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# A requirement and challenge of joke-ability in humor researcher

## A fusion autoethnographic analysis

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – With particular reference to qualitative humor research, this paper aims to look at fieldwork from a new angle. The purpose of this paper is to address humor research foci by completing a fusion autoethnographic analysis of how lead author used humor to interact with the participants. This analysis outlines the two examples of joke-ability; specifically self-deprecating humor and more generally attempts to blend in.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper draws on fusion autoethnography where Author 2 actively worked to help Author 1 push deeper into her use of humor and its historical context within her life. This created a dialogue to deepen the self-analysis on Author 1's humor methodology.

**Findings** – The use of humor, by humor researchers, may be of particular importance if the researched groups, society, or nation values humor in both formal and informal contexts. Researcher's humor can be a spontaneous and dynamic way of learning and engaging with the researched environment.

**Originality/value** – This paper aims to be a starting point for the discussion about the understudied issues of place and role of the use of humor by a humor researcher, and the challenges of conducting humor research within an educational context. The innovative fusion autoethnographic analysis helps to reflect upon researcher's role and behavior. The study contributes to humor research methodology by exploring the effects of researcher's use of humor on both the researcher-participant relationship and the data.

**Keywords** Qualitative research, Autoethnographic analysis, Humour research

**Paper type** Research paper

### Challenges of humor research

With humor research being viewed as frivolous (Bhat, 2005), there is a large omission and a lack of research within certain areas of educational research. For example, while there is a significant number of research studies and publications which investigate stress factors for teachers (e.g. Carlyle and Woods, 2002; Griva and Joekes, 2003; Kyriacou, 2001), there appears to be few research studies focused on the relationship between humor and teachers' and students' lives. It is also important to note that many existing publications on educational humor are out of date, which shows limited advances within the field.

It appears that rather than being a coherent body of literature on humor in education, it is not systematic enough and the naturalistic descriptive and experimental studies are rare in this field (Banas *et al.*, 2011). The existing qualitative studies into humor in education concern among others: gender of pupils and teachers (Hutchings *et al.*, 2007; Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Thomas and Al-Maskati, 1997); novice teachers' dilemmas (Goodson and Walker, 1991; Bondy *et al.*, 2007); teaching methods (Ulloth, 2002; Vogel, 1995); classroom management (Martin, 2003; Monroe and Obidah, 2004); teacher's personal qualities (Davies, 1990; Horng *et al.*, 2005; Hutchings *et al.*, 2007; Kher *et al.*, 1999) teachers' well-being and workplace culture



(Bullough, 2012; Mawhinney, 2008b; Miller, 2008; Woods, 1979; Richards, 1996); and the benefits of using humor at school (Bullough, 2012; Dudzikowa, 1996).

Aside from only a few of these studies (Mawhinney, 2008a; Woods, 1979; Richards, 1996), most do not explore how humor is used in the staffroom. The staffroom is the only place in schools where adults get together without students or administrators around. There are both exposure and personality “nudity” elements in staffroom humor. The freedom of being in an adult-only environment that is less formal than a classroom reveals itself in teachers’ use of humor. Joining in, as a researcher, is therefore being “plugged into” the context and “tasting” the atmosphere of a particular staffroom. Therefore, in this particular field, the application of humor on the part of a researcher may be necessary.

However, there are many unknown aspects when conducting a study on humor. Although the advice on how to approach participants and how to build rapport is available in different books on social research or methodology (e.g. Bryman, 2008; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), with few qualitative studies in the humor research area, there is a lack of guidelines on how to effectively carry out humor research within an educational context. The search for guidelines in the literature on how to be funny when conducting humor research failed miserably, but the closest topics we have come across were texts showing criticism of an expectation for writings about humor research to be funny.

Martin (2007), for example, said that expecting texts about humor research to be funny is similar to assuming that studies about human sexuality should be titillating or depression research should be gloomy. Raskin (1985) comments on such expectations without controversial comparisons, but still in an emotional manner as he points out:

Others have found it necessary to apologize, somewhat curiously, for the fact that their books or articles on humor are not funny (which in most cases they are not, and this book is, and intended as, no exception, no apology!) or, alternatively, castigate their predecessors, competitors and (I am afraid) successors for having written unfunny stuff on humor (Raskin, 1985, p. 7).

