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ABSTRACT

Humorous exchanges using sarcasm and teasing can be found in many workplaces despite the fact that they are often considered inappropriate. This study looked at what causes people to participate in sensemaking after engaging in these types of humor and examined how people make sense of sarcasm and teasing. The framework for this study was Sherif’s Social Judgment Theory (SJT) (1969) and Sensemaking (1995). Twenty people were interviewed about their last workplace exchange involving these types of humor and their answers were recorded and analyzed. The results showed that recipients, through sensemaking, assimilated jokes that were insulting and not humorous. Jokes that were funny did not prompt reflection or assimilation. The results also provided several sensemaking resources that help both tellers and hearers of jokes understand the rationale for why jokes may be funny or insulting. The findings of this study provide an understanding of humor that can facilitate a more collegial work environment in organizational setting.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Humor can be a much appreciated—even necessary—social lubricant in the workplace. Many offices have running jokes that never fail to bring a smile and make the workload feel a little lighter. As much as Americans love humor, there are some disagreements about what constitutes acceptable humor in the workplace. Sarcasm and teasing are often considered inappropriate in the workplace and it’s easy to see why, as many jokes that are funny in a particular context would be extremely awkward to explain in a meeting with the Human Resources Department. Despite the warnings, these types of humor are still common in many workplaces. These jokes are like the deep fried foods served at local fairs; we all agree that they are a bad idea, but many people still choose to partake. People enjoy risky humor.

Joking is a playful activity and is usually done when people feel comfortable around one another. Joking can strengthen relationships and serves as a way of expressing affection without saying so directly. Conversely, there are a variety of reasons why jokes may fail; however, sarcasm and teasing seem to be particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation. Occasionally, jokes are not taken in the spirit in which they are intended and feelings are hurt or people feel insulted. Given the risk involved in these types of humor, this thesis examines how people make sense of these types of jokes.

Importance of the Study

Many different types of incentives are used to retain good employees. Most of the incentives, such as pay, vacation time, and benefits, are easily understood and controlled by employers. The type of incentive that is not-so-easy to control is the work
environment, in particular, the way employees interact with one another. As we navigate our way through various relationships, it makes sense to look more closely at situations where relationships frequently go wrong.

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem is that sometimes we just don’t understand one another. What is harmless, or entertaining, to one person may be very hurtful to someone else. When people have difficulties with their coworkers, they often change jobs instead of trying to work things out. Employers lose talent and a great deal of manpower is needed to find a new worker. There is a need for information that can help others learn to work well together. There aren’t many resources that help people understand the possible effects of sarcasm and teasing-- and also the possible reasons why these jokes may not be as bad as some assume.

**Definitions of Terms**

Sarcastic humor involves a stark contrast between what is said and reality. The word *sarcasm* is often used to describe ironic humor, but the term *sarcasm* can carry a negative connotation that suggests that the element of irony is missing and therefore the remark is reflective of actual negative feelings. For example, the comment, “Well, we all think you’re an awful guy,” could be considered humorous if everyone knows it is not true, but it could interpreted as insulting if the recipient suspects that the speaker thinks that the person is truly awful. Merrian Webster (2015) defines sarcasm as “the use of words that mean the opposite of what you really want to say especially in order to insult someone, to show irritation, or to be funny.” While the definition for sarcasm may vary,
the definition for my research will be that sarcasm may or may not be playful, but definitely includes the element of irony if it is meant as humorous.

Teasing is different than irony because it is may be grounded in the truth. Merriam Webster (2015) offers the following definition for tease “to laugh at and criticize (someone) in a way that is either friendly and playful or cruel and unkind.” What makes teasing funny is the assumption that the target will also be amused even though they are being playfully criticized. Playful teasing, in the best form, communicates that a person is flawed but still accepted.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

In order to shed light on how people make sense of sarcasm and teasing in the workplace, this thesis will begin with an explanation of the philosophical and ethical assumptions and the theoretical basis that, together, provide a framework for this study. A literature review will follow--explaining the previous research on this topic as well as the rationale and research questions. The scope and methodology of the study will then be presented before the results section and a discussion of my findings. The thesis will end with a discussion on the limitations of the study, recommendations for further study, and conclusions.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

The field of organizational studies has long established that happy employees make better employees (Wright, 2006). While the quality of co-worker relationships within the workplace is only one of many factors that affect employee happiness, it is an important feature than can be improved through better communication.

Culture is dynamic and like all parts of culture, humor is constantly changing. The mores of cultures and subcultures determine what styles and topics of humor are acceptable, and these standards are always in flux. There are occasions when people intend to be offensive, but very often offense is taken when the desired effect was quite the opposite. People unknowingly offend or insult when they participate in humor styles that others deem offensive. What is fun and playful to some may be hurtful to others. Knowing why people find a particular kind of humor funny or unfunny helps people understand what kinds of humor are appropriate.

Parker Palmer (1983) asserts that:

First, we must see that not knowing is simply the first step toward truth, that the anxiety created by our ignorance calls not for instant answers but for an adventure into the unknown. If we can affirm the search for truth as a continually uncertain journey, we may find the courage to keep the space open rather than packing it with pretense. Second, we must remember that the truth seeks us as well. When we become obsessed with our own seeking, we fill the space with methods and hypothesis and reports that may be mere diversions. But when we understand that truth is constantly seeking us, we have reason to open a space in which truth might find us out. (p. 72)

An essential part of this process is trust. We have to trust that people are not trying to offend or to be easily offended, and or we have to trust that there are explanations that we do not yet know. Not only is treating others as trustworthy the right
thing to do, it also provides an important social benefit. According to Solomon and Flores (2001) “Most people respond to trust by being trust-worthy, making further trust all the more likely” (p. 33). Without trust employees will only give the minimum required, they won’t offer their best ideas or enthusiasm (Solomon & Flores, 2001).

