where a feeling of superiority may occur, and the response to the humour (such as laughing or smiling) might offer a form of release from tension or normal social strictures (relief).

It is apparent that the three theoretical groups supplement each other in their overlapping components and are complementary when considered as an integrated explanation of humour. The three groups of theories have been summarised succinctly by Raskin (1985). He maintained that the incongruity theories relate to a humour stimulus; the superiority theories emphasise relations or attitudes between people; and the relief theories relate to the feelings and psychology of the participants. The three groups of theories summarise the key points of each perspective only and there are many other specific elements of humour addressed within these broad group categories, such as the script-based theories discussed more fully by Raskin (1985) in his semantic-focused book. Raskin (1985) limits humour analysis to verbal humour and although such linguistic and script-based semantic deconstruction can be extremely useful, such limitations will not be made in this project. In order to establish the links between humour and organisational culture, a broader analysis of humour will be required that deals with the variety of humour forms found inside modern organisations. This may include forms of humour that have physical elements such as those found in some practical jokes and therefore are not as readily explained by semantic, script-based analyses.

Anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown (1940) emphasises that joking is highly contextual and that, in order to understand joking relationships, research must focus upon the social structure where humour occurs. Work-based humour is highly contextual and specific to the organisations in which it occurs and to the participants in the organisations. In order

to address the context for this research project, this review will now address humour research specific to organisations and literature regarding humour at work.

Humour at work

‘Organisations are full of jokes and humour’ (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999, p. 103) and humorous talk is a constant accompaniment to serious business talk in companies. Organisation studies are beginning to recognise the importance of humour in the workplace and acknowledge that humour and joking are a feature of organisational life (Collinson, 2002). In the past twenty years there has been increasing interest in humour in organisations (Westwood & Rhodes, 2007). Workplace humour is an important topic that offers insights into organisational behaviour and humour can have both positive and negative outcomes in organisations (Duncan et al., 1990). Humour is associated with the ‘contradictions, inconsistencies and incoherence’ of organisations and can help researchers to study paradox and ambiguity which are prevalent in work contexts (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993, p. 505). Humour is a communication behaviour and is understudied especially in employment settings (Allen, Reid, & Riemenschneider, 2004).

Context

One of the difficulties when studying and discussing humour is that it can never be replicated in a different context from the one in which it occurred (Bowers & Smith, 2004) and therefore researchers uniformly emphasise the context in which humour occurs as being a key variable in the humour (Barsoux, 1993; Chapman & Foot, 1976; Cohen, 1999; Douglas, 1999; Duncan et al., 1990; Grugulis, 2002; Morreall, 1983; Palmer, 1994; Raskin, 1985; Wilson, 1979; Zillman & Cantor, 1976). Jokes and the sharing of humour express the social situation in which they occur (Douglas, 1999) and turn an individual experience into a collective one (Cosser, 1959). Joking and humour are not present in just the utterance but are part of the entire social situation or context (Douglas, 1999). Laughter usually occurs with others (Bergson, 1911; Douglas, 1999) and particularly when participants share similar values and beliefs (Chapman & Foot, 1976; Terrion & Ashforth, 2002). Laughing together implies that individuals in a group like each other

and can work or live together (Cohen, 1999) and humour is social and contagious; one person's laughter reinforces the laughter of others (Morreall, 1983).

Humour is the result of an appraisal process in which the individual can explain the mirthful behaviour to himself as fully or partly caused by stimuli which are considered funny in his cultural environment (Zillman & Cantor, 1976, p.111).

Therefore it would appear that any study of workplace humour needs to be undertaken within actual organisations in order to consider the highly contextual nature of the construct and to fully understand the humorous situation and its implications.

Types of humour and responses to humour

As already discussed, humour is a highly contextual phenomenon and the situation and participants strongly influence forms of, and responses to, humour. Audiences or respondents to humour can affect the humour used in situations by their responses to the humour. For instance, loud spontaneous laughter in response to a joke will reinforce the 'joker' and he/she is more likely to repeat the joke in future similar settings. Conversely, humour that generates a non-response or a hostile reaction is likely to fizzle out and might not be repeated in a different setting with a different type of group (Dewitte & Verguts, 2001). Therefore, when studying humour it appears useful to study both the creation of humour as well as responses to humour. Barsoux (1996) defines spontaneous humour as that which is 'rooted in a particular context' (p. 500) whereas standardised humour is exemplified by cartoons on a wall or 'canned' jokes that are scripted.

Humour has been well-researched by linguistic scholars who have analysed humour texts and used script-based techniques to explain humour (Attardo, 1997; Attardo, 2001; Raskin, 1985). When discussing Raskin's (1985) semantic theory for analysing jokes, Morreall (2004) summarises the five factors necessary for verbal humour: (1) a switch from a serious mode of communication to joking communication must occur; (2) a text for the joke; (3) two overlapping scripts that are compatible with the text; (4) an opposition relation between the two scripts; and (5) a trigger realising the opposition relation. Morreall (2004) argues that prepared jokes can be analysed following this format but emphasises that it does not apply to all verbal humour. Prepared (fictional) jokes are a form of sophisticated verbal humour that has special features not necessarily

present in other verbal humour. Such jokes are repeatable texts and can be understood out of their context which is different to situational humour where ‘you had to be there’ (Morreall, 2004). He points to the ‘cognitive restructuring of text at the punch line’ (p. 396) apparent in formal jokes but emphasises that anecdotes describe incongruity in everyday life and can be funny but have no ‘semantic tricks’ as in formal structured jokes. Morreall (2004, p. 396) accuses script theories of adding ‘theoretical baggage’ to simple stories and asserts that the semantic theories do not add any further explanations to simple anecdotes. Norrick (2004) agrees that many jokes are outside the realm of script theory analyses and highlights jokes that depend on performance for their humour, and he argues that linguistic humour analyses exclude non-verbal humour.

Functions of humour

Although usually perceived as a positive construct, humour can have negative impacts and functions. Workplace humour is often specifically targeted at a particular butt and hopes to amuse its audience of co-workers and colleagues (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999). Humour at work can be used as a tool against management (Critchley, 2007) and is often offensive and subversive (Westwood, 2007). Physical humour, sometimes called horseplay may disrupt work, damage property, pose a safety hazard or have a malicious intent. ‘Horseplay in the workplace is frequently the result of employee attempts to be humorous sometimes with disastrous results’ (Duncan et al., 1990, p. 274). Bradney (1957) found that although horseplay was rare in retail situations, it was more common among young males. In research where members of Department X were encouraged to play physically in a fun room, Warren and Fineman (2007) found that several department members felt humiliated and embarrassed as a result of this physical-style humour. They cautioned that fun and humour at work can elicit both positive and negative responses.

Humour has an important social function in the workplace (Lundberg, 1969) and can minimise status differences between leaders and subordinates, break down barriers between people and assist organisations to be more responsive (Barsoux, 1996; Holmes & Marra, 2002a). Malone (1980) calls workplace humour a ‘double-edged sword’ (p. 357) because what one person considers to be funny may be offensive to another.

Spontaneous humour that occurs inside organisations is a vital communication channel that can be used to convey serious messages (Collinson, 2002). Humour is one of the channels for facilitating upwards communication between subordinates and managers and managers can use humour to draw out information from employees (Barsoux, 1996). 'Humour helps to reconcile the contradiction between hierarchy and collegiality' (Barsoux, 1996, p. 502). Barsoux (1996) contends that humour achieves these hierarchical communication functions because when using humour, leaders must show something of themselves. Using humour is a way of coping with the confusion and paradoxes inherent in most organisations and gives organisational jokers a chance to vent their frustration or anxiety. Thus humour transforms 'worrying inconsistencies into a source of amusement to be celebrated with others' (Barsoux, 1996, p. 503). Although humour may not actually change organisational situations, it makes them more bearable. Humour may assist with defusing negative emotions and employees can distance themselves from emotions at work through using humour (Grugulis, 2002).

Humour also helps to convey messages upwards that may be difficult for lower-level employees to make otherwise. Under the guise of humour, subordinates can express their displeasure about facets of work to managers without the risk of reprisals. They can frame their remarks as 'just a joke' even though it contains true and serious elements or sentiments unexpressed by many. Humour may be a way of expressing aggressive or subversive attitudes in an acceptable manner (Barsoux, 1996; Holmes, 2000) and can be used to express cynicism and displeasure (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999). Humour allows people to relax together and express daring ideas that may be worked into useful organisational initiatives. Using humour may also allow subordinate workers to challenge the hubris of leaders (Kets de Vries, 1990) and offset 'toxic effects of power and uniformity' that can arise when leaders are unchallenged (Barsoux, 1996, p. 506).

Using humour at work can have effects that are not always positive. These range from humour as a form of control by those in power and as a form of subversion or challenge by those of lower status (Holmes & Marra, 2002b). Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) distinguish between humour that is motivated by 'Nothing more than joyous delight in

having fun' (p. 104) and humour that is aimed or targeted in some way to make a specific point.

Scholars such as Koestler (1964) highlight the link between humour and creativity and Barsoux (1996) emphasises this in the organisational context when he suggests that humour uses divergent thinking and therefore encourages creativity and innovation in the workplace. Greenberg (2005) supports these positions and cites the example of IDEO, a North American company that has become very successful by nurturing creativity through the sharing of humour, fun and play. By 'acting goofy' (p. 392) and encouraging workplace play this company believes that barriers are broken down, ideas shared more freely and innovative new designs are created. Not only has this company achieved product design success but it is also now teaching its methods for stimulating creativity through humour.

Collinson (2002) highlights the growing tendencies from functionalist, prescriptive researchers to exhort managers to use workplace humour as a useful tool to achieve objectives. He contends that more critical approaches are required. He criticises functionalist approaches as being 'one-dimensional' and states that they neglect power effects and resistance humour in organisations. He argues that humour cannot 'be packaged like a commodity' (p. 279) and that artificially attempting to create a 'fun' culture is likely to be counter-productive in organisations.

Humour, power and status

Westwood (2004) emphasises the long-held relationship between humour and power relations and links this relationship back to the superiority theories of humour conceptualised by Hobbes (1640) and to the empirical anthropological research of Radcliffe-Brown (1940). The anthropological stance that humour is a 'peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940, p. 196) suggests that workplace humour is important in defining status and power relationships in organisations (Duncan et al., 1990). However, there is little consensus regarding the effects of workplace status on humour. Lundberg (1969) asserts that workplace peers have more fun than higher-status colleagues but that lower-rank workers are unlikely to

make higher-status colleagues the butt of their joke. Such studies suggest the existence of a joking monopoly that gives managers and higher-status employees more freedom to joke but subsequent research has found little support for this suggestion (Duncan et al., 1990) and suggests that using humour mitigates status differences (Duncan, 1982). In an early study exploring humour use in a department store, Bradney (1957) found that joking is more prevalent among people of the same status but that higher-status people would instigate humour with subordinates in order to maintain good relationships. Lower status members could use humour with higher status people and temporarily achieve equality. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) also emphasise that humour can be a useful tool to mitigate status differences between workplace groups or individuals.

Conversely, other researchers state that humour is a 'status-related activity' (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001, p. 123) and is more often used for hierarchy building than to develop cohesiveness. Those with higher status are more likely to produce humour as their jokes are more likely to elicit positive reactions due to their positions. High-status individuals can enhance their positive identity as leaders by using humour to deliver directives and criticisms (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). However, Collinson (2002) warns that managerial humour may backfire and incite cynicism and mistrust. He claims that as more men are managers, managerial humour may be gendered, aggressive and sexual and therefore insulting to some employees. He concludes that humour may emphasise workplace status differences and create conflict and tension.

Gender

The concept of gender is an important consideration when examining organisational culture (Schnurr, 2005). Gender dominance is an assumption of most feminist theories and these theories are preoccupied with women's status in a male-dominated society. Gender is an important factor of organisation studies and equality and equity continue to elude women. In early feminist theories, gender has been conceptualised as the difference in biological characteristics, but more recently gender research is concerned with aspects of experience, cultural practices and processes of power relations. Feminist theoretical positions are important to highlight organisational issues (Calás & Smircich, 2006).

Gender has organisational impacts in regard to gendered workplaces and in roles enacted by individual organisational members (Schnurr, 2005). Feminine workplaces are more open, concerned with supportive relationships, collaboration and interpersonal dimensions (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). Gender scholars argue that bureaucratic organisations are inherently masculine with power structures that exclude women (Crompton, 2006). However, Crompton suggests that it is not helpful to perceive organisations as either masculine or feminine but instead to consider social practices and the ways in which gender is played out inside organisations.

Gender also influences humour styles and usage (Holmes, Marra & Burns, 2001) but there are only a few studies that examine the 'gendered character of humour in organisational contexts' (Johnston et al., 2007, p. 114). Humour researchers that have investigated gender effects upon humour use and styles, found that women leaders can effectively use humour to perform leadership actions and lessen the risk of being perceived as unfeminine (Schnurr, 2005). Using humour is a way to balance their gender and professional identities. Hay (1994) found that masculine workplaces were associated with competitiveness, and were more focused on organisational outcomes than on relationships. Men use more jocular abuse and their banter is more competitive (Hay, 1994) and women's humour is often exhibited more privately (Hay, 2000). There are also gender differences when telling jokes. 'Men tell more jokes and tell more successful jokes' (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001, p. 135). Women tell more jokes than men do but only when they are among other women with no men present (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). Women laugh more than men in both single-gender and mixed-gender groups. However women's laughter is more associative and supportive, whereas men laugh more at their own contributions to humour (Easton, 1994). Men and women also have different reactions when it comes to fun activities at work and the next section looks at the concept of organisational fun.

Fun and play

There has been little academic research into the concept of organisational fun and this topic appears to have been adopted by prescriptive management writers exhorting the benefits of 'fun cultures'. Workplace fun has been emphasised in organisational culture

writings particularly from the popular guru writers of the eighties who declared that strong cultures can be created and built. Popular management writers (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Kanter, 1983; Peters & Waterman, 1982) enthusiastically proclaim that creating fun at work is a key feature of strong cultures and leads to increased productivity and innovation (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Deal and Kennedy (1982) identified a *work-hard, play-hard* culture in companies that combined hard work with workplace fun. However, there is a danger for companies that attempt to manufacture a fun or play culture that organisational members may feel that such cultures are imposed. Therefore contrived workplace fun may be greeted with cynicism by workers (Fleming, 2005).

Another issue is that of the conflict between corporate objectives and fun. Some researchers question how far fun can go before it hinders productivity (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Due to the paucity of research into workplace fun, once again a definition has proved elusive. The *Collins English Dictionary* (2003) defines fun: *a source of enjoyment, amusement, diversion, pleasure, gaiety, merriment, jest or sport, frivolous activity*. This definition implies that fun, though enjoyable, is not necessarily *funny* and there is also an implied active element to fun. Fun may also be associated with the idea of play and Costea, Crump and Holm (2005) discuss a Dionysian (a childlike God) perspective of workplace play, suggesting that managers are increasingly attempting to incorporate fun and play into work. They raise the question, ‘Is management appropriating the concepts of fun and play or is play colonising management and making it imperative in modern cultures for workplace experiences to be more childlike and enjoyable?’

Many organisational culture writers assume that fun cultures stimulate humour, are desirable inside organisations, and that they help to boost productivity (Fleming, 2005). The importance of workplace fun appears to have been assumed from adopting the perspectives of these prescriptive culturists. However, research supporting this imperative appears to be scanty. Culture and humour literature emphasises the relationship between fun and productivity and treats workplace fun as a tool that managers can use to enhance performance and develop organisational culture (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Recent research asks the question: is managed fun a new form of

workplace control? (Warren & Fineman, 2007) This research regarding fun in a specific department suggests that 'managed fun is an oxymoron' (p. 93) and that the terms are contradictory. Prescribed fun will often fail as it is oppressive and may stimulate rebellious (or real) fun and humour that mocks the managed fun (Warren & Fineman, 2007). Fleming (2005) agrees that fun cultures are not necessarily desirable to all organisational participants and may be met with cynicism and distaste. However, he also believes that having fun at work may blur the boundaries between work and non-work and therefore make work more like leisure or play activities that are more enjoyable. Humour artificially created by management has the potential to backfire and create cynicism and unhappiness (Collinson, 2002; Fleming, 2005). Managers have to be careful using humour as there are many variables associated with it including individual differences such as gender, age and culture (Malone, 1980).

To add to the terminological confusion and indecision, when discussing the concept of fun at work the term *play* is often used synonymously as part of this concept. Costea, Crump and Holm (2005) contemplate modern organisational cultures and in their exploration of workplace play refer repeatedly to workplace 'fun'. Dictionary definitions of *play* contain references to games, sport or diversion and amusing oneself (Collins, 2003). Dandridge (1986) discusses the work/play dichotomy and contends that fun at work is associated with play rather than work. Play at work is being fostered and generated by modern managers and is becoming part of a 'wide spread of playfulness and fun as imperatives throughout the cultural body of the West' (Costea et al., 2005, p. 140). The ideals of fun and play may influence managerial initiatives and boundaries between work and play are being blurred. This is creating new relationships between work, enjoyment, well-being and performance (Costea et al., 2005). Adopting a fun and playful focus is changing managerial practices and emphasising personal well-being as well as productivity (Costea et al., 2005).

Those endorsing prescribed workplace fun contend that using *humour* creates a fun-filled environment which in turn creates a desirable place to work that enhances productivity and reduces absenteeism (Santovec, 2001). Collinson (2002) cites American companies such as Southwest Airlines, Ben & Jerry's, Sun Microsystems and Kodak that have

created fun committees to plan events and encourage playfulness in the workplace. Current cultural trends suggest that playing (hard) and working (hard) are now synonymous rather than dichotomous and that adopting a fun and playful approach inside organisations is a useful tool for managers to achieve organisational goals. The concepts of fun and play appear to be closely related and aligned with the concept of humour. Therefore fun and play must be considered when discussing workplace humour as they may have implications within organisations for managers and workers. There appears to be an emerging imperative for companies to offer play, fun and humour as part of the modern work experience.

Outcomes from humour use

The research discussed in the preceding section implies links between humour and fun and organisational outcomes such as productivity. There is very little literature linking humour to organisational outcomes but there is some research that links the concept of fun cultures to outcomes such as performance and job satisfaction.

Job satisfaction concerns the degree to which people like (or dislike) their jobs. Attitudinal factors are predominant in job satisfaction studies and relate to employees' attitudes and feelings about the different aspects of their jobs (Spector, 1997). Job satisfaction is one of the most researched organisational outcomes and several different scales have been developed to measure this factor. The limitations of using an already established scale such as the *Job satisfaction survey* (JSS; Spector, 1988 in Spector 1997) or the *Minnesota Satisfaction questionnaire* (MSQ; Weiss, Dawis, England & Lofquist, 1967 in Spector 1997) are that research is limited to the facets that developers have placed in the tool. Although Spector (1997) lists fourteen facets of job satisfaction, these do not include humour and/or fun and these facets are also not included in any of the other scales examined. Although humour is not generally a factor included in job satisfaction scales, Spector (1997) does consider factors of the workplace environment that affect satisfaction and potentially humour could be considered a factor that affects the job environment and therefore impacts upon satisfaction. Greenberg (2005) supports such a contention by stating that humour at work can create good moods in employees which affects their work behaviour. People report greater job satisfaction when they are

in positive moods. He then links humour and good mood to performance outcomes by suggesting that positive moods improve employees' cooperation which positively affects performance. Greenberg (2005) also links humour and moods to recruitment outcomes and contends that organisations such as the US Air Force now consider factors such as mood classification and emotional intelligence in their recruitment initiatives.

Literature on organisational culture and humour emphasises that fun may boost production but this relationship is under-researched (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Roy (1958) explored the social interaction between groups of factory machine operators and found that the fun and humour by these workers constituted a form of psychological survival to offset the demands of monotonous work tasks. In the factory, management style was laissez-faire and therefore the work group was left to its own devices for job satisfaction. The forms of humour varied from outbursts of horseplay to nonsense and themed ongoing jokes and pranks. Activities barely interrupted work activities but provided a refreshing pause in the workers' day and, most significantly made time move along (seemingly) more quickly because it was punctuated by frequent humorous outbreaks. The day was segmented into a selection of different 'times' in which different jokes were enacted. For example, every day the call 'banana time' went out and one worker's banana would be taken from his lunchbox and devoured by his co-workers causing much hilarity for the group. Although such humorous interludes improved working life for this group, no evidence was found that such relief humour actually boosted production in any way (Roy, 1958).

Although literature supports the link between happiness and performance, Hosie, Sevastos and Cooper (2006) suggest that there is a lack of empirical evidence in this area. They reassess the *happy-productive worker* thesis and their research investigates the relationship between managers' happiness, job satisfaction and performance. They conclude that although there may not be a clear causal relationship; happiness, satisfaction and performance are linked and that workplace conditions that improve the quality of managers' lives may result in positive organisational outcomes. A study of fun and job satisfaction in health care workers offers some preliminary evidence that having fun at work results in employees that are more satisfied with their jobs, but it also

concludes that more research is needed in this area (Peluchette & Karl, 2005). Barsoux (1996) links humour to organisational productivity and considers humour to be an 'organisational resource' (p. 500). He states that humour use is 'rarely trivial or random' (p. 500) but operates as a vital communication channel inside companies. Several researchers have linked workplace humour use to improved performance and cite successful companies such as Southwest Airlines which have encouraged humour use to improve service levels from aircrew (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999; Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

Personal factors such as being funny can have impacts on job satisfaction (Spector, 1997), and people that joke are more popular. In the workplace, people prefer to work in groups that have more fun (Bradney, 1957). Although Roy (1959) found that humour relieved boredom for factory machine operators, he found no evidence that the frequent and ongoing humour use that he observed boosted production and suggests that it may even have had the opposite effect and may distract workers from their tasks. He did, however, highlight the positive effect that using humour had on retention and suggests that using humour makes a monotonous, boring job bearable and therefore these workers were able to stay in these jobs through their use of 'the mock aggressions of horseplay' (Roy, 1959, p. 167). Arthur (2001) contends that taking a break to have some fun provides stress relief for workers which leads to improved productivity at work and better retention of employees. She cites the example of Remedy Corp Software Company that implemented fun activities and improved productivity and doubled its retention rates compared with the industry average.

Recently there has been recognition of the positive connection between workplace humour and productivity (Collinson, 2002). The idea that having fun at work may be important is becoming a more popular notion (Arthur, 2001). Understanding the relationship between humour and organisational outcomes may help managers to use humour in a way that produces superior performance (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Romero and Cruthirds (2006) produced a model of humour selection and styles to help managers use humour successfully for positive outcomes. They argue that while jokes are most successful by those with humour delivery skills, managers can choose forms of

humour that don't require comedic talent and may use comic strips or video clips to enhance meetings and work activities. However, although if used well humour can be enjoyable and productive, when used inappropriately or poorly it can detract and have negative impacts (Fatt, 2002). Using humour to mock or tease co-workers for improper workplace actions may discourage poor performance or undesirable behaviour by suggesting that such behaviour should not be repeated (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). However, Clouse and Spurgeon (1995) warn that managers who allow sexual and racial humour risk damaging organisational performance and risk legal repercussions.

Most of the literature that links humour to organisational outcomes does so through a cultural lens and exemplifies claims of such links by citing well-known successful companies such as Southwest Airlines, Kodak, and Ben & Jerry's that have fun cultures (Greenberg, 2005; Mathis & Jackson, 2007). Such literature implies that creating a fun culture that includes humour can assist companies in business outcomes such as improved performance and recruitment.

Specific individuals are more inclined to create organisational humour and the next section reviews literature regarding such characters who are labelled as 'jokers'.

Jokers

Within organisations, there are individuals who are more likely to create and encourage humour, joking and fun. Some of the labels that have been assigned to such individuals include *jester*, *joker*, *clown* and *fool* (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Duncan & Feisal, 1990; Kahn, 1989). The term *joker* is used to discuss and identify individuals who are key humour instigators and creators. Clowning at work is commonplace and is not popular with management as it can waste time or distract people from their work and implies a 'rejection of disciplined and even ordered behaviour' (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999, p. 106).

The role of a jester or fool has a long history dating back to the first half of the sixteenth century (Charles, 1945; Fisher & Fisher, 1983) and jesting activities took place in the courts and houses of nobility (Happe, 1996). Fools participated in religious and royal processions, theatrical performances, and were accepted by all social classes.

Historically jokers could ignore conventions of behaviour and disregard the consequences of their foolish actions. They created an alternative reality that operated under different rules. They may have been disruptive, but assumed a social function that challenged moral sentiments of the time (Berger, 1997). These traditional jesters were seen as being wise and could, through their clever use of humour, offer criticism to those in authority without confrontation or fear of repercussions (Bakhtin, 1965).

Similar to the court jesters of mediaeval times, modern organisations require a joker to avoid excesses of power and reaffirm reality (Barsoux, 1996; Kets de Vries, 1990). When investigating humour use in workplace meetings, Holmes and Marra (2002b) found that in every meeting there was one individual who contributed more humour than others and they attribute this to the extroverted personalities of such individuals. Corporate ‘fools’ have a useful purpose in organisations; they build bonds within groups and avoid confrontation through using humour (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995). However, they risk their own promotional opportunities in a similar way to mediaeval court jesters who were not promoted to higher roles. Clowns at work are both subversive and heroic (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999) and operate in a similar way to traditional jesters by parodying authority figures and attacking directives using humour as a safety shield (Barsoux, 1996). Authority figures such as managers only succeed in looking churlish if they take offence at the joker’s jibes (Westwood, 2004).

Although Kahn (1989) suggests that the role of the joker may be unofficially assigned to those willing to accept it, Wenger (1998) argues that such roles are negotiated within the joker’s organisational community as members engage with and relate to one another. Barsoux (1996) agrees that the joker role is self-appointed and can be a dangerous one as ‘challenging the dominant view is apt to prejudice one’s career advancement’ (p. 506). ‘People who both generate a lot of jokes and are sensitive to negative appraisal will be considered to be humorous by their peers’ (Dewitte & Verguts, 2001, p. 37) and these individuals are the ones most likely to assume the role of joker in their work group. The joker is likely to be in the core group of the organisation and is an active social participant at the heart of the organisational community (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The joker often takes responsibility for ensuring that funny events (such as a

practical joke played on someone) are retold to as many colleagues as possible, thus encouraging greater social participation and creating communal histories. A joker can achieve role distance through the trust established in group relationships and this role distance allows him/her to get away with behaviour that may disrespect others (Fine & De Soucey, 2005).

Work groups construct joking cultures that are often lead by the joker. The joker achieves high social status in his/her group and can get away with jokes and behaviour that may be considered shocking or inappropriate for others (Charles, 1945; Douglas, 1999). The joker performs some key functions within organisations, such as: challenging management; pushing the boundaries; developing the culture; and providing relief from stress and pressure (Plester & Orams, 2007). However, as emphasised in the following quote, social knowledge is imperative to successfully assume the joker role.

The joker must know the target (and the audience), and the target and the audience must know the joker. This relationship gives the joker the *right* to joke. However, it does more; it gives the joker the authority to ‘get away’ with the joke (Fine & De Soucey, 2005, p. 3. Emphasis in original).

Workplace jokers play an important role in maintaining and developing organisational culture through their use of humour. Their joking activities highlight the organisational situations where the constructs of humour and culture operate synonymously and this overlap will be investigated further.

2.3 The gap in the literature.

Humour is universal and there is no human culture without humour (Berger, 1997). Clouse and Spurgeon (1995) explore humour literature in relation to organisational culture and leadership and emphasise that there are very few studies on organisational humour. They surmise that humour is a symbol of organisational culture and that the patterns of humour in an organisation can be interpreted to determine the meaning of workplace occurrences. They suggest that thriving corporate cultures are enriched by humour and cite North American companies Southwest Airlines and Kodak as good examples of successful companies that have humour as a key part of their culture.

‘Productive camaraderie’ (p. 4) is based on goals, values, rituals and humour and using humour is one factor that builds a sociable atmosphere that augments employee performance (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995).

Humour is a powerful form of symbolic activity and often its importance is unrecognised and underestimated. ‘Humour is an important feature of workplace culture’ (Holmes, 2007, p. 7) and each organisation has a mix of humour features that includes dimensions of amounts of humour, types of humour and humour style. Within organisational cultures, boundaries for acceptable and competent behaviour are often established using a humorous framework (Linstead, 1985). Over time, groups develop joking cultures full of humorous references known to the group members and these are used for building more humorous interaction (Fine & De Soucey, 2005). Members of the group understand these references and they offer possibilities for further interaction. Those involved in joking relationships must ‘belong to the same social system and accept its frame of reference’ (Dwyer, 1991, p. 5).

Humour reflects corporate values and assumptions and may hold important clues to the nature of the organisation (Barsoux, 1996). Understanding joking patterns is necessary to understand an organisation’s culture (Duncan et al., 1990) and humour can both change and reinforce organisational culture (Linstead, 1985). Kahn (1989) claims that humour helps an organisation sustain its culture and shared identity and Holmes and Stubbe (2003) also recognise the mutual relationship between humour and culture. They suggest that although humour is a distinctive feature of organisational culture, it also simultaneously assists in creating and maintaining organisational culture. Insights offered by humour interactions may also emphasise subcultures within organisations (Holmes & Marra, 2002a). Different organisations use different amounts of humour (Holmes & Marra, 2002b) and humour is an idiosyncratic facet of an organisation’s culture that makes it unique (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

Although Deal and Kennedy (1999) claim that fun and humour are key components for building strong cohesive cultures, Collinson (2002) cautions that manufacturing humour as a control technique reduces humour to a commodity that can be turned on or off by

management. Fleming (2005) undertook field research in a communication company to explore the popular assumption that fun cultures enhance organisational productivity and are enthusiastically embraced by employees. His findings suggest that although many employees do happily adopt managerially prescribed fun cultures there are groups of employees that meet such contrived efforts with cynicism and distaste. Management gurus (such as Deal & Kennedy (1982), Peters & Waterman, (1982)) enthusiastically endorse the notion of creating fun cultures inside organisations to avoid a work versus play dichotomy. This creates workplace atmospheres that lead to more enjoyment and pleasure at work and ultimately improve performance (Fleming, 2005). Fleming (2005) claims that the key aspect of this approach is the ‘symbolic blurring of the boundary’ (p. 286) between work and non-work. He clarifies that fun cultures attempt to create the conditions or context for fun to occur in contrast with traditional perceptions of work as serious business.

Fleming (2005) contends that practitioner literature regarding workplace fun makes the assumption that creating fun cultures will be accepted in a positive way by employees. He agrees that although some employees perceive fun cultures positively there are those who greet these programmes with scepticism and aversion. Many of his respondents felt patronised and stated that the fun initiatives were phony. Several of his respondents preferred dignity and respect in their workplace and did not enjoy obligatory participation in asinine fun activities. Fleming (2005) concludes that the secret to organisational fun may lie in self-management and autonomy rather than in formally created ‘fun cultures’. His research highlights that there are many facets of fun cultures that need further exploration, including the popular assumption that fun cultures are universally desired and an overwhelmingly positive factor within organisations.

Douglas (1999) classifies jokes and humour as symbols of a social, mental or physical experience and considers them a form of cultural rite. However, she takes this rite definition further and suggests that while rites impose order and harmony, joking is a special kind of rite that can disorganise groups as well as denigrate and devalue therefore it can have the opposite effect to a rite. She concludes that jokes are an ‘anti-rite’ (p. 155). Gabriel (1995) links stories, symbols and humour and suggests that subcultures

within organisational culture may use humour to ridicule organisational rites. He discusses 'fantasy' within companies and suggests that organisations may contain a wealth of unsupervised and spontaneous activity such as jokes, cartoons, nicknames and gossip. He further poses that this 'symbolic refashioning of organisational practices' (p. 479) is created purely in the interests of pleasure (Gabriel, 1995) but that one should also consider the possibility that humour used to ridicule rites and practices, although pleasurable for many, may also cause displeasure and harm.

Gabriel's (1995) research suggests that humorous and tragic stories offer insights into the organisational culture and often humour makes light of organisational difficulties, is self-mocking, proud, and defiant but stops just short of rebellion. Westwood (2004) supports this position in regards to subversive humour, stating that while humour can parody, satirise and deride organisational life, it cannot of itself actually subvert or overturn social systems. Therefore the relationship between humour and the organisation is one of 'adjacency and edgy juxtaposition, not opposition' (Westwood, 2004, p. 785). Using the example of Rabelais's carnival, Westwood (2004) suggests that the rebellious comedy prevalent in mediaeval times never succeeded in changing social reality but served to remind everyone of the constraints and fragility of everyday life. He asserts that although subversive humour has potential to promote misbehaviour, it remains at this level. It stops short of action and does not pose an actual threat to the authority structures of organisations.

Similar to Kunda's emphasis on culture as normative control is Lynch's (2002) contention that workplace humour is used as a type of control for 'establishing collective norms' (p. 436). Lynch suggests a model of humour as a control process. He suggests that workplace structure influences social practices and this affects organisational culture which in turn influences individuals' perceptions and behaviour. Organisational members use humour to identify with the organisation and also to distance and differentiate them from their organisational culture. Schnurr (2005) suggests that one way organisational culture is enacted is through using humour and that this reinforces, challenges, and modifies organisational culture.

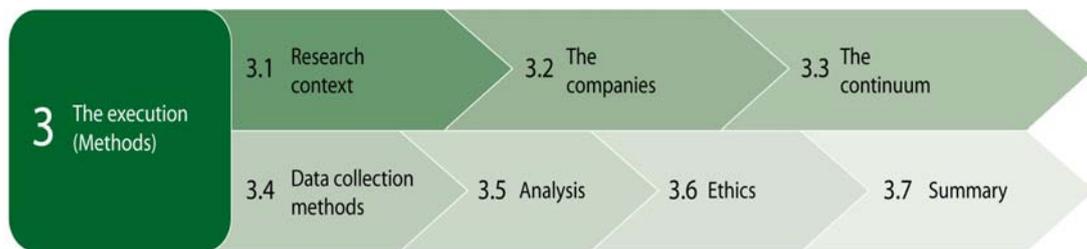
These researchers agree that workplace humour studies potentially offer useful insights into organisational culture, fun cultures, workplace norms and organisational difficulties. Only a few have continued research into these areas and it is apparent that a gap in the literature exists and there is much potential for workplace humour research. In the few studies that explore both organisational culture and humour there is one unifying theme, namely that this is an area worthy of further research. The literature offers a strong justification for humour and culture research projects and researchers believe that humour reflects cultural values and assumptions (Barsoux, 1996) and that it is necessary to understand humour and joking in an organisation in order to understand the culture (Duncan et al., 1990). Schnurr (2005) emphasises the potential for rewarding research into organisational culture through analysis of humour and joking styles and Martin (2002) highlights the need for further humour research inside organisations. Holmes and Marra (2002a) reflect that humour emphasises organisational subcultures and Linstead (1985) points out the role that humour plays in changing and reinforcing organisational culture. Researchers draw attention to the lack of empirical studies into organisational humour and fun and suggest that future studies should explore sequences of joking (Fine & De Soucey, 2005) and outcomes of fun and fun cultures (Peluchette & Karl, 2005). Johnston et al. (2007) claim that humour research in organisational contexts is an *impoverished* field.

This current research project was formulated to address the dearth of research that explores both humour and organisational culture and the influences that they have upon each other and upon key organisational processes, behaviours, and outcomes. The literature has highlighted that organisations are complex and can be viewed in different ways and from different perspectives (Westwood & Clegg, 2003). Organisational practices and processes can be examined and these organisational processes have varying levels of formality or informality that may influence culture, performance of tasks, and social behaviour (Morand, 1995). An organisation may also be seen as an entity constructed by those who are part of it and interpreted in different ways so that shared meaning varies (Smircich, 1983) and organisational participants form their own reality (Czarniawska 2003). All of these factors are important when researching organisations and the clearest message from the existing literature is that organisational culture,

humour, and fun require further research and are potentially valuable topics for understanding organisations and the people inside them.

Essential to this acknowledgement of the need for further research is the contention that future studies should employ multiple research methods and, in particular, observation of live humour interactions (Avolio et al., 1999). Researchers claim that organisational humour studies should be undertaken in real-world settings (Allen et al., 2004). The next chapter embraces these multi-method and real-world research imperatives and presents the suite of methods used to explore the humour/culture relationship in real organisational settings.

CHAPTER THREE: THE EXECUTION



3.1 Research context

This chapter presents the research methods and begins by contextualising the methods through discussing the main research goals, influences on the research, and my research philosophy. Justification is provided for the adopted research strategy and a continuum tool which was developed to compare the disparate organisations in the study is discussed. The continuum was developed to assess organisations on the basis of degrees of formality (or informality). Four companies participated in the research project and they were evaluated on this continuum before the data collection began and were then re-evaluated as part of the data collection.

The data methods are fully explained and justified and features of the project such as participant selection and the interview pilot study are discussed. Section 3.5 presents the analysis strategy used to manage and understand the data. This section comprises segments on coding, categorisation, themes, and connections. It also outlines the advantages of using NVivo7 software to assist with data management and analysis.

The chapter concludes with the ethical stance and strategy adopted in the research. This is necessarily a lengthy chapter due to the complexity of the research design, justification of this strategy, and the multiple methods adopted to fully explore the research question.

3.1.1 Research goals

The goal of this research was to investigate the influence of organisational culture on humour practices. This research subject is worthy of investigation because humour is

very important to people in their working life (Barsoux, 1993; Collinson, 2002; Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990; Grugulis, 2002) and literature has suggested that humour at work is a component of organisational culture that is important yet under-investigated (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995). A better understanding of the influence of organisational culture on humour enactment may help improve work experience and organisational outcomes.

3.1.2 Influences on the research

Humour is very important to me. My personal fascination and engagement with the topic of workplace humour comes from my own experiences of employment in companies where humour was valued and encouraged, as well as from one significant workplace experience where laughter was expressly discouraged and forbidden! Both had lasting impacts and fostered many questions about the relationship of workplace humour, the type of company, and possible outcomes affected by the presence (or lack) of humour. One immediate and personal outcome was that I left the humourless company very quickly, managing to work for only three months in such an environment. It was evident even during my short tenure that high staff turnover was a continual problem for this organisation and this stimulated my interest in the influence of humour upon organisational outcomes such as satisfaction and recruitment.

I must admit to an influence in my research that has arisen from a British television comedy, *The Office* (Gervais & Merchant, 2002) depicting an office manager obsessed with fostering humour in his workplace. Amusement for the audience is created as this manager adopts the joker role at all costs. This comedy, enacted in a *mockumentary* style that portrays a pseudo-documentary, has fascinated me and even assisted me in formulating research questions and presenting papers investigating workplace banter (Plester & Sayers, 2007), and the role of the joker at work (Plester & Orams, 2008).

My Masters thesis (Plester, 2003) investigated and identified functions of humour in three companies while raising further research questions that seemed worthy of consideration. During this research I became particularly interested in how organisational culture influenced humour, and how organisational formality effected the enactment of humour.

It appeared that levels of formality (or informality) were a major factor in the way that individuals behaved generally and specifically in the way that they used humour.

3.1.3 Research questions

This is an exploratory research question and the key overall research question being explored in this study is: *How does organisational culture influence the enactment of humour at work?* The following ten research questions support this main enquiry and break the fundamental question into smaller components that explore in greater depth the facets of culture and humour in order to understand their relationship. These ten research questions underpinned the questions asked in the semi-structured interviews and Table 8.1 (in Appendix A) presents the actual interview questions, the concepts that they are exploring, and the research question that they are attempting to answer using the abbreviations R1, R2, etc. to indicate the related research question.

- R.1.** What manifestations of culture are present in the organisations?
- R.2.** What manifestations of humour are present in the organisations?
- R.3.** Is there a definable culture? If so, what assumptions underpin it?
- R.4.** Are there subcultures or countercultures? If so what are these?
- R.5.** What effect do humour and/or culture have on organisational outcomes? (Perceptions of recruitment, satisfaction and performance.)
- R.6.** Does humour operate in similar ways in organisations in different companies?
- R.7.** How do levels of formality/informality influence the organisational culture?
- R.8.** How do levels of formality/informality influence the workplace humour?
- R.9.** How does humour influence the organisational culture?
- R.10.** How does the organisational culture influence the humour used?

The questions were iterative as they explored facets of both the humour and culture constructs. For example, Questions 1 and 2 aimed to explore manifestations of both constructs and guided the observation and document collection towards collecting

examples of both cultural and humorous articles. Question 3 attempted to identify whether or not there was an overall consensual organisational culture. If there was a dominant culture this question explored how it was manifested and enacted by organisational participants. Question 4 explored the possibility of a fragmented culture by investigating the existence of *subcultures* or *countercultures*. Questions 5 and 6 investigated the idea of linking humour use to outcomes of performance, satisfaction and recruitment and querying the way in which humour was used. Degrees of formality were examined as a comparative tool between the organisations and Questions 7 and 8 explored this potential connection. The final two questions investigated the influence of humour and organisational culture upon each other and were directly linked to the overall research question.

3.1.4 Research Philosophy

This project is primarily qualitative research which is ‘fundamentally interpretive’ (Creswell, 2003, p. 182). It is important to discuss research philosophies and assumptions as Bryman and Bell (2003) emphasise that research design is influenced by assumptions held by the researcher. There are two broad general paradigms of research: positivism and interpretivism. A paradigm incorporates the researcher’s ethics, epistemology, ontology and methodology. The major paradigms in qualitative research are “positivism, postpositivism, constructivism and participatory action frameworks” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 183). A positivist research position advocates that reality is created from a single truth which can be universally applied. This research perspective claims to be objective and value-free. Using this position in organisational research would involve studying parts of the organisation in isolation from each other (Davidson & Tolich, 1999). As humour and organisational culture are dependent on contextual elements the positivist paradigm did not appear to be an appropriate research position for this project.

Interpretive research assumes that knowledge is derived from the process of interpretation and that the researcher’s own world view and assumptions become part of the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The interpretive paradigm assumes that the world is ordered as a whole and is comprised of interwoven and complex variables that

must be researched in relation to one another. This approach argues that it is impossible to separate values and theory from research. Interpretive research aims to understand meaningful social action through precise descriptions of people's actions and words in a particular research context. Using a variety of different methods can strengthen findings in interpretive approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

There are several types of interpretive paradigms and one of these is the constructivist paradigm which is commonly used in ethnographic research and case studies.

Constructivism takes a relativist position and assumes that there are multiple realities within research. This position encourages exploratory research and multivoiced texts and may include a "passionate participant as a facilitator of multivoice reconstruction" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p.196). This suggests that research findings are co-created between researcher and respondent(s) and that naturalistic methods such as participant observation are useful.

Using a constructivist interpretive research approach involves "reflecting critically on the self as the researcher" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p.210). This means that the researcher must consider both the self that he/she brings to the research field and also the self that may be created while in the field. It is possible for a researcher to create a 'self' in response to the research situation. The researcher must consider his or her own interactions with respondents and interpretive research must consider "the circumstances that form the backdrop" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 6) to interpretations that are made. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) also contend that the richer the empirical research the stronger the support for interpretations.

My research assumptions are that there are multiple realities from different world views and that realities are co-created in organisational environments. My assumptions support an interpretive and constructionist research paradigm that is adopted as the philosophical position underpinning this project. Since the goal of this research is to understand elements of organisational culture and humour and the assumptions and values associated with these concepts, then a process of understanding and interpretation created with participants creates an understanding of their reality. As my own experience includes

participation in organisational environments some of my own experiences and assumptions will be similar to those of participants' and will influence the co-creation of interpretations. Therefore it is important during later research phases to consider the influence of my personal assumptions on analysis and discussion of findings. The variety of participant interpretations will also inform new findings and extend and enrich my own assumptions about the investigated topics. This interpretative position contrasts with positivist paradigms where the researcher's own experiences and assumptions have no part in the research.

My research design has been devised to explore interpretations that participants have of their organisational culture and humour. The data collection also allows for interpretations that may be created with participants through their interaction in the research process. By participating in the research process, participants may think specifically about the investigated phenomena. Thinking about and discussing their interpretations may develop a deeper understanding of their organisational culture and workplace humour. In sharing this process with the researcher new and deeper interpretations may emerge and thus result in the co-creation of interpretations about the studied topics. The data collection was designed to collect interpretive, meaningful and rich data from a variety of different companies.

3.2 The companies

The research was conducted inside four different companies. In total, eight companies were approached with access requests and four agreed to participate in the project. Approaches regarding access were made at senior management level via the CEO of each company. In the three larger-sized companies, the HR departments implemented the access arrangement and were the ongoing liaison point throughout the research. In the one small company that participated, all arrangements were made directly with the CEO. The four participating companies have been assigned noms-de-plume to protect their identity and will be known as Adare, Kapack, Sigma and Uvicon throughout this thesis.