However, we believe that although writing about humor in a humorous way may not be crucial for the presentation of research findings or argument, using humor during the research can be of great importance as it can help others accessing and gathering the research data. It is worth noting, however, that humor research as a field of knowledge has been struggling for decades to be treated seriously and not associated with telling jokes (Raskin, 2008). Thus, potentially Maria’s (Author 1’s) approach adds to this struggle. On the other hand, it could be argued that this study takes on the challenge of exploring the expectations of humor researchers.

Interestingly, Greengross (2008) notices that “studies of humor are overwhelmingly conducted in the laboratory, and laboratory studies notably do not reflect the natural occurrences of humor and laughter” (Greengross, 2008, p. 94). Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a lack of guidelines for humor researchers to be funny since such advice would be only relevant to qualitative research where a researcher actually meets and spontaneously interacts with participants. Thus, our quest for humor researchers’ guidelines was unsuccessful, but it shows the importance of exploring how Maria attempted to establish guidelines in the field through fusion autoethnography.

## Methodology

In order to provide a context of how we collectively explored Maria’s approach to humor research and to take an inward look, we need to provide a context for the initial

humor study. Below are two series of methods: the initial study followed by the autoethnographic study. Whenever first person references below are used in the methodology or findings, they refer to Maria. Lynnette (Author 2) is the theoretical voice in the paper that is found mainly in the front and back of the paper, with pieces streamlining throughout the findings section.

*The initial study: teachers and staffroom humor (Maria)*

The initial research studied teachers' interactions and use of humor within a school's staffroom. The purpose of the exploration was to show the importance of staffroom humor in teachers' professional lives. The research questions concerned the details about staffroom humor, workplace culture, and workplace relationships. Specifically, there were three overarching questions that guided the study:

*RQ1.* How do teaching staff use humor in the staffroom?

*RQ2.* What influences staff use of humor in the staffroom?

*RQ3.* Are there inter-school differences in the way that humor is used?

To conduct the research, I used an exploratory multi-case study method and what Bryman (2008) calls a comparative design. Following Yin's (2009) terminology, the "case" in this research was the use of staffroom humor and the "units of analysis" were: observed behaviors of teachers of three different educational settings, the staffrooms' funny artifacts, and group and individual interviews with the teachers.

Having taken that into consideration and also understanding the neuralgic nature of conducting research into teachers' privacy zones (i.e. staffrooms) that is expressed in the literature (Kainan, 1994; Mawhinney, 2012; Richards, 1996), I decided that conducting a relatively brief and, therefore, not too intrusive study would be most considerate in terms of participants' well-being. Thus, I conducted three semi-structured group interviews with teachers at three different secondary education settings in England. Subsequently, I conducted staffroom observations at all three schools. I visited each staffroom four to ten times at intervals between 55 minutes to 1.5 hours. These visits were structured to be brief with a purpose. The observations were unstructured participant observations recorded by means of extensive notes. However, I also tried to take some notes during or after those observations.

*Fusion autoethnographic approach: humor researcher's self-exploration*

The subject of this paper, however, is not the methods used in the research, but the approach of the researcher's use of humor while collecting the research data. This analysis is important because Cooper and White (2012) argue that the qualitative researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and data analysis. They go on to explain that the researcher does not stand outside his/her research but is actively involved, not only in the research, but also in the interpretation of data and construction of the research findings. The researcher must always be ready, willing, and able to identify his or her assumptions pertaining to the study at hand in whatever form the study may take.

Originally, this research was set up to investigate staffroom humor at three educational settings; however, humor between participants and the researcher gradually became another focus. The issues of relationship between the participants and me and the use of humor between us emerged during the fieldwork and became a

crucial part of the study. For this study, participants were informed from the beginning that what I was researching was workplace humor. Participants' awareness, or lack thereof, into what is exactly being studied had an impact on both my use of humor with the participants and participants' use of humor with me.

According to Morreall (1991), sharing humor, like sharing food and sharing music, is an ancient social gesture bringing people together. Using humor with participants seemed a natural and obvious activity to me. The rapport with participants was also built by means of my non-humorous behaviors. The creation of rapport with participants required me to embrace the opportunities, behave spontaneously, and use different personal qualities depending on the situation. When considering how to approach the research questions, I had to face the following problem: Should I offer my own humor exposure and let the participants be the audience/observers of my use of humor?

