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Donut time: the use of humor across the police work environment

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to examine ritualistic humor or joking that exists in a small, rural police department in Western New York.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected through participatory observations and interviews during the summer of 2014. Both authors worked in tandem to capitalize on individual expertise to maximize data collection and analyses.

Findings – Results suggest that humor is leveraged by officers to socialize, cope and demarcate authority. Depending on the circumstance, humor can be orchestrated or spontaneous, given the intentions of the officer.

Originality/value – Humor is an important lens through which to view police behavior. The current research underscores the importance of levity as a gauge of organizational and individual health.

Keywords Policing, Law enforcement, Humor, Joking, Levity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Scholarship on workplace humor has illustrated its functional qualities (Roy, 1959; Duncan *et al.*, 1990). Humor builds social and professional cohesion, provides a venue to cope with occupational stressors and can demarcate authority within an organization.

In the last 30 years, humor and policing scholarship has been fertile ground for researchers and practitioners to better understand the complexities of the law enforcement culture (Holdaway, 1988; Pogrebin and Poole, 1988), yet the scarcity of information on the social phenomenon still exists. The current study aims to bolster research interests in humor and policing by capitalizing on an author's "insider" opportunity to examine not only humor in a complex work setting, but also insight into the work culture.

A number of benefits can be derived by understanding how humor is framed and diffused among police officers. At the department level, understanding levity among law enforcement officers can be useful for supervisors who have an important role in gauging the highs and lows of the rank-and-file (Schafer, 2008, 2009). That is, supervisors observe officers' morale and cohesiveness, and can develop strategies to maintain or enhance departmental optimism. As Roy (1959) illustrated in his classic work "Banana Time", understanding when humor is employed is important in increasing occupational satisfaction[1]. Arguably, a by-product of occupational satisfaction is improved officer and community relations and interactions.

At the individual level, a better understanding of occupational levity could have a positive impact on reducing the social and psychological problems that are correlated with the policing profession. Specifically, understanding when happiness occurs in policing can bolster intervention techniques (e.g. counseling, group programs)

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to decrease divorce rates, binge drinking and suicides that plague the profession. As Garner (1997, p. 49) posited, "[…] one may see humor as a stress-relieving method for law enforcement officers in allowing an expression of a myriad of suppressed emotions."

Grounded in data from a convenient sample, the current research aims to fill the "humor-void" in policing, and bring to the fore – insight on a small, rural department in Western New York. Studying small municipalities is important, as they constitute approximately 86 percent of law enforcement agencies in the USA (Reaves, 2011). Therefore, the research question that will guide this study is:

RQ1. How functional is humor in a small, rural police department?

For this study, humor and related synonyms will utilize a functionalist approach, which "[…] interprets humor in terms of the social functions it fulfills for a society or social group" (Kuipers, 2008, p. 364). Framing humor from a functionalist perspective reveals a variety of understanding of social interactions. Coser (1959, p. 172) suggested that a functional quality of humor is that it can serve as "an invitation" to bridge the "social distance" between individuals. Fine and Soucey (2005, p. 6) echoed the building of relationships, and further detailed that humor is a mechanism to smooth interactions, set boundaries and "create norms of actions" for individuals.

Martineau (1972) expands this understanding of the cohesive properties of humor to suggest that humor can be used to distance or undermine individuals. Similarly, Plester and Orams (2008, p. 253) found that jokers would use humor to challenge authority, but "without subverting it." Challenging institutional boundaries not only provides relief for the joker, but also other workers. Coping through humor, however, as Dean and Gregory (2005) reported, is "contextual." Across gender and ethnic lines, for example, jokes might not effectively translate. Still, as Scott (2007, p. 363) suggested, though humor may not be palatable to others, it "should be perceived as appropriate, indeed essential," for those in occupations dealing with death. The following section of this ethnographic study provides insight on how humor in law enforcement aids in understanding how police officers are socialized, cope with occupational hazards and demarcate authority. Thereafter, the methods that guided this research are proffered, followed by the findings of the current research. We conclude with a discussion on benefits of the current research.

