

On going too far

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Abstract

In the vernacular ideology of humour there are definite ideas about where the limits of joke acceptability lie. In practice, many joke performances seem to go beyond those limits and yet arouse little if any opposition. This paper considers the role that limits play in humour through case studies of two successful practical joke performances. I argue that the performance and appreciation of jokes consists in the playful transgression of limits, but not just those that happen to be contentious in a particular socio-political moment. Even in an apparently innocuous and widely supported joke there are indications of hypothetical disagreement that index awareness of transgression. The acceptability of specific jokes is socially constructed in very context-specific ways that transmute limits without obliterating them. The reception of practical jokes suggests that awareness of limits is ever-present, even in jokes that are completely successful.

Keywords: practical jokes, limits, norms, targets, disagreement.

1. Introduction

Does anything go in humour? A good question and a very pertinent one. In fact this question seems to be of central importance in the reception of jokes of all kinds. While jokes are popular and widespread, there is no shortage of examples of jokes, stand-up comedy routines, and other humorous forms that run into disapproval for having gone too far. Rather than seeing the number of failed jokes as a sign of the times (Lewis 1997), I suggest that it is in the nature of jokes themselves deliberately to court such failure. Even successful jokes contain the potential for going too far and signs of this potential are present even in performances that raise no objections. To risk going too far is the successful joker's boast.

What does it mean to go too far in humour? To begin with, we may observe that this question is separate from the effectiveness of joke performance — instead, it touches on moral or ethical dimensions. Joke appreciation is closely tied to morality (Kramer 2011: 147) and to withhold support from a joke performance — a phenomenon that has been dubbed *unlaughter*— conveys an unmistakable censure of the joker (Billig 2005). In a recent study of the reception of rape jokes in online forums, Elise Kramer (2011) has suggested that at the heart of every joke there lies a debate or an argument. The argument is not whether or not the joke was performed well, but whether it should have been performed at all.

At any given time, some jokes are recognised as particularly likely to go too far. Today, rape, race, and the Prophet Muhammad are all topics that are virtually guaranteed to raise serious and prolonged arguments. These jokes have become iconised provoking debates that may have more significance than the jokes themselves, as participants use their positions to index and perform their beliefs and identities (Kramer 2011: 160, 163). At the time of writing, for example, the world is in turmoil with arguments over an allegedly blasphemous cartoon, with people lining up in defence of religious orthodoxy on one side and the defence of free speech on the other. The telling of such jokes is a way to announce a political position, and in this context arguments and criticism from others may even be welcomed because they heighten the differences between “us” and “them,” differences that carry enormous political and moral weight (Billig 2001; Smith 2009).

Most jokes do not have this lightning rod status, and it is likely that most jokes are performed and positively received with little if any argument. Yet Kramer (2011) suggests that disagreement is a necessary component of all humour, in that “those who find a joke funny and those who do not are mutually constitutive groups that cannot exist without each other” (Kramer 2011: 163). She further suggests that this hypothetical disagreement is true for all jokes, not just the ones that are especially contentious at a given time. I contend that indications of the existence of this hypothetical disagreement may be found in successful joke performances because humour consists in the playful countenancing of transgression, a temporary lifting of salient norms and values (Mannell et al. 1976; Veatch 1998). Viewed in this way, humor would seem to require the hypothetical existence of some who would uphold the norm and consequently fail to take a playful attitude to the joke that trampled it. The recognition of a norm violation must include the understanding that someone, somewhere might disagree with the violation.

Practical jokes do not have the high profile of anti-Islamic jokes. As a genre, however, they are frequently disparaged as being primitive and aggressive (Marsh 2015). Because they are enacted rather than simply told, they have live targets who are incorporated into a play activity without their prior permission and frequently without even their knowledge. This condition of unilateral play violates our expectations that play is voluntary and consensual. The idea of compulsory play is an oxymoron — yet, that is exactly what practical jokes are for their targets. When targets are let in on a practical joke, they are effectively asked by the joker to extend retroactive permission for a transgressive play form. They must respond to the fact that they have been made a plaything of someone else. This characteristic lies behind the frequent criticism of this genre of humour and sets the stage for potential disagreement. In the following pages I analyse the performance and reception of two successful practical jokes in order to highlight the operation of hypothetical disagreement in humour.