My use of humor with participants can be seen as taking up a role of a "wise fool" – whose use of humor goes beyond amusement and serves as a critical function for questioning social conventions (Vanhoozer, 2005). "The fool subverts worldly wisdom by invoking a different logic" (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 439). Since "fools are free of law and order, and free of terrors of reality" (Styan, 1975), they also escape or minimize consequences of their actions. Fooling granted me a certain power position that helped me gain a lot of insights into participants' lives, while at the same time controlling the research situation (from rapport to data collection).

Using my fieldnotes and memos, I conducted an autoethnographic analysis in order to understand my own use of humor with the teachers. I used this method because, at its core, autoethnography attempts to blend the personal and cultural understanding (Ellis, 2004) by theorizing the self in the research process (McClaurin, 2001). Ellis (2004) discussed the wide range of variety in autoethnography approaches from ethnographic memoir to co-constructive autoethnographic approaches. The type used in this analysis is called fusion autoethnography (Mawhinney and Petchauer, 2013). This is a multi-authored autoethnographic approach where the exploration is divided between two people. The initial researcher explores "the 'look inward' that exposes a vulnerable self in relationship to and through cultural interpretations. The corresponding wide-angle lens that focuses on the outward social and cultural aspects is orchestrated by the second researcher" (Mawhinney and Petchauer, 2013, p. 7).

Maria worked with Lynnette on this project, as Lynnette did explore the use of humor in the staffroom in a past project. We decided to work together we had a common interest in humor research. Also, our individual failed search around how to do humor research made this fusion autoethnographic exploration important for us individually, but we saw the need to discuss these issues in order to help fill the gap in the literature – this is why we opted to use fusion autoethnography.

In this analysis, Maria pulled out two sections of her fieldnotes and memos from the initial study that outlined her use of humor. She developed three codes to look at the data and her use of humor with participants: humor facilitating data collection, negotiating access, and rapport. After the initial analysis, Maria decided to focus on two areas of systematic use of her joke-ability: self-deprecating humor and attempts to blend in with participants. Lynnette implemented a wide-angle lens by reading and posing questions on the two areas based on the limited constructs within humor research. Lynnette actively worked to help Maria push deeper into her use of humor and its historical context within her life. This created a dialogue to deepen the self-analysis on Maria's humor methodology.

One detailed example of the process looked as such: Maria coded instances of self-deprecating humor in her fieldnotes; then, Maria selected a portion of those codes and wrote a reflection on the code; Lynnette would pose deeper questions about Maria's background and use of humor. A sample of the questioning is: "Why did you choose to do something as vulnerable as self-deprecating humor? In other words, why make fun of yourself? Is this something you always do? Is this a protection mechanism? This is where you need to dig deep" (notes from 5/13/13); Lynnette posed the questions to Maria initially during Skype dialogue sessions. Since we both live in different countries, Skype was the main median for our dialogue sessions; Maria would then go back to reflecting on the questions and write responses to Lynnette's inquiries; the process would then start from the beginning until deeper levels of discovery were satisfied by both parties.

The data analysis continued with the writing process. Lynnette pieced together the paper from Maria's initial writings and musings on her use of self-deprecating humor and blending in as a researcher. Lynnette then proceeded to draft the paper into its current state for two reasons. One, we were able to use the findings section, as pieced together by Lynnette, as a way for Maria to then go back and review the information reflectively and address more theoretical questions that arose from Lynnette. Second, Lynnette was able to infuse the theoretical perspective into the writing. Thus, when the process was complete, it was a fusion of Maria and Lynnette, as is the reason for this methodology choice.

We found that the use of fusion autoethnography provided richness to the dialogue about humor research. More importantly, it helped Maria explore her relationship and positionality as a researcher on a deeper level. Where areas of Maria's past experiences were delved into, sometimes uncomfortable, she was able to really put a mirror up to her role as a humor researcher.

### **Self-deprecating humor**

It could be argued that using self-deprecating humor with participants is a risky endeavor, as it can make the researcher vulnerable and thus unprotected. According to Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006), vulnerability of self-deprecating humor lies in possible misinterpretations of it. In my case, however, self-deprecating humor is my life-companion, and I treat it as a domesticated beast. In order to explain, I ought to discuss my very first experiences of humor.

