That joke isn't funny anymore…

An exploration of humour, jokes and their relationship to social work

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or part in another university for the award of any other degree

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Abstract

Humour can be seen as trivial, peripheral and even an affront to some people in relation to the solemn business of social work. This thesis makes an original contribution to social work practice and thought, by exploring the relationship between jokes, humour and social work. Jokes are worthy data in themselves to study, and humour is intrinsic to social life. This thesis draws on the extensive body of literature on humour and the history of joke telling. Neither have been studied together in relation to social work.

Exposing contradictions in complex social phenomena has a track record as a creative way of knowing. The methodological approach taken reflects the qualitative nature of humour and jokes, and the analysis employed combined psychoanalytic and thematic approaches, in which "thematized meanings" were found across data sets.

Social work and social workers occupy a contradictory position in society. The findings here indicate that humour and jokes provide a transitional space which helps social workers manage the contradictions and ambivalences of their work. The jokes made about social workers reflect a profession under attack, and the humour and jokes made by social workers reveal the desire to convey their humanity and to create relationships. Importantly my research shows that whilst there is a danger in humour being used unethically, humour can help social workers attach to their teams and their colleagues, and help build resilience, as a culture of humour within teams creates a nurturing environment, with social workers who will be more likely to stay in the job. Importantly as well humour can help facilitate relationships with service users, and become a tool for service users and social workers to bond.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Introduction

Jokes and humour can often make headline news, and sometimes have tragic consequences. For example after a hoax call to a nurse caring for the pregnant Duchess of Cornwall in December 2012, the nurse took her own life. In a tearful apology to the family of the nurse at the inquest, one of the DJ's who made the hoax call said: *"I urge you to speak up… and consider the feelings of others when trying to make a joke*" (Davies, 2014).

This chapter provides an account of my research journey, and my rationale for exploring the relationship between humour, jokes and social work, and the relevance this has for contemporary social work practice. It explains the reasons for exploring a complex issue which goes to the heart of social work practice, and to provide insights into what it means to be a social worker in Britain today. This chapter also provides an overview of the structure of the thesis.

In summary this thesis examines firstly the existing literature and what it reveals about the relationship between social work practice and humour; secondly I explore what jokes and humour reveal about social workers and the work and finally I examine the part jokes and humour play in the role and the perception of social work.

My research journey

I qualified in 1988 as a social worker and began working for a local authority which covered economically declining mining villages in the North of England. Four years earlier miners and police had fought on the same streets I walked as a patch based community social worker. In the villages most forms of authority appeared to be treated with tacit and sometimes explicit hostility, including local authority social workers. A year after I qualified, the Cleveland case broke in the news (Campbell, 1997). In my newly qualified mind child abuse and specifically child sexual abuse appeared to be everywhere, alongside the cases of neglect and physical abuse. Emotional abuse was seen to go hand in hand with all these other forms of abuse. In 1990 in Rochdale and in Orkney children were removed from their homes due to allegations of satanic and ritual abuse.

The degree I had completed had radicalised and energised me to think that as a practicing social worker I could make a real difference to individual lives, alongside broader collective struggles. My degree had helped me understand that I would also be working in a hostile and challenging social, economic and political environment, with some of the most marginalised sections of society. However the extent of poverty, abuse and hostility I experienced when I started work at times felt shocking and overwhelming.

Despite this I found that at work there was much humour and laughter, and often as a 'soft southerner' (from the south of England) I was the butt of jokes, not only from the service users, but also my colleagues. At other times I was an eager player in practical jokes, made in the office. One of my colleagues 'Mike' was an inspirational cartoonist and frequently created cartoon works of art to entertain the team, often poking gentle fun at his colleagues, the challenges of the work or celebrating the work life of a departing colleague. Another colleague, 'Mary' loved practical jokes and on one memorable occasion once sello-taped my sandwiches to the ceiling. Recalling such incidents sounds puerile and trite in the face of dealing with child abuse and the everyday personal tragedies of social work practice, but these experiences remain with me to this date, and still bring a smile to my face when I recall my colleagues and experiences from this time.

Looking back at my time in practice, I reflected on what the experiences added or subtracted from the day to day work and what role they played not only in my work life, but in the experiences of my colleagues and other social workers. Humour appeared, at least on the surface, to be the mechanism for aiding work relationships and enabling myself and my colleagues not only to survive in this hostile environment, but to bond and importantly to practice effectively. The laughter the humour created made me feel in one sense re-energized and uplifted, ready to meet the difficulties, which I faced in the day ahead, or at the end of the day helped me to process what had happened and to draw some solace from those experiences. At the same time I find myself agreeing with Pickering and Lockyer (2009) that most of the time we do not stop and think about humour or why it works.

This made me feel that there is a life affirming component to humour, which seems missing in other aspects of social work life. It was almost as if humour provided me with unique opportunities to bond and experience closeness, not just with colleagues, but

with service users, particularly children in care. This also reflected my experiences growing up and I can remember as a child making my friends laugh in the primary school dining hall, or listening with friends, for hours on end, to Monty Python episodes, then reciting the scripts.

In 1993 I undertook an MSc in Social Research Methods at the University of Surrey and was introduced to a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches to research. After completing this I returned to social work, for 10 years. In 2004 I started work as lecturer at South Essex College teaching the new social work degree. This felt like I was combining my academic knowledge with my practical social work experience, and this led me to enrol on the Professional Doctorate programme at the Tavistock, which gave me the opportunity to think about humour and social work in more depth. In 2011 I returned to practice for 3 years before returning again to lecturing in September 2014.

The professional doctorate has been of significant value to myself, as it has allowed me to reflect on practice issues in depth. I feel the professional doctorate provided me with a unique opportunity to almost detach myself from work and take an aspect of social work practice grounded in my work experiences. This all-encompassing view allowed me to take a novel and original path, as I was not bound by any prescribed service requirements. My main goal was to provide an original approach to integrating professional and academic knowledge. This has helped me create a thesis which makes a useful contribution to both theory and practice in social work.

Rationale for the study/ relevance to contemporary practice

When I began this study of humour in relation to social work I was often met with perplexed and occasionally disparaging comments. Some colleagues felt that I was trivialising the very serious business of social work, and that such a study was 'frivolous'. Gerhardt (2010) has pointed out that when people write they often project aspects of their own experience into their ideas, and this appears particularly true of myself, as I have had a long standing interest in humour.

The disparaging comments I received are understandable, as to suggest that one might find humour or laughter in social work, could be seen as undermining a profession which often struggles with its own self-confidence or sees itself as being under attack (Jones, 2012; Rogowski, 2012; Warner 2013). On another level I was puzzled by these responses, as having qualified in 1988 and worked in social work since I had often

experienced humour directly on several levels. There were occasions when humour was sometimes aimed at me by service users (we referred to people as 'clients' then), who made fun sometimes of my accent and a common response to my first social work encounters with service users was: "*you're not from round 'ere are you?"* Even today as a practicing social worker for a local authority, I frequently experience shared humour with colleagues and service users.

At a recent team meeting a foster carer shared stories of children who had 'curried' their tropical fish by sprinkling garam masala in their tropical fish tanks. Another child had thought he could re-charge his mobile by putting it in the microwave. In the safety of the team meetings or office, as colleagues we would share our stories and experiences with each other to create humour and to change the mood from what sometimes seemed to be the unrelenting gloom of the work. Billig (2005) has pointed out that it is easy to claim that possessing a sense of humour is nowadays deemed desirable, as to say that someone lacks a sense of humour is often seen as one of the least desirable qualities someone can have.

Sharing humourous stories and jokes which involve service users can lead to feelings of discomfort, and I am wondering if the readers of this thesis will experience some discomfort or emotional response to the material, and may question, is this appropriate behaviour for a social worker? I can remember laughing during team meetings and experiencing feelings of discomfort. At other times I can also remember feeling sadness, disbelief and anxiety too. For most of the time social work is not humourous or the source of jokes as it deals with death, abuse and the very worst things human beings can do to each other. However I felt that like emotions such as anxiety, fear, hatred and stress; love, joy, laughter and humour are essential and core components of what makes us human, and like these other emotions could not be ignored in any examination of contemporary social work practice. Uniquely perhaps humour, jokes and laughter seem to polarise views, as humour can alienate and exclude, but also to unify and bring pleasure almost in equal measure and for that reason raises significant questions which I feel are worthy of exploration.

Sullivan (2000) argued that gallows humour (humour used by social workers to emphasise the difference between them and service users in terms of status, saneness, intelligence and knowledge) fitted the superiority theory of humour. Sullivan's (2000) findings are important as they suggest that social workers are

practicing in way which goes against their ethical practice and what is required of them by the HCPC's standards of proficiency. Like Billig (2005) I was concerned that "*the cruelty of our laughter*" does not reflect well on social workers and given my professional and personal experiences wanted to explore this further. Importantly the HCPC Standards of Proficiency require social workers to *be able to understand the emotional dynamics of interactions with service users and carers* (HCPC, 2012 9.10. One could posit that humour is a critical part of emotional dynamics, which impact on our interactions with service users, and provides us with insight into modern social work practice. Social work and humour has been studied before and it has been found that humour and the sharing of jokes and funny stories can build resilience in social work teams (Siporin, (1984); Witkin (1999); Moran and Hughes (2006) and Gilgun and Sharma (2011). Gilgun and Sharma's (2011) study found positive aspects of humour use, as the social workers in their study used humour to regulate anxiety, exasperation and fear. In addition the social workers often used humour to regulate their emotions, to problem solve and to express liking of service users. As a result Gilgun and Sharma (2011) concluded that this fitted with the three major theories of humour: superiority, relief and incongruity.

The College of Social work Code of Ethics (2013) states that social workers are required to practice in a way that establishes and maintain the trust and confidence of service users and their carers, and that social workers should "work in a way that merits that trust" (TCSW, 2013). Could social workers be considered to be trustworthy if they were finding humour in their practice, and could such behaviour therefore be considered to be unethical? And yet given that humour, laughing and jokes are so universal and featured so much in my own practice could this be ignored or set aside as 'frivolous.' There is also a contradiction or paradox at the heart of research into humour, as many have written about the importance of humour (Sullivan (2000); Newirth (2006); Cooper, (2008), but there is also a fear of taking such a frivolous subject as jokes and humour seriously. As Metcalfe (2004) suggested exposing contradictions in complex social phenomena has a useful track record as a creative 'way of knowing.'

Jokes occupy a particular role in society and as Wittgenstein in his famous quote, eloquently put it: "*a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would*

consist entirely of jokes" (Malcolm, 2001). Jokes can provide a serious insight into human behaviour, so I wanted to use jokes themselves as a vehicle for reflecting upon social works position and role in society. There is a danger in studying something seen as trivial as jokes and humour one could risk feeding the marginalisation of social work. This is an important point and reaches at the tension at the heart of this research project, as humour can be both helpful to social workers and service users, and can also be unhelpful and undermine relationships.

Billig (2005) has pointed out humour is at the heart of social life, *"not in the ways of easy pure creative enjoyment, but at its core humour is the no less easily admired practice of ridicule"* (Billig, 2005 p.2.). On the one hand jokes provide us with an insight into serious social, interpersonal and organisational phenomena and help us understand the position of social work in society. In this sense jokes occupy a philosophical position. Social work is a politicised arena and is vulnerable to political changes and attacks, due in part to the marginal position it occupies in society. Jokes by their nature enable one to obtain more than one interpretation of reality and humour can rely on the existence of numerous complex realities for its comedic effect. Critchley (2002) pointed out that *"humour is an exemplary practice because it is a universal human activity that invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives"* (Critchley, 2002 p. 18).

Chiaro (1992) stated that analysing jokes is much like dissecting a frog, as nobody is principally interested and the frog expires. As any professional comedian will be at pains to point out, examining a joke effectively kills it. Joking about something is also a method of disengaging from the object of the joke. It could be that the jokes about social workers reveal some of the hostility with which society regards social work or at least help people to manage their uncomfortable feelings about social work or the task of social work. Given the unpleasant and grim tasks that social workers often engage with it's hardly surprising that some of the key tasks which jokes achieve is to distance the teller and the recipient of the joke from the grimness of the work.

I chose to examine the jokes which were made about and by social workers as it seemed to me that one could not begin thinking about humour in relation to social work, before one considered what humour existed 'out there.' I had been interested for over 20 years in what jokes people made about social work, as this was so integral to my own self-identity. Like other commentators I still struggle to make sense of the enmity

and hostility with which social work is regarded in Britain. "Only joking" is used to hide uncomfortable truths and Goffman, (1974) argued that the phrase "*just joking*" is one of the most commonly used in the English language. The problem is that this can also be a cover for self-deception around our *true nature*. Would it be possible to imagine social work practiced without humour?

Research questions
I was interested in all aspects of jokes; humour and social work, but narrowed this down to specific questions:

1. *What does the existing literature reveal about the relationship between social work practice and humour?*
2. *What do jokes and humour reveal about social workers and the work?*
3. *What do jokes and humour reveal about the role and the perception of social work?*

My initial approach to this subject matter could be described as 'scatter gun', or even akin to a magpie gathering data from a range of disparate sources, because humour did not occur in set orchestrated occasions. So I initially had my own collection of jokes and notes about humour I had informally collected over a number of years, in the form of diary entries. I then turned to the internet to collect jokes and examine what social workers said about humour, and finally I gathered interview data, in which I asked questions such as "*what is the funniest thing that has happened to you in social work?* This enabled me to ask interviewees about whether they had experienced anything humorous in aspects of their work. This semi-structured approach enabled me to explore their feelings about all these issues. I ended by asking about humour in relation to social work students and their experiences of the use of humour in training. Finally shared a joke with the interviewee to explore their reaction to it. I will now briefly outline the structure of the thesis.

Structure of the thesis
Chapter 1 in which I explain my research journey and outline the rationale for the study

Chapter 2 reviews the body of literature on humour, considers the current context of social work practice, theories of humour, the relationship between humour and resilience, what an analysis of humour can offer social work, humour in organisations, values and humour and the relationship between gender and humour

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodological paradigm and core assumptions, the design and analytical approach taken (psychoanalytic and thematic) and the process of telephone interviewing. The ethics of conducting research is also considered, as is the approach taken to gathering on line data.

Chapter 4 discusses the themes and findings from the data. The themes are illustrated with reference to data from interviews or jokes themselves.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to theories of humour, psychoanalytic approaches, and the role of social work

Chapter 6 concludes with a review of my research questions, the research journey undertaken, the issues raised by the study and strategy for disseminating my findings. The research is critically evaluated in relation to contemporary practice and contemporary issues, and the implications the study has for social work practice.

Chapter 2 Literature review

"*To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain and play with it.*"

Charlie Chaplin (Dunaway, 2013)

Introduction

I begin this introduction by outlining the process by which I identified what literature to review. At first several colleagues at the Tavistock suggested authors who had made contributions to the study of humour, including Freud and Lemma. Alessandra Lemma, a consultant clinical psychologist, had written a book exploring humour in psychotherapy and everyday life (Lemma, 2000). I then searched the Tavistock library and found Freud's work and bought a 1960 edition translated by James Strachey (Freud, 1960). At the same time I came across a thesis entitled *Psychoanalytic aspects of humour* carried by someone called RT Baker for a M16 master's programme in Psychoanalytic Studies in 2004. I carried out searches at the University of Essex and found a doctorate thesis carried out by a nursing colleague at the University of Essex in 2012. My supervisor spoke of anthropological studies and another colleague spoke of the work of Michael Billig, all of which led me to investigate and review their work further. Pickering and Lockyer edited a book in 2009 *Beyond a Joke: The limits of humour* and I found this to be particularly useful source of information.

In relation to humour and social work I utilised the search tools which enable me to access social work journals, and occasionally my fellow students would highlight a new piece of research into humour. This highlighted a number of specific studies which had focused on social work and humour, such as Siporin, (1984); Witkin (1999); Sullivan (2000); Moran and Hughes (2006) and Gilgun and Sharma (2011).

It appears as if anyone interested in how human beings function as social beings is interested in humour and jokes, as most fields of the social sciences including sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, theorists of organisations have all studied humour and jokes (Lemma, 2000; Paulos, 2000; Cooper, 2008). Billig (2005) found that the problem with humour is that it is so widespread in popular culture, that it is far from being a 'fringe activity' (Dessau, 2012), but it is degraded and controlled by powerful economic forces, which invest "*vast sums of money in making people laugh.*" (Billig, 2005 p.4) It is fair to say that there have been various attempts

throughout history to produce an all-encompassing theory of humour, but no-one has yet succeeded.

This chapter examines the relationship between laughter and humour. It also reviews the types of humour which exist and the theories of humour and jokes. The chapter then explores the relevance of humour in the current context of social work practice, the relationship between social work and humour (including the fear of not taking social work seriously and Clare in the Community) and what an analysis of humour can offer social work. It concludes with a review of the relationship between humour social work, organisations, values and gender.

As Pickering and Lockyer (2009) point out there is a complex interplay between the ethics of humour, as where we might accept attacks on people who wield enormous power, humour against the weak and defenseless can be bullying. What standard and norms exist in society and importantly in social work practice about what is acceptable, as Pickering and Lockyer (2009) point out humour is not confined to one particular genre or narrative and "infiltrates every area of social life" (Pickering and Lockyer, 2009 p.6.). As highlighted above in extreme cases people can kill themselves as a result of ridicule (Davies, 2014) and I was interested in exploring some of the difficulties and concerns which can be raised by humour, and make sense of these within the context of contemporary social work practice. Given the reach of humour into most areas of social life I utilised the internet as a source of data and interviews with social work practitioners.

However one must also recognise that not only in social work, but also in social life some censorship of humour is warranted, for example in relation to protecting children from some forms of sexual humour (Pickering and Lockyer, 2009). It would be unethical to accept any humour which explicitly broke laws or contravened the code of conduct.

Laughter and Humour

Nelson (2012) has described laughter as a 'connection.' Laughter is not the focus of this research, but is closely related to humour and jokes, as it is one of the outward physical signs of the emotional response to humour or jokes, as humour and jokes cause laughter. Spinoza said that laughter is merely pleasurable and for that reason good (Holt, 2008). However Provine (2000) recommended that laughter should be studied through observation and experimentation, and advocated that we should avoid the trap of assuming that humour is inherently good.

In the 18th century the "humours" were the bodily fluids which were thought to provide people with their individual temperament (Billig, 2005). The humourist became the creative writer who invented comic "humorous" characters, and the phrase "a sense of humour" only started to be used in the 1840s (Billig, 2005). Lyttle (2002) found that humour has had many definitions and means something different from jokes, mirth, or laughter, as in the past the word "humour" was equated with mood.

Laughter for Bergson has 3 qualities, firstly it is uniquely human, as he argues that we do not laugh at mountains or rivers, and only laugh at animals when they display human qualities, secondly 'an absence of feeling accompanies laughter,' as laughter frees us from the customary restrictions of social empathy and thirdly that laughter is socially shared (Billig, 2005).

Holmes (2000) found that there were many definitions of laughter, humour and jokes, including distinctions between humour and wit, but all the definitions agreed that humour must involve some kind of cognitive dissonance and settled on a definition where instances of humour were utterances, which were intended by the speaker to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least one of the participants (Holmes, 2000). In this thesis I have taken humour as an umbrella term to cover the things that are essential to the humour, i.e. any activity or social interaction which at least one the participants laughed at or had defined as funny, amusing, comical, droll, hilarious, witty, or mirth making. In the next section I explore the different types of humour revealed by the literature and made reference to the data I collected.

Types of humour
Gallows humour

Gallows humour has been viewed as jokes and humour about one's own or other peoples suffering, often in the face of very serious unpleasant circumstances and frequently told by those who have shared adversity (Sullivan, 2000). For Freud (1950) such humour was the ego's opportunity to gain pleasure and has been described as "grotesque satire" (Dessau, 2012). An example of such gallows humour:

> *Two social workers were walking through a rough part of the city in the evening. They heard moans and muted cries for help from a back lane. Upon investigation, they found a semi-conscious man in a pool of blood. "Help me, I've been mugged and viciously beaten" he pleaded. The two social workers turned*

and walked away. One remarked to her colleague: "You know the person that did this really needs help."

Black humour

Black humour (from the French *humour noir*) is a term which originated from André Breton to describe a genre of humour which arises from cynicism and skepticism, and was often a satire on the topic of death (Haynes, 2006). The purpose of black comedy is to make light of serious and often taboo subject matter, and some comedians use it as a tool for exploring vulgar issues, thus provoking discomfort and serious thought as well as amusement in their audience (Dessau, 2102)

Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude from the German has been defined as laughter, jokes and humour which creates pleasure at someone else's misfortune, and is often related to feelings of dislike or envy towards other people (Smith et al, 2009). Van Dijk et al (2011) found that such emotions can be 'deserved' or 'undeserved', but that *schadenfreude* is generally a socially undesirable emotion.

Teasing behaviour

Some commentators have defined 'teasing behaviour' as humourous actions or joking behaviours which is "largely harmless" and constitutes a playful interaction (Davies, 1990). Strawser et al (2005) found that teasing often had negative effects on children during their childhood and defined teasing as a type of bullying or peer victimization, largely characterised by verbal taunts (e.g. around appearance, performance or family). In this context it is hard to view teasing behaviour as 'harmless.'

Theories of the causes of humour

In order to understand the role humour plays in relation to social work I examined the theories which currently exist as to the causes of humour. Over the centuries there are a number of theories of the causes of humour, and what makes people laugh, and as Billig (2005) has suggested no single theory can hope to explain the complexity of humour.

I found there are many theories of humour and Lyttle (2002) found that there were over a hundred theories of humour. Although humour does not lend itself to a single definition, it is widely seen as central to social life (Billig, 2005; Cooper, 2008), for example Billig (2005) has argued ridicule often constitutes humour, whereas Fabian (2002) argued that humour provided a benign role and enables us to reconcile what is otherwise irreconcilable, as humour encounters human weaknesses and the difficulties of human existence with a benevolence. I was interested in exploring this constant tension between the cruel as opposed the benign aspects of humour.

Billig (2005) has pointed out that humour is also a mechanism through which people create their own identity. People do not react to humour in the same way and humour can be used as an excuse for unacceptable behaviour or a positive way of managing stress (Moran and Hughes, 2006). There is an element in the nature of humour itself which makes it harder to analyse than other social phenomena, as it is so idiosyncratic. As Lemma (2000) has pointed out when people communicate using humour, they often have more than one meaning behind the humour "*it's funny, but it's serious, deadly serious sometimes*" (Lemma, 2000 p. 21).

Gilgun and Sharma (2011) suggested that there are three main theories of humour: *as an expression of superiority, as a release of tension, and as an enjoyment of incongruity.* However, in contrast to their findings, my review of the literature suggested 5 categories of theories of humour, jokes and laughter:

- *Developmental theories of humour*
- *Anthropological/ Superiority theories of humour*
- *Incongruity theories of humour*
- *Social 'subversiveness' theories of humour*
- *Humour as a psychosocial mechanism for managing emotions (release theory)*

Developmental theories of humour

Some theorists and researchers have argued that humour is central to human development (Bateson, 1953, Bowlby, 1999). Some evolutionary scientists suggest that humour has played a vital role in the development of the unique intellectual and perceptual abilities of humans (Clarke, 2008). Clarke (2008) argued that when the brain finds something amusing it recognises a pattern that surprises it. On an evolutionary level this ability to recognise patterns unconsciously is an asset and the benefits of

humour encouraged human beings to develop their adaptability to new circumstances (Clarke, 2008). Bateson (1953) argued that humour is an evolutionary step in the human species. He found that the ability to discriminate between messages encoded at different levels of abstraction was inherent in the development of playful activities, humour amongst them. Billig (2005) argued that the human capacity to smile and laugh is biologically inherited, which gives infants an evolutionary advantage in how to communicate, as it provides survival factors. Robert and Wilbanks (2012) suggest that humans might be 'hardwired' to experience cycles of humour, affect, and laughter, and that the positive affect in an audience that is induced by a humour creator might 'bounce back' to the creator through automatic responses to audience laughter.

Other developmental theorists have focussed on language development in children and humour. Word play is an important part of language development in children, and many researchers have highlighted how developing children enjoy jokes and riddles (King-DeBaun, 1997; Musselwhite and Burkhart, 2002).

Bowlby (1999) argued that smiling was crucial to developing attachment and Nelson (2012) has argued that laughter effect arousal and regulation from the care giver to the baby. Nelson (2012) argued that laughter is a process for the caregiver and babies to attune to each other, and is the beginning stage of how we learn to interact with one another. Laughter and humour therefore provide a secure base for exploring the world. For Bowlby (1999) a smile can ensure responsiveness to the infant from the person providing care, ensuring physical proximity and a loving relationship. Humour therefore plays a central role in attachment, long seen as fundamental to a child's development (Bowlby, 1999); Howe; 2005; Howe, 2011). These points are reinforced by Spitz (1965), who suggested that the early stages of development a smile is motivated by the sight of the human face. Aimard (1988) found that humour is a regulator that helps to clarify and preserve the balance between the child and their family, and children use humour to negotiate and manage difficult situations.

Drawing on object relations theory Baker (2004) pointed out that humour is a developmental achievement in a child and as such represents an important component in the later establishment of object relationships. The formation of the 'transitional space' may be considered to be a developmental achievement as it is instrumental as both a mode of relating and as an adaptive technique. As the child acquires the ability to move back and forth between internal and external reality then the transitional space

expands and contracts accordingly. This then allows the child to exist in a duality of realities and, through the utilization of humour and play, experiment with different scenarios that allow a growing understanding of the incongruities between the two (Baker, 2004).

Bollas (1995) suggested that a sense of humour is essential to human survival, and the mother who develops their baby's sense of humour is assisting him to detach from mere existence and as an adult, they will find humour in the most awful circumstances, ultimately benefiting from the origins of the comic sense. This had resonance for me in relation to social work.

Finally I have included in this group of developmental models of humour theories Chomsky's notion of 'linguistic competence' which Raskin (1985) developed the theory of humour competence. Raskin's theoretical model focusses on the reason why one person might find something amusing whereas another person may not. This Raskin (1985) suggests is understood in relation to people's social positions, and which group an individual would identify with, and that 'like minded individuals often share humour, while those in different positions of power do not.

Anthropological/ Superiority theories of humour

Humour is universal to human beings and Apte (1983) pointed out that no 'humour free' culture has yet been found. Many of my interviewees and contributors on line also spoke of the universality of humour. For example:

> *If I think about the hardest teams that I have worked in, the best functioning, …but it is often where humour is at its finest. Drug and alcohol was a tough place, genuinely with really good banter.*

Anthropological studies emphasize cultural and social factors in explaining the causes of humour, e.g. the inappropriateness of humour at a funeral (Lemma, 2000). Lemma (2000) has provided several examples of different cultural contexts , which in other cultural contexts would be unfunny, for example not appreciating a joke in Trinidad is equated with 'not belonging' and most cultures considered humour and laughter to be a social lubricant or even a sign of social acceptability (Lemma, 2000).

Carden (2003) described the findings of humour across a range of cultures including North American Indians, the Maoris, native Canadians in Canada, African-Americans, Jews, Polish and Irish and that humour is a vehicle of "maximum consciousness" through which minority cultures reflected on their own anger and distress. Carden (2003) argued that humour helped cultures preserve a sense of identity. The strategies, in the eyes of anthropologists not only favoured in-group cohesion, but also have systematically served to question the legitimacy of exploitation and oppression. For example Scheper-Hughes (1993) described the use of gallows humour by the inhabitants of an impoverished shantytown in northeastern Brazil.

Billig (2005) found that a number of anthropological studies (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, 1986; Eisenberg, 1986; Miller, 1986 and Clancy, 1986- all cited in Billig, 2005) revealed that mothers often used teasing to manage childrens inappropriate behaviour. This form of social control was often used as an alternative to physical chastisement, and to establish parental authority.

Other theorists and philosophers e.g., Plato, Hobbes and Bergson (Billig, 2005; Holt, 2008) believed that at its root all humour is interpersonal mockery and derision, and this has been referred to as 'the superiority school of thought.' Holt (2008) suggested that all laughter is a '*slightly spiritualized snarl'* (Holt, 2008 p.81). Sullivan (2000) argued that gallows humour was humour used by social workers to emphasise the difference between them and service users in terms of status, saneness, intelligence and knowledge and fits the superiority theory of humour.

Freud (1960) argued that we repress our hostile impulses against our fellow men and make our enemies small and inferior, and in this way overcome them. Jokes then are a rebellion against authority and can be used to 'alienate our enemies' (Freud, 1960). Jones argued that "*humour is one of the chief means of self defence against the slings and arrows of an unfriendly world*" (Jones, 1955), but Lemma (2000) points out that humour is more likely when one party retaliates for some provocation, than just establishing superiority over someone.

Psychologists have been more interested in the mechanism of jokes and found that what makes people laugh hardest is the speed with which they get the punch line (Lewis, 2009). Whilst psychologists have focussed on the internal processes which

influence the formation of humour and jokes, sociologists have tended to focus on what function jokes and humour achieve in society.

Comprehension-elaboration theory argues that the degree to which someone will enjoy humour is determined by how difficult the humour is to comprehend and by the cognitive elaboration performed after comprehending the humour (Cooper (2008). This theory suggests that the degree to which one person will find a comment or behaviour as humourous depends on, the motivation of the person conveying the joke, whether the humour is socially appropriate to their situation and whether the humour is offensive to themselves or other groups. The immediate enjoyment of the humour may decrease if the individual finds the humour to be hurtful or concludes the person expressing the humour had an undesirable motive Cooper (2008).

When discussing the cultural aspect of jokes told in the totalitarian regimes Lewis found that j*okes "revealed peoples states of mind and … jokes gave them courage*" (Lewis, 2009 p. 5). Lewis (2009) argued that jokes were so popular in the Soviet Eastern bloc countries, because they enabled people to defend against the pain of their everyday lives, resist the oppressive nature of the regimes and made themselves feel superior to their corrupt and incompetent leaders.

Humour mirrors and often expresses the moral, cultural and political themes of the age it arises in and reflects the complex dialectic of discipline and rebellion (Billig, 2005). For example in the Middle Ages it would have been socially acceptable to mock the physically afflicted or people with learning disabilities, however this is now seen as distasteful and unacceptable. In the hands of an oppressed group, humour can be used to challenge authority, but used by the powerful it can be used to oppress minorities. Holmes (2000) and Mik-Meyer (2007) studied the use of joking in the workplace and identified hierarchical patterns of humour, with humour flowing downwards, as 'superiors' make jokes to 'inferiors', or social workers to service users, rather than vice versa. This type of humour could be described as "repressive."

Robert and Wilbanks (2012) indicate that when humour is used by high-power supervisors in an aggressive manner to control or dominate others it reinforces hierarchical difference and power, whereas cycles of reciprocated humour can reduce obvious hierarchical differences.

Billig (2005) placed the theorists of humour within their social context, for example Hobbes argument that as laughter reflects the sort of base, selfish motives that need to be disciplined, humans need external controls in order to prevent their selfishly destructive urges from running riot. Billig (2005) suggest that a society filled with laughter would not be a happy place, but rather a place where human beings were baited unmercifully, however it also feels desirable to me to see humour as a vehicle for rebellion and subversiveness, where the powerful are baited by the powerless.

Incongruity theories of humour

Locke, Pascal, Kant and Schopenhauer subscribed to this body of theory and argued that humour arose from a conflict between the logical and respectable, dissolved into the illogical and absurd (Paulos, 2000; Holt, 2008). Incongruity theory is also supported in the writings of Kant and Kierkegaard (Cooper, 2008), and Wittgenstein was concerned with the humour found in nonsense, logical confusion and language puzzles (Paulos, 2000). Wittgenstein argued that something was funny because it was a logical contradiction (Paulos, 2000). Fry (1968) demonstrated that when someone tells a joke there is normally a behavioural cue that what someone is about to deliver is false, and not an everyday ordinary interaction. It is as if someone is saying I am about to tell you an incongruity here and the test is whether you will be able to understand it.

Holt (2008) argued that when logic goes astray, laughter serves to draw attention to the fallacy and this is similar to Nietzsche's argument that laughter is a cure for aberrations of pure reason (Holt, 2008). Following the developmental theories of Piaget, McGhee (1971) found that children's level of cognitive functioning and their comprehension and appreciation of humour was based on violation of cognitive expectancies.

I remembered the times when my own children laughed and as a parent there are few things more enjoyable than being able to see your children laugh. Children particularly those aged 7 and above were more likely to find something humourous if it was incongruous to their expectations. The distinctive aspect of the incongruity theory of humour is that it does not propose an emotion behind our enjoyment of the ludicrous, and modern-day theories of humour approach this topic from an analysis of jokes (Billig, 2005), suggesting that most jokes are based at least on one level on incongruity. I wonder that as adults we might envy a child's ease of laughter and pleasure at the ludicrous.

Social 'subversiveness' theories

Orwell said that '*every joke is a tiny revolution*' (Lewis, 2008 p. 19). Lewis (2008) argued that jokes are powerful tools in creating change, as they are linked to resistance and to challenging oppression. A group process occurs when a joke is told, as Blau (1955) noted jokes were almost always shared with a group whereas complaints were told to individuals (Blau, 1955 cited in Coser, 1959). Rustin (2003) pointed out that an audience is required to produce a community of shared feeling. Jokes and humour aimed at making fun of the oppressively powerful appears 'justified' and the jokes, which punctured the pomposity of the Soviet Union worked to eventually undermining the social authority of the regime (Lewis, 2008). Billig (2005) argued that joking relationships are not presumed to be necessary for the continuation of social life in general, but humour can ease the exercise of power.

Employees who are adept at using humour can adopt the role of 'sage fool' as a way of managing and expressing dissenting opinions, feeding these back to management in a less challenging way to authority (Cooper, 2008). Bergson said the '*humourist is a disguised moralist*' (Coser, 1959). Holmes (2000) found that humour could be a means by which subordinates could challenge power structures and make what might be thought of as "risky statements", in a light hearted way. Christie (1994) argued that humour enables us to tolerate antithetical ideas. Gilgun and Sharma (2011) argued that there is an interplay between the audience, target of the joke and the joke teller, and their relationship provides the joke teller with the authority to get away with the joke (Gilgun and Sharman, 2011).

In the 1960s Schmulowitz, an assiduous collector of jokes, found that jokes contained great power (Holt, 2008). He referred to them as the '*small change of history*', and how jokes have "*detected and exposed the imposter and have saved man from the oppression of false leaders*" (Holt, 2008 p. 40). Carden (2003) found that humour is developed and strategically used among physically or ideologically oppressed communities and at a socio-cultural level, to challenge their oppression. As such humour and joking behaviour appears to reflect ideological struggles between dominant and subdominant traditions.

Humour as a psychosocial mechanism for managing emotions (release theory)

The final group of theories is linked to the emotional context of humour and jokes, and was later associated with Freud's ideas about the causes of humour. Humour is seen as the release of inhibitions, and the need for laughter is a process by which people

vent their repressed tensions, and advocated by nineteenth century theorists such as Bain and Spencer, it has been referred to as Victorian relief theory (Billig, 2005). Freud's work (1960) gave birth to an extensive psychoanalytic literature on jokes and humour. Freud's key argument is that jokes, like dreams, unmask hidden truths and thereby offer a release for the mind (Lewis, 2008). When someone says of someone else they are "a bit of a joke" this is almost always something nastier or vicious. Freud (1960) observed that the first aspect of humour begins with the infant smile. In this respect humour is one of the most primitive and fundamental aspect of our psyche and an indestructible part of our unconscious desires. Holt (2008) found that the journalist Gershon Legman collected dirty jokes and found that dirty jokes revealed the *'infinite aggressions'* of men against women, supporting Freud's hypothesis. For Legman the telling of a dirty joke was equal to verbal rape (Holt, 2008).

Freud (1960) argued that jokes and humour need an audience, as jokes are primarily social affairs and the satisfaction from them comes primarily from the fact that the anxiety expressed in the joke is acknowledged and shared by the audience listening to it. In this sense the audience becomes the container for the jokes. Here the laughter of the audience confirms for the teller that the pleasure of the joke outweighs the pain and anxiety and that both the teller and the audience have survived the attack from their shared unconscious. Billig (2005) argued that both Hobbes and Freud saw the fundamental conflict between individual desire and social order- humans are selfish, but we need to live socially, so humour allows us to manage the difficult feelings we have towards others, such as racism, hatred or the desires to hurt others. Freud (1960) argued that repression is the way through which unruly human nature is socially disciplined, and for Freud (1960) a way of understanding this as *jokes provided sense in nonsense.*

Berger (1997) pointed out that aggressive jokes break the taboo on aggressive acts, and become a mechanism for individuals, social groups or society to express its frustration without physically attacking. Berger (1997) argued that we want to believe the best of ourselves, and if we laugh at cruel or obscene jokes it is because humour and jokes are an escape from reality, or as Freud (1960) suggested an escape from the reality of ourselves. Billig (2005) pointed out that Freud's work revealed the unpleasant and harmful nature of humour, and avoided the supposition that humour is necessarily to be applauded for being witty or clever, for example racists do not become any less racist by telling a joke (Billig, 2005a)

Barron (1999) argued that humour is more than just a manic defence, and at its most sublime is produced in the face of death. Viewed this way humour and jokes become 'safety valves' for hostilities and discontent ordinarily suppressed by individuals or groups (Coser, 1959). This is supported by research in the field, as Sullivan (2000) found that social workers in children services found the humour allowed them to vent their feelings about children, so that they could face them again. The more the social workers spoke negatively about a particular child, the more they *"appeared to be able to see them positively" (*Sullivan, 2000 p. 48).