2. “Just another office prank”

The tin-foiled desk or cubicle falls into what I call the booby-trap subtype of practical joke. The booby trap subtype involves some backstage work by jokers with the goal of secretly making some part of the target’s environment unusable and convincing targets into using these adulterated everyday objects in the everyday fashion. When they do so, they are surprised to learn that the normality they expected was just a façade. The disclosure is sometimes unpleasant or messy, but it need not be; the essential requirement for effective performance is simply surprise, with the goal of testing the target’s composure. The ready availability of digital recording devices allows jokers to record booby trap pranks and share these recordings with wider audiences online. The recordings typically cover both the backstage setup, the moment of sudden revelation, and the aftermath (or post play) in which targets deal with the realisation that they have been targeted. So many such videos have been posted online in the first decades of the 21st century that the “office prank” or “tin foiled desk” has achieved the status of an Internet meme in which the ubiquity of recorded versions encourages more performances and variations on the same joke.

A particularly elaborate example of a booby trap prank video was posted on YouTube by some computer programmers from Slovenia in February 2008. In it, they show how they wrapped their boss’s entire office and contents in newspaper while he was away; then they show the moment when he walked in to discover the prank, and how he reacted. Although modestly entitled *Just Another Office Prank*, the video is especially well produced. The jokers have framed their performance with care, aware that they are reaching an international audience far removed from the relationships that marked the original performance. I have not spoken directly with any of the protagonists in this joke, nor with members of the Internet audience. The following analysis is based on the evidence of the video itself, the comments and other responses posted on YouTube, and the results of interviews with other practical jokers (Marsh 2015).

The full exposition of a practical joke account, whether in an oral narrative or, like this one, a video recording, frequently follows the stages delineated by Labov & Waletzky (1967) for personal experience narratives, beginning with an orientation to set the stage and ending with an evaluation that explains the value and significance of the narrated event. *Just Another Office Prank* opens with a lengthy orientation beginning with the familiar Twentieth-Century Fox fanfare, promising an epic feature to follow. Titles appear on screen to set the scene and introduce the time, place, and players: Ljubljana, 2nd April 2010. “Boss goes to Cuba for 9 days. Co-workers and friends decide they really like those youtube [sic] newspaper pranks”. Thus viewers are introduced to the protagonists and informed what type of prank to expect. The following 66 seconds depicts the backstage preparations for the joke, in which the pranksters are shown wrapping an office and all its contents in newspaper. The floor is also covered with newspaper, with a “red carpet” made of red paper squares on top that lead from the door to the office chair. The pranksters also write “Welcome back boss” in yellow-Post-Its on one of the walls. This segment ends with a still of the young jokers posing in front of their handiwork, all giving thumbs-up signs.

After these orientation and set-up phases, there is a ten-second pause. The camera is inside the wrapped office, pointed at the door. There is an undeniable moment of tension as viewers join the pranksters in waiting to see whether this elaborate set-up will work and how the target will respond. The door opens and the boss comes in. As he enters, a hidden recorder starts playing the “Imperial March” from *Star Wars*. At the same time, the jokers send him a text message on his phone that says, “Smile. You’re on Candid Camera.” For the next two minutes, the recording shows the boss’s reaction. He laughs, apparently uncontrollably. He walks back and forth, picks up one wrapped object after another and replaces it, and breaks into more laughter. Then he stops laughing, sits in his chair — but immediately spots something (presumably newspaper-wrapped) under the desk and starts laughing again. After two minutes of this laughter, the video ends with an evaluative coda in which the videographer/joker offers his own critique of their work. “Oh yeah... we also replaced his windows shell with a custom console programme and disabled safe mode... But somehow I managed to f%\$k up the taping... Ah well. Almost perfect!” (Looooooka 2010).