My dad introduced us (me and my three siblings) to the world of comedies. He offered us something I would call humor training. I remember numerous occasions when we sat in front of the television to watch a comedy together and discussed and analyzed humor used in the films in an "online" manner. Part of our humor training was to provide immediate and humorous remarks to funny moments in the films. We often sat in the kitchen, and my dad taught us how to use humor to disregard a criticism in a subtle way or how to create a quick ripostes. This "out-joking each other" often included ridicule and was my dad's way to teach us to distance ourselves and the way to cope with the problems and conflicts, which was a normal part of living with siblings.

Self-deprecating humor had a special place in the humor training as my dad always stated that an inability to laugh at oneself was the worst personality trait ever. He saw it as a way of fighting with stuck-upness, over-seriousness, and arrogance that can always creep into our lives. He wanted us to be self-critical but not in the way that causes complexes and low self-esteem. On the contrary, he saw it as a way to attract people and to make and keep friends. So, I used it in various aspects of my life for those reasons.

For example, in school, I was always the class clown, which helped me overcome my shyness and to build and maintain friendly relationships with teachers and classmates. Moreover, I would classify many of the experiences of performing as a class clown as ecstatic intellectual satisfaction, “triumph of narcissism, the triumphant assertion of the invulnerability of the self” (Freud, 1927, as cited in Meissner, 1999, p. 136). Such performances also provided me with the pleasurable moments of levity within the serious mode of a lesson.

Therefore, I never found the use of self-deprecating humor as a self-harming device that deprives me of my worth. My choice to use this type of humor with participants can be explained by the dynamics of the researcher-researched relationship. Using self-deprecating humor on my part as a researcher was about attacking oneself and not the participants. Any humor directed at participants may have been perceived as ungrateful and possibly even rude treatment of the “hosts” of the studied setting. Except, of course, situations when I felt welcomed into the teasing game.

Thus, I found myself using self-deprecating humor in order to achieve five goals: to accustom the participants with the researcher and research; to highlight my modesty and down-to-earth approach to my own role and work; to sound approachable and friendly; to encourage participants to open up; and to provoke free use of humor on the part of participants. These reasons were underpinned by a great sympathy toward teachers and their occupation, since teachers are faced with constant criticism and they undergo all kinds of invigilation in their professional lives (Dainton, 2006; Woods and Jeffrey, 2002).

During the research, I often found most of my self-deprecating humor revolved around my immigrant status. As a woman who grew up in Poland, my accent is quite noticeable to others. I found myself using my accent as the icebreaker to many initial humorous interactions with the teachers. For example, prior to an interview, I had the following notation in my fieldnotes:

When one of the teachers was reading my letter (describing the research aim) and a consent form, I interrupted him saying: “Don’t worry, I don’t work for the KGB [secret intelligence agency under the former Soviet Union] any more,” ridiculing my Eastern European accent (Memo, June 28, 2011).

There follows another instance where I was preparing an interview with a teacher. The following is what I noted: “When asked what my research was about, I replied, “I don’t know, I don’t speak English” (Memo, June 28, 2011). The joke behind my immigrant status became a part of my shtick with the teachers.

This is noted in the following excerpt:

Staff joked about me secretly recording them and suggested that I probably placed bugs in different places. I played along admitting that the place was wired and I work for the KGB (Fieldnotes, August 2011).

The re-occurrence of such jokes was linked to the fact that I wanted to refute any potential doubts teachers might have had about my cultural and linguistic adaptability to conduct the research. Humor production is one of the greatest challenges in the acquisition of second language and, therefore, I as an immigrant, felt that I should prove, by means of humor, that my linguistic and cultural skills are sufficiently proficient to allow me for a full comprehension of teachers’ humor.

However, targeting my immigrant status may be perceived as racist humor and thus offensive. Self-deprecating humor, even if targeting ethnic background, is safer because it is self-directed. In other words, I had more right to target myself than anyone else.