Freud's theory suggests that the pleasure we derive from jokes stems from the psychic energy used to inhibit aggressive and sexual impulses. It follows that the people who laugh hardest at malicious jokes are the ones who have most deeply buried their aggressive tendencies, but research by Eysenck suggested that those who laugh most at lewd sexual jokes are people who are least likely to be sexually repressed (Holt, 2008).

Jokes

Jokes have been a part of human culture since at least 1900 BC (McDonald, 2010). According to research conducted by McDonald (2010) a joke about flatulence in ancient Sumer is currently believed to be the world's oldest known joke[1], suggesting that this is an often repeated theme up to and including the modern day (i.e. you can hear fart jokes told in any pub or school playground nowadays). Palamedes, a Greek hero who outwitted Odysseus, is said to have invented the joke (Holt, 2008). The emperor Augustus was believed to have compiled no fewer than 150 joke books, but only one book of jokes survived from the earliest period of recorded history entitled *Philogelos* or lover of laughter (Holt, 2008). Jacobson (2010) argued that humour is nothing if not critical and the Greeks valued comedy higher than tragedy, as comedy "*affirmed the vigorous and unpredictable livability of life*" (Jacobson, 2010).

Even if fart Jokes can be dated to be over 4,000 years old, jokes are not the *platonic* version of an unchanging idea, and are an historical form which changes over time, often driven by the cultural context from which they emerge (Holt, 2008). Lewis (2008) argued that particular societies give rise to particular cultural forms of expression, ancient Greece had its myths and Elizabethan England had its plays. The former Soviet

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[1] The joke is; *"Something which has never occurred since time immemorial; a young woman did not fart in her husband's lap"*

Union and Eastern bloc of communist countries had humour as a form of political cultural expression which challenged the ruling orthodoxy. There is a group process at play with jokes, and as Blau (1955) noted, jokes were almost always shared with a group.

Freud (1960) made a distinction of types of jokes and argued that one type of joke is non-tendentious or innocent humour, and he gave the example of one:

"*not only did he disbelieve in ghosts, but he was not even frightened of them*" (Freud, 1960 p. 92).

Freud (1960) argued that children engage in such jokes, which are innocent, mildly amusing, and playful and reveal no unconscious hidden agendas. Baker (2004) pointed out that this is similar to Winnicott's transitional space where normal logical suppositions are temporarily suspended. Freud (1960) made a distinction between humour and jokes and pointed out that for humour to take place only one person is necessary, for comicality two persons are necessary, and for a joke three are necessary: the teller, the listener and the person who it is directed at. As Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (2009) point out the joke teller and the listener have active roles in making the joke work. In summary humour can be a solitary event, but jokes require social interaction. As the example from Ancient Sumer illustrates jokes are often recorded and lend themselves to analysis. Laughter is a peculiarly human trait (Coser, 1959) and occasions for humour invite closeness in relationships and involves reciprocity.

In contrast to the occurrence of a recorded joke an occurrence of humour, is harder to analyse, and by their nature they are seldom recorded. However the growth of digital recording technology has enabled more instances of humour to be recorded. YouTube provides many examples of unorchestrated occurrences of humourous encounters.

Jokes are a neglected area of research, particularly in relation to social work, for example Holt (2008) when claimed that no history of jokes or the philosophy of jokes existed, so he had to write his own. There is a paucity of published social work jokes, for example the *Penguin Dictionary of Jokes* (2003) contains no references to social work, despite having 3 psychologist jokes and 2 jokes about sociologists (Metcalf, 2003). Although Young (2012) published a book entitled *The Best Ever Book of Social Worker Jokes; Lots and Lots of Jokes Specially Repurposed for You-Know-Who,* this

was a book of as Young indicates "tired, worn out jokes" applied to social workers, which suggests there is a limited number of original social work jokes.

Clare in the Community

In my opinion it is not possible to discuss jokes, humour and social work without making a reference to *Clare in the Community*, which is a Radio 4 comedy series featuring a social worker. Harry Venning first created Clare in cartoon form in 1994 for the Guardian newspaper, and she appeared there on a weekly basis. The title is a play on words relating to care in the community. In 2004 the cartoon was adapted for BBC Radio 4. Clare has a long suffering partner Brian, who is a teacher, and the humour centers on the portrayal of Clare as a social worker who meddles in other people's problems rather than deal with her own.

This dissertation has not analysed Clare in the Community, because it is a fictionalised account of the life of a social worker. However it is important to acknowledge that several of my interviewees made reference to Clare, when social workers discussed their relationship to humour. Some suggested that like joke emails the series provided relief e.g.:

> [If] "*I'm feeling a bit stressed or just sort of like want cheering up a bit, I'll stick Clare in the Community CDs on, because I, and I find that you would not want any social worker working like that.*" (Interviewee Pat)

Some interviewees felt that Clare was an example of humour which was not supportive of them:

> "*A lot of it was about social workers not doing, not practicing what they preached for example… I don't think much of the humour around social workers is very supportive of social workers. It's usually to kind of like you know taking the mickey really.*" (Interviewee Meg)

It also appeared that interviewees liked Clare because she oppressed her boyfriend: "*what I like about Clare is that her boyfriend Brian is a teacher and he gets the mickey taken out of him even more than social workers. It's like he's even further down the [pecking] order.*" (Interviewee Lee)

However there was also recognition that some of Clare's behaviour, albeit a fictionalised comedy was grounded in and reflected real social work practice*:*

"I just find… she does and I think you know says, probably what we have all been tempted to say much the same. She just comes out and says it,... and she was gonna give a supervision, but … she was dashing out of the door putting her coat on … she had been all afternoon this poor student trying to get supervision and when she got it, she was disappearing out of the door with her coat on." (Interviewee Pat)

The current context of social work practice

Social work plays a particular role in society, and this role has been debated and analysed extensively (for example e.g. Seed (1973), Jordan (1984), Davies (1994), Payne (1996), Mullaly (1997), Lymbery (2005), Thompson (2005) and Horner (2007). Payne (1996) suggested three perspectives on social work: 'individualist reformist', 'reflexive-therapeutic' and 'socialist-collectivist'. The choice of which definition is contingent on the historical context, practitioners personal skills or knowledge, agency requirements or the needs of the service user. Jordan (1984) suggested that arguments about what social work practice is, are really arguments about the causes social problems and the solutions to those problems (Jordan, 1984). Mullaly (1997) argued that there are essentially two perspectives of social work practice, firstly the "*conventional*" perspective where professionals engage in statutory activities focusing on individual service users, where practitioners work mainly in an 'individualist-reformist' and 'reflexive-therapeutic' way. Mullaly (1997) contrasts this with the "*progressive*" perspective, which informs a smaller number of the profession who consider individuals' problems the result of an inequitable society. Social work practice in this context has focused on challenging societal inequalities, such as sexism, poverty, disablism and racism.

As a result "*social work is a contingent activity, conditioned by and dependent upon the context from which it emerges and in which it engages*" (Harris 2008) The International Federation of Social Workers defined social work as a profession which "*promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being*" (Hare 2004) The two definitions illustrate the complex and contradictory nature of social work. Social workers are required to change the society they are dependent upon for their existence. It is unlikely that any government will look favourably on a profession whose ethical position depends on biting the hand which feeds it. It is not unusual therefore that social work has been undermined by successive governments, who have sidelined social work, subsuming it

under 'social care', and removing its central role in relation to youth offending and mental health (Jones, 2012; Rogowski, 2012 and Warner, 2013). Warner (2013) has shown how politicians, in conjunction with the press, actively mobilized public anger towards social work. The Social Work Taskforce (2009) emphasised that how social workers were portrayed in the media is critical to the profession of social works' relationship with wider society (Social Work Task Force, 2009).

Rogowski (2012) has pointed out that decades of de-professionalisation, managerialism and the move to a technical-rationalist and business model has dominated the discourse around social work (Rogowski, 2012). Rogowski (2012) has further argued that social workers are often so focussed on 'getting the job' done that they are in danger of losing sight of what and who they are, including their professional uniqueness and style of intervention.

In 2008, the government commissioned the Social Work Task Force, which recommended the establishment of the College of Social Work, alongside 15 recommendations for improving and reforming social work. The establishment of the College of Social Work in 2012 and Social Work taskforce reforms have been seen as attempts by the profession to resist some of the challenges the profession has faced. In contrast the government emphasizes the legislative role of social work e.g. the GSCC (2008) stated that social work services are delivered to promote and secure the wellbeing of the service users *"as it is a profession regulated by law"* (GSCC, 2008). The GSCC has been replaced by the Health Care Professions Council, which also emphasises that social workers must practice lawfully, safely and effectively (HCPC, 2012).

Social work practice in Britain therefore exists in a repressive atmosphere, in which many politicians, members of the public and the media appear, if not explicitly hostile, to sometimes display little confidence in the profession, particularly in the wake of recent child deaths such as Daniel Pelka and Keanu Williams (Bennett, 2013 Elkes, 2013). Given that social work is conditioned by the societal context from which it emerges, and given the centrality of humour in contemporary society, I hypothesised that an exploration of humour, and the jokes which are told about social work, would enable me to investigate the role and place of social work in society.

Freud's belief that every society requires a certain level of repression to function appears to resonate in this current climate (Billig, 2005). Studies of joke telling in Eastern Bloc countries (Lewis, 2009) and anthropological studies of oppressed groups use of humour (Carden, 2003; Scheper-Hughes, 1993) suggest that jokes, joking behaviour and humour flourish under repression, as people seek ways to express themselves through humour. Oppressed groups can rebel and challenge oppression though 'safe mechanisms' such as humour.

Social work and humour

Social work has a complex relationship with humour. In some respects given the serious endeavour of social work it would appear to be the last place where one would find humour, however research suggests otherwise. It is hardly controversial to suggest that most people like to laugh and enjoy humour, as Billig (2005) and Dessau (2012) point out there is a multi-million pound entertainment industry given over to the purpose of making people laugh. Possessing a good sense of humour has long been viewed as a key to success in personal relationships (Guéguen, 2010; DiDonato et al, 2013)

Chiller and Crisp (2012) point out that social work as well as being emotionally demanding and stressful, is lacking in rewards. Under-resourcing, high staff turnover, high caseloads often translates into poor morale and negative organisational culture (Chiller and Crisp, 2012). As a result the average working life for a social worker is only 8 years compared to 15 for nurses (Chiller and Crisp, 2012). Chiller and Crisp (2012) argue that humour can be (alongside resilience, mindfulness and emotional intelligence) strategies for improving the longevity of social workers and their own self-care. I have found that a study of the uses of humour in relation to social work could therefore provide insight into the employment retention of social workers.

Jokes and the use of humour by social workers and their colleagues are cited as one of their most common coping mechanisms (Moran and Hughes, 2006). Gilgun and Sharma (2011) stated that social workers rarely confronted humourous situations in their everyday practice, but suggest that humour may help "*social workers deal more effectively with difficult situations*" (Gilgun and Sharma, 2011 p.2).

As the relief theory of humour suggest, jokes and humour can help people tolerate and face adversity, and as anthropological studies indicate in-group humour can help acknowledge and dispel negative emotions. Humour can be a strengthening factor in

social support among people who have come through trauma and challenges, and it can also be a way for people who have survived a difficult experience to support and encourage those who are still going through it.

The Munro Report (2011) highlighted the importance of consistency in relationships and the need for workers to be emotionally resilient. Munro argued that amongst the factors which helped social workers develop resilience was the role of supervision, support and being able to express themselves emotionally (Munro Report, 2011). Hart, et al (2007) found that resilient people are people who have overcome adversity, and have long known the value of humour, therefore possessing a sense of humour is associated with resilience (Hart, et al, 2007). Wolin and Wolin (1993) found that there was a connection between creativity and humour in people who are resilient. They suggested that humour counteracted the role of victim, and that laughing about your situation created new ways of being, and enabled active resistance to adversity.

Wolin and Wolin (1993) found that in-group humour can help rid a group of negative emotions and strengthen social support among people who have come through trauma and challenges. Sharing one's survival of a difficult experience can mentor and encourage others. Psychiatrist Victor Frankl wrote in 1946 about surviving Nazi concentration camps that humour was a weapon for sell-preservation, as it created the ability in humans to rise above the most awful of situations, if only for a few seconds (Frankl, 1946). Richards (2007) pointed out that in extremes of poverty and deprivation amongst the Nigerian people there are many characteristics in common; warmth, resilience and, above all, humour. Humour therefore provides a vital social function in relation to resilience to traumatic events. Moran and Hughes (2006) study focused on whether students entering the social work profession already used humour or developed this as a mechanism for coping with stress. They found that students who used humour to cope were less lonely and less depressed.

Moran and Hughes (2006) found that a person's sense of humour can be a mitigating factor in the effects of stress, and laughter can provide '*a form of control in uncontrollable situations*' by being self-affirming (Moran and Hughes, 2006 p. 504). This is supported by studies including Freud's work (1960) and Lemma (2000) where a 'gallows humour' can help individuals wrest back some control in what might appear to be hopeless situations.

Pickering and Lockyer (2009) argue that identity is linked to the use of humour. Stereotypes exist in relation to social work and as noted above *Clare in the Community* utilises such stereotypes for comedic and humour effect. Other authors have also suggested that humour is central to social workers identity. Drinkwater (2011) suggested that among the personal qualities that make a good social worker, he would add a sense of humour, alongside empathy, integrity, objectivity and perseverance. In particular he suggested that humour can be useful with a joyless or "*curmudgeonly*" colleague or to "*break down barriers with steely clients.*" Rogowski (2011) too suggested that frontline social workers, particularly child protection social workers have always used humour, often gallows humour, as a way of managing their day-to-day work. However he also acknowledged that there may be times where humour is used inappropriately, and when social workers are disrespectful of service users, but he pointed out that social workers are "*not robots working in a sterile environment*" (Rogowski, 2011).

Like Cooper (2008) who pointed out that humour is used frequently in the workplace, I found that humour and joke use has considerable implications for interpersonal dynamics and relationships in organisations. Managers who utilise humour are perceived by employees as being more relationship oriented (Decker and Rotondo, 2001 cited in Cooper, 2008). Cooper argues that humour plays a significant role in the workplace relationships: *"humour dynamics can facilitate or detract from the formation of new relationships, as well as strengthen or destroy existing relationships"* (Cooper, 2008 p. 1088) Cooper (2008) pointed out humour can be shared between employees or it can targeted on an individual (including employers or service users). This is intentional use of humour and can include sarcasm, visual images, orchestrated jokes, storytelling or puns. It is also intended to cause a reaction. Humour can be seen as 'potentially facilitating the therapeutic environment' (Baker, 2004), and Newirth (2006) found that jokes and humour in psychoanalytic treatment could be a means of interpreting and understanding unconscious meaning.

The fear of not taking Social Work seriously
"*Laughter is the flip side of fear*" (Smith, 2013), and given the current context of social work practice in the UK, with public, media and politicians' lack of confidence in social work, there could be a fear in not being taken seriously as a social worker. The implication is that a lack of seriousness could be undermining to a profession already struggling to regain confidence in its practice. In such circumstances a study into the

use of humour by and about social work could be seen not just as a risky, but frivolous, irrelevant and possibly undermining of social work credibility, however it is impossible to imagine a world without humour, as it is so integral to social life and my study indicates that an investigation into humour reveals significant findings in relation to social work practice.

One local authority has as its tag line that they and their practitioners are "*serious about social work*." By implication one could assume that in studying humour in relation to social work, one runs the risk of not taking the practice of social work seriously, after all could one imagine the tagline "*lighthearted about social work*," or "*serious about nursing*"? It could be suggested that this tagline itself reflects a need to be taken seriously and a profession which lacks confidence, or fears being ridiculed or the implication that it is not a serious and earnest endeavor. This I suggest has to be understood within the context of social work's own insecurities, anxieties and fear about whether it is taken seriously, not just by its service users, but by wider society. This is an important issue, as without its own and societies 'legitimising' seriousness, how can the social work profession be trusted to make the very difficult decisions it is required to make?

Billig (2005) has argued that humour is universal to all cultures, and as such is central to social life. Without the possibility of humour and laughter, serious social life could not be sustained (Billig, 2005). In my opinion social work could not take on the very serious work it does, without the possibility of laughter, jokes and humour.

The consequences of telling an offensive or oppressive joke has significant consequences in social work and for social workers in practice. Forwarding of "joke e-mails" is a common experience in most modern workplaces, and homes, where the use of the Internet is commonplace, however in 2010 five social workers in Scotland and England were dismissed after they forwarded a string of "joke" e-mails, including one containing a mocked-up image of convicted sex offender Gary Glitter carrying a child in a plastic bag. However as Pelling (2008) suggested "*there is something drastically awry in the world when social workers are dismissed for forwarding tasteless emails, but keep their jobs when a child dies.*"

In discussing the forwarding of joke emails in social work offices, respondents to a CareSpace forum (the online community for social care hosted by Community Care), suggested that many social work practitioners wish to be taken seriously and earnestly

in their endeavours to help and support service users, and for many practitioners the forwarding of joke e-mails is unacceptable e.g. *"What they did was totally inappropriate… The fact it's an agency that seeks to protect children makes it even worse"*. In contrast other social workers viewed the forwarding of joke e-mails as acceptable behaviour within a modern office environment e.g.: *"We all need a little light relief at work... What's the harm in having a laugh in your lunch break? Laughing is good for your mood [and] a good mood improves productivity and reduces stress!"* The responses suggested that forwarding joke e-mails in social work offices is contingent on them (a) providing some humorous relief from the work and (b) not making exploitative or oppressive comments.

What can an analysis of humour offer social work?
As the claim to having a sense of humour appears to be universal too many researchers and commentators tend to be obliged to make universal claims about their ideas and findings (Willis, 2009). My intention here is not to make such universal claims about humour, but to find out what jokes and humours reveals about the difficult nature of social work and secondly, what humour can do for social work.

As indicated above the use of humour has been analysed and considered in relation to other professions (Barron, 1999 and Lemma, 2000). A review of social work literature reveals that there has been in my view a sporadic interest in the use of humour in social work (Siporin, (1984); Witkin (1999); Moran and Hughes (2006) and Gilgun and Sharma (2011), but no studies have combined a study of humour in social work, with jokes by and about social workers. There are the 'in-jokes' made about social work by social workers, and the stories social workers tell each other when they want to share humorous experiences. In examining these phenomena I was able to reflect upon the role social work occupies in society, make an original contribution to social work practice and theory, and examine the role humour plays in the lives of social workers and the teams they work in.

A potentially fruitful area of research is in the relationship between humour, staff turnover and absenteeism. Robert and Wilbanks (2012) suggest that humour might play a role in decreasing these phenomena, and increasing the incidence of positive humour events might reduce the probability of "impulsive quitting" owing to negative affective states and by aiding in the development of strong friendships at work, which

have been associated with lower turnover rates (Robert and Wilbanks, 2012). Indeed, this is an area that my finding highlights.

The review of the literature suggests that the use humour and jokes could provide a social function in relation to social work. Romero (2005) found that team humour contributed to '*positive mental state'* and that this was associated with higher reported work effort. Uttarkar (2008) in her study of mental health teams found that humour was a way of reducing the guilt felt by staff at the advantages they had over their clients. However Sullivan (2000) argued that not only does '*gallows humour'* serve the function of self-protection, managing uncomfortable or derogatory thoughts about service users, it may place further stress on social workers who struggle earnestly with their own imperfections (Sullivan, 2000). Moran and Hughes, (2006) found that humour can be both a help in moderating the effects of stress in social work and utilising humour can help others to deal with situations of extreme stress. Cooper (2008) points out theories about the causes of humour share a common thread in that they are concerned with explaining what motivates individuals to enjoy humour, rather than uncovering the social mechanisms of humour. I found that it is the underlying and often unconscious social mechanisms which allow humour to flourish or not to flourish which are themselves worthy of study, as some interviewees spoke of discomfort in sharing humour with managers, or avoiding sharing humour in the presence of managers, often making the work feel less tolerable for them.

Stories have appeared occasionally in the popular press criticising social work practice and attacking social workers for their lack of humour. For example on 20/6/2009 a story appeared in the Daily Mail entitled '*Social workers took away my twins after I'd joked that birth spoilt my body"* (Allen, 2009). The story began with the explanation that the mother had her twin babies removed from her care by social workers after she joked "*that their caesarean birth had ruined her body*". The story went on to explain that the couple had paid out for fertility treatment and it is only further into the story that it was revealed that the 6 week premature babies were taken into care, after hospital staff warned that the first-time parents were struggling to care for them.

In relation to an analysis of humour, the blog response to this article were illustrative of perceptions of social work practitioners, for example, one commentator suggested social work practitioners are similar to the Gestapo and another commentator stated that: "*This is very common behaviour from social workers who prefer to go after soft,*

law-abiding targets instead of confronting dangerous abusers. SS claim they're over-worked, but while they persecute this innocent family they aren't spending time protecting children who need it." (Allen, 2009)

It could be suggested that the article and subsequent comments revealed was the social construct of social workers as humourless, '*child snatchers'* unable to filter what appeared to be '*harmless jokes'* made by '*innocent parents'*. The result of which was that the parents lost their children to the '*humourless'* care system. In 1991 Punch magazine published a list of world's most loathsome human beings[2]. Amongst the list which included Saddam Hussein, Jeremy Beadle, Gazza and Nancy Reagan, social workers were the only professional group listed. I was troubled by this poll which made social workers "loathsome" and worthy of ridicule. Statistically Punch readers were mainly young, male, living in the South of the UK and wealthy (Punch Magazine, 1991), so they were not representative of the population of Britain. It was in my mind significant that a poll of largely young, southern, wealthy men, people unlikely to have any direct contact with social workers, was labelling a group of ethnically diverse, predominantly female professionals as 'loathsome human beings.'

Articles such as these create a discourse around social work which generates a particular image in the popular mind about what and who social workers are. Inevitably this impacts on the work or the challenges in taking the very difficult decisions social workers face every day. If in the public mind social workers are humourless, loathsome, "Gestapo like" characters, then social workers behaviour and actions are much more likely to be called into question.

Finally Morreall (2009) argues that humour can foster an open, constructive attitude to mistakes, and "*laughing at a mistake can be more beneficial than sinking into self-blame or depression*" (Morreall, 2009 p. 75). Morreall (2009) argues further that humour can restore personal relationships, and that one of the most effective ways of showing people we have forgiven and forgotten behaviour which may have caused offence is by joking with them. However placed in the context of child deaths, it is hard to apply Morreall's approach when reviewing the outcome of serious case reviews into childrens deaths. It would be hard to imagine the public 'forgiving' Lisa Arthurworrey for her perceived fallings in relation to Victoria Climbé if she was to make a joke.

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[2] Thomas, D (editor) Punch magazine 150 years of Punch *Perrier Poll* July 1991

Social work, Humour and stress

It is uncontentious to say that social work is a stressful job (Obholzer, 1997) and sharing jokes, using humour can help social workers cope with the stress of the work. If used selectively, sensitively and appropriately, humour can be seen alongside other mechanisms as a positive method of dealing with stress (Collins et al, 2008; Drinkwater, 2011; Rogowski, 2011). There is evidence of the lack of humour and levels of unhappiness in the social work profession and some authors suggest this begins in social work training (Tobin and Carson, 1994; and Collins et al, 2008).

Humour can be both a help in moderating the effects of stress and utilising humour can help others to deal with situations of extreme stress (Moran and Hughes, 2006). Sullivan (2000) argued that not only does 'gallows humour' serve the function of self-protection, managing uncomfortable or derogatory thoughts about service users. As Mik-Meyer (2007) found social workers sometimes felt powerless to change their service users lives. In consequence social workers used humour to deal with the frustrations and anxieties of the job, but this also became the first stage in moving on to constructive problem solving. Gilgun and Sharma (2011) found that case managers used humour to cope with and relieve stress. They found that stress included frustration and anger when parents were unwilling or incapable of handling their own issues and provide adequate care for their children. Gilgun and Sharma, (2011) found that team meetings became the conduit for channelling frustration and the use of humour in this context went beyond stress relief and became a way of regulating negative emotions.

Could the use of humour aid social workers to be more confident in their practice? Barron (1999) points out that a reduced capacity for humour 'impoverishes our psychic life'. Stuber et al, (2007) found that humour can help children and adolescents tolerate painful medical procedures. Other research that laughter has long been viewed as 'good medicine' for a variety of illnesses (Bennett and Lengacher, 2006). Coser (1959) found that some patients 'taught' other patients through jocular interactions to cope with the hospital environment. It has long been part of folk mythology that being happy makes you feel good. "*A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones*" (Proverbs 17:22, *NIV*). The notion that psychosocial considerations can help to maintain good mental health was put forward by Cousins in the 1970s as he speculated that if stress could worsen his condition, then feeling good could improve his health, and on a self-medication regime of humorous videos his disease went into

remission (Bennett and Lengacher, 2006). However enthusiastic and wide reaching claims for humour such as its relationship to *"longevity, recovery from illness or production of endorphins do not withstand close analysis"* (Martin, 2001 cited in Moran and Hughes, 2006 p. 513).

The idea here is that using humour in the workplace helps you not only to survive, but to thrive. Satyamurti (1981) found that social workers used a variety of strategies to make their work more tolerable, and she found these strategies were both individual and collective, practical and conceptual. Social workers shaped their situations in the context of their main relationships.

Satyamurti (1981) also suggests that social workers experienced meaningless in their work, which contradicts with the public perception of social workers as a vocation, with a capacity of creative and helpful human relationships. She also noted that a process of deskilling, i.e. a move away from traditional case work was occurring in 1981, and social workers rarely experienced what she termed as successful work. Nearly 30 years later Overell (2008) reinforced this and suggests that there is a dilemma in the way modern work is constructed, as work is an arena for self-realisation, but is also increasingly alienating and oppressive, as we come to work to do something good, but find that we do not and find little kinship or solidarity.

Moran and Hughes (2006) found that social work students did not see humour as one of their coping strategies in contrast to experienced social workers who relied on humour to manage or cope with stress. Moran and Hughes (2006) expected to find that a positive attitude to humour would be associated with other positive measures for managing stress, but found that attitudes to humour, amongst social work students revealed little relationship to stress or health levels. They also found that some humour requires "*permission, which may be explicitly or implicitly sought*" (Moran and Hughes, 2006 p. 512) as social work students felt guarded about when it was appropriate to talk about humour in regard to social work. Moran and Hughes (2006) cited the example of a mental health team where the team shared laughter over the 'funny side of service users behaviours', although the practitioner needed to reassure the student this did not carry over to face to face interactions. It is this contradictory nature of humour use that has been found in other research e.g. participants in Sullivan's (2000) study found that by talking about humour and its uses they were discovering something new about their interactions with service users. Lemma (2000) claimed that a judicious use of humour

can aid the development of a positive atmosphere during therapy, and it is possible to suggest that this could also be true of social work, particularly in supervision. It can be uncomfortable for a social worker to become aware they have responded in a prejudiced manner, but unwanted prejudicial thoughts have a better chance of being managed if they are expressed (Sullivan, 2000).

Humour and organisations

Some research on humour in organisations has found that humour can be a double edged sword (Cooper, 2008). Cooper (2008) pointed out that how humour is used in the workplace can be dependent on several factors, the perceptions of those involved and the subject of the humour. If the quality of the relationship with a manager is positive then the subordinate will interpret the use of humour positively and if the relationship is poor then subordinates are likely to attribute negative characteristics to a manager's use of humour (Cooper, 2008). The second factor is appropriateness of the humour, and whether the person using humour is 'in tune' with the culture of the organisation. Used appropriately humour can decrease conflict, release tension, increase morale or communicate a message (Cooper, 2008).

Uttarkar (2008) found in that staff in a mental health team she studied utilised humour to mask fear and to evade discussing its impact on staff. The team depended on humorous interludes to seek relief from relentless discussions about the painful experiences of their patients (Uttarkar, 2008).

Research into the use of humour in organisations reveals humour can be used in many different ways. The use of humour at work is often seen as an artefact of the social system. When humour is carried out by those in power to those without power in the form of '*teasing'* it can be done for the purpose of '*getting the job done'* and humour can be used by managers to reinforce power differentials (Cooper, 2008). Cooper (2008) found a correlation between managers' use of humour and the way they are perceived by their staff and a shared humorous experience allowed an individual to feel validated and drew workers and managers to feel closer (Cooper, 2008).

Cooper (2008) drew a distinction between vertical humour (humour between managers and subordinates) and horizontal humour (humour between co-workers). She also found that there was also differences in how humour was used and its relationship to social attractiveness, and with those with high humour orientation being judged as the

most socially attractive. 'Clowning humour' was judged more favourably than sarcasm, although this was mitigated by gender (men more likely to find sarcasm humorous) than women (Cooper, 2008). In developing a joking culture, workers created their own identity as distinct from management (Cooper, 2008). Cooper (2008) also suggested that humour can be a vehicle for *self-disclosure*, which is associated with liking and attraction within relationships. She argued that humour can be used to more safely disclose personal information, and that the humour one uses reveals something about oneself.

Brannen and Pattman (2005) found that laughter can stand in for criticism in social work and that laughter served to create solidarity between social workers. Brannen and Pattman (2005) also found that laughter and humour are important ways of signaling tension and dissension in social work teams, but also of managing it and rendering a situation less threatening. However humour also involved a degree of risk taking, For example although sexually motivated jokes in the workplace are considered risky people still tell them (Cooper, 2008).

It is likely that when humour is used in the organisation by social workers two or more of the causes of humour may coalesce e.g. conveying superiority, managing incongruous feelings or relieving anxiety/ stress (Gilgun and Sharma, 2011). There is potentially cyclical pattern to humour, i.e. when humour builds or detracts from a relationship, it encourages or discourages others from expressing humour. If someone feels themselves to be belittled at work they are unlikely to respond positively. Humour is a form of social communication, which acts as a reinforcing or punishing event, as it *manipulates affect* (Cooper, 2008 p. 1101). Holmes (2000) found that humour was an effective strategy for reducing offence. Given that social work is constantly dealing with situations which can raise difficult emotions, humour can be a process which helps to manage these issues. Evidence from ethnographic research e.g. Locke (1996) supports this. Locke (1996) observed paediatricians comedic acts with patients and their families, and found these interactions caused the family to like the doctor more. Could this also be true of social workers encounters with children, where there is a need for children to feel liked and to like their social workers?

Robert and Wilbanks (2012) *Wheel Model of humour* emphasise the distinctively social nature of humour and indicates that humour-induced positive affect results in transmission of emotion in groups, which in turn creates a climate that supports humour

use and subsequent humour events. Robert and Wilbanks (2012) argue that humour events must be viewed as part of a cyclical and cumulative process whereby individual events have an incremental influence on affect, but also lay the foundation for additional humour events (Robert and Wilbanks, 2012). A key theoretical component of Robert Wilbanks (2012) theory is *emotional contagion*. Emotional contagion is a process whereby people imitate others' demonstrations of emotions such as facial expressions, speech, smiling and laughter which results in the actual experience of similar emotions (Robert and Wilbanks, 2012). As Carpenter (2011) suggested the 'climate' which social workers operate in is important. She suggests that a negative mind-set and inability to feel positive about change which is so crucial to surviving in social work. In this sense the negative emotional contagion can have a harmful effect on the operation of social work teams, and the opposite can have a positive effect on teams.

Robert and Wilbanks, (2012) suggest that there are at times whilst it might be possible to over-emphasise humours potential positive effects, humour "might be an unsung hero in peoples' day-to-day affective lives" (Robert and Wilbanks, 2012 p.1093). But they also posit an important limitation that if humour can help stimulate and develop positive affect, how can it be that nobody has yet demonstrated this? (Robert and Wilbanks, 2012).

Values, empathy and humour
Whilst researchers have argued that humour and ridicule can be used oppressively (Billig, 2005; Mik-Meyer, 2007) there is an intuitive appeal to the idea that humour can enable social workers to cleanse themselves of negative feelings about their service users (Sullivan, 2000). The key issue is that this may go against the social workers code of ethics, or standards of proficiency, and this is a theme that emerged in my findings.

Sullivan (2000) has argued that the use of humour in social work practice is a daily occurrence, and can often involve derogatory or 'gallows humour' involving service users. Sullivan (2000) drew a continuum between racist and sexist humour at one extreme and innocent non service-user based humour at the other extreme. Sullivan (2000) argued that gallows humour, which is potentially oppressive or discriminatory can be tolerated on the basis that it relieves tension or stress. However Sullivan argued

that this is a form of *'meta-discrimination'* because it "*reinforces perceived differences between social worker and service user*" (Sullivan, 2000 p. 46).

Personal values appear to play a central role therefore in the operation of humour for social workers. Hampes (2001) found a connection between humour and empathic concern and suggested that these qualities were associated with emotional intelligence. Social Workers and managers who sensitive to the values of others, emotionally positive and optimistic create climates of goodwill and co-operation (Morrison, 2007; Howe, 2008).

Sullivan's (2000) work on gallows humour supports the need for social workers to identify and deal with potentially discriminatory values, attitudes and behaviour *(*Sullivan, 2000). She found that social workers reported using this type of humour as a common coping strategy, and as such utterances are difficult to object to, the issue raises particular tensions between actual and ideal perceptions of themselves (Sullivan, 2000), and this tension emerged in my findings.

Gender, Social work and humour
The majority of social workers and social work managers are women (CWDC, 2010). Across the CWDC footprint the majority of the workforce is female. In social care higher proportions are male, a fifth (19%) of local authority social workers are male, with a lower proportion in the independent sector (11%). This gender split was paralleled in social work management with 79% female and 21% male. There were similar figures in the private sector, with 79% female and 11% male (11%not known) social workers, but lower female manager in private sector management (58% female and 30% male, with 13% not known) (CWDC, 2010[i]). In this respect social work reflects the gender division of nursing, which is a similarly gendered profession. Bassett (2003) found that most nurses used humour and particularly experienced nurses made reference to humour. Bassett (2003) found that humour was seen by nurses to be a way to overcome stressful or emotionally demanding situations.

Pullen and Simpson (2009) in their study of nursing found that male nurses tended to use humour in particular ways. They found that male nurses harnessed sexuality as a mode of resistance, where humour became an important form of play. When male nurses' masculinity was threatened they behaved with '*excesses of camp and outrage'*, which helped establish difference from hegemonic masculinity (Pullen and Simpson, 2009). Pullen and Simpson (2009) argued that men draw on sexuality and humour to

have fun with and bridge difference from a perceived 'heterosexual masculine norm.' However my interview sample of 10 men and 9 women suggest that there is a gender bias in social work at least in terms of who is prepared to talk about humour, as out of the 9 women 3 could not think of anything funny which had happened to them in social work, whereas only one male interviewee could not think of anything. However my findings did not reveal any significant differences, but this would appear an area worthy of future exploration.

Watts (2007) found that the most harassment-prone occupations for female workers were unsurprisingly in the most male-dominated workplaces. The highest levels of harassment were experienced by female police officers and female construction workers. She found that humour in these workplaces was used as a punishment, and was part of a broader pattern of sexual harassment. Watts (2007) suggested that '*having a laugh*' and being able to "take a joke" is central to male identity. Watts (2007) argued this is a central feature of male-dominated environments in a way that it is not the in female-dominated professions and occupations. She argued that women appear to be much less comfortable with the joke culture, experiencing it as difficult to handle (Watts, 2007). Women's disdain for the excessive or inappropriate use of humour by male colleagues focused on its hostile nature and damaging effects (Watts, 2007).

However Seager and Thummel (2009) stated that men often feel inferior to women when it came to talking skills and emotional literacy. Seager and Thummel (2009) found that *humour and "banter" can sometimes be a vital part of the group process in allowing the release of tension, creating a less persecutory space and enabling the emotional intensity of the conversation punctuated so that it does not become too intense or overwhelming at any given time* (Seager and Thummel, 2009 p. 256). They point out that a "feminised" style of communication fits better with psychotherapy, and that a masculine style of communication fits less well. It could be suggested that joking, humour and 'banter' is less likely in a feminised profession such as social work and attempts by social workers at using humour in the workplace problematic in themselves as they are less likely to 'fit' with the prevailing ideology. It might be then that the use of humour within social work continues the gender divide, where could be, if Watts (2007) is correct a tendency for men in social work to utilise humour and women not to. The findings from my study suggests that male social workers were more likely to employ humour, or discuss the use of humour.