By several measures, this office prank shows all the signs of being uncontroversial and innocuous. Like most practical jokes, it is embedded in a small group context among people who know each other, and it employs methods that are familiar within that profession — borrowing from an Internet meme, and adulterating computer software. Different workplaces develop unique joking cultures with widely varying boundaries for what counts as appropriate humour (Holmes et al. 2002; Fine et al. 2005; Plester et al. 2008) and a robust joking culture can be a point of pride for members of workplaces in much the same way that it is for friends within joking relationships. It is likely that this was not the first time the programmers had joked with their boss, and they probably chose this particular prank because they believed he would appreciate it, based on his reaction to earlier jokes and perhaps also to his participation in jocular exchanges within the workgroup. Since different people react very differently to the same jokes, especially when they are the direct targets of those jokes, knowledge of one’s target is most necessary. Practical jokers boast of their ability to size up potential targets and their likely responses to the fact of being pranked (Marsh 2015). To skirt the boundaries of appropriateness outrageously but nevertheless win the support of the target is the apex of the practical joker’s art; the fact that the programmer calling himself Looooooka and his collaborators created this elaborate video and posed on YouTube indicates that they were proud of this joke, and that they counted it a success.

The two minutes of convulsive laughter from the target also mark this as a highly successful joke. The vernacular ideology of this genre holds that a good practical joke is one in which “the victim can laugh along”. Unlike arguments over the propriety and funniness of verbal jokes, which can be endless (Kramer 2011), disagreements over specific practical joke enactments are definitively decided once it becomes clear that the target has played along. The laughter of the target indicates support, agreement, and appreciation for the joke (Hay 2001). Because practical jokes are enacted rather than being narrated, the identity of the target is unambiguous, in contrast to fixed verbal jokes that are characterised by ambiguity between the narrated and narrative event. Those who self-identify with the target of a contentious verbal joke have a strong debating position, but as Kramer (2011) found it is not unassailable.

The vernacular ideology of laughter also holds that laughter is an automatic, unfalsifiable sign of authentic amusement (Fine 1984: 97) and that the amount of laughter is a direct reflection of the degree of amusement and support for the joke. The target in this case laughs so much that he seems unable, for the time being, to commit to any particular course of action; he circles, picking up objects and replacing them, moving back and forth, and periodically erupting in loud laughter. As Wallace Chafe (2007) points out, laughter literally incapacitates any other action. However, laughter is not a mere reflex, and it may conceal as much as it reveals. Considering all that the target of a practical joke must cope with at the moment of enactment, doing nothing is not a bad strategy. Particularly in booby-trap jokes like this one, the targets are aware that their reactions are being closely watched by the jokers and a cohort of supportive onlookers. They are in a bind: when one is the target of a practical joke, support means agreeing with a violation against oneself, at least for a short while, but failure to laugh along runs the risk of marking one as an anti-social, humourless misfit (Smith 2009).

Vernacular theory posits laughter as an uncontrollable outburst and thus a true reflection of attitudes and feelings. The idea is that funniness is a quality that resides somehow in jokes, and that anyone with the right emotional and intellectual equipment will perceive it; having perceived the humour, the assumption is that laughter is virtually automatic. This thinking is useful and necessary, because jokes demand that their audiences take a moral position, albeit a playful one. One cannot remain morally neutral about a joke that one claims to understand. Both joke tellers and audiences fear that some of the stigma of transgressive jokes rubs off on them. This suspicion has been dubbed the “moral stickiness” of jokes (Fine et al. 2010: 313). People commonly laugh at a joke but also try to distance themselves from the moral positions that their laughter might suggest (Hay 2001). Given this scenario, it is useful to be able to claim that one laughed because one could not help it. The vernacular theory pushes responsibility for humour support away from the speaker and onto an external source, namely the purported inherent “funniness” of the joke itself. Ideas about the irrepressibility of laughter reinforce this stance.