It is worth looking at the humane humor rules that advise among others: not to target an attribute that cannot be changed, but instead advise to target oneself, (i.e. to use self-deprecating humor), and to target our own ethnic group or gender, but no other ethnic group or gender (Nilsen and Nilsen, 2013). Those rules expand Toth's (1981) idea of humor from females being underpinned by a humane rule that one should not laugh at what people cannot change such as race, sex, or appearance. It does not mean, though, that for some people such humor can be offensive. It may be argued that most acceptable laughter at the joker's self-deprecating humor comes from insiders who share similar demographics (age, gender, employment status, race) with him/her and are most familiar with the joker. Targeting immigrant status among other immigrants can make them more comfortable giving them "more right" to laugh along than non-immigrants.

According to Plester and Sayers (2007), self-deprecating humor can indicate what is acceptable to a person or can help protect oneself in advance from a likely insult. Besides, fool's power is power in weakness (Vanhoozer, 2005). Thus, in the case of self-deprecating humor, fool's weakness is his/her strength. I believe that in my case, it served as a function of accepting politically incorrect humor and subconscious prevention of unlikely, but potential doubts, participants may have had about humor research being conducted by a foreigner.

I also found that I would often use humor in instances when I would make a mistake. I found that I used humor, in these situations, in order to cover up my embarrassment. Such use of humor helped me to regain status quo in a smooth manner and give others an impression that I remained unruffled and professional in the face of adversities. This use of humor demonstrated itself during a group interview at a school that was preceded by a little confusion over my inability to switch on the audio-recorder. The following is an exchange between Paul (a teacher) and I:

PAUL: I'll tell you what I really like, when Polish people come in and offer chocolate biscuits.

MARIA: Oh yes, yeah, yeah.

PAUL: That's what I really like.

MARIA: Mhmmm. Real professionals, with not very well working devices! I know that! [laughter] (Transcript, August 2, 2011).

Also, when asking teachers to sign consent forms I often said, "Can I attack you with a consent form?" Asking teachers to sign consent forms when observing those who had already agreed to participate was hugely problematic for me, as it required interrupting both my observations and any on-going conversations. It was stopping the participants from continuing their activities to remind them about my research and me. Waving my consent forms to a person who has just sat down and had a first bite of his/her long-awaited meal seemed really unfair and inappropriate. Coming up with some original phrases or witty comments about the research or consent form was my way of reducing the impact of the interruption. This is where self-deprecating humor was a useful strategy and allowed for a smooth transition from interrupting teachers' talk to continuation thereof.

When I started my research in educational settings, I knew teachers might associate observations with some kind of inspection. The way to get accepted by them and present the research as a non-threatening activity was achieved by modesty and humility revealed in my self-deprecating humor. The message hidden in the



self-deprecating humor could be phrased like this: “Look, I can laugh at myself so you shouldn’t feel intimidated by my presence and worry about having to control your behaviors and humor in front of me. I want you to trust me and feel safe around me. I am not here to evaluate your use of humor, to criticize it or report it – I just want to have an insight into it.” Using self-deprecating humor, perhaps the most vulnerable type of humor (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp, 2006), can be also read as a sign of a person being able to handle and understand all kinds of jokes regardless of its contents or form. I hoped that my approach would forestall teachers’ attempts of mincing and would allow them to joke freely in my presence.

During the interviews, I used self-deprecating humor to ease both the participants and myself. The expert use of self-deprecating humor can be used to demonstrate a person’s modesty, put the listener at ease or to ingratiate oneself with the listener (Martin, 2007). Taking into consideration that the teachers and myself were experiencing some level of stress during the interview (which is not an everyday activity for either of us), self-deprecating humor aided in lessening the impact of the stressful event (Lefcourt, 2001). This particular function of self-deprecating humor is visible in the following fieldnote:

Victoria suggested that her male colleague should join the research, as he was supposedly funny. We joked about the consent form being actually signing up for organ donation. The male teacher [Henry] replied that his kidneys were not in a good state for donation. I decided to joke along and asked: Any other organs you’d like to donate? (laughter). Once Henry circled all “Yeses” on the consent form, I commented: “I can’t believe how naive you are” (Fieldnotes, March 2012).

In another example, the tables were turned. I used self-deprecating humor, but the teachers responded in a way to make me feel better about myself. They may have thought I was being hard on myself or had some hidden complexes, and so one of them provided me with reassurance even though they were amused by the story:

When one female lecturer was signing the consent form, I joked about her being naive to trust me. [Ed] (male lecturer) replied that I had a trustworthy face. I joked about my face looking funny and confessed to them that somebody had once told me that I had curly face and curly teeth. [Ed] asked me to present my teeth to prove this theory. I grinned and presented him my teeth but he said he couldn’t describe my teeth in these words (Fieldnotes, March 2012).