Summary

This chapter has considered the history of research into humour, and the context of this within contemporary social work practice. I found in my review of the literature that humour is a universal human experience and jokes have existed for thousands of years, although the specifics of humour depend greatly on their historical and cultural context, and jokes can represent a society's unique culture. Social theorists, philosophers and researchers have analysed the roots and explanations of humour and have reached very different conclusions as to the causes of humour.

Developmental and attachment theorists see humour as central to human development, language and survival. Superiority and anthropological theorists of humour emphasise that humour is interpersonal mockery and derision, which can be used oppressively or to create in-group solidarity. The incongruity theory of humour has a distinctive aspect in that it does not propose an emotion behind our enjoyment of the illogical or ludicrous, we laugh because something is funny, and that is good enough in itself. The social subversiveness theory of humour emphasise the value of the sage fool and the role humour provides in creating social change. Finally the release theory of humour sees it as a psychosocial mechanism for managing emotions. Seen from this perspective humour is viewed as the release of inhibitions, a way of venting repressed tensions, and as a vehicle for unmasking hidden unconscious truths.

However whilst we can learn how and why we find something humorous, the perception of such a complex phenomenon of humour and jokes still lies with the individual and this remains a key issue in any investigation into humour and jokes, as whilst humour can be a solitary event, jokes require social interaction.

Humour and jokes often occurs in social work offices. Social work practice faces many challenges, and there are a number of roles which humour appears to play in relation to social work, stress, organisations and gender.

Social work is a complex, demanding profession, defined by contradictory tasks and feelings. Social workers are required by their standards of practice and proficiency, their code of ethics to place Service Users at the heart of their practice and thinking, yet those same service users can be cruel, abusive and murder their relatives. Humour can be a mechanism by which social workers themselves resolve the tension of these often conflicting and contradictory values, tasks and feelings.

This review of literature raises some important issues, as humour or jokes helps social workers manage the tensions and contradictory emotional demands in their work, as well as having potentially positive effects on individuals health and team functioning. The important question for me is how humour achieves this. The findings of various writers (Watts, 2007) suggest the gendered aspect of the workforce and the ideal perception of themselves (Sullivan, 2000) makes social workers wary of the use of jokes and humour. Do the jokes made about and by social workers reflect a profession at ease with itself or does such humour undermine a profession already struggling to gain confidence with its own place in society. The developmental and subversive theories of humour suggest, in my opinion, that only a securely attached profession, sure of itself and its work can laugh at itself.

In the next chapter I explore the methodology and methods utilised in this study.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Introduction

This chapter covers the research paradigm adopted, the methodological issues, the methodology of interviewing, sampling frame and ethical issues. The methodology described here is multi-layered and is an attempt to combine on line data with data gathered from interviews. This has been challenging and has raised complex methodological and ethical issues, some of which are unique to the approach I have adopted here. A comment by Mulkay (1988) set the scene for me, in that he argued that the very task of analysing humour appears antithetical to humour itself, as to analyse humour the researcher must operate primarily within the realm of seriousness.

Humour is a complex area to research in relation to social work (Moran and Hughes, 2006; Gilgun and Sharma, 2011). As explored in Chapter 2 not everyone agrees what humour is nor how it is manifested, not everyone agrees what causes it and not everyone agrees what purpose it serves. Tobin (2003) has pointed out that humour is part of the messy reality of everyday life. There is what Carden (2003) has termed a degree of 'elusiveness' about humour, which poses a key challenge in researching humour, which has meant that I adopted a unique and original approach to this thesis, as what seems humourous in one context can be deeply troubling and upsetting in another context or to another person. I feared that in looking for humour and asking people about humour, that I would be creating the humour myself, but I found that I could not explore reactions to humour, without explicitly asking these questions, or at times asking social workers about a joke to reveal their assumptions and understandings.

My research paradigm and core assumptions:

I have been influenced by several approaches in what could be termed as my ontological position, or what is important to my own reality. Bruner (1990) has argued that human 'realities' are the result of sustained and intimate processes of construction and negotiation enclosed within a particular culture. It follows from this assumption that the ontological position is to make interpretations of the subjective world, in order to be able to understand those human realities.

My own approach to knowledge used in and about social work has been influenced by its competing traditions. Theories about social work have often been viewed as distinct and conflicting, with, as O'Leary et al (2013) suggests, psycho-dynamic perspectives at one end and Marxist/ collective approaches on the other. The two are often presented

as split and irreconcilable, and it feels to me that this split has influenced my own approach to the research paradigm. Such a split in the theoretical basis of social work, is also paralleled in the division in research paradigms such as "hard"/ quantitative methodologies versus "soft"/ qualitative methodologies. These conflicting and completing ideologies have had an influence on my own epistemological stance, which still desires an improbable unification of these approaches, possibly because I desire to reconcile conflict. As O'Leary et al (2013) point out whilst the conflicting approaches are important to the theoretical basis of social work practice, as social work practice is often driven by 'hard, quantitative and empirical data', "*they do not focus on 'how' the social work relationship and its boundaries are constructed and maintained.*" (O'Leary et al, 2013 p.139). My research approach has focused on how the social work relationship operates, and an examination of humour enables me to do that. My attempt therefore is to engage with the messy *intersubjectivity* of the real world of social work practice and its complexity through the medium of humour.

My research fits within the knowledge or epistemological body of qualitative approaches to research for several reasons. Qualitative data is generally concerned with the inter-action between humans, and humour is a key process by which people interact. Humour is also subjective, and like most qualitative data could rarely be regarded as objective and value free (Whittaker, 2009). Quantitative researchers have argued that qualitative research is of minimal value except in the exploratory phase of a study (Gilbert, 2008). In contrast, qualitative researchers have claimed that the application of purely quantitative evaluation techniques distorts reality into overly simplistic data analysis (Cameron and Este, 2007). Hollway and Jefferson (2013) argue that whatever social factors (class, gender, race, physical and sensory abilities) explain, they fall short of a complete explanation, as what research into these factors alone fails to address is understanding people as 'psychosocial beings', who have a simultaneous internal psychic world and an external social existence.

I will now outline the 3 assumptions which underpin the methodological approach to my research: *The researcher is merged with the world; findings and arguments, based on interpretation, rather than descriptions; and a plan which is reflexive and flexible*

The researcher is merged with the world
The notion that we 'learn from experience' and that our emotional response to the world is central to our understanding is a psychoanalytic one (Cooper and Lousada, 2005).

Making links between our thinking, feelings and analysis, is a process for increasing our knowledge of the world in which we live.

Several researchers (Bronowski, 1953; Clarke and Hoggett, 2009) have argued that at its core good research is sceptical about the possibility of researching human beings, their social and psychological realities from a 'value free' stance. I suggest that, in line with researchers such as Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000), Clarke and Hoggett (2009) and Mason (2004), we come to understand the world through our attempts to control and change it, and this is not a neutral activity. Bronowski (1953) argues that "*There is no absolute knowledge. And those who claim it, whether they are scientists or dogmatists, open the door to tragedy. All information is imperfect. We have to treat it with humility.*" (Bronowski, 1953: 353). It is this humble, imperfect attempt to engage with the real world which has driven in part the methodological approach I adopted. The idea of the researcher being key to the process of the research, the use of self as a method and process is central to my approach to this thesis.

Clarke and Hoggett (2009) take their starting point that the world is mediated by our perceptions of it and hence there is no "neutral and objective" process for examining the world. Mason (2004) pointed out that how we perceive how the social world is made (our ontology), affects not only why we conduct research, but the methods with which we conduct it. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) argued that we are irrevocably "*merged with our world*" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000 p.80), already before any conscious reflection, so it is a dubious construction to see the researcher and object of the research as separate. Qualitative researchers need to be aware of the extent to which their own judgement, creativity and skills with language generates categories and elaborates meaning of the material under scrutiny. The qualitative researcher needs to show evidence of careful reflection on the professional and personal investments they have in the research outcome. Gibbs (2008) pointed out that life is about experience, and the material world does not exist beyond our perception of it. As outlined in the introduction I have had a long standing interest in humour in relation to social work and was therefore interested in accessing the experiences of social workers and their perceptions of humour and jokes, as well as my own.

I explored how social workers used humour in their practice, and elicited this through the interviews I conducted, as well as gathering data on-line, including jokes. My approach contrasts with a rigid quantitative and mechanical approach, which I would argue does not always 'fit' with the complex and messy world which social work

inhabits. Reason (1994) has stated that our understanding of the world stems from our involvement and engagement with it. Reason (1994) suggests that we start to lose our understanding once we detach ourselves from the world. Reason (1994) was critical of the ontological approach to the world in which the 'knower' is detached from the world, and this had resonance for me, as I was connecting an analysis of jokes with interviews and reflections by social workers on how they used humour and jokes in their work. I wanted also to think about the 'beneath the surface' emotional context of all this, recognizing that my own emotional response is a very useful research tool (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009). As a practicing social worker, I am a part of the profession I am examining, that in itself both bounds and informs the research I have conducted. My approach was an attempt to capture the social meanings (including unconscious meanings) which are contained in everyday actions (Brewer, 2000). Practitioner research often has the aim of promoting or facilitating change in practice (McBeath and Austin (2013). As such practitioner researchers have advantages, particular insights into the nature of the work and ease of access to subjects.

Findings and Arguments, based on interpretation, rather than descriptions
Mason (2004*)* argued that qualitative research should produce explanations or arguments rather than mere descriptions. Wren (2004) pointed out that qualitative approaches to research made a 'good fit' for practitioner/ researchers as a qualitative approach is characterised by more open-ended and exploratory questions concerned with meanings and processes. My research is grounded in the interpretivist tradition, in that we interpret our actions, and our understanding of the actions of others and that we impose meaning on the world. We inhabit cultural worlds and engage in cultural practices that are defined by shared interpretations. It might be suggested here that my research is driven by an attempt to make sense of the enigma at the heart of human interaction as anthropologist Geertz stated that we might be consoled by the belief that we are all alike, but have the "*worrying suspicion that we are not*" (Geertz, 1983. p. 42).

Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) argue that it is not methods, but the researchers understanding of the essence of the area she/he is concerned with, (ontological understanding) and what the researcher can know about the world (epistemological understanding) which determine good social science research. It is through the process of reflecting on the process of conducting the research, that one gains understanding of the researchers construction of reality-why is this important? It is because one needs to pay serious attention to the different types of linguistic, social, political and theoretical

issues which are "*woven together in the process of knowledge development*" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000 p. 9). I share Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2000) position that:

"*There is no such thing as unmediated data or facts; these are always the results of interpretation. However the interpretation does not take place in a neutral, apolitical, ideologically free space. The researchers' paradigms, perspectives and concepts, as well as their political interests and backgrounds bring out certain types of interpretation possibilities*" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000 p. 9).

From this viewpoint my research began from a sceptical and interpretive/ reflective approach which engaged with the process of generating knowledge, which opens rather than closes the possibility of new knowledge creation.

A clear plan, but one which is flexible
A methodological plan is at the core of any good research and it is necessary to have a clear plan of how the data will be collected in a systematic, sensitive, ethical and appropriate way for the questions I wanted to answer. Mason (2004) has argued that in order to have research taken seriously, the research itself needs to be done well. I wanted also an element of flexibility to my research methodology, as I felt a rigid over-deterministic stance would not be appropriate to the complexities of humour, however alongside this each part and stage of the research process has to be explicitly thought about, as it is about producing knowledge (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009).

Part of what I wanted to do was to find out what social workers found funny or made them laugh, as this appears so important to individuals and teams functioning (Brannen and Pattman, 2005; Gilgun and Sharma, 2011; Holmes, 2000). Wren (2004) argued that in this process the qualitative researcher constantly approaches and re-approaches the empirical data, and places their 'taken-for-granted' assumptions under constant scrutiny. The first assumption I made was that social work took an emotional toll on practitioners. This was supported not only by research (Obholzer, 1997; Tobin and Carson, 1994; and Collins et al, 2008), but also by the evidence which emerged from the data I gathered.

Wren (2004) has argued that without a reflexive approach, we do not take thinking forward, so in order to do this the qualitative researcher works with different levels of interpretation, and in order to produce results which are valid and justifiable, the qualitative researcher needs to constantly question what weaknesses are inherent in a

particular way of thinking, and to consider what the research paradigm is not capable of explaining.

Mason (2004*)* has pointed out that the major effort during the research process should involve self-questioning activity. In this sense the research process is a reflexive act, i.e. thinking critically about what the researcher is doing and why, confronting and often challenging assumptions particularly the researchers own and recognising the extent to which our own thoughts, actions and decisions shape the research (active reflexivity on the part of the researcher). One problem is that the research journey can be lonely and isolating. A constant questioning and reflection on whether I was justified in making the links or coming to the conclusions I was making was central to my methodology.

Rationale for analysing jokes
Billig (2005) has argued that in any contemporary examination of humour, the absence of jokes would be unthinkable. Jokes are worthy data in themselves to study and I have always been fond of jokes and from the start of my career in social work have searched for jokes about social work. The jokes I found came from a range of sources, including ones told to me personally, and ones I had collected from existing websites, on line blogs and forums.

Freud (1960) recognised that jokes could be an important source of data. Alston and Platt (1968) found that jokes were a way of expressing negative judgments and criticisms, and crucially are a way into the collective unconscious. I believed this would give me a way into the unconscious role which social work played in society, what did a joke represent for the listener, what kind of jokes did social workers tell each other? Did they share jokes with service users. Fry (1968) has argued that humour is an episode set off from the rest of experiences by a 'play frame,' which signifies that what is contained in the joke or the humour is not real, but the effect and the emotions the humour creates are real and necessary for relationships.

Lockyer (2006) has argued that greater confidence can be had in findings which are gathered from different sources and subjected to different analytical strategies. Arksey and Knight (1999) argue that whilst qualitative methods reflect views that knowledge is provisional, uneven, complex and contested, triangulation allows the research to have more depth. The problem is as Blakie (1991) points out that such an approach based on triangulation may become "*a hotch potch of mixed methodology with no underlying rationale*" for the choice of methods. However I would argue that in investigating such a

complex social phenomena as humour, which is not linked to one single theory or method, the researcher requires a complex range of approaches. Blakie (1991) also pointed out another disadvantage of triangulation is that the researcher can attempt to make inconsistent data sets artificially compatible in order to produce a more coherent account. I combated this issue by leaving space for uncertainty and doubt through the reflective approach I adopted, and found that the data yielded an interpretation that is original and unique contribution to social work knowledge. As the jokes I collected are publically held and widely accessible I considered the ethical issues of harm, confidentiality and consent to be minimal.

Methodology in collecting jokes

I collected social work jokes for a number of years, making notes in personal journals when I was told a specific joke about social work and combining this with a search of the Internet. This revealed five primary sources and an article published by Community Care on 26th December 2007 (author Caroline Lovell), and several websites which are listed in the bibliography. Billig (2005) argued that possessing a sense of humour is often taken as a mark of a desirable and well-rounded personality. Conversely it is believed that prejudiced people lack humour. Sartre (1948) in his analysis of anti-Semitism suggested that there may be an intrinsic connection between humour and prejudice. The purpose of such a joke is to validate prejudice, and the prejudice is often founded in a stereotype.

Nate Prentice ran a website from 1994 to 2003, which appeared to be one of the first sources of joke collections solely for and about social workers. He revived the website in 2008 and on the website he stated that:

> *It has been clear throughout my professional development that Social Work is an undervalued profession. It is clear, for example, that although lawyers spend only one additional year of study, they make more money than we do. So, in an attempt to bolster the standing of the profession, I will try to help the profession to be able to compete with other more highly valued professions, such as lawyers, in at least this professional arena.* http://www.socialworkchat.org (website now closed)

It is interesting that in having jokes made about social work as a profession, Prentice believes that this would challenge the undervalued status of social work. It is puzzling to me that although social work has existed in America and Britain since the turn of the

century, and arguably with the founding of the NSPCC in 1884, social work could not be characterised as a new profession. It could be suggested that there may be other reasons why social work is an undervalued profession, than whether jokes are made about social work.

I found that in utilising the Internet as the main source of jokes, a high proportion of these were American in origin, and whilst not discounting the very useful collections from America I was primarily interested in British jokes, as I wanted to explore what the jokes communicated about British social work. As Critchley (2002) has pointed out when we tell a joke there has to be congruence between the joke structure and social structure, and for this reason I focused my collection on Britain.

I noted how often jokes about social workers had been reinterpretations or the re-workings of jokes about other professions. For example several jokes were re-workings of jokes about doctors or lawyers. The re-workings of doctor jokes had at their heart a concern for the overuse or abuse of power, for example:

Q: What is the difference between God and a social worker?

A: God doesn't pretend to be a social worker.

It is noteworthy that the *Clare in the Community* (CITC) series plays to the negative stereotypes about social workers, in that the key character Clare is portrayed as insensitive to the needs of her service users, whilst at the same time being overly dogmatic or "politically correct" with her colleagues, service users or members of the public. Social workers in my interviews would often make reference to the fact that when CITC was in the Guardian it was read by a smaller 'social work audience' and once on the radio reached a wider audience. I had direct experience of a grandfather who made reference to listening to Clare and laughing at the stereotype of an insensitive and unhelpful social worker, which unfortunately reflected his lived experience of working with a particular social worker.

The jokes made by and about social workers reflects the insider/ outsider dichotomy identified by Sacks (1992). Freud analysed this in relation to the Jewish jokes and Kulick (2000) applied this to gay jokes, and it could be suggested that the process of analysing or sharing a joke within one's own group in effect sanitises it. Put another way when social workers tell jokes to other social workers, they 'sanitise' the prejudices, but the same joke told by a member of the public about social work reveals

personal and even societial attitude to social work. One might suggest that the converse could be true, that jokes made about service users reveal social workers 'true feelings' about service users.

Billig (2005) found that a simplified sorting of the world into its psychological positives and negatives will not suffice to de-code jokes, and researchers needs to have a wider psychosocial understanding of the complex relations between the individual and the social. As Kahn (1989) points out jokes enable us to simultaneously make a statement and also withdraw it from seriousness, because a joke offers the listener the opportunity of taking the punchline seriously or not and if the truth of a joke is welcomed, then the person making it usually desires to be associated with it, however truth is not welcome, the teller of the joke distances themselves from it.

Telephone interviewing

I chose interviews as one method of gathering data as Silverman (2000) has pointed out interviewing is seen as the *gold standard* of qualitative research techniques, because it yields such rich data. Interviews allow for understanding and meaning to be explored (Arksey and Knight, 1999). I transcribed the recordings myself, and found that there was much value in doing this, as it provided me with a lot of time to reflect in depth on the data, although the disadvantage was the time it took- about 8 hours transcription for one hours recording. I felt that the transcription added an additional layer of reflection. I had reflection during the interview, immediately after the interview, then extensively during transcription as I had to listen several times to the recording to be able to transcribe it, and then again when I read and re-read the transcripts. I felt it was important that I was able to immerse myself in the data, and as others have pointed out ttranscription, whilst time-consuming and at times frankly boring, it was a Riessman (1993) suggests a good way of familiarising myself with the data

After collecting the jokes, the second stage of my research strategy involved interviewing a sample of 19 social work practitioners, from various teams, across different authorities and sectors (children and adults services). This sample was obtained by utilising existing contacts with colleagues to invite their colleagues to come forward to be telephone interviewed to discuss their views of the use of humour at work. The sampling frame was based on snowballing, where interviewees were also asked to nominate possible contacts, and colleagues were asked to circulate my

information sheet and urged to contact me. 2 pilot telephone interviews were carried out in March 2010 to assess the viability of the investigation.

Contact was made initially through email and then followed up by a 20-60 minute telephone interview. I sent the interviewee a leaflet, outlining the research and sought informed consent from every interviewee. I gave them the opportunity to terminate the interview at any time, should they become distressed. No-one appeared to become distressed at my questions, and as might be suspected many of the interviewees were punctuated by laughter, so I feel it is fair to conclude that no harm was caused to the telephone interviewee participants.

There were several reasons why I conducted my interviews via telephone, recorded these and then transcribed the recordings. Holt (2010) has pointed out that telephone interviewing requires particular skills for the researcher, for example the need to explicitly direct the conversation due to the absence of non-visual clues, but this means that one of the disadvantages of telephone interviewing is that there is a lack of physical and visual information. Some of the interviews contained some contextual information, as several interviewees made explicit comment about their surroundings, e.g. I am in a quiet room near the office, driving home, at home etc

In a similar vain to Holt (2010) I found telephone interviewing provided me with enormous flexibility. As Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) point out telephone interviewing can be both cost effective and less time consuming, than face to face interviewing. As a full time practicing social worker, this was in itself invaluable, as the process of having to arrange and travel distances to complete interviews, would have substantially impacted on the volume of data I would have been able to collect. To have arranged and conducted nineteen face to face interviews, with social workers, some of whom, lived over one hundred miles from where I was based, would have made the practicalities of obtaining this sample virtually impossible. I found that telephone interviews also gave some power to interviewees, who could choose the time and place for the interview. For example on one occasion an interviewee found a quiet room away from their desk to be able to speak to me freely, this suggested that he was more confident in his responses, as he was not as constrained, if he had been within earshot of colleagues.

There is also something uniquely valuable about the telephone itself, as Holt (2010) points out and for those who use the telephone often and are comfortable in using it for

communication, it is almost better than face to face interviews (Holt, 2010). Research by Irvine et al (2010) suggest that telephone interviews can be 'just as good' as face to face interviews in achieving successful interactions and high-quality data. This does not detract from the fact that visual clues can also be useful when interviewing participants, particularly when considering the unconscious aspect of the content, but the telephone interviews facilitated a relaxed and conducive approach to the interview itself, and this is supported by other commentators. Mason (2004) argues that semi-structured interviewing is characterised by the interactional exchange of dialogue, and is relatively informal style which reflects the description of the process as "*conversations with a purpose*" (Mason, 2004). Most qualitative interviews are designed to have a fluid and flexible structure, and qualitative research operates from the perspective that knowledge is situated and contextual and it is the job of the interviewer to ensure that the relevant context is brought into focus (Mason, 2004).

Mason (2004) argues that from this perspective meanings and understandings are created in an interaction, between the researcher and interviewee. I chose interviews because I wanted to explain or understand something about the social process, social organisation and what humour meant to social workers. This required talking to people in depth about their experiences of humour and trying to understand and elicit the complexity of emotions and emotional context of such behaviour. Denscombe (1998) has suggested semi-structured interviews had the strength of allowing flexibility and the interviewee to develop ideas and elaborate issues raised by the researcher. It also allowed me to improvise and help develop interesting points, where there was a particular response to a question I found useful. I found that open-ended questions enabled interviewees to talk freely about their experiences and views of humour. In addition semi-structured questions allowed me to question underlying motives, feelings and emotions (Gilbert, 2008).

Irvine et al (2010) warn that participants in telephone interviews can be more reticent and less confident in their responses. These tentative responses, Irvine et al (2010) suggest may be influenced by the researchers less frequent use of response tokens (e.g. "yeah" and "mm mm"), so I was conscious to ensure I made such responses when conducting the telephone interviews, to ensure more expansive data was given in the interviews.

One specific question was informed by Holmes (2000) finding that humour is one means of realizing repressive discourse and managing power in organisations. This

was reinforced by initial comments from my two pilot interviewees who both commented on the relationship between power and humour. I was also interested in how humour can be used to subvert power structures, either by social workers against their organisations, or by service users against social workers, so I asked explicitly about this in the interviews.

It could be that the use of humour in the workplace enables people to learn coping strategies, but using humour is not always a sign of good coping (Moran and Hughes, 2006), particularly in sensitive circumstances, and people who use humour exclusively can fail to develop other coping strategies or damage the very relationships they are required to develop and nurture. The bulk of the data collected from the joke data was qualitative in nature, as this fitted with the philosophy and aims of the research. Limited quantitative data was also collected, i.e. age of social workers, gender, ethnicity, role and length of time in practice and place of work, and due to the small sampling frame, the quantitative date collected was of limited scope to make comparisons, but may suggest areas for further research.

Ethical Issues and telephone interviewing

I had considered observing social workers in practice. Barbour (2008) has pointed out observational field work can fall foul of ethical approval committees. Mik-Meyer (2007) during her fieldwork study of 2 rehabilitation centres in Denmark, noted how often social workers laughed, often at their clients, who in contrast did not tend to laugh. The material presented in her work was part of a larger study. I considered initially collecting observational data from social work offices, but discounted this on ethical grounds. In order to obtain informed consent from participants I would have explained the purpose of my research and this would potentially influence both the behaviour of the subjects and the data I would have collected. There were also practical consideration, such as the time consuming nature of gathering such data, and the difficulty in obtaining consent.

Mason (2004) argues that it is important to conduct all research in ways which are ethically sound. Ethical issues play a particularly important role in psycho-social approaches to research. Clarke and Hoggett (2009) argue that it is particularly critical that any qualitative research carefully considers the potential harm the research could create for the participant. This was particularly complex for me as I was attempting to do something original and I would argue unique. My research crossed different aspects of data collection, my first source of data collection was the internet and my second

source of data collection was telephone interviewing. My research proposal was submitted to the research committee of the Tavistock Trust Research Ethics Committee and I received approval on 15/11/11 to proceed with my research.

I established confidentiality by removing identifying features in the interview, and applied gender neutral names to the transcripts. Where possible I also sent interviewees a copy of their transcript. However this was not possible for some people I interviewed as there was a substantial time lapse between the interviews and the transcripts being completed, by which time individuals had moved jobs or were no longer contactable, or did not respond to the email I sent them requesting they contact me for a copy of their interview transcript. In places it was prudent to change some of other key features such as age and gender, to ensure that anonymity was maintained.

This raised specific researcher-practitioner issues and I considered the implications of an interviewee making unethical comments to me about their practice, e.g. an interviewee could make unethical statements (which they considered humorous) about a service user or disclose they have behaved in ways which have harmed service users. In discussion with my supervisor I agreed that this could raise code of conduct issues which breech the HCPC standards of proficiency. Whilst the approval of the ethical committee is the string point, I was also conscious that my research could raise ethical issues as it progressed (Alston and Bowles, 2003) and planned that if this did occur during the course of the interview, I would raise this with my supervisor to discuss further action.

The research design and theoretical basis for analysis
In this section I reflect on the theoretical approach to analysing the data I collected. Mason (2004*)* has argued that thinking qualitatively means rejecting the idea of a rigid research design, and this is something which intuitively appealed to me, as I felt both the ethics, which are covered later in this chapter and the methods for researching humour needed to be both informed, but 'potentive', in the sense that there is potential for revealing something. I therefore wanted to be free of a priori strategic and design decisions. However I was also bound by the ethics of the process and ensuring my work met clear ethical guidelines. In this sense it did not mean that my own qualitative research should not have a particular design or impetus. As if I can have a methodologically rigorous position I might at least be able to justify what I did. As Bywaters (2008) has pointed out this is important, because social work has suffered from low status both as an academic discipline and as a form of practice, despite

representing important human values, such as caring for others, challenging discrimination and empowering the most vulnerable. Research, used as a 'way of knowing', can play an important role in strengthening the status of social work as an academic discipline. Cameron and Este (2007) pointed out that research is essential way of improving the understanding of the context in which social work is practiced as a means of fostering the development of the professional body of knowledge for social work. I found myself influenced by several tenets in research philosophy:

The role of concurrency
Gibbs (2008) argues that concurrency, the analysis at the same time as data collection is not only possible, but good practice too. This fits with the theoretical approach adopted by psychoanalytic researchers (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009). In this process I considered Shaw and Norton (2008) model which outlined 2 dimensions, so that research and the contribution it can make to practice can be compatible: Dimension 1—on whom is the *primary substantive focus* of the research, and Dimension 2—what is the *primary problem focus* of the research?

In this respect the *primary substantive focus* of my research is on humour and social work, what is it, how it manifests itself, how it is used and what it means to social workers themselves? What jokes are told about social work? What do social workers themselves find funny and what do they share with each other to make themselves laugh. Dimension 2- *the primary problem focus of the research-* is more challenging and involved understanding why certain jokes or humour has come about, what problem or purpose does the example of humour serve to resolve in the practice of social work and why do people use it in different ways.

Reflexivity
Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) argue that reflective research has at its core the fundamental importance of interpretation, one cannot make the assumption that facts are out there and in this respect reflection turns inwards and onto the researcher, the intellectual and cultural traditions which underpin the researchers motivation. The research process therefore constitutes a reconstruction of social reality where the researcher actively interprets and creates data construction and text production.

The role of language itself
Carden (2003) has pointed out that humour is a function of primarily of language, and language is a prominent way in which humans make sense of and order our

experiences of the world. Wittgenstein's famous phrase '*the limits of my language are the limits of my world*'[3] draws attention to the idea that language forms a tangible framework to our actions. Discourse analysts regard discourse as a constructive process, through which meaning is negotiated or produced (Gill, 1996). I was therefore interested in examining the ways in which language is used by social workers in their practice, and how it is used about social work by society, in the form of jokes and what social workers themselves find funny. As Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) pointed out "*language is the medium through which the life world discloses itself*" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000 p.85).

Boydell (2009) has pointed out that metaphors can be useful way of understanding how individuals think and see the world, as metaphors are pervasive in our language, thoughts and actions. In deed it could be argued that jokes become metaphors in themselves for the way social work is viewed in society. A key function of language is self-presentation. Individuals may attempt to portray themselves in a favourable light and others in ales favourable way. Individuals select the account of themselves that they wish to present to the world (Potter and Wetherell, 1987)

A Thematic psychoanalytic methodology for analysis

Each interview was transcribed by myself, including pauses, laughter and some physical responses (for example sighs). This enabled me not only to reflect on the words spoken in depth and consider my emotional response, but also to immerse myself in the data itself. There has been a tendency for researchers to utilise transcription services, although it was very time-consuming (about 8 hours for every hour of interview), I found this approach particularly useful and informative for my own reflections.

This also results in a considerable amount of data and as Clarke and Hoggett (2009) have pointed out, as data analysis proceeds, particularly with large amounts of data a thematic approach is inevitably required in order to make the task of analysis more manageable. Therefore an inductive thematic analysis was employed to make sense of the data. This involved a systematic examination and re-examination of the data to discover repeated themes, recurring narratives and underlying unconscious data, to hypothesise the 'below the surface' feelings and emotions displayed by the data, as Mason (2004*)* has pointed out psychoanalytic approaches to research attempt to elicit

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[3] http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7672.Ludwig_Wittgenstein

elements of which the subject is not fully conscious of, and unconscious dynamics were often the product of attempts to avoid or master anxiety.

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a useful tool in its own right for qualitative analysis in "thematizing meanings" across complex data sets. What was particularly useful for me in relation to humour is that thematic analysis acknowledges that individuals make meaning of their experience, and that the social context impinges on those meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke, (2006) also argue that a good thematic analysis will make the researchers assumptions transparent. My assumptions were *that I am merged with the world; I would produce findings and arguments, based on interpretation, rather than descriptions; and my methodology would be reflexive and flexible).*

Braun and Clarke, (2006) indicate that there has often been debate over what counts as a theme, and answer this by suggesting that there will be a number of instances of the theme across the data sets, and these I found occurred both in frequency and space, e.g. if some social workers talked about humour in relation to humanity, or in relation to risk taking these became themes I adopted.

I also wanted to go beyond this surface meaning which is the tradition of a thematic approach, and to combine a thematic approach with thinking what may be conveyed by the jokes, interview and on line data, what may below the surface, and what might unconsciously be communicated. Clarke and Hoggett (2009) argue that the unconscious plays a significant part in the generation of research data. Clarke and Hoggett (2009) argue that the researchers' emotional reaction to the data, shapes and effects our perceptions and reactions, and reflects a complex interplay between the external and internal worlds, of the researcher and the data collected.

My interest in humour and its relation to social work therefore could stem from my own unconscious desires. These could be a desire to be liked, to make others laugh, to be attractive and entertaining to others. There could also be within me a deeper uncomfortable desire to laugh at or make fun of service users, and this is not necessarily an easy or uncomfortable position to recognise, and perhaps this whole enterprise might be grounded in an uncomfortable position which reflects my desire to ridicule service users. It would be against my value base, against the HCPC code of conduct and could result in my dismissal to make fun of service users or denigrate their experiences for the entertainment of others, yet their behaviour and my reaction to their

behaviour may warrant my own laughter or humour. These are important issue which I return to in the ethical section below.

By allowing the respondent to structure their own response and to talk about what they feel in response to a question allows some indication of unconscious feeling and motivation (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009). For Bollas (1987) we reveal ourselves though our utterances and what we say. However uncovering the unconscious motivations and feelings might lead as Brown (2006) has argued, to the psychoanalytic researcher making erroneous, or "wild" and causal analysis of another's psychosocial motives. This is where the process of reflection is so important to ensure the research findings are filtered not only through the researchers' comprehension, but the supervisor and at times supervisory reflective groups. Although psychoanalysis alerts us to the need for reflexivity in the research process, it also describes the limits to self-knowledge, after all we cannot know everything about anothers motivation and unconscious.

What I was interested in doing then was interpreting what people had told me, but what gives me the right, the position to do this? After all as Hollway and Jefferson (2013) point out there a strong democratic reason for believing what participants tell researchers. What then gave me the special privileged 'god's eye view' to interpret what people had told me? I could claim legitimacy, so long as Hollway and Jefferson (2013) argue I made no claim to any special objective status with my analysis.

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) argue that we cannot understand research subjects without exploring their experiences of the world, but we also cannot understand those experiences of the world without some understanding of how research subjects inner worlds effect their experiences, and this has to be understood through the additional psycho-social inner world of the researcher themselves. During this process I developed some broad ideas which appeared to show that humour could be linked to positive emotions and such as bringing joy or happiness. In other respects themes such as fear and hatred became apparent. In a third broad category I placed the unknown, in the sense that I found it hard to categorise some comments and arguments as ambivalent, where they seemed associated with neither positive nor negative emotions.

Validity, reliability and generalizability
It is important that in order to be taken seriously as a researcher who wishes to establish some important conclusions, consideration is given to validity, reliability and

generalizability. Yardley (2008) has argued that whilst quantitative researchers have placed great emphasis on concepts such as validity, this does not mean that qualitative researchers should ignore such issues, and indeed qualitative research recognises that the researcher will inevitably influence the production of knowledge. Kvale (2002) has argued that the traditional research concept of validity can be replaced by the postmodern concept where knowledge is validated through practice. This holds particular appeal for a professional doctoral thesis which is focussed on social work practice. Yardley (2008) has argued that generalizability (whether the results can be considered representative of social work practice) comes from theoretical or logical generalizations rather than statistical ones and good qualitative research which is flexible and creative, relies on its capacity to evoke imaginative experience and reveal new meanings (Yardley, 2008). Validity can be established by ensuring the whole study has to have coherence and transparency, and that there is a good '*fit between the data, methods and interpretation of the data'* (Yardley, 2008 p. 235).

Yardley (2008) also argues that there are procedures researchers can follow to enhance validity, for example triangulation. Another procedure is discussing findings through reflective group discussions and I utilised such discussions in research groups and individually with my supervisor. A crucial aspect of ensuring and testing validity involved searching for data that did not fit themes or patterns I had identified.

I also understood that an ethical qualitative approach is sensitive to the context in which the data is constructed, and it was important that I was sensitive to the socio-cultural context of participants did not just impose my own meanings or categories to the data, but was open to the complexities and inconsistencies of participants talk (Yardley, 2008)

Internet methodology: On-line data collection and social networking sites (SNS)
As I collected data on jokes it also became clear that there was considerable amount of on line data available in the form of on line forums about humour in relation to social work. The distribution of humour is not random, and humour varies according to the types of interaction within social work teams and between social work and wider society (Holmes, 2000). As Holmes (2000) argued there is a distinctly creative aspect of humour and this merits further investigation. Therefore I needed to find original and unique ways of exploring how and why people thought about humour in relation to social work. As a result of this I found 4 sources of on line data, a Facebook collection of posts and 3 on line debates conducted via a Community Care forum.

In my search for jokes on line I came across a collection of posts on Facebook entitled "*Wierdest (sic)/funniest/strangest thing you've been asked to do as a social worker?*" This was an interesting source of data as it was information social workers themselves had put on the internet, and it paralleled my opening interview question to my interviewees. Shields (2003) has pointed out that with computer literate respondents the internet can provide an opportunity to give uninhibited responses. As such it appears to be 'more natural' and closer to everyday behaviour than information disclosed as part of an interview. This data contrasted to the purposeful snowball sample I had utilised for gathering my sample for interviewing. As such this source of data had some benefits, in that it was more random (than the interview sample), and for that reason it could be suggested to be more representative of the views of social workers. Although the randomness of the data was limited to those who self-selected and contributed to Facebook.