The philosophical basis for this study is grounded in the notion that if we open ourselves up to new possibilities and truly listen, new answers will come to light and we will have more resources to draw upon in understanding one another. This idea extends to both the gathering of knowledge in this study and the gathering of knowledge as we navigate our way through daily interactions.

**Theoretical Basis**

Sensemaking, as the name makes clear, is a concept that is used to make sense of things (Weick, 1995). People use sensemaking to deal with ambiguity and talking to other interrelated people about a particular incident in order to find a plausible explanation. “These are moments of sensemaking, and scholars stretch those moments, scrutinize them and name them in the belief that they affect how action gets routinized, flux gets tamed, objects get enacted, and precedents get set”( Weick et al., 2005, p. 419).

The problem with making sense of humorous occasions is that humorous occasions do not prompt sensemaking (Morreall, 1987). It is frequently stated that sensemaking is initiated when ambiguity is encountered, but as Weick et al. (2005) points out, the genesis for sensemaking is found in disruptive ambiguity. If the humorous occasion is funny, it doesn’t result in disruptive ambiguity, instead, it results in amusement. Morreall (1987) claims that amusement is one of three different reactions to
incongruity; the other two reactions being negative emotion and reality assimilation.

Morreall also explains that when met with a humorous situation people may feel the need to enjoy the situation a little longer or share the situation with others, but they don’t feel the need to understand the situation in the same way that they seek to understand what has happened in a negative situation. “There is nothing to be done in amusement as there typically is in negative emotion or reality assimilation” (Morreall, 1987, p. 196).

Morreall’s supposition that an attempt at a humorous event will provide one of three reactions also lines up nicely with Social Judgment Theory (SJT) (Sherif & Sherif, 1969). Just as there are three possible reactions to a humorous situation, there are three attitude zones for new information in SJT. The three attitude zones (sometimes referred to as latitude zones) for SJT are: the zone of acceptance, the zone of rejection, and the zone of non-commitment. New information that is feasible is within a person’s zone of acceptance and results in the person incorporating the message into their idea of what is true, in other words, sensemaking. This is likely the opposite of what is desired when someone is being sarcastic or teasing. If the person making the joke has good intentions, the best result is that the new information is within a person’s zone of rejection (obviously a joke) or their zone of non-commitment (inconsequential).

Even though no sensemaking occurs naturally following successful humorous exchanges, it is possible that sensemaking could be performed and the reasons that the humor was judged as acceptable can be shared with others. Likewise, if a humor attempt has failed and sensemaking has taken place, the rationale can be shared to help others. The reasons both for and against teasing and sarcasm can provide sensemaking ideas to be used as resources. Weick explains (1995) “Sensemaking is best described as a
developing set of ideas with explanatory properties, rather than as a body of knowledge. This means that sensemaking exists in the form of an ongoing conversation…” (p. xi).

The Literature

Limitations to Humor Perception

Even in the best of circumstances, there are physical and cultural limitations as well as personality differences that prevent the appreciation of humor. The comprehension of sarcasm is particularly difficult for many. “Irony understanding depends on complex social, emotional, and cognitive inferences that are made possible by a comprehension system that is capable of rapid coordination of this information and by knowledge of a broad range of interpretive possibilities” (Pexman, 2008, p. 289). The ability to understand irony is so complex that it has been studied by several different fields--often with inconclusive results. According to Pexman (2008), groups known to have difficulty with irony comprehension include: developing children, individuals with autism spectrum disorder, and individuals with brain injury. The right side of the brain is known to be instrumental in language, but it also plays a role in understanding non-verbal cues. Weems (2014) claims that humor is right-hemisphere dominant as it is the right hemisphere that helps people understand the intent behind communication. People who have damage to the right hemisphere function on a literal level as they lack the ability to recognize the difference the subtle emotional and non-verbal cues that indicate the conversation is intended as humorous.

The many neural mechanisms involved in understanding irony cannot all be considered here, but it is helpful to be aware that illness may hinder the ability to
comprehend sarcasm. Not everyone can perform the mental gymnastics that irony interpretation requires. Howrigman and MacDonald (2008) reported that humor served an honest demonstration of a person’s cognitive fitness.

In addition to mental fitness, cultural differences may also affect the ability to understand irony. One factor that has been linked to understanding irony is the tone of voice that is used by the speaker. Cheang and Pell (2008) discovered the tone of voice used to communicate sarcasm/irony was different for speakers of Cantonese than from speakers of English and went on to state, “the specific acoustic conventions for communicating sarcasm seem to vary among languages” (p.1,394). This finding suggests that one problem in communicating ironic humor may be that the characteristic tone of voice used in communicating ironic humor may be unfamiliar to people who are not native speakers. Complicating things further is the fact that even within a given culture the tone of voice may not follow a predictable pattern. Not only are there differences in the delivery style of humor, the raw material of many jokes may also be different. Uekkermann et al. (2007) found that social and cultural knowledge help facilitate the understanding of jokes. “For example, many jokes used in everyday life refer to stereotypes or current political affairs, and relevant knowledge is required for adequate humor appreciation” (p. 556).