It is important to know that self-deprecating humor on the part of humor research presents certain challenges. Although I did not receive any such signals from the participants, misread self-deprecating humor on part of the researcher may undermine the research as it can suggest that the researcher does not trust his/her own abilities or is not certain about the relevance of his/her own research.

### **Blending in: the camouflaged researcher**

According to Sharma (2008), a social researcher needs a number of social qualities such as, among others, good-humor and wittiness, and this leads to a discussion about the researcher’s ability to blend in and joke along with participants. A key challenge of the observations in the context of this study was the need to observe within the staffroom. Being in the staffroom to observe could be considered an invasion of the teachers’ private enclave or even a violation of teachers’ privacy (Kainan, 1994). Yet, in order to understand humor, I needed to be in spaces where teachers would use real life humor.

The staffroom observations posed many challenges. Entering the staffroom means stepping into a unique space; potentially the only private space within school buildings.

I can imagine it is similar to going to the backstage of a theater – the makeup is off, the casual clothes on, and actors do not need to act any longer. Such theatrical comparison is aligned with the staffroom being portrayed, drawing on Goffman's (1971a, b) work, as the backstage (Calvert, 1975; Woods, 1979). The initial challenge as an "outsider" was that it can be difficult to blend in, and some of the jokes may be difficult to analyze as they are inside jokes. Additionally, within Western society, humor is valued, and it is seen as offensive to accuse somebody of a lack of humor (Chiaro, 1992; Ross, 1999; Shammi and Stuss, 1999).

Consequently, observing humor in staffrooms by teachers was sometimes misunderstood as an assessment about how funny they were. The teachers of the Devon School kept teasing me and asking about how their school performed in terms of funniness in comparison to other educational settings. Although being teased may be associated with overstepping certain boundaries and potentially hurting a person, my experiences of humor training made me perceive teasing as an intellectual game. Being resistant to personal jokes, I simply appreciated such humorous exchanges and interpreted them as a sign of being accepted and participants feeling comfortable in my presence.

Also, in the Albatros Language School, a number of teachers admitted trying to impress me with their humor on my first visit to their staffroom. Laughing with participants (while researching) is an intellectual and organizational challenge, as well as an enriching personal adventure. It is after all about becoming privy to the intimate humorous world of teachers. There are both exposure and personality in staffroom humor as the freedom of being just among adults and in a less-formal environment reveals itself in teachers' use of humor.

I thought that approaching a staffroom in a certain manner might be a key for gaining rich and "real" data. My personal approach was to be relaxed, smile a lot, and on occasion, joke and laugh along with the teachers. I also stuck a "joke-proof jacket" note on my jacket. The humorous note fulfilled a double role of identification and differentiation (2005), as it was used to help me be accepted by the participants, and it served as a reminder of my role as an outsider researcher/observer. The difficulty was in perceiving what would be appropriate and funny for a particular group of people. For example:

One male manager decided to provoke a conversation with me when we were on our own: "Tell me about your day, your life, yourself." "Getting" the joking mode, I decided to reply by lying down on the row of chairs and starting to pretend to be a psychiatric patient. I started a "pretended confession" complaining about one teacher (Archie) showing no gratitude for the Polish cheese I brought for him during the pilot study. I then said that I was missing Archie (he was one of the funniest teachers I had come across in my research) (Fieldnotes, July 2011).

This was a funny and spontaneous scene. This particular participant was a member of the core staff at Albatros and was an important figure there; his contributions helped to maintain a humorous workplace atmosphere and appreciation of humor and/or disapproval of people's lack of humor. By amusing him, I believed I proved my funniness – a silent requirement to be tolerated in the staffroom.