The selection of companies for this research was purposeful and the companies that were chosen appeared to offer an environment that would help answer the key research

questions. 'Purposeful selection' (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88) can achieve typicality or representativeness of the settings. This allows the researcher to examine cases that are critical for theories and extreme cases can be a good test of theories. When choosing whom to study, Silverman (2000) recommends theoretical sampling which means choosing groups to study that have relevance to the research questions and the theoretical position.

The continuum of organisational formality (see below) was created early in the research process to have a tool with which to compare different companies. The continuum assessed formality levels regarding organisational processes at each company. This assisted with the purposeful selection of the companies and each company's formality was assessed on the continuum. I attempted to select a company from each sector of the continuum so that a range of companies, from informal to formal, was represented in the data collection.

This first assessment was based on publicly available data such as websites, brochures or annual reports. While it is recognised that such available data may be considered 'propaganda' or advertorial in nature and thus could portray the company in a particular perspective, other factors were also considered in this early assessment. Factors such as phone and personal interactions with company representatives assisted in developing this pre-assessment of formality. For example, when approaching one company a personal contact recommended sending a formal letter to a senior company executive. The executive's assistant rang me to inform me that the letter had been received and sent to a senior Human Resources (HR) manager for a decision regarding the research request. The request was discussed at an HR team meeting of the senior managers. Another manager then contacted me and a formal interview was arranged to negotiate research access and permission. The manager considered my request after this personal contact and then further discussed this with her senior managers before a decision was reached. This process that took quite some time and indicated that the company was departmental and hierarchical and this reflection informed the pre-assessment that this company was a formal company as it appeared to have levels of hierarchy and a formal departmental structure. The meeting with the HR manager also enabled some further discussion about

the company and she indicated that there were formal rules and policies at this company which further reinforced the pre-assessment of high formality.

In contrast, at another company personal contact was made after meeting the Managing Director at a social event. He requested that an email was sent to him outlining the project. Upon receipt of the email requesting one month inside his company to undertake the research he sent a one word response 'yep'. This style suggested that formal processes might not be used in this company and that this company might offer an example of an informal organisation for the study.

Therefore, at each of the four companies written material and documents were considered in the pre-assessment while reflecting that these were available for advertising purposes and thus might not offer a true representation of the company's formality level. All contact with the company was also considered and examined for clues to the formality levels reflected by this contact. It was considered that this early assessment was an important first impression and a guide to help select companies with potentially varying levels of formality/informality which would offer a broader perspective to the research project. It was expected that this early assessment would be refined and amended after one month's continuous engagement in each organisation.

A second assessment was made of each company once the data collection was complete, based on information collected inside the company and I was then able to either corroborate or refute the initial assessment.

One month was the time frame for the data collection phase inside each company. During the data collection phase engagement with the company was full-time and research took place continuously during the normal business operating hours which were from approximately eight-thirty in the morning until five-thirty in the evening. The one month time frame was selected as it appeared to offer sufficient time to integrate within each workplace and establish rapport in each company. The time was short enough to enable data collection within multiple sites in order to compare several companies.

At the start of the project it was not determined how many companies would be studied or when the data collection would be considered complete. Pettigrew (1990) highlights the difficulty researchers face in deciding when to stop collecting data. He suggests that ‘pragmatic judgement’ (p. 272) considers the themes, research question, the setting, time frames, the relationship between the researcher and subjects, and issues such as resource constraints. The cessation of data collection after research in four companies was determined by pragmatic issues such as time constraints and access agreements as well as recognising the point when sufficient data had been gathered. After the data collection period in the fourth company it was decided that an immense amount of data had been gathered, research saturation had occurred, and the research question could be answered. It was significant that in the fourth (and final) company studied, many of the events being observed and discussed replicated events from the first three companies and even some of the same emails were circulating that had been seen in the earlier data collections.

3.3 Continuum tool

3.3.1 Using degrees of formality to compare organisations

Four very different companies were the sources for the data collection in this project. A key problem in formulating the research design was the issue of comparing ‘apples with oranges’. Comparing the company culture of one company with that of a completely different company constituted a significant challenge. Investigating several different types of company and their culture may have resulted in individual case studies. These cases would be difficult to compare and contrast as some would be the proverbial ‘apples’ while others were ‘oranges’. The concept of organisational culture is so complex and ambiguous that comparing companies solely on this construct seemed to be an impossible task. Humour was also likely to be highly contextual and specific to each individual company. Therefore a tool was required that allowed comparisons across differing companies and industries to investigate similarities and differences in the organisational culture /humour relationship. The organisational formality/informality continuum was created as the tool used to compare the different companies.

The terms *formality* and *informality* as used by Morand (1995) were selected for the continuum because they describe both organisational structural components and organisational social activity which was relevant to this research. The terms *formality* and *informality* also offer two opposing positions which are useful for creating a continuum with opposing poles. The terms are free of the connotations and potential value judgements associated with the concept of bureaucracy and common implications associated with using the word *bureaucracy*.

The continuum was designed using levels of formality or informality in order to place the researched companies in a comparative framework. Assessing each organisation on the continuum facilitated comparisons of the four organisations. It was hypothesised that the formality levels in an organisation could influence and be infused throughout the organisational culture and that this could also influence humour activities. By selecting organisations that had differing formality levels, different types of organisational culture might be experienced and compared and that this might result in varying organisational humour. It is acknowledged that formality levels are only one of many elements of organisational culture. The literature had suggested that formality was part of organisational culture that may influence humour enactment (Beetham, 1996; Handy, 1993; Morand, 1995).

Structure, hierarchy and the processes used in an organisation are less ambiguous and more obvious than perceptions of culture and humour. Employees and outsiders can usually identify those individuals with management authority and the hierarchy inherent in the company (Beetham, 1996). Company documents can also depict degrees of organisational formality/informality to someone (such as a researcher) outside the company. Once the companies had been assessed, their level of formality was considered in regards to frequency, types, styles and forms of organisational culture and humour found in each company.

3.3.2 Creating the continuum

The criteria for the continuum were selected from Beetham's (1996) adaptation of Weber's (1947) features of bureaucracy. The four criteria Beetham (1996) suggests are hierarchy, continuity, impersonality and expertise and these will be further discussed below. Morand (1995) also proposes a model depicting four factors that contribute to an organisation's formality or informality and these are: (1) external and technical environments of an organisation; (2) structural elements; (3) organisational culture; and (4) the people's commonsense knowledge of formality and informality. Morand's (1995) model links the concepts of formality/informality to organisational culture and his research discusses joking and humour as an element of both workplace culture and levels of formality/ informality. Therefore it also appeared to be a relevant model to adapt for the similar purpose of investigating organisational culture and humour, and using formality and informality as a basis of comparison. The first two of Morand's (1995) four contributing factors were used in the creation of the organisational continuum (Figure 3.1) as they offered criteria for assessing organisational structure and the external environment in which the company operates. These two important factors were not included in the Beetham (1996) model and therefore amalgamating components from the two models appeared to give a more comprehensive assessment of formality levels. The third and fourth factors of Morand's model were not included in the continuum as organisational culture was being investigated as one of the key research objectives and the *commonsense* knowledge of the organisational members would also be assessed within the greater research project.

Using six criteria combined from the two reviewed models (Beetham,1996; Morand 1995) to assess degrees of formality/informality was the first step in the process of comparing organisational similarities and differences and investigating the relationship between the researched organisations' culture and humour. The six criteria that were combined to create the formality continuum are listed and described below.

3.3.3 The six continuum strands

Hierarchy

The strand pertaining to hierarchy considers such organisational conditions as the divisions of labour and each person's defined responsibility in their role. It asks questions of the organisational participants such as, are employees answerable to a superior? Is there an identifiable chain of command? Does the organisation have an organisational chart showing the authority structure? How much autonomy do workers have? Who controls and prescribes company strategy and operations? (Beetham, 1996).

If a company has obvious chains of authority where employees answer to a particular superior who in turn answers to a higher authority; an organisational chart shows these positions, employees require authorisation to implement decisions, and company governance comes from higher authorities and is filtered down to employees, the company is deemed to be *highly formal* on the strand of hierarchy. Conversely, if employees are highly autonomous and able to make independent decisions and are involved in a team-based approach to governance and company direction, the company is placed on the *highly informal* end of this strand of the continuum.

Continuity

The continuity strand is assessed by investigating whether or not the company offers employees full-time salaried or wage positions (formal) or whether it prefers to employ casual and part-time workers and independent contractors offering more flexible remuneration options such as fees or alternative payment schemes (informal). Continuity is also assessed in respect of whether or not the company has a prescribed career structure with continuous advancement opportunities (formal) or fewer prescribed policies and opportunities for employees to work in different roles and work areas (Beetham, 1996).

Impersonality

In formal bureaucratic systems, work rules are kept without favouritism and written records are kept of transactions. There are formal written rules and policies and such companies may be more goal-oriented and have formal dress codes (Beetham, 1996). Companies that closely fit this description are assessed as being *formal* or *highly formal* in the impersonality strand while those with fewer stated rules, policies, dress codes and record-keeping, are given an *informal* rating.

Expertise

The fourth strand of the continuum considers whether or not managers (or those with positions of responsibility) are selected on merit and/or for formal qualifications that they possess (high formality), or whether they are chosen for other attributes such as fitting the culture or for attitudinal attributes favourable to the organisation (informal). Other workplace conditions considered in this strand are whether or not formal training processes operate in the company, whether roles are fixed and prescribed (formal) or loose and flexible (informal). This strand also considers whether access to knowledge is controlled (formal) or freely shared and accessible to all (informal) (Beetham, 1996).

Environment

The strand assessing environment considers the company's external and technical environments and its industry requirements and demands. If the organisation operates in an industry with prescribed regulations and procedures that must be adhered to, the organisation is placed in the *formal* sector of the continuum. If the industry has fewer formal requirements or regulations, then the company is placed in the *informal* sector (Morand, 1995).

Structural elements

The way the organisation is structured is the final organisational condition assessed on the continuum. Clues to formality degrees in structure are sought by examining organisational charts (if they exist) and investigating whether an organisation is divided into divisions or functional departments (formal) or if a more *organic* structure is present that comprises flexible teams or groups to achieve tasks (informal) (Morand, 1995).

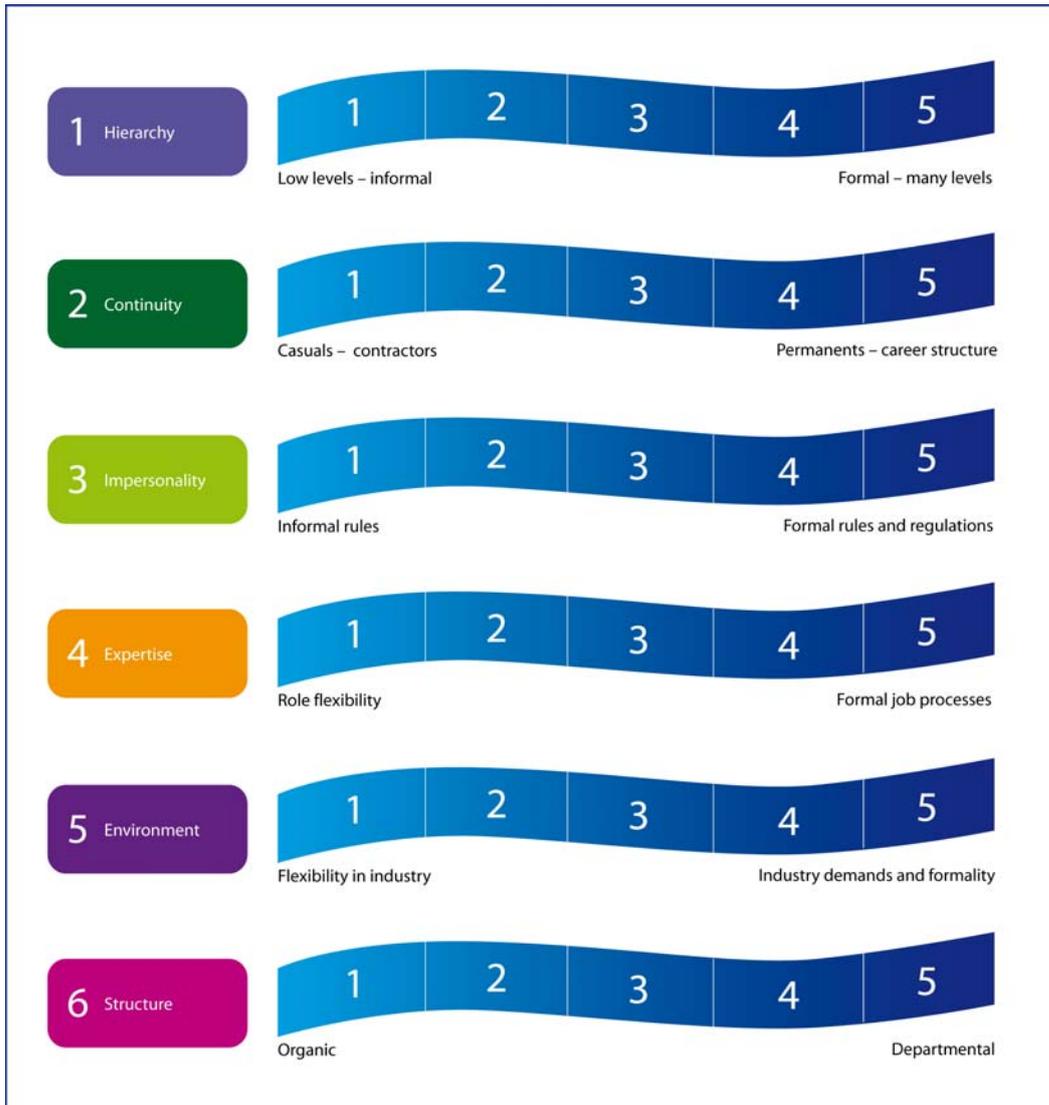


Figure 3.1: Organisational formality/informality continuum

As Beetham (1996) emphasises, organisations are generally a combination of formal and informal relations, and factors such as bureaucracy are often a matter of *degree*. Therefore the continuum was used to assess the *degrees* to which each organisation rated in respect of hierarchy, continuity, impersonality, expertise, environment and structure. The continuum is presented above (Figure 3.1) and the lighter blue ends denote the degrees of *informality* in each category and the darker shaded ends depict the opposite position degrees of *formality*. The scales are divided into five sections with each section assigned a numerical symbol from one through to five. The number one in the blue end

of the continuum denotes very low degrees of formality (therefore extreme informality); two denotes low formality; three denotes neither high nor low formality (the mid-way point); four represents high formality; and five a very high degree of formality. Each of the six continuum components is structured in the same way.

After each organisation was assessed on each of the six strands, the numbers assigned to the degree of formality for each strand were added together and then that total was divided by six to determine an average degree of formality/informality. This average score then determined the organisation's overall assessment in respect of informality/formality and is presented on the aggregated continuum (in Chapter Four) that shows all of the researched organisations and their comparative positions. This assessment was made (by the researcher) before the data collection phase of the research and documentary data such as organisational charts, company reports, brochures and websites and the process of negotiating with the organisation was used to make this initial assessment. The assessment was revised after the data collection phase, once the organisational respondents had assessed their own organisations on the same continuum elements. Again, the score was aggregated and presented on a final comparative continuum representing all the companies (presented in Chapter 4). The final continuum results were used to make inferences about a company's levels of formality, then this was compared with the data collected regarding company culture and humour.

3.4 Data collection methods

My epistemological position, previous experience and own personality traits all contributed to the selection of methods for the project. The selection of qualitative methods appeared the most useful for accessing rich, contextual data that would help to explain the ambiguous and complex phenomena related to humour and culture. These methods also suited my personal abilities and style. I feel that I am good at integrating with groups of people and smoothly assimilating into workplace situations therefore participant observation was a method that I could successfully implement. One of my personal skills is talking to people and I have often found, in past jobs and prior research, that people disclose a lot of personal (and workplace) information to me. A key value of

mine is honesty and perhaps others sense this and risk disclosure, sensing that I will respect their confidential information. Collecting data through interviews was a way of using this strength and offered a logical, recognised and effective tool for exploring participants' insights and perspectives. As the sole researcher it was important to recognise my personal capabilities when planning the project in order to create a design that was comfortable to implement and carry through as well as one that would effectively answer the research question.

The study of organisations is about understanding the social world of organisations and it is necessary to explore 'attitudes, behaviours, experiences, artifacts, symbols, documents, texts, feelings, beliefs, meanings, measures, facts and figures' through empirical study (Stablein, 2006, p. 347). Investigating the associated literature led to the realisation that the constructs of humour and culture were extremely complex, somewhat ambiguous and often highly dependent on the individual set of contextual circumstances that circumscribed behavioural responses. I needed to find methods to examine humour and culture in a meaningful and realistic way. It appeared that there were many directions that research questioning could follow and that it was not possible for me to account for, or even know all the potential directions. This exploratory research needed to offer people the opportunity to create their own categories of response and to simultaneously try to reflect real-world actual organisational behaviour. While offering flexibility of response, the research design also needed to offer some consistency in order to compare responses and to find some ways of comparing different organisations that had different core business activities and objectives.

The following sections discuss the methods incorporated in the research design, offer justification and support in the literature for employing these particular methods, and describe how each was used in the data collection. The three methods were: semi-structured interviews; participant observation; and document collection. The diagram below (Figure 3.2) shows an overview of the research design and methods.

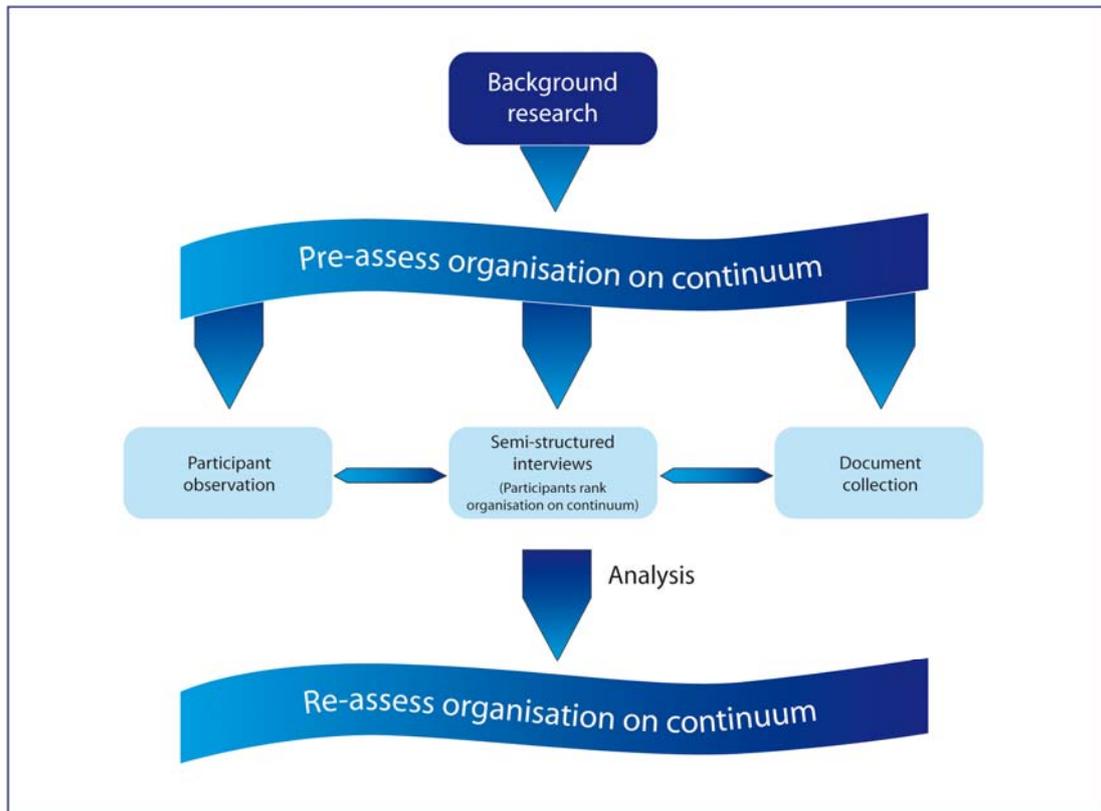


Figure 3.2: Research methods

I have experience with using a variety of data collection methods and have previously used all of the methods utilised for this project. The methods of interviewing, participant observation and document collection were familiar to me. As well as experiencing prior success with these methods, I had also experienced some of the inherent problems. I believe in gathering multiple perspectives on any phenomenon and this is reinforced in the choice of a mixed-method approach designed to investigate the research problems from multiple perspectives. Lockyer (2006) supports this mixed-method approach to humour research and believes that multiple data collections give more precise and complex results than mono-method approaches. A single method may work well in one context but not as well in others and so the data collection was designed to offer methods for several possible situations. For example, while in three of the companies participants were willing and able to be interviewed, inside Kapack most people initially declined to be interviewed. Rather than abandoning this research site and the hard-won access there, I decided to rely more heavily on the observation methods and document collection.

Ironically, after I had decided to continue at this site (using only two methods) people became more comfortable about the research process and agreed to interviews.

Every method is subject to inherent flaws and biases and by using a variety I hoped to offset the biases in one by using several methods. For example, relying totally on data collected from structured interviews can be problematic due to influences such as *social desirability* which means a respondent may give socially acceptable answers to questions rather than true answers in the bid to be highly thought of by their interviewer (Stöber, Dette & Musch, 2002). Therefore, having an observational component can be useful to see if interview responses describing organisational events are supported by the observation data. Participant observation and interviews allowed for researcher and participant interpretation of cultural elements and humour events.

3.4.1 Interviews

In total 59 interviews were completed. The main purpose of the interviews was to understand culture and humour through listening to the people and their views on their work situation and experiences. ‘The qualitative researcher attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of people’s experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations’ (Kvale, 1996, p. 1).

The key research objective was to explore and define the relationship between humour and organisational culture. As this research question incorporated two complex constructs and multiple assumptions, it was broken down into ten smaller research questions that covered different aspects and assumptions inherent in the key question. The question assumes that there is a dominant culture in an organisation, therefore one of the research questions was used to explore this assumption and investigate whether there was a dominant or universal culture in each of the participant organisations. If there was an overall culture, how was it defined and manifested? The key research question was divided into ten more specific questions which formed the basis for the interviews. Each of the ten research questions assisted in formulating the final list of interview questions. A table was created showing which interview questions related to which research questions and is presented in the appendices (Table 8.1 in Appendix A).

Interview respondents were asked to describe organisational culture and even to create a metaphor for their culture. However, it could not be assumed that respondents would understand the concept of organisational culture. Therefore participants were asked whether they understood this concept and short explanations of the concept were offered when necessary. Kvale (1996) calls this *thematizing* and this clarifies the purpose of the interview and the concepts being explored.

The interviews were semi-structured, which meant that all participants were asked the same basic set of questions; however, there was flexibility in the process to follow interesting ideas and for the participant to expand answers into topics that were important to them. If a particular thread of conversation appeared to offer useful insights, further questions were asked of the participant to fully explore relevant topics. This flexibility also allowed for the exploration of ideas that may not have been incorporated into the interview design. All interviews were tape-recorded as this allowed me to return to data in its original form as often as is necessary (as suggested by Silverman (2000)).

Interviews were taped using an audio device and transcribed as soon as possible afterwards. During the interview I also took handwritten notes of the interviewees' responses to support the audio recording. I did this for two reasons. One was that I treated the interview opportunity as extremely precious and as a one-off situation that I was unlikely to be able to repeat. Therefore two methods of recording the data seemed to be wise, particularly in case of any malfunctioning of the audio equipment, which fortunately did not occur. Secondly, audio equipment is not flawless and occasionally there was an utterance or idea expressed that could not be deciphered audibly, therefore on several occasions that hand-written note saved the situation and valuable ideas were not lost. Tapes were transcribed and transcriptions were stored in electronic files and managed using the NVivo7 software tool.

Pilot study

Maxwell (2005) claims that pilot studies test your ideas and methods. Six, one-hour-long pilot interviews were carried out with respondents of different ages, genders and cultures and from different organisations. At the end of the pilot interview, respondents were

asked eleven questions relating to the actual interview and their responses and feelings about the process. From their responses to these extra questions, the interview questions were further refined and improved. Each interview was reviewed immediately afterwards to summarise immediate impressions of how successful the process had been. Some minor changes were made to the interview questions and format following the pilot interviews and, in particular, the order of some of the questions was revised. One respondent suggested that a question about why they worked within their industry would be relevant and this was incorporated into the final question list.

In the pilot interviews the concept of organisational culture was discussed before beginning the interview and this had an effect on how subjects answered the first two questions regarding their industry and their company. It appeared to lead these first two questions and respondents immediately related the first two questions to the culture concept. After the pilot study the question order was revised so that participants were asked about their company and industry before any discussion of the culture concept and this seemed to enable the respondents to talk freely about the aspects of work that were most important to them. In subsequent interviews, when respondents actually discussed their company culture during the first two questions, it appeared more genuine than if they had been led there by the discussion preceding the interview. Overall, the pilot interviews demonstrated that the interview instrument was a successful tool for exploring the concepts of both humour and organisational culture.

Participants

Anybody inside the participant organisations that agreed to be interviewed, was interviewed. Usually the first interview was the hardest one to get as people appeared to weigh up whether or not I could be trusted and whether this was a threatening process. Once one or two people had survived the experience it usually snowballed, with participants encouraging their colleagues to participate.

Many of the interviews were with people who simply volunteered, for many different reasons. Some were happy just to have 45 minutes away from their work tasks and said so; others appeared interested in the project and in particular the subject matter. Some

assumed that by participating they would help the company, as most were aware that I was writing a report reflecting the company humour and culture at the end of the study month. Some felt that they wanted their input to be included to depict a full reflection, while others appeared to welcome the opportunity to criticise practices in their workplace.

As well as accepting all volunteers, I actively approached other company members and asked them if they would consider taking part. There were a variety of responses; a few gave a straight 'no' and most of those who declined claimed that they were 'too busy'. It was obvious that many genuinely were very busy (although those that agreed were equally busy in many cases). Some people readily agreed, booked a time and then did not show up, or offered to reschedule which sometimes did not happen. Interestingly, some people originally said 'no' but towards the end of the research period approached me and agreed to take part. I did gently ask some people who had originally declined if they would reconsider and some agreed after this second approach, while others still declined. Twice was the limit I imposed on making an interview request as I was wary of being intrusive or badgering employees. In every organisation I did more interviews towards the end of the research month than in the first few days. This constant negotiation within the organisations exemplifies Maxwell's (2005) contention that within the research process one must constantly renegotiate relationships and access.

3.4.2 Participant observation

Participant observation was the second data collection method used in this project. This involved becoming a pseudo member of the organisation for the duration of the project. Although my main focus was on recording data, I attempted to behave like the subjects that I observed. Each of the companies assigned me a workspace in the open-plan environment where I sat with my computer, taking notes about the activities while appearing to work in a similar way to those around me. In the three larger companies, I was moved through different departments during my stay to gather a more comprehensive overview of the whole company. I was introduced to my colleagues and explained the purpose of the research. I personally asked those seated around me if they

had any objections to my being among them and recording the everyday events and occurrences (see Ethics section). I also reassured these subjects that should anything occur that they were unhappy about having recorded, they need only approach me and the notes would be erased. Although a few people did approach me and ask if I had recorded certain incidents (such as swearing in a jocular way after a customer phone call) all laughingly insisted that I 'keep it in there!' I did not have to remove any incidents from the data records although a few participants asked for reassurance about their anonymity which was gladly given.

Researcher presence

It took (at most) three days for participants to accept and ignore my presence and continue their usual behaviour. My presence in each company became part of the everyday banter and humour and after a few days I was included in much of the joking and humour and teased like a genuine staff member. I was called: 'the fun fairy' and addressed as 'hey funny lady' on some occasions. This good-natured acceptance allowed me to form trust relationships with the participants and improved the data collection as participants more readily consented to interviews. Some individuals went out of their way to let me know when a major incident had occurred that they thought was relevant to the research. I was also invited along to company events such as parties, celebrations, awards and a Christmas ritual, where I was expected to fully participate. As was their custom for departing staff, one of the companies even gave me a farewell morning tea at the end of the research period while another presented me with a Christmas gift!

Of course such involvement can also attract criticism of researcher effect upon the studied data and this will be discussed in the limitations section (Chapter 7). However, the benefits of becoming well integrated inside these companies appeared to outweigh the pitfalls of researcher effect. This integration offered me deeper access and understanding of the complex lives of the participants. Superficial focus is inferior to the depth achieved from 'long-term participant observation' (Martin & Frost, 1996, p. 607). Participating in the humour on some occasions furthered my understanding and interpretation of the impacts of humour and culture. Using ethnographic methods such as

participant observation may assist in uncovering a 'deeper reality' (Martin & Frost, 1996, p. 611) and observation is a useful tool to explore tacit understandings.

While interviewing is often an efficient and valid way of understanding someone's perspective, observation can enable you to draw inferences about this perspective that you couldn't obtain by relying exclusively on interview data (Maxwell, 2005, p. 94).

This method was chosen as one that could assist in uncovering the deeper levels of culture and examining the interpretive perspective of what an organisational culture *is* alongside the study of the more apparent cultural manifestations of what an organisation *has*. It was also useful in collecting data about actual workplace artifacts, rituals and activities that are manifestations of the organisational culture. Participant observation can record concrete instances of what people say and do and verbatim quotations and unadorned descriptions are useful ways of recording raw data (Silverman, 2001).

Although participant observation is a data collection technique, analysis processes begin simultaneously with this form of data collection. While observing, I was also evaluating, choosing what to record, and making decisions about the data. In the research design for this project, analysis was incorporated as an initial part of the design and commenced right from the beginning of the project. A coding system was used for recording observed data and deciding how and what to record was crucial in setting up the participant observation.

Coding

A coding system is based on the premise that researchers require procedures to organise texts arising from data collection. The coding system will assist the researcher in seeing patterns within such texts (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). A coding system must be sensitive to the form and characteristics of the participants in their setting (Sharpe & Koperwas, 2003). Three key decisions need to be made in developing a system: whether the categories will be exclusive of each other; whether a category is capable of an all-inclusive or exhaustive description of an event or behaviour, and finally the actual number of codes/categories to be used (Sharpe & Koperwas, 2003). Sharpe and

Koperwas (2003) recommend simplicity over complexity where possible and suggest an outer limit of between sixteen and twenty categories in a system to increase accuracy and reliability.

My coding system evolved with eighteen categories before the data collection process began. Although it was my intention to create categories that were exclusive of each other, this was not possible as some events and incidents overlapped. For example the *Secret Santa* event was recorded as a ritual but also some of the threads of conversation and joking were recorded as banter and therefore it belonged in two categories simultaneously. Therefore exclusivity of categorisation did not appear to be possible in many examples. An event or sequence of behaviour, such as a string of jocular banter was recorded as one complete record and was recorded only in the *banter* category even though parts of the observation may have also fitted other categories. This was for practical reasons because recording using hand-written notes was difficult and had to be done speedily to capture the whole incident in its entirety. Crossing between categories during this process would have resulted in lost data and incorrect observation notes. It was expedient to capture the data immediately in the most obvious category and then re-examine it later in light of how it fitted other categories.

Another important factor in category development is the distinction between physically or socially based definitions. Physically defined categories classify behaviour that has explicit links to an individual's physical action and can be verbal or involve movement. Socially determined categories classify behaviour according to the researcher's perception and interpretation and include inferences made by the researcher (Sharpe & Koperwas, 2003).

The coding in this project comprised fourteen categories that were physically defined and five that were interpretive. The five interpretive categories related to organisational cultural concepts such as values and assumptions, which were not explicit behaviours but were inferred by the researcher from participant behaviour. The physical categories were directly associated with actual behaviour such as telling a joke or sharing a funny email. The physically defined categories were structured according to types of humour being

enacted by participants, such as practical jokes or retelling formal, structured jokes. The interpretive observation categories attempt to understand factors pertaining to the organisational culture of the company. As this is an intangible construct, these categories rely heavily on researchers' interpretation. I used a category that noted underlying assumptions that formed culture and recorded observations that I interpreted as exemplifying these assumptions.

My coding system arose partly from previous experiences in researching humour at work (Plester, 2003) as well as considering humour and culture facets identified in the literature. I had found that banter was the most prevalent form of shared humour at work so this was a key category for the observation records. Five other types of humour formed other sections. It was important to comment on the actual business activities of the organisation as this offered the context for culture and humour. A section for formal workplace events was created as this formed part of the exploration of formality in each company. Displays and artifacts were observed as a manifestation of culture, as were rituals and email. Groups formed a category in order to explore the possibility of sub-cultures within the overall culture. Metaphors and symbols were investigated to indicate participants' interpretation of their own culture. Categories were created for assumptions and values to identify embedded or underlying facets of the culture (Schein, 2004). The outcomes category recorded data linked to the areas of recruitment, satisfaction and performance.

Table 3.1 shows each of the 18 categories used to record activities during participant observation. An operational definition has been created for each category and is also presented in Table 3.1. Although a category may have been created to investigate an organisational culture aspect (such as rituals), there might be an organisational ritual that is also an example of humour. The overlap is acknowledged as an inherent part of category creation and events were recorded in the category that appeared most appropriate during the observation and then reconsidered during the analysis phase.

Making decisions about what constituted humour was a key challenge of the observational process. During the time spent in each organisation, in my endeavour to

appear and act as an organisational member I sat at a desk among the other workers, and typed notes on my computer (when I wasn't talking to people or conducting interviews). I generally behaved in a similar manner to those around me. Frequently I would record an observation such as a joke being told near me (or even to me sometimes) or I would record a string of humorous banter by people between cubicles or at the photocopier. I realised that I had developed antennae that alerted me to when humour was occurring. I became attuned to the people around me and was aware of when they had changed from work tasks to sharing a humour moment. I then analysed this factor of my behaviour and attempted to clarify what these (seemingly intrinsic) markers were to humorous behaviour. They comprised such cues as using a louder voice to make a jocular insult to a colleague, 'Dave you lazy sod...', or a loud profanity in a joking voice 'sheee-it!', or a physical action such as throwing a (harmless) missile at a colleague to promote an interaction. Some observed activities appeared to be playful and fun without being humorous and these were originally recorded in humour categories and reviewed further in the analysis process.

Table 3.1: Coding categories for observation

Category	Operational definition
1. Business activities	The actual workplace activities carried out by participants
2. Formal events	Official work events such as meetings
3. Displays/artifacts	Items in workplace of cultural significance or humorous intent
4. Groups	Work teams and social groups
5. Incidents	Incidents that stand out, appear significant and outcome is apparent
6. Metaphors/symbols	Images, figures of speech that describe or depict organisation
7. Email	Electronic communication sent at work (or shared at screen)
8. Banter	Verbal jibes between colleagues, jocular abuse
9. Practical jokes	Actual physical prank or action enacted to create humour, often pre-arranged
10. Formal jokes	Structured verbal or written, uses traditional 'joke' format
11. Running jokes/ themes	Repeated humour, jokes, banter that are ongoing or have theme
12. Horseplay	Spontaneous physical 'fun' /play; can be dangerous
13. Jokers	Individuals that often create and instigate humour, jokes, play, fun
14. Rituals	Ceremonial or traditional social activities enacted in the company
15. Assumptions	Generally understood facets of culture/behaviour, underlying
16. Values	Ideals and principles important to organisation, tacit or explicit
17. Outcomes	Performance, recruitment, retention, satisfaction linked to culture or humour
18. Displayed material	Written or published material reflecting culture or humour

During the observation I recorded verbatim accounts of events and utterances wherever possible as Seale (1999) suggests that this adds to reliability and offsets the researcher's personal perspectives from influencing the raw data. Systemising field notes improves their reliability and researchers may take short notes as the event occurs; expanded notes after the session; a journal to record issues and ideas, and a running account of analysis and interpretation (Silverman, 2001). This was the system adopted throughout the research. As incidents occurred, I wrote as fast as possible and in (coded) shorthand to attempt to capture the incident verbatim. Afterwards I revisited these observation notes and expanded them if I felt I had left out any pertinent facts. I also tried to record the context of the incident. At the end of each day and at a midway point in the day I made a general reflection in my researcher's logbook noting any features of the day, big events, problems and even my own feelings at the time. Frequently these reflections were more *ordinary* than extraordinary and even recorded such mundanities as that nothing much had happened; everyone was in meetings or all around were working quietly and not interacting. Conversely, major occurrences were also recorded when they occurred. These reflections formed an ongoing record that proved useful when analysing the data after the research visit was completed. This record refreshed some of the sights, sounds and feelings of the actual experience.

3.4.3 Document collection

In utilising Schein's (1985, 2004) theoretical framework, I had to ensure that all three levels of culture were investigated. In order to achieve this, I investigated artifacts of culture as well as data concerning espoused beliefs and values. One of the ways in which a company typically espouses its beliefs and values is through written documents both for its own internal staff members and to also disseminate this information to external stakeholders. Therefore document collection was incorporated into the research design as it appeared to offer a useful method to collect this type of company information.

The company documents exemplified pertinent features of the organisational settings. Silverman (2001) emphasises that documents, tables, advertisements and cartoons offer useful examples of the organisational environment and supports document collection as an appropriate tool for organisational research. Documents offer organisational

researchers a heterogeneous data source that can offer valuable information and build a rich description of the organisation (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Bryman and Bell (2003) claim that organisational documents are *non-reactive*, which means that, because they have not been created specifically for research, there is no reactive effect within the research process and this increases their validity as a data source. They suggest that documents should be evaluated using four criteria of: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and (clear) meaning (Scott, 1990 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2003) as this is a rigorous set of criteria for assessing documents. These criteria were considered when collecting documents during the data collection and only those that appeared to reliably meet these standards were collected. All documents were collected with the approval of company management.

3.5 Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative process comprising five stages. The following model (Figure 3.3) depicts each of these steps and they are further discussed below.

3.5.1 Analysis steps

Transcription

Transcription was an ongoing process and all of the interview and observation data was transcribed from the audio tapes and handwritten notes into electronic files, and stored. As my typing skills are poor and transcription is a lengthy process, professional help was engaged in transcribing interview tapes and observation notes. I thoroughly checked each transcription and compared each with the handwritten interview and observation notes to check accuracy. This accuracy check also constituted the first in-depth reading of each individual transcript to ensure full engagement with the data set.

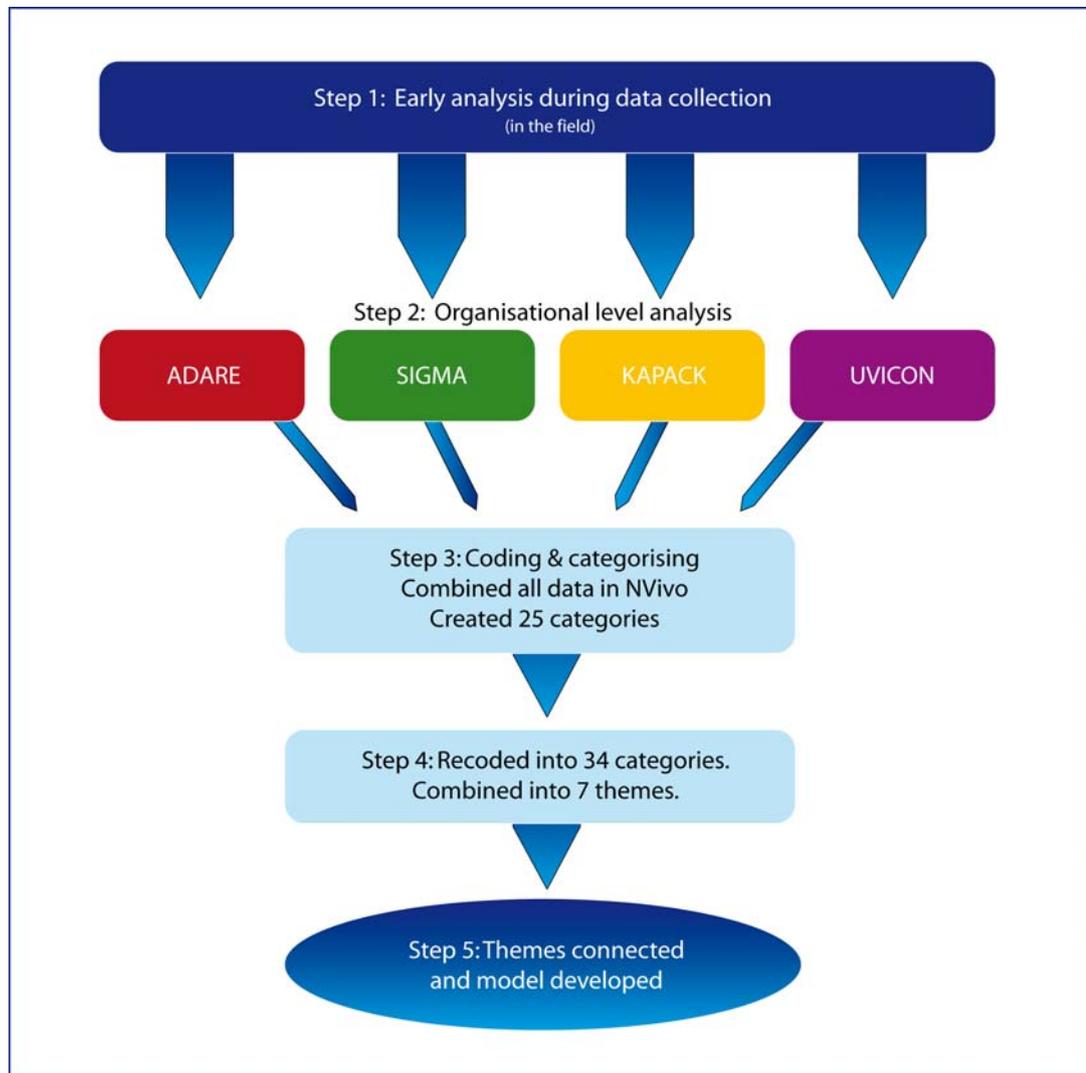


Figure 3.3: Analysis steps

I carefully reviewed the text in the collected documents and all text that discussed cultural facets or humour (and fun) was also transcribed into electronic files. The cultural facets were identified as those that explicitly referred to organisational culture as well as those containing any references to the cultural facets that had been used in the recording categories for observation (see Table 3.1). References to humour and fun were also transcribed and examples included extracts that discussed fun as a value (found at Sigma)

or those claiming that the company had a ‘fun culture’ (Kapack). The documents were also examined for text that discussed policies relating to humour, fun and culture, and any written material that appeared to offer insights to the research question were transcribed into the electronic files.

Analysis in the field (Step 1)

Step 1 involved analysis that occurred while collecting the data in the field. The participant observation recorded events and occurrences under different headings and therefore this involved an on-the-spot analysis of what type of event was being recorded and which category the event belonged within. The eighteen categories described earlier in the *participant observation* section were used and data was recorded in the category considered the most appropriate at the time of recording and then subsequently reviewed in the later analysis process. Maxwell (2005) treats analysis as part of the research design and maintains that it should begin simultaneously with the start of data collection and is part of the first observation or interview.

As well as categorising observations while collecting data, I kept a researcher’s logbook and diary entries included thoughts and feelings, reflections on incidents, and insights from daily events in each company. Silverman (2000) recommends that researchers record their own behaviour and how they are treated, as well as what they can see, hear and feel. I included my personal feelings and responses and thus the logbook entries resulted in a diary-style account of the research process. This was useful to revisit and recapture the essence of the experience during post-collection analyses. This form of on-the-spot analysis captured immediate feedback and impressions that assisted in the overall organisational depiction. Some of these logbook entries are used in the discussion chapter to exemplify and clarify key points.

Organisational level analysis (Step 2)

Step 2 involved an individual analysis of each company. Data from the four companies was not combined until Step 3. This early analysis was conducted upon the data immediately after finishing at each company in order to assess it while it was still ‘fresh’.

This involved transcribing all of the interviews and observation notes and scrutinising these and the collected documents for first impressions, obvious interest areas and early themes. Background information about each company concerning size, business activities, description, roles and industry effects was analysed in this step. Background data came primarily from company documents and from descriptions gathered in interviews when respondents answered the questions, ‘Tell me about your company?’ and ‘Tell me about this industry?’