The internet now features in most people's everyday life and as such it is an integral part of how many people communicate, including social workers. As Masson et al (2011) points out Facebook as well as contributions to on-line forums, MySpace and Twitter have become dominant features of the modern internet landscape, and significant features in many service users and social workers lives. Facebook is probably the best known of the social networking service and websites. Dodworth et al (2012) found that Blogging and social networking were more common in the younger age category, with 64 per cent of the thirty to thirty-nine-year-olds accessing Facebook or alternative social networking sites (Dodworth et al, 2012).

The world of SNS is a rapidly evolving and changing world. As Livingstone and Brake (2010) point out new opportunities, brought in by social networking sites such as Facebook tend to be associated with new risks for teenagers and children (from bullying, harassment, exposure to harmful content, theft of personal information, sexual grooming, violent behaviour, encouragement to self-harm and racist attacks). It could be argued that some of these risks also apply to social workers, i.e. harassment and threats from service users.

However the use of Facebook also poses a number of practice issues. Some commentators suggest that service users feared that social workers themselves might use SNS to further investigate their lives, for example one commentator to Netmums in 2012 expressed fear that her social worker had looked at her Facebook profile. On the

Community Care Forum site a student invited comments in relation to the use of social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Bebo, MySpace, MSN etc. within social work practice with children and families, and raised questions such as: *Are SNS an ethical resource for social workers?* And *Do SNS help or hinder your practice?* The online debate about the use of Facebook suggested that some social workers feel uncomfortable or ambivalent about the site. Other commentators felt that it had been both appropriately and inappropriately used as a tool for tracing children/ families in post adoption cases. Facebook had also become a vehicle which appeared to allow parents to continue their "battles" with social care, where their children had been removed from them. However other social work commentators to the site suggested that social workers should use SNS sites such as Facebook to '*uncover truths about the parents they were assessing.*' (Community Care Site, 2012). This would however raise many ethical questions, which might be seen as crossing a boundary in terms of practice.

As a result of the questions over practice, some local authorities have drawn up policies and have been piloting procedures for the use of Facebook by social workers. One such local authority was Wakefield MDC which issued guidance for staff in December 2011 entitled*: Use of Social Networking Sites (Facebook) by Social Care Staff in the Course of Their Work.* It stated: *where a member of staff maintains a social networking profile for their own personal use, this must not be used to communicate with service users, or to convey official information, nor must it be used for collecting or surveying information which may be used for official purposes.*

The guidance also placed prohibitions on social workers examining the social networking profile of their service users using their own personal profile. At the same time the local authority launched its own pilot project into formalising the process of examining social networking web sites and test an authorisation framework to enable social workers to look at social networking sites in controlled circumstances and use the information publicly available. This was justified by the council on the grounds that obtaining such information could inform assessments and assist in the supervision of service users and their families and associates about whom there were concerns. This suggested that the potential benefit to social workers outweighed the ethical breaches of confidentiality and service users right to privacy.

Social work activists are keen to utilise the social networking aspects of Facebook. For example Coventry University Social Work Action Network has a Facebook group for informing people about campaigns and activities they are involved in, and had around 30 members who are drawn from all levels of the Undergraduate Social Work course. Dodworth et al (2012) concluded that the use of Facebook and other social networking sites had the potential to improve services and communication to and between foster-carers.

Livingstone and Brake (2010) found that there is limited research into online practices, and this is one area of social development which social work is lagging behind. Many service users, particularly young people are enthusiastic users of social networking technology (SNT) and Livingstone and Brake (2010) argue that there is a need for researchers to keep up to date, to match young service users' enthusiasm for SNT.

Masson et al (2011) pointed out that social workers increasingly have to embrace the new means available to make and maintain contacts with service users. Childline uses a variety of means to talk to its service users (telephone, e-mail and internet chat). Utilising Facebook as a tool for research has some track record, e.g. Masson et al (2011) used Facebook in relation to tracing former looked after children who, in childhood, had sexually problematic or harmful behaviours, a group traditionally seen as 'hard to reach'. Masson et al (2011) contacted this group through Facebook ten years or more after their last known contact with services. Dixon (2012) carried out research into a Communication skills module on a Social Work York University course 11 years after it had been delivered and contacted ex-students through the social networking site Facebook. Masson et al (2011) found that if used with care and sensitivity, researchers should not be discouraged from using Facebook as a source of information. If anything, they argue, tracing respondents can enable researchers and collaborating services to free themselves from over-reliance on official databases when conducting longitudinal research with this population and enable a fuller picture of people's subsequent lives to emerge (Masson et al, 2011), and I found that the use of SNS and SNT enabled me to develop a fuller procure of social workers lives, and their views of humour.

Beneito-Montagut (2011) argued that "*everyday life takes place on the internet and that there is no difference between on line and offline interpersonal communication*"

(Beneito-Montagut, 2011 p.717). Beneito-Montagut (2011) refers to this as '*expanded ethnography*' as a methodological approach to gathering data on individuals use of on line communication in a holistic manner. In this place the researcher is observer and occasional participant in the data collection.

In my original research proposal I had planned to carry out a focus group with social workers. When I searched on-line I found that there was data already existing on line, in the form of group discussions about humour and social work. I then posted my own question to prompt an on line discussion, *Is it appropriate to share a joke with service users? What sort of jokes about social work do social workers share with each other?* This repeated a question I had posed to my interviewees. At the end of the discussion I requested permission to use the comments in my own research. One respondent asked that their comments be removed and not analysed. I therefore used the on line forum as if it were a focus group, although the comments were spaced over a month.

Although humour is a subjective social phenomenon, as highlighted above it is a universal feature of human behaviour, as there is evidence that humour is used frequently and consistently, both across cultures and time by most human societies, and no 'humour free society has yet been found' (Apte, 1983; Carden, 2003; Billig, 2005). However what constitutes humour is often culturally unique and specific. What the on line collection of data allowed me to do was access this culturally specific phenomenon, and the context in which humour was used by social workers.

Beneito-Montagut (2011) found that on line data from the virtual world had its limitations, as it does not provide a full and rich detail of lived experience which 'real' ethnography or interviews can provide. Beneito-Montagut (2011) also suggested that Facebook and other blogs are often perceived as spaces for relaxed emotions (joy, like and dislikes), whereas 'hard and intense' emotions (love, anger, hate etc.) are rather performed in private spaces. Although humour can also reflect hard and intense emotions, it is more likely to be associated with relaxed emotions. In this respect data from on line sources, I argue therefore fits with the emotions which are more often associated with humour.

Bloor et al (2001) stated that the internet has great advantages over other methods in terms of immediacy and the virtue of overcoming any geographical limitations on data collection. Gill and Elder (2012) indicate that there are several advantages to utilising the internet as a source of data, firstly individuals tend to reveal more personal

information, more quickly than in face-to-face encounters. Secondly information is accessible and does not mean participants have to break their everyday regime, and make 'special time' for an interview. This together with the accessibility of the information, and the potential for making the research process more transparent suggests that SNS and on-line data can make a substantial contribution to data collected. Gill and Elder (2012) argue that on-line relationships are not significantly different from relationships off line, but that the internet has the added advantage that on-line anonymity can have a 'disinhibiting affect, where individuals can feel less restrained and express themselves more freely than they would do in face-to-face contacts.

James and Busher (2006) point out that utilising on line data avoids participants responding to the non-verbal and verbal cues that can occur in face to face data collection. As a result one could argue that the data collected is less tainted from researcher bias in this respect, when it is gathered directly from the internet (as the case of 3 of my on line data collections). James and Busher (2009) have termed this form of research (from published on line discussion forums) as "netgraphic" research.

Online ethical considerations
The growth of electronic media and digital recording technology has enabled more instances of humour (like all aspects of social life) to be discussed on line and recorded, as we live in a world where unorchestrated occurrences of humour are often recorded, posted on line and accessed by millions. Likewise our views can also be published freely on line to millions.

Masson et al (2011) pointed out telephone texting, e-mail and internet chat have to be used with care and in line with professional ethics and data protection legislation but they offer potential as ways of communicating with service users, which complement more traditional means such as interviews and home visits. SNS such as on-line blogs and Facebook can be a rich resource for social work researchers, but their use raises several ethical issues, and data collected from these sources needs to be handled carefully and judiciously. It could be harmful to a service user who identified themselves from the comments or description made by social workers on line. As such the information from posts needs to be anonymised, and any identifying features removed.

Smith (2011) highlighted the case of a residential childcare worker, who had been struck off the register by the Scottish Social Services Council, as they had used

Facebook to befriend the mother of a service user. As a result the SSSC published guidance on the dangers of social services workers misusing the internet (Scottish Social Services Council, 2011). Social media sites often allow people to "friend" each other. The SSSC said it was not acceptable to do this either with a service user or their carer, as this would create a "*personal relationship outside the workplace.*"

Scarton (2010) argued that both Google and Facebook raised new issues for therapists and their clients, and the points she raised could equally be applied to social workers. She pointed out that the availability online of personal information threatens to alter the relationship between therapist and patient. Traditionally, therapists obtained information about a patient through face-to-face dialogue. If outside information was needed, the therapist would obtain the patient's consent to speak with family members or a previous mental-health practitioner. At the same time, patients traditionally knew little about their therapists outside the consulting room. Now, with the click of a mouse, tech-savvy therapists and patients are challenging the old rules and raising serious questions about how much each should know about the other and where lines should be drawn (Scarton, 2010).

SNS are a rapidly developing area of practice concern for employers of social workers and raises ethical issues, not just to research but to social work practice. Once an online post is made, unless it is withdrawn, it is there for all to see, but does this mean the behaviour of service users is fair game for ridicule? How do the on line comments reflect back on the profession, would people, for example, view the posts made by social workers as making fun of service users and belittling them? If so would I suggest it is important ethically to challenge such behaviour to maintain the credibility of the social work profession, as it is important to expose and challenge unethical practices.

One source of data was the Care Space forum, an on line discussion group social workers hosted by the Community Care magazine. There were 3 separate discussions conducted on line which I accessed one discussion group about forwarding "joke" emails June 2010 (referred to as CC1 in my analysis; a second debate in response to an article by Drinkwater about the importance of humour in social work offices between January and February 2011 (CC2) and a debate initiated by myself about the use of jokes between October and December 2011 (CC3).

The CareSpace forum requires users to agree to specific guidelines on the use of the forum and applied to all the content and participation on the site. One could argue that the forum is a valuable source of information, as social workers can discuss the issues affecting them with anyone who has access to the site. The agreement points out that contributors are legally responsible for the accuracy of their posts, and that contributors are covered by UK law from among other things, libellous comments and discriminatory behaviour (based on sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, disability etc). I felt the forum was a useful source of data as social workers wrote about their feelings about work in a semi-anonymous environment, where, although there was some filtering of comments, these appeared to be true reflections on what social workers were thinking, as there was often minutes or seconds between comments made, suggesting spontaneity to the posts and their replies.

I initiated an online discussion between October and December 2011 and started this by posting two questions to the forum contributors: "*Is it appropriate to share a joke with service users?*" and *"What sort of jokes about social work do social workers share with each other?"* At the end of the discussion I asked the commentators whether I could use their comments in my analysis and one commentator asked for their comments to be removed.

The disadvantage of utilising such data is the issue of anonymity. Although participants to on-line forums complete a registration process and choose an anonymous user name, they can still in theory be identified by the hosts. In the past researchers have assumed informed consent as individuals have placed their comments in the public domain (Capurro and Pingel, 2002; Berry, 2004 and Barbour 2008). The issue of whether individuals have consented to their on-line discussions being analysed for research purposes needs careful consideration and what harm may be caused by analysing them needs to be pondered. The openness of many social networks, can also be problematic. People using public sites do not expect researchers to be gathering their comments and analysing them. Whilst all the contributors to the forums I analysed had online user names and no identifying pictures, sometimes their gender was identified and their comments may make some of them identifiable. These issues were addressed by ensuring that no identifying features remained in the final analysis. I anonymised the data from the 3 forum discussion groups into Community Care 1, 2 and 3.

Gill and Elder (2012) point out that previous researchers (e.g. Pittenger, 2003) have suggested that as the internet is a public space, the onus for protecting the anonymity of subjects lies with the internet users themselves and not the researcher. However, they argue that some responsibility does lie with the researcher to protect subjects and participants from any possible harm. Gill and Elder (2012) suggest that the use of screen names rather than real names can offer individuals protection, and places responsibility for anonymity and protection on the subject/ participant rather than the researcher, but also acknowledges the individuals own agency in this, as in deciding to comment and engage publicly they are also deciding to open themselves to scrutiny and examination. Gill and Elder (2012) also point to another area which is important for online researchers: identities on line can be malleable in a way they are not off line. People can pretend, but Gill and Elder (2012) do not believe on line research data should be dismissed for this reason alone, and as with empirical research there needs to be a process of assessment.

British Psychological Society (2013) suggests that a key principle in internet-mediated research (IMR) (as well as offline methods) is to ensure that ethical procedures and safeguards are implemented so as to be proportional to the level of risk and potential harm to participants. Accessing the online discussion groups gave me access to a far greater range of social workers than I would obtain by interviewing alone. It also gave me a more natural source of data which in and of itself produced an immediacy which felt real, as if I was conducting my own discussion group, with a far wider group than I could ever have reached ordinarily. Mik-Meyer (2007) in her humour study observed social workers in practice. I did not have the time to carry out such observations, which one could argue are more intrusive than anonymous posts made on line, but the online discussions gave me access to an important range of jokes, views and opinions.

The subject matter: humour could be considered non-contentious as I was not asking participants to discuss intimate topics, such as their medical status or sexual orientation.

Neither would the publication result in shame or threats to material wellbeing e.g. job loss, as the data was presented anonymously. The British Psychological Society (2013) indicate that where it is reasonable to argue that there is likely to be no expectation of privacy, the use of on line data without gaining valid consent may be justifiable. At the end of the on line discussion I made it clear that I was researching humour and social

work and asked for consent to analyse the on line discussion group material and only one on-line commentator asked for their comments to be removed, which I did.

Examples of how I developed the themes in my findings
Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that there is no clear agreement about what thematic analysis is and how you go about doing it, however in one respect I felt that the process of creating a theme is rather like digging, or growing plants. I have been lucky enough to have an allotment for a number of years and the process of thematic research, and perhaps qualitative research itself, felt to me to be similar to the time and energy required to grow vegetables, akin almost to the physical process of lifting and sifting through material, turning it over, looking at the soil for what might be fertile, and realising that the soil is basis for plants to make their roots and connect to each other. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that the academic rigour lies in devising a systematic method whose assumptions are congruent with the way the researcher conceptualises the subject matter.

So I followed 5 stages in creating my psychosocial themes: firstly I familiarised myself with the data/ In respect of the interviews this involved transcribing the interviews and introspect of the online data (the jokes and discussion groups) it involved re-reading and reviewing the material. I often shared some of the material with others for their response and ideas and in this respect my tutors and the group tutorials were particularly useful.

The second process involved generating initial codes, and for this I was particularly indebted to Hollway and Jefferson (2013) stance in which the researchers own internal psycho-social feelings and experiences provided me with the starting point for analysing other peoples. I believe too that as researchers we cannot understand research subjects without exploring their experiences of the world, but we also cannot understand those experiences of the world without some understanding of how research subjects inner worlds effect their experiences, and this is medicated through our own experiences and values. During this process I developed some broad ideas which appeared to show that humour could be linked to positive emotions and such as bringing joy or happiness. In other respects themes such as fear and hatred became apparent. In a third broad category I placed the unknown, in the sense that I found it hard to categorise some comments and arguments as ambivalent, where they seemed associated with neither positive nor negative emotions. The third stage of the analysis,

involved sharing my material with my tutor and reflecting on the conditions which gave rise to the comments.

This was a deductive approach to my analysis. Several other researchers had written about the important role humour had in relations to managing the stressful aspects of the work or 'providing relief' (Moran and Hughes, 2006; Gilgun and Sharma, 2011 and Chiller and Crisp, 2012), so I would expect a theme such as humour and the work to arise from the data, given that many other writers had written about this previously. However I was also aware that the multi-dimensional aspects of humour suggest that simple 'surface' themes were not enough as humour is a multidimensional phenomenon. So my supervisor had highlighted, alongside my comments about the complexity of humour, a theme which emerged about the contradictions of social work in society, so broadening a theme about how to manage the stress of the work into a theme and finding about the role of social work in society.

In contrast I discovered other themes through what I would term an inductive thematic process in which the data suggested further ideas about what jokes and humour might convey about social work. For example I found that fear and hatred often featured in jokes shared by social workers on line, and became an important theme to pursue across my data sets in terms of speculating on what gave rise to the conditions which reflected such comments. For example:
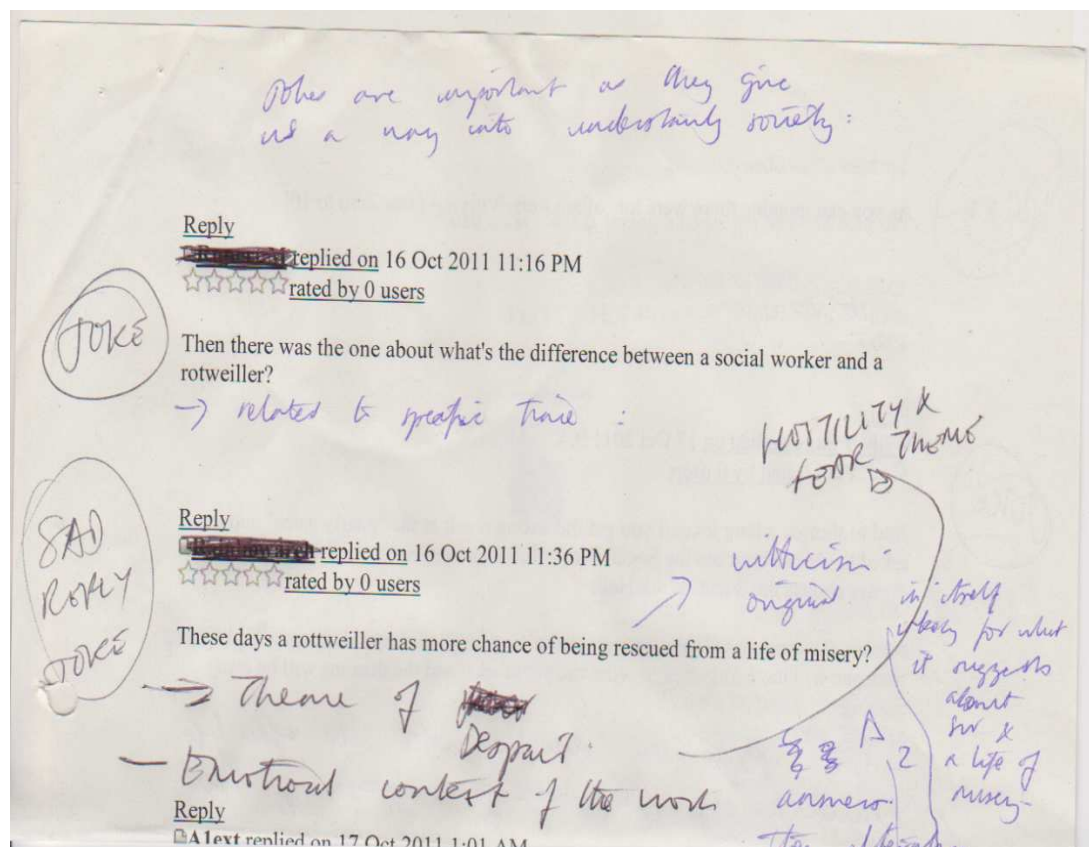
Once I developed these themes it was important then to review them (the fourth stage of the process) in sharing the information and then discarding themes which did not fit with other data. This process involved both defining and naming the themes and reflecting the 'story' which developed as a result of them. This in effect became the final stages of developing the themes which involved producing the chapters on Findings, Discussion and Reflection which is ultimately about convincing the reader of a definite set of arguments which is about understanding humour in relation to contemporary social work practice.

Conclusion

The methodology employed in this thesis is complex and multi-layered and an attempt to make an original and unique contribution to social work knowledge and understanding. The qualitative methodological approach I adopted does not fit into neat categories of established methodologies, but is located within an interpretivist approach which adopts psychoanalytic thematic methods, to make sense of the data and I suggest that the multi-dimensional approach applied here is unique. In addition to collecting jokes about social workers on line, I also accessed on line discussion groups facilitated an on line discussion with 19 contributors to a CareSpace forum and interviewed 19 social work practitioners.

However I do argue that it is nonetheless rigourous, justified by the topic and meeting the exacting standards required of a serious researcher. This has not been easy and in attempting this process I have faced methodological and ethical issues. This was in part driven by the nature of the topic and interviewees made reference to the complexity of finding a methodological process appropriate to analysing humour, for example:

> *I think the thing is about humour is that when you actually try to describe it or talk about you actually lose the sense of what it's about really* Interviewee Eden

This is an idea which runs through some of the literature on humour (Mulkay, 1988), that once the process of analysis begins, this effectively kills the purpose of humour. This was and remains a methodological problem for many researchers into humour (Carden, 2003). Therefore the complexity is in part caused by the nature of the topic.

In terms of the data gathered on line, I arrived at a position where I concluded that the harm would be minimal and therefore utilised a resource which yielded very fruitful information, but also shows great potential for use in future research, not least because of its accessibility. In terms of the ethical issues I concluded that not only were social networking sites a useful means of gathering data, the ethical issues of using such data could be dealt with by, requesting consent on line and where this was not possible treating the data anonymously. Masson et al (2011) had utilised Facebook as a method of reaching hard to reach service users. Masson et al (2011) found that if used with care and sensitivity, researchers should not be discouraged from using SNS as a source of information, and I share this conclusion.

For other researchers I should point out that the process of re-reading and re-interpreting data to develop themes is a time consuming process and I broke many of the target completion dates that I set myself. Alongside working full time, I found it hard to give myself over to the research process which requires a great deal of time and energy, but learnt much through the qualitative thematic 'digging' process while my allotment suffered from a lack of digging.

Addendum
Developing the 11 themes in the data analysis

When I began researching humour I found that previous theorists had predominantly found that there were 3 theories to explain the use of humour- incongruity, superiority and release. In addition to these 3 theories my review of the existing literature suggested that there were 5 categories in all and I termed the additional categories: Developmental theories and Subversiveness theories, which I suggest are new categories in themselves. I examined the data from the jokes, online discussion and interviews and found that the data did not fit neatly into these 5 categories and in relation to social work practice found new themes which sometimes combined aspects of the categories I had identified. For example, in terms of managing the emotional context of the world, social workers used humour release their emotions, but also had to manage the incongruity of working in two contradictory worlds, suggesting that often one category or theme was not enough to explain my finding. This led me to discuss what the 11 key findings could say about contemporary social work practice and a form of 'meta' analysis in which I found that in relation to humour, jokes and social work humour could be used to manage the contradictions inherent in the social work role; it

could also be used to establish relationships by communicating humanity; it enabled social workers to practice taking risks, but it also enabled some to become de-sensitised and that men and women used humour differently.

How participants for interviews were recruited

There were several aspects to recruiting my interviewees. Firstly I asked fellow students on the Doctorate programme to forward my information sheet and consent form to their colleagues. This yielded 8 interviewees from a range of adult and children teams mainly across London. At the time of recruiting my interviewees I was also teaching on a Post-graduate Practice Educator programme at the University of Essex. As many of these practitioners were experienced senior social workers I asked them if they would be happy to take part in my research. In addition I was also in touch with practice teachers who were currently supervising social work students from the Social Work degree course I was teaching on and this made up the remaining 11 in my sample.

A Statement of Limitations

a) Limitations of scope

It is important to recognise that this thesis has some limitations. Firstly this thesis has limitations in its scope, for example I have not interviewed service users as part of this research nor especially focussed on the use of humour when social workers engage with children, and these two issues remain possible fruitful areas for future development in this field. Whilst I made some tentative findings in relation to gender and the use of humour in social work, this too was not explored in more depth and remains an area for future exploration. The same can also be said of ethnic differences in the use of humour, and one of the draw backs in utilising on line data is that often gender and ethnicity are not identifiable.

b) Inherent limitations (tentative voice) and limitations in generalisations

The method to I took to analyse the data I collected, which I termed a psychosocial thematic approach was informed by Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) methodological approach. The limitation of such an approach is that it is based on the researchers own interpretation, and whilst themes were often developed in consultation and reflection with my tutor and other students, they often shared my theoretical approach. In such

circumstances it is possible that other researchers might make alternative connections and findings arising from the data. As such some of the interpretations I made from the data collected may be suggested to be tentative. An inherent limitation of such an approach means that the findings can have different interpretations and reflecting on some of the interpretations in this thesis one could make statements with a more tentative voice, as there are other possibilities for analysis. One example of this is the comments made by Narin (page 104) in relation to using humour with social work students. I asserted that such a comment revealed a level of insecurity the social worker feels about his position. An alternative interpretation could be made that Narin found it incongruous to apply humour in such a situation or that it was simply inappropriate to use humour and Narin was not someone who saw himself as using humour in relation to social work.

Some assertions were made as generalisations from the data and it is fair to suggest on reflection that these too could be considered to be tentative. In this respect I agree with Arksey and Knight (1999) that qualitative methods reflect the view that knowledge is provisional, complex and can be contested, and it is important in this addendum to acknowledge this reality. An example of this could be found on p 94 where I suggested that social work offices and social workers were often characterised as 'dour and gloomy', and related this to the high turnover of social work staff when compared with other professions. Of course not all offices could be characterised in such a way and certainly many offices |I worked in where not always gloomy places in which to work.

Another example of a generalisation can be found on page 100 when Ali suggested that the emotions and possible consequences which a joke elicits can be terrifying. I asserted that this suggests that newly qualified social workers (NQSW) operate in a fearful culture, where they feel unable to venture into risky areas in their interactions with others. Of course it is possible to assert that not all NQSW operate in fearful organisational cultures, and do not fear the consequences of making a joke at work.

Chapter 4 Findings

But that joke isn't funny anymore
It's too close to home
And it's too near the bone
More than you'll ever know...

(Steven Patrick; Johnny Marr and Morrissey: That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore The Smiths, 1985)

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of my main findings. In the next chapter I reflect upon these findings and discuss their implications. There are several sources for the comments presented in this chapter, firstly websites which published jokes about social work, secondly 4 online discussions about aspect of humour and social work, 1 on a Facebook group for social workers and 3 on the Community Care CareSpace Forum and the interview data I gathered. In order to differentiate the comments from the 3 Community Care CareSpace, I reference the period in which they were gathered e.g. CC1, 2010, CC2 February 2011 and CC3 December 2011. CC1, 2010 was a discussion prompted by a Community Care journalist (McGregor, 2010a) who posed the question, as to whether it is acceptable for practicing social workers to send or to forward on joke e-mails in the work environment. She highlighted the case of five social workers who had been disciplined for doing so, with the concluding remark: "*the moral of the story is: no matter how funny you find it, don't forward it from work*" (McGregor, 2010a). CC2 was a discussion about humour and contained 28 responses to an initial post which asked for views of Drinkwater's (2011) article about the importance of humour in social work offices. CC3 was a discussion I initiated online between October and December 2011 was a debate I started by posting two questions to the forum contributors: "*Is it appropriate to share a joke with service users?"* and *"What sort of jokes about social work do social workers share with each other?"* At the end of the discussion I asked the commentators whether I could use their comments in my analysis and out of 19 contributors to the on line discussion, one commentator asked for their comments to be removed.

The light bulb joke is probably the most familiar of all jokes about social work, and it was the first joke I ever heard about social work, when I started practicing as a social worker in 1988. The joke posed the question "*How many social workers does it take to*

change a lightbulb?" The punchline for this archetype joke relies on highlighting a stereotype of social workers. In the first version of the joke I heard the response was: *only one, but the lightbulb must really want to change*. I found 42 different versions of this same joke (see appendix 1) which suggests at least that in terms of humour, social workers are good at recycling material.

The punch lines revealed jokes which reflected the superiority theory of humour (where humour derives from interpersonal mockery and derision) for example:

> *The answer is zero. Case Managers no longer feel that they should change lightbulbs.*

Many of the jokes fitted with the incongruous theory of humour, which suggests that humour is caused by a conflict between the logical and respectable, dissolved into the illogical or absurd:

> *None. The light bulb is not burnt out; it's just differently lit.*

> *The lightbulb must first fill out all the appropriate forms to determine eligibility for service.*

> *We don't change light bulbs - we empower them to change themselves.*

> *'I hear you saying that you are concerned about the lightbulb. Tell me more about that.'*

At least four of the punch lines reflected the social 'subversiveness' theory that humour is created from resistance or challenging oppression, for example:

> *The light bulb doesn't need changing; it's the system that needs to change.*

And:

> *...All of them. One to hold the bulb in place, the rest to incite revolution.*

The punch lines also focussed on issues around budgets and this appeared to be a common theme:

Only one, but an agency can do it cheaper.

None, it's not in our budget.

As many as my budget will allow.

None, it is no longer a home care activity.

The lightbulb archetype joke works at its best by articulating the stereotypes which exist about social work and this punchline appears to encapsulate 3 key stereotypes:

Four. One to change the bulb, one to counsel the old bulb because it's been thrown away by an uncaring society, one to arrange the case conference and one to make sure they are all following the correct working practice.

I have used these jokes as an introduction to my findings as they illustrate some of stereotypes which exist about social workers.

1. Humour and the work

"*My mother warned me I'd end up in a job like this if I didn't work harder at school"* (CC3, 2011)

The findings suggest that the use of humour plays a particular role in the work environment, for example interviewees and on-line commentators both linked humour to job satisfaction. The suggestion from these findings is that humour creates group solidarity and helps social workers bond together through shared experiences. In the following extract Lee made explicit reference to how humour can enrich social workers working life and make the task of social work more tolerable for social workers themselves, for example Lee stated:

I've enjoyed working in teams...where I have had job satisfaction, or where I've been happy there and also where I think things have kind of worked for the team and the task of the team in hand... there's been banter has been part of it really...so I think it ...kind of oils the wheels of human interaction, I think whatever kind of work situation you are involved with I think humour kind of

helps jolly the day along really I guess, for one thing....want of a better thing really...and .... in that sense I see it as a kind of cement or a glue in relationships, without which life would be all the more impoverished. Relationships arguably more likely to become unstuck!

Her reference to oil, wheels and glue, suggest that humour has an almost mechanistic role and in this sense helps social workers in their interactions with each other. Whilst making an important point about how humour "*oils the wheels of human interaction*", and suggesting humour facilitates communication, this excerpt also reveals the interviewees unconscious anxiety about losing relationships. This is a social worker who was at the time of the interview working for themselves, in a self-employed capacity, and my initial emotional response was a sense that she was missing working relationships, that she felt herself to be adrift from a secure base, to which she could attach herself to. As a result she was unconsciously anxious that she could become "unstuck" and 'un-cemented' in her work, and lacked the job satisfaction she had experienced in other work, which experiences of humour had helped to facilitate.

The frequency and positive aspect of humour was reiterated by social workers on-line:

"*There Is a LOT of humour in our office-especially the bit occupied by my team. The downside is that other teams occasionally complain about the noise but is* [sic] *does help with the stress*" (CC2, 2011)

and:

"*Humour is essential and lucky for me plentiful could not get through the day without it.*" (CC2, 2011)

In common with the other comments this suggests that humour is indispensable and needed by social workers and their teams to function effectively, although the reference to luck suggests that the creation and use of humour is the hostage of fortune and an accidental occurrence, rather than a regular or integral component of the work.

This was also supported by comments made online e.g.

"*We all need a little light relief at work... What's the harm in having a laugh in your lunch break? Laughing is good for your mood* [and] *a good mood improves productivity and reduces stress!*" (CC1, 2010)

The refrain that humour helped social workers carry out their work was a theme which came up often in the on line comments and comments made by interviewees. Another commentator emphasised the importance of humour for the work itself:

"*Our team is full of banter and jokes and it's partly why I love the job. Yes the humour is sometimes dark and would not be particularly amusing to those not working in the field but it helps you get through the stress and helps you bond as a team. We do often get told off though the laughing too much.*" (CC2, 2011)

This comment suggested that "dark" humour is helpful for them not only because it relieves the stress of the job. The reference to dark humour is an explicit reference to "Black humour" (from the French *humour noir*), a term which originated from André Breton to describe a genre of humour which arises from cynicism and scepticism, and was often a satire on the topic of death. It is significant too that the author of the post stated that they are told off for "*laughing too much.*" The image revealed by the on line comment was of children being "told off" by their parents for not being serious enough in their behaviour and actions. This also supports the rebellious theme of humour, (what I described as Social 'subversiveness' theory in the literature review) where employees who are adept at using humour can adopt the role of 'sage fool' as a way of managing and expressing dissenting opinions (Cooper, 2008). Holmes (2000) found that humour could be a means by which subordinates could challenge power structures and make what might be thought of as "risky statements", in a light hearted way.

Yu spoke about how humour can make workers more popular at work:

I noticed myself that it seems to be the social workers who can laugh off cases, and you know have a quip here or there, an anecdote available at the drop of a hat, … they … seem to belong to groups or cliques and it appears that they are readily kind of recruited into, you know the group that goes down to the pub at the end of the week… or invited to things on a personal level, not necessarily connected to work.

The comment that social workers need to 'laugh off cases' is a reference to managing some of the anxieties and emotional pain the work can cause social workers. However it is important to note that there is an element of exclusion, revealed in this comment. One could suggest there is an element of conscious jealousy, as this social worker feels excluded from these groups, unhappy that he is not invited or recruited to the

group which goes to the pub. Therefore whilst humour may help some social workers to make friendships and engage with others, there is a contradictory aspect of humour, as at the same time it connects and engages people, it also excludes others who are not included in the humour.

A team manager who took part in the on line discussion about the importance of humour in social work offices, illustrated concerns about the exclusionary aspect of humour, e.g.

> *"Humour is great it helps to make the day bearable at times… but it can exercise a …oppressive power on those who are not in the joke…. Also it can mask incompetence because those who are witty and likeable can sometimes get away with poor practice." (CC2, 2011)*

These were points to counterbalance the references to humour being fun and helping with stress, as it is important to recognise that not only can humour be used to exclude others, but significantly it can also mask poor practice. If humour is utilised by poor practitioners not only to oppress others, but also to hide their own incompetence and inability to practice safely or well, then humour in social work can take on a concerning aspect.

Exclusion also featured in Riley's comment about her colleague:

> *… well my colleague used to have… a big piece of cardboard that she stuck up on the desk, the shelves between us saying "Riley and I are not talking to each other" [laughs] and then she would turn it over if she thought it was acceptable for us to have a conversation on the basis that we spent too long talking.*

Riley's comment highlights the importance of communication in social work practice (Koprowska, 2005; Trevithick, 2005). The excerpt above suggested that Riley felt uncomfortable that her colleague should express her feelings and cease communication in such an exclusive, almost harsh, way. When she described the behaviour, she was laughing about it, but in citing this as an example of humour Riley was also revealing her own discomfort.

Humour made at the expense of social workers styles of communication also featured in jokes made about social work:

> *Q: How can you tell when a Social Worker is on leave?*

A: He asks more open questions (CC3, 2011)

The following joke dated from the Community Care collection in 2007, and illustrated the importance of communication in social work practice, whist mocking the superficiality of some communications:

A social worker asks a colleague: "What time is it?"

The colleague answers: "Sorry, I don't know. I have no watch."

The first one says: "Never mind! The main thing is that we talked about it."

Zia's comment illustrated the important role shared experiences have in creating group solidarity at work. In response to my question about how humour effects relationships at work Zia replied:

All the things which sprung to mind, were all the things that were half funny and half horrendous. When you get the context it's quite erm difficult because you can tell things aren't funny in so many ways as well and only ... other workers get that…it's so peculiar, the work a lot of the time… to work in this world where everything is different to your normal life in so many ways… so the people you work with are damaged or so troubled quite often, that you could not have a friendship with them or you would not even sustain it… I feel like I live in two worlds-there is my world and then there is the people I work with.

Zia was struggling to reconcile the emotional experiences of living and working in different worlds. In reality social work is not practised on another planet, so it is both part of this world, but I think Zia is making an important point about the place of social work in her mind and the external reality of the work. In discussing the humour in her team Zia commented that 'funny situations' were "*half funny and half horrendous,*" and suggested that only social workers could understand why this would be so. She indicated that as social workers share similar experiences, they can find humour in such situations, which would not been seen as funny or humorous by people 'outside of social work', and in this respect humour can create group solidarity, through a shared experience of this dual work life. However this can also create tensions between those outside social work, who do not share these experiences.