Although clearly successful, the Slovenian programmers’ prank contains indications that the jokers were aware of the potential for going too far. These indications are the cues that they inserted in the original enactment for the benefit of their target, and others that framed their video version for a distant, anonymous audience. Several devices seem to be intended to persuade the boss that their intentions were benign. The “Welcome back boss” sign, a “red carpet” made of paper, and the playing of the “Imperial March” were all reminders that despite his current disrespectful treatment he was indeed the boss and that the degradation he was undergoing was a ritual reversal, not a permanent one. The hyperbole in some of these signs also cued the play frame, reinforcing the message that what was happening was temporary and not meant to have lasting effects.

The joke concluded with a text with the instruction, “Smile. You’re on Candid Camera.” Since it was introduced in Alan Funt’s reality television show in the 1940s, this formula has become synonymous with practical jokes, and its use here provides an unmistakable explanation of what is going on, in case the target missed it. The formula is also highly significant for an understanding of the reception of humour, because it reflects the imperious way in which jokes of all kinds demand an audience response.

Simply put, jokers are aware of their transgressions, and they seek support for them from salient audiences.

For the YouTube audience who would be unaware of the original context and are not part of the joking relationships where the joke arose, additional humour cues are added. Like those aimed at the target, the film cues mostly relied on comic hyperbole. The Twentieth Century Fox fanfare cues fiction. The setting and motivation are carefully laid out — Ljubljana; the boss is away; the workers are inspired by the popular and widespread wrapped office desk meme. The audience is allowed entry to the backstage domain of the joke, which itself uses comically sped-up video accompanied by the “Yakkety Sax” theme, familiar from the *Benny Hill Show* as a marker of comedy. In this segment the jokers make sure to point out their careful attention to detail — such as wrapping the boss’s slippers; effort and attention to detail are indications that a practical joke is meant to be benign. Finally, the video shows fully two minutes of the target’s laughter, proof positive according to the vernacular ideology of this genre that this joke should be counted among the good ones.

The Internet audience also appears to have reacted favourably to Looooooka’s joke. The video was uploaded on 8 February 2010, and by 6 January 2015 it had been viewed 293,441 times on YouTube. It had 600 likes, 38 dislikes, and 151 comments, all but 19 of which were in English. When jokes are performed in the digital realm for audiences that are at a spatial and temporal distance, “likes” may be taken as the equivalent of physical laughter; that is, as shows of support for the joke. Although the numbers are hugely uneven, the presence of as small number of “dislikes” (the digital equivalent of unlaughter) is a sign of disagreement. There is no way to know who posted the likes and dislikes, or why they did so, but the comments contain some significant patterns.

Many comments expressed amusement and support for the joke and the video either directly or indirectly:¹

- (1)
 - a. Hahahaha! Genijalno! (“Ingenious”) (Mad Rat4)
 - b. Sweet! Good job! (bluenoserr3)
 - c. This is funny and even funnier when he curses in English at the end. Well done. (bob8jelly1)
 - d. THIS SIR, IS ART (A13X5TR3MB)
 - e. The Imperial March was the golden touch (MasterChiefTwago)

With the exception of (e), it is unclear to what extent commenters distinguished between the narrative (the video) and the narrated event, but the distinction does not matter. If the content of the video was found to be heinous, then attention to its production values would be out of place. There is a complex relationship between aestheticisation and appreciation in jokes. Jokers draw attention to their skill to show that their motivations are benign, and audiences can point to the skilful construction of the joke as a way of dodging moral responsibility for appreciating it (Fine et al. 2010; Marsh 2014).

Some viewers responded by making jokes of their own:

- (2)

- a. Did you wrap the left over newspaper with newspaper? :D (MelodyVocaloidChii)
- b. 19 newspapers were injured in the making of this video. (Priest214)
- c. he was laughing like a BOSS! get it :D (The Brony Talk)

To reply to a joke with another joke is a common technique for showing support (Hay 2001). The response maintains the play frame that the first joker opened, thereby implicitly agreeing that play was appropriate, especially when the follow-up jokes are related to the original in topic or theme.