This first treatment of the data was written up as an organisational report for each company. This stage of analysis involved what Guba and Lincoln (1989) call ‘member checks’ where findings are taken back to the respondents for them to check. The company received this report within two months of the data collection and it was presented as a reflection of the company culture and humour style. It was not an action-oriented report suggesting improvements or changes, but simply a narrative including quotes from the (anonymous) organisational members that highlighted key elements of the culture and humour.

After the report had been sent to and circulated among company members, I contacted relevant managers for feedback about reactions to the report and these reactions formed part of the results presented in Chapter Four. It also gave me some guidance as to whether my initial impressions and findings were synonymous with those of company management and these ‘member checks’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) were a useful validation of the findings.

Two of the feedback sessions were verbal exchanges arising from meetings with company representatives and the other two were written emails from managers. One of these emails is included in Appendices (Appendix B) and this particular company (Kapack) outlines how the report was received and follow-up actions that the company implemented. In each case the managers that were contacted regarding the follow-up report were those who had facilitated the access to the company. The reports were used to write the contextual background of each company that is presented in the first results chapter (Chapter four).

Categorising in NVivo7 (Step 3)

A huge amount of observation and documentary data had been gathered over the intensive month at each company and 59 interviews had been conducted. The management of this quantity of data was problematic. Therefore a specialised computer-based qualitative software programme was used to assist with effectively managing the data for intensive scrutiny and analysis. The tool utilised was the latest version of the qualitative data software NVivo7. Qualitative data programmes are considered useful in this kind of data analysis because they facilitate traditional processes of coding and categorising large amounts of data (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). The NVivo7 software offers flexibility in coding and speedy data retrieval and can assist with managing and linking ideas as they emerge from the data (Richards, 2002).

All of the collected data was transcribed and converted to electronic files which were imported into NVivo7. Although there is little written information regarding this specific programme due to its recent development and release (April 2006), Babbie (2007) suggests that software for qualitative researchers can be useful for some aspects of data analysis. He cites NUD*IST (the precursor to NVivo7) as a useful programme for managing qualitative data and highlights its usefulness in coding and searching data.

Coding in NVivo involves sorting data into categories which are called *nodes*. Some nodes can be independent and not linked to any other data and these are termed *free nodes* within the software. However, the programme also offers the ability to link categories of data and these can be arranged into *tree nodes* which have a parent node defining the category or theme and *branches* or *child nodes* within the set. Creating *tree nodes* can be useful to link coded categories of data and identify themes and connections within the data. Although *free nodes* and *tree nodes* were used to manage the data in this project, in the interests of simplicity and clarity I will discuss data groups using the terms *categories* and *themes*.

The coding and search abilities were the functions primarily used from the NVivo7 software during the analysis. Critics have suggested that using software when coding data can result in coding that becomes decontextualised as the coded material becomes

separated from the original text. However, one of the key advantages in NVivo7 is that the researcher can easily and swiftly move between coded segments and the original source documents. Segments of text that are coded can also encapsulate the surrounding paragraph to capture supporting contextual elements. The advantages of effective and efficient coding and data retrieval appeared to offset potential criticism and allowed more time for thoroughly engaging with the large and complex data set. Recent research suggests:

Software (skillfully used) supports more rigorously and fluidly the research processes we engaged in with manual methods, and provides a range of techniques and tools that were impossible, unknown or too time-consuming before computers entered the field (Richards, 2002).

Although the software was a useful tool, it could not code and organise the data without researcher input. Therefore, as in manual data analysis, a high degree of engagement with the data was still essential alongside deep thought and meticulous scrutiny to determine categories, themes and relationships within the data.

Coding

Maxwell (2005) asserts that the main analysis strategy in qualitative research is *coding*, which involves categorising and organising data into broad themes and issues. Coding may uncover repeating ideas which occur when the same or similar words and phrases are used by different participants to express the same idea (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Coding can create categories that may be further organised into themes which are groups of repeating ideas. Coding data according to a theoretical scheme enables the researcher to link the elements together with the focus steadily becoming narrower (Silverman, 2000).

In this current project, coding was an iterative process that involved constantly revisiting the categories and moving data within categories. An advantage of this iterative process was that that each transcript was reviewed many times as I moved between coded segments of text and the original transcripts. The data from all four companies was combined and coded into 25 initial categories. The initial 25 categories were later re-grouped into different categories and finally organised into themes. These first 25

categories were stored in NVivo7 as *free nodes*. The initial categories for coding the data were the 18 that were used as observation categories (see Table 3.1) and six more categories that were created from the strands of the formality continuum (hierarchy, continuity, impersonality, expertise, environment, and structure). In this analysis stage, all of the data collected from interviews, observations and documents was coded and put into one of these categories. Some data extracts were coded into two or more categories simultaneously if there appeared to be multiple ideas within the text. Any data that did not fit into one of the categories was temporarily stored in a separate category entitled *other* and reviewed in the next stage (Step 4) when the categories were reorganised.

Analysis included exploring transcripts for data elements that were physically countable (Berg, 2004) such as number of funny emails and ratings of formality on a simple scale. The analysis also included an interpretive reading of the meaning of the physical data (Berg, 2004). This included descriptions of culture, metaphors gathered in interviews and participants' perception of the effect humour had upon their work satisfaction and performance. Berg (2004) concludes that using both analytical approaches offers a more convincing overall analysis.

While working within these early categories, links became apparent between different threads of data and between categories and a thematic structure began to evolve within the data set. Groups of repeating ideas may have a common theme. A theme is 'an implicit topic that organises a group of repeating ideas' (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 38). A thematic analysis focuses on patterns of behaviour that are identifiable in the data (Aronsen, 1994). The next analysis step involved creating new categories and identifying themes that linked the categories.

Identifying themes (Step 4)

It became obvious that the initial 25 categories were inadequate for the large and complex data set and the category labelled *other* had a large amount of data that did not fit within the other categories. Therefore the categories were re-examined and the data was coded again and moved into 34 new categories. Some categories remained and some new ones were created to include different ideas that had emerged from the analysis. Some of the

original categories were combined in this step. For example, descriptions of the business activities at each company had been coded into the *business activities* category and these descriptions had come from interviews, observations and document descriptions. There was also a category that assessed and described the industry *environment* and this was collected from the continuum assessment of formality and interview descriptions of the business environment. It became apparent that the data assessing formality and informality was similar to descriptions of the business activities and that there was overlap between these categories. Therefore a theme was created (a *tree node* in NVivo) called *formality and informality* and this included the six continuum categories as well as categories that described company size, company activities and roles.

Similarly, the five categories that accounted for different types of humour (banter, practical jokes, formal jokes, running jokes and horseplay) were all combined into one larger category entitled *humour type*. This category became a branch of the theme entitled *humour* which contained seven categories of data related to humour. The regrouping of categories at this coding stage resulted in extra categories being formed and a total of 34 categories were created. The 34 categories were organised into seven key thematic groups or *tree nodes* in NVivo. The seven themes and 34 categories are presented in the table below.

Table 3.2: Themes and categories

Themes and categories	References
HUMOUR CULTURE RELATIONSHIP	232
HUMOUR	
✚ fun cultures	47
✚ humour function	36
✚ humour importance	58
✚ humour management	57
✚ humour type	60
✚ humourless times	59
✚ negative impacts	57
WHO ARE WE?	
✚ assumptions	40
✚ culture descriptions	60
✚ espoused values	11
✚ groups	64
✚ metaphors	50
✚ subcultures	59
BOUNDARIES	
✚ appropriate humour	24
✚ gatekeepers	14
✚ jokers	60
✚ limits and boundaries	22
FORMALITY AND INFORMALITY	
✚ company activities	42
✚ company size	18
✚ continuity	29
✚ environment	44
✚ expertise	28
✚ hierarchy	27
✚ impersonality	31
✚ roles	13
✚ structure	29
MANIFESTATIONS	
✚ displays	41
✚ incidents	35
✚ rituals stories and legends	51
✚ email	70
OUTCOMES	
✚ performance	49
✚ recruitment	49
✚ retention	19
✚ satisfaction	49

Berg (2004) suggests two key approaches to data analysis. Transcribing observation notes converts human activity into text that can be analysed from a phenomenological perspective that captures the actual events alongside the essence of the experience. It can

also offer an interpretive orientation that uncovers patterns of action and meaning. Berg's (2004) analytical suggestions were utilised and this produced two results chapters.

The first results chapter (Chapter Four) presents the contextual background of the research sites by describing each company individually and this chapter arose from the early data analysis in Step 2 that analysed each company as an individual data set. This chapter also includes the degrees of formality assessed using the continuum tool in the interviews. This data was analysed numerically and content analysis was done with the (recorded) text that arose while people were making their assessments. Average scores are presented for each company and compared with the average scores assessed before the data collection.

The second results chapter (Chapter five) adopts an interpretive orientation and data have been reduced and connected to present patterns of meaning from all four companies combined.

Although the coding process and results have been explained, the following three data extracts present text examples and specifically show how segments were coded and categorised. The first extract is part of an interview response and the respondent had been asked how important humour was to him at work.

Very very important, I think it breaks down a lot of barriers I think it stops a lot of people getting snappy and annoyed and I think that if you can laugh about something it is just going to make your day go a lot easier. I think it builds relations with people as well so then you can ask them for help and assistance for later down the track (Adare respondent).

The respondent is explicit in stating that he thinks humour is important, but he goes on to describe why it is important and highlights some functions of humour when he talks about 'make your day go easier' and 'builds relations with people...'. Therefore this extract was coded in two different humour categories. The first part of the extract was coded and placed into the category pertaining to *humour importance* while the second part was included in the category related to *humour functions*.

The following two extracts were both coded into the category *espoused values* which was part of the theme- *who are we?* The first extract was taken from the Kapack staff induction manual and each line was a heading within the section, ‘What we value’

Confidentiality of clients and client information
Legally correct behaviour
Brand image of firm
Dependable
Specialised advice
Approachable we have a ‘roll up the sleeves’ ethos
Confident we are not afraid to ruffle a few feathers
We have a *valuing diversity and fair employment practices* policy
Committed to EEO
Valuing and rewarding staff

(December 12, 2005)

This second data extract is taken from observation notes and the *values boxes* were observed, noted and recorded during data collection. During analysis this extract appeared to be a clear example of espoused values and was therefore also coded in this category.

There are four sparkly decorated boxes prominently displayed in this department. Each one represents a core company value and they are suspended from the ceiling. The values are: *harmony, attainment, honesty* and *fun*. The New Zealand flag is on the harmony box (July18, 2005).

The seven themes form the basis of the results and discussion chapters. The data were continuously re-examined and in this analysis stage, data from all of the data collection methods was re-coded and reorganised into these seven themes:

1. The humour/culture relationship
2. Who are we?
3. Formality and informality
4. Humour and fun
5. Boundaries
6. Manifestations
7. Outcomes

The *humour/culture relationship* theme was directly linked to the main research question and included data that linked humour and culture or discussed the influence of organisational culture on humour enactment. Much of the data in this theme came from interview questions, particularly those that directly asked respondents about the relationship. Data was also analysed from observation notes and collected documents .

The theme *who are we?* described organisational culture and included subsections relating to the interview participants, descriptions and metaphors of culture, subcultures, groups, assumptions and espoused values. Data included in this theme came mainly from interviews but was supported by observations and documents .

The *humour* theme also was formed from all of the data sources and comprised the categories of: functions; fun cultures; importance; management; topics; negative impacts; and outcomes from humour. The categories within this theme were created from the interview responses to questions such as those asking about the importance of humour, and negative impacts of humour. Data in the humour categories also came from observations of humour and from documents that described policies for email humour and humour harassment policies.

The *formality and informality* theme was formulated primarily from the interview data but was also supported by documentary data and observations. The formality theme included the assessment of each company on the organisational continuum along with participants' comments made while completing the scale. There were six strands in the formality continuum and these became categories within this theme, entitled: continuity; environment; expertise; hierarchy; impersonality; and structure.

After constant engagement with the interview transcripts I intuitively felt that many respondents had identified that their workplace humour had definite boundaries and limits. Phrases such as 'crossed the line' and humour that had 'gone too far' were common in transcripts. Therefore using the query function in NVivo7, I searched for these and other related phrases and discovered 72 references to a *boundary* relationship linking culture and humour. The *boundaries* theme had four categories relating to appropriate humour, boundaries and limits, and individual humour roles assumed by

gatekeepers and jokers. Relevant observation and document data was also integrated into this theme.

The *manifestations* theme included categories regarding rituals, legends, and stories as well as humour and culture displays, email and four key incidents that were significant manifestations of humour and culture. These incidents were analysed using content analysis and were analysed to ascertain the actual events in the incident but also the meaning of the events and implications for the participants and the organisation were explored. This interpretive approach was effective when analysing an incident as it did not merely rely on researcher interpretation but also gathered interpretations of the incidents from those directly involved as well as from peripheral organisational members and senior managers.

Although there were many interesting incidents that occurred throughout the research process I used a 'data reduction technique' (Silverman, 2000) and decided to focus upon one key incident from each company. The selected incidents from each company were representative and typical of the company while also showing significant aspects that depicted the influence of organisational culture on the humour involved in the incident. Each included incident seemed highly significant to both the organisations and the researcher. These four incidents were also discussed by multiple respondents, were observed during the data collection, and had significant and identifiable impacts within the companies. They were included in the results as each constituted a significant event for the company and all demonstrated enactment of humour within the organisational setting. Three involved a company ritual and the fourth a humorous email that caused major upset and embarrassment for the company.

The *outcomes* theme included four categories with data that linked humour and/or organisational culture to recruitment, retention, satisfaction and performance.

Connecting themes and model development (Step 5)

This phase of the analysis involved connecting the key themes. Themes can be grouped together to form more abstract ideas that become theoretical constructs which can then be

organised into a theoretical narrative that addresses research questions or concerns. Such a narrative tells the participants' story as closely as possible, using their own words and weaving together their subjective experiences with abstract concepts (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

From the initial engagement with the entire data set, this step involved deciding which data would become the focus of the ensuing discussion. With such a large and complex data set it was not possible to use every utterance, written proclamation or observed antic and the hardest part of the data reduction was eliminating some aspects of the data. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) suggest that when selecting which text to include in data analysis, the researcher should ask of the text: does it relate to the research concern, does it clarify thinking, does it help with understanding participants and does it seem important? Therefore, at this phase the original research question was revisited and the data threads and themes that appeared to give the most useful insights into the humour and organisational culture relationship were explored in greater depth. The questions suggested by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) were applied to the entire data set when making decisions about presenting results and discussing themes.

In this final analysis step, the themes were further explored and relationships between them were identified. The seven themes that were identified are presented in the two results chapters and subsequently form the basis for the discussion. Connecting categories and themes attempts to understand the data in context and to identify relationships in the data and using both categorisation and connection offers a well-rounded analysis (Maxwell, 2005).

The final conclusion-drawing step involved ascribing meaning to the data, discussing patterns and regulations, and offering explanations and propositions. Maxwell (2005) asserts that identifying the connections among the categories and themes is an analytical step necessary to build theory but does caution that it can result in a loss of contextual background to the data. Although a research objective was to contribute to organisational studies in the form of a theoretical model, it seemed important when studying the highly contextual constructs of culture and humour not to lose the contextual background to the

data (as suggested by Maxwell (2005)). This imperative resulted in the production of two results chapters, one (Chapter Four) offering the contextual background for each of the four companies and setting the scene for Chapter Five which presents the results from the combined data set from all four companies. The discussion (Chapter Six) connects the data themes, offers explanations and proposes a theoretical model of the humour/culture relationship. It was necessary to return to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and to compare the emerging thematic connections with prior literature and this forms the basis of the discussion. Literature also had to be sought to compare the emerging findings in organisational areas and themes that had not been anticipated.

The final section of this chapter outlines the ethical stance and approach and the guiding principles adopted in this project.

3.6 Ethics

Organisational research invariably involves interactions with human participants and this was true for this current research project which involved participant observations and in-depth interview conversations. Although this project was rated as a low risk project on the self-assessment checklist offered by Massey University and did not require a full ethics application I was aware that humour has the potential to cause harm to others. Therefore I decided to present the project for discussion and evaluation by Massey University Albany Human Ethics Committee (MUAHEC). Key concerns were the possibility that humour could be used to cause distress to individuals. I recognised that issues such as sexual or racial harassment could emerge during the research project when discussing or observing humour. The project was fully approved by the Massey University Albany Human Ethics Committee (MUAHEC05/013) and the approval letter has been appended (Appendix C).

3.6.1 Ethical issues

In organisational research, ethical issues are concerned with four key areas: harm to participants; lack of informed consent; invasion of privacy; and deception (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Fontana & Frey, 2005). Babbie (2007) asserts that the two most important

ethical concerns for participants are anonymity and confidentiality. Berg (2004) warns that subjects can be manipulated into participating in research, particularly those in low-status positions. The ethical aspects highlighted by these researchers were all considered and plans for any problems were developed prior to data collection (Babbie, 2007; Berg, 2004; Bryman & Bell, 2003).

3.6.2 Voluntary participation

A feature of this project was that all data collection was overt and explained to participants. After access had been granted, I requested that the senior managers allow me to fully explain the project to staff using the most appropriate medium. At the three larger companies this was achieved through email and the company intranet and at the one small company through direct contact with the entire group. Information sheets were distributed at all the companies with my contact details and the chief supervisor's. The sheets also informed participants of their rights and their right to be excluded from the observation phase of the research. The data-collection methods were outlined and the sheet emphasised the voluntary aspect of the project. No senior managers from the companies attempted to coerce staff members into interviews but left me to negotiate individually with company members during my month's stay. Interviews were arranged and negotiated personally with potential participants and a consent form was signed by those who agreed to be interviewed. The information sheet was again presented to each interview participant and also stated that participants could refuse to answer any questions without any explanation needed. It was also highlighted that should any parts of the data collection cause participants any discomfort or distress they could approach the researcher to discuss this or to arrange exclusion.

3.6.3 Anonymity

All participants and organisations were guaranteed anonymity and their responses and remarks remained private and confidential. This was challenged in one company when company members asked about the responses of their colleague after an interview. I clearly stated that this was confidential information. Taking this ethical stance also

resulted in previously reluctant staff members agreeing to be interviewed. A coding system was used in the interviews and for participant observation and all participants were assigned a series of numerals and letters known only to the researcher. No names were written on interview sheets for audio tapes and the observation notebook used only the coding system. This coding system was only known by the researcher and details were kept locked and protected. Rather than using the impersonal coding system in the results and discussion chapters, false names were created in order to preserve the personal quality of the data while protecting the anonymity of subjects. Where necessary, any details that could identify individuals or companies were altered or omitted.

3.6.4 Do no harm

A key consideration of this current project was the reduction of harm to participants. Through consultation with the Massey University Albany Human Ethics committee (MUAHEC), a contingency plan was developed in case of any harm or upset to participants and this included provision of counselling services if the need arose. Fortunately, these services were not required during the data collection as no participants became upset during either the observation or interviews. An adviser was also on hand should any matters have arisen regarding Maori issues or perspectives and once again this adviser was not required. All data was stored in a secure location in locked containers and electronic data was protected with firewalls and passwords.

Although risk to participants was unproblematic during data collection, there was the threat of risk to the researcher in one of the companies where humour styles were extreme. This potential risk came from the continuous practical jokes in this organisation and I was included as a target for these jokes which were sometimes highly physical. The screws were removed from my chair on one occasion in the hope that I would sit and subsequently fall. As I had recently had knee surgery (a fact known to the jokers) this was potentially physically dangerous. Although I did not require counselling services, I did liaise closely with supervisors during this research phase and became very vigilant while in this company.

No participants appeared to be harmed by the research process and none claimed any distress caused by the data collection. Informed consent was sought and gained because of the potential invasion of privacy from observation. Participants were informed of their right to be excluded from the field notes if they so desired. No deception was practised and all data collection was open and transparent to the extent that participants joked about the process and even checked that I had collected all of the interesting and funny events. The ethical aspects of the project were unproblematic and it seemed as if studying workplace humour was perceived to be non-threatening and non-invasive and participants were reasonably relaxed and happy to include me in their workspaces.

3.7 Summary

The data collection methods and methodological approach have been presented in this chapter. The continuum tool that assessed organisational formality was discussed and the analysis strategy was outlined and justified. The chapter concluded with the ethical aspects of the project. Results are declared in the next two chapters with Chapter Four offering the contextual background for each individual company while Chapter Five presents collated findings from all four companies and highlights the important themes and their relationship to one another.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PLAYERS IN CONTEXT



In this first of two results chapters, each company is discussed as a distinct separate entity to offer the contextual background that formed an important framework in which to analyse the combined data relating to humour and organisational culture. The latter half of the chapter presents the results from the organisational continuum which includes formality levels for each of the companies. These levels were assessed prior to undertaking the research and then again during the data-collection period.

The information presented in each section of this chapter has already formed the basis for an individual report for each of the participating companies. The reports were supplied to each company approximately two months after the conclusion of the research and contained only the findings from their own company. Reports were presented as a reflection on organisational culture, and humour, and their impacts and outcomes inside the company. The continuum results assessing degrees of formality were also discussed for each individual company.

4.1 The four companies

Results in this chapter have been garnered from all of the data sources used in the research. Company documents have been analysed to build the descriptions of business activities and espoused organisational culture. Emphasis has been given to those company documents that described cultural components such as core beliefs or values promoted by the company. Interview transcripts were analysed and coded to formulate descriptions of each company and its culture and humour activities. To exemplify key factors about each company, the quoted examples use respondents' words verbatim from the recorded interviews. Observation notes have been used to describe actual events that

were experienced inside each company and where possible, actual verbatim examples of humour were recorded as well as interpretive descriptions of humour or cultural events. This section comprises a general overview of each company, and Chapter Five presents some specific and significant events that occurred during the research.

The four researched companies were: *Adare*, a small Information Technology company; *Sigma*, a large financial institution; *Kapack*, a medium-sized law firm; and *Uvicon*, a large utility provider. A description is provided of each organisation comprising its key business activities, a cultural description and an outline of humour activities. These snapshots of the individual organisations give the reader a frame of reference for the second results chapter and provide a contextual background for each company that underpins the collated findings presented in Chapter Five.

4.2 Adare

The findings regarding the Adare company culture, activities and humour originated primarily from only two of the data sources, participant observation and interviews. This was because the company had very few company documents other than employment and client contracts, and none pertaining to company culture. The company website highlighted the company activities and employee experience rather than cultural components and beliefs. When the managing director was asked if the company had any documents that portrayed the culture or values his pithy reply was ‘waste of fuckin’ time!’ This lack of documentation and the managing director’s response to the research request is in itself a useful example of the company culture which will be discussed below.

4.2.1 The Adare business

Research was undertaken inside Adare during the month of May 2005. Adare is a service organisation offering expert assistance in the area of Information Technology (IT) security and networking. The company employs 25 people in three key areas: engineering, sales consulting, and office administration. Of the 25 company employees, only three were female. Key business activities included: visiting clients; formulating

and implementing IT solutions; and liaising with various vendors. The company is a specialist in its area, uses specialised systems and employees stated ‘We are the top security consultancy in New Zealand’. The company was described by some employees as ‘ethical and switched on’ with a style of management that was inclusive and promoted good working relationships.

4.2.2 Culture at Adare

Interview respondents asserted that the organisational culture here was positive, unique and very special. Although the cultural questions did not specifically mention humour or fun, every single Adare respondent linked the organisational culture in this company to their workplace humour, as exemplified by these quotes:

The culture, a lot of it has got to do with the humour that we have, we all share the same sort of idiotic behaviour (Adare respondent).

The humour *is* the culture (Adare respondent).

Descriptive terms used by respondents when discussing Adare’s organisational culture included: ‘humour, joking, fun and play’. Several respondents, including the managing director, separated the organisational culture into two definitive components; one being the *play* culture and the other the *work* culture.

Although humour and fun were key ingredients of the culture at Adare, workplace performance was even more important and respondents also stated that ‘excellence, expertise and professionalism’ were factors of organisational culture at Adare. One of the few documents collected from Adare was a web-based company profile and this document highlighted the company’s work ethos, outlining company excellence and emphasising the company commitment to ‘quality solutions’ and ‘unparalleled service’. The document described the extensive training undergone by company consultants and promoted the company slogan of ‘fundamentally superior’ which was recently formulated. The document exemplified the second key component of the company culture, that of commitment and belief in excellence. However, although company employees verbally emphasised their superior performance and standards of excellence (articulated in interviews) this documentary effort at creating branding and a slogan for

the company was ridiculed and resisted by several staff members, while others appeared unaware of its existence. Employees freely criticised this marketing initiative and rarely used the document or the ‘fundamentally superior’ slogan in any external communication to clients. This resistance supported the managing director’s earlier claim that creating documentation about the company culture was a ‘waste of time’. Employee perception of the company’s excellence promoted high workplace standards and innovation at Adare, but simultaneously appeared to foster arrogance and an ‘us versus them’ mentality regarding competitors, customers and vendors who were frequently ridiculed and denigrated in the Adare workplace.

Responses from interviewees highlighted another key factor of the organisational culture. This was the belief that the culture was primarily created and fostered by the managing director of Adare. He initiated much of the humour, organised many practical jokes and regularly used strong profanity as a humour device. In this predominantly male company, competition was a facet of the culture and observation notes recorded frequent jocular abuse particularly among male colleagues where each attempted to outdo the other with ever more insulting jests. Practical jokes were common and some were planned in retaliation to prior pranks demonstrating the competitive urge to ‘pay people back’.

Colleagues also competed to drink the strongest forms of alcohol (even early in the morning). They competed to find increasingly obscure and potent forms of liquor and goaded each other to drink shots in one swallow. Profanity was common and irreverent and a mild epithet was often countered with stronger expletives. There appeared to be no boundaries to the expletives used if they were framed in a manner indicating humour and thus could be considered ‘just a joke’. Company members even invented some of their own rude terms which are discussed below. The competitiveness, particularly in regards to profanity, mostly occurred among the male workers and in particular between the male staff and the (male) managing director.

Interviewees maintained that the culture was relaxed and friendly, team-based and that there was ‘high visibility’ in most aspects of organisational operation. Alcohol was

mentioned as a contributing factor to workplace culture and in particular during company social events. Ritual drinking games were imposed upon new staff and there were drinking traditions to celebrate birthdays.

I've never worked in a company where you can have alcohol for breakfast for any reason, where work just stops (and it can be for the rest of afternoon). Even if I have a lot of work on and I'm trying to get it done, it is still 'stop working come over here and have a drink'. It is just so relaxed, the whole attitude is relaxed, and basically as long as you work you can do anything (Adare respondent).

Karaoke was identified as a key feature of many company celebrations and the company had a karaoke night during the research month. The event was organised to celebrate two company events that included the arrival of a new staff member and a farewell to a former colleague. The karaoke night served as an exemplar of company culture; it took place at the office and included all Adare staff as well as some invited vendors and customers. There was plenty of alcohol supplied and upon arrival people were enthusiastically coerced to drink a *shot* which was a blend of several different alcoholic beverages, sauces and spices. Singing commenced early in the evening with everyone encouraged to take a turn with the hired karaoke unit. The evening concluded in true Adare style when, led by the managing director, the wheeled office chairs were hauled out to the car-park and raced down the steep driveway into the parking area. This incident illustrated the play and fun components that were such a key part of the culture, as well as the alcohol rituals (the spiked shots) and showed the managing director as a key instigator of the fun and games. The races were risky as participants could have been hurt but this did not deter the competitive male members of this company. The following day the managing director announced with great glee and enthusiasm that these were the 'inaugural annual car park races' and he suggested that they would be repeated at future functions. This showed the establishment of a new cultural ritual exemplifying the company's emphasis on fun and risky activities.

Interviewees were asked about company rituals and observations were also made describing rituals seen or experienced while at Adare. Most staff discussed the ritual of bringing in an alcoholic drink on their birthday and the competitive quest to see who

could find the most unusual or horrible drink. The drink had to be ‘downed’ first thing in the morning by the entire staff, although some staff members were skilled at avoiding this ritual. ‘Anything to do with drinking has been turned into a ritual ceremony’ (Adare respondent).

 Birthday traditions are that you always bring in some alcohol and not standard stuff; quite a few people will bring in their cultural thing (for example Korean sake). The tradition is that it arrives in the morning and you have it before you start work in the day (Adare respondent).

Observational notes were taken regarding displays and organisational artifacts and interviewees were asked questions about items that were displayed in the organisation. The displayed artifacts highlighted the humour and fun prevalent at Adare. A genuine fireman’s hat replaced the official fire warden’s cap (issued by the building management). Adare staff were amused by the idea of the (female) office manager wearing the hat for fire drills. The hat was prominently displayed on her desk at reception and was a significant artifact for this company.

Other artifacts were potentially more contentious; in particular, two workplace clocks. One of these made a simulated flatulence noise on the hour and was referred to as the ‘farting clock’ and relished mainly by the male members of staff who took great pride in pointing out this device. On one occasion when there was a visitor in the office, the clock was quietly removed before it could make its hourly noise, as it may have caused offence to this particular foreign visitor, but in general the clock was not removed for visitors.

The second clock was a standard clock that had been adapted by cutting out and gluing pictures of male homosexual pornography onto the hands and face of the clock. The staff fondly referred to this as the ‘gay porn clock’ and some male staff members proudly admitted to having ‘pornalised’ the clock. Running jokes in this primarily male environment focused on accusing other males of being ‘gay’ and making remarks regarding homosexuals and homosexuality. The clock was created as a form of teasing for some of the male engineers in the company and in particular one older male who particularly disliked homosexual references and humour. Although these clocks would be considered offensive and highly inappropriate in many workplaces, Adare staff (with two

exceptions), professed to find them amusing and inoffensive and part of their unique company culture. It was interesting to note that people in this environment also created their own words to describe some activities, such as ‘pornalised’ in the clock situation. On several other occasions the managing director was recorded as saying ‘sit your *mangina* down’ to male employees, insinuating that they had both male and female genitals.

Also displayed at Adare was a poster depicting a male standing aggressively (clenched fist) over a female who had been (supposedly) knocked to the ground. The poster proclaimed ‘punch her in the face to show that you are right!’ This type of sentiment displayed as a joke did not appear to be an attitude adopted by male workers, but staff found it amusing because it was such an improper and ‘politically incorrect’ sentiment and they knew that it was dangerous to display such a poster. When asked about the poster (on display in the staff kitchen) senior managers laughed and said ‘we don’t go there (the kitchen), it’s for women’ and the remark was topped by a second comment ‘anyway the kitchen’s just a pathway to the beer’. The potential issue posed by the poster was laughed off with more gender-based humour. There was a feeling of rebellion and riskiness in this ‘humorous’ display and none of the female employees claimed to find it offensive. They merely rolled their eyes at yet another example of their male colleagues’ humour. Staff appeared aware that such displays are unusual in most workplaces but this ‘daring to be different’ contributed to their perception of having a unique and risky workplace culture that disregards conventional workplace rules.

4.2.3 Humour at Adare

We love humour, we love laughter (Adare respondent).

When asked about humour at Adare, respondents noted that it was impossible to separate the humour from the culture and went so far as to say the humour *was* the culture. Most respondents stated that enjoying humour at work was important to them and suggested that humour offered stress relief, a break from work and a way of bringing people together. Most of the humour at Adare was spontaneous ‘spur-of-the-moment stuff’.

The most common type of humour evident at Adare was banter and people here, like their counterparts in other companies, enjoyed teasing each other, especially about a mistake that was made or a silly action. Banter at Adare was generally good-natured and equitable but was described as ‘kicking humour’ that targeted weaker people. Humour was also described by respondents at Adare as: ‘non-PC’ (not politically correct); ‘close to impropriety’; and ‘risky’.

The main humour I guess that is used is focused on people doing silly things, things at the time they don’t see as being terribly silly, but however they are. It is certainly healthy and it certainly works within Adare (Adare respondent).

There was recognition among Adare employees that banter could go too far sometimes or target someone too often, but people generally understood each other’s limits and respected them.

I think, at any one time someone is being spit on, so to speak, without being picked on, certainly not victimised. I think there is a limit for specific people and when that limit is reached I think the people are smart enough to back off, we don’t target somebody and bang, bang, bang, they sort of target you and move on, or we move on, the collective *we* (Adare respondent).

In the interviews, Adare respondents had lots of incidents to describe because there had been lots of significant jokes and incidents over the years. This was supported by the observation of 27 practical jokes during the research period. These practical jokes ranged from hidden ‘fart’ machines making rude noises (played on a new recruit on her first day), letting off stink bombs in the office (two incidents), to frequent use of the company megaphone to startle unsuspecting victims. Many of the practical jokes had physical components such as removing the seat from a chair and waiting for an unsuspecting victim to sit down and subsequently fall to the floor. This did happen during the research period and the victim was a vendor representative visiting the company for a business meeting. He was unharmed and appeared to take the joke good-naturedly, but there was the potential for this joke to actually physically hurt someone. The megaphone joke was a particular favourite and a joker (usually the managing director) crept up behind someone hard at work. On one occasion the prank was played on an employee coming out of the kitchen carrying coffee and the managing director shouted through the

megaphone causing him to spill his coffee on himself and the floor. Usually the ‘victims’ response was to swear at the perpetrator. The megaphone prank was played six times during the research period with different targets (including the researcher).

Computers and technology were often used in Adare’s practical jokes and changing someone’s desktop picture was a favourite prank. On one occasion while out of the office, a female administrator had her scenic picture changed for a photograph of two naked male posteriors. The photograph was taken in-house and featured the managing director and another (male) employee. The woman screamed when she saw it then laughed and promised retribution later. In this instance the perpetrators knew their target and were aware that she would not take offence or threaten them with sexual harassment laws. Everyone in the office at the time was ‘in on’ the prank and waited avidly to see the result. Much laughter and hilarity ensued and the fun signalled the start of Friday ‘playtime’ which involved online computer games played by several people while enjoying alcoholic drinks.

Food fights have occurred at Adare company functions and a small version was observed on one Friday afternoon as staff members threw sausage rolls at each other. Party poppers were ‘let off’ during the working day for no reason other than to have fun or give someone a fright and the notice board was covered with photographs that had been altered in some way or had people’s names added as a teasing insult. For example, a staff photo was altered so that the employee looked like a popular *Star Trek* character with big ears and lips.

The practical jokes were noisy and often distracting, particularly when someone was on the phone. In the aforementioned food fight, a (new) female staff member was observed calmly dealing with a customer matter on the phone while sausage rolls were hurtling past her head. Staff were used to such mayhem and had adapted to working while loud and unusual activities occur. Some professed to find it distracting and difficult to work in this environment but most agree that having this kind of fun is the reason that they work at Adare. People in this company were perfectly aware of the potential for these jokes to cause harm or offence but were willing to take the risk to maintain their unique

workplace culture. They appeared cognizant of each other's limits and attitudes and only chose targets that would 'take a joke' of this nature.

While most Adare respondents agreed that humour could go too far and hurt people the general feeling was that people knew where the limits were at Adare and were usually careful not to hurt others. A few interviewees suggested that humour had gone too far occasionally and in these cases people had been either physically hurt or experienced hurt feelings. Most people agreed that if too much humour was directed at one individual, this would be harmful to their self-esteem and that usually a good balance was achieved at Adare. Three respondents mentioned that humour could be time-consuming or distracting from work tasks especially when dealing with people on the phone but overall people at Adare were happy with the levels of humour and did not want to see less humour or sanitised humour in their company.

Interviewees also pointed out that there were gender differences in the types of humour enjoyed and that everyone had different tolerance limits.

Yes it can go a bit far, it can be offensive to people, and because of the culture they might not actually make a thing about it (Adare respondent).

It was reiterated by most participants that humour was never intended to be deliberately hurtful to anyone; it just worked out that way sometimes. While observation notes highlighted that no one actually objected to or protested about any of the jokes and pranks, when in the interview situation (out of the workplace), some respondents suggested that they had to be seen to accept the humour or risk being alienated from the workplace culture. Much of the humour was created and instigated by the managing director and, in particular, he organised most of the practical jokes and this will be further discussed in Chapter Six.

This final quote from an Adare employee encapsulates the overall feeling that emerged in the company; that the humour and culture here relieved work pressure and thus was an important part of workplace life for people in this organisation.

The office while it is a place of work can also be a place to go to relax, to get away from a customer for a while, just being in a fun environment or not so

serious environment for a while. Humour has its positives and negatives, it always will do, and I think overall it is more positive to the way we operate rather than a negative (Adare respondent).

4.2.4 Response from Adare

This section concludes with the reactions and responses from management and staff at Adare. As highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, each company was sent an organisational report written specifically to reflect and emphasise facets of their organisational culture, humour use, the relationship between the two, and any perceived outcomes. In the interests of presenting accurate depictions of each company, a follow-up call or email was made asking the company for feedback and reactions to the report. The response from Adare endorsed their unique and humorous style and a junior staff member rang to advise me that the report had been received. She then gleefully depicted the scene in the Adare office over the phone, describing the managing director, feet up on desk, report in hand, happily reading aloud to his assembled staff amid cheers, catcalls and general jocular banter!

A later meeting with four of the Adare staff confirmed that they perceived the organisational report to offer a very accurate and insightful depiction of the company and they were proud of their contribution to the overall research. The managing director did happily note that the report identified him as one of the practical jokers in the company contradicting research that suggested that company jokers were more likely to be lower-level staff members than those in management positions (Plester & Orams, 2007). Staff at Adare were particularly pleased that although the report described their frequent, outrageous, and even contentious humour, it also emphasised the point that the company was professional and focused on work outcomes above all. The meeting with Adare staff included the managing director, two senior staff members and one junior-level employee. Diary notes were made during and immediately following this meeting.

4.3 Sigma

4.3.1 The Sigma business

Research was undertaken inside Sigma during the month of July 2005. The company is a service organisation offering mainly financial and insurance services. Sigma employs over 800 people in many different areas such as operations, human resources, and marketing. Since its inception in 1989 Sigma has grown rapidly; from the original staff of five to over 800 people today. As part of this of growth there have been several mergers with other financial companies. This rapid growth and integration with other companies has had an impact on business outcomes and activities but has also had an impact on the company culture as people from different companies have been merged and have found ways to work together.

It has a lot of history behind it in terms of other companies, so you've got a lot of people with different backgrounds working together to move forward (Sigma respondent).

Most respondents attested that the main reason that they worked at Sigma was due to the people at the company and the excellent company reputation rather than being attracted to their specific job. The words of one respondent reflected this finding:

I never thought I'd be in insurance; you don't sort of grow up and say I want to be an insurer (Sigma respondent).

Eleven of the fifteen interview respondents had no previous experience in the insurance industry and felt that they knew little about insurance when they started. Four interviewees stated that they had learned (by word of mouth) that Sigma was a good company to work for and that this had strongly influenced their decision to apply for a position at Sigma.

4.3.2 Culture at Sigma

It's all about vision and values (Sigma respondent)

Thirteen of the Sigma interviewees firmly attested that there was a strong, definitive and identifiable culture in this organisation. All of these respondents immediately articulated the four core company values of *harmony*, *attainment*, *honesty* and *fun* and suggested that

they were the cultural markers for the company. They suggested that the culture was values-based and that this fostered a sense of pride in the organisation. In the words of one respondent, ‘The *way* we do things is extremely important’. Data collected from both interviews and observations suggested that there was a genuine adoption of these four values throughout the company. They were often cited, displayed in many different forms throughout the company, and fostered through management initiatives rewarding employees for demonstrating behaviour in keeping with the values.

Interview responses citing the values as key cultural components were supported by observational notes on values-based behaviour noticed inside the company. No negative responses were made about company values in interviews or recorded in observation data. Three responses are listed below and these were answers to the question asking Sigma interviewees to describe the company culture:

I think (the company culture) is hard-working with an element of fun; we have really good values for our company- honesty, harmony, attainment and a fun theme. Sometimes I think we lack in communication a bit (Sigma respondent).

They are really big on this whole values thing... I think they genuinely are really big on these values. I do my job, have fun doing it but I don't know about the values... but they genuinely do care and are passionate about doing these things and I think everyone does try to display them (Sigma respondent).

I think the whole thing about fun and harmony and attainment really comes through, they are the three for me and we also have honesty as one of our values but that for me almost goes without saying. I believe in the integrity of my team it is something that we don't proactively work at (Sigma respondent).

Respondents suggested that it was possible to align personal values and goals with the goals of Sigma, and this was fostered and encouraged in the Personal Success Plan (PSP) used in the performance review process.

The second-most cited feature of the organisational culture at Sigma was that people were *supportive*. A team atmosphere prevailed in most areas of the company and colleagues were helpful and friendly to each other. Interviewees affirmed that most of the people at Sigma wanted to help others ‘and that includes other people in the company’. This affirmation supported observational data suggesting that the company value of *harmony*

was important to Sigma employees and was integrated into the cultural ethos at the company.

Success was also cited as a key element of the culture and other features such as rewards, recognition and the celebration of achievement and success were emphasised. As part of the emphasis on success, respondents recognised that the professional conduct and standards at Sigma were key cultural factors.

I think our culture is driven on success in the game we play. In the market we work in there is a very positive outlook. That sort of thing is reinforced by the values we have and the culture is like an individual-driven culture as far as values. Every person that I have come in contact with believes that they can make things work in Sigma and if they don't they don't work for Sigma (Sigma respondent).

The culture was also described as positive and relaxed, 'You've got that whole beach feeling, slightly relaxed and it just translates in a positive way for the organisation'. This blend of relaxation and professionalism appeared to be a positive cultural element that promoted the successful working environment experienced at Sigma.

Sigma is a family-orientated company, very relaxed although professional, not a very complicated company, loves to give back to the person, the client as well as the employee (Sigma respondent).

Reward was another key factor emphasised by interview respondents. It seemed that Sigma was willing to reward good performances, and recognised hard work, and that employees valued this stance. People felt that they worked hard in their roles but that this did not go unnoticed and was valued by their managers and the overall company.

The company culture I would say is to get the work done but also they are very good in rewarding good work that is done and any success that you make, the rewards are quite great (Sigma respondent).

Respondents noted that the culture was also departmental and that each team or department had its own specific rituals and identity, resulting in many subcultures within the overall company culture. 'I think the culture varies depending on what your job is and which team you are in with regards to your job.' Sigma interview respondents gave two answers to questions regarding the existence of organisational culture. The whole

company culture was discussed but their team-based environment and departmental culture was of greater relevance to them individually. Therefore it was noted that the culture could be both individual and simultaneously team-specific, which sometimes resulted in a lack of communication or even competition with other groups or teams.

A factor in the development of subcultures at Sigma was the mergers and integration with several other companies. The company had grown and developed significantly and this had created major challenges as people from different backgrounds, used to operating in different ways, were assimilated into the larger Sigma company. Respondents pointed out that there were groups of people inside the company that preferred to do things the 'old way' and that appeared to resist organisational change. 'When we integrate with different businesses there can be quite a lot of resistance in a scenario like that' (Sigma respondent). Many respondents spoke of cultural change that they had noted during their own personal tenure and the implications that this had for them as individuals and for their teams and departments. 'We have new people come out and work in our department and their culture is different to what our culture is' (Sigma respondent). It was noted that there were both positive and negative aspects of each phase of change but most respondents appeared to frame the developments in a positive light.

Many documents were collected during the research at Sigma and these included workbooks outlining personal responsibility. These outlined what being a values-based organisation meant to Sigma and stated that the company was concerned with 'celebrating the essence of who we are and what we aspire to become'. There was a quarterly news magazine containing a profile on the latest Employee of the Month, a baby corner, sports events and summaries of company family events. There were also monthly and weekly newsletters.

Other documents analysed were: the *Personal Success Plan* (PSP); the Sigma code of conduct; a dress-code document; and a service charter specific to one department. The PSP was an individualised company document given to every company member and it was developed with the employee and his/her manager with specific goals and objectives agreed upon and evaluated twice yearly. The dress-code document had recently been

revised and a professional colour pamphlet had been distributed stating correct dress requirements as well as displaying photos of both correctly and incorrectly attired employees. The formal weekday dress was defined as well as the smart-casual dress standards expected on casual Fridays, which occurred once per month. This document was displayed on departmental notice boards. The message reinforcing dress requirements had also been reiterated at a departmental feedback session with a fun (and funny) fashion show where different managers and employees were dressed in different styles and the rest of the staff were given a competition form to rate whether or not the attire fitted the dress code. Correct entries were put in a draw and the winners were taken out to morning tea by a senior manager. This department found a fun way of reinforcing a serious message and commitment to the dress standards.