Conversely, using humor with participants can bring many benefits to the atmosphere of the observations, although there is a risk of over-familiarity between the researcher and the participants. There was a point where I was so involved in the joking banter at Albatros that one of the male teachers stuck his bottom in my direction and pretended to talk with his buttocks. On the one hand, it was a sign of really

blending into the crowd and being treated as one of the group; on the other hand, it was humor I could not respond to as a researcher. The reason why this joke represented a cut-off point for me was my subjective humor distaste for vulgar humor. Although here my personal preferences came into play, I knew that I could not give away my attitude about it, as this would have been a critical evaluation of participants' use of humor that could have damaged my relationship with them. There were other difficult situations where sexual innuendos were directed at me, but I knew that for the sake of research, laughing along was the only way out. Such situations demanded staying professional and showing appreciation of a joke and moving my own humor preferences aside.

The complexity of the over-familiarity also demonstrated itself in another situation. The following excerpt is from my fieldnotes:

We started talking about Archie being absent in the staffroom today because I put him in the "older" category on my observation sheet (there were two age categories "older" and "younger.") One staff member [Chris] said something: "I bet you had problems ticking the gender, you probably could not decide whether to tick 'male' or 'female' "-he joked. I quickly replied with a punchline: "Yes that's why I ticked 'Both' [...]" and then I exploded with loud laughter and [...] I was met with a dead reaction as if I went a step too far for an outsider." I quickly wanted to recover from this situation saying, "Oh, I'm just provoking Chris to come here" (Fieldnotes, July 2011).

The unsuccessful use of humor caused dissatisfaction, but I believe that my "humor training" and, in particular, my years of practice as a class clown in my high school, equipped me with an ability to recover quickly and not to take such incidents personally. The role of class clown entails everyday exposure to unexpected or undesired reactions of the audience (e.g. lack of amusement, ignorance). However, the success rate of my "performances" in class and popularity it granted me covered the rare "failures," and so I never felt discouraged to use humor in front of other people. On the contrary, past experiences of seldom failures fueled my drive to use humor later in life (at the university, at different workplaces, and the like).

Pretending that there is no risk in using humor with research participants would be very naïve as risk is an inherent part of humor since it concerns the (mis)understanding of humor. My use of humor, in this particular research, was underpinned by a drive toward authenticity of the qualitative humor research. Using a range of humor types with the participants (e.g. humor directed at oneself and humor directed at participants) was a way of experiencing and provoking their humor boundaries and thus getting an insight into their humor preferences. But not just that; I believe it gives a humor researcher a glimpse of a particular workplace culture and workplace relationships that are to some extent reflected in the humor. It is important, however, to withdraw at the right moment from the banter and return to note-taking and observing –to become less visible and, therefore, a less-influential researcher. Using humor with participants during data collection presents a danger of researcher's humor affecting the data generation. In this respect, researcher's use of humor prior or post data collection is much safer.

What is important to note here is the power relationship between participants and researcher. It is due to a participants' kindness that a researcher can conduct his/her research. They also hold the information the researcher is seeking, but the researcher's power lies in sufficient cognition of the research issue and their role of asking the questions (Basit, 2010). Joking with participants may be one way of flattening this unequal relationship and a means by which participants feel appreciated and not used. However, this still does not necessarily solve the unequal power issues, as some roles may be only suspended, but their traces remain (Solomon *et al.*, 2006).

When talking about the use of humor by a humor researcher, I can only refer to my own experiences; hence, the importance of this fusion autoethnographic analysis. The idea of the researcher bringing humor into humor research has been appreciated by participants in my research. Having finished the group interview at Albatros Language School, on the other hand, I noted down the following:

The atmosphere of the interview was just amazing. We all laughed a lot and the poor digital recorder was shaking! It was clear that a good joke was appreciated among the participants, and they had a great bond probably stimulated by their humor. I really felt a part of a team rather than an outside researcher. Some teachers regretted they could not take part in the group interview due to other plans lined up (Memo, June 28, 2011).

In these instances, the above examples demonstrate that the application of humor on the part of myself as a humor researcher was a key to the doors that were otherwise closed to me. Thus, humor was one way of gaining participants' affection and, subsequently, trust.