Humor in policing

Socialization

Humor in the policing profession, like many organizations, uses joke telling and other forms of comedic expression as a tool to form professional and social bonds among institutional actors (Linstead, 1985; Holdaway, 1988; Duncan *et al.*, 1990; Godfrey, 2016). Humor provides insight and maintains the realities of the policing profession, which "build[s] cohesion" among officers (Terrion and Ashforth, 2002, p. 58; Holdaway, 1988). Scholars suggest that humor in policing is esoteric in nature (Linstead, 1985; Garner, 1997). Garner (1997), for example, posited that regardless of the law enforcement agency's location in the USA, jokes or any humorous anecdotes are understood and appreciated by police officers. Those outside of law enforcement, however, might perceive the occupational humor as unsavory and unprofessional, which some have characterized as "gallows" or "dark" humor (Lester, 1996; Garrick, 2006; Vivona, 2014). Garrick (2006) reported that gallows humor is common among emergency service workers, including police officers, and is utilized as a coping mechanism to contend

with occupational exposure to tragedies and death (Vivona, 2014). Nonetheless, as Garner (1997) further detailed, real-life humorous events carry more value and are subsequently more impactful among officers than fictitious stories. Arguably, these comedic-lived experiences, especially those dealing with danger, provide lessons for other officers that are coded in humor. McNulty (1994) argued that commonsense in policing is not always innate. Therefore, humor becomes a method of producing knowledge and templates for performance to other officers, all the while building professional bonds. Duncan *et al.* (1990, p. 275) reported that workplace humor has continuous cultural impact on organizations, which may be used as a "tool" for development that aids in "[…] define[ing] the roles of employees." Holmes (2000, p. 179) saliently observed that humor "maintains solidarity and collegiality" that undergirds "the social cohesion in the workplace."

Coping

It is well-documented that officers tend to not be expressive of their feelings when involved in a dangerous or tragic event, as they may be perceived as weak or unfit (Herbert, 1998; Pogrebin and Poole, 1991). Humor, however, provides an acceptable and useful avenue to cope with the observed misfortunes in policing (e.g. murder scenes) (Moran and Roth, 2006; Roth and Vivona, 2010; Vivona, 2014). As Holmes (2007) might posit, humor moderates occupational tension of the officers. In their research on officers' coping strategies with child abuse cases, Wright *et al.* (2006, p. 506) reported that humor is a "[…] highly valuable strategy in releasing work stress and in maintaining a work atmosphere that [is] light-hearted." Similarly, in a study on officers that work in the area of child exploitation, humor, as one participant in the study claimed, "[Took] the toxicity out of the moment" (Burns *et al.*, 2008, p. 26). As Burns *et al.* (2008, p. 26) also commented, "Humor was used effectively to bond the team together, to release tension during particularly difficult moments, and to cut loose and have fun." Recent scholarship on crime scene investigators (CSI) found similar results. Roth and Vivona (2010, p. 323) reported that CSI workers are "saturate[d] in horrid experiences;" they access humor to "anchor" themselves into a "sense of normalcy" that maintains their "emotional survival."

Demarcation of authority

Humor and authority seem to be fundamentally in contrast to one another. "Humor" conjures up sentiments, such as levity, light-heartedness and openness. "Authority" summons adjectives, such as rigidness, power and punitive. Organizational scholars noted that humor and power are not mutually exclusive social constructs. Rather, there is a clear link between these two concepts in organizations. In organizational research, the interplay of humor and authority is known as superiority theory. Simply, superiority theory posits that organizational leaders will use humor as a "communicative tools" to illustrate dominance (Godfrey, 2016, p. 166; Duncan, 1985; Lefcourt and Martin, 1986; Terrion and Ashforth, 2002). Humor, as scholars claim, is a deployed tactic utilized by those in power to instruct subordinates into acceptable cultural and occupational practices (Duncan, 1985; Lefcourt and Martin, 1986; Terrion and Ashforth, 2002; Godfrey, 2016). In policing, this normative approach is a means for reinforcing hierarchal structure and preserving occupational standards. Given that the profession of policing has a heavy reliance on teamwork and loyalties, supervisors may employ humor to coral deviant acts (e.g. breaching prescribed protocol) of officers

(Holdaway, 1988). Holmes (2000, p. 179) stated "Humor may be used by the powerful to maintain authority and control while continuing to be collegial […]."

For officers, humor can be a shield against supervisor criticisms. In his research on British police officers, Holdaway (1988) reported that officers may have inside knowledge of supervisors' embarrassing mistakes. This information, veiled in humor, becomes a safeguard of sorts that has the potential to ridicule supervisors, should criticism be directed to the officer (Holdaway, 1988).

In addition to being a safeguard against criticism, humor can also be an avenue for rank-and-file officers to vent institutional concerns (Holmes, 2000). Specifically, officers may challenge supervisor or institutional dictates by encoding concerns within jokes. Beyond joking about the dichotomy of "us vs them" that tends to be present with hierarchy in police organizations (Reuss-Ianni, 1983), humor can be employed by the rank-and-file to cope with, for example, disagreeable directives or organizational policies (Holdaway, 1988; Godfrey, 2016). This subversive approach to humor, as scholars have noted, becomes a means to distance oneself from institutional agendas, while maintaining the organizational integrity (Collinson, 1988; Holmes and Marra, 2002). As Holmes and Marra (2002, p. 65) stated, "While the powerful may use humor to maintain control, it is also available to the less powerful as a socially acceptable means of challenging or subverting authority."