Social workers practice in a world which is contradictory. Zia's experiences are not uncommon for many social workers. Living in two worlds is a theme which other writers have written about (e.g. Waddell, 1985; Becker and MacPherson, 1988). In the extract above Zia spoke about how the 'horrendous' world of child abuse contrasted with her own life and personal experiences. This is important as it illustrates the contradictory worlds, which social workers find themselves both inhabiting and having to negotiate, and part of this negotiation involves tolerating the contradictory experiences of the work.

Jay, a team manager, explained how she used humour with her team, and how it can improve working relationships:

> *I certainly use it as an icebreaker and I think it's important, you know to be able to break the ice in a professional relationship… it can be a very-in our kind of work-it can be a very stuffy, very corporate, very serious environment and I think as soon as somebody smiles or goes one further and laughs or creates a smile, I think it goes a long way to creating friendships and professional relationships, working relationships. I certainly use it for that reason and you know I use it with my team and professional associates on a daily basis. If anything I have to remind myself that I might use it a bit too often.*

Jay has communicated her unconscious wish to be seen by people as 'non-corporate' and someone who 'can have a laugh.' She spoke of the importance of warmth, smiles and laughs in a very serious environment, but warns of not using humour too often, as it reflects a near conscious fear of not being taken seriously, as she reminds herself not to use it too often.

An online commentator also suggested that humour was appropriate to be used in certain circumstances:

> *I don't think jokes by email are appropriate as they* [are] *more often than not offensive ... and I wouldn't share a joke with a service user ... but I am quick witted - I do use my humour and in certain circumstances I find that it helps, more so with service users who are sometimes confrontational, not engaging in the assessment process or defensive.* (CC3, 2011)

There is a desire then to be seen as humourous, by social workers, but to hide this within 'quick-wittedness' and use it with defensive service users, a method for them to engage with a social worker. This suggests that humour conveys an important but subtle unconscious message to a service user, that the worker is someone with whom they can establish a relationship, but someone who is "quicker" with confrontational service users and therefore more intelligent than they are.

Overall though there was a warning that you could not provide a blanket response to the question of humour and its use in relation to social work practice:

> *Humour is so essential for cementing all types of relationships and unfortunately it's not used enough because people are too wary of offending. I say, if you are a good judge of the situation and the person you are conversing with, you can often use humour to make a situation better. I use it ALOT and its never failed me.* (CC3, 2011)

This theme revealed some key points: that social workers work in a world which is contradictory, as their work experiences contradict their personal experiences. Many social workers utilise humour to create and sustain relationships, not only with their colleagues but also with service users.

2. Humour and the emotional context of the work

A social worker is facing a mugger with a gun. "Your money or your life!" says the mugger. "I'm sorry," the social worker answers, "I am a social worker, so I have no money and no life." (source: http://www.workjoke.com/social-workers-jokes.html)

Freud (1960) and Berger (1967) theorised that humour and jokes enabled people to escape from the realities of our own emotions, and act as 'safety valves' for managing our sometimes uncomfortable feelings towards other people. In this respect humour succeeds as it helps individuals to process their uncomfortable emotions. I found too that an important effect humour can have is to act as a valve which releases the tensions of working in social work. In this extract Ellis made explicit reference to feelings of discomfort at what he was reading:

> *At the moment I am working with a lot of people who have a lot of very serious offences and recently we had to look through… witness statements, to establish what had actually happened. I was reading through these with a psychologist*

and they really were harrowing because they were descriptions of prolonged sexual assaults of a very serious nature. And when we stopped... we were just answering which patient would you invite to a dinner party? … It just diffused it. At times under a microscope you could argue, was this the most professional? I don't think it is, but as a way of defusing tension, it helps people bond… I think it is really invaluable…. I think it just sometimes the pressure can be so immense, you need to laugh it off, you need to find a valve to release that and humour does that... Interviewee Ellis

This use of what may be termed gallows humour, creating humour in the face of the distress and pain of others, was used by Ellis as a way of coping with the emotional pain the work created, whilst also distancing himself from the experiences of the victims of these sexual assaults. The social worker made explicit reference to a valve to release these feelings, which echoes the relief theory of humour (Billig, 2005). He also recognised that such comments could conflict with the professional value base, but justified them as necessary for releasing emotions, presumably of hatred or fear of the service user, who had committed serious sexual offences. Joking in this way enabled the social worker and the psychologist to sanitise their uncomfortable feelings. This view of humour as an emotional valve was also shared by Omari, whilst also making reference to the functioning of social work teams:

It's a very unfunny profession…, but within the profession itself… people are always having a laugh and a joke erm… Very often that's their way of coping and managing to deal with all of those things that [have to be dealt with]..*. If you think of a social worker, coming in today and on their case load they might have two or three child protection issues that have arisen, that have to be dealt with straightaway-the stress and the pressure of having to try and manage that, so when you are away from that seriousness, there does tend to be that joviality [yeah] erm… You know within teams and you find that the team, a good team will always have a good humorous ethic…*

Humour provided Omari with an opportunity to 'move away from the stress and pressures of the work.'

The following comment by Gene reflects the tolerance of imperfection, and that the emotions which social work practice create, are never far from the surface:

If you have been out on a particularly difficult visit or something like that, you might come in and have a little sound off... and then you are back out again with a smile on your face, talking to the same people … even though you might want to strangle them! You know but, that old adage about what comes out in the office stays in the office …I think we are all human at the end of the day, and sometimes our professional face may slip with people you can trust … And then the professional face goes on again when you are working with people

Gene comments indicate that the office is an important and safe place for social workers to sound off in. Given the open plan aspect of many social work offices one is left wondering whether this is always possible.

In the following comment, Harley reiterates the point made above that humour relieves the tension of the work:

I worked with a team for older people, … with older people you get a lot of death... and sometimes when it all got a bit heavy,… it was nice to relax and have a bit of a joke about, so I think it does relieve the tension.

At times humour can be used to challenge those in power by the humour maker (Holt, 2008). In the following extract Morgan used humour to manage his emotions caused by his frustration with another professional:

We are a multi-disciplinary team, with different schools of thought, for instance if there is a young person with a particular conduct diagnosis with very difficult behaviour to manage-a psychiatrist who does not know the case very well might suggest medication such as risperidone as an option. And those of us who aren't of the same kind of medical model, feel that was unethical because there is no real evidence base of what you are trying to achieve … it zonks somebody out. …when the psychiatrist was trying to push this line through we kept making, or we made numerous references to "oh so we can just dope them up, they are doped up so it's not a problem many more?" it was obviously humour with an edge, but still using humour to make a point rather than making it directly and risking a clash of personalities or clash of disciplines

The comment could also reflect the social workers own frustration with his lack of power to prescribe medication, and by making a serious point through the less threatening mechanism of humour, Morgan was adopting the position of the 'sage fool.'

Social workers who are adept at using humour can adopt the role of 'sage fool' as a way of managing and expressing dissenting opinions, feeding these back to management in a less challenging way to authority (Cooper, 2008). There is wisdom and effective safe challenges from this humour base, and the comments appear to carry separate unconscious messages, that 'I am frustrated with the power you hold over someone, but I am also frustrated that I do not hold that power.' There is an element of rebellion in this comments, a challenge to the authority of the psychiatrist, which is familiar to the subversiveness theory outlined in the literature review.

Some social workers used humour to 'de-sensitise' themselves to the emotional toll of the work:

> *Q: What is the difference between God and a social worker?*

> *A: God CAN be shocked.*

> Source: http://homepage.ntlworld.com/richard.pipcairn/jokes.html

It can be shocking to consider that a 'loving' parent can abuse and harm their child, but if social workers remain in a shocked or traumatised state would they be able to continue to carry out the work? This joke is an attempt to make light of the anecdote that social workers have to be unshockable, in order to carry out the work. Some interviewees suggested that as social workers stay in the work for longer, they become emotionally hardened or de-sensitised to the work, and Dee suggests that what might shock a social worker at first in practice is something social workers become 'hardened' to as they progress:

> *I probably wouldn't say that in my office, where I am in an open plan office… you forget how, easily shockable you are when you first start your career in social care [laughs] and then you are not as you go on…*

Ollie reiterated the point that social workers become desensitised to the work they have to deal with, and it is the gallows humour, which is part of the de-sensitising process:

> *I think* [humour is] *essential… part and parcel of it would be considered by a layperson to be very, on the cusp if you like, it is almost like gallows humour because-not that we become blasé-that's the wrong word. But we become desensitised to a lot of the stuff that we have to deal with. We are working in a*

profession that is, is, is quite dour most of the time, because people are only involved with us because the level of needs

Dour is associated with sternness or harshness; forbidding or even ill-humoured and gloomy. The social worker refers to the cusp, which suggest risk taking in using humour. Is it the vulnerability to falling over the edge, which social workers fear, or more likely fear losing their job? The dour discourse was also reflected in the online discussion forums:

"Social work offices are the dourest places on earth. Social workers have lost their humour." (CC1, 2010)

This view of social work offices and social workers as dour and gloomy, might go some way in explaining the high turnover of social work staff when compared with other professions (Chiller and Crisp, 2012). I would suggest then that the reverse is true, that a view of social work offices and social workers as cheerful and upbeat would result in higher staff retention and lower staff turnover. Clearly humour can play a crucial role not only in the retention of staff, but the perception of the social work profession. In this context it appears worth ending with this joke:

"I did ask a government official how they determined how many Social Worker vacancies there were unfilled in the country... and he told me they just counted the chairs without cardigans hanging over the back." (CC3, 2011)

3. **Humour and humanity**
   Q: How come they bury Social Workers 300 feet in the ground?

   A: Deep down they are really good people

This joke appeared on the website SocialWorkStuff.info and illustrates a particular finding in relation to social work, a self-deprecating and particularly human aspect to the humour used by and about social workers. As Cooper (2013) has suggested the joke captures and compresses complex and contradictory thoughts and feelings about social work and social workers, and plays such ideas against each other (Cooper, 2013). As Cooper (2013) suggests the joke operates by evoking an "*image of a soft liberal mindset often attributed to social workers, always prepared to excuse, redeem, forgive, explain away, understand the worst aspects of people's behaviour towards others; a mindset often invoked to account for social workers' alleged propensity for*

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indecision, inaction, failure to look harsh realities in the face" (Cooper, 2013). This theme also appeared in another joke (which appeared on 5 websites):

> *Two social workers were walking through a rough part of the town in the evening. They heard moans and muted cries for help from a back lane. Upon investigation, they found a semi-conscious man in a pool of blood. "Help me-I've been mugged and viciously beaten" he pleaded. The two social workers turned and walked away. One remarked to her colleague:" You know the person that did this really needs help".*

The jokes I suggest reveal societies view that social work practice can be dismissed, as it will always too easily forgive the wrong doer. However this sense that social workers are ready to forgive and 'deep down' basically ok, is an aspect social workers wanted to communicate about themselves. Humour is common to human experiences (Apte, 1983; Billig, 2005; Holt, 2008), and it is possible that humour has a unique potential for demonstrating particular characteristics of a social worker, so when applied sensitively and appropriately it could be a useful tool to enable social workers to help service users manage their own emotions, as Morgan explained:

> *Actually* [humour] *can be really quite a powerful tool in relieving people's sense of anxiety, particularly if they are talking to a social worker and they have had ideas in their head that social workers can only be quite a punitive thing through children's services… I think it is very important to get over that, that boundary, and I think any humour, anything which makes you seem more human, nothing really does that as well as humour, where I think sometimes It's really really valuable therapeutically.*

The effect of humour applied by this social worker is then to distance themselves from others social workers, and also to make himself appear "more human." It may be that this interviewee wanted to unconsciously communicate that he is different from "punitive" social workers, and in this way the humour is used in a way to make the social worker seem less threatening, more in some way just more human.

Social workers used humour to make a joke about their own behaviour, for example Jerry commented:

> *I say to people you know …maybe at the end of a working relationship I would say things like: I mean this in the nicest way but I hope we never see each other*

again type of thing … if I'm working out a plan with a family, … I will have a little bit of a joke with them and say "you're going to get fed up with the sight of my face"… it's not such a bad face, but I'm going to be coming round every week. … I do try to lighten up a situation … that's potentially a serious situation…
Interviewee Jerry

The comment illustrates the use of humour as a way of defusing the emotions and anxiety service user's face when working with a social worker. This suggests that it is humour, which allows the social worker to 'appear more approachable' and to be a safe mechanism for acknowledging the anxiety a service user may be feeling. It illustrates in my view the theme that humour operates in social interactions, to play a unique role in making the individuals which use humour appear to be 'more human.' One could suggest here that this may also be the unconscious anxieties of the worker, as they try to defend against their own feelings of anxiety, the encounter poses for themselves.

Other interviewees, such as Ellis, made similar points and linked humour to effective functioning in social work teams:

It is hard to overstate the importance that humour has in the social interactions. And if I think about the […] *teams that I have worked in, the best functioning… it is often where humour is at its finest.*

Another interviewee, Kennedy, suggested that being able to use humour, is an important key skill for social workers, and suggested that it illustrates a common shared humanity with service users and provides a unifying/ harmonising effect in helping social workers in their relationships with service users:

To … have a bit of laugh at yourself, find a way of laughing with others, is actually part of the human skill you know it's something … that would help social workers because that is… our clients are the same as us … in many ways so there [are]… *a lot of grim situations, the circumstances of most of the people we are dealing with, so I think humour is quite important really*

Kennedy, a team manager, suggested that humour is crucial to effective social work practice:

I would just be worried about sending someone out to work with people if they could not have a bit of a laugh or to laugh at themselves- not inappropriately,

sometimes what we are doing isn't … a bit funny but I kind of think that if they don't have [a sense of humour] *… then they are really not up to the job, it's about working with people…* (Kennedy)

This suggests that not only do social workers need to have sense of humour to be able to effectively carry out the work, it would be concerning, at least to this team manager if a social worker did not have the ability to laugh at themselves. What this suggests is that a social workers ability to laugh at oneself is a beneficial characteristic in creating relationships with others. This appears to be in line with a reflective approach in social work, where the ability to reflect back on a social workers own behaviour and process it in way which is 'emotionally safe,' an ability to laugh at oneself is critical to effective practice and managing one's emotions. Milan took this approach when engaging with direct work with families, and indicated that in direct work with families humour can be very useful:

Sometimes, for instance, I would be working with a mum and child and there is another toddler in the room who is busy playing with the toys in the corner and will do something just randomly quite funny, enough to generate a laugh-I can share that humour, that can be quite a good leveler

In the following excerpt Cai, a social worker, gave an example of how she used humour 'at her expense', when she carried out direct work with service users and their families.

I'm working with a family and ... humour would be at my expense, if I do something wrong, something silly and kids will laugh at or.... [the] *kids do something irritating like pull faces at the video camera... I'll chortle at that or... maybe secretly inwardly groan, 'oh for goodness sake grow up', but yes so errm.... there will be kind of shared jokes or just humour just being playful, errm with families I am working with...*

Therefore the themes developed by these examples is about showing a 'playful and showing a human side' of the social worker. There is a need for play and playfulness in human engagements, particularly with children, in order to effectively communicate and form relationships with them, particularly in the development of the self (Nicolson, 2014). It would be hard to imagine that a child would feel comfortable talking to a social worker who presented as unable operate in this way. In this sense humour coveys a

particular subtle and unconscious message to the recipient, that the user of humour is 'worth making a relationship with.'

4. Humour and relationships with service users

The findings illustrated above suggest that social workers used humour frequently in their workplace and with their colleagues. Historically Social workers are bound by the GSCC code of practice and more recently by the HCPC standards of proficiency, which explicitly states that social workers: "*Recognise that relationships with service users and carers should be based on respect and honesty.*" (HCPC, 2012 2.8 p.7). One could argue that making fun of, or laughing at the expense of service users does not mean that social workers are treating their service users with respect. However Social work jokes often exploited the conditions of service users for humourous effect e.g.:

> *There was a social worker who discovered a simple assessment tool for whether a client was ready to leave an in-patient mental health facility. The client was asked to repeat a procedure... the social worker touched her wrist, elbow, shoulder, in that order and said, "wrist, elbow, shoulder". The first client tried it and said, "wrist, shoulder, elbow (touching elbow when saying shoulder). The Second client said, "elbow, shoulder, wrist (while touching wrist, elbow, shoulder). The third client got it right with, "wrist, elbow, and shoulder". That's great! Said the social worker. How'd you do it? The client pointed to his temple and said, "kidneys".*
> Source: http://www.socialworkchat.org/swChatForum/index.php?topic=836.0

This joke utilised the theme to 'mans' best friend':

> *A man went to the social worker and told him he wanted help because he thought he was a dog. When the social worker asked him how long he had been thinking he was a dog, he replied, "Ever since I was a puppy." The social worker said, "OK, lay down on the couch." The man said, "I'm not allowed on the couch."* (SocialWorkStuff.info)

As a result of finding these jokes I was interested in whether social workers themselves had drawn or found humour in the behaviour of service users. Dee admitted that she had and gave the following example:

I had a lady who threatened to bite me ….She said if you come nearer to me I'll bite you, and I said to my NQSW [newly qualified social worker] *'well she wouldn't have had any luck because she didn't have any teeth!'*

In drawing humour from the behaviour of this service user, the social worker used humour to defuse the anxiety and manage the fear the NQSW or she may have been feeling.

Building a rapport and establishing relationship with adults and children requires time, sensitivity and patience. Humour, this social worker suggests, can be a way of measuring the establishment of a relationship with an adult or a child. In the following extract Quinn gave an example of how this can 'normalise' a relationship with the parent of an autistic child:

I remember one parent telling me-she said to her [autistic] *son "her hair needs cutting badly"* [he asked] *"why would you want it cut badly?" you know she said it to me as a joke, but if I say that someone, they will go to laugh and think "oh, should I be laughing or not?" … I think joking with someone is a good indication of the strength of the relationship, and that they have, if you have built up good relationships*

Humour can become a measure of how comfortable parents and children are with the social worker, but the worker also acknowledges that people both inside and outside of social work, might be anxious that such interaction might risk being seen as inappropriate.

In this next comment by Issa, it is the service users use of humour which enables the relationship with the social worker, who recognised that humour elicited a different response from herself.

I had a bit of a shared joke with, today, with a service user … it was a discussion about how she would access the service again, having been coming before and having not responded for ages… and I said to her, because she is involved with a family support worker, so I said "oh, is there a CAF [Common assessment framework] *done on your daughter" … and she said to me "oh is that the form where everybody in the whole world gets to know your business?" And I thought that was really funny… so I did joke with her and I said "yes that's exactly the form where everybody gets to know your business" ….it did break the ice and*

…it did kind of change the conversation a bit…it kind of gave it a human connection and I did end up thinking "oh well I will just see her, I'll waive all the formalities and give her an appointment"

This suggests that humour has a reciprocal role in helping both social workers and service users work together. It is noteworthy that service users might use humour, like social workers themselves, to seem 'more likeable' and more sympathetic to social workers. The concerning aspect of this account is that it suggests the process for receiving a service is less than equitable. The exchange of humour improved the service users relationship with the social worker to the point that the social worker offered the appointment to the mother, because she had demonstrated a sense of humour. At one level this feels rather unfair that a family would receive a service because they were able to joke with the social worker, but at a more complex level it reflects a particular aspect of how relationships operate. It suggests that Issa was able to identify with the mother and think: *yes I can work with you as you have shown me a human face, a side of you which is similar to me.* This was supported by online comments, as other practitioners found that it was the service user who sometimes initiated the humour in the relationship e.g.:

Perhaps the work that I do is different enough from many social work situations (I am in CAMHS) to allow for appropriate and useful use of humour. I would never use humour in a way that trivialises someone's situation. I don't think the careful and subtle use of humour means that the worker necessarily comes across as a 'joker'......much humour is instigated by clients, I find. (CC3, 2011)

What can these jokes and examples of shared humour tell us about relationship building? Humour can create an area of commonality where shared moments of 'funny occurrences,' wit or 'banter' can help relationships. It could be suggested that humour helps social workers negotiate those internal and external realities in their work, by mediating their feelings toward service users, and even establishing moments of shared meaning. Some service users want social work help, but most are hostile 'suspicious or uncooperative' (Bower, 2005) and humour enables social workers to manage their relationships and importantly for some service users too, as my findings suggest that their use of humour can facilitate their relationship with their social worker.

5. Humour and risk taking

Engaging effectively to assess risk can be particularly challenging, but it is a critical part of social work in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children and vulnerable people (Broadhurst et al, 2010). Social work practice often involves assessing risk and making judgements on whether it is safe for a child or vulnerable adult to remain in the situation they are in, or whether there must be a different form of intervention. The HCPC standards of proficiency, requires social workers to: "*Be able to use practice to challenge and address the impact of discrimination, disadvantage and oppression* (HCPC, 2012 6.2 p.9). Treating service users in a humourous way would be oppressive to them, and humour used inappropriately can result in dismissal and de-registration, as in the example of the 'joke emails' which were forwarded by social workers.

A team manager who contributed to the online discussion suggested that humour is a complex undertaking and requires monitoring:

> "*It probably sounds paranoid but as … team manager I constantly scan to ensure that humour is appropriate and isn't leaving people excluded. By the way I don't think I am a kill joy but I would just say that humour is a more complex issue than it may sometimes appear.*" (CC2, 2011)

Ali suggested that when social workers do risk the use of humour, they do so after experience. Fear of the consequences of telling a joke appear close to the surface for Ali, as she suggested the emotions and possible consequences which a joke elicits can be terrifying:

> *I think that … saying something humorous there is obviously a little bit of risk involved by definition that you are, hoping that it is funny because if it falls flat…* [So you would] *err on the side of caution-that does take experience and practice and maybe is a larger part of my work now than it would have been in the past. I think I would've been terrified to venture any jokes at all…*

This raises an interesting point, if this social worker was terrified to venture a joke earlier on in her career, but felt more secure after years of experience, it suggests that newly qualified social workers operate in a fearful culture, where they feel unable to venture into risky areas in their interactions with others.

The next example of risk taking and humour, appears an emotionally and physically painful encounter for the social worker. Ellis was working with a man in a forensic unit, who had in the previous week written a death threat and placed it under his door:

> …Then he came and apologised to me whilst the snow was out. So we went outside and I said "right I'll give you six snowballs, and I won't move, and I will let you throw six snowballs at me." And he really packed them down hard! I thought if this gets me in the face it's going to knock me over. But it was something about that basic 'slapsticky'- 'this guy is going to let me throw snowballs at him'-and I think if you look at the power dynamic. …He was just delighted! If you hit me with one you can have another six. I think in the end he had about 20 and he got me three times. There was something in there, that took the power of humour, but it was just… he laughed… It was a very funny encounter for a guy who isn't warm to me… I think it was really useful, really powerful… I don't know if, or how long that will sustain our relationship

My first emotional response to this was that in the face of a death threat from a service user, this was a potentially risky course of action for the social worker to take to address the perception that their relationship had become problematic. The relationship had come under strain and this was an attempt to repair the situation. The episode was risky as it could have rebounded on the social worker and the service user, with the service user actually hurting him. Relationships often break down because social workers are working with challenging people in difficult circumstances. This felt like an attempt to 'detoxify' a situation by the social worker by allowing himself to be 'punished' and to allow the service user to express his real aggression to the social worker. In this short episode the social work relationship with the service user is condensed to a simple dualistic relationship of persecutor or persecuted, where there are only 2 positions in life. In this respect the episode reflects some of the jokes made about social work, which also operate in dualist forms.

Ellis in an attempt to re-build his relationship with this service user, and could be an unconscious attempt to disengage from some of the values the organisation, as at the same time he felt guilt at detaining the service user, he also felt guilt at his earlier comment. The humour became a means of punishing the social worker, throwing snowballs is normally fun and funny, but this felt like the social worker had placed himself into his own private stocks. Associated with the risk the social worker had

taken, there is also an element of trust here, and it could be suggested that the risk taking was an attempt to rebuild trust in their relationship. The risk for the social worker was in making himself vulnerable, but he suggested that this risk was worth taking, as it allowed the social worker and the service user to improve their relationship.

In contrast other interviewees reiterated that they would not use humour, for example to challenge senior management, and such practice risked Nat not being taken seriously:

> *I think challenging is a very serious business and if one used humour to do that, I think I won't be taken seriously… I would think that perhaps humour doesn't have a place when it comes to challenging hierarchies or senior management if you like*

In the next extract Vivien discussed humour in relation to social work students and raised the issue of risk taking and modelling behaviour:

> *Being seen to be making humour or saying things which could be potentially risky* [such] *as a joke, particularly about service users where students fear they are going to be evaluated and could be thrown off the course for one thing. Plus being in a learning environment sort of constrains … students... latent or innate or interior humour coming out, but then some of the work of teaching and lecturing could include issues of risk taking which could be to do with relationships and... modelling humour, either allowing social work students the space to actually express their humour or to talk about it, and the risk taking and to kind of analyse it.*

The comment by Vivien suggested that there is a role for using humour to explore risk taking, and that constraints placed on students, only stop their latent or innate humour from coming to the surface.

Drew's comments reiterate the 'risky' aspect of humour and suggested that the personal aspect of humour makes it a 'moveable feast.' 'Moveable feast' originally referred to the Christian religions practice of moving feast or holy days, and has been adopted into the language as a metaphor for things which change over time. There is fear underlying this comment, as the word careful is used twice:

> *I think you have to be very careful because obviously a sense of humour is a very personal thing… especially in social work obviously, you got to be very*

> *careful about things that might be said that might be …something one person who thinks is funny is going to be offensive to somebody else... so it is...a... sort of... it's a bit of a moveable feast, isn't it?*

This also reflects the changing aspect of humour, in that it is not a static phenomenon. Billig (2005) also made reference to this being one of the contradictory aspects of humour, in that we all laugh, but what we laugh at changes with and over time.

Uta's comment also illustrated the 'risky' aspect of humour, and suggests that humour can disguise what we really think. This is similar to Freud's (1960) theory that there is a substantive unconscious aspect to what humour communicates. It is noteworthy that this social worker recognised that humour hides what individuals are often 'really' thinking, but there is a risk to express humour, as it might actually reveal what lies beneath (difficult emotions, such as hatred or fear) or it may reveal opinions or emotions social workers would rather hide:

> *I think sometimes there is a risk taken with humour, because not everybody has got the same perspective and maybe some times we try and hide things that we want to get across within humour. So sometimes I think there is a risk associated, because we make a statement about things within the guise of humour, or so called humour and there is something rather difficult underneath all of that, that maybe we have tried to get across that we disguise it a bit*

The following comment, by Kaoru also discussed risk and suggests a further aspect in relation to risk and humour, that social workers need to be able to trust the individuals they share their moments of humour with. This also appears to be related to an ability to 'safely self-disclose' information about oneself, and the social worker made explicit reference to the conscious and unconscious aspects of humour:

> *You know that whole thing about us being able to have a sense of humour … I mean there is always a fine line… I think you have to be able to have a bit of a laugh at yourself- it's that whole thing about trusting again- maybe that links with … self-disclosure, that, that you know if we are self-disclosing then- even whether it is unconsciously or consciously- in humour, then trust would be quite an important part of it wouldn't it?*

In interviewing social workers about humour, I found that it was not unusual for the interviewees to discuss seriousness, as the following comment by Narin illustrates. The

following comment suggests that some supervisors do not want to 'risk' the use humour in their relationships with their supervisees or in their work with social work students. This social worker uses the words 'work like' relationships, implying that developing competence as a social work student is parallel to work practice, but not the 'real thing':

I have supervised a number of social workers… my relationships have always been quite serious with them-obviously you have to maintain your professional boundaries, er because you are supervising, you are line-managing and helping them to develop their social work skills and competence… I'm not sure whether I would want to use humour in that relationship really [sure] I have had so far, it's always been very work like relationships. You know there might be a case, it really depends on people's approach and my approach, yeah you can have a laugh in supervision, you can have a joke about something, but that's where it ends really, when it comes to clinical work I think, you know I haven't used, I don't think I have used, any humour through working with trainee social workers.

This excerpt is also reveals a level of insecurity the social worker feels about his position. As other interviewees and commentators have suggested the use of humour reveals an ability to be able to laugh at oneself, but it is suggested that this requires a 'safe' and holding environment and an ability to take the risk of humour.

Such risk taking can have serious consequences for social workers, as explained in the literature review, when in 2010 five social workers in Scotland and England were disciplined and de-registered after they took the risk of forwarding a string of "joke" e-mails, including one containing a mocked-up image of convicted sex offender Gary Glitter carrying a child in a plastic bag. This was debated on the Community Care discussion forum (CC1, 2010), the first I analysed. Many of the comments to the forum suggested such behaviour overstepped the professional boundary of social work behaviour e.g.:

"*Joke e-mails should be kept for private e-mail accounts not work ones*"

"*It's just plain stupid… To do it on a work e-mail account shows very poor judgement*"

"*What they did was totally inappropriate… The fact it's an agency that seeks to protect children makes it even worse*"

"*I am all for jokes, but I do not find child sex abuse to be a joke…*"

It appears therefore that some social workers were at times poor judges of what is ethically acceptable, in terms of joking/ humourous behaviour, and as a result eventually lost their jobs. One commentator to the forum suggested that there is a complex aspect to this, as local authorities have strict policies and guideline for using the internet:

> *"In local authorities there tend to be some very strict internet and email policies, in some part this is good, but takes any sense of trust or individual accountability away from the actual person who does the deed.….having a joke in the office, especially beneficial to lift spirits after a particularly difficult day or case, surely such laughter in the office should also be deemed inappropriate as it is a non-work activity being done on work premises in work time…What we need is not big brother restrictions… We need to be trusted and if one of us should over step the mark, then deal with that individual…"* (CC1, 2010)

This line of argument will be familiar to practitioners, as there has been a rise in technical-rationalist and managerialism models of social work practice (Jones, 2012; Rogowski, 2012 and Warner, 2013), where poor practice can be "managed out" or made less likely by following the correct policy of procedure. In this line of argument the problem lies with the individual social worker not following the policy, rather than a culture of fear and lack of trust, which could undermine individuals own abilities to make those judgements. It could suggested that this reflects what Evans and Harris (2004) described as the exaggerated death of discretion, and that paradoxically more use of rules and policies can lead to more uncertainty.

6. Humour, hostility and fear

Parents unhappy at their experiences at the hands of the care system have published jokes about social workers on line. Facebook and other online technology has allowed parents not only to contact children in care, and children to contact their parents, but also to voice their unhappiness with social work practice. In this context such jokes appear on line:

> *A woman stood and watched a social worker being beaten by ten people, after a policeman broke them apart he said to the woman, "why didn't you try to help"? To which she replied "I thought ten was enough"*

I found that a number of jokes fell into the hostile/ fearful theme, and as in the example above, sometimes making humour out of jokes about physical attacks on social workers. As a practitioner it is both painful and fearful to read such jokes, and the jokes reflect a hostile, almost hateful view of social work practice. Chasseguet-Smirgel (cited in Barron, 1999) argued that humour is more than just a manic defence, and at its most sublime is produced in the face of death. It is therefore not by accident that many jokes about social work often feature death and violence, as they reflect this unconscious drive. In this way humour and jokes serve the purpose of becoming 'safety valves' for hostilities and discontent ordinarily suppressed by individuals or groups (Coser, 1959). As Cooper (2011) has pointed out the outrage at child deaths is directed often at social workers, as social work has failed to relieve the rest of society from the anxiety of thinking about childrens maltreatment and neglect (Cooper, 2011). The joke relies on the teller and listener feeling hostility or anger towards social workers:

> *Q: How do you save a London Child?*

> *A: Shoot a social worker* or alternatively *A: Sack a social worker* (later version)

One could argue that these jokes can be contextualised in the wake of the Public awareness of inquiries into the deaths of abused children such as Marie Colwell in 1973 or Jasmine Beckford in 1984. The subsequent inquiries into these deaths and media response to the findings of the inquiries, were often critical of social work practice. The jokes are unambiguously hostile not only to the practice of social work, but to social workers themselves and it could be argued that the jokes derive from the context of encountering social workers in the deaths of children. The most poignant visual joke appeared as a cartoon in the *Today* Newspaper on 1/7/1987 and was a visual pun on the *damned if you do/ dammed if you don't* variety by a cartoonist named Kal (Kevin Kallaugher)[4]. In the cartoon the figure of a social worker is strung up to a tree by his neck, by a lynch mob for taking a child into care from a family. In the next panel the same social worker is seen as being hung by the same group for leaving an

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[4]

http://www.cartoons.ac.uk/browse/cartoon_item/anytext=%22social%20worker%22?page=8

abused child with a family. This visual joke also illustrated how jokes can convey opposing ideas in the same frame.

In the wake of the controversy surrounding Cleveland in 1989 (Campbell, 1997), I made note of a joke which had been told to me in 1991, which attacked social work, less for its failure to act, but more because social workers had acted in a rigid and 'un-negotiable' manner:

> *Q: What's the difference between a social worker and a terrorist?*

> *A: You can negotiate with a terrorist.*

Many of the jokes I found suggested that there was anger or fear held by individuals of what actions social workers had taken with them. In this respect the humour was used to attack social work and the role it has, most notably in child protection. The Rottweiler, pit bull terrier or aggressive dog is a familiar feature in the lives of many children and families, who are subject to social work and is often used as a status symbol (Donovan et al, 2013). In this context this infamous joke appeared in the late 1980s:

> *Q: What's the difference between a social worker and a Rottweiler?*

> *A: You have a chance of getting your child back from a Rottweiler*

It could suggested the joke was driven in part by increasing public and political concern over dangerous dogs and particularly attacks on children by violent dogs which were kept as a status symbol by some families. Public pressure and media concern eventually resulted in the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, which restricted and regulated dog ownership of particular breeds. The Act itself was widely criticised as a piece of ill-conceived and poorly thought out legislation (Kaspersson, 2008). The original joke arose from this context. In a similar vein and dating from a similar time, a more aggressive version of the joke appeared in the 1990s:

> *Q: What is brown and black and looks good on a social worker?*

> *A: A Rottweiler*

These jokes took on a particular poignancy in the case of Peter Connelly (Baby P). When Jason Owen had moved into Tracey Connelly's house with his 15-year-old

girlfriend and five children, aged variously from 7 to 14, together with a pet snake, and at a later date he also added a Rottweiler, an Alsatian and a Staffordshire bull terrier the household (Jones, 2014; McShane, 2009).

Hostility to social workers can be directly related to public concerns about social work practice. In February 2006 a Scottish sheriff stated that it "*beggars belief*" that a social worker recommended probation for an armed robber who attacked two women in Aberdeen (BBC News channel, 2006). There were often hostile comments then made on line and amongst there was this joke:

> *Q: The old joke about the difference between a social worker and a Rottweiler comes to mind!*

> *A: The Rottweiler has a brain*

By 2008, in the websites I reviewed, the dog in the joke had changed from a Rottweiler into a pit bull terrier, which reflected the changing nature of aggressive dog ownership in Britain, but also added another dimension of violence:

> *Q: What's the difference between a social worker and a pit bull terrier?*

> *A: At least you can get part of your baby back from the pit bull.*

These jokes fall within the superiority theory of humour, where the hostility conveyed by the humour involves mockery and derision. These jokes reflected an explicit outpouring of anger towards the profession. The final joke I found in this category suggested a poignant reflection on the 'miserable' lives of social workers and the 'failure' to save children from abusive families:

> *Q: what's the difference between a social worker and a Rottweiler?*

> *A: These days a Rottweiler has more chance of being rescued from a life of misery?* (CC3, 2011).

Threats, Hostility and physical attacks on social workers are real and common (McGregor, 2010b; Donovan et al, 2013). Practitioners' fear of violent men remains an important theme in many inquiry reports and serious case reviews, in the sense that fear of the violent abuser can often paralyses thinking and stop practitioners acting to save children (Brandon et al, 2008). Stanley and Goddard (2002) found that feelings

comparable to helplessness were a daily feature of many child protection practitioners' lives, and that children were consequently being left in dangerous situations. I had often heard anecdotal reports of the RSPCA removing pets from families, where they were deemed to be hurt or neglected, but then children were left in the care of those same families.

Fear featured in Fran's response to my question about whether she had ever felt uncomfortable when humour has been used in the workplace, and she gave the following example:

> *I had been working with* [a service user] *and they threatened not just me, but my children … the police were involved and they were even going to be putting me into a safe house- … the partner of the mum come running into reception …. with a video camera and we all went into lockdown…. I had not been allowed to discuss any of the events leading up to it, with any of the other workers and this student, he went to the window and he said "oh this is damned inconvenient", he says "I need to go to my lunch" and he was laughing, when he said it and some of the others laughed and afterwards, I mean, I did challenge him and … it was not funny for me and a lot of the people could not understand why I didn't see the funny side of it because I was told not to tell anybody, because they did not want to spread anxieties and that, but my heart was going, really panicking, you know*

This social worker appears to be projecting the anger and fear she felt with this family on to the student social worker, who has made an insensitive comment. The serious threat to be killed by this service user, is conscious, real and serious. However what becomes more significant is the social workers anger with the student, rather than the family who posed the threat. In this respect the humour used by the student makes the social worker feel less safe, as her own anxieties go unrecognised.