There was continuity among the documents and many reinforced and highlighted the company values and vision. Documentation appeared to offer a key method of communication between upper levels of company management and the many individual employees in each department. Newsletters were written in a chatty, informative style and included photos of different employees and departments that may have had special events or occasions. These documents reinforced the key company value of rewarding and celebrating achievement as well as highlighting fun activities that had taken place. The regularity of such bulletins appeared to be a useful way to diffuse and reinforce company ethos and culture to its large number of employees and appeared to be working effectively at Sigma. All of the bulletins and newsletters were professionally presented, colourful and interesting.

4.3.3 Humour at Sigma

Every Sigma respondent stated that enjoying humour at work was important to them and suggested that humour offered stress relief, a break from work and was a way of bringing people together. Sigma respondents strongly asserted that using humour at work made their job easier, more enjoyable, and the fact that they could enjoy humour and have fun was one of the reasons that they worked at this company.

(Humour is) absolutely important, I'm in a high stress team... we try and make a point of using a large amount of humour and things that can distract people whenever possible because I think it just takes the edge off (Sigma respondent).

(Humour is) very important. You spend eight hours a day working, so you can't do what you are doing and not crack a smile –it's too stressful. Sigma is a place where you can be yourself, and the job becomes less of a challenge, you find ways of communicating (Sigma respondent).

Most respondents stated that humour was part of the culture at Sigma. 'Everywhere I worked there has been humour within this organisation,' and respondents cited the core value of fun promoted by the company as an obvious example of the importance of humour as a cultural factor.

Fun was a term used by most respondents when answering questions about workplace humour. Although the term *fun* was not introduced to any interview respondents, they used the term frequently as it was a company-prescribed and promoted value. *Fun* was the most recent value and had been added to the other three during company development initiatives. Adding *fun* as a value has shown some strong self-awareness by Sigma as there was a traditional emphasis on professionalism, hard work and the need to behave appropriately with clients, managers and peers. This newest value provided balance to the strong work-focused ethos apparent in the company. Promoting fun enabled employees to relax more on the job and to take some fun breaks in their day. However, the other side of this seemingly positive initiative is that there was also a feeling in the company that fun was 'prescribed' and that staff were obliged to have fun. It was difficult for managers to promote the value of fun while not actually ordering it to occur. However, employees did indicate that because fun was promoted, they felt comfortable about taking a break in their day to laugh and share humour with colleagues.

Many of the initiatives that were described as 'fun' by employees were company organised events such as outings or in-house treats. Interviewees described an occasion when senior managers, adorned with sparkling fairy wings and headdresses, delivered barbecued sausages and ice cream to employees throughout the company. Many interviewees described this event and had enjoyed and appreciated it. The event was

interpreted as an indication of senior management's commitment to this stated value of fun.

While fun was emphasised and fostered, there were limits on what was acceptable and most Sigma respondents discussed limits for fun. Interviewees stated that most people were aware of acceptable limits and thus fun at Sigma was appropriate and employees were careful not to offend or transgress norms with inappropriate behaviour. Although the rules for fun were not stated, people were intrinsically aware of which behaviours would qualify as appropriate fun in this workplace and which would not. For example, several respondents attested that physical jokes or horseplay activities that risked corporeal harm would not be welcomed under the value of fun but would exemplify fun going too far and 'crossing the line'. Respondents also noted that fun that was acceptable at work was different than fun that they might have in their own time away from Sigma.

Overall, a positive balance appeared to be maintained in regards to workplace fun at Sigma. Fun was encouraged and fostered but employees very clearly stated that the fun stayed within workplace-appropriate boundaries. Employees eagerly anticipated future fun events and seemed to appreciate the effort and forethought put into such occasions. They also appreciated that sometimes a random fun event occurred that they had not anticipated (as in the fairy-sausage-delivery day). Most respondents also emphasised that the annual Christmas party was a fun-filled event that was most enjoyable and eagerly awaited. This overlap where questions about humour elicited responses discussing fun will be further discussed in the next two chapters.

Another question asked interviewees whether the Sigma culture affected the humour that was used at work. Most respondents agreed that the workplace culture regulated the types of humour used at Sigma and again referred to the company values that encouraged fun and emphasised harmony. Sigma employees were well aware of social boundaries that were respected when using humour and emphasised that humour activities were appropriate and as inoffensive as possible. As this respondent highlights, people regulated their choice of humour according to which people were involved:

I think we are not always PC as far as our humour but I think, some of the humour that we have within our department is the sort of humour you would have with your friends. We sort of relay the same stories that we may be telling our friends to our colleagues at work too but then we probably control our humour as far as who we are interacting with (Sigma respondent).

The most common type of humour evident at Sigma was banter and at Sigma this was generally good-natured and equitable and described thus:

I think we just give each other grief to be honest, have little digs at each other... we give each other a bit of grief and that is fine, pretty light hearted (Sigma respondent).

There was recognition among Sigma employees that banter could be hurtful sometimes or target someone too often but people generally understood each other's limits and respected them. 'We wouldn't really have a lot of racial humour but we probably do have some sexist humour' (Sigma respondent).

Generally the everyday humour described by respondents and observed during the research time was good-natured and exemplified jocular abuse found in many other New Zealand organisations (Plester & Sayers, 2007). Occasionally some profanity was used by participants in banter but generally they were (jokingly) chided by their colleagues for this usage and on the whole banter was reasonably careful between colleagues.

You don't get any prejudice or sexist stuff otherwise people will come back and say 'no, that is actually part of the code of conduct' (Sigma respondent).

Some examples of sexual innuendo or homosexual references were recorded but once again these were discreet and careful, between individuals who obviously knew each other well enough. People at Sigma were primarily concerned with not causing offence and this was evident in most of the observed humour. 'I think there are boundaries we don't cross and so it (humour) is kept pretty clean PC' (Sigma respondent). As found in humour research (Plester & Orams, 2007) a few of the jokers were able to use slightly riskier humour but in general daily verbal jousting was mild and inoffensive.

Most respondents claimed that when their workload was particularly heavy or during very stressful times there tended to be a lot less humour or humour could temporarily

disappear. Often they were too busy to get involved with humour and if everyone was busy then no one had the time or the inclination to create any humour. However, most affirmed that at the end of such a patch they were ready to enjoy a joke or a laugh with their colleagues and friends at work. Sometimes colleagues would be aware of their heavy loads and offer to help or create some light relief or fun for them. Respondents claimed that humour was a wonderful way to reduce stress and to cope with a hard day. Many respondents attested that relieving stress with humour enabled them to continue working more effectively and happily.

All respondents affirmed that humour used inappropriately could result in negative impacts in the workplace. This was an area of key concern at Sigma and respondents stated that it was very important to keep humour at work 'clean, safe and non-offensive' (Sigma respondent). There was a strong awareness of the fact that what one person could find funny might be very offensive to a different person. Most Sigma respondents asserted that it was better to err on the side of caution and abstain from making a joke if there was the potential for offence. Interviewees were also aware that in a large company such as Sigma there was more potential for unwitting offence to occur and so it was judicious to take care with humour. There was also mention of company policies and ethos regarding profanity and inappropriate humour. This respondent described the humour styles in her department:

People are fairly careful with inappropriate humour, simply because we do get along as a team and people understand that they don't want to put people out too much so they are reasonably careful about what kinds of humour they apply where, but you will probably find that you get all types of humour in pockets (Sigma respondent).

Although Sigma employees were careful about humour use and aware of the company ethos, all respondents reported that they enjoyed plenty of humour on a daily basis at work. 'I haven't had a single day when there wasn't some kind of joke or fun. I haven't spent a single day without laughing' (Sigma respondent).

4.3.4 Response from Sigma

A response was also requested from Sigma after they had time to read the organisational report and circulate it among several departments in this large company. Once again a face-to-face meeting was arranged and two representatives from Sigma met with me to discuss findings at this company. Each of them came from a different department of the company one from the *Operations* division and the other from *Human Resources* (HR). The operations manager was a senior manager and the HR employee a lower-level employee. Both emphasised that the report depicted an accurate picture of the culture and humour at Sigma. The HR employee was interested in improving employee alliance with the company and engagement with its values. The feedback session resulted in brainstorming ideas for an upcoming workshop focusing on employment engagement at Sigma. The senior manager reported that reading the report had helped him realise how important fun and humour were to his staff. Both felt that the report had some actual practical uses and value for them in their daily work lives and therefore this appeared to be a positive outcome of the research project. The meeting provided feedback that interpretation of the company culture and humour was accurate and relevant.

4.4 Kapack

4.4.1 The Kapack business

Research was undertaken inside Kapack during the month of November 2005. Kapack is a medium-sized commercial law firm and has been practising law for approximately 20 years. There were 119 people working for the company 72 females (60 %) and 47 males (40%). There were 24 partners in the firm and, of these, 20 were male and four female. There are several different departments within the company and each offered a different type of service. While many departments provide legal services to external clients, other departments focus on supporting the law-based business activities. These departments provide internal corporate services such as Information Technology (IT), marketing, and human resource management (HRM). There were 17 secretaries who supported the varying legal teams and all of these employees were female, several of whom had been with the company for many years. The company had changed from being run as 'just a collection of little practices' (Kapack respondent) to today's more

focused business approach resulting in a more corporate atmosphere. Respondents suggested that this corporate approach had changed the workplace environment and impacted upon the organisational culture in many ways.

4.4.2 Culture at Kapack

The process of change was a key cultural feature at Kapack and the company has undergone huge changes in the last three years. They first underwent a merger and then a subsequent disengagement with the merged company. Change has been so significant at Kapack that it was discussed by most respondents and appeared to be a key component influencing company culture. Interviewees pointed out that continuous change inside Kapack had meant that organisational stories had been lost and that there very few enduring factors from the company's past. While some respondents suggested that working in the law profession itself was heavily steeped in lore, history, and heritage, others firmly asserted that there was no history at the company due to all the changes and that, in fact, there was a feeling of starting anew in the last three years. One respondent even described the company culture as being 'a blank slate'. Respondents suggested that the company changes in the last few years have resulted in the company being more like a 'corporate business'. The change process has changed the company culture but most respondents were unsure what the culture was becoming and how it would develop. Respondents suggested that the HR team was working on this area and there was an expectation among respondents that culture, values and a company mission would eventually be defined and documented in some way.

One respondent typified the people at Kapack as a 'bunch of lawyers' and other respondents used the descriptors: 'intellectual, argumentative, competitive and professional' to describe the types of people that worked here. Kapack people were also depicted as being: 'friendly, approachable, hardworking, and successful'. The less complimentary descriptors 'precious' and 'high maintenance' were also used. The professional feature of being lawyers was the most highlighted aspect of the company culture and this was also described by the non-lawyer respondents. Company affiliation was an area that may have suffered during recent mergers and organisational culture was more strongly associated with being a lawyer or law-associated professional rather than

with being a Kapack company member. The tradition and significance involved with being part of the law profession was a strong defining factor for these intelligent and articulate professionals. Therefore the identity of the company culture appeared to be firmly grounded in the company's core business of practising law and being lawyers. However, the more recent addition of corporate services supporting the law activities were a less-acknowledged part of the company identity.

Company identity was alluded to by only a few respondents and all of those who discussed this concept stated that 'we don't understand our identity'. It was suggested that very few people in the company could actually articulate a company vision, mission or answer the question 'who are we?' It became apparent in analysing interview responses regarding company culture that some company members actually spoke about the company as 'they' rather than including themselves in the company collective and using 'we' to describe the company. This appeared to be a significant distinction in a company struggling to define itself and suggested a slightly detached attitude on the part of company members.

There was only one company document that described company culture and this was a graduate recruitment document in which there was one page pertaining to company culture that stated that the environment at Kapack was one 'where people are challenged and encouraged to do their best'. The document also emphasised diversity as a value, as well as integrity, success and professionalism. The statement that Kapack 'values diversity' (also stated in a staff induction booklet) was the only reference discovered throughout the research at Kapack that pertained to company values. Interview respondents did not refer to company values except to state that they did not know what they were and that there were no documents describing values or setting out mission statements. The graduate recruitment document reflected some aspects of the culture and values but few internal staff members referred to this document or even appeared aware that it existed. The recruitment booklet also claimed that Kapack promotes fun at work and listed some of the parties and sports events that the company provides, as well as the Friday drinks ritual. These events were observed and recorded at Kapack but it appeared that although the marketing brochure emphasised fun aspects of the company culture, fun

was not a company value and was not often used by actual company participants to describe the company culture.

A key uniting factor of the culture at Kapack which became apparent through both interviews and observations was the team culture that occurred from interactions within different workgroups. People who could not describe an overall company culture were able to discuss culture in their team or business unit and point to factors that comprised the culture in their smaller group. Hesitance and uncertainty that had characterised responses to questions on overall company culture were replaced with confidence, enthusiasm and certainty when discussing their individual work teams. It appeared that respondents identified more strongly with their business unit than with the company as a whole

As well as referring to business group affiliations, respondents also highlighted that there were many other sub-groups that both contributed to overall culture and also divided the organisation. For example, respondents suggested that the overall culture could be described as ‘masculine’ and ‘boysee’ and asserted that there were pockets or groups that were male-centred and this created a ‘boy’s club’ feel to the overall culture.

There is a bit of a boys’ group. I don’t think it is organised but I think any of us female solicitors will probably tell you that there is a real lads culture in some areas. They kind of do lunches and drinks and stuff like that with a few of the male partners (Kapack respondent).

At Kapack there was a feel of exclusivity when people talked about the ‘boys’ club’ particularly from the women but male respondents also discussed this phenomenon and suggested that it was subtly divisive and covert. Female groups were also identified and ‘girls’ lunches’ and coffee mornings were arranged for female-only participants. Age also featured in social differentiation and several respondents suggested that ‘the young ones get together’ as did groups of the ‘old timers’.

Although the team component of the Kapack culture appeared to be strong and clearly understood by participants, the overall company culture was described as ‘weak’ and it was even suggested that there was no overall culture or that it was barely noticeable and

not identifiable. There was an overall feeling from approximately half of the Kapack participants that there was no definite company culture, as suggested below:

I wouldn't classify it as a strong culture. It's made up of a lot of really personable people, lacking direction and cohesiveness. If you ask a number of people what we stood for, they wouldn't be able to give you the same answer (Kapack respondent).

Conversely, about half of respondents described a friendly, energetic and exciting workplace that was happy and relaxed. These descriptors appeared to articulate the attitude of the people and the style of business interaction apparent at Kapack. It also highlighted initiatives that the company had pursued by encouraging the relaxed style to offset the pressure and stress found in most highly competitive law firms. This more casual approach appeared to have a significant impact on workplace activities and respondents suggested that it enabled them to be more customer-focused and develop better client relationships. Many respondents suggested that this was a key factor of the culture and a significant point of differentiation from other law firms. Only one respondent suggested that such a relaxed style had negative impacts and this respondent suggested that this way of working resulted in mediocrity rather than superior performance.

One final point regarding company culture came from interview respondents who suggested that organisational culture was different in each level of the company. These two quotes from respondents highlight the feeling that the culture is fragmented according to which level you work on and by the role that one fulfils at Kapack.

There is obviously a different culture in the corporate services area to what you would find upstairs for sure and part of that is the result of the different levels within the building (Kapack respondent).

You've got the Partners and the Associates and the Solicitors up the top and then you've got the corporate services which are sort of down on level two. When anyone refers to corporate services it is always down. They are not treated the same ... They are not on the same level and are spoken to the same. You've got such a clear-cut distinction. You've got all the lawyers are upstairs and the secretaries and then you've got everybody else is downstairs in corporate service (Kapack respondent).

4.4.3 Humour at Kapack

The most common type of humour evident at Kapack was banter which was ongoing and prevalent but also very quiet as it was shared among small groups of people usually in fairly low voices so as not to disturb those working nearby. In general, Kapack staff appeared to be very careful in humour use not to distract others at work or to use any forms of humour that could upset colleagues. In the whole month of observation no incidents of (observed) banter contained any profanity or potentially contentious subject matter. In the context of the overall study this was highly unusual and perhaps reflected the guarded and constrained nature of humour at Kapack. There were some instances of extremely mild innuendo but banter at Kapack was gentle, quiet and generally careful. This respondent articulated concerns regarding the noise that humour (and laughter), generated:

I feel a little bit worried sometimes about the noise perhaps that comes from that area (when using humour)... we need to have young people and we need to have fun, but I still worry a little bit when they get a little bit too loud and laughing too much that it is not quite professional and it might look like perhaps that they are not doing much (Kapack respondent).

People at Kapack were careful and considerate in their humour use, particularly in regards to distracting others by making a noise. They were also a little 'worried' about openly using humour as this might suggest that serious work had been abandoned. Standards of work and professional conduct were extremely important in this traditional law environment where 'time is money' and segments of time were accounted for and billed. Therefore 'time out' for joking and laughter made some people anxious that they would be perceived as unprofessional or not working hard enough.

I think you just have to be a little bit careful but it is good to have some humour. I mean it is an office and it is a business so you've got to try and do your job, and I suppose you do wonder if people are laughing and doing a job at the same time, if they might be perhaps not concentrating on what they are doing and might get it wrong, is another bit of a worry (Kapack respondent).

Humour that was discussed at Kapack in interviews or that was observed during the research month was neutral and careful. Practical jokes or physical humour were not a

feature of the humour at Kapack and during interviews respondents offered opinions regarding these forms of humour:

We don't have people hitting each other with hammers. Maybe there are no practical jokes because the nature of the work here is serious so humour is momentary and you can't actually risk someone's workflow or work. You could imagine if the company could play a practical joke or something and it got into the news (Kapack respondent).

Verbal humour was also careful and avoided sexist, sexual and racial themes; however, during the research period, one significant email incident occurred that had embarrassing repercussions for Kapack. This will be discussed in Chapter Five as it is one of the recorded incidents of the project. In this legal environment, Kapack employees were very aware of the potential for humour to be interpreted as harassment or to cause offence:

It is a work environment and now with the harassment and the way the employment is you have to be very careful what you say to people and how you say it... and I think that has put a little bit of a dampener on it (Kapack respondent).

Respondents did admit that sometimes riskier forms of humour were used but people were careful about when and where. Some respondents suggested that all forms of humour including riskier types (racial, sexual, and sexist) did occur, but these types were not actually observed during the research at Kapack, perhaps exemplifying the caution utilised with such types of humour.

I think a bit of everything would have happened here, including racial jokes and including a practical joke, very occasionally. I can't quite think of one at the moment but I am sure there has been the odd one, but generally it is just talking and laughing. There is not enough toilet humour – it's a mature place (Kapack respondent).

Four respondents claimed that there was not enough humour at Kapack and that it would be desirable to have more humour and fun at work.

I think we want to tell people that we are a fun organisation but they can't use that word fun because that would be downright lying. We are not really a culture around fun, we don't have a value called fun but I know that HR are very aware

of that. They sort of are trying to bring on people that might create that fun or introduce that fun (Kapack respondent).

Humour at Kapack was guarded and careful. When discussing the potential for humour to go wrong and cause bad feelings at work, every respondent discussed boundaries to humour. Phrases such as: ‘it can go too far’; ‘when someone steps over the mark’; and ‘you need to find a balance’ were used to suggest that humour must be contained inside boundaries in the workplace and to confer the idea that there were *limits* for humour. For example, this junior respondent spoke of being chastened by her boss for being too loud in her humour:

Humour is important, I seem to be the loudest I think I am. I have only been told off once by my boss oh no twice. I don’t think there is enough humour (Kapack respondent).

The apparent boundaries for humour use were maintained by a few organisational humour guardians. These employees appeared to have a strong influence in deciding the types and forms of humour that was acceptable inside Kapack. Typically, these gatekeepers were female, in the older age bracket and had long-term tenure and status at Kapack. They observed standards of propriety and clearly stated that they did not expect profanity or lewd content in either verbal humour or in content displayed on computer screens as a result of email humour. At least three such respondents recalled that they had chastised (usually younger) staff members when they felt that humour incidents stepped outside the boundaries of what they considered appropriate. These ‘gatekeepers’ stated that they had told younger, newer employees that some of their humour was inappropriate, as illustrated by this respondent.

I will say ‘now keep the party clean chaps, keep the party clean’, because it’s not filth but it can be quite you know! (Kapack respondent).

Others recounted instances where they had told younger employees that the humour was too loud and disruptive. These informal humour guardians made it very clear to colleagues which forms of humour they approved of and which they did not.

We don’t have terribly rude jokes here either; I think humour here is more about what is acceptable. You can do what is acceptable and funny, well certainly in this area (Kapack respondent).

Some respondents suggested that people were also very careful in regards to gender-based humour at Kapack and that this was a form of respect towards colleagues, as highlighted by this quote:

There is a very healthy respect from a lot of the males towards the females. They are very careful what is on their screen or if they say something. I think they talk quietly amongst themselves, obviously because they don't want everyone to hear. I also think that is respect for females – they won't want to be somewhere where maybe someone was repeating disgusting jokes but it doesn't happen around here (Kapack respondent).

In summary, humour at Kapack was cautious and kept within certain boundaries that appeared to be defined and managed by organisational guardians or gatekeepers.

4.4.4 Response from Kapack

Initially it had been agreed that the follow-up session at Kapack would be a face-to-face meeting with some key people and a possible presentation to staff from the researcher. Unfortunately work demands at Kapack made this too difficult and so an email response was sent by the HR manager outlining the overall reaction and effect of the company report. This email has been presented (Appendix B) with any identifying names blacked out for privacy reasons. The response from the HR manager suggested that there were mixed reactions to the report from Kapack staff and that some staff had been disappointed that the report had suggested that humour levels were low at Kapack, while others had agreed that this was an accurate depiction of the company. This company had been struggling with defining and developing their organisational culture and also senior managers had concerns that employees here did not have fun in their workplace. As outlined in the email there have been real efforts here to plan and offer more workplace activities that stimulate fun and humour and Kapack want to promote themselves as a *fun company*.

Management at this company would have liked the research report to offer them actual recommendations for workplace fun creation but during earlier negotiations for research access it had been agreed that the report would be reflective and not an action-oriented document. Feedback from Kapack suggested that not only had the report been

reasonably accurate in its perception of company culture and humour but also that it had been an actual catalyst for organisational change and development.

4.5 Uvicon

4.5.1 The Uvicon business

Research was undertaken inside Uvicon during the month of December 2005. Uvicon is a multi-utility corporation responsible for supplying electricity and gas. The company owns and manages a range of energy and technology businesses. Over the past few years, the company has undergone some significant mergers with other energy suppliers and most recently merged with another utility supplier which has resulted in employee numbers rising to 853. Management at Uvicon consists of a board of seven directors and an eight-person management team. From analysis of company documents it was noted that all management team members and board members were male and appeared to be of European ethnicity.

The Uvicon premises host a highly technological control room where energy status for all supplied areas is constantly monitored 24 hours per day. Employees who work in this area suggested that this sector of the company is quite different from the other, more management-oriented areas of Uvicon and described the control room as the ‘heart’ of the company. The engineers agreed that the key focus in this area was to ‘keep the lights on’ and one engineer asserted: ‘we’ve got our own culture in here’.

4.5.2 Culture at Uvicon

From the interview responses some key elements of the company culture became apparent. The most-emphasised element by respondents (over half) was that of *flexibility*. Uvicon has a flexible work hours policy where employees are free to begin work early and leave earlier in the afternoon when that suits them. This factor was keenly emphasised and highly valued by those who took part in the research. The flexible work hours enabled employees to co-ordinate factors such as child-caring responsibilities, sports commitments and family arrangements, and supported the second key cultural feature *work/life balance*’.

Six respondents suggested that Uvicon's commitment to employees' work-life balance was a key feature of the culture and highly valued. This was demonstrated by the flexible work hours already mentioned and by other company initiatives such as financial support for health initiatives like attending a gym or joining a weight-loss programme. The company also had several bikes and helmets available for staff to use in the nearby park. Six respondents also stated that they felt that the company genuinely cared about the people that it employed and also mentioned the above schemes as exemplars of this care.

Respondents also stated that within their actual work roles they were 'treated like adults' and left to achieve their goals rather than being overly supervised in their tasks. Respondents felt that company managers trusted their employees to find their own best methods and styles to complete tasks and therefore respondents felt empowered, autonomous and valued. Respondents claimed that this environment of mutual respect and consideration motivated them to perform their work tasks to the highest level possible. This caring environment appeared to translate into better service delivery to customers and all interview respondents stated that they cared about doing the best job possible for their company and customers.

I was quite impressed when I first came to Uvicon about how it actually cares about its customers and delivering the service (Uvicon respondent).

It is probably the best company I have ever worked for. I find from my point of view they invest in the people that work in the company (Uvicon respondent).

I think there is a wonderful sense of pride in the way that we do things. There is a hunger for personal development, personal recognition, and that is a big focus, and it is a very responsive and ready environment (Uvicon respondent).

The concept of values was discussed in responses to the interview questions about culture and again over half of the respondents suggested that values were an important element of the company culture. Respondents suggested that the individual values of each employee as well as those officially espoused by the company influenced the organisational culture. They also suggested that culture development is led by company values and these respondents emphasise the importance of company values to people at Uvicon.

I guess it is about the value the people work in the organisation have so it's the values they bring to the organisation and then it is a conglomerate of all those to what makes up the culture (Uvicon respondent).

We have tried to create a really proactive culture which has been led by some of our values (Uvicon respondent).

The official company values were easy to find at Uvicon. They were presented to new company recruits in an induction kit that also included a CD and a values jigsaw puzzle. (A kit was given to me on my first day.) Values statements were also displayed in various prominent places in the workplace, and even tastefully etched onto a glass display on one floor. The four stated company values were: (1) '*extend your horizons*' relating to innovation and creative intelligence; (2) '*take action*' encouraging decisiveness, initiative and action; (3) '*work smart*' relating to achievement and clever thinking; and (4) '*be straight*' exhorting employees to exhibit integrity, openness, trust and transparency.

These clearly stated values appear to be supported by the workplace policies of flexibility and employee autonomy and this workplace environment allowed employees the freedom to work in ways that aligned with these values. The workplace environment enabled the values to actually be enacted by granting employees the ability to take initiative and work creatively. The espoused and enacted values appeared to nurture and support the positive workplace atmosphere. Therefore it appeared that the stated values at Uvicon were a key element of the company culture and fitted comfortably with the actual work tasks and operational elements within the company. No negative comments were made by respondents regarding these values and their adoption throughout Uvicon. The espoused values were developed in the last two years and may have been a useful cultural component in assisting Uvicon cope with the massive changes and integration brought about by their latest merger.

The process of change has been a key feature at Uvicon and the company has undergone huge changes in the last two years, due to two significant company mergers. Coping with change can be challenging for employees in any organisation. Mergers can create difficulties in defining and redefining organisational culture when two different cultures become combined. Respondents at Uvicon suggested that combining cultures was a

major challenge in this recent merger and contended that the Uvicon culture and that of the merged company were fairly disparate. Moving into the future as one new company and developing an integrated culture incorporating aspects of both organisations was a key challenge for Uvicon. Respondents felt confident that teams such as the HR team had the ability and expertise to develop an integrated culture as this had been achieved in the past after other mergers. Interviewees emphasised that it would take time for this to develop and there would always be historical and enduring areas of difference but that overall positive integration was possible in the open and transparent environment at Uvicon.

In the beginning I think it (culture) was probably not so strong from when we merged. It probably wasn't strong then but now management and organisational development up in HR have come together and made the culture that I think you'll find most people really like now. A lot of people are more positive and ask questions about anything they want and they get some answers, and I think the communication is good and open (Uvicon respondent).

Although respondents emphasised that there was an overall cohesive culture now at Uvicon there were also different pockets of culture within the business. Data was collected from a range of workplace teams within the company. All respondents agreed that an overall whole-company culture was apparent at Uvicon but several suggested that within this whole-company framework were divisions or subcultures that were primarily determined by the specific tasks of that work group. This was particularly apparent in regards to the group of engineers that had responsibility for 24-hour monitoring of the energy grids and power supply. This group, for example, was not able to adopt the company's flexible-hours methods of working due to the need for 24-hour monitoring. Therefore a shift-work system was used in this sector of the company. This different modus operandi created a feeling of separateness for this group as they were part of the overall Uvicon company but had different and specific task requirements. They had adapted to this by developing their own group culture within the overall Uvicon framework. This respondent both summarises the cultural differences and refers to the similarities in regards to autonomy to complete work tasks and manage responsibilities:

I think different parts of the business have different cultures, there is no doubt about that and I think the culture from the part of the business that I am involved

in is fairly relaxed in the way we do our business but at the same time we have got quite a large responsibility, and the responsibility for us is to keep the lights on, keep the power going for 40% of the population of NZ and also the culture is one that you are left alone to do your business to a degree (Uvicon respondent).

Cultural divisions were apparent in other areas as Uvicon is ultimately an engineering and technological company but also an efficient corporate and management organisation with financial, marketing and sales departments. Respondents pointed out the cultural difference between engineering and management roles.

There are a few cultures... So I think there is an engineering embedded culture around doing stuff that just makes things work but it's very much a get in and get your hands dirty, that is the culture here (Uvicon respondent).

The other key area in cultural separation arose from the mergers with other organisations and respondents suggested there would always be some lingering cultural differences depending on which organisation one had originated from, no matter how integrated the company became as a whole.

4.5.3 Humour at Uvicon

All Uvicon respondents asserted that humour at work was important to them but to varying degrees. However, although humour at work was important to all individual respondents, very few respondents asserted that humour was part of the culture at Uvicon. Respondents suggested that the culture *allowed* humour but it wasn't actually an integral part of the culture. Culture at Uvicon was positive and supportive, flexible and open which permitted humour and fun to occur but it was not particularly encouraged or endorsed at Uvicon. From observational data it was apparent that incidents of humour were not particularly prevalent on a day-to-day basis at Uvicon. Workplace displays indicated that playful items such as cartoon characters and cuddly toys were issued to staff to create and humour and fun activities in organisational development initiatives and training days.

Although there was less apparent humour at Uvicon than other companies, respondents emphasised the functional aspects of humour used at work to offer stress relief, break up boredom and add enjoyment and fun at work.

Humour has the ability to break down some of those pressures that are building and I would say for some that there isn't enough opportunity just to chill out a little bit and put things back into perspective (Uvicon respondent).

In the interviews respondents were asked about the types of humour used in the Uvicon workplace and it became apparent that humour was enjoyed but also that it was cautious and mild. People at Uvicon mainly used types of humour that were appropriate and unlikely to offend others.

We haven't got destructive humour and if we do see destructive humour we point it out but it is not going to be positively received. I think sarcastic humour exists when you honestly fear that you are going to get black marks against you (Uvicon respondent).

Most respondents agreed that humour at Uvicon was mainly enacted through verbal jousting and joking also known as banter. Banter at Uvicon was ongoing and regular but also shared quietly among small groups of people so it didn't disturb those working nearby. Respondents discussed factors that restricted banter. For example, some suggested that banter would not have sexist, sexual, or racist themes. Other respondents suggested that these types of humour may occur at times but that people were pretty careful about who they joked with and the content of their jokes.

We don't have dirty jokes or anything offensive, no racist jokes or anything like that, so it's all in good fun (Uvicon respondent).

They do tell jokes and sometimes it is inappropriate too, sometimes it's highly sexist (Uvicon respondent).

All respondents suggested that banter was the predominant form of humour and several respondents emphasised that physical types of humour such as horseplay or practical jokes were very rare in this workplace. Observational data supported this claim as no physical humour was observed during the research time; however, banter was observed and recorded.

When discussing the potential for humour to go wrong and cause bad feelings at work, respondents discussed the probability for humour to be perceived as a personal attack or to be considered 'not funny'. Several respondents suggested that too much humour could be distracting from work tasks and therefore could impact negatively on performance.

As found in the other three companies, most respondents at Uvicon discussed boundaries for humour behaviour at work and suggested that occasionally humour could ‘go too far’ and really upset or offend someone. All suggested that when the ‘line was crossed’ humour would have a negative impact and would not be funny any more.

All respondents at Uvicon appeared to consider work tasks and performance as their utmost priority and times when humour was part of their working life were enjoyable, but achieving results and completing their jobs was always the main focus. From observations at Uvicon it was apparent that although employees enjoyed humour and were open to getting involved in joking and banter, there was actually very little on a daily basis as people were focused on their work tasks. Humorous interchanges were much more frequent in break-out areas or at social events related to work. This was a comparatively quiet workplace with very task-oriented people who enjoyed laughter and fun, but shared it at the completion of tasks or in non-work moments. The following respondents’ comments summarise and exemplify the work-task focus and the boundaries apparent in humour use at Uvicon:

In general humour has a positive outcome and when people are laughing, then it’s good, it’s always good but it’s not good when it gets in the way of getting things done and if it’s too social where people just sit in the café, and drink coffee and joke and play around and that sort of stuff, I guess that is not productive (Uvicon respondent).

I’m sure if some people take it too far I suppose, but I think that is with anywhere though. Some people don’t know when to stop and they’ll cross the line or whatever. I’d have to say I’ve never seen it here but I’m sure if it went too far it might not to be such a joke anymore (Uvicon respondent).

4.5.4 Response from Uvicon

A follow-up response from Uvicon regarding the organisational report was difficult to achieve as my key liaison contact left the company before the report was presented. Her replacement had also been involved with the research and received and circulated the report in her colleague’s stead; however, only a short email was received due to her busy workload and major organisational developments. The short response showed appreciation for the report and thanked me for the positive depiction of the workplace culture. The manager and her colleagues agreed with findings that humour was not a key

part of the culture here, nor was it very prevalent in this workplace. Her email suggested that humour use had decreased at Uvicon as people struggled to deal with the issues created by their recent merger with another utility company. She emphasised that this had been a busy and stressful time for the organisation but that her colleagues still attempted to smile and joke at work and she hoped that humour use would increase in the future. This respondent suggested that Uvicon would soon be working on cultural development and she was looking forward to leading some changes in this area.

4.6 Continuum results for formality and informality

As discussed earlier, organisations have levels of either formality or informality in their structure, expertise, hierarchy, impersonality, continuity and environment. The final section of this chapter revisits the organisational continuum devised in Chapter Two. This makes it possible to compare each of the companies in respect of levels of formality and the subsequent impact on organisational culture and humour.

Each company was assessed on the organisational formality/ informality continuum. This assessment was made before the data-collection period and again during the data collection phase. It was anticipated that choosing companies with different levels of formality would provide a sample of companies that had different facets of organisational culture. This formality assessment would also assist in the comparison of culture and humour styles in these organisations. The formality continuum results are presented below with a summary of each company's formality levels. The formality assessments are simply presented here and will be further discussed in Chapter Six in regards to their overall influence on the organisational culture and humour relationship.

The first assessment of formality for each organisation was made from the initial researcher contact and from publicly available documents. An objective of the project was to select a variety of organisations that represented types of company found at extreme ends of the continuum as well as representing companies that were located by varying degrees towards the middle of the continuum. Selecting organisations from differing positions on this continuum made it possible to compare the organisations and from this comparison, implications were formulated regarding the company formality

levels and their influence upon organisational culture and humour use. It was anticipated that some organisations would be highly bureaucratic and formalised, others would be almost completely informal and socially organised, while the majority of organisations would have both formal components and informal processes. The first figure shows the pre-research assessment for each of the four companies and the final company positions determined during the research are presented in the second figure.

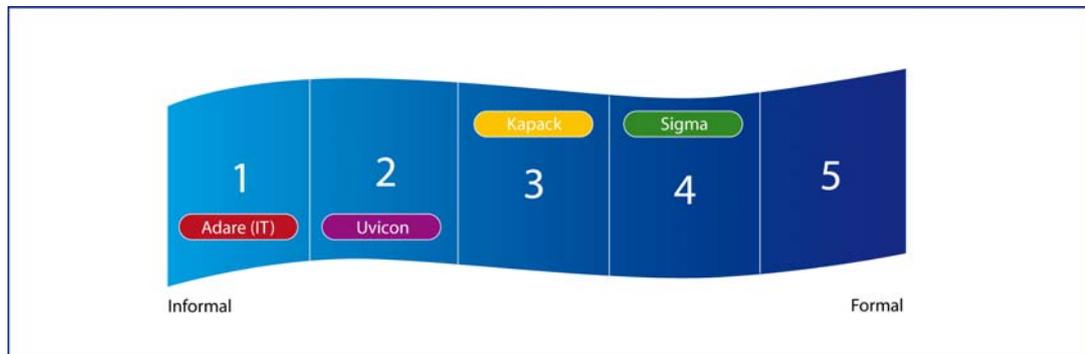


Figure 4.1: Pre-research formality assessment

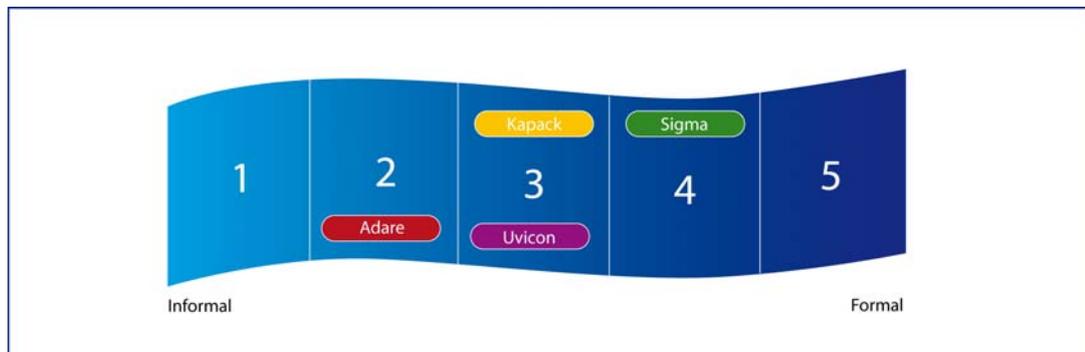


Figure 4.2: Final company position on organisational formality continuum

4.6.1 Adare

Before arriving at Adare the perception of this company was that it would be highly informal, non-hierarchical with very little organisational structure and few rules. This pre-collection position was estimated from social involvement with the managing

director, visiting the company website, negotiation regarding access and from other word-of-mouth perceptions gleaned from their IT industry colleagues. In April 2005 (before the research period) this company was ranked on the six continuum strands with all scores falling in the 1-2 (informal) range, denoting high levels of informality thus low overall formality. Overall the numerical representation was 1.16 which placed the company firmly in the first sector of the continuum and rated them as *extremely informal*.

When the data collection was complete and 13 interviews had been completed, the assessment was revised to take into account the respondents' ranking of the company. Contrary to the original prediction that this company would be highly informal and in the extreme end of informality, rating by respondents changed this assessment to a reading of 2.4 which still classified the company as *informal* but not *extremely informal* as had been predicted. Observation data supported this interviewee assessment as there were formal structures and new managerial levels inside the company that had not been foreseen before the research period. The IT industry environment in which Adare operated was more formal than anticipated and this contributed to their higher ranking.

One respondent pointed out that the company is in a period of change and had moved from a very informal style and was actually becoming more formal as new management initiatives were implemented. The respondent firmly suggested that this change in formality levels was already having an impact on the organisational culture at Adare and might end up even changing the fun and humour elements in Adare.

Adare showed low levels of formality in each of the six sectors but particularly in regards to *impersonality* which refers to formal rules and regulations in an organisation. Adare did not document or create formal policies regarding rules and regulations but behaviour was determined by social norms and modelled by the managing director. Colloquialisms, slang, swearing and even a few company-coined expressions were used freely in this workplace. There was no official dress code at Adare; employees wore whatever they chose but adapted their dress according to their daily business activities. For example, when visiting customers, the consultants were more likely to adopt a more formal mode of business dress for the day (such as a suit and tie). There were some areas where

change was evident in the formality levels as recently a middle level of management was developed with sales team members now reporting to a manager rather than directly to the managing director as in the past. The structure of Adare was reasonably organic with teams for certain activities but these were fairly fluid and people became involved in different areas on an 'as-needed' basis allowing quick responses to customer needs and utilisation of different team members' skills.

4.6.2 Sigma

Before conducting research at Sigma, my perception of this company was that it would be *formal*, with many hierarchical levels and clear rules and regulations. This pre-collection position was estimated from visiting the company website, formal negotiation regarding access and from other word-of-mouth perceptions gleaned from clients and employees of Sigma. In June 2005 scores for all six continuum strands were assessed and these suggested that high levels of overall formality would be found at Sigma. The average numerical representation was 4.0 which placed the company firmly in the fourth sector of the continuum suggesting that Sigma would be a *formal* organisation.

After the data collection was complete the assessment was revised and although there were some slight changes, the overall score still remained in the fourth sector of the continuum (4.33) after aggregating the scores of each of the 15 interviewees. No respondents rated the company in the informal sectors of the continuum. Therefore Sigma was considered a *formal* company in terms of its culture and structure.

Research regarding formally structured organisations suggests that they may be bureaucratic with an authority hierarchy, centralised decision-making and formalisation of work tasks. There is likely to be a more formal type of speech pattern used and an official dress code (Morand, 1995). A significant number of respondents pointed to Sigma's clearly prescribed dress code as a formality factor when ranking the company on the impersonality continuum strand. Research has also suggested that formal organisations produce more goal-oriented activity that is consistent with the organisation's stated objectives (Morand, 1995). This would appear to be the case at

Sigma, where formal processes and regulations underpin the clear business goals and focused tasks for employees.

Respondents emphasised that formality levels had evolved with the company's development and that Sigma had changed from being an informally run company in the early days to having the current more formal environment. People that had been with Sigma for some time were aware of this change and discussed the 'fine balance' between formalising expectations while still allowing flexibility. In the words of one respondent 'the structure is formal but I can relax inside it'. Generally the formality apparent at Sigma was seen as a positive factor in this work environment and there appeared to be a certain amount of security in having a formal structured environment governing work practices while still having approachable and personable managers. Respondents also pointed out that clients demanded and expected formality in interactions and processes and highlighted that formal procedures govern the financial services industry.

4.6.3 Kapack

In October 2005 this company was pre-assessed on the continuum. The assessment average was 3.6 and predicted that the company would be in the middle sector of the continuum. This suggested that Kapack would be *neither* a formal nor informal organisation but would comprise aspects of both styles.

Respondents rated Kapack as *neither* formal nor informal in respect of hierarchy, career continuity and expertise. The company was rated as *informal* in respect of rules and regulations (impersonality) but as *formal* in the areas of industry environment and company structure. After aggregating the scores of each of the 16 interviewees, Kapack was assessed to be *neither* formal nor informal. From the 16 interviews, the collated score for Kapack was 3.4 which placed the company (as predicted) in the third strand of the continuum and designated it as *neither* formal nor informal. The company demonstrated aspects of both formality and informality in most areas of its business.

The respondents' assessment of their company was supported by the observational data and notes were made on the formal components of Kapack's business such as operating correctly inside the legal industry and dressing formally for court and client

appointments. Contrastingly, some aspects of work life were conducted informally at Kapack and internal workplace rules were not formally stipulated. Behaviour was governed by norms of behaviour and propriety rather than by a written code of conduct. Although there were few written rules at Kapack governing staff behaviour, the workplace rules that were formalised and documented were those pertaining to legal issues such as sexual harassment laws and discrimination practices. These legal positions were made very clear in company induction documents. The data suggested that Kapack utilised a mixture of formal and informal management methods that provided an overall balance to workplace operations.

4.6.4 Uvicon

Prior to the data collection at Uvicon it was predicted this company would be an *informal* organisation and would be rated in the lower end of the continuum. This pre-collection position was estimated from visiting the company website and during negotiation with company representatives regarding access. In November 2005 the company was assessed at 2.5 which placed Uvicon in the *informal* sector of the continuum.

After the data collection had been completed the assessment was revised and it was noted that respondents rated the company differently from the pre-research expectation. Respondents rated Uvicon as *neither* (3) formal nor informal in regards to hierarchy, structure and environment. The company was rated as *informal* (2) in regards to rules and regulations (impersonality), expertise and continuity. After aggregating the scores of each of the 16 interviewees, the collated score for Uvicon was 3.13 which placed the company in the middle of the continuum and designated it as *neither* formal nor informal. Overall the company demonstrated aspects of formality and informality in most areas of its business.

I think we have moved slowly away from a formal culture to something which is much more informal and relaxed based on relationships and partnerships and things like that (Uvicon respondent).

I think there has been a real active wish to become more informal to allow people to actually take accountability and responsibility (Uvicon respondent).

Data collected from observations and company documents supported this midway continuum position for this company. Even though it was one of the largest companies in the project, company policies such as flexible work hours and encouraging work-life balance resulted in less overall formality inside the large hierarchical structure and within an extremely regulated industry. Workplace rules regarding employee behaviour were informal and not formally stipulated but in regard to safety procedures, rules were extremely well-documented and strictly enforced in keeping with regulations in the energy industry.