Irrespective of the hearer’s ability to interpret humor is the fact that some people just do not like ironic humor or teasing. People who grew up believing in a strict work ethic may consider joking inappropriate in the workplace. There are also people who suffer from gelotophobia, which is a fear of having people laugh at you. Ruch et al. (2009) found that the degree to which people fear being laughed at is culturally
determined and varies a great deal from country to country. Common to people who suffer from gelotophobia is the inability to perceive “the shared fun quality of playful teasing and rather perceive it to be like ridicule” (Platt, 2008, p. 121).

While these examples of physical limitations, cultural differences, and personality traits are not exhaustive, they do offer specific instances and situations where humor is likely to be misinterpreted.

In addition to knowing with whom to joke, it is also important to consider the situation before attempting to create a humorous moment. The presence of outsiders can be particularly problematic. “Outsiders to relationships can more accurately observe our actual communication behavior but are less accurate than we are at specifying the meaning of those behaviors within this particular relationship” (Wilmot, 1995, p.130).

**Benefits of Humor**

“Humor is generally welcomed in social interactions because of its predominant function to amuse” (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p.82). Humor can be used as a management tool and subordinates can also use humor. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) list many ways in which humor can be used by management to shape organizational outcomes. They claim that humor can increase group cohesiveness, improve communication, reduce stress, increase creativity, improve organizational culture, and enhance leadership. Holmes and Marra (2006) claim:

> Skillful leaders recognize the transformational potential of humor, as well as its value in helping achieve transactional objectives, and they exploit its varied functions to create team, smooth ruffled feathers and generate creative energy. Effective leaders typically make use of humor for its most obvious function of strengthening solidarity or social cohesion between team members, building good rapport and emphasizing collegiality. They use humor as a resource for attenuating the inevitable face threatening behaviors that are involved in hierarchical relationships in every
workplace where people are required to follow instructions, respond to
critical comment, and accept decisions with which they may not fully
concur. And they exploit the transformational potential of humor, i.e. its
creative energy, to stimulate innovative thinking in attacking problems and
generating ideas. (pp. 132-133)

It seems that humor has the potential to help everyone in the workplace. This is
consistent with a study by Decker (1987), who found job satisfaction is positively
correlated to the sense of humor of supervisors. In a similar study, Hurren (2006) also
found that teachers had an overall higher job satisfaction when they worked under
principals who share humor in the workplace compared to teachers working under
principals who shared little or no humor.

Humor is ubiquitous in the workplace at all levels. One character that is less likely
to be seen in a position of leadership is the joker. Not all organizations have jokers, but
when they do, the jokers usually have four key functions: challenging management,
pushing the boundaries, developing the culture, and providing relief (Plester & Orams,
2008). Jokers know their audience and their audience knows them “This relationship
confers the right to joke and, more importantly, gives the joker the authority to “get
away” with jokes” (Plester & Orams, 2008, p. 256). Familiarity between the joker and the
targets of the jokes would be unnecessary if the joker only made jokes that were
universally acceptable, but that is not always the case. The joker can push the bounds of
decency because they know the target and the target of the joke also knows them.

Organizational humor is often classified into different categories and frequently
judged to be either a positive type of humor or negative humor. Sarcasm--and to a lesser
extent, teasing-- are frequently considered unacceptable in the workplace. According to
Morreall (1997) “In building teams and good morale in the workplace, we simply cannot
afford humor that divides and humiliates people. Racist and sexist humor are out, obviously, but so is most sarcasm” (p. 293). Martin et al. (2003) describes negative humor as denigrating, disparaging, teasing or ridiculing group members. No one would argue that racist humor and sexist humor are inappropriate in the workplace as they often lead to lawsuits.

Another possible harmful effect of humor that isn’t received in a positive light is that the person making the joke will not get an opportunity to apologize because they will not be made aware that the joke was offensive. There are many reasons why people do not provide feedback in problematic situations. Bisel & Afterburn (2012) found that people often refrain from offering upward negative feedback for five different reasons; they feared harm to themselves, they considered the supervisor as being the person responsible, they questioned their own expertise, they predicted the supervisor wouldn’t care, and they just didn’t think the timing was right for feedback. It is likely that some of the reasons for not providing feedback to supervisors are also reasons why people would fail to provide feedback to coworkers. Without the benefit of feedback, the situation is unlikely to be corrected.

In a previous study (Anderson, 2011), people were interviewed people on the topic of humor in the workplace, while ten of the respondents in the study agreed that sarcasm and teasing were inappropriate in the workplace, nine of the respondents said that these types of humor still exist in their workplace and eight of the respondents said that they actually enjoyed these types of humor. The presence of sarcasm and teasing in the workplace was also confirmed by a case study by Ojha and Holmes (2010). Surely
there has to be a more redemptive outcome than assuming that all of the people involved in sarcasm and teasing are knowingly participating in negative humor.

One possibility is that even though sarcasm and teasing are theoretically regarded as negative, they still manage to amuse some of their targets. This idea is consistent with Briggs’ 1928 findings where he said of targets of sarcasm “They may even enjoy the barbs if they are sufficiently clever” (p. 689). Respondents to Briggs’ questions about the acceptability of sarcasm also indicated that “Sarcasm is amusing or boring according to cleverness” and “It depends on whether or not it is deserved. If it is, I take it and grin. If not, it makes me angry” (p. 689).