At the street-level, officers may utilize humor in interactions with the public, which can reduce the intensity of situations. In Holmes' (2007, p. 520) research on creativity in the workplace, she noted institutional actors may use humor to "soften an instruction, and release tension or defuse anger." In the era of community policing, employing levity during routine traffic stops, for example, illustrate the firm, yet humanitarian side of law enforcement. As some scholars might posit (Linstead, 1985; Fleming, 2005), this blurring of symbolic boundaries can be transformative for relations between officers and citizens.

Methods

This study emerged in a personal conversation between both authors. The second author was planning a qualitative examination of police behavior and activity during their "downtime." Both authors worked in tandem to capitalize on personal and research experiences to maximize data possibilities. Data were derived from ride-alongs and interviews with a small, rural police department in Western New York, during the summer of 2014. There are slightly less than 50 sworn officers in the department, with two-thirds dedicated to patrol. Given the size of the department and the request of the officers, descriptors will not be used in the subsequent sections (e.g. names, years of experience), as to maintain anonymity of the agency and its employees. Instead, we utilized ranks of the officers and general terms to identify those involved in scenarios and humorous episodes (e.g. first officer, second officer).

The second author, who was has prior law enforcement experience (in another jurisdiction), was able to access the department through one of the supervisors, whom he had known for a number of years. This gatekeeper vouched for the second author and introduced him to the officers in the department. Subsequently, the second author secured seventeen ride-alongs and semi-structured interviews with eight officers (six street-level officer and two senior supervisors) within the department.

In-line with other policing research (e.g. Mastrofski *et al.*, 1998), we focussed on a non-participant observational approach to obtain data from officers during ride-alongs. The primary advantage of this research design is that it allows the researcher to

observe subjects in their natural environment (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The drawbacks of field research is that it requires agency and officers' consent to mobilize the research agenda. Further, ride-along-time and constructing narratives from field observations are time-consuming.

Ride-alongs lasted four hours with each officer, covering all hours of the day, except 3-7 a.m.[2]. On long observational days, the second author would change patrol officers at the four hours mark to maximize data collection possibilities. During ride-alongs the second author would engage in informal conversation with the officers, but did not take any handwritten notes. Rather, with the rare exception of importing "key words" into a personal cellular phone to trigger memory on particular moment, the second author refrained from taking notes on ride-alongs to minimize participant bias. At the completion of each ride-along, the second author immediately documented the observations.

For convenience of the six street-level officers that volunteered to be interviewed, semi-structured interviews were conducted over the telephone. The remaining two interviews were of senior supervisors, who were readily available for face-to-face interviews. Using a semi-structured approach to interview the officers allowed for fluid dialogue between the second author and the eight participants. As Schleef (2006, p. 11) noted, semi-structured interviews allows "for flexible, yet guided conversation[s] and introduction of unanticipated topics." After each interview, responses were immediately transcribed, and many direct quotes were documented.

As mentioned above, the second author was able to gain access to the agency and bond with officers, given his prior law enforcement experience, which often resulted in open and free-flowing dialogue. The first author was provided daily notes from the second author on ride-alongs and interviews. The first author provided feedback to the second author on these notes, including follow-up questions to ask and other observational details to be cognizant of while engaging the officers. This peer approach to data collection contributed to a broader examination of the police officers' behavior, and helped to ensure that the second author's experience did not limit or bias his observations. To mitigate analytic biases in the current research, the first author analyzed the field notes. It should be noted that the first author has no law enforcement experience, which provided a more objective view of the field notes.

Results

Similar to Vivona's (2014, p. 134) recent research with CSI workers, findings in this section suggests that humor is structured at times, yet "spontaneous and circumstantial" at others. What follows are accounts for the themes of humor described in the literature review section of this study (i.e. socialization, coping and demarcating authority).

Socialization

Humor, regardless of rank, was a social activity that all officers recall engaging in at some point in their career. It is, many of the officers commented, "[…] part of the job." This bonding ritual of "ball-busting" are fraternal scripts that officers tend to rely on to build relationships. Socializing or "framing" the role of an officer is about striking a balance between professional and personal identities. The intimacy and depth of the jokes and pranks was an indicator of how connected one officer was to another. Being able to give, receive and appreciate humor was an integral component of officers in this study.