4.7 Summary

It was important to present each of these companies as an individual entity to provide the contextual background for Chapter Five. Each company was unique and had specific cultural components as well as an individual style in respect of humour use. This chapter has presented each of the four companies and their organisational culture and humour activities. This contextual narrative will help offer richness and the essence of these four unique companies. These company stories underpin the thematic connections that emerge when all of the data is combined data in the next chapter.

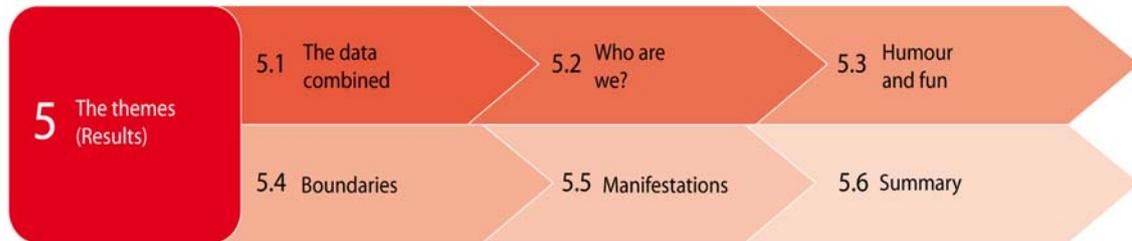
It appeared that the continuum created to assess levels of formality within these organisations was a useful tool as it offered a method of describing how formal or informal a company might be and then allowed for revision of this assessment once actually inside the organisation. Levels of formality appeared to be an important cultural element at each company. Using this tool allowed for the selection of a variety of different types of company for the research project and an attempt was made to choose companies with varying levels of formality.

As suggested by Morand (1995), it was assumed that formality levels would have some impact upon the prevailing organisational culture and its relationship with workplace humour in this research. Using the continuum was successful as it was predicted that the companies selected for the research would be: one *very informal*; one *informal*; one *neither* formal or informal; and one *formal*, thus offering a fairly extensive range of formality levels to allow analysis of these levels and their impact on organisational

culture. The post-research analysis showed that the companies selected were ranked: one *informal*, two *neither* formal nor informal companies and one *formal* company which was not too different from the prediction and still offered a range of formality levels for analysis. However, what was not achieved was research inside companies at the extreme ends of the formality continuum. No companies were ranked as *highly informal* or *highly formal*. Future research may be needed to undertake similar research inside companies at the extremes of formality or informality and these may be difficult to find and/or access.

The individual depiction of each company and the assessment of their formality levels concludes this first results chapter. This contextual information regarding each company will be integrated into the discussion and used to explore the overall impacts of the organisational culture and humour relationship, its outcomes and its implications for theoretical development and management practice.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE THEMES



5.1 The data combined

The previous chapter presented an individual profile of each company and findings regarding their organisational culture and humour. This second results chapter combines the results from all four companies and is organised into five key sections that present and exemplify the key facets of organisational culture and workplace humour. The sections were derived from the themes identified when analysing the data.

The first section (5.1) presents data that directly relate to the main research question exploring the relationship between humour and organisational culture.

The second section (5.2) is entitled ‘*Who are we?*’ and it presents results regarding company culture and the importance that it assumed for the people in these companies. This section discusses: the participants; professionalism; subcultures; change and other cultural factors. Metaphors used by respondents are presented and the section concludes with perceptions of workplace outcomes attributed to organisational culture.

Section 5.3 presents findings regarding humour and includes data from the categories describing humour types, functions, and importance. This section also links humour to workplace outcomes perceived by respondents in the four companies. This humour section presents interpretations of humour and some actual examples of these constructs.

Following the humour section is the results regarding boundaries. This was a significant finding and the idea that boundaries were created to limit humour behaviour is significant when discussing the influence of organisational culture on workplace humour. These humour boundaries are influenced by key elements of the organisational culture such as

the formality levels discussed in the previous chapter and different individuals assume roles that simultaneously constrain or enable boundaries in these companies.

The final section presents findings regarding actual manifestations of culture and humour in these workplaces and consists of data that was collected mainly in observations or document collection. This section includes descriptions of displays, a significant incident from each company, email and stories or legends.

Presenting the collated results in a thematic structure sets the scene for the subsequent discussion chapter that will answer the main research question about the influence of organisational culture on humour enactment.

5.1.1 The influence of organisational culture on humour

The main research question in this project asks *'how does organisational culture influence the enactment of humour?'* and specific interview questions were created to elicit respondents' perceptions on this question. All 59 of the interview respondents discussed organisational culture and humour in their own company and there were 232 different references to elements of this relationship. Most references that discussed the influence of organisational culture on humour came from interview data and were elicited by the two specific interview questions exploring the relationship. However, many references were spontaneous connections made by respondents and the link to culture was emphasised in interview responses to questions about workplace humour types and impacts.

The highest number of responses discussing the influence of organisational culture came from Adare and that this was the company that used the most humour and had fewest constraints on humour. Interview respondents at Adare claimed a strong link between humour and their organisational culture and their interview assertions were firmly supported by observation data. Observation records showed that humour was an integrated part of every activity at this company and a key part of their daily communication as well as integral to all company events.

Many humour and culture links were made at Kapack but the majority of these responses had a negative perspective suggesting that humour was lacking at the company and was **not** part of the overall culture. Responses from Kapack participants suggested that the organisational culture in this company suppressed and constrained humour.

Sigma respondents linked fun to their company culture rather than humour but suggested that because fun was a company value, this also meant that humour was a part of their culture, as fun usually resulted in shared humour.

Uvicon respondents made the fewest links between the humour and culture constructs and this aligned with observation notes that recorded fewer examples of humour in this company. Documents at Uvicon also stated that company members had completed a survey and highlighted that they would like more *fun* in this workplace.

These interview responses (below) linking humour and culture supported the researcher's interpretation that at Adare humour was a very important part of the culture and was also integral in developing the culture. At Sigma fun was endorsed and humour was created from workplace fun. Contrastingly, at Uvicon and Kapack although humour occurred, it was not a significant element of the culture.

Examples of responses where respondents linked the organisational culture and humour are:

It is hard to split the humour from the job because without the humour there is no culture and without the culture there probably wouldn't be the humour (Adare respondent).

Because humour is so much a part of the culture, it is hard to actually separate it. I certainly think that we wouldn't have the success without it, put it that way (Adare respondent).

I think all cultures do (affect the humour), though the type of humour that we think is appropriate may be a little bit more moderate than humour that might be in other organisations and that might be a reflection of the nature of the industry that we are in but it is not borderline offensive or anything like that. It is not the extreme it is a nice medium in the middle I think (Sigma respondent).

I suppose so because since I've been here, I mean everyone has got a different sense of humour and there hasn't been anything too overboard or too over the

top or too gutterish or anything like that. So I think it (culture) must somehow be affecting the humour and what's acceptable is pretty much mainstream, without anyone having to come down on anyone (Kapack respondent).

Observation notes showed links between culture and humour. For example at Adare where humour was encouraged and treated as an important cultural factor, many practical jokes were observed during the research month. Contrastingly, in the careful and constrained environment at the Kapack law firm, no practical jokes at all were observed in the research month. In the informal culture at Adare, humour interchanges were peppered with profanity and sexual and racial insults. Contrastingly, inside the three larger and more formal companies humour was much more constrained and few profane, lewd or racial humour references were observed.

The term *humour* was not used in any company documents that were viewed and no company documents linked humour to company culture. Some documents linked the concept of *fun* to the company culture. In a booklet encouraging university graduates to join Kapack, one page described company culture and claimed that Kapack was a 'fun company'. They also used the term *play* claiming to 'work-hard and play-hard'. Sigma espoused *fun* as one of the company values and this was featured on many company documents and any pertaining to company culture. Fun events and incidents were recounted and highlighted in weekly, monthly and quarterly company newsletters and publications. Uvicon claimed on their intranet site that 53% of staff considered 'having fun' as one of the things that the company did well. However, the same survey quotes several staff suggestions stating that more fun at work would improve their work life. Adare had very few company documents of any sort and no documents relating to cultural or humour aspects of the company.

More insights to the influence of organisational culture on humour is presented in the following sections that present results depicting key cultural elements in these companies.

5.2 Who are we?

5.2.1 Interview participants

In total, 59 interviews were conducted, namely: 13 interviews at Adare; 14 at Sigma; and 16 each at both Kapack and Uvicon. There were 34 female participants and 25 male. Ages ranged from 20 to 64 years old with the average age of participants at 35. Respondents were asked their ethnicity and 47 claimed that they were New Zealand Europeans; five were European; four Maori; and three of Asian origin. Thirty-eight of the participants had a tertiary qualification and all except for one participant were full-time employees. Tenure of participants ranged from three days with the company to 20 years and the average tenure was four-and-a-half years.

Roles varied but were divided into seven key categories of general work responsibilities. The categories were: senior managers (13); administration workers (12); sales people (11); HR workers (10); engineers (6) and finance officers (4). A strength of the data collection was that this role diversity in respondents included participants from different status levels of the company, ranging from junior administrative staff working in the mail room to managing directors and senior partners with 20 years' experience. This diversity and responsiveness from all levels of the company assisted me in gaining multiple perspectives and a broad depiction of organisational culture and humour effects inside the companies. Interview participants were asked specifically whether there was an overall culture in their company, and if so, to define or describe it. Although participants were only asked about their own company culture, 32 of the interviewees discussed the *concept* of organisational culture within these questions. Seventeen respondents asserted that organisational culture was difficult to define, complex, and meant different things to different people. The remaining 15 respondents claimed that culture was definable and was about people and their behaviour. These respondents suggested that the concept of culture defined 'who we are' in the organisational context and some cautioned that there might be differences between what was presented as culture (by management) and what was actually the culture as perceived by themselves and other colleagues.

5.2.2 Professionals

When defining their own company culture, the most prevalent response from interviewees emphasised the professional aspects of the organisation. Forty-three respondents asserted that the organisational culture was primarily about ‘what we do and how well we do it’. All discussed feelings of pride in their company and the importance of excellence in their work and several respondents said that the good reputation of the company was a key cultural factor. Some respondents suggested that the industry in which the company operates was a key cultural influence.

Observation data supported the interview responses in all four companies and records highlighted the importance of excellent performance and high work standards observed in the companies. At Adare, amidst all the humour and hilarity, business activities were still prioritised and this company has been successfully competing in their industry for nine years. People were observed working diligently on their tasks and behaving in a businesslike and professional manner with their clients usually on the phone. Kapack has an extremely good professional reputation and people here worked very hard and took very few breaks. Sigma rewarded employees for excellent achievements and espoused this as a company value. At Uvicon observation records described people that were very task-focused and hard working at all times. At all four companies, staff worked beyond their official hours when tasks needed completing.

Documentary evidence from Kapack, Sigma and Uvicon also emphasised performance and professional standards. Documents collected described these companies as ‘successful’ with a ‘good reputation’ and described being the ‘top’ and having ‘excellent performance’. The Adare website highlighted their professional capabilities and claimed that they were ‘the best’ in respect of professionalism and performance.

5.2.3 Subcultures

Thirty-two interview respondents highlighted the existence of more than one prevailing culture and referred to the phenomenon of *team culture* as an important facet of organisational culture. These respondents differentiated team culture from overall company culture. Thirty-eight different types of work teams were described and 24

interview participants belonged to more than one work team. The concept of subcultures was specifically explored in the interview process but many respondents highlighted it early in the interview when discussing whole-company culture and it therefore seemed to be particularly significant to them. Some respondents pointed out that there were cultural differences between different branches of the company, different departments, even on different floors of the company. Respondents from the three larger companies also noted that there were different cultures inside the company when two companies were merged inside one company.

Interview respondents suggested that subcultures were created from social groupings that arose from demographic factors such as age, race, gender, workplace roles and family situation. Many respondents belonged to more than one social group. Some respondents suggested that there were groups that shared email exclusively and only sent certain emails to people in their group. Only a few respondents stated that they did not belong to any informal or social groups in their workplace. These respondents suggested that they separated their work and social life and preferred to use non-work times for family or personal pursuits. The most popular social groups organised through work were sports groups, particularly netball, soccer, and touch rugby. Some people belonged to informal groups that met for drinks after work (usually at the local pub) and some respondents indicated that there were gender-based social groups.

At all four companies, observation notes were made regarding different groups and clusters of culture. Groupings became apparent when observing different departments in each of the three larger companies but also inside the smaller company (Adare). Specific groups that interacted in different ways were observed. For example, at Adare on Friday afternoons a group finished work early and played an online game against each other. Only specific interested people played and they were dubbed 'the gamers' by other uninvolved colleagues. They had their own particular terms used in this activity and other company members were excluded from this gaming subculture.

Inside Uvicon there was a specific unit of people that controlled and monitored on-going product service and supply and a different style of interaction and behaviour was

observed inside this control room than elsewhere in the company. They worked under highly stressful conditions and were less constrained in their language, humour and behaviour than their counterparts in the corporate areas of the company. Therefore it was noted that a subculture existed here (also identified by the interview respondents) and although they remained a part of the overall company, they had special team characteristics, rituals and behaviour.

The majority of interview respondents thought that there were some groups within their organisation that were exclusive and people had to meet certain criteria in order to gain entry. The key exclusive group was that of senior management or partnership and these groups were seen as exclusive to high-ranking people in the organisation. Some exclusive groups were defined by work-specific criteria while other groups became exclusive due to the specific nature of the work or tasks that were undertaken by the group. For example, in the law firm there was a group that practised litigation in the courts and one had to be both a lawyer and a litigator to belong to this team.

Departments were also seen as exclusive and sometimes physical barriers such as being on a different floor led to exclusivity in work groups.

Other exclusive groups were socially determined. Some interview respondents identified the boys' group that drank together. They felt that women were restricted from entering this male group but other interview respondents pointed out that there were also some exclusively 'women's groups'. National culture was identified as a group characteristic that excluded others and two such cultural groups were identified within the companies. At Adare, respondents identified the 'Korean social group' as being exclusive to the three Korean employees who socialised together.

Age was mentioned in regards to exclusivity and some respondents felt that there were social groups that only included younger staff members while others identified the 'old man's club' comprising older employees who did not join workplace fun and games but were more serious and grouped together. One respondent also identified the group that met outside to smoke as exclusive of non-smokers.

5.2.4 Change and development

The third key cultural factor in these companies was that of cultural change. Nearly half of the interview respondents claimed that culture was flexible and that it constantly changed. Three of the four companies had experienced mergers with other companies in the last three years and these mergers were noted as having a particularly significant impact on cultural change. According to respondents, cultural change was significant in these companies and interview respondents attested that there was some resistance to cultural change, particularly from older employees who had been at the company a long time. Most respondents claimed that company history and major events were important in developing the company culture. Three respondents claimed that culture could be created and fostered inside a company while one dissenting respondent suggested that culture 'just happens'.

Change as a key cultural factor was not able to be supported through observation and documentary data as cultural change couldn't be observed but had happened over a period of time and as a result of significant company events. Although some key events were observed and will be presented later in the chapter, data regarding cultural change came solely from interview respondents.

5.2.5 Other cultural factors

Managers from all four companies insisted that they had a 'fun culture' and all four companies promoted themselves as having fun and encouraging fun at work. Uvicon did this in a recruitment advertisement and on their intranet. Kapack promoted the idea of being a fun company in their graduate recruitment booklet. At Adare the managing director and staff promoted their reputation for fun by word-of-mouth and frequent email announcements to staff, customers and vendors, highlighting fun and funny incidents in the company. Sigma had the most official written declarations that fun was important to them and this was promoted on their website and in many company documents. Fun was a stated and defined company value and was included in all documents pertaining to values. At Sigma, employees' adherence to the company values was assessed in

performance reviews and all employees were officially assessed on how they contributed to the value of fun in this workplace. This example came from an interviewee at Sigma:

I would say it is fairly important to this company because they have identified it as one of their core values now. Fun is a value and we are still trying it out (Sigma respondent).

Managers and employees perceived that there were identifiable outcomes from encouraging workplace fun and endorsing a fun culture. This quote from one manager discusses the idea of actually recruiting people to add fun into the workplace:

We have really balanced that up and tried to get that mix, also we have a pretty fair idea of what we are looking for when we go in and do we need more maturity in the team, do we need a bit more fun in the team, do we need more guys, do we need more women, what kind of mix do we need (Sigma manager).

Examples of references to fun came from the graduate recruitment booklet at Kapack which reads 'Here at Kapack we have fun and we work hard-play hard'. At Sigma company documents state, 'Our company values are harmony, honesty, attainment and fun'.

Using fun at work had some other implications for workplace outcomes with some respondents asserting that they chose to work for the company due to their perception of the fun culture:

My sister works for Sigma and she has been here about six years and she loves it here and she told me how fun it is and how great the people are, and how nutty they are basically. When there was a position available she suggested I applied for it and basically based on her recommendation I applied. I have found that what she has said is true (Sigma respondent).

As well as recruitment outcomes, respondents quoted below suggested that retention was also affected by the ability to enjoy humour and fun at work:

For me personally and I am probably one of the very lucky ones, is that I come to work to have fun to be honest. I come to work for just as much for the social side of it as the work side of it if I wasn't having fun I would give it up in an instant (Sigma respondent).

I found that is a lovely company to work for. I love my team I don't particularly to be honest love my job but I think the most important thing is that I get along

with the team and the team is great, lots of fun. I'd be sad to leave (Sigma respondent).

I have been offered jobs with more money but have chosen to stay here because of the culture- the fun and flexibility. I enjoy working here so I stay (Adare respondent)

I left my last company because there was no fun, no laughs. I worked alone. These guys make me laugh (Adare respondent).

Respondents also highlighted that there were performance-related implications from having fun at work:

If I'm having fun with what I'm doing then I am going to be doing better simply because I am a bit more engaged, so there is that follow through from it (having fun) (Uvicon respondent).

You are probably more happy to work for a firm and to do the long hours when needed if you feel like you are sort of valued and that you are having fun on the way (Kapack respondent).

Satisfaction and enjoying work were also emphasised as being important to workers and humour and workplace fun improved job satisfaction for the following respondents:

I think the days when we are having more fun I enjoy my job more (Sigma respondent).

Interestingly enough we are trying to get a bit more of our humour out there to the guys who have come on board- a lot are very straight laced. If you have a bit of fun you will find your work a lot more enjoyable. You need a release and you've got to have a laugh... Join in and have fun then work is more tolerable (Kapack respondent).

The perceptions of outcomes from humour and fun cultures all suggested positive effects. The next section discusses perceived outcomes from workplace humour use which suggests that humour and fun enactment may also lead to some negative outcomes inside these companies.

Half of the interview respondents discussed the leadership of the company as a key cultural factor. Most of these respondents suggested that company culture was driven from the top or by strong individuals who had a leadership or senior role in the company. Others argued that people actually managed their own workplace behaviour and that

company culture was a result of participation from all company members. Observation notes suggested that although leaders influenced organisational culture, other key individuals could also be fairly influential from lower-status positions. This will be further examined in regards to two specific roles in the *boundaries* section.

Specific incidents highlighted the leaders' roles in cultural situations and in the email incident at Kapack (discussed later) the CEO sent a reprimanding email to all staff when a joke had 'gone too far' and affected the company reputation. At Uvicon's *Secret Santa* event (also discussed later) the company leaders did not attend and this event was organised, attended and promoted by lower-level staff but had managerial approval and funding. The leader's influence on overall culture was most apparent in the smallest of the companies where the managing director had more interaction with all his employees than the CEOs at the larger companies.

Values were highlighted as a key cultural component by nearly half of the respondents. Two of the organisations (Sigma and Uvicon) claimed to be 'values-based organisations' (VBOs) and had clearly defined and documented values. Most of the respondents who emphasised values as an important part of the culture were from these two values-based organisations. Values are an abstract concept and not necessarily observable; therefore data regarding values at the companies came primarily from the interview responses. In the two companies that had written values, data was collected from relevant documents that displayed these values. It was also observed that the two companies that had articulated their company values displayed these written values prominently and in several places throughout their company.

The majority of respondents described their company culture as 'friendly', 'relaxed' and/or 'positive' and emphasised that this was important to them. These respondents who claimed that their company was friendly also emphasised that the company was 'open' and that there was good communication. Although most respondents asserted that their companies were friendly, only one company document actually stated that people at the company were friendly (Kapack recruitment booklet). At all four companies, most people were friendly to the researcher and to other visitors, which supported the

respondents' assertions. The respondents who described the positive attitude inside their company also claimed that being 'happy' was a facet of their culture and these people claimed that they felt supported by respectful behaviour from colleagues and management.

Balance between work and personal life was considered a key cultural component by some respondents who emphasised that this balance made them happy at work. Most of these respondents were from Uvicon where work/life balance is actively promoted, documented and encouraged.

There were 24 other cultural descriptors used by small numbers or single respondents only. These included: alcohol as a component of the culture (at Adare only); stress; those that thought that their company had a 'weak, nebulous culture' (Kapack respondents only); respondents who insisted their company culture was 'unique' contrasting with those who thought that their company culture was typical of all other firms in the same industry; and respondents who deemed their organisational culture to be 'moderate', 'nice' and even 'cheesy'.

To assist in understanding the culture within the four companies interview respondents were asked to create a metaphor to describe their organisational culture.

5.2.6 Metaphors

In order to extend respondents cultural descriptions, there was one interview question that asked specifically for a metaphor and asked interview respondents to compare the company to something. While some respondents answered readily, not all respondents were able to do this. Interview transcripts were also searched for metaphors used by respondents in their answers to other questions. Overall, 63 metaphors were used by respondents to describe their companies. The spontaneous metaphors were used naturally throughout the interviews when making a point about the company, the culture or the humour. All of the metaphors were coded in NVivo7, listed, and then rearranged into groups that appeared to have similar themes. For example, all the metaphors describing the company as some sort of animal were grouped together and the categories collapsed to form one 'animal' category.

The most oft-used metaphor for the respondents' company was that of a *family*. There were 26 clear comparisons where the company was described as being 'like a family' or extended family. The second-most used metaphors were those that linked the company to enjoyable early-life events such as school, kindergarten, University and even a circus. There was a feeling of fun and enjoyment in these metaphors inferred from the tone used when given by respondents and the big smiles that accompanied these responses (noted in handwritten interview notes and reflections).

The third key category of metaphor (14 responses) was when the company was compared to other businesses and deemed to be 'just like them' or, conversely, unique and different from other companies. Some respondents in this category described their company as 'corporate' and this did not appear to be a positive endorsement of their company, but an indication that the company was becoming more formalised and like the 'big corporations'. The other categories included the company being compared to different animals; competitive situations such as sports or battles; vehicles; and plants.

5.2.7 Outcomes of organisational culture

Part of the exploration of the influence of organisational culture on humour was to investigate workplace outcomes that arose from cultural elements and humour activities. Some specific questions were asked regarding respondents' perceptions of recruitment, satisfaction and performance, and the effect that humour and culture had on these. The following findings present respondents' perceptions of the impact that culture had on these factors. When discussing impacts of culture and humour, most respondents also discussed a fourth outcome, that of workplace retention and their perceptions of the impact that culture and humour had on retaining employees.

Most respondents perceived that it was important to recruit newcomers that *fit* the organisational culture and only a few respondents disagreed and contended that workplace skills were more important than cultural fit. Several respondents asserted that they stayed with their company because they were happy with the organisational culture. The quote below identifies this respondent's ardent belief that fitting the culture at Adare is very important:

I think in the past there have been mistakes made and I think that has really highlighted that it is really important for people to fit in. We have had a few hires in the past, where admittedly they have been a bit younger and probably didn't know how to take us and all that sort of stuff and they didn't work out. They ended up heading on down the road because either they had a strange attitude towards stuff or they couldn't fit it. I think it is very important getting somebody to fit the culture, because if you don't get somebody that fits the culture, they generally stick out like dogs balls generally don't fit in don't join in the social aspect of the company and end up becoming an outsider which is no good for them or the company. I think it is really important, if you are not completely sold on the culture, at least have an understanding of it and being tolerant of it, that would probably be as far as you go as having somebody not engrossed in the culture, because any less than that and you would become an outsider (Adare respondent).

Most interview respondents claimed that their organisation's culture improved their satisfaction with work which resulted in improved performance. Only three respondents disagreed, stating that the company culture actually impaired their performance and only two respondents felt that organisational culture had no impact on performance whatsoever. The interview respondents also emphasised that organisational culture influenced their decision to stay or leave a company and a few respondents specified that they had previously left companies where they had been unhappy with the organisational culture. These quotes exemplify interview responses to questions about organisational culture and outcomes:

In general most jobs I get bored with, and struggle to stay for two years. I have been here for over five and I haven't even had thoughts of leaving. I could get more money elsewhere, but it's not just solely about the income, because most places where you get the better income you are back into a strict regulated office environment, long hours etc. It is our culture that actually keeps me here (Adare respondent).

The culture, it can provide you either with a reason to stay or a reason to leave and that is a huge part of the reason why I left (*name of previous company removed*). It wasn't so much the job it was the culture. It got to the point where, when I first started it was quite a good culture but then they had changes in management and I didn't like the culture there at all (Uvicon respondent).

Data that linked humour to these specific outcomes is presented in the next section that focuses on the humour and fun findings.

5.3 Humour enactment

This section presents data regarding humour types, topics, functions, impacts and importance. The management of humour is discussed, as well as insights into negative impacts of humour. Data was derived from interviews, observations and document collection that included physical articles that portrayed humour (such as cartoons), actual verbatim incidents of verbal humour, physical humour incidents and examples of email humour that were collected during the research.

5.3.1 Types of humour

All of the interview respondents stated that verbal banter was the main form of humour used in their workplace. Banter was defined as verbal humour that involved a *put-down*, a tease, ‘taking the piss’ and enjoying humour at the expense of others or even at one’s own expense. Respondents also noted that banter arose after conversations with clients (usually over the phone). These jocular interactions were sometimes recounted to colleagues and more joking occurred. Banter was also likely to occur after someone had made a *faux pas* of some sort. Mistakes offered opportunities for jocular abuse and teasing among workplace colleagues.

All observed incidences of banter and other forms of humour were recorded and these records supported the respondents’ assertion that verbal banter was the most common form of humour in each of these workplaces. Overall, 152 incidents of banter were recorded and each of these incidents was recorded verbatim (as closely as possible) while they were occurring. The highest number of banter exchanges was recorded at Adare (64 incidents) while 34 originated from Sigma, 30 from Uvicon and only 24 from Kapack. An example of recorded banter is presented below. The group of people involved in this short exchange had previously exchanged insults about one another’s ties and Don was wearing a pink tie on this day:

Don: I’ve got about 40 ties – I’m going to wear each one and get votes on which to keep and which to put in the bin.

Brad: Put that pink one in the bin!

Don: (*to others in group*) Brad questions my sexuality in this pink tie...

Sara: Ray's got a pink one and Paul has too. (Paul is their boss.)

Brad: (*grinning at Don*) Do you and Paul have a thing going on?

Don: I wish I did – I might get a better pay rise that way! (Researcher's logbook, Sigma, July 2005)

This exchange typified the types of banter that occurred in three of the companies. It was friendly with some mild sexual innuendo, all involved were laughing and smiling and they enjoyed this light teasing. Banter was commonly used by workmates to tease each other about their physical appearance and clothing.

Half of the interview respondents claimed that email was the second-most common way of sharing humour in these workplaces and 70 examples of email humour were collected during the research period. Although respondents claimed that email humour was a common way of sharing humour, it was difficult to collect examples of this type of humour as collecting these examples relied upon the goodwill of company members and reminding them to send me a copy. Not being part of the company intranet meant that many such examples were missed due to my being unaware of their circulation. However, one reliable informant from Adare meant that most examples of email humour circulated during the research period were collected from this company. This was also the company keenest to share humour for research and with fewest constraints and boundaries on workplace humour. It is possible that many other examples of email humour were circulated among work colleagues but discreetly among like-minded people or groups who may not have wanted these to become part of the research. Some of the same examples were seen inside more than one of the companies. Twelve email examples were video clips, 38 were visual jokes and 20 were written text-based email jokes. Appendix E contains examples of the email humour collected at the companies and Appendix F has a table showing the different types of email sent, the subjects of each, company and themes of the email.

Only a few respondents declared that practical jokes occurred at work and most of these interview respondents were from Adare where practical jokes were common. Similarly,

only a few respondents stated that formal verbal jokes using traditional joking formats were shared at work. Physical humour that included throwing balls, hazing newcomers and slapstick humour was only discussed by Adare respondents and was not a form of humour that was commonly used at the other three companies.

Observation data showed that during the research period there were 26 practical jokes, 13 incidences of horseplay, six formal jokes using a traditional (spoken) joke format and 12 running jokes that continued over a period of time and maintained a particular theme (such as teasing each other about neckties as exemplified above).

5.3.2 Humour topics

Most workplace humour was based around mocking colleagues about their mistakes and their activities (157 observed incidents). Thirty-two (observed) humour incidents concerned colleagues' appearance; 21 incidents were self-deprecatory incidents where the joker mocked or derided him- or herself; and 30 incidents involved jesting comments about outsiders such as customers or suppliers of the organisation (usually after an external phone call was completed).

Most interview respondents from Kapack, Sigma and Uvicon asserted that humour was 'innocuous', 'sedate', and 'politically correct' (PC) in these workplaces. However, some respondents from these companies claimed that sexual, sexist and racial humour did occur inside these companies and that humour was sometimes crude and could be considered 'toilet humour'. Observation notes supported the first assertion and very little of the humour observed at the three larger companies was potentially offensive. It is likely that humour of this nature did exist, as claimed by the smaller group of respondents but that it was not shared openly in these environments. In this example where profanity was used for humorous effect at Sigma, the employee is gently reprimanded by her manager:

The team manager (Brad) receives an email telling him his subordinate has won a recent contest:

Brad: Gail- you won the dress code competition. You get morning tea and a ride in Jane's Porsche

Gail (*laughs loudly*): FOR FUCKS SAKE! OH MY GOD!

(*Everyone laughs*)

Brad (*cautioning tone but smiling*): The mouth on you! (Researcher's logbook, July 2005)

Humour at Adare was different from that at the other companies and most of the humour examples that used profanity or 'toilet humour' was recorded at Adare. Here there were 24 examples of humour that used extreme profanity, 11 that used mild profanity and nine recorded examples of toilet humour pertaining to bodily functions.

The example below shows humour used when an Adare engineer made the same mistake twice and is jokingly reprimanded by the managing director (MD):

MD: Next time we will bend you over this desk (shows) pull down your trousers and get the girls to spank you with table tennis paddles.

Joe: (*interjects*) ...and you're not allowed to enjoy it...

MD: ...and if that doesn't work we'll swipe CDs down yer arse!

(Researcher's logbook, May 2005)

Observation records from all of the companies included humour examples that used sexual innuendo, some with sexist tones and some that involved racial themes. However, observation data showed that most humour incidents were innocuous humour and did not have sexual themes, racial themes, or profanity and thus supported the interview respondents' claim that humour was mostly inoffensive in the three larger companies. However, it was also apparent from observation notes and interview comments that the humour themes at Adare were different from those of the other three companies and that there was more risky, risqué and potentially offensive humour observed at Adare and the company members were aware that the humour here would be considered inappropriate in other companies.

Other themes used in humour examples were company events; alcohol consumption; and a few examples of puns or wordplay. A few respondents asserted that humour arose from telling stories about activities such as their weekend events.

5.3.3 Function and importance of humour

When interview respondents were asked how important it was to them to have humour at work, the majority firmly stated that it was very important; ten said that it was moderately important; while only two declared that humour was not important to them at all. When discussing the importance of humour, most respondents extended their answer by describing why humour was important to them and this description often included functional aspects of humour use that they felt were relevant to them. Key among these responses was the function of relieving stress and tension at work.

Some respondents indicated that humour played a part in assisting communication through building relations, breaking down barriers and bringing people together. Other functions identified were: relieving workplace monotony and boredom; ‘energising’ the workplace; health benefits; creating a nice atmosphere; and making work more enjoyable. Some respondents cautioned that humour was also used to ‘put people down’ and was also used as a defence mechanism. Some extreme examples of *putdown* humour were seen at Adare and these were in the form of insulting banter and also in humour displayed on walls and notice boards. Results regarding humour displays are presented later in this chapter.

Many respondents suggested that *putdown* humour had a harmful effect inside their company and the next section presents data relating to negative humour impacts.

5.3.4 Negative impacts

Data relating to negative impacts came almost exclusively from interview respondents as only one incident was observed during the research period that had an obvious negative impact.

More than half of the respondents stated that the most common negative impact of humour was when it became too personal, targeted an individual, and caused offence to

someone. This was considered harmful, malicious and a poor use of humour by most respondents. Respondents contended that if targeted (putdown) humour was sustained, then it became a form of bullying.

Another negative impact of humour use was when humour was too noisy and distracting and interview respondents suggested that humour overuse negatively affected the organisational performance as it distracted people from their work tasks. Inappropriate humour was also considered to have a negative impact and respondents suggested that unacceptable and inappropriate humour could become harassment. Respondents highlighted that different people had varying levels of acceptance and humour appreciation, and implied that using humour could be risky at work. Humour had negative impacts when it 'crossed the line' or 'went too far'.

Several respondents raised the issue of damage caused by humour, both physical damage to property and people, and also damage to workplace relationships when humour went wrong. These respondents suggested that humour could be destructive within the workplace and also outside the organisation when it affected the company's reputation. This situation did occur within one company and was observed and recorded and will be presented as a key incident later in this chapter.

Although some respondents asserted that there was always humour in their workplace, the majority of respondents contended that at busy or stressful times or when facing serious issues, humour tended to disappear temporarily. These respondents suggested that people became wary of using humour at these times as it was more likely to upset or annoy colleagues. Respondents also mournfully suggested that Monday mornings were 'humourless' times as people collected themselves to begin the new working week.

5.3.5 Outcomes from humour

Respondents' perceptions of the impact of humour on three workplace outcomes (recruitment, satisfaction and performance) were examined in the interviews. Some respondents suggested that participating in workplace humour was a way of fitting into the culture in their company and was therefore a way of becoming socialised when first recruited.

Only a few interview respondents felt that it was important to recruit for a sense of humour and the majority of respondents felt that a sense of humour was **not** a key attribute sought in their organisation's recruitment. Respondents were evenly divided in their perception of humour use during recruitment interviews, with half stating that humour had been used during their interview and conversely half claiming that there had been no humour used. Although no questions were asked about retention, some respondents volunteered the insight that enjoying humour at work contributed to their on-going retention in their current company.

The majority of respondents felt that humour at work improved their satisfaction but a few respondents felt that humour at work detracted from their satisfaction, and some respondents asserted that humour had no impact on their satisfaction.

Approximately half of the respondents felt that the use of humour at work improved their performance, while nine thought that humour use impaired performance and eight respondents felt that workplace humour had no impact on performance.

These results will be further discussed in Chapter Six and may have implications for managers in such issues as whether or not to attempt to manage or create humour in the workplace. The final humour section presents data highlighting respondents' perceptions of managing humour and policies relating to humour management.

5.3.6 Managing humour

People were divided in their perceptions of humour management. Half of the interview respondents asserted that humour was 'free' and not managed in any way in their company. However, the other half of respondents argued that it was managed, regulated and even promoted to some extent. Some respondents suggested that humour was managed informally through behavioural norms and expectations. The respondents that agreed that humour was managed in their workplace specifically referred to email humour that was regulated through company policies. At Kapack all humorous video clips were intercepted and deleted by the IT Department. These clips were deemed to be potentially offensive in their content and too loud and distracting when played in the open-plan office.

Documentary data showed that although there were some policies covering email use in the three larger companies there were no formal policies pertaining to humour use or management. At Kapack there were clear policies regarding harassment at work but none of these specifically mentioned using humour as a form of harassment. While there were no documents relating to humour in these workplaces, the three larger organisations had written statements and policies covering the concept of *fun* at work. When discussing the idea of humour management and behavioural expectations, many respondents articulated the idea of constraints to humour and humorous behaviour and the next section presents data relating to humour boundaries.

5.4 Boundaries

This section presents data pertaining to boundaries and constraints on workplace humour. It is an interpretive section arising from respondents' perceptions as well as researcher interpretation of observational and documentary data. This theme developed in the data analysis phase of the project and this (boundaries) facet had not been considered or specifically explored in the initial research questions and therefore had not been part of the research design. Throughout the analysis of the interview transcripts it appeared that respondents had frequently referred to *boundaries* when discussing workplace humour. Using the NVivo7 software, a query was generated searching for the words and phrases 'boundaries'; 'cross the line'; 'go too far'; 'limits'; 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' as these were all descriptions found in the interview transcripts.

5.4.1 Appropriate humour behaviour

The search generated 71 responses where respondents described boundaries for humour used at work. Some of the respondents referred to humour use being inappropriate at specific times, including during serious discussions or meetings or during work time where people needed to focus on their work tasks. Respondents suggested that these inappropriate times were unofficially prescribed, there were no set rules or regulations but people knew or assumed that humour was not useful at these times.

In the three larger companies there was an assumption that there were boundaries and limits when using humour and it was also assumed that people knew what the boundaries were. This was contrasted by the data from Adare suggesting that at this company there were few boundaries and that any form of humour and joking was acceptable and encouraged. Many respondents articulated types of humour that were deemed to be crossing the line or overstepping the boundaries. Several respondents suggested that sexual or racist humour transgressed appropriate behaviour norms; some suggested that any humour that targeted individuals or personal characteristics was unacceptable; and most respondents stated that humour could go ‘too far’. This respondent emphasises the importance of fun as a cultural element at Sigma and indicates that there are implicit limits to fun and humour at this company

I would say we recognise that fun is definitely part of the culture... I think humour is always there in the background, because I think we do have a corporate-type company, emails and dodgy jokes going around. It's frowned on if it is too politically incorrect and I would think there is an unspoken understanding that people are careful with what they are sending and to who that sort of stuff is okay because you get a bit of a laugh out of it (Sigma respondent).

Humour that hurt people's feelings, hurt them physically or damaged property was humour that transgressed these informal boundaries. Some respondents stated that the humour in their workplace was mainly neutral or moderate but conversely some respondents claimed that using humour actually enabled people to *push* the boundaries at work. In contrast to respondents from the larger companies, most Adare respondents suggested that their workplace humour had no boundaries.

Respondents advised of email regulations that limited or restricted some types of humour (often pornographic) and thus management was creating boundaries with such policies. The policy restricting video forms of email humour at Kapack was an example of one of these managerially imposed boundaries to a specific form of humour. Several respondents felt that the CEO of their company set the limits of acceptable humour.

Observation notes showed that at Kapack, Sigma and Uvicon humour was careful and people joked and laughed quietly among themselves. Once again, Adare was the

contrasting company with seemingly few boundaries and behavioural constraints, and observation notes showed that all forms of humour were shared noisily and freely at most times.

Another finding emerged from this *boundary* data theme and it appeared that there were specific organisational members who assumed the role of keeping humour within the boundaries while there were other individuals who took responsibility for creating and encouraging humour.

5.4.2 Jokers

In each company, particular individuals were identified as the people that created and instigated humour most often. The term *joker* was introduced to respondents in the attempt to identify those individuals who were most involved in humour activities. In the three large companies, people identified someone in their immediate work area or department but respondents still knew of people from other departments that were considered to be jokers. The joker characters appeared to be well known throughout their company.

At Adare every respondent identified the managing director as a joker. A second individual was also identified as a workplace joker and appeared to assume the role of ‘sidekick’ to the Adare managing director. At Sigma, although a male was identified as the main joker, this was the only company where a female was identified as one of the jokers by her immediate team members. Kapack had two senior management personnel as their jokers and one of these had just achieved partner status. At Uvicon three jokers were identified and all of these were also male and there seemed to be gender implications to the joker role.

Those identified as jokers from the four companies came from all different status levels within the organisations. Some held senior management positions, some were junior-level employees and one was the managing director. Observation data supported the respondents’ identification of their workplace jokers and these characters featured in more of the observed banter, jokes and horseplay incidents than their colleagues and were

recorded as the instigators of pranks and fun. There was no documentary data that identified or discussed workplace jokers.

5.4.3 Gatekeepers

When analysing the data relating to humour boundaries, I developed a ‘hunch’ that some of the limits to workplace humour in these companies were created by specific individuals. The interview transcripts were analysed and searched for data that indicated that there were ‘gatekeepers’ who determined what humour was (and was not) appropriate in these companies. From this analysis it emerged that particular individuals and some groups of people set some of the boundaries and limits for humour and these people were all senior people at a reasonably high-status level. Some of them were senior management people such as the Chairperson, CEO or managing director and others were individuals who were older and had been with the company for a longer period of time.

This was particularly evident at Kapack where gatekeepers included senior managers and also older senior secretaries who were conservative, expected formal workplace behaviour, and were very vocal about any humour behaviour that transcended their personal standards of propriety. Gender and age appeared to be factors of the gatekeeper role and this responsibility was more often assumed by older female workers. Interview transcripts revealed that reinforcing appropriate humour and setting humour limits primarily came from older women respondents and that these were the individuals most likely to be offended by inappropriate humour. These excerpts from interviews with older females illustrate their attitude to humour and their gatekeeper role:

I mean personally I don't like practical jokes so I haven't really come across any. We don't have terribly rude jokes here either, I think it is more what is acceptable to me you can do what is acceptable and funny (Kapack respondent).

I have two young guys that I hear and I think, ‘oh goodness me’, or I will say ‘now keep the party clean chaps, keep the party clean’, because it's not filth but it can be quite, you know. I think some of the emails that are going around now, you know if you are standing by someone and they bring up an email and you think ‘oh my goodness I shouldn't have seen that’. I'll just say ‘whoo whee’ (Kapack respondent).

Younger members of these companies supported the concept that higher-status colleagues were gatekeepers to humour claiming that they had been ‘told off’ for inappropriate humour and even for humour and laughter that had been too loud. These junior staff members conceded that ‘They let us have a little bit of fun’ but also asserted that they were told fairly quickly what humour was not appropriate.

Even at Adare where there were few boundaries and constraints to humour, the two senior women who managed the office operations were gatekeepers and one admitted to occasionally telling the managing director when his humour had gone too far and hurt someone. Other Adare staff confirmed that these two women set some boundaries and they were careful that some of their humour did not affect these particular individuals. For example, when the male employees threw small balls or sausage rolls at each other across the office they were careful not to hit either of the women as they would have to buy them a bottle of wine in compensation. This was a rule imposed by the women.

At Kapack there was a strong recognition of the law and the legal implications of using inappropriate humour which added an extra level of constraint in this company. Many of the senior respondents referred to this legal imperative when discussing humour use and appeared to use legal requirements to reinforce their position as gatekeepers. Sigma respondents also cited their industry as having a constraining element on humour, claiming that their moderate humour use reflected the industry in which they worked. These industry and legal factors were used by the gatekeepers in justification of imposing their codes of humour behaviour and standards on their colleagues.

Respondents also suggested that different teams and groups had different limits for humour and therefore humour was limited by which team you were in or by which group you were interacting with at the time. Group boundaries were affected by the individuals in the group and, as exemplified by the quotes above, these humour gatekeepers had a powerful impact upon their immediate teams and groups- suggesting a subcultural effect on humour behaviour.

Although it appeared that certain types of people assumed gatekeeper roles to humour standards, the biggest group of gatekeepers arose from the management ranks and

approximately half of the respondents suggested that managers and company policies were responsible for setting and maintaining humour boundaries.

5. 5 Manifestations

This final section of the chapter presents data that highlights manifestations of workplace culture and humour in the four companies. The manifestations of culture and humour include: rituals; legends; physical articles of both culture and humour; and incidents that exemplify cultural and humorous facets of each company.

5.5.1 Rituals

When discussing workplace rituals, over half of the interview respondents referred to some type of ceremonial ritual in honour of people's birthdays. Most respondents from the larger companies described a celebration including cake (or other food) while respondents from Adare described a birthday ritual that involved a potent form of alcohol shared with colleagues. Respondents also claimed that morning tea rituals were organised for various reasons but chiefly to farewell departing colleagues or to welcome new arrivals.

After birthday and morning teas, the Friday drinks ritual was the next most common ritual described. Most respondents discussed company-organised regular Friday drinks and some respondents described drinks events organised off-site by groups of work colleagues. Three of the four companies had regular Friday afternoon drinks organised and paid for by the company. Two of the companies enacted this ritual weekly while the third company organised it on a monthly basis. The drinks supplied were primarily alcoholic drinks, but non-alcoholic drinks were also available. Two of the companies provided food with the drinks. Observation data confirmed respondents' claim that Friday afternoon drinks was a common ritual at three of the four companies and in two of the companies I was able to attend, experience and observe this event. One company (Kapack) even highlighted the drinks ritual in their recruitment document.