Not all comments were supportive, however. A significant number expressed unlaughter and open disagreement:

- (3)
- a. well nice effort they put in, but not so funny (nixxblikka)
 - b. WHY is he laughing, id be pissed if somebody did that to me (Jordan Guerrero)
 - c. I wonder how much work they could have gotten done while they were doing that. (josh b)
 - d. see, if you put that much work into working you might get something useful done :P (jsadecki)

Part of the vernacular ideology of humour is that it is antithetical to the work ethic, although studies show that a healthy joking culture is beneficial in the workplace (Fine 1988; Plester & Orams 2008). Normal work is literally impossible so long as all the tools are wrapped in newspaper; practical jokes of the booby trap type insert elements of play into the everyday environment, blunting the usefulness of tools and implements and temporarily turning them into merely decorative objects. From a narrow utilitarian viewpoint, the jokers were wasting time and impeding productivity, both transgressions that would normally incur opposition and disagreement.

Closely related to the subject of wasting time at work is the matter of wasting other resources. This topic incited an open and lengthy argument among viewers, beginning with someone who complained that the jokers had wasted a lot of paper:

- (4)
- a. Wow meant to be funny but a good waste of paper. All of that paper could have been taken to a recycling company instead of being used for something so goofy. (Honey360Bee)
 - b. You must be AWESOME at parties..... (Donald Spry)
 - c. What makes you think they didn't do that after the prank was finished? How did you come to the assumption that all they did was whaste paper? That's kinda of like me judging you and calling you names like "Captian Buzzkill" or worse "Mr. Poophead", Don't turn a good laugh into something negative (plumbpetti)
 - d. Ok Mr. Poophead?! How old are you to be talking like a 3 year old? And you know what we don't know if they really did recycle that people when they were finished. They could have tossed it into the trash can like common garbage. You can call me all the names you want you 3 year old child. But the fact is yes they did waste paper. And it all could have ended up in the trash. (Honey360Bee)

- e. wow, really? i was just making a simple small comment not to over generalized, jump off your fucking menstrual cycle bitch, eat a snickers! (plumbpetti)

In this lengthy comment thread (only some of which is reproduced above), Honey360Bee's observation was treated as an instance of unlaughter, and as Kramer (2011) observed during rape joke arguments, her unlaughter was criticised as being unsociable. Unlaughter kills the play frame and carries implicit criticism of not only the jokers but also anyone who supports them by expressing amusement. When she labels her interlocutor's name-calling puerile, he or she reacts with an even stronger *ad hominem* attack, based on the contemporary element in humour ideology that associated humourlessness with women. Although we cannot be certain of the gender of this or any other online speaker, gender-based arguments remain powerful in arguments over jokes.

Honey360Bee's critique is an assault on one of the hallmarks that the jokers used to establish the play frame — the deliberate flaunting of wastefulness. The office prank was a massive waste of paper. Like other versions of this meme, it depended on the availability of generous amounts of material that was put to extraordinary and temporary use. In other versions of the joke, the *materia iocosa* is not newspaper but large amounts of aluminium foil, Post-It notes, or Styrofoam packing peanuts, all of which are put to extraordinary use. Within the play frame, questions of cost and practical concerns like how to dispose of the mess are temporarily laid aside. By its very wastefulness, the play frame is a violation of everyday norms.

Almost one-third of all comments focused not on the joke itself or the perpetrators, but on the target:

(5)

- a. great boss! great sense of humour! (Matt)
- b. That's probably the coolest Boss you can get! (nukeurhouse12 3)
- c. "Hahahahahahahahahaahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaahhaahahahahahaha hahahahaha.....you're all fired!" (cardinal6100)
- d. This prank was Before or after your salary reduction!?!? :D (MrKAFUCKable)

These comments and many others like them express admiration for the boss because of his supportive reaction to being the target of a prank. In the ideology of humour for practical jokes, targets who laugh along are more than being sociable; they are “good sports,” willing to give up a small portion of their self-image for the enjoyment of the group (Fine 1988: 123). Some commentators are envious because the interaction between jokers and target in this instance suggests a close, comfortable relationship between boss and employees.