**Rationale**

Humor has been studied extensively. As humor styles change and as tolerance for certain types of humor change, it is important that the study of humor be an ongoing process. We have a good understanding of why humor fails with certain people and we have a good idea of what people consider appropriate humor in the workplace. Despite the fact that sarcasm and teasing are frequently considered negative humor, they are both common in the workplace and they are both frequently enjoyed. The amusement that results from humor does not prompt people to make sense of why they were amused. This lack of scrutiny possibly accounts for why people accept the notion that sarcasm and teasing are bad, despite the fact that they are amused. In terms of saying that sarcasm and teasing are bad, are we just repeating something that isn’t entirely true? This conundrum prompts the following research questions:
RQ1: Why do some jokes prompt people to initiate sensemaking while other jokes go unexamined?

RQ2: In what ways do people make sense of ironic humor and teasing?
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope

This study explores the reasons why some jokes prompt sensemaking and also the ways that people make sense of sarcasm and teasing in the workplace. As discussed in the literature review, sensemaking begins when one encounters disruptive ambiguity. This study provides examples of would-be humorous situations where the participants felt compelled to begin sensemaking. In addition to looking at what types of situations prompted sensemaking, this study collected sensemaking data from situations that did not naturally lead to sensemaking. In other words, participants were asked to look back upon a previously unexamined experience in order to explain why people felt the way they did about their interactions with coworkers.

Methodology

In order to answer these questions a study was conducted using qualitative methods. Twenty participants were interviewed in order to gather information about sarcasm and teasing in the workplace. These interviews began with a brief explanation of the topic and then the participants were asked a few specific questions on the topics of this study. The participants were interviewed for approximately 8-15 minutes. These interviews were conducted in a way that encouraged dialogue in an effort to gather relevant information. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary, they could stop the interview at any time, and their answers would remain confidential—known only to the researcher.
Procedure and Materials

The participants were sought out in a variety of locations within Southern California. There were 11 women and 9 men with an average age of 46 years (SD 16.74). For a period of two weeks, I asked people I encountered as I went about my daily life, if they would participate. Participants were given a ten-dollar gift card from Starbucks or Trader Joes in exchange for answering a few questions. The interviews were conducted in locations such as coffee shops, a ceramics studio, a beauty salon, and church. Before the interviews began, they were asked to sign a waiver (Appendix A.) The interviews were recorded using a sound recorder. All of the interviews contained the same basic statements and questions listed in Appendix B, but they also contained additional questions as needed for clarification. The questions asked about the most recent times when sarcasm and teasing were used in their workplace. These questions were asked in order to gather information about sensemaking. Towards the end of the interviews, two open-ended questions were asked so the respondents could share their thoughts on sarcasm and teasing. Following the interviews, the recordings were reviewed and the results were analyzed.

Validity

Internal Validity

The concept of internal validity is only useful for the first research question of this study. (RQ1: Why do some jokes prompt people to initiate sensemaking while other jokes go unexamined?) The internal validity of a study is high if the study is designed in a way
that permits us to reach causal conclusions about the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable (Hoyle et al., 2002). In answering RQ1, the independent variable is the jokes, and the dependent variable is the presence of sensemaking. The internal validity of the interviews is high as face-to-face interviews allow for clarification of ideas that may be misunderstood.

The answers to RQ2 (In what ways do people make sense of ironic humor and teasing?) are all reported by the participants and not subject to the idea of internal validity. The assumption is that the answers given by the participants are a reflection of their feelings and that makes the answers neither right, wrong, or subject to logic. Instead the answers are all accepted with the understanding that the answers given are likely answers that would also be found in the larger population.

All of the questions asked of the respondents were designed for the sole purpose of gathering the necessary information needed to answer both research questions. As in all interviews, there is a risk of interviewer effects whereby respondents “give invalid, socially desirable answers to suit the interviewers expectations or desires” (Hoyle et al. p.102). These interviewer effects are unlikely as the respondents are kept unaware of the interviewer’s opinions on sarcasm and teasing and all answers are to be kept confidential.

**External Validity**

The external validity of a study is high if the results are reflective of a larger population (Hoyle et al., 2002). Regarding RQ1, with a total of 37 different humorous occasions shared by 20 different participants, this study can support or refute the idea that sensemaking does not occur in humorous situations. In particular, this study can answer
the question of what types of humor prompt sensemaking. Regarding RQ2, this study will provide many reasons why people do or do not like sarcasm or teasing, but there would certainly be more reasons, not mentioned here, in a larger study. In order to gather answers that are similar to the larger population, the respondents are from diverse backgrounds, ages, ethnicities, geographical locations, and fields of employment. There is no reason that the interviewees in this study would be unique from the general population in any way other than the fact that most of them reside in California. To account for any regional differences in humor, participants who have moved to California from other areas will be included in the study. Even with the efforts to interview a variety of people from diverse backgrounds it is not possible to provide an exhaustive answer to RQ2.

