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Stripping the Skin off Humour

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Abstract

Culturally specific hegemonic processes produce authority over meaning and exclude possibilities for authentic ethical encounters. Contingent on a binary relationship between 'self' and 'other', humour holds social tensions in particular ways. Where contemporary understandings of humour tend to posit humour as self-evidently desirable (Billig, 2005), there is an absence of psychological attention to the social power relations that constitute the "performativity" of humour – or as Butler (1993, p. 2) suggests, "the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains". This paper draws on the experience of living the contradictions of hegemonic discourse that produces social positions where laughter is enacted to enable a 'safe' encounter. If humour occurs on the boundaries of social convention then what does that mean for the complex relationships at "the hyphen" (Fine & Sirin, 2007; Jones & Jenkins, 2008) between us/them? Is it possible that rather than simply maintaining a particular social order, humour may also enable a re-defining of the contours of social relations? Could humour open spaces at the boundaries through recognition of multiple competing political discourses and make it possible for an ethical response that seeks authentic encounters with the 'other'?

Keywords: authentic encounters, ethical responses, humour, hegemony, ideological positivism, performativity, hyphenated selves

When I tell people I'm researching humour it often elicits a response akin to laughter. If laughter is read as a response to something humorous, as opposed to serious, then laughter in this instance can be understood as a 'safe' reaction to the common-sense idea that humour does not belong in the realm of seriousness.

Discursively produced as independently bounded categories, it appears as if locating humour in the space of seriousness violates boundaries of social convention that constrain how we understand and make sense of humour. Yet in the mundane world of day-to-day living, we regularly encounter violations of apparently fixed boundaries that often pass unnoticed.

Premised on the assumption that humour is a positive phenomenon that carries the potential to enhance well-being, research demonstrates the fluidity of conceptual borders by taking humour as medium for addressing serious issues, as well as a topic of serious investigation itself. Although research regarding the positive potential of humour is inconsistent (see for example Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Erickson & Feldstein, 2007; Kuiper, Martin, & Dance, 1992; Martin, 2002; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003), the idea of 'humour as positive' persists; and it persists to such an extent that particular forms of humour may soon become protected in law.[1]

Putting into question the 'truth' of humour as inherently positive, Billig (2005) is critical of contemporary research that privileges humour as self-evidently desirable. Tracing historical shifts in the meanings of humour, he argues that the dominating narrative of 'humour as positive' is an effect of what he terms "ideological positivism", or the ideological tendency to accentuate the positive while repressing the negative. By locating humour in the realm of ideology Billig (2005) makes it possible to re-think humour as a hegemonic discourse that dominates and oppresses.

Reading humour as a hegemonic discourse opens space for investigating the social power relations that constitute the performativity (Butler, 1993) of humour. For Butler (1993) performativity is "the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (p. 2), that is, the power of discourse to produce social norms through repetition. Through questions of performativity it becomes possible to ask how humour achieves its status as natural and how some meanings, such as the idea of 'humour as positive', are transformed into 'common-sense'. It also becomes possible to question what this means for our social relations in a hegemonic space.

[1] At present there is a Members Bill before Parliament that seeks to amend the Copyright Act (1994) and to protect the use of satire and parody as a positive form of social criticism (Hughes, 2011).

In the dominating narrative of 'humour as positive' questions of the constitution of humour are often taken for granted as self-evident, with those who appear to 'possess' or embody 'a sense of humour' viewed as experts (Billig, 2005). Dependent upon discourses of individualism, what constitutes humour in this narrative entails a moral dimension that becomes transformed into a matter of authority over meaning, and in the simultaneous split between funny and offensive, humour becomes a space where there exists a violent contest over 'who decides'. An example of the moral conflict that occurs in the struggle for authority over the meanings of humour was recently witnessed when Jeremy Clarkson 'joked' about how he would respond to public servants striking in the United Kingdom - "Frankly, I would have them all shot. I would take them outside and execute them in front of their families" (Top gear host forced to apologise for comments, 2011, para. 9). While Clarkson's later apology should have resolved the issue if it was simply a case of misunderstood humour, the question of whether or not his comments were funny or offensive persisted. Underpinning the ongoing conflict was an argument that depended upon the idea of a sense of humour and being able to recognise a 'joke' when confronted with one.

Asking the question 'who decides' presupposes the existence of an authoritative sovereign subject; it also presupposes a subjugated subject. As an account of agency (Butler, 2009) performativity questions the sovereign subject and argues that the subject is constituted in and through a hegemonic process of iterability (Butler, 1993). Butler (1993) argues, "performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition of the subject" (p. 95). That is, the subject emerges as a socially produced agent through the power of discourse to be repeatable.

If the authoritative subject is constituted through hegemonic discourses of humour, then the question of 'who decides' becomes dependent upon a circular argument where processes of repeatability lay out the conditions for authority. As such, claims to authority over the meanings of humour can be understood as the production of recognisable subjects – both expert subjects and marginalised non-expert subjects. This means of course that while a claim to authority makes intelligible the temporal condition of the subject it also reproduces the power of humour as a socially accepted form of speech that marginalises and excludes the 'other'.

In coverage of the controversy surrounding Clarkson's comment, the media inclusion of particular responses produced figures of authority that included criticism from the Union that represented strikers and members of the UK Parliament, as well as Clarkson stating that his comments were taken out of context. Missing from media coverage were the voices of strikers themselves. Spoken for and about, the effect was an 'othering' that produced strikers as a homogenous group of non-expert subjects.