In addition to being a good sport, these comments praised the boss's forbearance, suggesting, sometimes in a jocular way, that he could have disagreed and imposed serious punishment on the pranksters. Possible sanctions mentioned ranged from being told to clean up, to a salary cut, to (most frequently mentioned) being fired. This topic gives clear expression to the hypothetical disagreement at the heart of the joke. As outsiders, the YouTube audience lacked the personal knowledge that the jokers presumably had about their target and so they may overestimate the risk; but even so, the hypothesised risk indexes an important transgressive element in the joke; namely its

upending of normal respectful relations between superordinate and subordinates, and its treatment of a superordinate as a plaything. By pointing it out, the viewers bestow praise on the target and on the jokers, who had the boldness to take on the risk and the skill and judgment to carry it off. Talking about the possibility of a bad outcome is thus an effective way of supporting the joke.

Collectively, the comments on the office prank video reflect the dual character of the practical joke as both transgression and playful art. In the joke's reception by the Internet audience, support and appreciation coexist with acknowledgment of the violations that the jokers have perpetrated. The norms violated—respect for a superordinate, the importance of work and productivity, even the value of newspaper—are still valued; not one of them is thrown out completely. At the same time, the jokers' skill and daring are praised even as they violate these valued norms. The audience responds to the joke by countenancing the way it violated norms to which they are committed. This is the state of affairs described by Thomas Veatch (1998: 209) as a "tight-rope walk of the emotions," which he argues is at the root of amusement and humour.

3. One and a half meters

Just Another Office Prank was not a contentious joke overall; even for distant observers, the disagreements over it were mainly hypothetical. However, the nature of humour also allows for jokes that are more obviously transgressive, but incite little or no argument. As a case study, consider the following account of a reciprocal practical joke sequence from a small dairy farming district in the South Island of New Zealand. The story is found in the newspaper obituary of a man named Bill Hathorne:

He was a great practical joker, quick to initiate reprisals if anyone played a practical joke on him. Once a Linkwater valley dairy farmer was silly enough to remove a set of steps outside a gypsy caravan ... while Bill was inside living it up at a party. They all laughed, particularly the farmer, when Bill came to leave, opened the caravan door and fell 1.5m to the ground.

Next morning the farmer went out to milk his 200 or so cows. Imagine his surprise when he found someone had been in his unlocked cowshed before him and totally dismantled the milking machine. Hathorne had struck again.

(Grady 1997)

There can be no doubt that both of these practical jokes were transgressive. The vernacular ideology of humour for this genre frequently contains a rule of thumb that specifies the limits to this kind of play: there should be no actual physical danger and no permanent or lasting impact on the circumstances of the target outside of the joke. In my interviews with Indiana residents about Halloween pranks, for example, one person after another reiterated the mantra that pranks should do no serious harm, but only a little inconvenience. Any mess that was created had to be something that could be easily cleaned up. Similar codes apply in rural areas throughout North America (Siporin 1994: 55). Similarly, when practical jokes are performed in public, those responsible frequently

make a great show of pointing out that they are mindful of limits. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where students are renowned for carrying out elaborate displays of public foolery known as hacks, the students also claim to adhere to what they call “The Hacker Ethic”, which includes the following admonitions: be safe; do not damage anything; do not damage anyone, either physically, mentally or emotionally; and be funny (MIT Museum 2012). A similar code entitled the “good taste policy” governed a radio station’s limits for the prank phone calls that they would play on targets for their customers. The things that would not pass the test were “any medical issue; anything related to employment; any legal matters; anything illegal; false emergencies; or death” (*Yougotpranked.com* 2006).