Reliability

“Reliability refers to how dependable, stable, consistent, and repeatable measures are in a study and across several studies” (Rubin et al., 2010, p. 203). The reliability of this study is high as the questions are the same for all participants. This study is a collection of responses that are expected to reflect the responses of the larger population. It isn’t expected that an identical study would yield identical results as there would certainly be more explanations with more people being interviewed. The results of identical studies could be added to the results of this study to make a more exhaustive sensemaking resource. The reliability of this study is high even though there may be great variability in the responses. It is expected that many of the answers given by the respondents are the more common answers within a larger population.
Ethical Considerations

This study does not conflict with any of the ethical guidelines that must be followed by student researchers at Gonzaga University. There is also no experimentation that involves the manipulation of the participants. Instead, there is an exploration of ideas and a discussion of experiences that have already occurred. There is also no content put forth by the experimenter that requires an exploration of topics that are likely to greatly upset any participants. The participants will also be assured that they may quit participating at any time and that their answers will remain confidential.
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

Results

Research Question 1: Why do some jokes prompt people to initiate sensemaking while other jokes go unexamined?

The respondents were able to recall 37 times when sarcasm or teasing was used between themselves and another coworker. Of those 37 times, not one respondent participated in sensemaking when they found the situation to be humorous. Sensemaking did occur seven times out of the 37 occasions (19%). Five of the times that sensemaking occurred, it occurred spontaneously after a joke was offensive or possibly offensive. Twice, but with the same respondent, a sensemaking moment was presented by a supervisor who reprimanded the respondent for making inappropriate remarks. Even though the respondent was forced to talk about why his “jokes” were hurtful, it is still uncertain if the respondent tried to make sense of what he had done. When asked why he made the jokes, the respondent told me “I didn’t really care, I was the goose that laid the golden eggs and I knew they couldn’t fire me.” There were two times that the jokes were not funny, but there was no sensemaking as the respondent claims “jokes just go over my head.” There was also one negative exchange that did not lead to sensemaking. In this exchange one person made a joke about another person and the joke was not considered funny. The respondent claimed that because she did not like the person who made the joke, she assumed the person did not like her and so she just knew the joke was meant to be an insult. Given the history between the two people she didn’t think twice.
Inside Jokes 20

Sensemaking Occurrences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Exchange</th>
<th>Number of Occurrences</th>
<th>Sensemaking Prompted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humorous</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joke was insulting or offensive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target of joke didn’t understand joke</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disguised as friendly but received as hostile</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Types of jokes that prompted sensemaking.

The results for RQ1 were consistent with the claims put forth by both SJT and sensemaking theorists. According to SJT, new information is processed based upon where it lands in a person’s belief system. New information is assimilated only when it lands within a person’s zone of acceptance. When jokes were considered funny, the hearer did not scrutinize the information in the jokes. Instead, the content of the joke landed within the hearer’s zone of rejection—meaning the joke was not regarded as serious information. The jokes that were not considered funny fell into the two remaining zones in SJT. The jokes that were not funny but also not surprising landed in the hearer’s zone of non-commitment—meaning the hearer did not assimilate the information because what they heard wasn’t important enough to ponder. The jokes that were not funny because they were insulting or offensive were the jokes that landed in within the hearer’s zone of acceptance. It may be truer to say that because the jokes landed within the hearer’s zone of acceptance, the jokes were not funny. In all of these cases the hearer felt that what was being said lacked a playful quality. Without the playful quality, the hearer
assimilated the new information and the relationship between the two parties consequently changed in some way.

The results of RQ1 are entirely consistent with the idea that sensemaking begins when one encounters disruptive ambiguity. None of the participants were compelled to begin sensemaking when they found the situation humorous or when they knew that the jokes were not meant as jokes, but they did initiate sensemaking after hearing things that they considered insulting or offensive.

These results also support Morreall’s (1997) assertion that people will react in one of three different ways when they encounter the incongruity of humor. The hearer will either feel amused, feel negative emotion, or they will participate in reality assimilation. Just as Morreall claimed, the participants who felt amused did not feel the need to analyze the particulars of the exchange.

**Research Question 2: In what ways do people make sense of ironic humor and teasing?**

The majority of the respondents indicated that their last occasion of sarcasm or teasing between coworkers was humorous. Below is the list of reasons that the exchanges were judged favorably.

**The target has a good relationship with the other party.** This was the most common (37%) answer given for why a joke was interpreted as funny. Respondents said things such as “we’re close, so I knew they were joking” and “we’re friends” to indicate that the comments were all meant to be lighthearted when looked at in the context of their existing relationship to the other party.
The speaker and the target work in a difficult setting and the humor works because they are “in it together”. One respondent worked for a government agency that hired several new employees who she felt were not as qualified as the existing employees. The government agency was a regulatory agency created to protect the environment. Until recently, the agency only hired scientists and the addition of several people who were not scientists annoyed the scientists who already worked there. The scientists felt like the non-scientists didn’t know how to do their jobs and consequently made everyone’s job a little harder. Shortly after the new employees began working, the scientists created an in-group where they could talk about their frustrations. Within the group there was a lot of teasing and sarcasm directed towards each other and it was always okay because they were united against the new people. Another respondent worked in a bar that was in a bad neighborhood and had a few difficult customers. Shortly after she began working there, it became apparent that all the employees had to look out for each other. That feeling of solidarity assured her that all jokes between coworkers were intended as playful.