Many respondents described Christmas parties or events as key company rituals. All of the companies had Christmas events paid for by the company and these appeared to be eagerly anticipated by employees.

Respondents emphasised formal company awards as key cultural rituals and these included such awards as *Employee of the month* (or year), industry awards and quarterly performance awards. During the research period at Sigma, the *Employee of the Year* award was conferred and there was a celebration featuring champagne and catered food. Informal rituals were also described by respondents and observed during the data collection. These included tricks and pranks played on new company members; fun awards for mistakes and foolish actions, and general horseplay around the office. Rituals were observed and experienced during the research period. This respondent highlights some of the informal rituals at Adare:

Anything to do with drinking has been turned into a ritual ceremony, karaoke is installed as integral part of the organisation, and our ritual rugby thrashing by XTA (Vendor Company) is coming up again, followed by their ritual of us thrashing them at paintball.

At Kapack a senior partner (Sean) would wander around the office at approximately the same time each day telling all those whom he encountered a joke (mild and inoffensive) and this had become an anticipated daily ritual to people in this company. These daily jokes were recorded in observation records and this is one such example:

(Sean walks up to Katy and Carol who are chatting together)

Sean: OK a man goes to the doctor and says ‘Doctor every time I close my eyes I see a beetle on its back, spinning around’. What did the doctor say?

Katy: Is this about the group the Beatles?

Sean: I’m not saying

(Zane joins the group)

Zane: What was it? Tell it again?

Sean: A man goes to the doctor and says ‘Doctor every time I close my eyes I see a beetle on its back, spinning around’. What did the doctor say?

Zane: OK tell us

Sean: The doctor says, ‘don’t worry it’s just a bug that’s going round!’

(Only Zane laughs, Joan and Carol smile. Sean smiles and leaves.)

(Researcher’s logbook, 4 November 2005).

5.5.2 Legends

Investigating company legends was incorporated into the research design as research suggested that legends could offer insights into company culture (Morgan et al., 1983). In interviews, specific questions were asked about company legends. Gathering such stories was mainly dependent on interview responses and it was also hoped that such stories might be told to the researcher in an ad-hoc manner during the research. Disappointingly, this was not a successful facet of the data collection as respondents found it difficult to remember and recount company legends in the interview setting and very few examples of legends were gathered in the observation part of the data collection. Using documentary data collection yielded one example at Sigma where a book had been written narrating the (legendary) story of the company founders and their (heroic) efforts founding the company and competing with the big established financial institutions. Sigma respondents primarily referred to this book when asked about company legends as it offered a ready-made legend in its founding story.

Some respondents claimed that only the long-term company members knew the stories and legends in their company, and other respondents emphasised that company stories were a way of sharing the early times and that they fostered company pride. Inside Sigma a few respondents referred to the aforementioned company book, and a few Uvicon respondents related the story of a massive company crisis. Adare and Kapack respondents recounted times when employees had behaved outrageously at company events. For example, an Adare employee had been drunk at a function and dropped his trousers in front of a woman whom he disliked and this incident has achieved *legend* status at Adare and was referred to by most Adare respondents.

Respondents suggested that company stories were embellished over time and that the negative stories were often emphasised. Incidents and events that were observed while

inside the companies during the research period may (in time) become company legends and four significant incidents will be presented in section 5.5.6 of this chapter.

5.5.3 Cultural articles

In all of the companies there were physical articles that displayed and represented the organisational culture of the company. Respondents were asked to name any articles that they felt were culturally significant but they found this difficult and only sixteen respondents could name any cultural articles. This could be due to fact that such displays were an everyday part of their environment that they took for granted and couldn't recall in the interview situation. Observation was useful here as many articles were observed and noted while in the workplaces and sixty-two items were included in the observation data as examples of cultural articles.

Respondents cited works of art displayed in the company as a cultural article and at Uvicon respondents pointed out a large heritage plaque that had been removed from their previous premises and relocated to their current building. Other physical articles named by respondents included a fireman's hat, a framed rugby jersey, posters, stuffed toys, special clocks and even 'male interest' magazines in both the male and female bathrooms at Adare.

From observation data, 62 articles were noted throughout the four companies and these included 25 items that were examples of humour or had a humorous perspective and will be discussed below. The first physical articles that were noted were the premises and physical layout inside the companies. All four companies utilised an open-plan layout with desks and cubicles arranged in a central floor space. Three of the companies had large buildings in prime locations. These buildings were elegant and modern and had large expanses of glass, offering attractive views to inhabitants. Only the smallest company (Adare) had a less well-appointed premise with basic facilities and structure.

The second group of cultural articles observed was those that pertained to performance and were displayed inside the companies. These included: certificates and awards attained by employees; thank you letters from clients; boards indicating ongoing sales

performance; stars for good performance; and inspirational posters endorsing team greatness.

There were many articles that were displayed for fun or playful reasons. These included stuffed toys, company balls and other toys, fun awards for silly actions, decorations and a team hula hoop. In two of the companies there were prominent displays highlighting company values in several areas of the company. The three larger companies had professional works of art displayed.

All of the companies had some branded articles at their premises and these included articles such as business cards, mouse mats with the company logo, company profiles and plaques featuring the company logo and name. There were articles that were necessary tools such as the archive library at Kapack and admission swipe cards for all employees at the three larger companies.

All of the companies displayed lists that conveyed workplace information such as safety procedures and workplace seminars and at Sigma the dress code was displayed in words and photographs. All four companies provided magazines in break-out or eating areas for employee breaks.

5.5.4 Humour articles

All of the companies had some physical articles on display that were recorded as examples of humour. Once again, the majority of humour displays came from Adare. It was also notable that the displays at this company constituted riskier and more extreme forms of humour than those found at the other three companies. For example, on a sales board at Adare that recorded each consultant's sales performance, the Adare sales manager had (jokingly) registered the sales performance of the newest company recruit as 'still nothing lazy bitch!' As described in the previous chapter, humour displays at Adare included a pornographic and a flatulent clock and there was one particularly contentious poster. This depicted a photo of woman on ground with man standing over her and stated '*punch her in the face to prove that you're right*' with the sub-line: '*Brought to you by MORONs masculine overkill rules ok nancyboy*'.

At the other three companies humour displays included photos of staff members with alterations made to them (such as a celebrity body added to the staff member's head) and jokes pertaining to current news items. One cartoon at Uvicon referred to British police killing a suspected (rucksack-wearing) terrorist. The cartoon portrayed a British policeman with a smoking gun and Santa dead on ground with his sack still on his back. One officer is saying, 'Well he was wearing a rucksack!'

Most of the humorous displays at Uvicon were found in one particular department of engineers where the team culture was significantly different from that of other teams within this company.

At Kapack one company joker had a mock road sign proclaiming 'no swimming... crocodiles' in a self-deprecating reference to lawyers being considered as predatory creatures but there were very few other humorous displays here.

Only Adare openly displayed humour of a nature that could cause offence and insult to particular individuals and /or groups. The following list was displayed on the wall at Adare and was titled *Pithy sayings for work*:

I can see your point but I still think you're full of shit

I have plenty of vision – I just don't give a fuck

How about never? Is never good enough for you?

It sounds like English but I can't understand a word you're saying

I see you've set aside this special time to humiliate yourself in public

Aha! I see the fuck-up fairy has been visiting you again

You are validating my inherent distrust of strangers

I'm already visualising the duct tape over your mouth

Are you coming on to me or having a seizure?

The fact that no one understands you doesn't mean you're an artist.

These displays and other humour manifestations encountered at the four companies will be discussed in the next chapter.

5.5.5 Email

Examples of email were collected whenever possible while in the organisations and in each company one organisational informant agreed to send me copies of any emails that were circulated for the purpose of humour. Seventy email examples were collected in total and the majority of these came from the Adare company where, in keeping with their high emphasis on sharing humour, many joking emails were circulated among staff. In total, 56 of the emails came from Adare with just 14 examples coming from the other three companies combined. The emails were stored and analysed for form, content and humour themes. There were 20 emails that had sexual themes and 19 of these came from Adare. The one sexual example from Uvicon had a very mild sexual theme.

The sexual emails from Adare were extreme examples in several cases and would have been considered highly offensive in most workplaces as they depicted photos of genitals, ejaculation and even examples of sexual acts (see Appendix E). Over half of the sexually themed emails were in a photographic or video form. Although this form of email was acceptable and even encouraged at Adare, the law firm Kapack screened out all video emails to prevent objectionable material and video emails (frequently featuring sound effects) from distracting their employees.

There were seven sexist emails, all circulated at Adare, and all were disparaging of women in some way. Three of these poked fun at women's issues such as pregnancy, menstruation and body types.

Incongruity was a key theme to many of the emails and all of those with this theme were visual emails using photographs, graphics or video to depict people or animals in unusual circumstances, positions or clothing.

Seven emails contained satirical humour, mostly about political issues and one of these that was circulated at Kapack created an embarrassing incident for this company which is described in the next section (Incident three).

From Adare only, three emails contained racial themes, and a further three contained extreme profanity presented to create humour as shown in examples (Appendix D).

From the seven emails collected at Uvicon, two of these highlighted stupid actions, one of these was a print description and the other photographs of work events considered to be so stupid that they were funny.

A table was created and it lists each email, theme, description and form. It is included in Appendix E.

5.5.6 Incidents

This section presents four incidents and includes one incident from each participating company. These four incidents had a significant impact within the companies and they actually occurred during the research and were observed and experienced during the research. Implications and interpretations arising from these incidents were discussed with relevant company members to further explore their significance and impacts.

Each of the incidents included elements that reflected company culture and humour was also apparent in each one. The following four incidents exemplify: a hazing ritual (Adare); a company award ceremony (Sigma); email humour (Kapack); and a Xmas ritual (Uvicon).

Incident 1: Adare Sake Soju ceremony

On the first morning of research at Adare a new employee had started with the company while her predecessor was involved in saying goodbye to colleagues and packing his possessions. At 10 am the managing director informed them that there was a company ritual and that they had to participate as this was mandatory for all new employees and for those leaving the company. The managing director also treated me as a new employee and decreed that I too must participate. A table was set up in the middle of the open-plan area and all of those in the office gathered around. On the table were placed shot glasses full of an alcoholic drink (Japanese sake) and several power cables were lined up alongside the potent alcoholic drinks. The newcomer and several other staff

members (and I) stood in a line and tied the power cables around their heads. In turn each person shouted ‘SOJU’ and drank the shot in one quick swallow amidst much cheering and laughing from those assembled. The managing director claimed that ‘SOJU’ meant ‘Lets drink until we die!’ and photos were taken of each participant as they drank. These photos were later sent to various clients and industry colleagues by email.

Incident 2: Sigma Employee of the year

During the research month at Sigma the company awarded the title of *Employee of the Year* to someone selected from the twelve *Employee of the Month* recipients in the preceding year. This was a significant event at Sigma and a major achievement for the recipient who received gifts, champagne and a \$3000 travel voucher. The award was kept secret and a celebration was arranged. The recipient was invited to a (supposedly) regular group meeting along with his colleagues (and the researcher). The head of department (HOD) and other senior staff from the company arrived at the meeting and announced the winner of the award. Champagne was poured for all attending and a celebration ensued. During the award announcement, the HOD highlighted all the ways in which the recipient had met the company values and why he had been awarded the honour. He was invited to receive the awards and to make a speech. At the conclusion of his speech, caterers arrived bearing plates of food and the celebration continued until the end of the work day. The next day the award winner’s colleagues got to work early and wrapped all of his office space and equipment in toilet paper and then took photographs when he arrived at work. The company also displayed photographs of the winner with congratulatory messages on the days following the award.

Incident 3: Kapack PC eradicator

This incident was an example of email humour and the effects it can have inside (and outside) a company. At the beginning of the research period, one of the senior partners sent an email to everyone in the company claiming to be the ‘PC eradicator’. The email claimed:

I am now the Eradicator of Political Correctness at Kapack (self-appointed).
Political Correctness has got beyond a joke – we must make it a joke once again.

Please send me any examples of Political Correctness so that I can take immediate steps to ruthlessly stamp them out (Kapack email, November, 2005)

A response from another of the company's senior partners mimicked the satirical style and began by quoting a well-known New Zealander's stance on Political Correctness claiming that PC had '*gone mad*' and suggested that '*the provision of women's toilets on the fourth floor is merely a hollow gesture of battered male compliance to the left-wing lesbian cabal that runs this country.*' In the same satirical vein he suggested that this (women's toilet) area would '*make a great space for a games room with pool table, darts board, etc and there are already female facilities on the second floor.*'

The response to this email included general amusement and (mock) outrage from some of the women who suggested that the (male) partners had better not request any work tasks from women staff members as nothing would be done for them. Lively email banter flowed between several parties around this topic and all in the same joking style.

All of the emails in the string were forwarded company-wide and some people had a laugh, some didn't and the incident appeared to have ended. However, as is the way with email, four people sent it on to others outside the company such as their partners or spouses. The email was then described in a national publication in a humour column. All of the remarks were ascribed to the original PC eradicator and he and the company were identified in the column.

The CEO and Chairman of the Board were upset by this publicity and the CEO sent out an email with the subject line: '*How a bit of fun can get out of hand very quickly*'. His email outlined the fact that the email was published in a national publication and asked employees to be careful not to forward internal emails that are meant for fun, to others outside the company. The CEO stated that they knew who had sent the emails externally but accepted that no malice was involved (IT was asked to run a check on who had sent the email out of the company and four people had done so). The CEO's email also reminded everyone how quickly email can circulate to all sorts of people. He finished by suggesting that someone from the company should write a response to the publication but this never happened.

I was able to interview the email writers and they felt that some people had responded inappropriately and had failed to recognise that the comments were satirical. (There has been publicity in the NZ press about being overly PC and the term *PC eradicator* has been used by a prominent politician who claimed to have assumed this role.) The two main participants claimed not to be worried about the event but did suggest that it may have been wiser not to write their comments in an email.

The CEO stated that this was a clear example of how innocuous humour can be used maliciously. He said that he used to send out gentle jokes in some emails but got feedback that some people thought it inappropriate for the CEO to be sending jokes and so he stopped sending them. Everyone in the company was aware of this incident and it was considered significant and senior management was concerned about the effect on the company reputation and brand.

Incident 4: Uvicon Secret Santa

The research at Uvicon took place during the month of December so it was possible to observe and experience some company Christmas rituals and celebrations. On one of the floors of the company, all of the teams collaborated to organise a *secret Santa* event in the week before Christmas. This involved all those who wished to participate putting their names in a box. Each person was given a name from the box and bought that person a small gift costing no more than \$10. Each person wrapped the gift, wrote a note and the person's name on it and put it in the collection box. On the designated day, one person dressed and acted as Santa and distributed the gifts and read out any attached notes. The groups met in the company cafeteria and the company organised a catered morning tea for the employees.

The gifts varied and some were nice thoughtful presents while others were joking gifts, but most captured some aspect of the recipient and their interests. For example, a gift was presented to one young man who was about to leave the company with the message, '*for the man who has plenty of time on his hands, to use on the beach*'. The gift was a snakes-and-ladders towel and magazine. Each person had to open their gift in front of the whole group and many caused jokes, laughter and teasing. One woman was given lacy

red knickers which caused much speculation about who the giver was and elicited a few suggestive comments. The recipient appeared quite embarrassed and was lightly teased that the gift colour matched her face colour. In general, the gifts were tasteful and people were quite careful with comments and jokes. This was a happy event and it was agreed that different people would take turns in organising it each year.

5.6 Summary

This second results chapter has presented combined results from all four companies. Section 5.1 presented data that was gathered mainly from interview respondents and explored their interpretations of the influence of culture upon humour in their workplace. Findings about the influence of culture on humour suggested that at one company the two constructs were synonymous and highly interwoven but that at the other three companies organisational culture may have influenced humour by constraining enactment of some types and topics of humour.

Section 5.2 discussed organisational culture and considered each organisation as an entity, answering the question, '*Who are we?*' Results reflected the participants' interpretation of their organisational culture and the key elements of this culture. The data showed that respondents primarily defined their organisational culture in terms of professional roles and abilities and also that team cultures were a key consideration and affiliation when describing the overall organisational culture.

Change and development was a constant element of culture in these companies and metaphors used to describe the companies included comparing their companies to a 'family' and less frequently comparing the company to something fun, youthful and enjoyable. Combined with respondents' interpretations of their own culture was the observational and documentary data that supported respondents' descriptions and interpretations. Some perceived links were made from organisational culture to the outcomes of performance, recruitment and workplace satisfaction.

The third section (5.3) presented results relating to: fun; humour types and themes; functions of humour; negative impacts; jokers; and humour management. Data in this

section included respondents' interpretations of their workplace humour as well as actual verbatim examples recorded during observations. Banter was identified as the main form of humour shared in all four companies and email was also a key form of humour sharing for these organisational participants.

A contrast was apparent between humour used in the three larger companies and that used in the smaller, independently owned Adare company where humour was more risky with fewer constraints and limits. Data regarding humour creators or jokers was presented and the management of humour in these companies was considered.

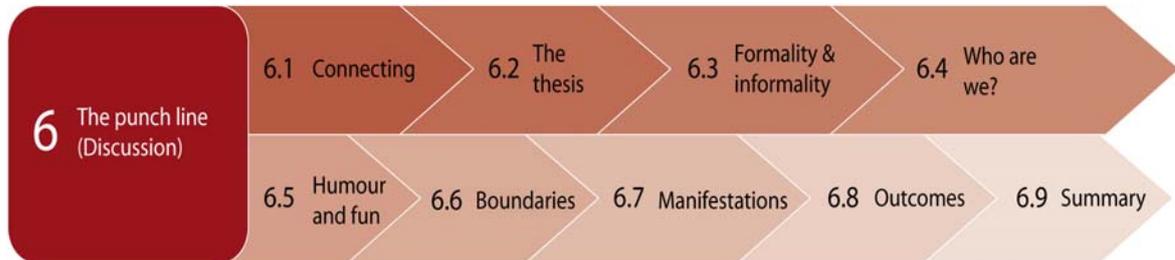
In section 5.4 there were findings regarding boundaries and limits in humour use. These boundaries included appropriate times for humour and appropriate types of humour. In three of the companies, noise levels were a key consideration and constraint on humour use. Email was regulated in the three larger companies and the data showed that higher-status and older long-term staff members acted as gatekeepers to humour use inside all four companies. It appeared that gender was a factor in the gatekeeper role as more women assumed responsibility for ensuring appropriate workplace humour.

In section 5.5 actual manifestations of humour were described under the headings of rituals, legends and physical articles. The companies had rituals for birthdays and when people left or joined the company. Friday afternoon drinks was a common ritual and some company rituals were based on humour and joking. Company legends were difficult to uncover as they relied on participants' memory and ability to recount stories in the interview setting and respondents suggested that only longer-term organisational members knew the legends. Likewise, respondents found it difficult to recall physical articles and displays in their workplaces, but this data was accessed through observation inside the companies which yielded a variety of cultural and humorous articles. The section concluded with four incidents experienced inside the companies and these were selected as representational incidents for each of the four companies. All four incidents included some cultural and humour components.

This results chapter has described activities and behaviours at the four companies but has not explained the significance or impact of the findings. The following chapter offers

discussion of these findings, relates them to reviewed literature, and emphasises the contribution that this research makes to organisational culture and humour research.

CHAPTER SIX: THE PUNCH LINE



6.1 Connecting

The literature, data analysis, and results all come together in this chapter which presents the overall thesis regarding the influence of organisational culture on the enactment of humour in these companies. The influence of culture upon humour has been depicted in a model (Figure 6.1) and each component is discussed in separate sections throughout the chapter. In section 6.2 the key points of the thesis are outlined. The seven themes that were identified in the analysis stages form the framework for this discussion.

The *formality/ informality* section (6.3) focuses upon the organisations' macro-level processes and is concerned with the processes of organisation within the organisational culture. The results from the continuum assessment are discussed and issues such as industry and size are examined. The influences of the assessed formality factors (hierarchy, continuity, impersonality, expertise, environment and structure) are discussed within the levels of organisational culture and their influence upon humour enactment is explored. The level of formality or informality in each company was an important cultural element that influenced workplace behaviour and humour enactment.

The organisational culture construct for the four companies is examined in section 6.4 under the title *Who are we?* The key facets of the dominant culture are discussed and this section is primarily informed by both respondent and researcher interpretation of what culture *is* inside these companies. Subcultures are also considered and key gender influences are examined. Further insights are gleaned through discussing respondent uses of metaphors to describe their companies.

Humour enactment is the focus of section 6.5 and this section discusses humour impacts which can be both positive and negative. This section also discusses the concept of fun cultures and outlines risks that managers face when attempting to create and contrive humour and fun within a company. Humour is discussed as an artifact of organisational culture and the possibility of humour becoming a shared value within a company is considered.

The sixth discussion section presents one of the key elements of the humour/culture relationship in these companies: that of *boundaries*. This is where the findings from the earlier discussion sections connect and the relationship between cultural elements and humour enactment becomes apparent. This section discusses how the levels of formality influenced cultural conditions that impacted upon humour use by creating permeable and dynamic *boundaries* for humour and fun activities. The discussion highlights roles assumed by specific individuals (jokers and gatekeepers) in either constraining humour or creating humour that may 'push' the boundaries. These dichotomous roles are discussed and some implications examined.

The *manifestations* of humour and organisational culture are discussed in 6.7 and these physical representations support the thesis regarding the humour/organisational culture relationship. Examples of displayed company humour and circulated emails are presented and implications of such displays are explored.

The final section (6.8) links respondents' perceptions of humour and culture to the organisational *outcomes* of recruitment, retention, satisfaction and performance. Workplace humour appeared to have a (mostly) positive effect upon mood which influenced performance and satisfaction for the respondents. Cultural fit is discussed and participation in humour activities appeared to assist socialisation and fit. The influence of organisational culture and humour upon retention is explored as well as negative impacts from too much humour.

The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the thesis and an introduction to the final chapter and its conclusions.

6.2 The humour and organisational culture thesis

The *Humour and organisational culture model* was developed to illustrate elements of the relationship between organisational culture and humour discovered after collecting and analysing data in the four companies. The model (Figure 6.1) depicts the influence of organisational culture upon humour enactment. The model shows the levels of formality/ informality as a key cultural element and the influence of these levels on boundaries created for humour enactment. The oval shape encapsulating organisational culture has been depicted with a dashed line to demonstrate the dynamic nature of organisational culture.

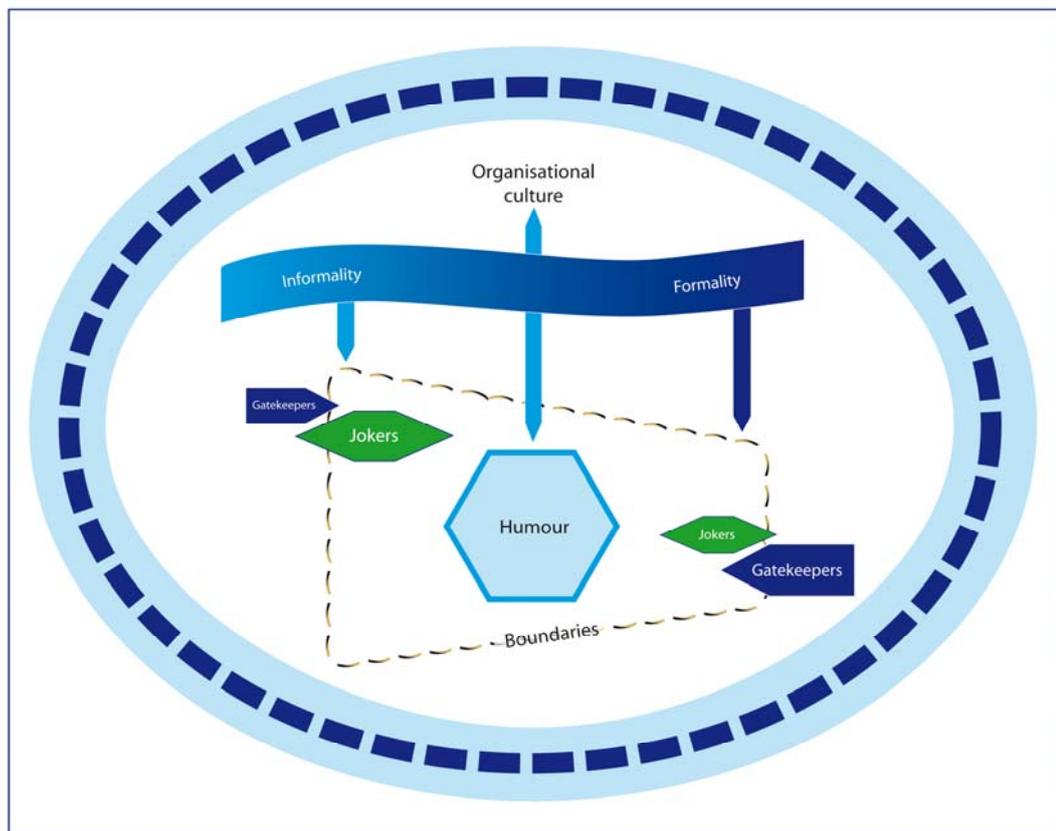


Figure 6.1: The humour and organisational culture model

The dashed line round the *boundaries* shape indicates that these boundaries are both dynamic and permeable. In the companies where formality was higher, boundaries

established for humour and fun were narrower and therefore humour and fun activities were more constrained. Formality and organisational culture strongly influenced the boundaries that were assumed and created by organisational members in regards to humour and fun. The coloured block arrows labelled *gatekeepers* and *jokers* illustrate the workplace individuals who assumed key roles in either maintaining and constraining these boundaries (gatekeepers) or challenging and pushing the boundaries (jokers). On the right-hand side of the diagram where the boundaries are narrower and formality is higher, the gatekeeper role is emphasised as it is more prominent in these types of company. Conversely on the left side of the diagram with the wider boundaries and high levels of informality, the joker role is depicted more prominently and the gatekeeper role is reduced and less significant.

Results have suggested that, as pointed out in prior literature (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995) humour is an artifact of the culture and humour is manifested in culture. The model shows that although humour is for the most part contained within the organisational culture and the boundaries created by the culture, humour can play a part in changing and developing culture. This is indicated by the blue double-headed arrow that shows that while organisational culture may influence workplace humour, it is also likely that at times humour influences on-going cultural activities, values and assumptions. Examples of significant humour incidents, such as the Kapack email incident and the Adare car park races, became part of the company folklore and cultural tapestry and changed social behaviour. The key factors depicted in the model will each be discussed in the forthcoming sections beginning with the influence of formality and informality which was assessed in the research.

6.3 Informality and formality

Chapter Four presented results from each of the four companies individually to give a contextual background to the collated data of Chapter Five and to highlight the differences and similarities found in each of these companies. Levels of formality and informality were assessed for each company and it was expected that these would have an impact upon culture and humour. This assessment of organisational formality was used

to examine organisational processes within the organisational culture and this also considered the external environment as a cultural factor (as emphasised by Schein, 2004). Assessing levels of formality offered a way of comparing disparate organisations on a continuum informed by Weber's (1947) bureaucratic factors. These elements of organisational culture relating to systems and structures appeared to have an influence on workplace humour enactment in these companies.

6.3.1 Size matters

It had been predicted, that due to its smaller size, Adare would be a highly informal company and this was validated by observations and interviews. Adare was rated as *informal* on the continuum and the informal structure and processes here fostered significantly different workplace culture and humour practices than in the three larger companies. Flat hierarchy, few rules, and an innovative industry environment influenced the organisational culture and facilitated more informal interaction between the people at Adare. Humour at Adare was riskier, more profane, addressed contentious themes and was much more frequent and prevalent than at the other three organisations. The smaller size of this company, coupled with the informal style of management and leadership resulted in fewer boundaries and constraints to humour and fun. Riskier forms of humour were permitted and enacted due to the personal knowledge each staff member had of his or her colleagues. Staff members here were cognizant of each other's personal limits and boundaries. This less formal work situation fostered a more intimate knowledge of colleagues which was important when using potentially offensive forms of humour, physical horseplay, and practical jokes. The lack of formality in the company organisation and structure added to this group awareness and was fostered (seemingly deliberately) by the managing director who not only encouraged lewd, profane, and physical forms of humour, but also assumed a joker role and actually created much of this humour himself. This strategic use of humour suggests a desire on the part of this organisation to establish humour as part of the organisational culture. Adare had a work-hard, play-hard, culture similar to that described by Deal and Kennedy (1982) and as suggested by Costea et al. (2005) play may even have become work itself.

Managers and employees in the other three companies were much more constrained in their personal behaviour and humour use and were restricted in their behaviour by accepted norms of behaviour inside their larger companies. With larger and more diverse groups of employees there was much more potential for humour to be considered offensive and inappropriate by organisational members. Fleming (2005) suggests that formal administrative organisations disregard personal and emotional elements such as fun and humour at work. The higher levels of workplace formality in the larger companies meant that workplace behaviour and humour were more closely monitored, and there were more formal evaluation processes of employee progress and behaviour (such as the personal success plan at Sigma). There were more people who acted as gatekeepers and constrained humour and behaviour within these larger companies. With larger numbers of employees came greater diversity and greater potential for humour to offend individuals or different groups.

The organisational culture in the larger companies was documented and disseminated to employees (at Uvicon and Sigma) and also governed by standards of propriety inside their industry (Kapack and Sigma). Outrageous forms of humour, such as risky practical jokes (for example the loosening of a chair's seat at Adare) were more likely to end in disciplinary action and even litigation inside these more formal regulated companies (Duncan et al., 1990; Panko & Glenn Beh, 2002). The incident at Kapack where a humorous email was published in the press and staff were reprimanded by the CEO exemplifies the reactions to humour use (or misuse) in the larger, more formalised companies. Had the email incident occurred at Adare with its informal atmosphere and lack of boundaries, the reaction to such publicity would possibly have been glee and further joking; however, at Kapack the incident caused concern and upset senior management.

6.3.2 Industry

The industry or environment in which each company operated also had an impact on formality levels and subsequently on organisational culture and humour. At Kapack and Sigma respondents assessed the formality of the industry environment as *formal* (4.3 and 4.2 respectively) Although Uvicon was rated at 3.8 which denoted a *neither* formal nor

informal industry, this rating was at the higher end of the scale and close to the formality levels at the other large companies. At Adare the environment was rated as *informal* which supports research suggesting that IT companies may operate more informally throughout their industry (Prager, 1999).

At Kapack, respondents felt that working in the legal environment had a strong impact on the expected standards of behaviour and this was also found in the financial environment at Sigma. The energy industry has undergone many changes in the last few years but at Uvicon there are still many staff that had been part of prior government departments and they have transferred old behavioural standards to their newer company. Once again differences were apparent at Adare. They operated in the highly dynamic and newer field of Information Technology (IT) with an industry culture that traditionally encouraged rebellion, creativity, innovation and being different (Kunda, 1992; Hudson, 2001; Prager, 1999). Therefore the outrageous humour and organisational culture observed appears to 'fit' inside their industry expectations and it could even be that the Adare managing director deliberately cultivated risky behaviour and antics as a form of differentiation within the competitive IT industry.

6.3.3 Hierarchy and status

Although none of these companies rated their hierarchical structure as *formal*, there were some status effects related to the formality levels at each company. Adare was the only company with an *informal* rating in respect of hierarchy and the other three companies were all assessed as *neither* formal nor informal for hierarchy. This may reflect the overall New Zealand workplace with its egalitarian styles, smaller companies and low power-distance relationships (Hofstede, 1977a; 1977b). Even though rated as *neither* formal nor informal on hierarchy, the three larger companies had more levels of hierarchy and therefore different status levels. Adare had a flatter management structure which resulted in less status differences between managers and workers. In such a flat structure the managing director needed to maintain his authority and status and he used humour to achieve this. He was the master of the jocular insult and putdown and usually the first to crack a joke or use extreme profanity and toilet humour. His constant initiation of risqué and risky forms of humour highlighted his work status as managing director and his

social status as the workplace joker. In this extremely masculine culture, humour use was important as a control device and a way of asserting masculinity and status. These effects will be further examined in forthcoming sections.

In the other three companies, senior managers were wary of using humour with subordinate staff. In these more hierarchical companies, humour use was perceived to be less appropriate for senior management and also carried with it the inherent risks of offending or embarrassing subordinate staff. Supporting Lundberg's (1969) contention that higher-status employees have less fun than lower-level staff, the CEO at Kapack stated that he had stopped using jokes and witticisms in his company-wide emails as it had been suggested to him (by a subordinate) that this was inappropriate for the CEO of a law firm. Although senior managers from Kapack, Sigma and Uvicon used some mild verbal banter with their subordinates and supported appropriate workplace fun activities, none of them assumed the role of workplace joker and created humour and fun activities.

6.3.4 Structure

All of the three larger companies were rated quite highly for formality in regards to structure. This was expected as with larger companies more structure is required in order to manage larger groups of people (Morand, 1995). Each of the larger companies was divided into several different functional departments and this more formal structural model contributed to their higher formality ratings. Within the departments, smaller groups were formed to work on specific business tasks and projects. At Adare there were teams that worked on specific tasks and these were also functionally determined for the most part (sales team and technical teams). However, in this smaller organisation colleagues were more likely to get involved in other areas such as project teams with both sales and technical employees which were formed to achieve specific goals.

Being organised into functional departments had an impact upon organisational culture and on the subcultures that developed within the departments and smaller teams that were formed within departments. Respondents emphasised their strong affiliations to their team and defined their team culture as being highly important to them. More humour was shared among people at team or department level than at whole-company level.

6.3.5 Continuity

The continuity strand assessed the company's career structure for employees. It considered whether a career path was offered; if the company used mainly full-time permanent staff; or if contractors and casual employees were utilised to perform business tasks. None of the companies were rated as *formal* on this strand and both Adare and Uvicon were assessed as *informal*. Adare did not offer a career path to employees but expected them to grow within their own roles and extend their own expertise and activities within this small company. Uvicon was also rated as *informal* in this aspect as the company employed a large number of contractors, temporary staff and casual workers. At both Sigma and Kapack there were definite career tracks within certain roles. For example, those with law degrees were hired at a junior level and could move to the level of senior lawyer, associate and eventually partner over time. The continuity aspects at the companies affected team and group membership and the individual roles that different employees were likely to assume in the cultural environment. A senior-level, long-term employee was more likely to assume the role of mentor and guide and assist new staff members in socialising and learning normative behaviours.

6.3.6 Expertise

This strand considered formality in regards to qualifications and job definitions. Sigma was again *formal* on this strand and through necessity Kapack was also formal in this area. These companies had to hire employees who were qualified for certain roles, such as requiring qualified lawyers at Kapack. At Uvicon and Adare different attributes were valued such as fitting the culture and attitudinal attributes, therefore recruitment initiatives were different in these companies. Person-organisation fit research (Bowen, Ledford & Nathan, 1991) suggests that hiring people who fit the organisation improves performance on some aspects of organisational performance. Hiring employees primarily for qualifications and knowledge had different impacts on organisational culture than when attitudinal aspects and fit were considered. At Adare they were particularly aware that hiring for attitude was imperative in this unique and highly charged humour environment.

6.3.7 Impersonality

The impersonality strand assessed official rules and regulations in each of the four organisations and three of the companies were measured as being *informal* on this scale. The exception was Sigma (the most formal company overall) which was assessed as *formal* on impersonality. At Sigma there were written documents covering most aspects of work life and this contributed to their evaluation of being the most formal of the four companies. There was a very specific dress code, company values were clearly stated and prominently displayed, and there was a written code of conduct governing employee behaviour. Although Uvicon and Kapack had some written policies regarding email behaviour and serious matters such as sexual harassment, their documents were not as specific as the detailed ones at Sigma. Sigma was the only company to have a formal written dress code and during the research period this was emphasised and reiterated in different formats to employees throughout the company. At Kapack, Uvicon and Adare, rules and regulations appeared to be formed through assumptions of correct behaviour rather than by following a written code as at Sigma. Kapack and Uvicon managers described situations where they had verbally discussed appropriate behaviour and dress standards with individuals. This supports Kunda's (1992) findings that 'normative control' is powerful in guiding people's workplace behaviour. At Adare there were no documents outlining rules for behaviour or dress and managers assumed that employees would work these out by observing their colleagues' behaviour. As expected, Adare had the lowest rating regarding impersonality and this reflected their smaller size and their more informal approach to the organisation of their business activities. Sigma's documentation of rules and regulations exemplified their more formal business operations.

The formality and informality levels could be considered as artifacts of the culture (Schein, 1985, 2004) as they were visible and partly tangible elements of the culture. However they also appeared to be linked to Schein's deeper levels of culture and reflected values of the company. For example Kapack had reorganised their office space into an open plan design to try and foster more social interaction and reflect their attempt to be a more relaxed and fun-filled law firm. Management here were trying to foster a

‘laid back’ cultural environment and this spatial change was an attempt to reflect this managerially espoused value. Similarly, Adare’s lack of hierarchy and formal rules and overall informal style appeared to reflect their values of autonomous behaviour and working styles. These formality and informality factors created different organisational conditions that influenced the organisational culture and subsequently humour activities inside the four companies.

6.4 Who are we?

When collecting data that pertained to organisational culture it was not assumed that the culture in each company would be homogeneous and cohesive (as suggested by Parker, 2000). The research design allowed for the possibility of fragmented cultures and explored the existence of group cultures within these companies. Although defining an overall culture was difficult for organisational participants there was an overriding and apparent dominant culture in each of the four companies.

In all four organisations, culture was primarily defined by the key work tasks undertaken and the expertise and professionalism demonstrated in enacting these tasks. Pride in company achievements and reputation was important and this was emphasised in the interviews, observations and documentary data from all of these companies. Incident two (Chapter 5) exemplifies the importance of achievement and professional conduct at Sigma and the ceremony for the *Employee of the Year* award was luxurious and highly valued at this company.

This professional aspect of the culture was a significant factor when examining the influence of culture on humour enactment. Because professionalism was the primary defining aspect of organisational culture in each of the companies, it influenced behaviour in regard to work tasks and also social behaviour and humour. Certain types and forms of humour such as practical jokes could reflect upon the company’s professional image and reputation and therefore were avoided by most organisational members in the three larger companies.

The significant exception was at Adare where, although workers and managers valued professionalism and excellence in their task outputs, their in-house humour behaviour was outrageous in comparison with behaviour at the other three companies. Two of the Adare staff stated that they were leaving the company as a result of this disparity in their perception of appropriate professional behaviour and the humour antics that they considered unprofessional. One of the disgruntled Adare respondents described a situation where he had brought a potential client back to the Adare offices only to be greeted by the sight of the managing director simulating a sexual act with another male colleague as a humorous antic to amuse the staff. He described his client's outrage at this activity and subsequent refusal to conduct any further business with Adare. He cited this example as one of the reasons why he was leaving to join another organisation and stated that for him professionalism and appropriate conduct were so important that he would actually leave the company even though he enjoyed much of the fun and humour at other times. As well as demonstrating the importance of professional behaviour as a key cultural factor, this incident also exemplifies an actual outcome of humour enactment.

Morgan (2006) suggests that organisational groups experience multiple realities and while being part of the overall dominant culture, people also interact in their professional or spatial subcultural groups. As these groups exist and interact within the overall company culture, Parker (2000) calls them 'nested' cultures but as the term *subcultures* is more commonly adopted throughout organisational culture literature, the next section uses this term to discuss the group or team cultures found in the four organisations.

6.4.1 Subcultures

The factor of size seemed to be important when recognising and defining whole-company culture. Consisting of only 25 people in total, the staff at Adare worked in an open-plan space which offered more opportunities for whole-group interaction. Social behaviour and humour were generally shared with all company members present in the office. This resulted in staff at Adare all knowing most of the key company legends and humour events and also meant that most Adare staff either observed or participated in most of the daily humour and fun.

In contrast the large numbers of employees at the other three companies meant that there were few opportunities for whole-company gatherings and therefore social behaviour and humour were shared in team, group or department sectors. Parker (2000) suggests that spatial or occupational divisions are key factors in creating subcultural groups. Organisational culture in these three larger firms was often defined by participants in terms of team or department culture and defining or describing whole-company culture was more difficult for employees in the large companies.

In the two companies where organisational culture was defined and documented (Sigma and Uvicon), employees used these official descriptions and quoted the prescribed values as cultural factors. This exemplifies Schein's (2004) second level of organisational culture espoused values and supports his theory that this is an important and influential aspect of culture. At Kapack where the company was large and divided into departments and there was no official documentation or endorsement of company culture, there was confusion and respondents struggled to define their organisational culture. Many of the Kapack respondents primarily discussed their team or department culture and also their industry culture and described what it meant to be a lawyer or in a law-based role.

Respondents in the larger organisations offered two organisational culture definitions. They described the overall company culture and also emphasised the culture prevalent in their primary work group or team. This suggested that the phenomenon of subcultures was an important facet of the organisational culture construct for the participants in the larger companies and supports Parker's (2000) contention that spatial and/or professional groupings are the primary divisions that influence subcultures.

Having identified their affiliation to the culture of the smaller group such as their work team, respondents then linked their humour use to the culture inside their department or team. Therefore their humour use was influenced both by the culture in the larger organisation to a certain degree, but more significantly to the behavioural norms and expectations within their sub cultural groups. This was quite different at Adare where organisational culture pervaded the entire company due to its smaller size. The overall culture at this small company was more like that of the teams and departments of the

larger companies. This team effect influenced humour use particularly in regards to themes, types and impacts.

At Adare all employees and managers knew each other well and interacted with each other constantly as there was only one open-plan area inhabited by all. This allowed all of the organisational members to know each other and develop group practices that maintained the company culture. Fine and De Soucey (2005) suggest that over time a group will develop a repertoire of humour references that they will continue to add to and use to build new humour interactions. As humour was of key importance to the managing director, most humour was shared loudly and constantly with the entire company and therefore became a key cultural factor. The constant use of humour also created stories and legends that were adopted into the culture and much of the cultural identity of this company was related to the humour that they used and proudly displayed.

Contrastingly at the three larger companies respondents defined an overall company culture but related more closely to their team or department culture. This team affiliation was important in regard to the research project as it was within this group situation that members of Uvicon, Kapack and Sigma shared more humour. Sharing humour assisted integration within the teams or departments and delineated subcultures within the organisation. Different subcultures operated within the large companies and were defined by the tasks that each unit enacted as well as their group practices and behaviour. Humour was an important part of their group interaction. The control room engineers at Uvicon exemplified this as their tasks were unique within the company. Due to the urgent nature of their tasks they even had different hours and structures than did other work departments. They shared humour that was specific to their roles and they observed different boundaries and types of humour than in the other Uvicon departments. In this mostly male engineering team, humour contained more profanity and was closer in style to the humour found at Adare. Using humour allows men to express sexist views (Mulkay, 1988) and research suggests that men show a greater preference for sexual humour and use this form of humour to assess each other's sense of humour (Duncan et al., 1990; Eastman, 1936).

As the employees at Adare were also primarily engineers the cultural similarities might be explained by role and task similarities which suggest that culture may be more than just a company-situated construct but may also be an industry or task-related phenomenon. Gender also appears to be a factor in the humour/culture relationship because in all of the other departments studied at Uvicon there was relative gender balance and humour styles were markedly different from that found in the control-room group. In the gender-balanced groups there were no examples of humour that used profanity or sexual themes and this type of humour was only observed within the male Uvicon control room team and at Adare.

6.4.2 Gender influences and masculine cultures

The contrast in humour activities between the three larger organisations and Adare suggested that there were some different cultural factors operating inside this smaller organisation. Some similar humour styles and topics were also recorded in the small control-room group at Uvicon. Both the Adare company and the Uvicon group consisted mostly of male employees and therefore gender literature was examined to help account for the significant behavioural differences at this company and within the Uvicon group. Crompton (2006) claims that organisations are socially constructed and have gendered substructures where organisational members may enact sexual aspects of masculinities or femininities. The group demography and the different themes (sexual and bodily function jokes) and physical types of humour observed at Adare and in the Uvicon control room suggested that these groups exemplified *masculine* cultures.

In their study investigating the role of humour in the culture of young men at school, Kehily and Nayak (1997) suggest that humour has a significant role in ‘consolidating male peer group cultures’ (p. 69) and that humour organises and regulates ‘heterosexual masculinities’ (p. 69). Their study suggests that everyday school life is suspended through humorous practices and play and that having a laugh with other young men is preparation for the workplace and its rituals. They claim that ‘humour is a technique for the enactment of masculine identities and can be seen to produce differentiated heterosexualities’ (p. 70).