By this standard, the practical joke sequence described here would seem to go too far. A fall of one and a half metres could really hurt, and a milking machine is an expensive piece of equipment whose proper functioning is vital to the economic wellbeing of a dairy farmer, to say nothing of the physical comfort of the cows. Yet it seems that the original rural New Zealand audience to these jokes approved of them. The inclusion of these stories in Bill’s obituary suggests that they were a part of the local joking repertoire, which in turn suggests that his acquaintances supported the jokes. Failed practical jokes within an in-group tend not to be mentioned again, because unlaughter throws a poor light on both jokers and audiences. It highlights the transgression of the jokers and casts doubts on the audience’s sense of humour; accordingly, in situations where it is important to keep harmonious relations, jokes that are not supported do not remain in the in-group’s humour repertoire (Fine et al. 2005). Shared laughter at a joke enhances solidarity, but unlaughter highlights and promotes disagreement and is therefore avoided. Since an obituary is not the place to raise disagreements, the fact that this sequence of jokes is recounted here suggests appreciation, not condemnation.

There are clear signs that the reporter also supported the joke, as reflected in his choice of the punning headline phrase “Made a Big Imprint” (a reference to what it might have looked like when he fell one and half metres to the ground, leaving an indentation like a character in a Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner cartoon from Warner Brothers). In newspaper accounts of practical jokes, the use of puns is a common tactic, at least in New Zealand: see, for example, the following story, which appeared under the headline, “Hatching Revenge”:

ARNA LOVES a practical joke, and plays plenty of them. She works in a Gloucester Street shop and her long-suffering workmates finally had the last laugh recently. One had rung her, pretending to be from a radio station. To win a prize, all Arna had to do was cluck like a chicken for 30 seconds. She did it. Much laughter ensued. Her fellow workers say their victory was “far from poultry”.

(Darling 2004)

Such puns are the journalistic equivalent of following a verbal joke performance with more jokes, long recognised as a way of offering appreciation and support of humour.

The fact that the story does not report whether or not Hathorne was injured at all adds to the impression that the dangerous joke at his expense was supported. We are told that he was a known practical joker, which supplies one possible reason for

countenancing the severe joke on him, for in both New Zealand and the United States folk morality deems any practical joker as fair game for targeting. Those who dish it out cannot complain if they receive similar treatment in turn. Further, locals in the rural setting likely had a different assessment of tampering with a milking machine than that held by distant observers. To urban dwellers reading this story in the newspaper, a milking machine is an exotic, expensive, and mysterious piece of equipment, but to dairy farmers themselves it is an everyday thing. Evidence from rural regions in Canada suggests that tampering with farm equipment like this was a regular part of ritual play and practical jokes, for example during the ritual play of a post-wedding shivaree (Greenhill 1989; 2010). The local context produces a humour repertoire that implicitly specifies the local limits of play.

When it comes to practical jokes, in practice it seems that the readily described limits on the content of the jokes matter less than their contexts. Some jokers endeavour to “make sure it’s play” (Bowman 1982: 71-72) by sticking to occasions that the community recognises as appropriate for this kind of play (Halloween, April Fools’ Day, weddings, and birthdays meet this criterion in North America). Above all, jokers report that the most important factor in achieving a successful joke reception is to “know your target” and be able to predict how he or she will respond. Many jokes are limited to close friends or relatives, because familiarity improves the ability to predict reactions. It also increases the likelihood of a positive reception, because the relationship between jokers and target supplies the information that targets need in deciding whether or not to play along.

Since the vernacular ideology of practical joking holds that the target’s response carries the most weight in determining appropriateness, locals would have been able to support the first joke in this sequence because Hathorne seemed to support the joke himself. In this case, the target offered implicit support for the joke on him by replying with a retaliatory joke of his own. Importantly, his joke resembles the first one in style and in transgressiveness. In these situations, jokers and targets compete to outdo each other in violation while staying within the locally-recognised canons of appropriate joking style. Hathorne’s retaliatory joke, like the pun in the obituary headline, maintains the play frame established by the first joke and builds on it.

The retaliatory practical joke is one of the most common responses that targets make, often leading to extending sequences of joke and counter-joke that build in intensity and competitiveness. If actual retaliation does not occur, targets may still react with various formulaic but playful threats of revenge. The phenomenon is widespread enough that it deserves some explanation.