### Discussion

As a researcher, conducting interviews on and observations of humor had unexpected challenges. It was quickly apparent that neither the interviews nor observations about humor can be conducted in a stiff manner; on the contrary, there was an element of performance required on my behalf. The expectation of the use of humor on my part had two sources – one inner and one outer. The inner source was my own need to prove my suitability for this kind of research to the participants. The outer source was the different signs I received from the participants that I interpreted as an expectation from the participants in the study that I could take on a humorous role. For example, during my observations at the first school, I was constantly asked to tell jokes, and there was a demand that I should participate in the joking banter. This went beyond friendliness and openness, and it became apparent that these attributes were not sufficient when conducting research into humor. However, there is a question of limits of being accepted/pleasing participants. Behaving in line with participants' expectations may lead to compromising the research goals (observing natural behaviors) and confusing the participants as to the researcher's role.

A further challenge when conducting interviews and observations in this manner is the balance between being an observer and a participant. There is also a difficulty between being humorous and a detached observer. It would be difficult to not laugh with the study participants and taking a non-participatory approach to the study may be unfeasible. The group interview transcripts, in my research, show laughter on the part of both the interviewer and interviewees. There is a sense of togetherness, thus equality hidden in the shared laughter as the division into the researcher and researched blurs by means of shared laughter. Moreover, I genuinely think that the researcher's use of humor in qualitative humor research has far more benefits than drawbacks.

An overall consideration when researching humor is how humor can be used with participants we hardly know. From my own work, it is apparent that it is useful to be able to detect participants' mood, humor preferences, and styles and join in with spontaneous comments and jokes. Consequently, it may be concluded that certain qualities are important when researching humor through interviews and observations.

According to Nash (1985), oral humor comprises elements of competitiveness, opportunism, and response to the immediate context. Therefore, it is important to be prepared both to make jokes and to comprehend the jokes of others. Blending into the

crowd through the use of humor is another important step, and here self-confidence may play an important role. Using humor with unfamiliar people, and the researcher is dependent on them, requires self-confidence and possibly even bravery.

It is also worth considering if humor researchers with a pre-disposition toward humor may be more successful in researching humor than those lacking such a pre-disposition. According to McGhee (2010), humor helps to increase one's resilience. I would argue, from my own experience, that being in an environment with a high frequency of humor enables a person to build a self-deprecating armor, whereby the individual is both able to appreciate humor and also capable of handling jokes directed at him/her. Having been accompanied by high-dosed humor from early childhood, I have developed quite a repertoire of humor-related skills that allow me to use humor with confidence and accept jokes directed at me without taking an insult. Both teachers and educational researchers are often the target of critique (Bullough, 2012; Oancea, 2005); therefore, I believe that the skillful use of humor would help them deal with the stress and negative aspects of the job.

However, the use of humor by humor researchers is not straightforward, and it cannot be perceived as a recipe for successful data collection regardless of the type/subject of the research, type of the researched environment, characteristics of the research participants, and researcher's social skills and complex power dynamics between researcher and participants. Therefore, some important questions remain unanswered: is it possible to say what kind of qualities a humor researcher should have?; Would a sense of humor be one of them?; How to balance the seriousness of the researcher's work with the researcher's joke-ability?; How to establish when humor reduces and when it emphasizes unequal power relationship (Holmes, 2000) between researcher and participants?

## Conclusion

Undertaking research into humor may require an element of humor on the part of the researcher. This framework can be used by humor researchers to help them gain the participants' trust and thus facilitate both observations and interviews. Laughing with participants can provide a sense of mutual understanding and may support a quicker acceptance of the outside researcher. Qualitative humor research entails different and often unexpected demands on the part of the participants and researchers with regard to the field we represent.

This paper discusses an innovative approach to conducting non-laboratory type humor research along with some of its challenges. The use of humor, by humor researchers, may be of particular importance if the researched groups, society, or nation values humor in both formal and informal contexts. My use of humor in this research was not a pre-designed tool for testing/experimenting with workplace humor; it was a spontaneous and dynamic process of learning and engaging with the researched environment. My use of the different types of humor and involvement in some of the jokes helped me to "feel" the teachers' humor preferences, staffroom atmosphere, and humor boundaries at particular workplaces. Even the most detailed observation notes would not have provided the sense of participating and experiencing teachers' humor at those workplaces. Still, in order to understand the phenomenon of humor research, more methodological discussions about humor research need to be added to the discussion.

On the other hand, this paper possibly poses more questions than it answers as to the use of humor by a qualitative humor researcher. The challenges and requirements of humor research described in this paper will hopefully be seen as a good starting point for a discussion on the place and role of the use of humor by humor researchers.

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