Data from Adare supported Kehily and Nayak's (1997) research as the males at Adare seemed to use their continuous humour to consolidate their workplace culture and emphasise their masculine style. For example, at a similar time most mornings the managing director would saunter towards the company bathrooms and loudly proclaim to all in the office, 'Just off for a shit!' The two administrative (female) staff members would roll their eyes or make some derisory comment such as 'too much information Jack', the male workers grinned or cheered, and the managing director departed grinning widely. This display appeared to reinforce that this was a male company and that male toilet humour was shared and enjoyed and female workers must tolerate these antics. The women did, however, feel free to jokingly criticise humour such as this with mild reprimands constructed in a joking manner. As this was the managing director noone complained about this humour style and it seemed to reinforce his status and role as the most dominant male as well as his penchant to be outrageous and shocking. Such displays also reinforced his status as the workplace joker and reinforced his masculine identity. By so openly declaring his toilet habits and emphasising the physical aspects of his body (Bergson, 1911) it appeared that he was using a potentially offensive form of humour to momentarily feel superior to his colleagues (Gruner, 1997; Hobbes1640) that may have made subordinates feel uncomfortable or degraded. The mild reprimands he received from his female colleagues reflected their distaste and highlighted their role as gatekeepers to humour incidents.

The male-dominated employee numbers at Adare resulted in a unique masculine culture that was constructed and consolidated by their humour use. Humour can be a technique to enact masculine identity and validates heterosexual masculinity through game playing, insults and story telling (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). It is common for young men to interact by using verbal and physical assaults that encourage male competitive styles and exhibit their masculinity and this was observed at Adare and in the Uvicon control group. Being able to take a barrage of joking insults without showing emotion is seen as a factor of group membership and a demonstration of masculinity. Using profanity is a treasured act of transgression of social norms that reinforces masculine identity and is enjoyed for its shock value. Banter and cursing may substantiate and bolster male identity and using humour may be a way of performing this masculinity (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). Sexist

and aggressive jokes may be a way to strengthen male bonding and improve group solidarity and in particular shared aggression towards outsiders to the group such as occurred when customers and vendors were mocked at Adare.

Kehily and Nayak (1997) found that homophobic humour helped their young male subjects to 'enact a hyper-masculine identity and so consolidate their heterosexual identity' (p. 82). They suggest that young men who do not cultivate this hyper-masculine style are targets of homophobic joking and homophobic jokes are used to define dominant and subordinate heterosexualities in male culture. At Adare one of the key instigators of homosexual jokes and insults was the managing director and such jokes were targeted at the younger male staff members. In particular one individual (Tim) who appeared less overtly masculine was the most frequent target of homosexual jibes and he did state that he found this tiresome as it was constant and ongoing. Colleagues at Adare also identified that Tim was the target of much of this humour and expressed concern that too much might harm him. This excerpt from observation notes exemplifies the jibes aimed at Tim:

Cara (newest employee) uses her computer and morphs a photo of Tim into Mr Spock with big ears and lips. She pins the photo on the company notice board. Several people crowd around to look at it including Tim.

Chad: There's even room for a caption.

Cara: *(smiling at Tim)* He can take it

The managing director (Jack) comes in and sees the photo

Jack: That's a bit gay! It looks funny hey it's even better from a distance. Hey Tim you look like Michael Jackson's bitch!

Everyone laughs

Cara: Oh sorry Tim.

Tim: No you're not! (Researcher's logbook, May, 2005)

Men use humour techniques that make each other appear vulnerable and emphasise 'the power of dominant versions of masculinity' (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 73). This power and dominance effect was obvious in the remarks by Jack (managing director) to Tim

emphasising his vulnerability. However, this example of male humour included a female participant who started the prank on Tim with the doctored photo. Cara was a new employee attempting to fit into the male culture by also teasing Tim. Fine and De Soucey (2005) suggest that women who want to become part of a male-dominated group must 'decode male behaviour patterns' (p. 131) and participate in teasing and coarse joking to become 'one of the boys'. At the start of the interchange, Cara suggested that Tim can 'take' the teasing but then realised that she set him up as a target for homosexual insults and attempted to apologise for starting the teasing. Her apology was met with Tim's forceful reply which was half annoyed but he also smiled to show he could take the joke. His reply showed that he considered that Cara had deliberately used him as a target to integrate herself with the dominant males and this had allowed them to make him the butt of their homosexual jokes. Cara chose the photo of Tim to display as she perceived him as the usual victim of workplace pranks and she attempted to socialise within the male culture by following their patterns of humour use.

Choosing one particular individual for many homophobic jibes may have been a technique to create group solidarity and reinforce the male culture and to reinforce the status levels of managers and subordinates. In his interview, Tim suggested that sometimes he retaliated or instigated jokes on his colleagues. Observations showed that Tim's attempts at humour were met with even more mocking and abuse and once again reinforced the prevailing male hierarchy. By making Tim the butt of many jokes and laughing at his reactions the Adare staff exemplified the superiority humour theories whereby they laughed at the degradation and debasement of another and experienced momentary superiority (as suggested by superiority humour theories; Hobbes, 1640; Gruner, 1997) while also reinforcing the prevailing male hierarchy.

Lyman's (1987) research in a college fraternity suggests that male joking is a form of controlled aggression. Power order in male groups is reinforced in their sexual and sexist joking. 'The joke form itself suggests this ambivalence about rules and acts as a kind of pedagogy about the relationship between rules and aggression in male work culture' (Lyman, 1987, p. 159). Joking that breaks societal rules creates excitement and strengthens bonds in male groups (Lyman, 1987). At Adare the managing director

emailed a joke file to his male engineers that when opened loudly announced, 'I love gay porn!' As each one opened it, everyone in the open-plan office could hear and they laughed and exchanged further homosexual jibes, once again emphasising the managing director's power and reinforcing his social status as daring and outrageous. Such sexually-oriented joking also may have been used for its release function and as suggested by Freud (1905) may have offered an outlet for stress, aggression, sexual feelings and emotions created in this fast-paced and pressurised work environment. Although there were similarities in humour used within the Uvicon control room, their sexual and sexist joking was less extreme and milder in its content. It is likely that their situation within the overall Uvicon culture moderated some of their humour and this highlights the effects of a team subculture existing within a dominant company culture.

The women at Adare appeared to accept the sexist and sexual insults as a part of their everyday working environment and this was similar to the acceptance shown by the young women in the Kehily and Nayack (1997) study. The women at Adare tolerated the male humour and at times countered with jibes of their own. In their research on women in IT positions, Allen et al. (2004) suggested that women were more likely to use humour (or laughter) to enable them to discuss issues and barriers in the workplace. It is possible that the Adare women used their own quietly-shared humour to offset the masculine jests that they tolerated daily. Hay (2000) found that women are more likely to share their humour in the private domain than openly and publicly. The incident (Chapter Five) describing the sake drinking ceremony enacted at Adare appeared to offer a challenge to organisational members to demonstrate that they could tolerate this tough male culture and cope with drinking the strong alcohol at the start of the work day. This ritual was forced upon new organisational recruits and the newest female recruit (and this researcher) felt that she had to partake and in effect prove that she was 'one of the boys' by completing this socialisation test on her first day.

The male-dominated culture at Adare exemplified the relationship between humour and organisational culture by highlighting how the managing director and his senior male managers emphasised their status by using profane, explicit humour. Other organisational members had to tolerate this even though they knew it was inappropriate in

most workplaces. Billig (2005) claims that 'rebellious humour mocks the social rules' (p. 202). The managers' use of humour accentuated the male environment, portrayed their capacity to be different and shocking and gave the company status and recognition within their industry by flouting conventional behaviour norms. It also appeared to be a way of keeping young, cool, IT workers that were in demand in this industry. Providing them with a zany off-beat work environment that they (mostly) enjoyed gave these employees freedom to behave in ways that would not be accepted in many other corporate environments. Employees at this company readily admitted that a sexual harassment lawsuit could easily be enacted against senior management here and that the humour and fun here was not typical of most corporate work environments. Collinson (2002) cautions that managers who allow men's aggressive joking as a safety valve to let off steam are facilitating oppressive joking and this may backfire and create resistance that could lead to lawsuits.

At Adare the humour and culture were interdependent and the shrewd managing director seemed to have deliberately fostered an environment of outrageous humour and fun as a point of differentiation. His role as the grand joker gave him social status with the younger male engineers. Ashcraft (2006) asserts that gender difference can function as a 'pivotal organising mechanism that is actively-even strategically-deployed by founders' (p. 101). Humour was also used as a form of control that highlighted his role status over his male employees. This was emphasised by his declaration: 'If they don't like it they can leave!' In fact, two interview respondents asserted that they were leaving the company in the near future as they were no longer happy with the continual jesting and wanted to further their careers elsewhere in more formal settings.

As well as having a specifically masculine culture it also appeared that Adare and the Uvicon control room team exemplified IT culture. Technology companies have a work-hard, play-hard culture and they want employees with a corresponding attitude who are comfortable with chaos and change. Such companies are highly informal and seek recruits with passion and a sense of community (Leinfuss, 1999). Adare and the Uvicon team may be examples of what Burris (1996) calls *technocratic patriarchy* where work is centred on computerised technology, there is gender imbalance and male identity is

emphasised through technological expertise. Informality is a feature of such technocratic organisations (Burris, 1996) and this could be an interesting area for further research.

6.4.3 Metaphor

Theorists suggest that using metaphors can help people to understand their organisations and ascribe meaning to their organisational experiences (Morgan, 2006; Pondy, Frost, Morgan, & Dandridge, 1983). Although respondents often struggled to describe their company metaphorically, using a metaphor engendered some emotive responses during interviews. For example, the respondents who suggested that their company was 'corporate' or like all the others used a derisive and disparaging tone that suggested a negative weighting to their response. Conversely, those who compared the company to a family, smiled, used an upbeat tone and appeared to be praising the company. Comparing the company to one's family appeared to be the highest endorsement that could be given and suggested that being at work was similar to being among loved kin.

The metaphors that compared the company to a childhood event (school or kindergarten) appeared to emphasise the playful and enjoyable aspects that these respondents perceived were typical of the culture and these metaphors appeared to carry a positive weighting and came from organisational members that were happy in their company. One respondent used a metaphor when asked about humour at work and suggested: 'It's like a cup of coffee, it energises you'. Company documents at Uvicon, Kapack and Sigma portrayed the company as being a 'fun place' and at Adare this was a verbal contention espoused by the managing directors and most of the organisational members. Managers and staff at all four of the companies agreed that having a *fun culture* was a positive asset and this is discussed in relation to humour in the next section.

6.5 Humour enactment

Humour was enacted in different ways and to different degrees in each of the four companies. The following sections discuss impacts of humour enactment as well as the claim from management at each of these companies that the company had created a fun culture.

6.5.1 Humour impacts

Employees and managers recognised the impacts of humour inside these organisations. Humour was approved, endorsed and even created by managers at Sigma and Adare. Collinson (2002) doubts that humour can be managed or suppressed by management and Malone (1980) agrees that workplace humour may be unpredictable and risky. At the three larger companies humour was sometimes shared covertly and even used to ridicule company-organised fun initiatives.

There is growing interest in the idea that employee fun and humour yields organisational benefits such as improved morale, productivity, job satisfaction, creativity and reductions in absenteeism and stress (Redman & Mathews, 2002). It appeared that managers were keen to link the concept of fun with their organisational culture and presented it as a key component when promoting the company. They associated workplace fun and humour with impacts on organisational recruitment, retention, satisfaction and performance. Employees supported this assumption and most perceived humour to have positive workplace impacts and there were 23 references to these perceived positive impacts.

However Billig (2005) asserts that while commonsense views assume that humour is inherently positive, humour is often used to ridicule others and this is socially significant. Taylor and Bain (2003) also emphasise the dark side and subversive elements that can be released through using humour. Humour inside the four studied companies was associated with some negative workplace impacts such as targeting specific people, promoting racial, sexist and sexual themes and making barbed points in the guise of a joke. The Adare managing director contrasted significantly with his counterparts at the other three organisations, and was the only managing director to actively encourage contentious forms of humour. He enacted humour himself that was profane, sexual, sexist, racial and would be considered inappropriate in many other corporate environments.

From findings in this research it appeared that using humour and fun in these modern organisations, created challenges for leaders. In the organisations that had less organised fun, people claimed that they would like to have a fun culture and workplace. However,

the companies that promoted humour as a cultural element risked cynicism (see Fleming, 2005) and complaints that it was compulsory and therefore not fun or funny any more. Redman and Mathews (2002) agree that using humour at work should not be applied as a quick fix to address business issues and adopting humour into a business culture is not desirable to everyone. Finding a balance between organised fun activities and actual humour that people enjoyed was a challenge for managers in these companies.

The data included 16 references to negative impacts from humour enactment. There was criticism at Adare that fun and humour were too extreme and that it hurt people physically and emotionally at times. The constant occurrences made it hard to actually complete work. Sigma seemed to have achieved the most successful balance and most participants here asserted that the company's fun and humour activities were enjoyable, promoted group cohesion and bonding, and created an enjoyable workplace atmosphere. Fleming (2005) suggests that companies which strive to develop fun cultures do this by establishing the context or cultural environment in which humour and fun activities can occur. Factors of such a context include employee empowerment, leadership (managers showing that they can have fun), group cohesion and perceptions of belongingness. He claims that humour, play and informality are features of a fun culture.

Finding the balance between genuine humour and manufactured fun was crucial. Managers had to be cautious that organised fun didn't polarise staff. One Adare manager told of an organised fun day that occurred in a company he visited and all staff had to dress up as TV characters for a day. He stated that while some enjoyed and embraced the day, there were those who were so vehemently against the organised frivolity that they stayed away from work for the day. Managed fun can be ridiculed by employees (Critchley, 2007) and may result in employees using biting humour to mock the fun (Warren & Fineman, 2007). Manufactured fun that is perceived negatively may stimulate *real* fun caused by this mocking and employees in Warren and Fineman's (2007) study subverted company initiatives by using play equipment in inappropriate ways that they perceived as funny.

Most respondents in the four companies assumed that humour and fun were organisational culture elements that were universally desired by workers and managers. Employees and managers suggested that having a fun culture was a marketable asset and that most people wanted to belong to a fun company. The companies wanted to present themselves as a fun place in order to attract top level recruits, as stated in the graduate brochure produced at Kapack.

6.5.2 Fun culture

When discussing the enactment of humour at work organisational respondents discussed fun and play synonymously and therefore fun and play were considered as part of workplace humour. Two of the four companies (Adare and Sigma) officially endorsed and even prescribed humour and fun at work while at the other two companies (Uvicon and Kapack) humour was not a key aspect of the culture and daily life. In the companies that actively encouraged and created fun more fun and accompanying humour occurred. Only at Adare and Sigma did data support the claim that fun was part of the culture. Kapack had one document declaring that they were a *fun* company but this claim was not supported by responses from Kapack employees who contradicted the document by stating that this was **not** a fun company.

Fun is probably what they try to project but not humour. I think we want to tell people that we are a fun organisation but they can't use that word fun because that would be downright lying. We are not really a culture around fun, we don't have a value called fun but I know that HR (Human Resources) is very aware of that. They sort of are trying to bring on people that might create that fun or introduce that fun (Kapack respondent).

I guess (we have) petty fun, I don't know if petty is the right word. It is not en masse and it's not huge laughter. Because of the quiet environment it could be inappropriate if someone just went, 'HA HA HA!' really really loud, or if a bunch of people did something funny (Kapack respondent).

Although most employees appeared to enjoy managerially created fun and humour, some of the Sigma respondents ridiculed organised fun as being contrived. This supports research that suggests that managerially created workplace fun is an 'ambivalent phenomenon' that creates both positive and negative responses from those involved (Warren & Fineman, 2007, p. 93). Several respondents from the three larger companies

asserted that continuous fun, play and joking were not conducive to serious work and perceived a negative effect on their personal performance and even some Adare respondents suggested that there was too much humour in their workplace and that it was distracting. In Warren and Fineman's (2007) research into workplace fun, members of Department X also identified similar difficulties in working in a noisy (fun) office and several of their respondents also took work home to complete in quieter surroundings. This perception of fun as a distraction resulted in a serious outcome at Adare when two of the respondents left the company to work elsewhere in more serious work environments.

Humour occurred throughout all four companies but it was notable that more humour occurred at the two companies where fun was officially sanctioned and stated as a company value. It seemed that official managerial approval resulted in employees feeling permitted to generate their own humour and fun and therefore more humour occurred overall in Adare and Sigma where humour activities were encouraged. In these two companies where fun was stated as a cultural factor people felt freer to laugh and this resulted in more overt sharing of humour. The fun culture espoused and endorsed at Adare and Sigma helped create an environment where humour enactment was acceptable and even encouraged at work.

People still enjoyed daily humour and joking at Kapack and Uvicon but it was noticeable that there was less humour in these companies that did not consider it to be a key cultural element. This could suggest that although humour was an artifact at all four of the companies and was observed and experienced at all four, it had only become a value and therefore integrated into the deeper levels of culture (Schein 1985, 2004) at Adare and Sigma. These two companies recognised and highly valued humour as a cultural element and this appeared to have been adopted by most company members. As highlighted by Schein (1985, 2004) when discussing espoused values as possible aspirations, Kapack obviously *aspired* to be have fun as a key cultural element, as stated in their graduate recruitment booklet, but they had not developed this element into a value that had been successfully experienced and adopted by company members. According to Schein (1985, 2004) when members of a group actually experience an espoused value (such as fun) this reinforces adoption of the value by the group and it may even develop into an embedded

assumption. Similarly company members at Uvicon emphasised that humour was not a key cultural elements at this company (as highlighted by the quote below) but company surveys had indicated that more fun and humour were desired by employees.

There is no real frivolity or funny times here. We have *fun* times, like the ball but really it wasn't really that much fun- it was fun because you all got to dress up and it was a special outing and it was being paid for- but it wasn't *funny* (Uvicon respondent, emphasis added).

All of these companies wanted to be known as fun places even when they didn't actually create fun or foster the conditions for fun to occur. Managers in all four companies perceived that fun was a desirable cultural facet that would appeal to potential recruits and could assist their company to retain valuable staff.

Although there were many impacts from humour enactment in these companies a strong theme emerged from the data highlighting that there were limits to what humour could and could not be enacted in these workplaces. This theme was identified as *boundaries* in the results. This key theme shows how organisational culture influences humour enactment and is discussed next.

6.6 Boundaries

A key theme that emerged from the data analysis was that of *boundaries* in workplace humour. As this theme emerged from the data analysis and had not been anticipated as an element of the study, literature pertaining to organisational boundaries was not reviewed in Chapter Two. Therefore relevant literature was investigated during the latter writing stages once it became apparent that this was an important theme in the results.

There are few examples in the organisational culture literature that exclusively discuss boundaries but Barth (1969) argues that studying boundaries of culture is more useful than investigating the content (cited in Paulsen & Hernes, 2003). Bureaucratic boundaries have declined in modern organisations, however, boundaries are still important, but are less visible and more subtle (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003). Paulsen and Hernes (2003) suggest that boundaries define the external parameters of organisation and their activities, but just as importantly, relate to the 'inner mental structures' (p. 9) of

organisations. Organisational members relate to socially constructed boundaries and perceive them as real and these boundaries determine 'norms of allowable versus deviant behaviours' (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003, p. 9). Martin (2002) views cultural boundaries as: 'moveable, fluctuating, permeable, blurred and dangerous' (p. 315) and claims that that studying boundaries is useful to view cultural theory in a different way. Organisational boundaries are socially constructed and may emerge during the research process as researcher and subjects discuss the significance of particular boundaries. Boundary setting is important as it a key element of organising and enables an organisation to distinguish itself from other organisations (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003).

Linstead (1985) and Davies (1982) both found that humour helps to clarify social and moral boundaries that define acceptable workplace behaviour, although Westwood (2004) highlights that the boundaries between funny and serious are ambiguous in organisations. It became apparent that there were boundaries in respect of what humour was acceptable in each of the studied workplaces. Metaphors such as 'cross the line' were used by respondents to indicate that humour could transgress acceptable workplace boundaries and 'go too far'. Workplace humour was constrained by boundaries of propriety and norms of social behaviour as exemplified by these quotes:

Obviously there are some inappropriate things as well as appropriate things and they are restricting what comes in and there are some things that aren't appropriate that come in but then again they still let us have a little bit of fun (Kapack respondent).

They'll certainly hand out the fun themselves which is kind of nice. But if you think you can do something that's inappropriate that shouldn't happen then they'll 'smack your hand' (Sigma respondent).

Supporting Paulsen and Hernes's (2003) contention that boundaries are socially constructed, respondents at the four studied companies emphasised that boundaries to humour were not officially defined but were assumed and known by socialised company employees. At the three larger companies, boundaries governed themes for humour and the types of humour that were used. Sexual and racial humour was rarely shared openly in these workplaces, although some respondents hinted that such forms of humour were shared covertly among certain groups of colleagues. Humour forms were mainly verbal

and few practical jokes or physical forms of humour were enacted for fear of managerial reprimands or even disapproval from colleagues.

Boundaries may constrain workplace behaviour and have a control function while also enabling energy release and action (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003). The boundary construct implies a social behavioural norm that was apparent in all of the companies. Adare operated more informally than the other companies and humour boundaries here were wider and more flexible. In this smaller, less formal company there were fewer boundaries to acceptable humour and only here was humour contentious and potentially offensive in an overt way. The example of the *punch her in the face* poster (see Chapter Four) demonstrates the difference in boundaries between Adare and the other three organisations. This poster would have been totally unacceptable in any of the other companies and would not have been displayed. The formal nature of the larger companies resulted in narrower boundaries and would not have permitted this humour display. The poster appeared to be a physical manifestation of the competitive masculine culture at Adare which resulted in different boundaries to humour activities. It also appeared to be an act of bravado reinforcing Adare's reputation as being outrageous and contentious in their industry. 'The boundary describes the outer limit of what one sees as allowable, understandable or feasible' (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003, p. 303).

The careful and comparatively constrained humour behaviour at the three larger companies suggested that boundaries were understood and observed most of the time by most of the employees. Although none of the companies had official written rules for humour behaviour, boundaries were developed that reflected the overall company culture and levels of formality. In his engineering research, Kunda (1992) suggests that in strong organisational cultures 'normative control' guides social behaviour. Paulsen and Hernes (2003) agree and add that boundary creation is an important factor in determining behavioural norms and upholding social power. The unofficial humour boundaries were known by all (socialised) employees and exemplify Schein's (1985/2004) deepest level of culture (assumptions) that reflects the unconscious beliefs and may govern organisational actions such as reprimanding those that transgress the limits. The boundaries that influenced humour enactment could be considered a cultural assumption adopted by

organisational members. Such deepest-level assumptions are not stated or prescribed by management yet are known and understood by those that are integrated into the organisation and must be gradually absorbed by new organisational members.

Schein (2004) asserts that in order to effectively research organisational culture the researcher needs to experience culture at the level of values and assumptions. He states that it is dangerous when researching culture to infer deeper assumptions from just artifacts as interpretations may project the feelings and reactions of the researcher. This was apparent during the research particularly in regards to artifacts encountered at Adare. From observation of the *Punch her in the face* poster at Adare my personal reaction was initially one of horror and shock. This personal reaction to the artifact could have led to inferences about the Adare culture and may have resulted in analysis that portrayed this company as overly aggressive, and hostile towards women. However spending time within the culture and gaining some understanding some of their underlying assumptions revealed that staff shared the assumption that this poster was a joke and it appeared that no-one in the company was offended by it. I questioned most staff about the poster and from all that I questioned, including the female staff, I received the same blasé reaction that the poster was 'just a joke'. The acceptance of such a contentious and offensive artifact seemed to be part of a basic shared assumption that at this company this poster was a form of joking that was acceptable in their specific culture.

The managing director claimed that the poster had been emailed to him and he had printed it off and displayed it. He knew that such a violent sentiment was objectionable but stated that at Adare the more outrageous and offensive the humour the 'more kudos' to the individual that found and shared such humour. He suggested that this was part of the competitive humour culture and a rebellion against 'politically correct' (PC) work environments. He strongly asserted that staff members did not advocate violence towards women and that the assumption that this poster was a rebellious and outrageous joke was shared by all staff. This interpretation is congruent with other humour behaviour in this company and raises questions about how such behaviour becomes normalised and how such shared assumptions are created. Schein (2004) suggests that deeper level assumptions are created from shared values and this could suggest that at Adare the value

placed upon outrageous and free humour expression was more highly prized than normal societal values such as not condoning violence towards women.

A final point for consideration regarding this poster is that if it was endorsed and displayed by the managing director then staff may have felt that they had to share his assumption that this was merely a joke. Therefore power and control effects may also be contributing to this assumption of 'harmless humour'. The managing director may have been exercising a form of power that Galbraith (1984) calls *condign power* which has elements of punishment in the term. His employees may have felt compelled to accept this example of 'humour' or risk worse repercussions by being ridiculed by him or even disadvantaged in their working activities. The managing director when asked about staff reactions to the extreme and continuous humour declared 'if don't like it they can leave' and this declaration appears to support an interpretation of condign power as the implied threat of termination (or punishment) was potentially a worse alternative for employees than enduring offensive humorous activities and displays.

It appeared that in all four of these companies there was a shared understanding of which types of humour were acceptable and which were not in each of the companies. Repeated references to the concept of boundaries and the shared understanding of humour that was appropriate in each company seemed to offer an example of what Schein (1985, 2004) defined as an assumption in his levels of culture model. The poster example at Adare demonstrated that the acceptance of this as a joke was so taken for granted that the Adare group had an assumption that others would also treat it as the joke that they intended it to be.

Cultural boundaries are permeable and can be consciously renegotiated and become blurred (Martin, Frost, & O'Neill, 2006). Boundaries in organisational culture are also fluid and moveable, particularly when an off-site event occurs and involves drinking alcohol. The Adare car park races using the office chairs was unlikely to have occurred during the regular working day but exemplified boundary fluidity in an after-work event fuelled by alcohol. Fleming (2005) suggests that boundaries between work and non-work are manipulated in order to create fun cultures and therefore managers strive to create

events that are pleasurable and similar to non-work events in order to enhance motivation and innovation. In encouraging staff to play computer games on Friday afternoons, Adare's managing director appeared to exemplify this fluid work/non-work boundary. Friday games may have been a way for employees to disassociate from work activities and re-enter their non-work environment at the start of the weekend leaving them with feeling of workplace fun to end their working week.

Each of the companies claimed to have a fun culture and all promoted activities at work for the purpose of having fun and for employee enjoyment. Such activities included parties, drinks occasions, games, dressing up and even playing with toys. In contemporary organisations, play and toys are becoming common and are not seen as a disruption to work activities. Modern managers are creating new mixtures of play and work and traditional boundaries are being destroyed (Costea, Crump, & Holm, 2005, p. 140). Workplace play and fun are becoming widespread and are used to renegotiate boundaries (Costea et al., 2005). 'Management itself has entered into a kind of Dionysian mode, a spirit of playful transgression and destruction of boundaries' (Costea et al., 2005, p. 141).

Kahn (1989) claims that when work groups share humour they construct boundaries and establish norms and this unifies their group culture. Humour sustains this culture as do legends, rituals and stories. This respondent outlines her perception of humour and boundaries:

I think the humour opens boundaries, not so much boundaries, it opens the ability to be able to just chat about things and get stuff off your chest and to sound people out, and alert people to issues... so the fact that we can joke with each other and build a relationship with people that I work with, I find it kind of means that you don't have that sort of formal boundary and you are able to push them a bit better than you normally could (Uvicon respondent).

The *Secret Santa* incident exemplifies a fun-related ritual that was managerially approved and supported and stayed within appropriate company boundaries. The department members enjoyed this event and it has been integrated into the company culture to be repeated in future years. The gifts exchanged between employees were carefully chosen and within appropriate styles and themes. However, the red lacy underwear that was

given to one team member appeared to be a humorous gift and it transgressed the accepted boundaries of this fun activity. Although some humour was shared when this gift was opened it was obvious that this gift transgressed the assumed boundaries and this caused some embarrassment to the recipient and to other disapproving staff. In contrast, the incident at Adare where alcohol was imbibed at 10 am in a ritual ceremony that organisational members were coerced into enacting shows that boundaries in this company were very different from those in the three more formal organisations. This ritual was also considered by Adare staff to be a fun and funny socialisation activity.

Supporting the earlier contention that professionalism was the most important cultural factor in these companies, interviewees emphasised that professionalism must be maintained even when having fun at work and the following quotes support this point:

On the first day I came in they were all about having fun but they really do define some things such as what clothes you can wear. They do encourage the whole fun thing but there is a definite line there and as much as we do joke about it is still very professional (Sigma respondent).

We need to have young people and we need to have fun, but I still worry a little bit when they get a little bit too loud and laughing too much that it is not quite professional and it might look like perhaps that they are not doing much to other people that is just in our area (Kapack team leader).

Interviewees asserted that there were appropriate limits and constraints on fun and humour and although both were enjoyed by most people there were situations where humour challenged boundaries, 'crossed the line' and went too far. It became apparent that humour boundaries were maintained and upheld by some key individuals who took responsibility for ensuring that lines were not crossed. Simultaneously, specific individuals challenged the dynamic boundaries and sometimes succeeded in reformulating the boundary positions. The term *gatekeeper* was utilised to describe these humour guardians while the descriptor *joker* was assigned to the boundary challengers and humour instigators.

6.6.1 Dichotomous roles: gatekeepers versus jokers.

The term *gatekeeper* originated with Lewin (1947) to describe persons that facilitate or impede the flow of information between people in groups or across organisations (Burke,

2005). Although gatekeeping has been defined as a role that involves bringing organisational and non-organisational members together, the gatekeeper role also highlights an organisation's boundaries and clarifies informal communication networks and structures (Morrill, Buller, Buller, & Larkey, 1999). As discussed earlier, the relationship between humour and organisational culture was important in setting boundaries in the four studied companies. The boundaries were dynamic and different humorous and cultural events impacted upon them. When boundaries appeared to have been transgressed or where a transgression appeared imminent, the gatekeeper would step in and inform the transgressors that they had 'gone too far' or would take some other form of action that would express disapproval. For example, at Kapack when the PC eradicator email had been publicised, the CEO of the organisation sent out a company-wide email resetting the boundaries and emphasising that humour could be risky particularly when contained in email. In this communication he had assumed the role of organisational gatekeeper and redrawn the boundaries for workplace humour, firmly reinforcing his expectation that staff would confine their future humour to less contentious forms. He also highlighted the perceived negative impact on the company's reputation.

When answering a question about her workplace humour, the following respondent highlights the boundary construct discussed previously as well as indicating the managerial role enforcing the boundary:

I think there is a line fully, and as much as it (humour) is encouraged and again just based on our team and our management. Our managers they have fun with us, its great for the team, we all have a laugh and a joke, but I think everyone knows where the line is... You know where the line is with management because there is a line and you can't go over it. When you've gone beyond the line and are spoken to I think that is when you really know you've crossed the line where you shouldn't go (Sigma respondent).

The gatekeeper role was not always assumed by managerial staff. At Kapack several respondents emphasised that they had assumed the role of gatekeeper and had chastised younger colleagues about forms of humour that they considered inappropriate. The Kapack gatekeepers were mainly older women who had long tenure at the company and felt that it was their responsibility to communicate their perceived company standards to

younger staff members. Examples in Chapter Four illustrate this when one gatekeeper tells her colleagues to keep the humour clean and another narrates her concerns that humour may get too loud and therefore be unacceptable.

There were more individuals that assumed the gatekeeper role at Kapack than at the other companies. This suggests a link between this boundary-setting function and the industry in which the company operates. Kapack was a law firm and people here were more serious and less frivolous in their workplace behaviour. Respondents at Kapack emphasised that this was a more relaxed law firm than others that they had belonged to. They suggested that although there was more humour and fun at Kapack than in other law firms, the law was a very serious business and therefore more individuals assumed the role of keeping humour and fun under control.

There was a departmental influence on the gatekeeper role and this role was also more evident in different departments. At the three larger companies, people from the Human Resources (HR) departments appeared more likely to assume this role. Three of the senior HR managers discussed situations where they had reprimanded employees for inappropriate humour behaviour. These HR managers suggested guiding informal behaviour as a component of their role. At the companies where there were more gatekeepers there were fewer and milder humour incidents and fewer jokers. Less humour incidents were recorded in HR departments than in other departments within the larger companies and this may have been due to HR employees assuming the role of gatekeeper and maintaining this role inside their own department.

Paulsen and Hernes (2003) suggest that reinforcing and resetting the boundaries is a way of upholding social power. Gatekeepers achieved status in this role through knowing and imposing organisational normative control. They were usually individuals that had longevity in the organisation and were keen to let newer and younger people know the social protocols and norms at the company.

At Kapack, several of the gatekeepers were older women who had been at the company for a long time and wanted to preserve the mystique of being at a law firm. They were

not lawyers themselves therefore could not achieve partner status, so gained and negotiated their personal status by regulating humour and joking.

At Adare the two female administration managers had assumed a gatekeeping role and firmly informed their younger male counterparts that if they were hit by flying missiles during horseplay activities then the young men would have to buy them a bottle of wine as compensation. They simultaneously designated their humour boundaries and highlighted their social power over the younger men in the company.

An older female manager at Uvicon described how a few younger staff members had been reprimanded for humour that transgressed the boundaries. At Sigma there were more official stated rules and policies than the other companies and therefore there seemed to be less need for anyone to step up and assume the gatekeeper's role as boundaries had been defined by management in the form of strict rules and regulations. People at Sigma regulated much of their own humour behaviour in accordance with these rules and their everyday behaviour reflected the formal environment in which they worked. However, on occasions senior staff members (such as the HR team) were observed adopting the gatekeeper's role. For example, when one Sigma employee used loud profanity (in a jocular manner) her manager used a semi-joking remark and reminded her that she had crossed the line and thus he acted as gatekeeper and reinforced the acceptable humour boundaries within this workplace.

In contrast to the gatekeeping function, the individuals who assumed the role of the joker enacted humour that frequently challenged the normative boundaries. Jokers achieved status through their humour abilities and were socially popular individuals in all of the companies. Only at Adare was the joker a managing director but at Kapack the three key jokers were all senior-level lawyers with partner status. At Sigma the key jokers were lower-level employees and at Uvicon they were mid-level employees. Therefore research (Plester & Orams, 2007) that suggests jokers come from the ranks of lower-level employees may need re-examining.

In this project, joker roles were assumed by individuals at all levels of the company and may have been more dependent on comedic skills and personality than on hierarchical

position. It was significant that the CEO at Kapack admitted that he used to send jokes in emails but feedback from some staff (the gatekeepers) suggested that they felt that joking was inappropriate from the CEO and he modified his earlier joking behaviour.

As found in earlier research (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995; Holmes & Marra, 2002a) the jokers created and instigated more humour than other organisational members and the role was assumed by those who were skilled at using humour and had comedic talents. In order to assume this role, they had to be funny and considered funny by their colleagues. In each organisation respondents were able to identify those that had assumed this role and most considered these individuals to be funny. The jokers themselves knew that they had this role and recognised their colleagues' appreciation of their skills. Such individuals enjoyed the extra social status that their joker position brought them. Colleagues enjoyed working with jokers and they were popular and admired in their companies. As also found by Fine and De Soucey (2005) the jokers' humour skills allowed these individuals to transgress the boundaries more often and more outrageously than their colleagues and they were allowed to get away with more risky humour than others.

The two dichotomous roles of joker and gatekeeper enhanced each other but in the three larger organisational settings the gatekeeping role appeared to be more dominant. This could be attributed to the higher formality levels in the larger companies that determined the boundaries for acceptable humour. Where the boundaries were narrower and humour was more constrained, it was constrained by those in the gatekeeper role. Humour created by the jokers was also monitored and controlled by the gatekeepers. Although jokers transgressed and occasionally challenged the acceptable boundaries, their success was often short term and therefore it seemed that the gatekeeper was the stronger position and had more success in the more formal organisations.

Status levels also appeared to influence the joker and gatekeeper roles. At the informal company, Adare, where the joker role was played by the (high-status) managing director, boundaries for humour were extremely loose and the joker role assumed dominance over the mild efforts of the gatekeepers who were low-level administrators. In his role as the

joker, the managing director indicated that there were few humour boundaries and exemplified this in his own humour activities. The gatekeepers inside the more formal companies that succeeded in constraining much of the humour were found in higher-status positions (such as those of managers). If they were not in high-status positions gatekeepers were often those that had long tenure in the company or achieved seniority through their age or their company knowledge. These non-managerial gatekeepers had sufficient status to control and limit overt humour behaviour.

The gatekeeper that chastised her colleagues for risqué emails succeeded in keeping this type of humour from being overtly shared in her workplace but may actually only have succeeded in driving it underground to be shared covertly among like-minded people. This is a speculative suggestion and further research is needed to explore whether forbidden or inappropriate humour disappears after such disapproval or whether it continues in secretive situations. Further research may also consider factors such as personality traits or psychological influences that lead people to adopt roles such as those of the joker or the gatekeeper.

6.7 Manifestations

Physical manifestations of culture and humour found in the data collection contribute to the overall thesis. This section discusses the actual physical artifacts displayed inside these companies and then discusses what these displays mean for the participants in the organisations. Parker (2007) suggests that the meaning ascribed to workplace artifacts comes from the objects themselves as well as from the way in which people interpret their meaning.

Documents and displayed items that were collected or viewed during the research offered physical forms of data for analysis and reflected company standards and norms in respect of behaviour. The graduate booklet used at Kapack highlighted the fun culture they espoused, advertised and offered as an enticement to new graduates. This highlights the cultural gap that can occur between espoused culture (Schein, 2004) and the ‘actual’ culture perceived by employees. Respondents at Kapack firmly clarified that although

management liked to emphasise a fun culture, in reality there was too much pressure and too much serious work for Kapack to be truly considered a fun workplace.

The many documents gathered at Sigma emphasised their commitment to creating a fun culture and exemplified their managerial endorsement of fun as a value to the extent that it was assessed in each employee. In contrast to respondents from Kapack, Sigma respondents agreed that the written managerial commitment to fun was supported in their actual actions and appropriately mild fun activities were regularly organised. Although the most formal company on the continuum, Sigma maintained a fun culture although it was restrained, careful and kept firmly within the accepted boundaries. Uvicon documents claimed that employees had fun at work but a company survey also emphasised that employees would like more fun in this workplace.

The documents also contributed to the research by reinforcing the boundary role in the humour/culture relationship. At Adare where there were different behavioural boundaries in humour use, posters and jokes displayed on the walls were different to those displayed in the other companies and portrayed their looser boundaries for humour. The 'pithy' sayings poster displayed at Adare (see Chapter Five) contained profanity and aggressive remarks that would have been unacceptable at any of the other three companies.

Email examples were also physical manifestations of humour and culture inside these companies. The email data supports the thesis that the relationship between humour and organisational culture involves setting boundaries for workplace humour. The examples of email collected from Adare are extremely profane, risqué and contain sexual, racial and sexist themes (see Appendix E for examples). The emails collected from Adare would not have been considered acceptable for circulation at any of the other companies and would have crossed their boundaries for appropriate workplace humour. It is possible that similar types of emails were shared discreetly among certain groups of people at the other companies but they were not overtly viewed, enjoyed and circulated as they were at Adare. Kapack's IT department was instructed to filter out any video emails to avoid potentially offensive material. Uvicon clearly defined in their company manual the types of email material that was considered offensive and specifically

mentions 'dirty jokes' suggesting that avoiding sexual harassment legislation was important to management here. The significant differences between emails from the Adare company and those collected from the other three once again highlighted the different relationship between culture, humour and acceptable boundaries here and the more constrained and cautious humour styles at the other three organisations.

6.8 Linking humour and culture to outcomes

One purpose of the research design was to investigate the impact of humour and culture on three organisational outcomes. The three that were considered were recruitment, satisfaction and performance. The data suggested that humour and culture influenced each of these impacts for most organisational members. A fourth outcome was also emphasised by some interview respondents and this was retention.

Retention is a key issue for many companies and is concerned with the reasons why people stay with a company or leave their jobs (Mathis & Jackson, 2007). There are many characteristics that influence retention decisions but one key factor that encourages employees to stay is having a positive, distinctive organisational culture (Mathis & Jackson, 2007). Although Mathis and Jackson do not list humour as a driver of workplace retention, like many other researchers they cite the example of Southwest Airlines as a company that has improved their retention rates through cultivating a positive culture that encourages fun and humour at work. Santovec (2001) claims that workplace culture is a key reason why people stay at a company or why they leave a job. Branham (2005) cites the example of J.M. Smucker, an Ohio company that was number one on *Fortune's* list of best companies to work for. Smuckers have a simple code of conduct containing three key values and the second of these is that employees should have a sense of humour.

Although recent research found that humour does not affect performance on specific goals it can radically improve performance on vague non-specific goals and may be an effective managerial tool in some contexts (Roach, Troboy, & Cochran, 2006). Using humour at work may create a positive atmosphere in a work unit which appears to stimulate higher productivity. Humour may have both direct and indirect effects on

performance as it enhances mood and motivational states of workers. Leaders that use humour create positive relationships with certain types of subordinate, which enhances performance (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999).

Approximately half the respondents in this study claimed that humour at work improved their personal performance. Several related humour use to improving their mood, which they claimed raised their performance to a higher level and in particular when working with clients, customers or colleagues. The following respondent emphasises this effect:

Yes humour will definitely improve it (performance). The day that you have a lot of laughs, that day I feel good, great and I have achieved that, confirmed policies, put through leads that I wouldn't normally do and you feel great about yourself. It's like a cup of coffee, it energises you. We use a lot of humour with the clients and they laugh, and sometimes they are hungry for that little bit of humour, you can sense that especially our older clients. You took the time to crack a joke in a professional way, the joke ends and then you get on with the query and then they think oh great she shared a joke with me today, somebody made my day (Sigma respondent).

Using humour in these workplaces seemed to create some positive impacts and it improved worker satisfaction which resulted in more positive moods and positive perceptions of colleagues. Shared humour encouraged co-operation among workers which enhanced their perception of their personal performance. However, those that perceived humour to have negative impacts upon performance, were respondents who considered humour to be distracting and too noisy which they claimed made their job difficult. Although this group were in the minority they highlighted an important issue with workplace humour – that of balance and appropriateness. These respondents were not totally against the use of humour at work, just mindful of the fact that when there was too much and it was inappropriate or too loud, it impaired their performance. This need for balance is exemplified by the following respondent:

It definitely affects your performance; it's about having the balance between the professionalism and the humour. If the humour wasn't around it wouldn't make it as enjoyable coming to the office, in my point of view (Sigma respondent).

The majority of respondents associated humour use with positive satisfaction levels. Greenberg (2005) offers an explanation for humour's impact on job satisfaction,

suggesting that enjoying humour creates positive moods and results in employees reporting higher levels of satisfaction. Several of the respondents supported Greenberg's explanation and claimed that workplace humour improved their mood, which gave them greater job satisfaction and led to better performance, particularly on tasks such as interacting with customers and colleagues. The following respondent supports this position:

Sometimes if you come in and you're in a really bad state of mind but if you kind of have a talk with someone and have a laugh about something it always puts you into a better mood and when I'm grumpy or down I definitely wouldn't do as good a job (Uvicon respondent).

The respondents who suggested that humour decreased their satisfaction at work perceived humour as an unnecessary intrusion and considered it a distraction from their serious work tasks. Some of the respondents who felt that humour made them dissatisfied at work came from Adare where there was a very great amount of humour. This dissatisfaction with humour overuse had a direct impact on employee retention at Adare. Two of the dissatisfied employees concerned about the 'unprofessional' culture and humour overuse left the company for positions elsewhere. Adare respondents suggested that these dissatisfied employees left the company due to poor fit with the company culture and its emphasis on humour. Research has shown that a person's fit with their organisation has a strong effect on their tenure and value congruence is a component of fit (Judge & Bretz 1992; Kristof, 1996). At Adare careful recruitment was essential as the unique humour-based culture would not suit all potential applicants. These quotes from Adare respondents highlight the recruitment imperatives in order to retain employees at this unusual company:

It's very important that people fit in. They need to fit in because you won't be lasting very long if you didn't like humour. You need someone to enjoy the culture, the tricks, the jokes and all that. It's useless getting rid of non-fits (Adare respondent).