Jaylan suggested that the media portrayal of social workers was in part to blame for the hostility experienced by workers such as Fran, but also suggested that the social work profession should take responsibility for its own portrayal to the public and in the media:

> *I think well the general public do have a … view of social work and think it is all about taking children away… er and [sighs] I think the media as a lot to blame for that really and there aren't any really positive role models on the TV either,*

which is a real shame [yeah] so I suppose you can't really blame the general public if we are not represented properly-how are they meant to know?

This desire to be portrayed in a more positive light by the media has been as an issue highlighted by Annie Hudson, chief executive of the College of Social work (Pemberton, 2013), who believes that the general public perception of social work can change, as social work is an alien and unknown world for many people. Hudson believed that the one of the best ways of communicating the complexities of the judgements social workers make is through TV drama (Pemberton, 2013).

Within this theme of hostility and fear one comment was particularly significant:

We don't need extra humour, the job is a joke in itself. (CC3, 2011)

I have to remind myself that this was a comment made by a social worker practitioner, rather than a parent whose children had been removed by social care. Sometimes the bitterest attacks on the profession are the internal ones. Does this also reflect a crisis of confidence in the professions own abilities or skills, or rather a personal hatred of the job? It is difficult to assess this without looking in detail at the other postings and comments made by this practitioner.

It is possible to conclude that the hostility and fear revealed by the jokes encapsulate societies loss of confidence in the profession. This reflects a commonly held critical position of social work, but the comments also suggest that the profession could take responsibility for its own portrayal to the public and in the media.

7. **Humour and laughing in an 'unhelpful way.'**

I work as a counsellor for a substance abuse/ gambling hotline and yesterday someone asked me if I could just tell them the winning lottery numbers so they could strike it rich and not have to gamble anymore. (Contributor to Facebook discussion, 2010)

If the standards of proficiency require social workers to treat their service users with respect, I found that in the course of their career some social workers admitted to using humour to make fun of service users. Anthropologists have suggested that one of the most effective ways of changing someone's behaviour is to mimic it or draw humour from it (Billig, 2005). Holt (2008) argued that at its most effective and applied judiciously

humour and laughter can overthrow some of the most oppressive regimes, and as Billig (2005) highlighted ridicule is an important social mechanism for regulating unacceptable behaviour. However such comments are questionable in the context of a profession which places human dignity, respect and value for the lives of the most vulnerable sections of society at its heart (HCPC Standard of Conduct, Performance and Ethics, 2012).

Ikram found that his colleagues spoke about service users in humourous ways:

> *I have actually been left sitting and feeling that when I have overheard other social workers talking about a particular case or a service user or a family or even a child in a kind of joking or humourous kind of way, it kind of makes me feel internally a kind of bit uncomfortable…And it feels a bit inappropriate but at the same time I think I understand it because it's about relieving the pressure and ... I suppose just giving it a little bit of relief*

Ikram made reference to his internal discomfort, but did not challenge his co-workers and instead viewed such comments as acceptable, as they provided relief from the pressure of the work. This raises the question as to whether the social worker himself would have felt empowered to be able to challenge unacceptable comments, or whether there was an office culture of making such comments acceptable.

Bryn described a humourous incident, and made explicit reference to her belief that gallows humour is oppressive and unhelpful in the caring role of social work:

> *I suppose some of the ways in which we do use humour, or have used humour, in social work, has been about trying to look at the absurd side of something which is quite tragic. There are sometimes where I have laughed …. in an unhelpful way and I think now I am less prone to that kind of gallows humour or less prone to sort of talking in a derogatory way about others. I like to think I am anyway. I think there is still a place for using humour to let off steam in that sense…* (Bryn)

The implicit recognition is that with time, Bryn believed she became less prone to talking about service users in a derogatory way.

However comments on line suggest that this continues in some social work offices:

"Our office is very funny, sick funny, very sick funny, no incident, no stupid comment and nothing at all really gets away without the urine being extracted." (CC2, 2011)

'Sick' humour has been associated with exploiting the vulnerable and making fun of less powerful groups in society. The author here is suggesting that far from being a safe environment in which "stupid comments" can be made, here is an environment where the individuals will be made fun of, exploited for their "stupidity" for the fun of others. Such an environment may feel oppressive and difficult for some social workers. It could be suggested that this a defence against the vulnerability the work creates in social workers. The defence is to attack the message and miserableness of the job. This is how individuals reconcile the pain, the closeness of death and fear which social work practice elicits in them.

Levi suggested that she laughed with people, although the comment suggests that she is laughing at service users, in an attempt to change or challenge their behaviour:

I use humour, particularly with addiction, …I will use it quite regularly if somebody's coming in and telling me a complete pack of lies and… when I am challenging them I'll just say things like if you are going to lie to me, tell me something which will make me laugh, that is worth listening to then, …you can use it I will use it in that kind of way... Because people will try and elaborate on the truth… And they are not meaning to be [funny] *and I will share that and I will laugh with people*

Here humour has been used as a powerful told to undermine the comments made by a service user and belittle the service user in attempt to change their behaviour.

Similarly Xin explained that he too laughed at the comment made by a service user:

It was during a court process so the local authority were basically looking to apply for an order to have a child removed from its mother and … whilst all the different legal teams and myself and the mother were waiting in the reception area to go into court, bearing in mind that the mother did have a mental health problem…she said "I don't like that shirt that you are wearing, I don't like that jacket you are wearing and I certainly don't like the aftershave that you have got on"… and it was just so out of context that I just burst out laughing.

These comments illustrate that social workers are not immune to making oppressive comments, but the laughter created in such contexts may defuse the tension that the social worker was feeling. The mother was unhappy as she was taken to court to remove her child from her, but she could not say this, so she criticised the social worker and his external appearance. I would suggest that the mother needed to find a way of showing her opposition to the social worker. In this sense it was easier for the social worker to accept this form of verbal criticism, as it gave the mother an emotional tool she needed to convey her unhappiness. It was easy for this social worker to dismiss this mother's criticism of him, as it reaffirmed his position that this was not a fit mother to be caring for children, and the laughter at her comment unconsciously conveyed this to her. Therefore utilising humour in these ways conveys 2 implicit messages, it reinforces difference whilst also allowing the service user to express her dissent.

Marlie made reference to the oppressive humour in different social work teams:

> *I think because everyone is a bit more attuned to how humour is used positively and negatively, its use is quite an affirming thing* [in this team]*, so you would not really get the high level of gallows humour or anything. There's not that kind of feeling of the jokes that are cracked in the staff room, where it's kind of a guilty pleasure to laugh type of thing, because that might be taking the piss out of certain mental health diagnoses or something... The humour tends to be quite light hearted; there would never be any kind of winding up, that I'd see maybe symptomatic of social care teams in childrens services for instance or the more kind of stressful frontline jobs*

In reflecting back on this comment, it was significant that the social worker made reference to a guilty pleasure at laughing, and this reflects the humour made in the jokes about service users. It suggests that whilst such humour brings pleasure it also brings guilt at the potential harm in treating service users in this way. The comment also suggests that there is a relationship between the role of the social work team, and that more stressful frontline works can results in more oppressive humour made about service users.

In the anonymity of Facebook or on-line discussion groups some commentators used the opportunity to point out some of the humorous things service users had said to them:

I used to work in a psych ward. One morning a schizophrenic patient asked me what planet I was from. I had to think about it, but finally answered 'earth.' he smiled and said, "That's a very good planet." (Contributor to Facebook discussion 2010)

Used in this context the humour is about creating in-group shared solidarity, albeit by exploiting the comments made by service users.

8. Social work managers and humour

My findings suggested that managers had a particular role to play in the relationship between humour and social work. In the second Community Care forum there was an on-line debate in January 2011 in response to the Drinkwater (2011) article about the importance of humour in social work offices. One of the first comments made in the debate was this:

"*I jest not when I say half plus of my team are on antianxiety/antidepressants as a result of the toxic adult care team we are in. On the funny side senior management are a joke…humour in this office sadly not. Still on the positive side another day closer to death."* (CC2, 2011)

This was a concerning comment for practitioners in social work as it made reference to the 'toxic' and challenging environment of a social work team. With its reference to toxicity and a depressing cry that at least they have "*death to look forward to,*" it illustrates Barron's (1999) suggestion that humour is often produced in the face of death. The findings echo Klein's theory of the death instincts in the infant (Klein, 1997). The care giving environment is central for the development of the personality, and if one equates care giving with a nurturing aspect of management, this negative and 'unloving' senior management who are 'a joke' produce a feelings of the nearness of death for this social worker.

Kay indicated that she used humour to challenge managers, suggesting that they may have in Kleinian terms moved to a depressive position in their relationship with management:

I had one service manager and she was very detrimental to the Safeguarding officer and she wouldn't be very complimentary in what she said and I felt a little bit that actually it was unprofessional of her to be, you know,… disrespectful to this person. So I said to her, and I just said "I wouldn't like to get on to the wrong

side of you, don't let go you, do you? You're a little Rottweiler when you get going" you know, and I laughed and that was my way of indirectly saying, actually you know what, you need to keep yourself in check here love…
Interviewee Kay

It is noteworthy that Kay made reference to a Rottweiler dog, which featured in the jokes about social work. The need to keep herself in check appears to be a reflective comment on the part of the social worker herself, and reflects her the fear she felt in her relationship with this manager. The comparison with a Rottweiler suggested that this manager was a potentially aggressive and unpredictable person to work with.

Marlie revealed that it was the manager who used humour to make explicit their own unhappiness with Marlie:

There was sort of gallows humour round me leaving the team really, for example one of my team called me Judas regularly in the last months of leaving… [the manager] *for the last month* [said] *'you know it's not too late to instigate disciplinary proceedings against you ha ha!" and then would walk off... and that's about …being perceived in this case, as a rat leaving a sinking ship…*

The experience recounted here is not a comfortable one for Marlie as she was exposed to the pain and unhappiness of the manager and other team members, who have projected their own feelings. They have made painful and oppressive remarks, such as calling the Social Worker 'Judas', and threatening her with disciplinary proceedings, because she had chosen to move from her job. This is an experience of humour used oppressively. One could suggest that the humour is used to manage their own unhappiness and jokes made to in terms of 'only joking' behaviour. The underlying unconscious message that 'we are unhappy you are abandoning us' could the managers own projections were being carried by the team.

Jaylan explained how she avoided using humour with their manager:

I am probably much more cautious with my humour with my manager than I would be with my colleagues, because I don't want them to think, or really what I think, or that I look down on the people I work with

There is a concerning aspect to this disclosure, which suggests that Jaylan looked down on the service users she worked with). It would be important to explore such an

admission in supervision, but it is interesting that Jaylan did not feel secure enough to be able to do this in supervision with their manager.

This element of caution and fear of using humour with their manager was reiterated by Zia, who was a team manager. In this account the fear of using humour is directed at the senior management:

> *You have to be very careful when using humour … one particular manager had an expression [on her] face which looks like she had just discovered a horse had shit in her handbag* [chuckles] *really, really disdained, and disapproved [of] the fact that I would use humour in a situation like that… but you have to be very careful in using humour in talking to the senior management*

Zia used crude language to distance herself from the rejection she felt from the senior manager, who had treated her use of humour so disdainfully. Accounts such as this are made as salutary experiences to practitioners who should avoid 'risking' humour with senior managers.

In another example Fran stated that she felt her manager lacked emotional intelligence, and he was poor at reading other people's emotions:

> *The times when humour has not worked out very well… in the office there is… going to be a consultation and people going….*[people] *possibly at risk of redundancy … one of the team managers was joking a little bit too much and I don't think he's very good at reading other people's emotions at all actually. … I think he went a bit too far with the old joking and everything and I said something like "well, everybody is under a lot of stress with the recent news about whether they have a job or not so I don't think everybody can be laughing." I did say something to rein him in a little bit …*

Emotional Intelligence has been linked to effective and competent social work practice (Morrison, 2007; Howe, 2008). Fran's comment suggests emotional intelligence is an important aspect in practice for team managers, as it suggested that reading emotions are important to be an effective manager. A poorly judged comment, needed to be challenged and 'reined in' in order to challenge the manager. The social worker has taken on the role of team arbiter and challenger to carry the teams concerns and make appropriate challenges.

In this next example Viv was critical of her team manager. In response to my question whether they had experience of humour being used to manage or challenge hierarchies she responded:

I can think about a colleague… Talking about a team manager in quite a, kind of quite a humorous way… referring to the person as "the boy" that kind of, not, not fully formed, kind of not an adult really, but it was done in a very humorous way, it wasn't so much… it was more of an inference behind it being "how did this person get to this position of power" it wasn't a kind of nasty "he's not a nice person" [yeah] it was more a "how did this jumpstart really get to be managing a team", when, you know, … there all of us were actually more kind of experienced…

The humour described by Viv centered on its use by a colleague who used humour to challenge the authority of the manager. The unconscious message is related to questioning the authority of the team manager, and references made to his age, "the boy" explicitly referenced his juvenile status and inexperience in their minds.

Humour brought to the surface issues with the authority of social work managers in the online discussion groups e.g.:

"Our office is suppressed by a middle management level who sit at the top of the office, monitoring who is doing what and saying what to whom :(This is a shame because when this level of middle management is not in the office, we get more work done than when they are there, humour at these times is rife, and their time of absence from the office is used by staff to offload the stresses and frustrations of the job. Essentially: Laughing is banned in our office between the hours of 9-5, and its also the case that if anything is said which is funny or irrelevant to the workplace, it is noted, and brought up in supervision; along with a copy of the acceptable behaviour policy." (CC2, 2011)

The concerning aspect of this post is the implication that with this level of surveillance, the social workers are unable to "do" humour in front of middle management and can only offload their stress and frustrations of the job when middle management are not there. This appeared then to be an 'emotionally unintelligent' office where feelings and the need to express oneself are not possible in an office which lacks the necessary

emotional support, or emotional containment. Emotions then have to be expressed in secret when the 'parent figure' or manager is not around.

The next online comment expanded upon the oppressive management style highlighted above, and related the lack of humour directly to stress and levels of absenteeism amongst staff. The comment post justified the use of humour and ended with a message for management practices in relation to social work:

> *Have worked in offices where management frowned on any 'irrelevant' chat never mind humour - result = high absence rate, stressed out staff and high staff turnover. Worked where we were treated like adults who were capable of judging what was appropriate, what (even if dark humour) was needed to lift the mood, and when it was Ok to have a coffee and a chat - result = high retention of staff, low sick rate, and guess what - the work got done, and sometimes we even went the extra mile and were happy to do so! Would be bosses - take note!* (CC2, 2011)

The findings from both the interview data and the on line discussions suggest that social work teams are split in their approaches to humour used in the office and there is a significant delineation in how different social workers and different teams manage their work, which directly affects retention and absenteeism amongst workers.

Many of the on line comments attacked the way that social work is managed, and some of the comments posted to the forum suggested that high levels of scrutiny drive humour underground, only for it to resurface after the managers have left the office. There is a dialectical process revealed in the forum discussion. On the one hand humour is tolerated and longed for by social workers themselves, but on the other hand management appear at times to suppress any rebellious and inappropriate outbursts of humour, which seep out when 'management is not looking.'

The use of humour in social work offices appears to be closely related to how the social workers themselves are managed. One can imagine that some social work office will be full of energy, positive and 'jolly' in their outlook, despite the "toxic" work pressures, and on the other hand some will be 'humourless, depressed and downtrodden'. As Carpenter, (2011) suggested this scenario will be familiar to many social work practitioners. In such offices misery, suspicion of management and pervasive negative mindsets can become the dominant mood and behaviour of the teams. Such

environments can take their toll on even the most positive, buoyant and resilient social workers, and may go some way in explaining the high turnover and low retention rates in the social work profession.

9. Political correctness, Values and humour

Social work is a profession with an explicit and established value base, which actively champions challenging experiences of service user discrimination (Banks, 2006; Thompson (2006); Adams (1996) and Parrott (2006). Many people are attracted to the practice of social work, including myself, because it has promoted a set of values which challenge discrimination and oppression. Humour is culture sensitive, but it is also an opportunity for oppression to continue in the work place, when this is challenged this too can be problematic for the challenger. Quinn made reference to challenging the comments of others:

> *One of his colleagues had been disciplined because he insisted on calling his team members "ladies." … and I thought "what is funny, I don't want to be called the lady." … I explained that it was not anything to do with being lesbian but a male caricature of what it is to be a woman. I think characterising "ladylike" behaviour is a male definition of pleasing somebody else. We had a discussion about it and of course I got an e-mail immediately afterwards which began with "ladies" as an address. I did not respond to the e-mail except to say I really resent this. They probably thought it was a humour thing misplaced, but I am the only social worker there.*

One could suggest that Quinn's comments fitted with the cultural stereotype of the politically correct, but socially uptight and humourless Social Worker, a stereotype which the *Clare in the Community* series exploits. However she made a serious and important point that gender oppression is constructed by and dependent upon language and as such can be challenged through language. The HCPC Standards of Proficiency require social workers to be able to practice in a non-discriminatory manner and to be able to use practice to challenge and address the impact of discrimination, disadvantage and oppression, particularly when language reinforces cultural stereotypes. It could be argued that Quinn is practicing appropriately by challenging sexist language. As a lone social worker amongst other professionals the comment also revealed Quinn's own feelings of isolation and vulnerability, particularly when she

tried to challenge her male colleagues. This indicates that challenging inappropriate and offensive humour can be an isolating experience, for the individual.

Similarly Alby commented on the political culture and context of the office in which she had practiced and where this became uncomfortable:

> *When I was working in* [local authority name removed] *it was a very politically sensitive office. You just could not make … jokes. That became a difficult place to work and there was lots of intercultural dynamics and fractious groups… I found that a very difficult place to work as I could not make the remarks that I wanted to… I thought there was a sense of fear there, there was times bullying amongst the groups that just made people retreat… people retreated and would not make statements for fear of being singled out.*

Alby's fear was that people no longer made jokes for fear of the consequences. This provides support for Quinn's finding that just using humour or making a joke is difficult, and socially isolating. If social workers such as Alby or Quinn feel isolated or a sense of fear in their offices, how can they then practice safely and effectively with families?

Harlow made reference to the need to make statements which were considered unPC, or not 'politically correct.' This comment is similar to the points made about taking a risk with humour and links to issues around ethical and practice safety, suggesting that the office is a safe place, not an isolating experience for Harlow. Outside the office is fraught with danger and risk, that make it unsafe for such comments to be made:

> *If we said something that was perhaps a little bit unPC, it was only because we … were really struggling to cope with it … And in the safety of the office, that is how we coped*

Commentators on-line suggested that the need to challenge oppression or discriminatory comments could also lead to targeting 'privileged groups':

> "*Surely we are all too politically correct to have any group or person as a source of ridicule*??*... That never seems the attitude when it comes to "acceptable" groups to ridicule such as the middle classes."* (CC 1, 2010)

The use of ridicule is often uncomfortable for social workers who have a significant role in working with vulnerable, oppressed people. This is one aspect of the paradox of

humour, that it is necessary for working relationships, but it can also be used to alienate and oppress. In the case of Quinn and Alby who found themselves excluded by what could or could not be said. It seems that we need a language to communicate in these ways or to find safe places.

This comment reinforces the point that humour is located within a wider social and cultural framework. Social work has a long history of challenging oppression (Banks, 2006; Thompson, 2006) which is central to the professions value base. The CC1 respondent is making a key point that frames social work behaviour in relation to humour within a discourse which is sensitive and accountable. It could be suggested that two processes are revealed by this comment, firstly that social work is insecure about it position in regard to its theoretical base and secondly that paradoxically social work is both *a part of and apart from* society, in the sense that everyone understands and uses humour, but that social workers are unsure of how to apply and where to use it.

In the context of the value base of social work Per suggested that humour is grounded in a particular view of British culture, which sees humour as central to the British psyche:

> *You often find those that taking the mickey out of someone else-it is almost like a British thing. In British culture it's kind of, it's almost a term of endearment, if people are poking fun out of you… whereas in other cultures they … couldn't get their head around that the fact that when someone likes you, they take the piss out of you*

Dee also made reference to the cultural complications of social work practice in an environment with a multi-ethnic workforce, with different values and understandings:

> *When you have got a real diverse population in the office, people from… Eastern Europe, from Africa and all over the world really and where there is a real different cultural background, you know you can't always expect that people are going to have the same kind of understanding as you. I mean I think British irony and stuff, if some people haven't got English as their first language, you got you be very careful really with things taken too you literally.*

One cannot therefore ignore the cultural specificity of humour, and the findings here suggest that the particular aspects of humour is linked to British culture and cultural

expectations. Meachin (2013) suggested that *Clare in the Community* offered a "*breezy riposte to the oft depressing media headlines about social work… lampooning social work's reputation for political correctness.*" (Meachin, 2013)

The majority of social workers and social work managers are women (CWDC, 2010). Feminism has played an important role in the development not only of social work and its value base, but also some authors argue in the 'discovery of child abuse and domestic violence, and placing the role of women and children as central to social work practice (Dominelli, 2002; Frost, 2005). Given the gendered employment division of social work, i.e. 80% female workforce, working with predominantly female service users, I located one joke aimed specifically at men working in social work:

Q: Why do male social workers prefer briefs to boxers?

A: Their "boys" prefer a warm, supportive environment!

Watts (2007) argued that 'having a laugh' and being able to take a joke is central to male identity, and that women appear to be much less comfortable with a 'joke culture' in the workplace. Women in Watts (2007) research experienced joke telling as difficult to handle and be part of and she found that women's disdain for the excessive or inappropriate use of humour by male colleagues focused on its hostile nature and the damaging effects of jokes on other people.

10. Social work training and humour- *traffic wardens of child protection*

Research by Moran and Hughes (2006) suggested that experienced social workers use humour often, whilst inexperienced or student social workers tended not to. I was interested as I had personal experience of using humour when teaching social work students. Some of the humour I instigated as a lecturer appeared to work well, and often there would be laughter or humour shared during lectures. However at other times the humour shared fell flat or seemed to inappropriately trivialise the serious business of training to become a social worker. I wondered if exploring the use of humour in relation to training might yield some interesting and useful comments from interviewees. I therefore explicitly asked interviewees about this and asked them for their thoughts on whether humour could be taught, or whether it had a place in the

development and training of social workers. Significantly Alby made reference to a particular culture she had experienced during her training:

I thought at times when I did my social work training… if a student said a remark which was perceived as sexist or ageist or in any way discriminatory the group would just seize upon it. I felt that was wrong. That was not about learning. That is about blaming.

This was experienced was shared by Bryn who commented on a learning environment, characterised by a lack of trust.

I am only recently qualified and … I don't think I did use humour very much at all when I was learning. But I think that was a lot to do with the environment I was in, that was not very welcoming or trusting … I do maybe using humour sometimes, not the level I use now, but with other students who were training and kind of again and some of the way with the strangeness of the situations you found yourself in …

This suggests that a culture of seriousness and insecurity begins in social work training, with training characterised by a lack of trust.

As with Bryn and Alby, Ali indicated that humour depended on training and an ability to communicate well:

I have a got a lot of experience in listening skills and communication skills and when I was training to be a social worker, lots of my fellow colleagues didn't have that experience… so it was much more difficult for them to read situations and to communicate well with people and sometimes humour would be misused or people wouldn't know when to use humour and then that whole communication would remain stilted, awkward and strained

Ali was consciously splitting herself off from her fellow colleagues, who did not share her abilities or skills. Collectively these 3 comments suggest the use of humour in social work could be perceived as a developmental issue, related to age and experience. This parallels the developmental theories of humour, where the ability to use humour is seen as a key component in a child's development. The work of Bowlby (1999) and the laughter theory of Nelson (2012) link humour development to attachment behaviour, as

humour creates the bonds between caregiver and child, and demonstrates pleasure with each other's company.

Critchley (2002) stated that "*If laughter lets us see the folly of the world in order to imagine a better world in its place, and to change the situation in which we find ourselves... true jokes would therefore be like shared prayers... humour lets us view the folly of this world by affording the glimpse of another*" (Critchley, 2002 p.17). In this context this joke suggests a better world without the need for social workers:

Q: In a perfect world, what question would a social worker ask of clients?

A: Do you want fries with that?

Incongruity theory of humour works of the basis that the absurd is juxtaposed with the logical and respectable. Could one imagine a world without a need for social workers? Presumably it's logical to wish for a world free of the need for social workers, where the role for social work no longer existed as child abuse or abuse of vulnerable people no longer took place. In my opinion this developmental issue reflects the sense that a confident and secure profession would celebrate its own demise in the face of less suffering.

In 2007 Community Care put together a collection of social work jokes, as part of a 'lighthearted' pre-Christmas edition of the magazine and the following joke was listed at number one. As it appeared top of the CC list, and made reference to training I utilised in my own research to question interviewees about their reactions to it. The joke appears to reflect the profession's insecurity with its knowledge base itself in that it reflects the much held with refrain "*social work-it's just common sense*". In its denigration of the profession it combined the incongruity and superiority theories of humour:

The social worker asked the bartender "What's the difference between your job and mine?" and the bartender replied, "I only had to go to bartender school for 10 weeks and I learned to mix a little of this with a little of that and wait a couple of hours to have people tell me their innermost thoughts while you went to school for 6 years, paid thousands and thousands of pounds, sit session after session using technique after technique, and you still may never hear them."

I asked interviewees what they thought of this joke, and what it said to them about social work? Many interviewees did not think this was a good joke e.g.

It didn't offend me, but I didn't think it was particularly funny joke, not particularly it was ok

Well I don't know, it wasn't that funny really was it?

It was a rubbish joke and I don't agree with it!

One interviewee (Ollie) had a particularly strong reaction to it:

That's the joke! Who told you that was a joke? That ain't no joke! That is shite!

One interviewee felt it reflected social workers poor sense of humour:

I used to read the jokes in Community Care. I don't find them hilarious. I think it is a conservative kind of humour… I don't find it particularly funny, but I find it interesting to think that maybe some social workers do think that's absolutely hilarious

Some interviewees felt that the joke did have something to say about the position of social workers in society and how people feel less able to confide in social workers, more likely to confide in other workers:

It is not a good punchline, I think there is truth in it… people will talk to hairdressers the way they won't talk to social workers. I don't think it's particularly funny but I think there is probably some truth in it
Social workers can be on par with taxi drivers aren't they, they are unpaid [yeah] unpaid counsellors I suppose rather than social workers [yeah] they can be similar depending on the pubs they work in

And one interviewee had worked as a bartender:

I think there is an element of truth to that. I don't think I have been a social worker for 20 odd years now and I say to a lot of people-I don't think social work is rocket science, it's all about personal relationships, and how you work with people. You have to use your theory behind it, you have to be able to link your theory behind what you are doing with it, from a legal perspective and so on, but

actually we all need to eat, sleep, drink, have relationships, all of that kind of stuff all of that Maslow and I think that… That it is how you develop interpersonal relationships from the barman, which I have been as well incidentally!

Some interviewees linked the joke to the way social work is viewed by society:

It irritates me a little bit I think, to be honest with you …and I think the reason it irritates me is because… it just kind of feeds the kind of Sun newspaper type of take on social work.., and we are never actually congratulated for the hundreds of children that we save or protect from risk every week, but they always focus on that one case that goes wrong and… it just makes me feel like social workers are just being done down again.

This interviewee linked the poor practice to how social work is viewed

I think there is probably something there… there is something there about having years of training and still not come out and be a particularly good social worker… sometimes people just aren't going to get it, sometimes it's a political view, it's a personal political stance. I think social work is quite a political occupation.

This interviewee touched on the complex dichotomy between the extremes of how social work is viewed:

I'm actually quite impressed and would be impressed if society thought of us as someone who has put in years of training… we tend to still be thought of either as overzealous child snatchers, à la Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, who would take your kids away at the drop of a hat or as incompetent fools who would not recognise a child at risk, but again I think it's since baby P is very much and that's what a social worker does, kind of traffic wardens of child protection… I'm actually wondering if that is a joke that came from an earlier time when the work was seen as a bit more of a diverse discipline

This comment suggests that over time social work has become reduced to a form filling activity. This theme was highlighted above (in the section humour and risk taking) and it suggests a reduction in the diversity of social work practice, in what Evans and Harris (2004) described as the 'exaggerated death of discretion', where paradoxically more use of strict guidance, rules and policies can lead to less confidence in practice.

11. Social work as a "hidden activity"

In the early 1990s there appeared in Britain phenomena known as bogus social workers- people who pretended to be social workers in order to trick their way into homes and examine children. Rickard (1994) found that '*professional, smartly dressed and knowledgeable Bogus Social Workers appeared either singularly or in pairs.*' In rare cases there were groups of 3. They often carried IDs which were convincing enough to allow them access, and appeared to know the names of the targeted family. In one case in Edinburgh in June 1992 Bogus Social Workers persuaded a single mother to allow them to remove her 3 and 4 year old children for a medical examination. When police investigated the range of incidents, they found that due to the variety of heights, ages, attire and regional accents, the incidents could not be considered to be the work of just one individual or a couple (Rickard, 1994). Police investigations into reports of Bogus Social Workers failed to find any substantial evidence or locate any suspects. One commentator suggested that the urban legend of Bogus Social Workers was fueled by the story of Marietta Higgs, a paediatrician from Cleveland, England who diagnosed 121 children as being victims of sexual abuse (Rickard, 1994). In this context the following joke appeared, as I made a note of it in my diary in 1992:

> *Q: What's the difference between a real social worker and a bogus social worker?*
>
> *A: You receive a visit from a bogus social worker*

My experience was of this joke being used '*in-house'* as a form of '*gallows humour'* and it did not appear on any of the websites I reviewed, suggesting limited public dissemination. It could be suggested that this may be due to the lack of publicity over the phenomena, and Nelson (1994) suggested that social workers and police had been reluctant to talk about the problem for fear of "*vigilantism or unfairly stigmatising already frightened families.*"

The date and timing of the incidents (from the early 1990s) suggested that occurrences of Bogus Social workers have lessened. However a brief review of the media suggests that as a phenomena it is still occurring. On 24 March 2009 3 individuals, a man and a woman who said they were social workers and a third man who said he was a police

officer visited a home in Chaddesden, Derbyshire[5]. On 3 December 2010 there was case of a woman described as white and slim built in her early-30s and around 5ft 4ins who examined a 4 month old baby boy in Bridgend North Wales[6].

The joke suggested that there is hidden aspect to the role of social work within society. In this next comment Terri also made reference to social work being an activity that is hidden from public understanding:

One of the difficulties in social work … [is] it's hidden away and nobody really understands it, and it's not well publicised or talked about, but then it is so difficult to do so because you know… yet the things that you could make a joke about in social work you have to be so careful about how they were taken or what context they were put in… but if you were to dramatise social work you will be at such risk of patronising people and things, yeah. It doesn't get done and then we are still in a hidden role which nobody knows about…

This comment is also supported by Ollie, who suggested that social work is a marginal activity, which like the service users who rely on social work, is an activity which society which would rather be unaware of:

it's an edge of society that people would prefer not to know about, are quite happy that there are social workers and people in social care profession who manage that but then if something goes wrong or something isn't right with it they tend to like to castigate people.

However the paradox revealed by the joke and the comments is that social work is often very visible, when a high profile child death makes news headlines across the globe. Perhaps it is possible that social work is visible when social workers would rather it is not, but as there is a limited understanding of what social workers do, there is also a problem of poor practice:

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[5] http://www.thisisderbyshire.co.uk/Bogus-social-workers-threaten-child-Chaddesen/story-11609361-detail/story.html

[6] http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/south-wales-news/bridgend-maesteg/2010/12/16/bogus-social-worker-strikes-91466-27833014/

I think people are very dismissive of social work … when I trained, I trained to be a counsellor as well. now that bit to me was the real learning, because it was understanding people, obviously you've got to understand all the policy and the this and the that, but that has stood me in greater stead than anything else and it's taught me to look at the underlying problems, instead of the presenting problems… and you look around in social work at some people, you would say, "if I had a problem I would never want you there"-quick to judgment, … with some people I think it is very applicable- the negative images-I don't think people have an understanding of what we truly do

Conclusion

In conclusion social work is probably at its most effective when it is not visible to public view, like much of what happens in everyday family life such as 'good enough parenting,' good enough social work often remains invisible to the rest of society, and only become visible when vulnerable adults or children die through a failure to act.

This chapter demonstrated that there were 11 key findings in relation to humour, jokes and social work. The findings were supported by interviewee comments, together with jokes and comments made on line. In the next chapter I examine what these findings reveal about social workers and the work and I examine the part jokes and humour play in the role and the perception of social work.

Chapter 5 Discussion and reflection- practice issues and humour

Introduction

This chapter develops an overarching analysis of the relationship between social work and humour, bringing together the themes delineated in the previous chapter and reflects on what these mean for contemporary social work practice. The findings show that humour is frequently made about social work and social workers. They also demonstrate that social workers themselves often use humour with each other, with their service users and about their service users. Service users often make jokes about social workers and publish these on line, as do social workers. Some service users utilise humour in their interactions with social workers.

The humour used in these contexts, by and about social work, has several effects and outcomes. At times these outcomes appear what could be suggested to be positive in that the social worker, service user, manager or society benefits from the use of humour in some way and the findings here support the comments that using humour or sharing a joke can release tension and result in practitioners remaining in teams or the profession longer (Collins et al, 2008; Drinkwater, 2011 and Rogowski, 2011).

However Billig (2005) has suggested that there is a tendency to view humour in terms of its positive effects and ignore its 'negative' aspects, so the findings presented in the previous chapter do not ignore the negative effects of humour and indicate that humour and jokes can result in less beneficial or negative outcomes for social workers, service users and the social work profession. There were also findings which felt to me, neither wholly beneficial nor wholly negative, and might be termed 'uncertain' in their effect on the profession. In this chapter I discuss the possible explanations for the findings and reflect on how they link to wider research.

Humour and contradiction- "The Inside Outsiders"

Social workers practice in a world which places contradictory demands on them (Evans and Harris, 2004). Indeed it might be suggested that the role of social work is inherently contradictory. My findings suggest that humour enables social workers and society to manage those contradictions and to hold conflicting views at the same time. The experiences recounted by my interviewees are common for many social workers, in which the 'horrendous' world of childrens or adult abuse contrasted with their own life and personal experiences. Existing in "two worlds" is a theme which other writers have written about (e.g. Waddell, 1985; Becker and MacPherson, 1988). As Social workers

work in sharply "contradictory worlds", social workers have to find ways of reconciling these worlds and part of this negotiation involves tolerating the contradictory nature of the work. Social workers are in Ungar's (2004) phrase the "inside outsiders," working both inside homes and outside social norms and conventions, operating across the two worlds of the social worker and the service user, the public policy and private pain. Social workers are both a part of society (and the state) and apart from society (working alongside an often socially marginalised minority).

Social workers found humour in situations, which would not been seen as funny or humorous by people 'outside of social work', and in this respect humour creates a group solidarity which is important for social workers. This however can create tensions between those inside and those outside of social work practice.

I have found that humour enables social workers to tolerate and negotiate these contradictory worlds. Whilst humour may help some social workers to make friendships and have good working relationships, the first contradictory aspect of humour, is that at the same time it connects and engages people, it also excludes others who are not included in the humour. My findings indicate that at times this works to create solidarity amongst social workers, particularly in the face of perceived injustices by management, or frustration with the behaviour of service users. In this sense social workers create solidarity amongst themselves at the price of excluding others. This parallels Carden's (2003) theory whereby social workers use humour as a vehicle for "maximum consciousness" through which the culture of social work articulates its own anger and distress and occasions of reciprocated humour can reduce hierarchical differences (Robert and Wilbanks, 2012)

This need to reconcile contradictory or uncomfortable feelings about the work, can result in cognitively separating and not thinking separate thoughts at the same time. This process of 'psychic economy' is often referred to as splitting, which can lead to polar simplification and classification (Freud, 1964). The use of humour by social workers is an enabling process whereby they manage contradictory feelings about their management, service users and even themselves. My findings indicate that social workers avoid the process of splitting by using humour to reconcile contradictory feelings, because humour allows two separate and contradictory views about something to be held at the same time.

The second important function of humour is that it enables both the real and unreal to be expressed, and enables reality to be tested. Grugulis (2002) found that humour enabled contentious statements to be made without fear of recrimination in organisations. She pointed out that humorous exchanges are used as "unreal" interactions that are not accorded the same serious consideration as "non-playful" interactions (Grugulis, 2002). I found this too, and that contentious hostile jokes made at the expense of social workers reveal societal views about social work (i.e. *social workers are worse than Rottweiler's, but buried deep down really good*). Crucially these statements are not real, but allow reality to be tested.