The joke was something that both parties knew and enjoyed from a television show or a movie. These jokes can often be very offensive to people who aren’t familiar with the original source. One respondent had a coworker jokingly refer to him as a “bitch” and because they were both lovers of comedy, they understood that the speaker wasn’t speaking as herself; instead she was pretending to be a tough gangster-type person. The humor had nothing to do with the person to whom she was speaking; instead it was the humor of a mild mannered, middle-aged woman acting like a gangster. Another example of this type of humor was when one respondent who was well liked complained
that no one was sitting next to him and another employee said to him “It’s probably because no one likes you” followed by “no offense.” In that scenario the two people were both fans of a couple of different movies where dimwitted characters think that saying “no offense” or “with all due respect” gives them permission to say the meanest things imaginable. Instead of feeling offended, the joke was a reminder of movies they both enjoyed.

The joke was meant to convey a compliment without coming across as overly sentimental. An example of this is when one respondent saw that his boss was hard at work and said to him “You have work to do?” Because both men knew that the boss always worked hard, this was a way of complimenting the boss’s work ethic without sounding too syrupy.

The speaker was trying to lighten the mood. An example of this is when you know that someone is trying to cheer people up. Some might say that you can never know another person’s intentions, but when it comes to joking the belief that someone has good intentions goes a long way.

The person making the joke frequently makes jokes. “I knew it was a joke because he is always cracking jokes.” The consistency of a person’s character may establish a safe context for humor.

The joke was funny because it was clever. This response came from a woman who claimed “sarcasm was an art form in my house as I was growing up.”

The joke was meant to soften a criticism. While maybe not the funniest of jokes, these jokes are often easier to handle than a direct criticism. These are also the types of jokes where you hope the recipient will do a little sensemaking and change their future
behavior. One respondent gave an example of this type of joke in a church staff meeting. An employee was complaining about a member of the church and he said that he was going to give that woman a piece of his mind. The senior pastor then interrupted the angry employee by saying “I think we’re going to go with the not pissing off people who pay our salaries option.” In this case the employee included himself in the humor by laughing at his own irritability, while the message from the pastor was clear.

Some of the jokes were judged as neither funny nor not funny for the following reason.

**The target did not understand the jokes.** One respondent understood that jokes are meant to be funny but she claimed “they just go over my head” so she just smiles and goes about her business.

Reasons that jokes were not considered funny are as follows:

**The joke was too personal or humiliating.** One respondent made two jokes that led to him being reprimanded by his supervisor. In the first joke he had a moustache hair fall into his mouth and he said to a woman with a lot of facial hair “don’t you hate it when your moustache hair falls in your mouth?” In his second joke he made a sarcastic comment about a female coworker’s clothing.

**The joke was or could possibly be racist.** In one case the joke was not considered funny because the recipient felt that it was racist. This definitely led to a sensemaking occasion afterward as she felt angry about the comments. In another case, the respondent, a Black man, said that he had a young Asian man make a joke using an expression that is used almost exclusively within the Black community. The expression has both a negative and a positive connotation depending upon how it is used and when
the young Asian man used the expression the respondent was surprised that the young man knew the expression. Rather than laugh at the joke, the respondent wanted to know what the young man meant.

The joke was meant to be hurtful. One respondent admitted to using sarcasm to shame people who he thought were too dumb to be working for a large defense contractor. He also said that he would later worry about getting caught and try to think up ways to explain what he had done so that he would not get into trouble.

The person making the joke doesn’t like the target. The respondent claimed that she didn’t even think about what her coworker said because it fit in perfectly with his history of rude remarks.

The target doesn’t think humor is appropriate in the workplace. One respondent said that she felt very hurt by a joke until her coworker explained that it was just a joke. The reason for this is because the woman had just moved to the United States from Korea. She explained “Asia is very competitive and so no one jokes at work.”

The target of the joke isn’t sure if the person making the joke likes him/her. This was the case when a respondent had been away from work for two months and someone said to him “you’re easy to forget” on his first day back to work. Thankfully the smile on the speaker’s face let him know that it was a joke, but the respondent admits to being worried for a moment as he didn’t know if things had changed while he was away.

Sarcasm and teasing are not appropriate for people in positions of leadership. The reason that there were only 37 joking occasions when each of the 20 respondents were asked about two types of jokes is because there were three occasions were the respondent did not share examples in response to the questions. In all three cases
the person was in a position of leadership and felt that either teasing or sarcasm was not appropriate given their position.

**Other Findings**

Following the specific questions about occurrences of sarcasm and teasing in the workplace, the participants were asked if there was anything that they would like to share on the topic. The responses were very helpful in understanding the way others see these types of jokes.

One respondent was quick to say that she feels people use sarcasm because they want to be cool. She said it is a way of acting distant and pretending not to care about what others think. Another respondent who looked back with regret about how sarcastic he had been years ago shared her sentiments. He previously worked as a food server in a chain restaurant where they had frequent trainings. He felt as if all of the training was beneath him and so he made frequent sarcastic jokes. Looking back, he sees now that he wasn’t the only one who felt like the trainings were ridiculous; he was just the only person who felt the need to show others that he was too cool to be there. He now feels that all of his sarcastic jokes made things uncomfortable for his immediate supervisors.

One respondent was a former psychologist who runs a small retail shop with his wife. He claimed to use both sarcasm and teasing in the workplace, but felt that his jokes were highly dependent upon his facial expressions. He claimed that his wife had a history of being treated badly and consequently expected people to continue to treat her badly. He claimed that it was very important to keep a smile on his face in order to let her know that things are okay. When asked why he continues to joke knowing that there is a high
risk of being misunderstood, he claimed that it was his way of saying to her “we are okay.” Despite the fact that she had been hurt in previous relationships, he wanted to act in a way that he considered normal as a way of making her feel well adjusted.