Someone who can't handle the culture or take the jokes is never going to really loosen up and become part of the team, and the team is a very important part of the job, being able to work with other people, etc. There are a couple of people I thought were very hard to break them in, they did eventually fit in but it took

them a little while to loosen up. The culture can be a little overwhelming for new people (Adare respondent).

Respondents from all of the companies suggested that ‘fitting the culture’ was an important factor of recruitment and ultimately contributed to employee retention. Interview respondents claimed that staying with the company was related to their personal happiness in their cultural environment. For most, a key factor of the cultural environment was the ability to enjoy humour and fun activities. Although having humour and fun at work was not a key priority for all interviewees, most desired an environment that allowed for humour that occurred at appropriate times and within the appropriate boundaries for their workplace culture.

Although a sense of humour was not an asset actively sought in their recruitment process, some of the managers interviewed felt that it was a desirable personality trait. A sense of humour would be a desirable asset if an applicant also had the required job skills.

If we found somebody with the same skills and same experience, I think the person with the sense of humour would have got the job over somebody else who didn’t. It’s probably in an unwritten fashion but it would be a deciding factor (Sigma respondent).

Once again this impact was more obvious at Adare where in recognising their extreme humour culture, managers here suggested that being able to handle the humour and contribute to it was an important asset. At Adare fitting the culture was one of the most important assets for new recruits and this was recognised by employees at all levels of the company and is summed up thus:

Someone will have to be able to take jokes. That would be quite important, if they can’t then they won’t enjoy it and we won’t like working with them, because this is a fun kind of place (Adare respondent).

It is acknowledged that no numerical data was collected regarding retention rates, performance indicators or levels of satisfaction at the four companies. Therefore these suppositions and stated implications reflect employee *perceptions* of the impact of the humour and culture relationship upon these workplace outcomes. These perceptions reflect the very real situations for these employees in these companies at the time of investigation. Future research may strengthen such findings and determine if the

perceived outcomes articulated by these responses are also felt by other respondents in different organisations and industry situations.

6.9 Summary

This chapter has presented a discussion of the key findings from the studied data. The humour and organisational culture model depicts the influence of organisational culture on humour and shows that company informality or formality levels influence the types of humour enacted in these companies. The formality levels within the prevailing culture in the organisations assisted in the creation of boundaries regarding appropriate humour and fun within these companies. It was suggested that formality or informality levels within these companies influenced the humour boundaries and that in the more formal companies the boundaries for humour enactment were narrower and more constrained while at the informal company, boundaries were less constrained and wider. The boundaries were dynamic and different organisational members assumed key roles. Gatekeepers attempted to keep humour within the constructed boundaries while jokers created humour and sometimes pushed the boundaries into new positions.

Employees of these companies primarily defined their organisational culture in relation to what they did and how well they did it (professionalism). Factors such as industry demands and expectations as well as company size had an impact upon company culture and it was found that no company had an entirely unanimous overarching culture but that each company hosted sets of subcultures within the dominant culture. In the one company that differed most from the other three (Adare), a strong gendered influence was discovered and issues of masculinity and women's coping strategies within masculine cultures were discussed.

Humour boundaries were apparent in these companies. The boundaries were influenced by the formality levels in each company and by the prevailing organisational culture. Boundaries were rarely formally stipulated but were assumed and known by employees. The roles assumed by key individuals were emphasised in this section. These

dichotomous roles involved either keeping humour within the boundaries (the gatekeepers) or being a humour instigator and joker and pushing the boundaries from time to time.

Physical manifestations of the humour/culture relationship were discussed and some significant differences between displayed materials at Adare and displays at the three larger companies reflected the different workplace boundaries in these companies.

This chapter concluded by discussing perceptions of outcomes related to the humour/culture relationship. The outcomes discussed were performance, satisfaction and recruitment as planned in the research design but also included perceptions of retention that emerged for respondents in their interviews.

The next chapter concludes the thesis with an overview of the findings and the potential implications for theory and practice as well as the contribution that this research makes to organisational culture and humour research. It highlights the limitations of the study and finishes with suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER SEVEN: APPLAUSE AND LAUGHTER



7.1 Recap of the *Laugh out loud* study

This exploratory research project was concerned with one overriding research question: *How does organisational culture influence the enactment of workplace humour?* Four companies were studied using three different methods and through adopting an interpretive research perspective. This interpretive perspective attempted to answer the research question by interpreting organisational members' responses and actions regarding what organisational culture and humour meant within these organisations. An assessment was also made regarding the formality or informality of each organisation in order to understand the way in which each company was organised in respect of six key strands. Four different data collection methods were used to provide rich, contextual and relevant information with which to formulate the findings. Data were analysed using context analysis and text was coded and recoded and finally organised into a thematic structure comprising the seven significant themes: humour/culture relationship; humour; who are we; boundaries; formality/informality; manifestations and outcomes.

Results were presented in two separate chapters. The first of these (Chapter Four) presented each company in a narrative form that provided the specific context that underpinned the collated findings presented in Chapter Five. The collated data were presented within seven themes in Chapter Five and discussed using the same thematic structure in Chapter Six.

7.2 Key findings

The research question was fully explored and addressed in the discussion. The findings suggested that one of the key influences of organisational culture upon humour enactment was in the creation and setting of acceptable boundaries for humour and fun activities. The organisational formality level was considered to be an important cultural factor that influenced boundaries that were created for humour enactment. These boundaries determined the types and forms of humour that were considered acceptable inside these companies. The boundaries were dynamic and particular organisational members assumed significant and dichotomous roles in boundary creation and maintenance. These people were identified as either jokers or gatekeepers. The jokers pushed or extended the boundaries in some situations while the gatekeepers strove to contain and limit them and discouraged colleagues from transgressing the metaphorical boundaries. Specific organisational participants negotiated and assumed these joker or gatekeeper roles. A model was created (Figure 6.1: The humour and organisational culture model) and depicts the influence of levels of formality within the organisational culture on humour enactment in the four companies.

All four companies claimed to have *fun* cultures but using humour at work was also risky and potentially problematic. Warren and Fineman's (2007) chapter describing the fun culture in Department X, discusses the concept of managed fun and the authors also argue that managed fun may not be *funny*. They propose that *real* fun may be different from manufactured fun and that fun organised by managers may be mocked and ridiculed, creating humour for employees. There may be some subtle and intriguing differences between humour and fun which may lead to further research. Warren and Fineman (2007) also contend that this is an area that requires further research.

The main findings in this thesis suggest that organisational cultures have a variety of elements and that key cultural elements such as degrees of formality and/or informality influence workplace humour enactment. The four studied organisations had levels of formality and/or informality based on the six strands used in the organisational continuum: hierarchy, continuity, impersonality, expertise, environment and structure.

Organisational culture and the company's informality/formality levels constrained and/or enabled workplace humour by determining boundaries for the humour and fun activities. Humour occurred both within and outside these assumed boundaries. Some fun and humour was created and endorsed by managers but not all employees enjoyed these manufactured activities. In the three more formal companies the boundaries were narrower and more rigorously enforced whereas in the one small informal company, boundaries were much looser and therefore humour was unconstrained and even outrageous. The humour that occurred within the informal company would not have been tolerated in the three larger companies with their higher formality levels.

The boundaries were dynamic and flexible and key individuals assumed dichotomous roles in respect of humour and fun at work. Jokers created and instigated more of the humour and fun and on some occasions pushed the boundaries. Gatekeepers monitored and constrained humour and fun and tried to keep it within the boundaries. These roles (gatekeeper and joker) were assumed and negotiated inside the organisation and, in some cases, also in the wider industry environment.

The final objective of the project was to link the organisational humour and culture to actual organisational outcomes. Links were identified between humour and organisational culture and their perceived influence on retention, recruitment, performance and job satisfaction. Respondents perceived that humour improved their mood at work which resulted in improved satisfaction and performance, particularly when communicating with clients or colleagues. Although positive impacts of humour were emphasised, many respondents highlighted negative performance impacts created by too much humour that distracted from task focus.

Humour and organisational culture were features that encouraged some respondents to join and remain with their company but also contributed to others' decisions to leave their company. Most people at these companies sought a workplace environment that encouraged appropriate humour within their workplace culture. Those who felt that they had found the right balance with regards to humour and organisational culture claimed that they would remain in their organisation while they were happy with the environment.

7.3 Contribution

This thesis contributes new insights into the influence of organisational culture on workplace humour. The relationship between these two important workplace phenomena is not thoroughly researched. The humour and organisational culture model (Figure 6.1) showing important facets of organisational culture's influence on humour enactment offers a new contribution to the field and may provide opportunities for future research and development.

The existing literature emphasised that organisational humour was an 'impoverished' area of research although there was growing interest in this research topic (Johnston et al. 2007; Westwood & Rhodes, 2007). In discussing how formality within organisational culture influences humour boundaries, this thesis contributes to the growing body of workplace humour knowledge. It also makes a significant contribution to the field of organisational studies that has not fully considered workplace humour as an important organisational concept.

The thesis suggested that boundary-setting was an important factor of the humour/culture relationship. This finding adds to current literature on organisational boundaries which has very little discussion of humour boundaries. Identifying roles adopted for constraining and/or enabling humour within organisations contributes to the small field of current research on organisational jokers (Westwood, 2004; Kets de Vries, 1990; Plester & Orams, 2007). The identification of the dichotomous roles of joker and humour gatekeeper is a new and original contribution in this area.

There is growing interest in the notion of workplace humour and fun cultures. This thesis contributes to this emergent stream of research and findings in this research support assertions that fun cultures are not universally desired and that managed fun may have some negative impacts (Fleming 2005; Warren & Fineman, 2007). There may be the potential for future research into similarities and differences between workplace humour and fun.

Some exploratory findings regarding links between workplace humour and organisational outcomes contribute to the debate regarding humour and performance and may add some real-world insights into this much debated organisational conundrum. There are also implications for recruitment and retention that may be useful to both managers and future researchers.

This research also had some practical value as each participating organisation received a report discussing their organisational culture, humour styles and the possible impacts of these. The reports were received positively by each organisation and operated as catalysts for further discussion and development. In one case, the report actually resulted in Kapack developing some new company fun initiatives and activities. Therefore this research also made a small contribution to ongoing management issues in these workplaces and may offer a basis for further initiatives that improve workplace life.

Organisational researchers have claimed that organisational research should take place in real-world contexts (Allen et al., 2004) and use methods that appreciate the complexity inherent in constructs such as organisational culture and humour. Research specialists suggest that adopting and using mixed methods in organisational research advances the field of organisational studies (Bryman, 2006; Smith, Schneider & Dickson, 2006). The *Laugh out loud* project used a suite of mixed methods and thus makes a contribution towards using a real-world mixed model study in organisational research. This research design exemplified a *mixed-method study* (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2006) and resulted in a broad, complex and rich organisational study that simultaneously considered both the contextual and the individual factors within the studied organisations. This offers a contribution to research practice and may encourage other organisational researchers to consider mixed-method approaches to complex research problems (Bryman, 2006).

Finally it has always been my hope that exploring important factors (such as humour and social interaction) inside workplaces may result in deeper understanding that might eventually help the real people that work, play, live and laugh in their organisations.

7.4 Limitations

Although this thesis contributes to both academic knowledge and management practice, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. One month was spent at each company and a longer time frame may have produced further insights and understanding. The number of organisations studied was limited by the temporal and practical project boundaries and included four companies. The four companies were all operating in a corporate white-collar environment and therefore different effects may have been discovered in manufacturing or blue-collar industries.

Studying four companies resulted in research that was broad in its scope; this is in contrast to the depth that might have been achieved by a longitudinal study of just one company. This could be considered a limitation but it is a factor that was also carefully evaluated in the research design. Research objectives were to compare a range of companies and analyse similarities and differences in order to establish common threads in the humour and culture relationship. A key objective of the research was to compare different types of company using the organisational formality/ informality continuum in order to combine findings from several companies that offered insights into the humour and organisational culture on a wider scale. It was anticipated that the assessment tool (the organisational formality/ informality continuum) may be used again in further research and that this study may be able to be replicated and extended in the future.

All of the research was conducted by me (the sole researcher) and therefore my personal demographic characteristics had an impact upon results. Characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, education and age affect access to information as well as interpretation of data. Being a female researcher may have limited my access to certain varieties of male humour. Being a pakeha (white) woman may have limited my understanding and access to humour and social interaction among those from other ethnic backgrounds. Being well-educated affects the way I talk, think and behave and this may have impacted upon conversational settings such as the interview situations. Although I could not change any of these factors I did recognise their potential impact and attempted to be as similar as possible to those in the research environment. I dressed in styles similar to others,

behaved as they did and slightly modified my language and personal style in an attempt to 'fit in'. For example, although I am naturally ebullient, colourful and even a bit noisy, in the quieter corporate environments such as at the law firm (Kapack) I was soberly dressed, quiet and serious like those around me.

All of the demographic factors that make up the person that I am also affect the researcher that I am and influence the way in which I see the world and how I interpret what I see. These influences affect all research and all researchers, and every attempt was made in the research process to recognise these factors and be reflexive about them. During data collection I offset these influences by taking careful and meticulous notes, collecting genuine company documents, using verbatim quotes from participants, and quietly recording humour and cultural life as it occurred around me. During analysis I recognised and presented my world view and research position to locate and contextualize my interpretations of the data.

Being present in my own research may have influenced some results as I became another person in the organisation's social interaction and had to respond to people and events around me. However, once again recognition of this facet meant that wherever possible, I remained quiet and unobtrusive in the hope that normal everyday behaviour would occur.

There is also the potential for respondents to *perform* when they know that they are being observed. This factor was recognised and observation notes showed that for the first two to three days there were some performance elements as participants showed off their jokes and humour styles. Fortunately, this effect noticeably subsided after a few days and the demands of work required participants to continue their normal behaviour in order to fulfil their responsibilities. Being busy usually meant that participants forgot my presence and resumed normal behaviour. When I suspected that events or incidents may have been enacted to perform for the research project, I quietly questioned others as to the past occurrence of such incidents and was usually reassured that an incident was typical and therefore not falsely created to enhance the research. An example of this was the fart machine at Adare which was produced on the first day of research. When I asked about its use, I was assured that it was always used when new people joined the

organisation and therefore it seemed that I was observing typical humour behaviour at this company. I did subsequently observe the fart jokes played upon an unsuspecting new recruit.

A limitation was identified from the results that linked humour and culture to actual organisational outcomes. The research into this facet was exploratory and although findings suggested that there were both positive and negative effects of humour use on outcomes such as retention, recruitment, performance and satisfaction, further research is needed to strengthen these findings and explore them in greater depth. The findings presented represented respondents' perceptions of the link between workplace culture and humour and the studied outcomes. Although these findings were valid and authentic perceptions at the personal level, these links were not further explored in respect of company statistics or collated, formal measures of these outcomes. This offers a potential area for future research discussed next.

7.5 Future research

Further research could include investigating the perceived links between humour and organisational outcomes. Such research may utilise measures of these outcomes such as the JSS or MSQ job satisfaction scales (Spector, 1997; Weiss et al., 1967) or company statistics regarding overall performance, retention and recruitment statistics. Such measures may complement and extend this current research that investigates respondents' personal perceptions of these workplace outcomes.

Gender emerged as an important influence upon humour and cultural behaviour and future research may enhance current research in this area. Gendered cultures are a much debated organisational topic and cultural research that focuses on humour, gender and culture may offer further insights in this field.

Although this research did not specifically investigate leadership and the many associated theories, leadership facets offered some interesting possibilities. For example, the joker at Adare was the managing director and company owner and he created and instigated most of the humour. This contrasted with earlier research (Plester & Orams, 2007) that

suggested that the joker role was not adopted by those in leadership positions and that senior managers were afraid of creating humour with their subordinates (Plester & Sayers, 2007). Humour and leadership requires further investigation and analysis.

The notion of assumed humour roles was proposed in this thesis and this is a relatively unexplored area in humour and cultural research. Therefore further investigation into the roles of jokers and gatekeepers may be worthwhile.

The notion of humour *boundaries* created and influenced by degrees of formality/informality within organisational culture offers opportunities for future investigations. The humour and organisational culture model (Figure 6.1) could be tested and extended in other situations and in different industry sectors.

The collected documents included examples of email humour and many artifacts of humour. Although Parker (2007) and Warren and Fineman (2007) have recently published research regarding humour artifacts and their use (and misuse!) there is little research pertaining to email humour. The data set collected during this project could be further analysed for additional themes and new interpretations on email humour. With the fast-paced advent and adoption of technological practices such as email communication, this appears to be an interesting and topical area for future humour research.

The idea of having a fun culture was desirable to most of the managers and employees in this study. This may offer an area for further exploration and research. There may be value in separating the concepts of humour and fun and investigating whether these phenomena are interdependent or if they can be different and distinct in a variety of workplace contexts.

As the most extreme and highest number of examples of humour and practical jokes came from the IT company (Adare) it may be of interest to develop further research into IT cultures and their impacts. A particular aspect may involve exploring how some extreme forms of humour enactment become normalized within a company's culture and impacts of such humour within their wider industry community. Prior research in this

area suggested that IT companies may have unique and specific cultures (Plester, 2003) and Warren and Fineman's (2007) research was also generated from an IT department that endured managed fun initiatives. This specific industry may offer potential opportunities for further research in the fascinating field of culture, fun and humour.

7.6 Laugh out loud

Humour is important to me and humour was important to the people in these organisations. Throughout this research I considered myself fortunate to joke with participants, smile, participate, and observe, and on many occasions I enjoyed the opportunity to laugh out loud. Westwood and Rhodes (2007) state that humour in organisations is 'pervasive, entrenched and highly meaningful' (p. 5). This PhD research has strengthened my conviction that humour at work is important, significant and a common ingredient of modern working life. Understanding the relationship between humour and organisational culture is an important but overlooked area of organisational studies. The thesis ends with this respondent's fervent quote that exemplifies a typical response from this study and strongly emphasises her need to laugh out loud!

You have to laugh. Laughing gives you energy. Laughing is very good for your team. Laughing can sometimes ease tension. You've got to be able to laugh at yourself and each other. I think it's really important, I don't think I could work with someone who didn't have a sense of humour. I think it is important. People have to be able to have a laugh! (Kapack respondent)

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APPENDICES

Disclaimer:

Please be advised that this appendix contains some examples of humour that contain profanity and/or sexual, sexist and racial content. This material is included to illustrate actual examples of workplace humour collected during this research project. Please be advised that some content may offend.

Appendix A

Interview questions, interview review, Table 8.1

As outlined in the information sheet all responses to these questions will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and your replies will not identify you personally, or your organisation in any way. Data collected from this interview will be stored in an approved and locked facility. Please be aware if there are any questions you prefer not to answer you are under no obligation to do so and your reasons do not require any explanation.

A. Organisational culture

1. Tell me about your company/ organisation
What does it do? How does the organisation do it? Why did you choose to work here?
2. Tell me about this industry/ profession.
Why did you choose to work in this industry?

This section is related to the organisational culture of your company. The concept of organisational culture implies that groups of people have different ways of doing things and that organisations can be 'minisocieties'. Organisational culture has been described as 'the way we do things around here'.

3. Do you think that there is an actual overall culture in this organisation?
Who are you?
4. Describe the organisational culture.
Can you think of any examples that illustrate the culture here?
5. Can you think of any descriptions used to describe this organisation or its activities?
E.g. 'This organisation is like...'? If you had to compare this organisation to something, what would it be?
6. How formally or informally is this organisation run?
7. Please place the organisation on this continuum for formality, there are six separate sections and each is scaled from one to five, five represents extremely high formality levels and one represents low formality or extreme informality levels.
8. What formal groups or teams are you a part of at work? (e.g. professional division).
What informal groups or teams are you a part of at work? (e.g. social club).
9. What other formal groups or teams exist inside the organisation?
What other informal groups or teams exist inside the organisation?

10. Do you know of any exclusive groups or groups that are 'outside' the culture or that operate within the workplace but do things differently than is usual or 'normal'?
11. Is there any resistance/ backlash against the culture?
E.g. Trade Unions or other groups that may oppose some aspects of workplace operation or procedure?
12. Can you tell any organisational stories, myths, legends?
When did it happen?
Who was there?
How do you know this?
Why is it significant?
13. Do you have particular rituals, ceremonies? E.g. birthday celebrations.
What do they mean?
14. Do you have any special organisation keepsakes, emblems, logos, slogans, things?
Where are they? What do they signify?
15. Do you have any documents, printed material that portrays the culture?
Do you agree with this portrayal of your organisation? (These documents will be treated with complete confidentiality.)
16. Does the culture at work affect how you feel about your job?
Example?
17. Do you think that the workplace culture affects your workplace performance or the way that you carry out your job?
Your co-workers?
How? When? Examples.
18. When hiring staff, how important is it that new people 'fit in' or 'fit' the organisational culture?
Why?

B. Humour

This section asks questions specific to the use of humour in your organisation. It relates the workplace humour to your organisational culture (if appropriate) and links humour to three possible work outcomes.

1. How important is humour to you at work?
Why?
2. Is humour part of the culture here?
How?

- Why?
3. Does the company culture affect the humour that is used?
How?
 4. What sort of humour happens here?
When does it happen? What is the main method of sharing humour among staff members?
 5. What sort of humour does not happen here?
Why not?
 6. When is there no humour?
Why?
 7. Can you describe a funny event that happened at work?
Why was it funny?
When did it happen?
Who was there?
 8. Is a sense of humour an attribute sought when hiring people?
How?
Why?
 9. Was humour a part of your recruitment interview?
Example?
Do you think it helped you get the job?
 10. Does humour at work affect how you feel about your job?
Example?
 11. Does humour at work affect your ability to do your job well or your workplace performance? Your co-workers? How? When? Examples.
 12. Does humour have a dark side or negative consequences sometimes?
How?
Why?
When?
 13. Is humour 'managed' by anyone at work?
How?
Who?
Why?
 14. Are there any specific people that you would define as the 'jokers', or are the main creators of amusement?

Why do they have this role?
Any examples that you can recall of their antics?

C. Demographic

This final section asks general demographic questions in order to reflect similarities and differences of participants in the study and their general characteristics. It may be used to make general inferences regarding groups of organisational respondents.

1. How old are you?
2. Gender?
3. What ethnic group do you belong to?
4. What is your educational background?
5. How long have you worked here?
6. What is your role?
7. Are you a full-time employee, part-time, contractor, casual?
8. Any other personal information you wish to share that may be relevant?

Are there any other questions or points that you feel should have been covered in this interview or any further comments that you would like to add?

If there are any further points or recalled incidents you would like to offer at a later date please feel free to contact me in person while I am at your workplace or via the contact details on the information sheet.

Thank you for your participation in this interview, your contribution is deeply appreciated and will contribute to highlighting the relationship between organisational culture and workplace humour and the importance of this inside modern organisations.

Interview review

In researcher's logbook at completion of interview record:

Date, time, code and location of interview
My impressions of the respondent and the interview.
Discuss respondent's body language
Did the respondent appear engaged with the topic or aloof and withdrawn?
Any relevant interpretation or key insights

Any unusual occurrences or insights
Any incidents that were recounted or discussed
How answers were given e.g. freely and spontaneously or after extra prompting
Any questions that made the respondent laugh
Any questions that made the respondent uncomfortable
Any questions the respondent refused to answer
Any questions that enthused or excited the respondent
Any extra information offered by the respondent
Contextual information e.g. respondent in a hurry
Problems in the interview
Factors that worked well in the interview

Research questions

The key overall research question being explored in this study is: *What is the relationship between humour and the organisational culture of a company?* The following ten research questions support this main enquiry and break the fundamental question into smaller components that explore in greater depth the facets of culture and humour in order to understand their relationship.

- **R.1.** What manifestations of culture are present in the organisations?
- **R.2.** What manifestations of humour are present in the organisations?
- **R.3.** Is there a definable culture in the organisation? If so, what assumptions underpin it?
- **R.4.** Are subcultures or countercultures present in the organisations? If so, what are these?
- **R.5.** What effect does this relationship have on organisational outcomes? (perceptions of recruitment, satisfaction and workplace functionality)
- **R.6.** Does humour operate in similar ways in organisations across different industries?
- **R.7.** Do degrees of formality/informality affect the organisational culture?
- **R.8.** Do degrees of formality/informality affect the workplace humour?
- **R.9.** Does humour shape the organisational culture?
-
- **R.10.** Does the organisational culture shape the humour used?

Table 8.1: Linking questions and concepts

Question	Concepts	Research question	Analysis
<u>Demographic</u>			
How old are you? Gender? Ethnicity? How long have you worked here? What is your role?	Background of participants, sample. External influences Demographic influences on culture and humour Generational differences Occupational differences	R3, R4, R6	Percentage relating to age, gender, ethnicity, tenure and roles
<u>Organisational culture</u>			
Tell me about this organisation(Morgan, 1998) Tell me about this industry (Parker, 2000)	Culture, humour, participants own impressions, first question therefore little researcher leading or bias at this stage. What is important to them External factors	R1, R3 R6	Content analysis of description and words used, feeling of respondent, eg negative or positive attitude re company/industry Narrative and interpretive
Do you think that there is an actual overall culture in this organisation? (Parker, 2000)	Homogeneity of culture vs. fragmentation, identification of culture and norms, consensus, own interpretation	R3, R4	Content analysis Patterns of consensus or dissent
Describe the organisational culture? (Morgan, 1998)	Consensus, homogeneity, symbols descriptions used,	R1, R3, R4	Content analysis Links to humour
Can you think of any metaphors used to describe this company or its activities? (Morgan 1998)	Consensus, homogeneity, descriptions used, symbols, assumptions, values. Gives meaning to organisational reality	R1, R3	Content analysis Relate to metaphors used in literature

How formally or informally is this organisation run?	Overall impression of formality before ranking on continuum	R7, R8	Content analysis (Beetham 1996, Morand, 1995)
Please place the organisation on this continuum for formality, there are six sections	Ranking of organisation on 6 attributes Degrees of formality Comparison of companies. Considers external factors	R7, R8	Aggregate score for company, degree assessed Relate to findings on OC and humour –patterns?
What groups are you a part of at work? (e.g. professional division) (Parker, 2000)	Subcultures and countercultures	R4	Content analysis, descriptions used, patterns of words
What other groups exist inside the organisation? (Parker, 2000)	Subcultures and countercultures	R4	Content analysis, descriptions used, patterns of words
Do you know of any exclusive groups or groups that are outside the culture? (Parker, 2000)	Subcultures and countercultures, underlying assumptions, conflict, consensus	R4	Content analysis, perceptions, willingness to answer, interpretation of attitude
Is there any resistance/ backlash against the culture? How is this shown?	Subcultures, conflict, countercultures Fragmentation, resistance, humour use	R3, R9, R10	Content analysis, perceptions, willingness to answer, interpretation of attitude
Can you tell any organisational stories, myths, legends? When did it happen? Who was there? How do you know this? Why is it significant?	Symbols, culture development, humour, assumptions, historical influences	R1, R2, R3	Descriptions, content analysis, examples and interpretations, incidents described .

<p>Do you have any special organisation keepsakes, emblems, logos, slogans, things? Where are they? What do they signify?</p>	<p>Manifestations, symbols, artifacts, functionalist perspective – what the organisation has, history Interpretive perspective from respondent</p>	<p>R1, R2</p>	<p>Content analysis List artifacts</p>
<p>Do you have particular rituals, ceremonies? What do they mean (Smircich, 1983)</p>	<p>Symbols, underlying assumptions, values, Manifestations, historical influences</p>	<p>R1, R2</p>	<p>Content analysis</p>
<p>Do you have any documents, printed material that portrays the culture? Do you agree with this portrayal of your company?</p>	<p>Manifestations, symbols, artifacts, functionalist perspective – what the organisation has, history, consensus, dissent</p>	<p>R1, R2, R3, R4, R6</p>	<p>Content analysis</p>
<p>Does the culture at work affect how you feel about your job? Example?</p>	<p>Outcomes satisfaction</p>	<p>R5</p>	<p>Content analysis</p>
<p>Does workplace culture affect your performance or productivity? Your co-workers? How? When? Examples</p>	<p>Outcomes functionality</p>	<p>R5</p>	<p>Content analysis</p>
<p>Is ‘fitting’ the culture an attribute sought when hiring people? How? Why?</p>	<p>Outcomes recruitment</p>	<p>R3, R5</p>	<p>Content analysis</p>

<u>Humour</u>			
How important is humour to you at work? Why?	Assumptions, values, outcomes	R9, R10	Content analysis
Is humour part of the culture here? How? Why?	Linking humour and culture	R2, R9	Content analysis
Does the organisational culture affect the humour that is used? How?	Linking humour and culture	R10	Content analysis
What sort of humour happens here? When does it happen? What sort of humour does not happen here? Why not?	Manifestations, values, formality, context, types	R6, R9	Content analysis
When is there no humour? Why?	Context, values, culture	R6	Content analysis
Can you describe a funny event that happened at work? Why was it funny? When did it happen? Who was there?	Examples, importance, culture, values, contextual elements	R10, R9	Content analysis
Is a sense of humour an attribute sought when hiring people? How? Why?	Outcomes recruitment	R5, R9	Content analysis
Was humour a part of your recruitment interview? Example? Did it help you get the job?	Outcomes recruitment	R5, R9	Content analysis

Does humour at work affect how you feel about your job? Example?	Outcomes satisfaction	R5	Content analysis
Does humour at work affect your own functioning in your job? Your co-workers? How? When? Examples	Outcomes functionality	R5	Content analysis
Does humour have a dark side or negative consequences sometimes How? Why? When?	Fragmentation, resistance, counterculture, outcomes	R5, R10, R9	Content analysis
Is humour managed by anyone at work? How? Who? Why?	Outcomes	R10, R9	Content analysis

Appendix B

Response from Kapack HR manager regarding organisational report sent via email following the research at Kapack. (Names have been blacked out for privacy reasons).

Hi Barbara,

Great to hear from you. There was quite a bit of interest when the report arrived. We thought it was a pretty accurate report. Some had expected a slightly higher position on the humour scale. Some of the more cynical had expected lower so it was a good rating in that it catered somewhat to both views!

There was some interest in what we could do differently and maybe a little disappointment that the report didn't go that far, although we've explained that was pretty much outside your brief. Since then we've been working on internal communication at many levels on behaviours that link to the 5 year strategic plan we rolled out early this year which has placed 'intimacy' as the highest priority, i.e. working with clients and colleagues in a way that knows and understands their needs and delivers with a high level of rapport. As part of embedding this we've worked on introducing more fun and humour into events.

The Fun Champions group looks at ways that fun and humour can be increased. e.g., one off events such as a decorating competition, guess the Easter eggs in the jar, lunch time orienteering is the next event. We engaged a fun specialist [REDACTED] and flew her round both offices to lead fun events that engage people, hired [REDACTED] (an acting and dancing celebrity) to help us visualise the difference between intimacy versus arms length relationships in business, over breakfast sessions for everyone. We celebrated Easter with a 'get to know you' quiz and prizes over Hot cross buns. We added more fun to the annual Associates Conference by aligning with [REDACTED] General Manager to co-present on getting intimate with each other via lots of practical fun exercises. He was so creative.

We've increased the budgets for the Friday night fun drinks, assigned a month to each of the different teams so they are 'competing' with other business teams to have the best theme, games, food etc. and we're planning to open them to invite spouses, partners, boy/girlfriend from September once a month, again related to our promotion of client intimacy and fun.

We're seeing much more openness to take a risk and have encouraged that by introducing more transparency, and empowering people to speak up by providing safe channels for them to communicate through, with action taken on issues, which has all allowed people to show the true colours of their fun side a little more easily.

We're about to release to all our people the very first Annual Report we've heard of for a Law firm, which will include all the financials including partner incomes as part of encouraging that transparency and intimacy first with our people and then with our clients.

Of course we still need to work hard at all this or it will be seen as a flash in the pan so any ideas you've picked up in your travels/research would be great to hear. Do drop in for a coffee if you're ever passing this way.

Cheers



Appendix C



23 May 2005

Barbara Plester
c/- Dr M Orams
College of Business
Massey University
Albany

Dear Barbara

**HUMAN ETHICS APPROVAL APPLICATION – MUAHEC 05/013
“Laugh out loud: Linking humour and organisational culture”**

Thank you for your application. It has been fully considered and approved by the Massey University, Albany Campus, Human Ethics Committee.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, a reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kerry Chamberlain".

Professor Kerry Chamberlain
Chairperson,
Human Ethics Committee
Albany Campus

cc Drs M Edwards, M Orams & J Sayers
College of Business

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Appendix D

Examples of email humour

Email example 1, Adare, extreme profanity

From: xxxxxx

Sent: 2005 9:19 AM

To: Staff

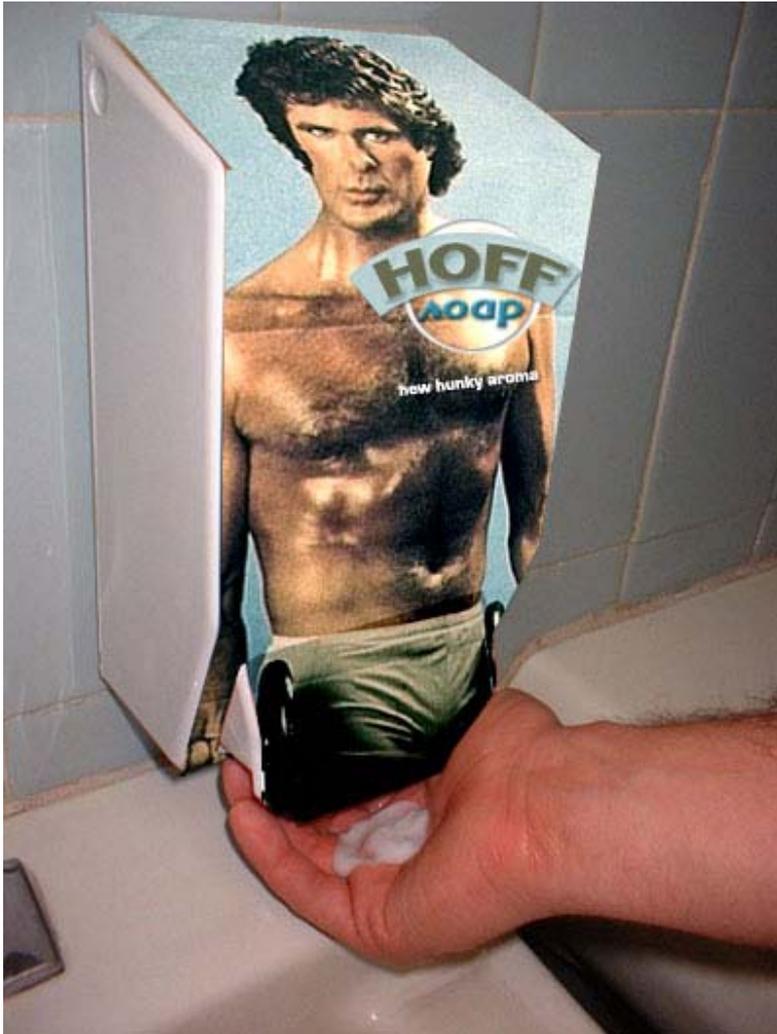
Subject: FW:



Email example 2, Adare, sexual theme

From: xxxxxx
Sent: 2005 8:30 AM
To: Staff

Subject: FW: New Soap Dispenser



Email example 3, Adare, sexist and sexual themes

From: XXXXXX

Sent: 2005 11:24 a.m.

To: xxxxxxx

Subject: FW: HAHahaha

A New Zealander walks into the bedroom with a sheep under his arm,
His girlfriend is lying quietly in bed reading.

The man says, ‘This is the pig I have sex with when you've got a headache.’

Girlfriend replies, ‘I think you'll find that's a sheep.’

The man replies, ‘I think you'll find I was talking to the sheep.’

Email example 4, Adare racial themes

From: xxxxxx

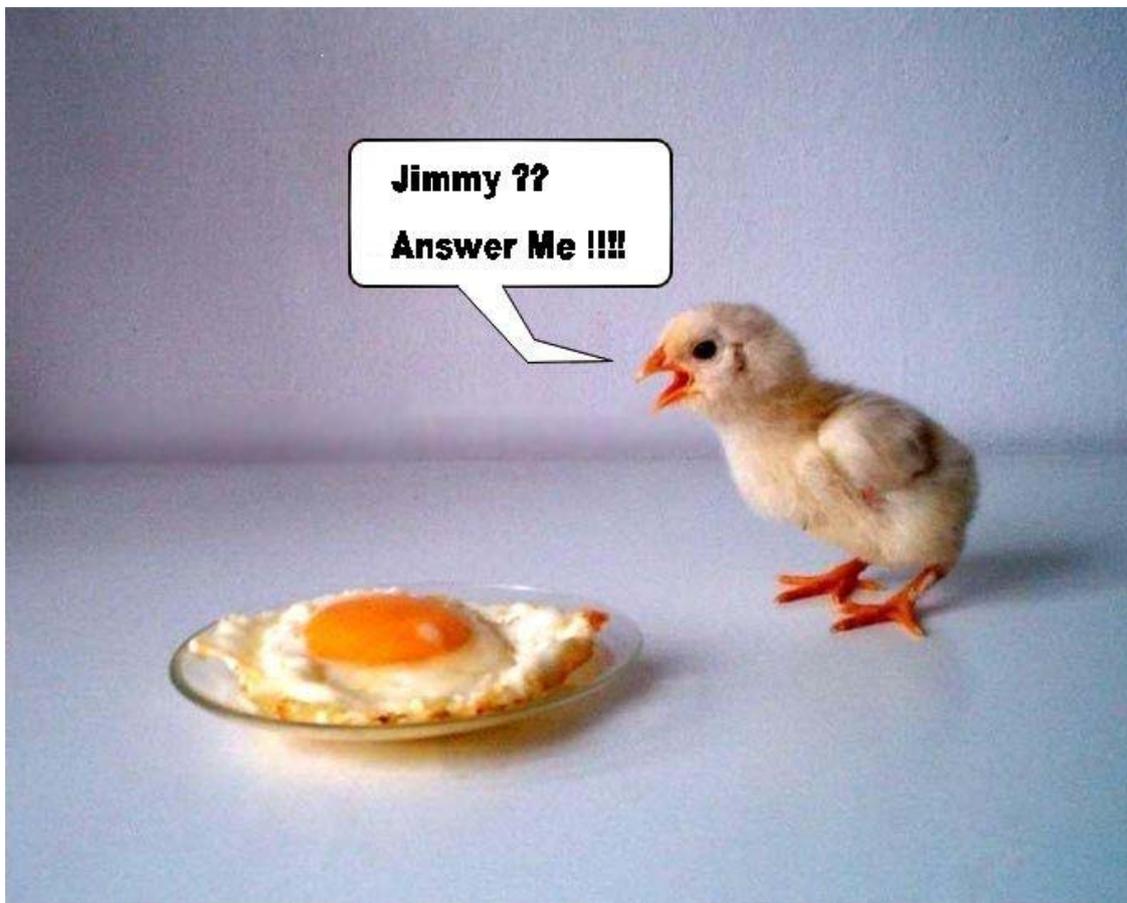
Sent: 2005 9:54 a.m.

Subject: FW: African Ipod



Email example 5, Uvicon and Kapack, chicken and egg, mild incongruity, pathos

From: xxxxxx
Sent: 2005 12:09 p.m.
To: xxxxxx
Subject: Awwww



Appendix E

Table 8.2: Email types and themes

Company	Email	Subject	Type	Theme
1. Adare	Camel toe	Female genitalia compared to camel's toe	Video	Sexual
2. Adare	Masculoff	Product created from male ejaculate	Video	Sexual
3. Sigma	Salary review	Salary review	Print	Work
4. Sigma	'Hoffing'-4-5 visual clips	Mocking TV star David Hasselehoff	Video	Celebrity
5. Sigma	Kiwi topless male of the year	Announcing upcoming absence	Print	Self-deprecatory
6. Kapack	Partner email	Offering free legal advice	Print	Work
7. Uvicon	Bad eyes	No sex causes bad eyes	Graphic	Sexual, racial (mild)
8. Adare	Funny web names	Wordplay-pun	Print	Sexual
9. Adare	Smells good	Dwarfism	Print	Sexual
10. Adare	Graphic artists	Doctored photos	Photos	Incongruity
11. Adare	African ipod	Technology, poverty	Photo	Racial
12. Adare	Fridge magnet	Cat as magnet	Photo	Mutilation
13. Adare	Bungy jump	Croc in water	Video	Incongruity
14. Adare	Pet costumes	Animals dressed up	Photos	Incongruity
15. Adare	Waterbed	Practical joke	Video	Incongruity
16. Adare	Hollywood in 2045	Doctored photos	Photos	Celebrity
17. Adare	Gas prices	Wealthy sheiks	Photos	Satire
18. Adare	Women's problems	Wordplay	Print	Sexist
19. Adare	KKK	Dressed as KKK	Video	Racial
20. Adare	Lord of the rings	Spoof	Video	Satire
21. Adare	Doves	Dress falls off	Photo	Sexual
22. Adare	Go Friday	Doctored photos royals	Photos	Incongruity, celebrity
23. Adare	Google-failure	George Bush	URL	Political satire
24. Adare	Beautiful sunsets	Sunsets then oral sex	Photos	Sexual
25. Adare	Happy couple	Large genitals	Photos	Sexual
26. Adare	On streets America	War on terror	Video	Satire
27. Adare	Costume	Staff member	Photo	Incongruity

28. Adare	Halloween	Costumes	Photo	Incongruity
29. Adare	Pig sex	Sex with pig	Print	Sexual
30. Adare	Tourettes	Swearing on sign	Photo	Profanity
31. Adare	Halloween	Male face between woman's legs	Photo	Incongruity
32. Adare	Slipping	People getting hurt	Video	Incongruity
33. Adare	Prom night in the hood	Black people in outrageous clothes	Photo	Racial
34. Adare	Hot dog	Dog in heat	Print joke	Sexual
35. Adare	Boyfriends	Males with piercing	Photo	Incongruity
36. Adare	3 com	Banknotes in glass	Photo	Incongruity
37. Adare	Drove my chevy...	Bush sings to victims	Photo	Political satire
38. Adare	Huge crack	Woman's bum on bike	Photo	Sexual, size
39. Adare	Cartoons	various	Cartoons	Variety
40. Adare	Models	Thin women	Photo	Sexist, body
41. Adare	Fragrance	Wordplay	Photo	Satire
42. Adare	Girls or gays	Transsexualism	Photo	Sexual
43. Adare	Spot the difference	Trick-tranquil photo becomes monster	Photo	Incongruity
44. Adare	Oh shit	People in scary mock situations	Photo	Incongruity
45. Adare	Dear John	Boy leaves girlrevenge	Print	Sexist
46. Adare	Soap dispenser	Hoff dispenser	Photo	Sexual
47. Adare	Store wars	Organic food	Video	Satire
48. Adare	Cook my sock	Wordplay	Print	Sexual
49. Adare	Crack in window	Buttocks in window of plane	Photo	Sexual
50. Adare	His n hers cars	Genitals on cars	Photo	Sexual
51. Adare	Personality test	You are a C***	URL	Profanity
52. Adare	English signs	Wordplay	Print	Sexual
53. Adare	Woman vs policeman	fishing	Print	Sexual
54. Adare	Tall & short women	Size	Photo	Incongruity, sexist
55. Adare	Adare intranet	Come buy our shit you c****	Print	Profanity risk
56. Adare	PMS	Woman attacks car	Video	Sexist
57. Adare	Pimp my ride	Stereo ad	Video	Sexual
58. Adare	Deer sir	Job application misspelt	Print & photo	Sexist
59. Adare	Kofi Annan	Bounty on head	Print & photo	Wordplay
60. Adare	Gay Sth African	Mock email pretend gay	Print	Sexual

61. Uvicon	Bad parking	Photo bad parking	Photo	Incongruity
62. Uvicon	Honey	Bee peeing	Graphic	Incongruity
63. Uvicon	For women	Pregnancy	Print	Sexist
64. Uvicon	Egs of stupidity	Anecdotes	Print	Stupidity, superiority
65. Uvicon	Health and safety	Photos work scenes	Photo	Stupidity, superiority
66. Uvicon	Jimmy	Chicken and egg	Photo	Incongruity
67. Uvicon	Smile	Cute animals	Photo	Incongruity
68. Kapack	PC eradicator	Political	Print	Satire
69. Kapack	Aussie police sign	Speeding excuse - graffiti	Photo	Incongruity
70. Kapack	Jimmy	Chicken and egg	Photo	Incongruity