My findings indicate that in the wake of high profile deaths (e.g. Victoria Climbé in 2000 and Peter Connelly in 2007) there can be 'waves' of hostile social work jokes. Such jokes serve the function of enabling the public hostility at the failings of social work to be expressed, and in such a negative political context social workers and the social work profession may be persecuted and attacked, for example Ed Balls victimisation of Sharon Shoesmith (Butler and Watt, 2011; Jones, 2014). Such jokes, one could argue, only add to the lack of confidence in the profession (Lombard, 2010) and reinforce the blame attached to the social work profession at the time of childrens deaths, but nevertheless provide some outlet for society's unhappiness.

Cooper (2011) has suggested that it is when the reality of child abuse becomes conscious in the public mind, the public and government express this hostility though verbal attacks and criticism of social work, punishing it with disproportionate vehemence. Fear, anger and hostility are in the air social workers breath and part of their everyday experiences (Smith et al, 2003 and Smith, 2006). Holt (2008) pointed that the hostility theory, the pleasure we derive from jokes stems from the psychic energy used to inhibit aggressive and sexual impulses, then it follows that the people who laugh hardest at the hostile jokes are the ones who have most deeply buried their aggressive tendencies. It is not unusual then for the parents who have their children removed after they have abused them, to champion such jokes, as my research has demonstrated.

Jokes made at social works' expense come from somewhere and it is my view that the real/unreal contradiction is at play, as the hostility can reflect a genuine unhappiness with social work practice. Research by Forrester et al (2008) showed that social workers can talk to parents in inappropriately confrontational ways and can be poor at

communicating empathy (Forrester et al, 2008). At this level the jokes cannot be ignored because they represent and articulate what some people may genuinely be feeling about social work. After all why should poor practice not be criticised or pointed out? In the same way that we enjoy hostile jokes targeted at government ministers, as an articulation of real unhappiness, whilst the jokes about social work are personally uncomfortable to hear, they convey real emotions and practice experience which cannot be ignored.

Social work is viewed as an activity on the margins of society, hidden sometimes from both public consciousness and public view, as it affects a relatively small minority of the population. The comments of interviewees and the joke about Bogus Social workers, highlight the invisibility of social workers. Paradoxically the use of humour can become a way for social work to become more visible, but not in ways that many in the profession would advocate.

Contemporary relationship based social work- risk and risk taking: "laughing in a helpful way"

Social Workers often work with very unhappy people, who are experiencing, what can often be described as 'the worst moments of their lives.' These people do not need their unhappiness to become the object of humour. Rogowski (2011) suggested that '*most practitioners know where to draw the line and only use humour as a release.*' However the literature review suggested that there may also be times when humour is used oppressively to minimise service users distress or create distance between the service user and the social worker or moderate the stress of the work (Sullivan, 2000; Moran and Hughes, 2006; Nik-Meyer, 2007).

Social work is a risky endeavour, fraught with anxiety and complexities, and the practice of social work, I argue, is primarily about risk taking. How and where social workers learn to take risks is a critical issue, not only in their training, but also in their everyday practice. The Scottish 21st Century Review of Social Work (2006) suggested that the social work profession was lacking in confidence and had become increasingly risk averse, and several writers have indicated that social work practice operates in an increasingly risk averse culture (Mitchell et al, 2012; Morgan, 2004 and Titterton, 2010). Mitchell et al, (2012), Morgan, (2004) and Titterton, (2010) suggest that the fear of taking risks arose from several factors, concerns about personal or organisational litigation; worries about the impact on organisations reputations, previous experiences

and most importantly from 'risk-averse cultures.' Mitchell et al (2012) found in a risk averse culture a disproportionate emphasis is placed on protecting organisations from the potentially adverse consequences of risk could undermined social workers capacity to identify safeguarding issues and enable positive risk taking.

My findings indicate that at times social workers took risks and used humour at their service users' expense and laughed in '*unhelpful ways.*' Some of the jokes made about service users would at best be deemed inappropriate, yet they still took place, so they served some purpose. As the hostile jokes represented societies views of social work, so the hostile jokes about service users served to express social workers unconscious feelings towards their service users.

Humour is seductive in its qualities, for example as Nushra Mansuri, BASW professional officer, (writing about *Clare in the Community*) said: "*given the deluge of media negativity about social workers, there is something very freeing about being able to laugh at ourselves*" (Meachin, 2013).

Social workers in my research suggested they needed to share humour, and this provided themselves with relief. The findings suggest that with the opportunity to relieve these negative feelings about their service users, to share 'banter' and where staff feel trusted, there is higher staff retention.

However this is a complex and intricate balance for those responsible for managing social workers. As O'Hagan (2010) highlighted humour can be used for sinister purposes including grooming children, as the person using humour seems more socially attractive. As one commentator said humour *can mask incompetence because those who are witty and likeable can sometimes get away with poor practice.* The risk here is that as in the superiority theory of humour, humour has a sinister and exploitative side, and whilst I do not share Plato, Hobbes and Bergson's view that at its root *all humour is interpersonal mockery and derision* (Billig, 2005; Holt, 2008), social workers are not averse to using mockery and derision in their work and relationships with service users.

An important question arose as I gathered these findings: 'why would someone take the risk of saying something which could be deemed to be at best inappropriate and at worst against the standards of proficiency, and possibly result in them losing not only their job, but ending their career?' What could be the value to a social worker in using

humour and taking such a risky course of action? In terms of managing risky situations Braithwaite (2010) has even suggested that humour can even be used to manage hostile or aggressive service users, "*if you are good at it, but can also be one of the most dangerous techniques* (Braithwaite, 2010)."

The answer lies in what humour can convey about the social worker who uses it. Researchers from a range of disciplines (particularly anthropology) point to the universality of humour (Apte, 1983; Billig, 2005; Holt, 2008). So humour as a universal human characteristic conveys a person's 'normality' to others and communicates *their humanity*. In this sense humour has unique power to convey a particular characteristic about a social worker, and that is why some social workers risk using humour, as the opposite, a lack of humour, conveys a lack of humanity.

If social workers are seen as humourless, it is possible that social workers could be stereotyped as simply 'bureaucratic automatons', unable to relate to their service users. Some comments e.g. Allen (2009) suggest that this portrayal of social workers as humourless or lacking a sense of humour, can be used as a way of criticising not only the actions of individual social workers, but the profession as a whole.

My first interview question was *"what is the funniest thing which has happened to you in social work?"* The majority of my interviewees not only saw humour as important, but they were uncomfortable and embarrassed when they could not think of anything funny. Social workers can often want to be seen as humourous as the opposite, humourless individuals, are valued less by society as they appear less likely to have successful interactions and relationships. In the words of Stephen Leacock the essence of humour is human kindliness and the opposite of humour is deathliness (Lynch, 1988). In this respect humour conveys a useful and important message to the recipient, that the humour or joke teller shares a common humanity with the recipient, which can form the basis of the social work relationship.

However many of the jokes I found made fun of the behaviour of service users and fit with the incongruity and superiority theories of jokes (Paulos, 2000; Holt, 2008). Here the humour and jokes are created by the incongruous nature of the responses which is related to the service user group. Superiority theory (Billig, 2005; Sullivan, 2000) is also at play in these jokes, as they exploit the behaviour of some service users.

As Frost (1992) argues the use of humour with clients is always risky, but he suggests that it has a place in helping relationships. Service users can themselves teach social workers the importance of finding the humour, irony and absurdity in their situations, and whilst it is unethical to laugh at people and their problems, it may be helpful to laugh with them as they describe the humourous aspects of their experiences (Frost, 1992). This I describe as 'laughing in a helpful way' and individuals who have lived through some of the most barbaric extremities of human behaviour appreciate the value of humour (Frankl, 1946).

Being an effective social worker takes an emotional toll and it is a serious concern to anyone concerned with the profession, that the average working life for a social worker is only 8 years compared to 15 for nurses (Chiller and Crisp, 2012) In Tham's (2006) study 48% of the practitioners interviewed wanted to leave social work within two years of qualification. Humour is one place in which social workers can obtain relief from the stress of the work. Humour I suggest has a key role in contemporary practice in building more resilient social workers, workers who are more likely to remain in the profession. The interviews and data I collected suggest that it really is better in the words of Pelling "*to laugh than to store pent-up emotion and erupt*" (Pelling, 2008). Frost, (1992) argues that *"humour as an antidote to adversity, stress, and frustration is useful and necessary to maintaining one's ability to deal with difficulties" (*Frost, 1992 *p. 33).*

The social worker who uses humour is a more resilient social worker. Furnivall (2011) argues that amongst other attributes which build resilience in children in care, (including being loveable and endearing, the capacity to understand their own and others' emotions, and to self-regulate) a sense of humour, particularly the capacity to laugh at one-self, is important. My findings suggest that the same applies to building resilient social work practitioners. Indeed I would suggest that having a sense of humour and being endearing (socially attractive) are part and parcel of the same attribute. Humour allows the social worker to apply discretion in their work and use an opportunity to have respite from the stress and pressures of the work.

Grant (2012) found that a sense of humour was related to developing social workers' emotional resilience and that it helped social workers maintain positive relationships, draw on a range of coping styles, and derive a sense of meaning from the challenges that they face. Therefore if the ability to apply and use humour appropriately is related

to more resilient social workers, I suggest that the inability to apply humour is correlated with social workers who struggle with the work.

Holmes (2000) suggested that humour in the workplace fell into 4 categories: equalizing or creating solidarity; defending or protecting the self against stress or threats; sharing similarities and creating solidarity and coping with weakness. I would add to these categories that humour for social workers helps them manage the contradictions of the work, humour also plays a unique role in conveying humanity, helps build resilience, and conversely acts at times to mask poor practice.

Humour and becoming de-sensitised

Social workers use humour to communicate their feelings to other people both consciously and unconsciously, and I found that humour was used by some social workers to 'de-sensitise' themselves to the work. That social workers should become desensitised to the work they are carrying out feels intuitively understandable, but on another level concerning. Can social workers function and continue to practice if they remain 'raw and shockable?' This can lead to burnout and stress related sickness, where the worker feels over-whelmed by the emotions the work creates for them. A concern is that in becoming 'desensitised' is that social workers no longer pay sufficient attention to the child or vulnerable adult. In this regard social workers become de-sensitised to the abnormality of abuse, as it becomes part of their unconscious world, and invades their sense of normality. The reality of abuse almost becomes normal, to be expected.

Social workers defend against becoming overwhelmed by the anxieties of the work (Cooper and Lousada, 2005). At times that can involve a retreat into bureaucratic work, at other times it can involve social workers de-sensitizing themselves to the feelings about the work, and defending themselves against feeling emotionally overwhelmed by the work. Despite very significant emphasis on "seeing the child" in assessments, a number of serious case reviews and public inquiries have evidenced practitioner failings in this respect (Ayre, 1998; Rose and Barnes, 2008). De-sensitising is an important concern in being able to stay focussed on the child, meeting the needs of children and identifying risk. In effect, elaborate bureaucratic routines and the need to spend time in the office are manifestations of not only how individuals, but also organisations create defences against anxiety (Cooper and Lousada, 2005). This occurs as one way of managing the intolerable feelings that arise from having to work

with children's suffering, the risks they may die and the day-to-day stresses of doing such complex and challenging work (Ferguson, 2010). Freud suggests repression is "*the most important of all defences*" (Froggett, 2008 pg. 8). My findings indicate that humour is another defence mechanism for managing the work, but it is also powerfully seductive for another reason, as social workers, like all human beings, are pleasure seeking creatures, and humour fulfils a pleasure seeking principal. Humour has a dual role for social workers as it allows the repression of painful, difficult emotions, while at the same time producing pleasure. Freud suggested that the pleasure principle in mental life had an almost omnipotent role (Freud, 2010) so it perhaps to be expected that my findings reveal that humour operates through this way too.

Humour and reflective practice

Critically reflective practice is now formalised within the PCF as a key part of social work practice, although in the past as Newman et al (2005) suggest *"Social care has also been characterised as having a culture of action over reflection"* (Newman et al, 2005 p. 141). The findings from both the interview data and the on line discussions suggest that social work teams differ greatly in their approaches to humour. Many of the comments attacked the way social work was managed, and some of the comments suggested that high levels of scrutiny drove humour underground. On the one hand humour is longed for by social workers themselves, but on the other hand management appears to fear inappropriate outbursts of humour, which then 'seep out' when 'management is not looking.' It is almost as if in social work one is not meant to be laughing, as this in itself reveals a poor practitioner.

However the given the universality of humour, my findings indicate that the use of humour is unavoidable in social work and that an unreflective approach to its management created more problems, particularly in the team culture and in the retention of staff. Indeed when social workers felt themselves more under scrutiny as the said they were more likely to leave particular teams or even the profession itself. Mustoe (2010) suggests that managers should observe staff using humour, as it can be one method of working with service users, and then assess the use of humour in terms of its congruence to circumstances. Nakhimoff (2012) stresses the importance of managers in communicating to staff and when it is appropriate communicating with a sense of humour. My findings suggest that managers themselves struggled to be congruent in their own use of humour. There is a role here for a reflective, emotionally intelligent and congruent response to humour use by staff and its management, and in

this respect the use of humour is related to level of an individual's emotional intelligence (Morrison, 2007; Howe, 2008).

My findings indicate that social work humour could also be seen as a developmental issue, related to age and experience. This parallels the developmental theories of humour, where humour is seen as important for a child's growth and attachment, as the work of Bowlby (1999) and the laughter theory of Nelson (2012) link humour development to attachment behaviour. Humour creates the bonds between caregiver and child, as it demonstrates pleasure with each other's company. I suggest that this also applies in social work, and that social workers attach to teams in which they find warm reciprocal bonds, and this experience enables them to make an attachment to the profession of social work. This is not to say that humour is an insipidly positive thing, as the findings also reveal the problems with humour, but as with the child and parent, humour can be part of the process of enabling positive and secure attachments. My findings also indicate that the converse is true, if social workers feel themselves insecure and unattached they will be less likely to remain in teams or in the profession. Humour use can provide social workers with reason to positively bond with their teams.

Therefore humour has an important role in helping social workers attach to the profession, but is of limited value unless it is applied in the context of an emotionally intelligent reflective practice.

Political correctness, Values and humour
My findings show that humour has a very specific cultural context. At a recent seminar where I shared some of my findings a Portuguese social worker, practicing in the UK made reference to the fact that she struggled to understand the subtle wordplay or cultural references on which 'British' humour depended. As highlighted above this is the exclusivity/ inclusivity role which characterises humour. My findings also suggest that the depth and popularity of humour with social workers is linked to British culture and cultural expectations. However only a cross cultural multi-lingual study could test this, as American social workers also used humour.

My group of 19 interviewees were self-selected and had volunteered to be interviewed. As a self-selected group this in itself suggests that they had a proclivity to use or existing interest in humour. 4 interviewees defined themselves as coming from ethnic minorities. The interview group consisted of 10 men and 9 women. This was not representative of the social work profession with its 80% female workforce. If the same

ratio was applied to my small sample it would have meant 4 men/ 15 women gender division. Other research into humour, such as Watts (2007) suggested that women were less likely than men to engage in joking behaviour. The findings from my study suggest that male social workers were more likely to employ humour, or discuss the use of humour. It could also suggest that I was just bad a recruiting women to my sample.

Social workers appear no less likely to engage in humour, and my sample size was too small to generate any significant correlations between humour and gender, although as a majority female profession my findings suggest that social workers are more cautious in their approaches to humour, and more likely to challenge when humour is used inappropriately or oppressively. Social work certainly appears to be the target of jokes and humour, and challenging this use of humour is far more complex as it reflects a dominant political discourse about the role of the state in intervening in personal family life. Challenging oppressive humour can be isolating and difficult, and social work is unlikely ever to be a 'popular' profession, but social workers can maintain their emotional health and challenge stereotypes about social work through the use of humour.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Introduction

This final chapter reflects upon the role which humour play in relation to social work. I begin by reflecting upon the personal journey that I have taken, and my motivation for undertaking such a study. I reflect upon the methodology chosen to examine humour and revisit the ethical issues, theoretical framework and the methodology adopted. I then revisit the questions framed at the start of the thesis, share my plan for future dissemination (and world domination)[7] and at the end I then reflect upon what my thesis can say about the relationship between social work and humour.

The thesis, a personal journey

I began this thesis with a belief that humour and jokes are such a common feature of everyday life, they deserve to be analysed in terms of social work. I found that the literature review supported this, and I found that in studying humour I was travelling in the footsteps of some very significant theorists and philosophers, e.g. Plato, Hobbes, Bergson, Freud, Locke, Pascal, Kant, Schopenhauer, Kant, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein who have all been interested in the explanations and causes of humour. In such illustrious company it is impossible not to feel overwhelmed and engulfed by the attempt to make sense of one aspect of humour, its relationship with social work, but it was also enlightening to drawn on such a wide range of literature.

As Critchley (2002) has argued when we tell a joke there has to be congruence between the joke structure and social structure. It feels to me that at times we live in a society which is obsessed with humour, and if humour and jokes are so interwoven with British cultural and social life, this thesis is on the relationship between social work and humour is probably a reflection of this cultural obsession. I found that relationships are at the heart of good social work practice with people, and the profession cannot ignore humour, nor can we see it as peripheral to human relationships. Indeed it might be argued that humour is what puts the social into social relationships, as in the words of my interviewee Lee humour "*oils the wheels of human interaction.*"

In the reflective process of writing this thesis, the thesis feels like a very personal obsession, where I have followed my own particular interest, and yet the universality of humour also suggests that my obsession and interest is shared by many people.

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[7] *This is my only attempt at a joke in this thesis*

In the process of carrying out this study I have thought often about what motivated me to embark on this particular area of research. Humour is viewed in some social circles as trivial and an optional extra to the serious business of social work. What then motivated me to take such a trivial path in the midst of this seriousness? It was in part driven by the fear that a work environment, without humour, would be a much poorer work environment in which to survive the challenges of social work, and I found this was reflected in my findings, e.g. Ellis commented: *if I think about the teams that I have worked in, the best functioning… it is often where humour is at its finest.* I too shared this experience.

I have always been fond of jokes and from the start of my career in social work have searched for jokes about social work. Freud (1960) and many other researchers (e.g. Billig, 2005; Lockyer and Pickering, 2009) showed that jokes are worthy data in themselves to study, and jokes about social work felt to me like a personal attack on social work and my sense of self, as a practicing social worker. The violence the jokes articulated were occasionally frightening in their passion, and felt to me to be hatred of social work. I feel it is important to recognise the real emotions which lie behind such jokes and humour. To quote Charlie Chaplin again "*to truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain and play with it.*"

I examined all the jokes I could find about social work. In one presentation I gave, a social work student was shocked by the aggressive nature of jokes made about the helping profession she was choosing to enter. This can be the problem when you are billed to give a presentation in the post lunch break and the audience is expecting to be gently entertained. The jokes often reflected the uncomfortable and painful reality of some of society's view of social work practice, and the hostility with which social work is viewed. When I shared an example of a social work joke with a colleague, he turned to me and said: '*why did I have it in for social work*?' This is an important question to think about, particularly given my use of psychoanalytic methods in analysing the data and interviewees I had collected. Did the search for painful and hostile jokes about social work reflect a self-loathing with myself or hostility to my own profession? I could not ignore the unconscious message which had driven me to the topic, particularly as I have used this method to make sense of the data I have collected.

However once I had found the most hostile jokes about social work, I was left with a feeling, ok so what, is that the worst you can do? I felt that as social workers we could

turn the jokes made about social work into our own, recapture them and sanitise them, almost in the same way that social workers process the emotional toll of the work on themselves. This was mixed with a feeling that there was something pleasurable about kicking against the staidness, the dullness of life that telling a joke or sharing a humourous anecdote encapsulates, even when it is a hostile one. I remain seduced by the idea that humour could be a powerful tool for change, as Orwell once said '*every joke is a tiny revolution'* (Lewis, 2008 p. 19). And within this there is a part of me that likes to 'kick over statues,' to seek the pain of the hostile joke.

This may account for my motivation or interest in humour and jokes, but is it a justifiable as a topic of research? There are problems with jokes and humour, particularly in a world which does not seem to take social work as seriously as it arguably should. Would not a more worthy thesis be aimed at boosting the image of social work, and does not joking undermine social work? After all we all want to be serious about social work. Or was this motivated by my own desire to find solace from the distressing and dispiriting stories I was hearing every day, my own rather elaborate defence mechanism for avoiding the emotions that work created in me or was this all just been a process of public self-analysis? I remain proud to be a practicing social worker, although I have recently returned to lecturing. I am proud of social works many achievements (whilst acknowledging its failings). I am proud of the dogged determination and dedication of many practitioners to try and help others, to change lives for the better and do something good, in the face of often what appear to be insurmountable odds.

So I think all of these points are true, that you can be both proud of social work, yet ashamed of its failings, that you can produce a very personal thesis, but one which might also say something useful about social work practice. In this respect I believe I have explored the below the surface emotional work of social work, its public image, and the difficult task that the public are shielded from. As a practitioner I am part of the "*messy reality of everyday*" social work life (Tobin, 2003), intrinsically connected to the methodology and research process, so I found that in examining social work jokes and humour, I revealed much about my personal stance. I felt myself drawn to those darker, bleaker jokes and humourous anecdotes which highlighted the ambiguous, painful and uncomfortable side of social work. In such a reflective approach there is an acknowledgement that this can be a fruitful approach to take in research, but it is also very personal one.

In social work new models of research are often being produced (Shaw and Norton, 2008), and what I have attempted here is to create a serious piece of research into humour, but also to use jokes and humour to make thoughtful points about social work practice. By sharing his humour with his readers Freud (1960) was one of the first writers to use humour to make serious points, particularly in how jokes can reveal particular aspects of our selves (Billig, 2005). In reflecting on this point a thought struck me, that Freud (1960) argued that our use of humour, and the jokes we found funny, could reveal some unpleasant even nasty characteristics about ourselves. What was Freud trying to achieve by sharing the jokes that made him laugh, was this Freuds' own form of public therapy, and in a similar vein I too have used humour to show that social workers are human, fallible and complex, having to be *part* and *apart* from the people they work with.

Research design

I have attempted to do something challenging and to make an original contribution to social work thought, and the design of this research was primarily in two parts, an exploration of jokes and humour online and interviews with social work practitioners. As the literature review revealed there are many theories as to why something might be humourous, I categorised these as: Developmental theories of humour; Anthropological/ Superiority theories of humour; Incongruity theories of humour; Social 'subversiveness' theories of humour and Humour as a psychosocial mechanism for managing emotions (release theory). As a social work practitioner engaged in emotional labour, the theories which suggested that humour has a key role in regulating emotional life, were always going to be the theory which featured highly in underpinning my research design, as I was particularly interested in the underlying and often unconscious social mechanisms which allow humour to flourish or not to flourish. The notion that we 'learn from experience' and that our emotional response to the world is central to our understanding is a psychoanalytic one (Cooper and Lousada, 2005). I therefore wanted a research design which allowed links to be made between conscious and unconscious thinking, feelings and analysis. This was never going to be quantitative. However I did not want a research design which ignored the other theories about the causes of humour and jokes, so wanted a flexible design which allowed this exploration.

I was interested in findings and arguments, based on interpretation, rather than descriptions. I also wanted a design which reflected a plan, but one which was flexible,

and allowed other data to be utilised in the analysis, i.e. if I found particularly useful online data and I share Lockyer's (2006) view that greater confidence can be had in findings which are gathered from different sources.

My research design allowed me to explore how the social work relationship operates, through an examination of jokes and humour, as it enabled me to engage with the messy *intersubjectivity* of the real world of social work practice in all its complexity.

Methodological issues

Given the complexity of analysing humour and jokes, this thesis was always going to present methodological problems. The first issue I faced was as a practitioner engaged in research, which often has the aim of promoting or facilitating change in practice (McBeath and Austin (2013). As a practitioner researcher I faced the disadvantages such as a lack of time, pressure from my "main" work, having sufficient expertise and over-identifying with practitioners, which could impact on my objectivity. I found that a reflexive approach to research guarded against some these problems, however at times I am sure I did identify with the practitioners in my study, as they made comments which resonated with me. Does this invalidate the research I carried out? I suspect it is part of the struggle of being a qualitative practitioner researcher who uitilises psychodynamic methods, and the only way of guarding against this was to continuously question my assumptions and deductions during interviews and during the analysis, and to test the themes which developed against other data. This is where regular supervision and discussions with my supervisors and fellow students was helpful.

Secondly this thesis would not have been possible without the use of the internet, as a source for jokes and for valuable comments about humour. Finding online data allowed me to access to jokes and views about humour from a far larger group of social workers than I would otherwise have been able to access. Social workers comments about jokes and humour were dealt with by treating this data anonymously, and removing any identifying features in the data. I had assumed that collecting jokes which exist in the public domain assumed informed consent as individuals have put these in the public domain.

Other researchers had utilised the internet as a source of data, as the internet has great advantages over other methods in terms of its immediacy and the virtue of overcoming any geographical limitations on data collection (Bloor et al, 2001). Gill and Elder (2012) indicate that there are several advantages to utilising the internet as a

source of data, firstly individuals tend to reveal more personal information, more quickly than in face-to-face encounters. Secondly information is accessible and does not mean participants have to break their everyday regime, and make 'special time' for an interview. This together with the accessibility of the information, and the potential for making the research process more transparent suggests that SNS and on-line data can make a substantial contribution to data collected. I found that on line people could be just as eloquent about their emotions, and their feelings about humour, and online data was very useful as it felt to me more immediate, the emotions expressed, less 'filtered' and ultimately a true reflection of feelings.

The final methodological issues arises form the subject itself (jokes). Pickering and Lockyer (2009) point out that the interpretation work of joke telling occurs at considerable speed and it is the analysis of the joke which effectively kills it off (Chiaro, 1992). What I have attempted to do is analyse something which is fleeting, the antithesis of something that lends itself to analysis, but in this respect I was aided by the internet which allows such fleeting comments to be recorded, while at the same time more closely resembling real life interactions.

Ethical issues

I established confidentiality by removing identifying features in the interview, and applied gender neutral names to extracts from the transcripts. In places it was prudent to change some of other key features such as age and gender, to ensure that anonymity was maintained.

As a researcher-practitioner I considered the implications of an interviewee making unethical comments to me about their practice, e.g. an interviewee could make unethical statements (which they considered humorous) about a service user or disclose they have behaved in ways which have harmed service users. In discussion with my supervisor I agreed that this could raise code of conduct issues which breech the HCPC standards of proficiency. I planned that if this did occur during the course of the interview, I would raise this with my supervisor to discuss further action.

The anonymity of the internet provides researchers with very useful data, but it also ethically questionable as assumed consent is not real consent, although in our tech savvy age it would appear unwise to place anything in the public domain, without a tacit awareness that it will be publically available. Some researchers have assumed informed consent as individuals have placed their comments in the public domain

(Capurro and Pingel, 2002; Berry, 2004 and Barbour, 2008). The issue of whether individuals have consented to their on-line discussions being analysed for research purposes needs careful consideration and what harm may be caused by analysing them needs to be considered. The openness of many social networks, can also be problematic. People using public sites do not expect researchers to be gathering their comments and analysing them. Whilst all the contributors to the forums I analysed had online user names and no identifying pictures, sometimes their gender was identified and their comments may make some of them identifiable. These issues were addressed by ensuring that no identifying features remained in the final analysis.

Gill and Elder (2012) point out that previous researchers (e.g. Pittenger, 2003) have suggested that as the internet is a public space, the onus for protecting the anonymity of subjects lies with the internet users themselves and not the researcher. However, they argue that some responsibility does lie with the researcher to protect subjects and participants from any possible harm. I concluded that the internet is such a valuable source of information people need to be aware that what they write on line can be viewed publically and as such is an important source of information for researchers. Without such data this thesis would be far more limited in its scope and applicability to practice.

British Psychological Society (2013) suggest that a key principle in internet-mediated research (IMR) (as well as offline methods) is to ensure that ethical procedures and safeguards are implemented so as to be proportional to the level of risk and potential harm to participants. Accessing the online discussion groups gave me access to a far greater range of social workers than I would obtained by interviewing alone. It also gave me a more natural source of data which in and of itself produced an immediacy which felt real, as if I was conducting my own discussion group, with a far wider group than I could ever have reached ordinarily.

The subject matter humour and jokes could be considered non-contentious as I was not asking participants to discuss intimate topics, such as their medical status or sexual orientation. Neither would the publication result in shame or threats to material wellbeing e.g. job loss, as the data was presented anonymously. The British Psychological Society (2013) indicate that where it is reasonable to argue that there is likely to be no expectation of privacy, the use of on line data without gaining valid consent may be justifiable. At the end of the on line discussion, I conducted, I made it

clear that I was researching humour and social work and asked for consent to analyse the on line discussion group material and only one on-line commentator asked for their comments to be removed, which I did.

Data analysis

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) argue that we cannot understand research subjects without exploring their experiences of the world, but we also cannot understand those experiences of the world without some understanding of how research subjects inner worlds effect their experiences, and this has to be understood through the additional psycho-social inner world of the researcher themselves.

I also wanted to go beyond the surface meaning which is the tradition of a thematic approach, and to combine a thematic approach with thinking what may be conveyed by the jokes, interview and on line data, what may lie below the surface, and what might unconsciously have been communicated. Clarke and Hoggett (2009) argue that the unconscious plays a significant part in the generation of research data. Clarke and Hoggett (2009) argue that the researchers' emotional reaction to the data, shapes and effects our perceptions and reactions, and reflects a complex interplay between the external and internal worlds, of the researcher and the data collected. I followed Hollway and Jefferson (2013) proviso that I could claim legitimacy in my analysis, so long as make no claim to any special objective status with my analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a useful tool in its own right for qualitative analysis in "thematizing meanings" across complex data sets. What was particularly useful for me in relation to humour is that thematic analysis acknowledges that individuals make meaning of their experience, and that the social context impinges on those meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke, (2006) also argue that a good thematic analysis will make the researchers assumptions transparent.

What does the existing literature reveal about the relationship between social work practice and humour?

We belong to a society in which fun has become an imperative and humour is seen as a necessary quality for being fully human (Billig, 2005 p. 13.) The literature review showed that humour is complex, as it serves various purposes, and often does not do one thing at one time. My review of the existing literature also suggested that there are several paradoxes of humour, in that it is both universal and particular, as humour can be found in all societies, but not everyone finds the same things funny. The second paradox is that it is both social and anti-social, it can bring people together, but at the

same time through mockery can exclude people. The third aspect is that it is both mysterious and resistant to analysis, but it is also understandable to a very young child.

The literature review also suggested that when humour is used in the organisation by social workers two or more of the causes of humour may coalesce e.g. conveying superiority, managing incongruous feelings or relieving anxiety/ stress (Gilgun and Sharma, 2011). There is potentially cyclical pattern to humour, i.e. when humour builds or detracts from a relationship, it encourages or discourages others from expressing humour. As Carpenter (2011) suggested it is a negative mind-set and inability to feel positive about change which is crucial to surviving in social work. Given that social work is constantly dealing with situations which can raise difficult emotions, humour can be a process which helps to manage these issues.

What do jokes and humour reveal about the role and the perception of social work?
Jokes made at social works' expense come from somewhere and it is my view that the real/unreal contradiction is in operation, as the hostility can reflect a genuine unhappiness with social work practice. The purpose of the joke is to validate prejudice about social work, and the prejudice is often founded in a stereotype.

Perhaps humour's pervasiveness in human interaction blinds us to its existence, importance, and influence, and that the prevalence of humour use might cause it to be taken for granted (Roberts and Wilbanks, 2012). Social workers practice in a world which places contradictory demands on them (Evans and Harris, 2004). Indeed it might be suggested that the role of social work is inherently ambiguous in nature (Roose et al, 2012). My findings suggest that humour has a particular role in relation to social workers as it enables social workers to hold contradictory views (about their work, their service users and their organisations) at the same time. Given the contradictory character of social work itself the two appear to me to go hand in hand, i.e. society manages its ambivalent and contradictory view of social work through jokes made about social workers, and social workers manage their ambivalent/ contradictory views of society and service users though their use of humour. My findings indicate that at times social workers took risks and used humour at their service users' expense and laughed in '*unhelpful ways.*' Some of the jokes made about service users would at best be deemed inappropriate, yet they still took place, so they served the purpose of meeting an emotional need in the workers. As the hostile jokes represented societies

views of social work, so the hostile jokes about service users served to express social workers unconscious feelings towards their service users.

I suggest that jokes and humour are sometimes both the "resistance and the attack" which reflects the ambivalence in which social work is held. It is deeply troubling that social work finds itself in both a unique and a complex role to carry out, and my findings lead me to conclude that humour is a mechanism through which social workers negotiate their place in the world. The ambivalent and complex role that humour plays in the world in my opinion reflects the ambivalent and troubled place that social work too occupies.

What do jokes and humour reveal about social workers and the work?

I found a great variety of jokes about social work, even for example 42 versions of the lightbulb joke. When social workers shared jokes they often revealed an ability to poke gentle fun at themselves, particularly in the "soft context" of building relationships and establishing supportive environments. However jokes made in the "hard contexts" of abuse and public enquiries were often hostile and attacking, suggesting that the jokes were driven by the context within which they arose.

Social workers like jokes and humour, as social workers were keen to share their jokes and their humour with me. Some social workers are actually very witty and humourous. As highlighted in the literature review humour appears to be a universal phenomenon experienced by human societies across time and across cultures (Willis, 2009 and Apte, 1983), although there is also a danger in making universal claims about humour. However therein lies the another paradox, what is the point of studying such a phenomenon if I do not believe that it may have universality in some respects.

Social workers sometimes have feelings of fear or anger towards their service users, but must treat these service users with respect and integrity. As a result social workers need to find ways of managing the competing and complex feelings they have towards their service users. Humourous or funny things happen all the time in social work, and social workers often talk about them, even in the midst of more overwhelming sadness and distress. It is insensitive and inappropriate to ridicule and make fun of people who are in vulnerable and unhappy situations yet ridiculing them may help them to gain some insight into the stupidity of their actions or decisions. However social workers also know that in talking in such a way this can go against the core value base of social work. So how do workers manage this contradiction? They displace their emotions

through the use of humour with each other. I found that service users often made social workers laugh, and whilst some of this humour was shared at other times humour was made at the service user. I suspect that no social workers would argue that this is ethically acceptable. I found that social workers had a need to safely discharge their negative feelings about service users, sometimes in the absence of reflective supervision or the absence of management surveillance.

Humour can be seen as trivial, peripheral and even insulting to some in relation to the very serious business of social work, but we cannot ignore humour, nor can we see it as peripheral to human relationships, as humour forms the basis of most positive relationships and relationships are at the heart of good social work practice with people. My thesis has demonstrated that humour is central not only in the beginning of relationships, but also in maintaining relationships.

The micro management of social work office interactions can lead to an 'underground' humour hidden from management, revealed through the internet or in confidential interviews. Does this mean that there is a crisis in the profession or that most social workers are practicing inappropriately? My findings do not suggest this, but rather there is a need to recognise the centrality of humour in relationships and the role it plays in helping social workers to manage their emotional ambivalence and contradictions of the work. I would suggest that being viewed as humourless is dangerous for the social work profession as it makes social work more vulnerable to attacks from those who wish to undermine the social work role.

It would appear therefore that social workers who use humour and jokes are trying to do several 'risky' things at the same time, show their uniquely human characteristics, discharge their own emotions and establish rapport. All of which it could be argued is ultimately about establishing relationships with service users, their colleagues and their managers. Added to this I have found that humour also helped social workers develop their resilience, as humour is closely tied to resilience *particularly the capacity to laugh at one-self (*Furnivall, 2011).

It was perhaps heartening that humour was sometimes instigated by service users and I found myself sharing Frost (1992) assertion that service users needed to be given the opportunity to share their stories as these often revealed great humour in how they managed their lives. However the times which humour about service users was used

inappropriately needs also to be monitored, as this only makes social workers task more challenging and undermines society's view of social work.

Strategy for disseminating my findings

Now that I have recently returned to teaching social work I plan to utilise my links with University of Essex to disseminate my findings to the academic social work community. I also plan to share my findings with my participants and as one participant suggested that I offer a workshop where social workers can share their views on the relationships between humour and social work.

My plan is to submit several articles:

Article of the overall findings- to the Journal of Social Work practice and the European Journal of Social Work

An article on the use of mixed qualitative methodology with online data in social work research- Qualitative Social Work;

It may also be possible to share my findings at conferences involving social work practice, e.g. JSWEC or with the Centre for Social Work Practice of whom I am a member.