The explanation lies in the mixed feelings that practical jokes often arouse in their victims. In my conversations with the targets of practical jokes, they usually express a mixture of feelings. Deciding whether or not to countenance the joke’s transgression, and the implications of that choice, can be a convoluted process. By retaliating in a playful mode Hathorne diverted attention from the question of whether or not he was really amused by being tricked into taking a heavy fall. Instead, he got even, not by complaining or bringing charges, but staying within the joking frame already established. Onlookers—including the owner of the milking machine—were enjoined by the vernacular ideology of joking to countenance the second joke so long as it matched the original in style. One joke is thought to justify another. The joking frame thus allows

participants to vent their disagreement with their treatment, but under cover and without open unlaughter and the social disruption that it can cause. Sequences of retaliatory jokes are another index of the disagreement —both hypothetical and not so hypothetical but repressed— at the heart of this joking genre.

Jokes in general exhibit this sequencing feature. One joke, whether verbal or practical, seems to call for another, sometimes creating what has been called “joke orgies” (Fry 1968: 106-109). No other expressive forms have this characteristic to the same degree as jokes. It may be that as practical joke targets index disagreement with competitive joking, so do the audiences of verbal jokes. The disagreement may reflect the recipient’s true feelings (sometimes outside of their awareness), or it may be hypothetical, pointing to the transgression of limits by reminding us that someone, somewhere, would object to the way the joke has played with them. Either way, it is at the heart of the joke and the pleasure it brings.

4. The importance and unimportance of joke limits

The vernacular ideology of humour contains a ready supply of thoughts about what the limits of good pranking are. However, despite the proliferation of ideas about what constitute the limits of joking, code and humorous performance practice do not completely agree. Giseline Kuipers (2006: 156, 167) found that when she asked her Dutch informants to describe what kind of jokes they liked, they usually answered by pointing to the jokes they disliked, that is, the jokes that went over the limits, but the same people readily transgressed the same limits in their own joke telling. In the second example we have seen another example in which objective codes of practice seem to have been disregarded. In the first, despite the successful outcome, viewers were still aware of the violations that the joke contained.

The power of the play frame is such that, under the right conditions, anything can go in humour. But limits are far from irrelevant in humour. They are extremely relevant and ever-present. Without limits there would be no humour, because there would be no transgression (Lockyer & Pickering 2005: 14). The benign violation model suggests that humorousness lies in neither the form nor the content of jokes, but in the attitude of the receivers. However, the model is silent about which violations lend themselves to playful acceptance, and it must be silent, because there are as many reasons for both humour support and unlaughter as there are individual audiences. As a result, “nothing is funny to everyone and anything seems potentially funny to someone” (La Fave et al. 1976: 85). This thinking goes against the vernacular ideology of humour, according to which certain violations are never tolerable, and certain topics never appropriate for jokes. Vernacular, informal humour codes that specify limits to good jokes coexist with good jokes that happily flout those same codes, and it is the awareness of the former that makes the latter so enjoyable — and contentious. Within the humorous mode “all rules, including the rules of humour, become temporarily inoperative” (Kuipers 2006: 166).

Humour support forms, including laughter, all work by maintaining and building on the play frame that the joke initiated. Within that frame, questions of what the joke really means, or what it says about those who appreciate it, are not completely forgotten,

but are temporarily weakened. Appreciation and agreement may both be involved, but the essential characteristic is the reigning spirit of play.

If we recognise that amusement is play, then amusement is not something that happens to us, but something we choose to do, if not always deliberately or self-consciously. The belief that one cannot help but be amused is part of the vernacular ideology of humour; it allows this play to continue by disguising motives, sometimes even from the jokers and audiences themselves. In play and humour such thoughts and motives are placed into an “as if” mood, a fantasy realm, where they are not hidden so much as rendered in temporarily unreal or innocuous terms. Within this realm humour allows limitless play, whose pleasure is only enhanced when participants have an inkling that they might be going too far.

Note

¹ The original spelling and punctuation have been retained in all transcribed comments.

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