Looking back on my own experiences with sarcasm and teasing in the workplace, I see a couple of situations that could also provide sensemaking resources. Years ago I worked for a Caucasian woman who dated a Hispanic man. Many of my coworkers were Hispanic and during our staff meetings, she would tease the Hispanic employees about their thick Mexican accents. She repeatedly told everyone about her Hispanic boyfriend as a way of demonstrating that she was not racist. Despite this background information, her jokes were not well received. She had a way about her that made everyone in the room, except her, extremely uncomfortable. While her rationale for the teasing was that she thought she was part of the group, our rationale for not liking the jokes was that she was insensitive.

In another exchange I encountered a person who teased me about an incident in my life that was incredibly painful. Oddly enough, I found the joke very funny. The reason the joke was funny was because both the person telling the joke and myself enjoy humor that is funny not despite the fact that it is terrible, but because the jokes are terrible. The way that I knew this joke was intended to be funny is because we have both talked about appreciating the humor of the celebrity roasts on the Comedy Central television channel. This television channel occasionally puts on celebrity roasts where a celebrity is joined by several of his friends, peers, and comedians for the sole purpose of making fun of the celebrity. This isn’t a new concept as celebrity roasts have been taking place for many years. The humor of the roasts on Comedy Central is an extension of a
type of humor where the goal is to be both irreverent and creative at once. The participants in these shows delight in breaking taboos and pushing the concept of bad taste beyond acceptable bounds. When my coworker made the awful comment with a smile on his face and excitement in his voice, I recognized that he was mimicking roast-type humor. Later, we both agreed that the joke was funny because it was terrible and irreverent.

The answers given by the respondents along with the comments from others and myself show that humor styles and responses to humor are very diverse. Despite all of the different approaches to humor, all of the respondents were able to articulate their rationale for enjoying or disliking particular jokes. Some of these explanations came about naturally after a joke made them uncomfortable enough to engage in sensemaking and other explanations were developed at a later time in order to answer the questions in this study. All of these explanations can now become sensemaking resources for others.

Discussion

During the course of the interviews participants would often offer their “theories” about sarcasm and teasing. Some felt that these types of humor were for cowards who wanted to express anger, but could not do so directly. Many others felt that these types of humor were just not appropriate in the workplace. After listening to their ideas about the nature of these types of jokes, I would then ask if they participated in these styles of humor. Almost all of the participants who generally regarded these types of humor as bad went on to say that they themselves do participate in these types of humor, but they always felt it was okay in their circumstances because they were very close to their coworkers. In their minds, it was clear that their group of coworkers was the exception.
The content of the jokes among coworkers who regarded themselves as close was frequently similar to the content of the jokes that others considered offensive. It was clear that the content of the jokes was less important than the quality of the relationship in many cases.

The fact that sarcasm and teasing exist in workplaces despite their negative image suggests that some people may actually enjoy the insider status that comes along with risky humor. Small groups of workers may actually be exercising their trust in one another by engaging in humor that doesn’t travel well. When we tell a joke that would lose all charm if it were to be shared with an outsider, we are, in effect, saying that we trust the people present not to take what we have said and use it against us. In joking, we are also indirectly saying that the target of the joke is trusted. It is the forbidden quality of sarcasm and teasing that makes these risks possible and, consequently, makes these types of humor appealing.

The reasons for the negative image surrounding teasing and sarcasm may come from an overcautious society. Instead of laying out a few ground rules, such as “don’t tease people about things that they cannot change”, it may be easier just to discourage teasing all together. It may also be that much more attention is paid to these types of jokes when they have been hurtful. The times that jokes have failed may be more memorable than all the other times that the jokes have been humorous.

There were also people who refused to direct their sarcasm or teasing directly at other people. Instead they felt very strongly that these types of jokes should always be directed at someone or something outside of their relationships. A great use of sarcasm was provided by a woman who uses sarcasm as a way to learn about other people while
not revealing her own beliefs too soon. An example of this is when she says to a stranger that Donald Trump has some great ideas for the United States. If the person agrees then she has just learned that she is speaking to a Trump fan. If the person disagrees then she knows that the person she is speaking to is not a Trump fan and the speaker can indicate that she was joking. The speaker uses sarcasm as a way of quickly figuring people out.

The use of using sarcasm to figure people out was actually very different from the way many people participated in sarcasm or teasing. Many of the participants refrained from using sarcasm or teasing in the beginning of their relationships. Instead they waited for cues that their jokes would be appreciated. Very often they claimed that they knew whom to tease because they saw that person already participating in teasing or sarcasm. The people who were already joking around were the ones who were most likely to understand and appreciate humor.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

This study looked at what types of jokes prompted people to begin sensemaking. As expected, jokes that lead to disruptive ambiguity caused people to begin sensemaking. All of the jokes that caused disruptive ambiguity were either insulting or offensive. None of the jokes that were considered humorous prompted sensemaking and none of the jokes that were clearly insults, based on the history of the relationship, prompted sensemaking.

This study also examined the ways that people make sense of teasing and sarcasm in the workplace. The reasons people interpreted these types of jokes as they did have been compiled into the list of sensemaking tools that follow.