What I would have done differently

It is important to point out that other research into the relationship between social work and humour has been carried out as the result of larger research projects, where the research into humour was not the primary purpose of the study e.g. Gilgun and Sharma (2011) drew their case examples from data they gathered for a larger ethnographic study of a social service programme working with children at risk of offending behaviour. Mik-Meyer (2007) drew her material from part of a larger study of the meetings between social workers and clients in two rehabilitation centres. The point is that whilst humour is common place in social work offices, it is not always straightforward to gather information about humour, and in the past humour research has been carried out as an adjunct to a larger study.

Several interviewees and commentators made the distinction between being humourous and making a joke, and while I spent some time in the literature review making the distinction between the two, I felt it was impossible to study humour without looking at jokes, and as no-one had done this before in relation to social work, it felt to me to be an original endeavour. On reflection it would have been worth exploring this

distinction with my interviewees, as I suspect there is a discomfort in social work with joke and joking behaviour, which is viewed negatively, but conversely a desire to utilise humour, which is viewed positively. It would have been fruitful to have explored this more.

On reflection I would have liked to involve service users in my research, but this would have raised substantially more ethical issues, although I suspect it would have yielded some interesting and insightful results. Frost (1992) had suggested that humour could be used in working with service users and such questions as: *tell me about the last time you had a good laugh* or *would you tell me your favourite joke* could be posed as part of an assessment. His first question is paralleled in the first question I had put to social workers (see appendix 2).

In relation to working with children, I would have liked to explore humour in more detail. In children services it is important that children can establish a relationship with their social workers, and humour can work to help establish these relationships. Frequently children will tell a child protection social worker that they do not like them, and this in itself can become a barrier to keeping a child safe. It is after all very hard to engage with children and young people if they simply have no respect for what a social worker is saying. In the world such children occupy, frequently let down, hurt and abused, they find it hard to trust adults, and enabling such children to trust and like you, making them smile at the least, seems an important first step in forming relationships. But being entertaining to children, can also seem to be an insecure and desperate sign to be liked. Given that one of my findings is that humour is a mechanism for communicating a 'safeness or humanity' about the practitioner to the outside world, and most importantly to service users, this would appear to me to be fruitful area of further research.

Where possible I also sent interviewees a copy of their transcript. However this was not possible for some people I interviewed as there was a substantial time lapse between the interviews and the transcripts being completed, by which time individuals had moved jobs or were no longer contactable, or did not respond to the email I sent them requesting they contact me for a copy of their interview transcript. On reflection I would have transcribed interviews more quickly, although the process of doing it myself was very valuable in terms of the thematic approach I adopted.

Although my sample was small, I found that men were more likely to come forward to be interviewed, which biased my interview sample. Other researchers have found that

men use humour, particularly interpersonal mockery, and male dominated professions humour is often used to oppress and belittle women (Watts, 2007). I suspect that as a female dominated profession, this is a protective factor against the more oppressive forms of humour. On reflection I would have spent more time ensuring my sample reflected the ethnic and gender division within social work.

Concluding remarks: what is the relationship between humour and social work?
Given that social work is conditioned by the societal context from which it emerges, and given the centrality of humour in contemporary society, I hypothesised that an exploration of humour, and the jokes which are told about social work, would enable me to investigate the role and place of social work in society.

In conclusion there is no single definition of the relationship between social work and humour, however there are key features, which my thesis has revealed. I share Pickering and Lockyer assertion that humour "*infiltrates every area of social life*" (Pickering and Lockyer, 2009 p.6.) The implication of this infiltration is that humour insinuates itself into social work practice and as such is unavoidable. For this reason social workers have to find ways of personally and professionally managing humour, as it is inescapable. As a society we fear the word joke as to be seen as "a joke" is undermining to any person or to a profession. Social workers fear not being taken seriously, but conversely use humour and jokes to manage their unhappiness at work, or to cope with the stress of the work, and I found myself agreeing with Bollas that *we may choose between our comic and tragic potential* (Bollas, 1995 p. 245).

Over the course of my career as a child care social worker I have worked in 7 different teams and offices, and I can identify with comments that linked humour used in an office to staff retention, as it appears to me that the most positive, most supportive social work environments are frequently ones were humour punctuates daily interactions, where staff felt safe to make jokes, and share their banter as part of their resilience to the stress of the work.

The College of Social work Code of Ethics (2013) states that social workers are required to practice in a way that establishes and maintains the trust and confidence of service users and their carers, and that social workers should "work in a way that merits that trust" (TCSW, 2013). Could social workers be considered to be trustworthy if they were finding humour in their practice, and could such behaviour therefore be considered to be unethical? Given that humour, laughing and jokes are so universal

and featured so much in my own practice could this be ignored or set aside as 'frivolous.' There is also a contradiction at the heart of research into humour, as many have written about the importance of humour (Sullivan, 2000; Newirth, 2006 and Cooper, 2008), but there is also a fear of taking such a frivolous subject as jokes and humour seriously. Metcalfe (2004) suggested that exposing contradictions in complex social phenomena has a useful track record as a creative 'way of knowing' and I have followed this path.

Winnicott (1953) in his work on transitional spaces, argued that such spaces provide an opening between the child's imagination and the real world outside the child. In a similar way I have found that social workers use of humour and jokes permits social workers to talk about real and unreal situations. As a result potentially grave situations become not only less threatening, but amusing. Humour allows social workers to simultaneously live and practice in two worlds through the use of humour. Extending Winnicott's idea one could argue that it is almost as if humour allows social workers to negotiate and occupy the space between the true and the false self. In this sense I am indebted to Winnicott and his ideas about a transitional space.

Humour or jokes therefore provide a transition space which helps social workers manage the contradictions and ambivalences of their work. The jokes made about social workers reflect a profession at times under attack, whereas the jokes made by social worker reveal the desire to convey their humanity, and to create relationships. Importantly my research shows that whilst there is a danger in it being used unethically, humour can help social workers attach to their team and their colleagues and help build resilience.

Social work and social workers occupy a contradictory position in society. The posts and comments reveal that social workers have to manage the incongruity and emotional strain of the work. They are often asked to perform intimate tasks which are often at odds with the specific tasks of their roles, but fall within what may be termed 'helping' in its entire myriad of forms. A healthy psyche is one which actively cultivates conflict, manages it and an unhealthy psyche is one which does not tolerate difference. Humour enables social workers to hold contradictory positions in a healthy and sometimes unhealthy reflective space.

Chiller and Crisp (2012) study suggested that UK social workers were more likely to leave the profession, when compared to other professions. Tham's (2006) found that

qualified social workers in Sweden echoed UK social workers feelings of dissatisfaction and scepticism and 48% of the practitioners interviewed wanted to leave social work within two years of qualification. This is not a happy state of affairs, can the promotion of humour solve this? Probably not, but the lack of humour almost certainly will not and the positive accounts of the use of humour by my interviewees and contributors on-line suggests that social workers which use humour are more likely to stay in the profession. Carey (2014) in summarising other research emphasised good collegiate relations, support and discretion as priorities for staff satisfaction. It is unlikely that we will see happy social workers able to always manage all the distress and difficulties of the job, but a culture of humour within teams creates a more nurturing environment, with social workers who will be more likely to stay in the job. Importantly as well humour can help facilitate relationships with service users, and a method for service users and social workers to bond. This is not a bland call to pretend that humour is unproblematic and indeed the very problematic nature of humour parallels the process of social work itself.

My finding is that without humour we are more likely to see a negative impact on the profession, with humour there is more likely to be a positive impact, this thesis calls for attention to be placed on humour, a humour audit to be undertaken, as it is so closely related to the psychological and emotional health of social work teams.

Addendum
The Social Work World As It Is Now

Since collecting the interview and on line data which forms the basis of this thesis there has been significant ongoing changes and pressures on social work. As I write the Chancellor has announced a 40% budget cut to significant areas of public services funding (Perraudin, 2015). It is hard to imagine what form social work will take in the next 5 years, given the extent and savagery of the cuts to public services which are likely to have a significant impact on service users lives and the social work profession. With the Conservative victory the neo-liberal privatisation agenda I referred to in my introduction and the literature review has deepened and become embedded as the dominate discourse in relation to public services. In this context many social workers, use systems of flexible and mobile working, often spending less time together in offices, than they did in the past. Instead they rely on mobile phones and lap tops to conduct their work.

When social workers do go into their offices they often have to share desks under 'hot desking' systems. It might be argued that this can free social workers to spend more time with service users and the communities they serve (Unwin and Hogg, 2012), but it also has significant impact on levels of stress and retention. In this context humour can take on a particular significance, particularly the positive aspects of humour which can help social workers manage the work and to stay in teams, although the changes to the work environment are likely to mitigate against the positive use of humour, where individual social workers feel themselves isolated with decreasing contact with team members. In this respect the inevitable use of humour takes on a more significant role in contacts with service users, as my thesis suggests that humour is ubiquitous so social workers will utilise it in the time they spend with service users, if they find less opportunity to experience humour in their offices.

Summary of key findings

In brief, social work humour is a common feature in the lives of social workers and this thesis has evidenced its use in social work and the significant role it plays in social work. Social work and social workers occupy a contradictory position in society. Not only is humour important in establishing and maintaining relationships with colleagues and service users, humour enables social workers to manage the complexities and contradictions of the their role, as it provides a transitional space, enables possibilities and opens up opportunities which helps social workers manage the ambivalences of the work. Importantly my research shows that whilst there is a danger in it being used unethically, humour can help social workers attach to their team and their colleagues and help build resilience.

My thesis also points the way to further research and exploration which can have significant impact on the retention of staff. As with the developmental theory of humour, humour can establish and maintain relationships and allow individuals to attach to each other, and potentially their teams. Pleasure in anothers company is often facilitated through the use of humour and as such it is likely that humour aids staff retention and team stability. This makes humour a potentially powerful force in the struggle to retain staff, as my evidence suggests that the team which laughs together, is more likely to stay together. In this respect paying attention to or even facilitating the number of humourous incidents, either orchestrated through joke telling or anecdote sharing is likely to have a positive impact on retention.

Finally there are several aspects of the thesis which are worthy of further development and exploration, including the implications humour has for application in practice. My thesis suggests that there are different explanations for the kinds of humour which exist (from the 3 established explanations) and subversiveness and development may well be new categories in the fields of humour research. This in itself is worthy of more research and enquiry, as it may produce more information for academic study.

Importantly my findings suggest humour instances can co-create pleasurable experiences and memories which enable social workers to find solace in the work. The morale of the profession is always critical, but with the demise of the College of Social Work and British Association for Adoption and Fostering, morale appears even more important and critical to retention. In this context any aspect of practice which improves morale and aids the retention of experienced staff and ensures people remain in the profession is more than worthy of development and exploration.

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Website sources

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http://www.friedsocialworker.com/tribute.htm

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nateprentice@yahoo.com

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Appendices

Appendix 1

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The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

Research Ethics Committee

Application for Ethical Approval of Research Involving Human Participants

</div>

Please read the Notes for Guidance before completing this form. If necessary, please continue your answers on a separate sheet of paper: indicate clearly which question the continuation sheet relates to and ensure that it is securely fastened to the report form.

Applications should be made on this form, and submitted electronically, to your **Course Organising Tutor.** A signed copy of the form should also be submitted to the **relevant course Organising Tutor**. Applications will be assessed by the **Course Organising Tutor** in the first instance, and may then passed to **Trust Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement**, and then to **The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Ethics Committee**. A copy of your research proposal and any necessary supporting documentation (e.g. consent form, recruiting materials, etc) should also be attached to this form.

A full copy of the signed application will be retained by the **Trust** for 6 years following completion of the project. The signed application form cover sheet (two pages) will be sent to the **Trust Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement as Secretary of the Trust's Ethics Committee.**

1.	Title of research project: *An exploration of humour, jokes and their relationship to social work*

2. The title of your research project will be published in the minutes of **The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Ethics Committee** . If you object, then a reference number will be used in place of the title.
   Do you object to the title of your project being published?   Yes ☐ / No X

3. This research Project is a Student Project X

4. Principal researcher (s) (students should also include the name of their supervisor):

Name:	Course:
Stephen Jordan	**D60**

5.   If external approval for this research has been given, then only this cover sheet needs to be submitted

External ethics approval obtained   No

Declaration of Principal Researcher:

The information contained in this application, including any accompanying information, is, to the best of my knowledge, complete and correct. I/we have read ***The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Guidelines for Ethical Approval of Research Involving Human Participants*** and accept responsibility for the conduct of the procedures set out in this application in accordance with the guidelines, laid down by ***The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust ethics committee***. I/we have attempted to identify all risks related to the research that may arise in conducting this research and acknowledge my/our obligations and the rights of the participants.

Signature(s):
    ....……………………
    ………..

Name(s) in block capitals: STEPHEN JORDAN.

Date: 17/6/11…. Amended 24/10/11

Supervisor's recommendation (Student Projects only):

I recommend that this research project should be referred to ***The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Ethics Committee***.

Supervisor's
    signature:.…………………………………………………………………….………
    .

Outcome:

The Chair of the ***Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Ethics Committee*** has reviewed this project and considers the methodological/technical aspects of the proposal to be appropriate to the tasks proposed. The Chair of ***The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Ethics Committee*** considers that the Researcher(s) has/have the necessary qualifications, experience and facilities to conduct the research set out in this application, and to deal with any emergencies and contingencies that may arise.

This application is approved on behalf of ***The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Research Ethics Committee***.

☐

Signature(s):

....…………

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Name(s) in block capitals:

....…….…………….…………

Directorate:

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Date:

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☐

The application has not been approved by **The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Research Ethics Committee**.

Signature(s):
....……………………………..

Name(s) in block capitals:

…..…………………….

Date:

…………………………………………………………………………………………

………

Details of the Research

1.Title of research project: *An exploration of humour, jokes and their relationship to social work*
Name of researcher (s) (including title):   Stephen Jordan   **Contact Address**:   Tel: 079 (mobile) home: 0170   **Nature of researcher (student): Yes**   **Student Number:** u0638397   **Email:** social_steve_j@yahoo.co.uk (personal)   **Name of Supervisor: Liz Webb**
2.   Course title: Directorate: **D60 Professional Doctorate in Social Work**   School of Social Sciences, Media and Cultural Studies/ The Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust
3.   Level of the Course programme (delete as Appropriate):   **(c)   Postgraduate (research or Professional Doctorate)**
4.   Number of: **(a) researchers (approximately): 1**

(b) participants (approximately): 40

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5.   Nature of participants (general characteristics, e.g. social workers, primary school children, etc):

Social workers

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6.   Probable duration of the research:

from (starting date): December 2010   to   (finishing   date):   July 2012

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7.   Aims of the research including any hypothesis to be tested:

Social work has a complex relationship with humour and jokes. In some respects given the serious endeavour of social work it seems the last place where one would find humour. However reviewing the literature on humour suggests there is a relationship between how humour is used by the social work profession in the workplace and how social work is viewed in society. As Moira Gibb has pointed out "*the public image of social workers is fundamental to making social workers jobs do-able.*"[8] Social work has an 'image problem' and I believe the type of jokes made about social work offers an insight and analysis in part of this image. How can social workers understand their place in society and thereby make their work, in the words of Moira Gibb 'more do-able'?

Jokes and humour are highly valued in contemporary society. There are two related themes to be explored in this research. The first part consists of an academic investigation into the jokes made about social work. This will be investigated utilising a discourse analysis of the jokes

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[8] Bawden, A (2009) *Lifeline in a sea of bureaucracy* Guardian 22.4.09

made about social work, which exist in the public domain. The first part of the research will investigate and evaluate the range and characteristics of jokes about social work to be found in public use, and particularly disseminated through the internet. The value of this approach will enable me to locate social work in relation to the position it occupies in society, by revealing one aspect of the attitudes toward social work in contemporary British society.

The second and related part of the research relates the findings of the investigation to the practice of social work. This part of the research will focus on the characteristics of jokes and humour used by social workers themselves. Humour and jokes have been analysed and considered in relation to many other professions, but have been a neglected field of study within social work, and particularly the use of jokes by and about social workers.

8.   Description of the procedures to be used (give sufficient detail for the Committee to be clear about what is involved in the research). Please append to the application form copies of any instructional leaflets, letters, questionnaires, forms or other documents which will be issued to participants:

Please see the attached interview questions, consent form and information leaflet.

There are two aspects to the ethical issues in this research; firstly the collection of jokes which are in the public domain assumes informed consent as individuals have put these in the public domain. I will collect jokes by reviewing the existing jokes and humour on the internet.

In the second part of the research I intend to record interviews with at least 25-30 social workers and conduct 2 focus groups of 6- 10 social workers about how they use humour and the type of jokes social workers make in their work. I will begin the focus group by sharing some of the jokes and humour used by wider society about social workers. This will enable me to prompt the social workers to discuss humour and jokes, and gather their responses to the existing humour/ jokes made about them. I will then prompt participants to discuss the use of humour in their own workplace, the value of humour/ jokes and the problems/ issues in humour at work. Both samples involve interviewing a self selected group of social workers. Participants will be all given the opportunity to withdraw at any time, confidentiality will be guaranteed with no identifying features maintained when I analyse the results.

In doing so I believe this will contribute to social work practice, help me to reflect upon the place of social work in society and how humour can inform and support practice. There is an exploratory aspect to this research and the possible link between humour, jokes and the contemporary task of social work (as experienced by the profession and viewed by wider society).

It is not envisaged that discussing humour and jokes with social workers will cause them distress; however should anyone become distressed, the interview will be terminated immediately. If an individual becomes distressed during a focus group interview, they will be given the opportunity to leave the focus group.

9. **Are there potential hazards to the participant(s) in these procedures?**
   NO

   If yes: (a) what is the nature of the hazard(s)? N/a

   (b) what precautions will be taken? N/a

10. **Is medical care or after care necessary?**   **NO**

    If yes, what provision has been made for this? N/a

11. **May these procedures cause discomfort or distress?**
    NO

    If yes, give details including likely duration:

12. **(a)   Will there be administration of drugs (including alcohol)?**   **NO**

    If yes, give details:

    (b)   Where the procedures involve potential hazards and/or discomfort or distress, please state what previous experience you have had in conducting this type of research:

13. **(a)** **How will the participants' consent be obtained?**

See attached consent form

(b) **What will the participants be told as to the nature of the research?**

See attached information leaflet

---

14. **(a)** **Will the participants be paid?** **NO**

(b) **If yes, please give the amount:** **£**

(c) **If yes, please give full details of the reason for the payment and how the amount given in 16 (b) above has been calculated (i.e. what expenses and time lost is it intended to cover):**

15. **(a)** **Where will the research take place?**

At the researcher's workplace, home or at the participants workplace (via telephone)

(b) **What equipment (if any) will be used?**

Digital tape recorder and note pad

(c) **If equipment is being used is there any risk of accident or injury?** **NO**

If yes, what precautions are being taken to ensure that should any untoward

event happen

  adequate aid can be given:

16.   **Are personal data to be obtained from any of the participants?**
   YES

   If yes, (a)   **give details:**

1. Age

2. Gender

3. Ethnicity

4. Role

5. Length of time in role

6. Length of time qualified

This data will be collected in order to provide some quantitative data for analysis, to 'test' subsidiary hypotheses- e.g. *is there a correlation between age or gender and use of humour in the workplace?*

   (b)   **state what steps will be taken to protect the confidentiality of the data?**

Data will be stored only on a password protected computer or USB stick when transferring data, and destroyed up to five years after the research is completed. Participants will be allocated a number in order to anonymise the data, and no names will be used in the research, as well as any specific references to the geographical locations of professionals.

   (c)   **state what will happen to the data once the research has been completed and the results written-up. If the data is to be destroyed how will this be done? How will you ensure that the data will be disposed of in such a way that there is no risk of its confidentiality being compromised?**

Transcripts of the interviews will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for the duration of the research process. Once the research is completed and five years have passed all of the transcripts will be shredded. Electronic data will be permanently erased from any data storage.

17. **Will any part of the research take place in premises outside** *The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust*? **YES**

Will any members of the research team be external e.g. a research assistant to the *Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust*? **NO**

If yes, to either of the questions above please give full details of the extent to which the participating institution will indemnify the researchers against the consequences of any untoward event:

18. **Are there any other matters or details which you consider relevant to the consideration of this proposal? If so, please elaborate below:**

There is a remote possibility that during the interview, interviewees may disclose unethical or concerning behaviour or practices by themselves as professionally registered SW practitioners. In the first instance the interviewer will discuss these issues with their supervisor, and in consultation with their supervisor consider referring such concerns to the GSCC as possible fitness to practice issue.

21. **If your research involves contact with children or vulnerable adults, either direct or indirect (including observational), please confirm that you have the relevant clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau prior to the commencement of the study and the clearance number noted**

Research does not involve contact with children or vulnerable adults, but my last CRB was dated 10/12/10 for Essex County Council disclosure no: 001305291141

22. **DECLARATION**

I undertake to abide by accepted ethical principles and appropriate code(s) of practice in carrying out this research.

Personal data will be treated in the strictest confidence and not passed on to others without the written consent of the subject.

The nature of the research and any possible risks will be fully explained to intending participants, and they will be informed that:

(a) **they are in no way obliged to volunteer if there is any personal reason (which they are under no obligation to divulge) why they should not participate in the research; and**

(b) **they may withdraw from the research at any time, without disadvantage to themselves and without being obliged to give any reason.**

NAME OF APPLICANT: STEPHEN JORDAN **Signed:**

_____

(Person responsible)

_____ **Date:**

_____

NAME OF DEAN OF TRAINING: **Signed:** _____

_____ **Date:**

_____

ethics.app

[October 2010]

INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS

<u>Consent to Participate in a Research Study</u>

The purpose of this is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this study.

<u>Project Title</u>

An exploration of humour, jokes and their relationship to social work

<u>Project Description</u>

Jokes and humour are highly valued in contemporary society. Social work has a complex relationship with humour and jokes. In some respects given the serious endeavour of social work it seems the last place where one would find humour. However reviewing the literature on humour suggests there is a value to teams and individuals' functioning in how humour is used by the profession in the workplace. This will be investigated by interviewing a sample of social workers about their use of jokes and humour in their workplace.

I will ask you about how you use humour at work and how you use humour with colleagues and service users in your work. It is not envisaged that interviewing you about humour will cause you distress; however should you become distressed at any time during the interview, the interview will be terminated.

<u>Confidentiality of the Data</u>

In order to maintain the confidentiality of the data, the information you share with me will be stored on a computer which is password protected, and any transfer of data will be on password protected USB data storage device. No personal identifying features will be revealed in the research, unless this is already published information, for example on the internet, which the participants have consented to being released.

Remuneration

No remuneration will be offered to participants.

Disclaimer

You are not obliged to take part in this study, and are free to withdraw at any time during the interviews. Should you choose to withdraw you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason.

For more information please contact: Louis Taussig The Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust Research Ethics Office Quality Assurance & Enhancement Directorate of Education & Training Tavistock Centre 120 Belsize Lane London NW3 5BA Tel: 020 8938 2548 www.tavi-port.org

The Principal Investigator

Stephen Jordan Student Number: u0638397

Contact Address: 38 Hainault Avenue Westcliff on sea SS0 9HB

Tel: 07963357991 (mobile)

Email: social_steve_j@yahoo.co.uk

Consent to Participate in an Experimental Programme Involving the Use of Human Participants

The Principal Investigator(s)

Stephen Jordan Student Number: u0638397

Tel: **07xxxxxxx**

Consent to Participate in a Programme Involving the Use of Human Participants

I have the read the information leaflet relating to the above programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what it being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researcher involved in the study will have access to the data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the experimental programme has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me.

Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the programme at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

…………………………………………………………………….

Participant's Signature

…………………………………………………………………………………..

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS) STEPHEN JORDAN.

Investigator's Signature

………………………………………………………………………………

Date: ………………………….

For more information about this consent please contact: Louis Taussig The Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust Research Ethics Office Quality Assurance & Enhancement Directorate of Education & Training Tavistock Centre 120 Belsize Lane London NW3 5BA Tel: 020 8938 2548 www.tavi-port.org

The Principal Investigator

Stephen Jordan Student Number: u0638397

Contact Address:

Appendix 2 participant questions

Introduction: Statement of confidentiality and Outline of research/ purpose

(Give leaflets to participants)

Interview questions:

7. What is the funniest thing that has happened to you in social work?

8. Could you tell me about whether you feel humour effects relationships at work?

9. How does humour effect relationships at work? (Prompt e.g. does it create barriers between workers, or between workers and managers). Does it facilitate better relationships? Can you think of examples?

10.   Can you think of examples where humour might affect relationships at work? (Can you think of any times when have you felt uncomfortable when humour has been used in the workplace?)

11.   Humour can operate as a form of self disclosure in the workplace have you experienced this (e.g. when people want to share painful or embarrassing feelings (Cooper, 2008)

12.   Humour can be used to manage or challenge hierarchies at work- have you experience of this?

13.   Humour and SUs- have you experienced any shared jokes/ humour with SUs?

14.   Do you think humour can be taught to social work students?

15. Do you think this will help them in their development/ training?

16. Community Care listed this as their top joke about social work in 2007

The social worker asked the bartender "What's the difference between your job and mine?" and the bartender replied, "I only had to go to bartender school for 10 weeks and I learned to mix a little of this with a little of that and wait a couple of hour s to have people tell me their innermost thoughts while you went to school for 6 years, paid thousands and thousands of pounds, sit session after session using technique after technique, and you still may never hear them!"

17. What do you think of it? What does it say to you about social work?

<u>Factual data</u>

18. Age
19. Gender
20. Ethnicity
21. Role
22. Length of time in role
23. Length of time qualified

Appendix 3
<u>INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS</u>

<u>Consent to Participate in a Research Study</u>

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<u>Project Title</u>

An exploration of humour, jokes and their relationship to social work

<u>Project Description</u>

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Remuneration

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For more information please contact: Louis Taussig The Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust Research Ethics Office Quality Assurance & Enhancement Directorate of Education & Training Tavistock Centre 120 Belsize Lane London NW3 5BA Tel: 020 8938 2548 www.tavi-port.org

The Principal Investigator

Stephen Jordan Student Number: u0638397

Contact Address:

Consent to Participate

The Principal Investigator(s)

Stephen Jordan Student Number: u0638397

Tel: **07XXXXXXX**

Email address

I have the read the information leaflet relating to the above programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what it being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researcher involved in the study will have access to the data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the experimental programme has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me.

Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the programme at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)
……………………………………………………………………

Participant's Signature
………………………………………………………………………………..

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS) STEPHEN JORDAN.

Investigator's Signature
……………………………………………………………………………………
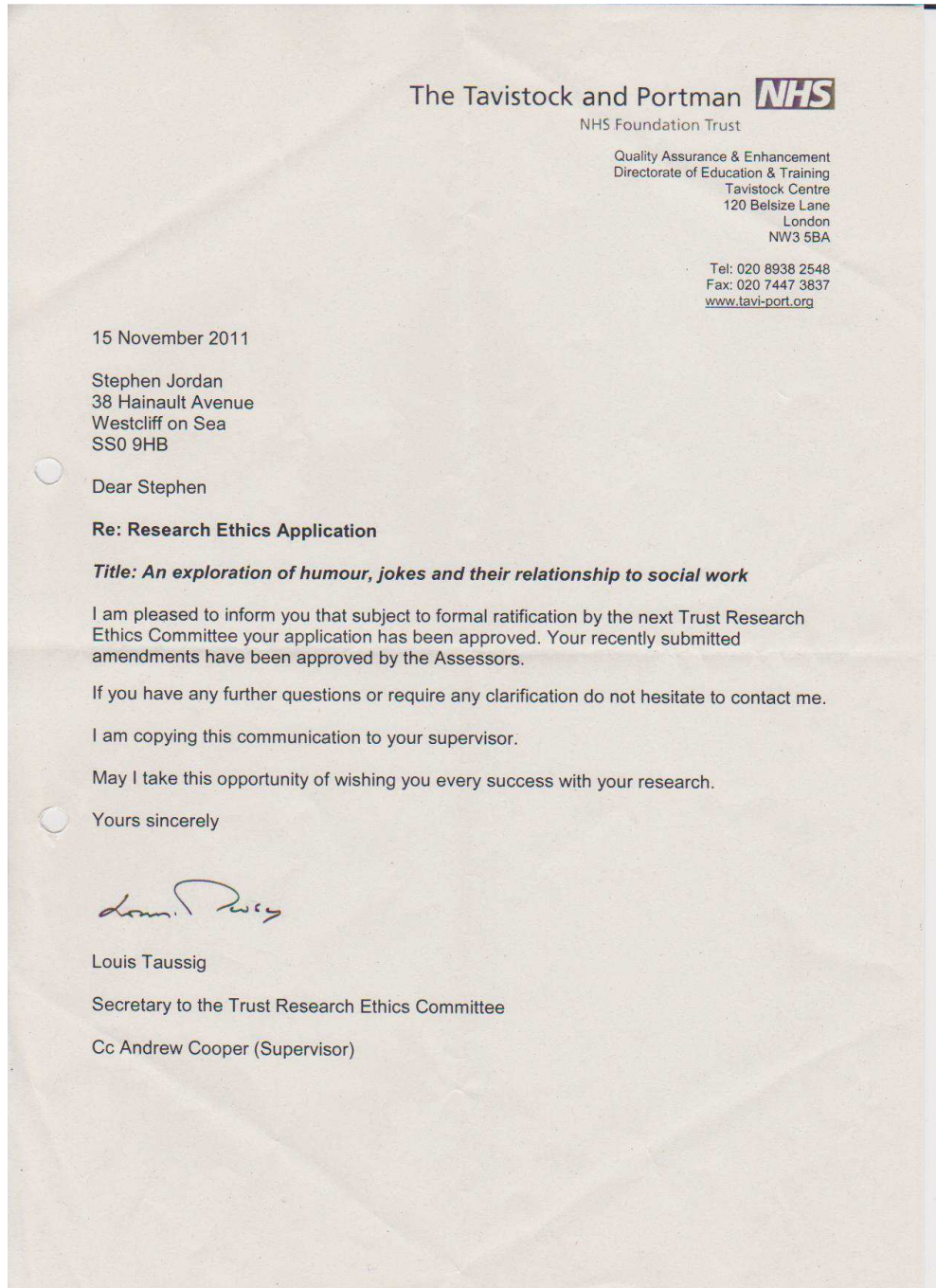

Date: ………………………….

For more information about this consent please contact: Louis Taussig The Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust Research Ethics Office Quality Assurance & Enhancement Directorate of Education & Training Tavistock Centre 120 Belsize Lane London NW3 5BA Tel: 020 8938 2548 www.tavi-port.org

The Principal Investigator

Stephen Jordan Student Number: u0638397

Contact Address:

Appendix 4 Ethical approval

The Tavistock and Portman **NHS**

NHS Foundation Trust

Quality Assurance & Enhancement
Directorate of Education & Training
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2548
Fax: 020 7447 3837
www.tavi-port.org

15 November 2011

Stephen Jordan
38 Hainault Avenue
Westcliff on Sea
SS0 9HB

Dear Stephen

Re: Research Ethics Application

Title: An exploration of humour, jokes and their relationship to social work

I am pleased to inform you that subject to formal ratification by the next Trust Research
Ethics Committee your application has been approved. Your recently submitted
amendments have been approved by the Assessors.

If you have any further questions or require any clarification do not hesitate to contact me.

I am copying this communication to your supervisor.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Louis Taussig

Secretary to the Trust Research Ethics Committee

Cc Andrew Cooper (Supervisor)

GRADUATE SCHOOL
Director: Alan White, BA(Hons) PhD
uel.ac.uk/gradschool

Mr Stephen Jordan

38 Hainault Avenue
Westcliff On Sea
Essex
SS0 9HB

16 June 2014

Dear Mr Jordan

University of East London/The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust: research ethics

Study Title: That joke isn't funny anymore: humour, jokes and their relationship to social work.

I am writing to inform you that the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) has received NHS documentation regarding the above study, which was submitted to the Chair of UREC, Professor Neville Punchard. Please take this letter as written confirmation that UREC acknowledges you had NHS ethical approval for your study and had you applied for ethical clearance from our UREC at the appropriate time; it is likely it would have been noted. However, this does not place you in exactly the same position you would have been in had clearance been obtained in advance. Therefore, when responding to any questioning regarding the ethical aspects of your research, you must of course make reference to and explain these matters in an open and transparent way.

For the avoidance of any doubt, or misunderstanding, please note that the content of this letter extends only to those matters relating to the granting of ethical clearance. If there are any other outstanding procedural matters, which need resolution, they will be dealt with separately as they fall entirely outside the remit of our University Research Ethics Committee.

If you are in any doubt about whether, or not, there are any other outstanding procedural matters you should contact Mr William Bannister at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (e-mail WBannister@tavi-port.nhs.uk).

Yours sincerely

pp Catherine Fieulleteau
Ethics Integrity Manager
For and on behalf of
Professor Neville Punchard
Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC)

Tel.: 020 8223 6683 (direct line)
E-mail: c.fieulleteau@uol.ac.uk

Docklands Campus, University Way, London E16 2RD

Appendix 5 Lightbulb jokes

How many social workers does it take to change a lightbulb?

1. *...Five. One to screw it in, three to form the support group, and one to help with placement.*
2. *The light bulb doesn't need changing; it's the system that needs to change.*
3. *It only takes one. But he/she has to go for supervision to an electrical engineer (multidisciplinary approach) in order to learn the theory of electricity.*
4. *...All of them. One to hold the bulb in place, the rest to incite revolution.*
5. *I wonder if social workers could agree theoretically on if the lightbulb should be changed at all. Councillors might suggest the lightbulb burned itself out and therefore doesn't deserve any help.*
6. *None. Social workers don't change anything. Boom boom.*
7. *None, it's not in our budget.*
8. *As many as my budget will allow.*
9. *Only one, but an agency can do it cheaper.*
10. *Two. One to change the bulb and another to put your kids into care.*
11. *None, it is no longer a home care activity.*
12. *None. Social workers don't have time to change lightbulbs.*
13. *...I'll do it, but I have 172 other lightbulbs to change first.*
14. *Three - One to do the work, one to share the experience, and one to supervise and make sure that professional work is done.*
15. *None; after all, it must begin to work within 2 years and only can be on for five years.*
16. *Only one can do it...social workers don't have time to find dates.*
17. *It doesn't matter anyway, they'll burn out.*
18. *The burned out bulb in the client's home must be filling some need for that client, or the client would have replaced it.*
19. *The burned out light bulb at home is a test to see how long it takes the spouse to replace it.*

20. *None. If it is the light at the end of the tunnel, it actually isn't the bulb that's burnt out, management simply turned it off without telling us.*

21. *None. The light bulb is not burnt out; it's just differently lit.*

22. *The lightbulb must first fill out all the appropriate forms to determine eligibility for service.*

23. *You can't change the light bulb until we have written authority to hire light bulb change specialists.*

24. *You must first define the measurable outcome you are trying to achieve and get approval from the Panel.*

25. *I have a question of clarification: Is this a generalist lightbulb or a specialist lightbulb? After all, we must fit the lightbulb to the most qualified changer..........*

26. *No, not until after I consult my staff and the Panel.*

27. *One hundred. One to change the light bulb and ninety-nine to handle the paperwork*

28. *In my care plan all lightbulbs are changed within 24 hours whether they want to change or not.*

29. *Actually in my care plan I think nurses rather than social workers are changing the light bulbs, and the idea is to change more of them faster to get them out of the hospital, except that when the nurses do it, they call it facilitating.*

30. *We don't change light bulbs - we empower them to change themselves.*

31. *...Whatever happened to self-determination?*

32. *..... they said the other lightbulbs will change it.*

33. *Only one; but they have to start where the lightbulb is at.*

34. *The answer is zero. Case Managers no longer feel that they should change lightbulbs.*

35. *I don't know. I'm still studying, but I'll research it and write an analysis, a minimum of 15 pages, 10 references, professional journals only, A4 format, and have it to you before Friday!*

36. *It takes about four Social Workers Don't want to get specific or detailed, someone may want me to present factual analysis as to the research [valid and reliable research] that was successfully performed to come up with a specific number*

37. *'I hear you saying that you are concerned about the lightbulb. Tell me more about that.'*

38. *'Is the lightbulb the thing you most want to change about your situation?'*

39. *'Only one---but the social worker will need a M.S.W. degree and two years' experience.'*

40. *'I am sorry but I cannot answer that question; it is confidential.*

41. *Four. One to remove the bulb from the socket and take it away, without checking whether or not there was actually anything wrong with it, one to accuse its owners of mistreating it, one to find somewhere else to screw it in for the next 6 months, and one to eventually bring it back and say it was all done with the lightbulb's best interests at heart.*

42. *Four. One to change the bulb, one to counsel the old bulb because it's been thrown away by an uncaring society, one to arrange the case conference and one to make sure they are all following the correct working practice.*

Various sources including:

http://www.eyrie.org/~thad/strange/lightbulbs.html
http://www.lightbulbjokes.com/directory/s.html)

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[i] Figures over 100% as they were rounded up