However, drawing on the work of Derrida, Butler's (1993) use of the term iterability recognises repeatability is simultaneously constrained and undetermined. As a form of speech the repeatability of meanings is contingent upon historical, social and cultural conditions that have contributed to the emergence of humour as familiar and also unfamiliar, open to unimagined and unintended reiterations (Butler, 1993; Morgan & Coombes, 2001). In *Humour and Hatred: the Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan*, Billig (2001) examines the connections between humour and hatred and shows how attempts to rebuke violent racist humour as categorically distinct are destabilised by both the certainty and ambiguity surrounding the multiple meanings of humour. While the dominating narrative enables racist humour to be classified as a form of hate speech (Billig, 2001; Butler, 1997a), it also creates space for hate speech to exist as humour – it *is* just a joke.

In a turn of humorous speech, the effect of 'it's just a joke' is that those who may typically be identified as authoritative voices on racist discourse are silenced and transformed into positions of powerlessness – the non-expert 'other'. So how do we challenge racist humour when offense indicates lack – lack of a sense of humour?

It may be uncomfortable to realise how the authority of 'just joking' can be used to silence voices critical of racism, but the silencing effects of humour have long been known by those voices regularly marginalised and excluded from the power to have authority over the meaning. Lowe (1986) attempted to write against the "darker, better-known side of ethnic [directed] humour" (p. 439) by arguing that the 'decision' of ethnic groups "to enter laughing" (p. 439) not only eased the struggle for full citizenship but also opened spaces for a new form of multicultural humour. At about the same time Billy T James had begun to emerge as an icon of Kiwi humour that represented the best of biculturalism. Consistent with Lowe's (1986) argument the Billy T brand of humour did, in many ways, have the effect of diminishing the line between in-group and out-group, and it had the effect of transforming how we made sense of

our relationships here in Aotearoa New Zealand, but it wasn't without controversy. It was also criticised as racist for drawing on racial stereotypes that re-produced the ethnic 'other' as the butt of humour.

While Lowe (1986) suggests that ethnic-generated humour has the potential to enable participation by undermining the 'darker' side of racially aggressive ethnic-directed humour, what is missed is a consideration of how participation through humour is conditional upon a process of iteration that keeps the relationship between domination and oppression intact. If participation as a legitimate subject is both constrained and enabled by hegemonic discourses of humour that are shaped by specific historical, social and cultural conditions, then is it possible that what Lowe (1986) sees as a 'decision' to "enter laughing" may also be understood as akin to a 'forced choice' where few doors were open and available?

Would Billy T humour have been successful if it didn't draw on existing discourses about our relationships in a colonial society? Was it funny because it was true? Was that how 'Maoris' were? Or was it funny because colonial discourses about Maori had become so familiar as to appear as common sense?

Butler (1993, 1997a) argues that context is important for performativity, and as Billig (2001) demonstrates what constitutes humour or hatred is dependent upon situational factors that shape meaning in particular ways. While it may appear a simple exercise to mark racist humour of the KKK as hate speech in the context of a wider social intolerance toward bigotry, what happens when the contextual conditions of social acceptability enable the re-production and perpetuation of bigotry through the performance of humour? How do we make sense of the status of the racial comparisons in Billy T humour? As a product of its time, do the 'Māori and Englishman' jokes in Billy T humour still make sense in today's society as socially acceptable humour, or racist humour, or even hate speech?

For Butler, hate speech is always retrospective, forms of speech do not become hate speech until articulated as such by an authority (Butler, 1997a, 1997b). Similarly, Billig (2005) argues that humour is also retrospective, and that it is often through a process of taking back authority over meaning that events are transformed into humorous during the re-telling of stories. Again, who decides? Who is without the authority to name hate speech that is performed as if it were humour, and when are they excluded? And how do those without authority name and challenge the hegemonic effects of humour if engagement means repeating processes of oppression?

Understanding humour as an exercise of performativity that delimits authority by holding social power relations in particular ways brings into question the possibility of natural or authentic humour that sits apart from the ways we speak ourselves and others as (il)legitimate subjects. If humour is understood as originating from discourse rather than subjects, then what do we make of intention? Can a joke be just a joke?

What I have tried to do up until this point is to disrupt common-sense notions of humour to enable a rethinking of humour that questions what humour is *doing*. This entails questioning how humour is positive and for whom it promotes wellbeing. Who has the authority to identify humour and hate speech; to say when a joke is funny? And to consider that if the source of humour is discourse and not subjects, and the performativity of humour, as it is commonly practiced, means the maintenance of a hegemonic relationship, then what does that mean for ethical relationships with the other? Can we continue to repress the negative effects of humour in the knowlege that this re-produces processes of domination where some have authority over meaning? Is it time to rethink humour as both positive *and* negative?

While Billig (2005) isn't explicit about how humour constrains the potential for an ethical response to the 'other' specifically, his work enables a rethinking of humour that makes it possible for dialogue to occur in space where meaning is negotiated on the boundaries of the hyphen – between the 'one' and the 'other' – or between the positive and negative. For Fine and Sirin (2007) the hyphen is a "dynamic social-psychological space where political arrangements and individual subjectivities meet…the psychological texture of the hyphen is substantially informed by history, media, surveillance, politics, nation of origin, gender, biography, longings, imagine, and loss" (p. 21).

Is it possible that rather than simply maintaining a particular social order that conceals the complexities of our relationships at the hyphen, could re-thinking humour enable a re-negotiation of how our relations might look? If space is to be opened in which an ethical response (Spivak, 2004) that enables authentic encounters with the 'other' (Said, 1978) becomes possible, it is necessary to analyse how humour is implicated in the re-production of a hegemonic relationship that constrains authority over meaning. By stripping the skin off humour we create the potential to maintain our desire to enjoy humour, while also opening spaces that recognise multiple competing political discourses, and through this it might become possible to respond to the call of the 'other' ethically and authentically.

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