Sensemaking resources that explain why jokes are considered funny are as follows:

- The recipient has a good relationship with the speaker.
- The recipient and speaker work together in a difficult setting and the humor is amusing because they are “in it together.”
- The joke is something that both parties know and previously enjoyed from a television show or a movie.
- The joke is meant to convey affection without coming across as overly sentimental.
- The person making the joke is trying to lighten the mood.
- The person making the joke frequently makes jokes.
- The joke is funny because it is clever.
- The joke is meant to soften a criticism.
- The joke is funny because teasing is okay when you are part of the group.
The joke is funny because it is completely terrible or irreverent.

Sensemaking resources that explain why a joke was neither funny nor unfunny are as follows:

- The target does not understand the jokes.

Sensemaking resources that explain why a joke was not funny are as follows:

- The joke is too personal or humiliating.
- The joke is or could possibly be racist.
- The joke is meant to be hurtful.
- The speaker has a bad relationship with the target of the joke.
- The target doesn’t think humor is appropriate in the workplace.
- The target of the joke isn’t sure if the person making the joke likes him/her.
- Sarcasm and teasing are not appropriate for people in positions of leadership.
- The person making the joke is insensitive.

**Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study is that it was not possible to interview both parties in each exchange. Given this limitation, it is necessary to depend upon one party to determine the reaction of both people involved. On one occasion a respondent told stated that she was sure that she had hurt someone’s feelings, yet when she went to apologize to that person, the target of the joke had no idea what she was talking about and said she had
found the teasing to be funny. That particular respondent made a point to state during the interview that she is a “very sensitive person.” It stands to reason that if people are estimating the reactions of others incorrectly because they themselves are too sensitive, then there are likely others that are estimating the reactions of other incorrectly because they are not sensitive enough.

Another limitation of this study is the difficulty of staying on topic. The term *sarcasm* was particularly problematic as many people have their own definition and kept reverting to their definition as the interview progressed. The working definition for sarcasm depended upon the participant’s understanding of the word *irony*. Using the word irony was often not helpful as many people don’t know what irony really means. In Steven Pinker’s style guide for writing (2014) he includes *ironic* in his list of commonly misused words saying that people often think it means inconvenient or unfortunate. Because people didn’t understand irony, much less sarcasm, I would often have to explain that sarcasm occurred when people intentionally spoke in ways that were opposite of the truth. Examples were given, but there were times when it was evident that the respondent did not understand the meaning of irony and twice the results of the interview were not helpful or relevant to this study. If not for the difficulty in understanding sarcasm, a different research method such as a survey tool could have been used. A survey would have made it possible to gather more data than what was possible through interviews.

**Further Study or Recommendations**

This study looked at humor styles that are prevalent in the United States. As we are becoming a more global society, it would make sense to expand our understanding of
humor to include the humor styles of other nations. In addition to looking at other nations, more study could also be conducted within the United States. In looking for more sensemaking resources, one area that will always be rapidly changing is the younger work force. Generations seek to define themselves on their own terms and it’s always helpful to remain aware of the values and ideas of the younger generations.

**Conclusions**

The relationship between the target of the joke and the speaker was very important in determining if jokes were taken as funny or insulting. Having a positive relationship often made the content of the jokes irrelevant as the hearer assumed the speaker had good intentions. Within a good relationship, most of the jokes were regarded as funny, but were times that the relationship was not enough to protect people from being insulted. Occasionally jokes were offensive or insulting because the content seemed sincere. Jokes that were hurtful resulted in disruptive ambiguity—which prompted sensemaking.

In cases where there was no sensemaking, participants were able to explain why they interpreted jokes as they did, leading to new understandings of humor. The reasons show how individual humor styles vary from person to person. This great variety in humor styles supports the notion that people are not trying to offend or be offended. Instead, there is just much that we do not understand about one another.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

Waiver

Thank you for your help. The purpose of this interview is to gather information about humor in the workplace. This information will be used to fulfill a requirement for a Master’s thesis.

Your responses are voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer and you are free to stop the interview at any time. Your answers and comments will be confidential, known only to the interviewer. This interview will be recorded using a voice-recording device so that the interviewer can review the content and accurately quote chosen statements in the Master’s thesis. This interview should take between 10-30 minutes.

I have read the above information and give my express consent to participate in this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can stop the interview at any time.

_____________________________________
Signature & Date

_____________________________________
Print Name
APPENDIX B

The Interview

Thank you for participating in my study. I want to ask you about specific times when sarcasm and teasing have taken place in your workplace, between coworkers. Occasionally people use the term “sarcasm” to describe any comment that they didn’t particularly like. For this study, the term “sarcasm” is neither good nor bad, only descriptive of a particular type of joke where a person says something that is opposite of the truth in order to make a joke.

1. Please tell me about the last time you or someone else directed a sarcastic comment to a coworker at work.

2. Was the joke funny?

3. At the time or shortly afterwards, did you reflect back on the joke and think about why it was funny or not funny?

4. If you did think about the sarcastic comment, what were the reasons that made the joke funny or not funny?

5. If you didn’t think about the joke at the time can you explain to me now why the joke was funny or not funny?

6. Please tell me about the last time you or someone else teased someone at work.

7. Was the teasing funny?

8. At the time or shortly afterwards, did you reflect back on the teasing and think about why it was funny or not funny?

9. If you did think about the teasing experience, what were the reasons that made the joke funny or not funny?
10. If you didn’t think about the teasing at the time can you explain to me now why the joke was funny or not funny?

11. Is there anything else you would like to share about sarcasm or teasing in the workplace?

12. How would you describe your sense of humor?