This acceptance of jocular banter, however, may not have been fluid across gender lines, as it was not observed by the second author[3]. On the single occasion when a female officer was the brunt of a joke, it was covert between the male colleagues. Simply, the joke about the female officer was not to her face, rather it was "behind her back." During the scheduling of ride-alongs for the current research, an officer commented to another that they will place the second author with a particular female officer for a night. One of the officers stated, "We'll assign him [the second author] to Officer ***. She'll talk the whole time. After four hours, he'll want to change officers." It was evident that the male officer was making sport of gender stereotypes. The officer's "biting humor" (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997), as policing scholars would note, projects the machismo ideologies that underlie the law enforcement sub-culture (Franklin, 2007; Yu, 2015).

This is not to suggest that women did not engage in humor. Still the officer's gender-quip is consistent with other scholars' observations of women in the workplace. Though the second author did not delve deeper into the causation of the "she'll talk the whole time" comment, as to not "put-off" the officer and disturb the research environment, scholarship on subversive humor may shed some insight. As Holmes and Marra (2002, p. 83) stated, humor may provide "a socially acceptable 'cover' for criticisms of individuals, and for subverting and challenging established norms and practices." In policing research, it is well-documented that women have and continue to encounter contestation in law enforcement, largely due to the engrained machismo culture (Franklin, 2007; Yu, 2015). Research dating back from the 1970s to present day assert that the most problematic issue for women in law enforcement are male officers. Yu (2015, p. 262) stated, "Feminist criminologists suggest that the single most significant factor for high turnover is the negative attitudes of male colleagues […]." Yu (2015, p. 263) qualifies by positing, "[…] many male officers continue to believe that women cannot handle the job physically or emotionally and therefore do not have the ability to exercise the moral authority of the state." Further, as Leskinen *et al.* (2015, p. 192) remarked, women that are in professions that "require stereotypical masculine behavior and appearance" have the propensity "to increase women's harassment risk." It can be argued the adoption of masculine attributes in the workplace are counter to society's practices, which may cause occupational friction (Holmes and Marra, 2004; Holmes and Schnurr, 2005; Holmes, 2006). Humor against women, therefore, as Godfrey (2016) noted in his research on humor and the military, becomes a vehicle to maintain the masculine status quo.

It is important to report that female officers also engaged in humor, but it was directed to citizens, rather than other officers. Scholars, such as Martin (1978) have noted that female officers tend to be cognizant of male counterparts feelings toward them (e.g. females employed in a stereotypically masculine profession), and are cautious to not succumb to female gender stereotypes (Holdaway, 1988; Terrion and Ashforth, 2002).

Those officers that shared a more intimate relationship with each other had a wider and emotional range of humor. As one officer reported about a fellow colleague that was pranked:

> The best practical joke I'd heard of was when our [patrol cars] had universal keys. One guy ran into a restaurant to get something to eat and [another officer] went and moved the [patrol] car, like it was stolen. [The joker] just sat across the street where the officer couldn't see the car. I thought that was pretty original.

Though harsh, this hazing is part of the engrained bonding practice between intimate officers that illustrate prestige within the social ranks in the department. In a distorted

way, often the most risqué of pranks or joke telling are reserved for those that are most collegial (Terrion and Ashforth, 2002). The reverse of this provides further understanding. During the fieldwork for this research, the chief of the department was only once spoken about in a joking way by street officers. Similarly, the chief did not vocalize any humor nor initiate pranks with officers. With the exception of serious incidents, officers noted that joke telling and other similar forms of levity were not daily occurrences among management. As one officer reported, personalities tend to change when officers get promotions.

This receding or absence of hierarchal humor is interesting, as it counters a key element of superiority theory: managers will access humor to illustrate their organizational dominance (Duncan, 1985; Lefcourt and Martin, 1986; Terrion and Ashforth, 2002; Godfrey, 2016). This, however, is not a new observation by humor researchers. Plester and Sayers (2007), for example, reported senior-level managers are less likely to engage in humor than subordinates. In particular, the authors noted unsuccessful joking "could result in a loss of respect or create feelings of derision" (Plester and Sayers, 2007, p. 180). One of the senior supervisors in the current research provided an alternative understanding to why humor is less common among supervisors: "Humor is not necessarily in how it is given, it's in how it is received." A supervisor has to be careful in how they deliver a comment because "it could be misconstrued as a negative statement" or a criticism. He continues to qualify by stating that as a supervisor, especially in law enforcement, "You can't be one of the guys anymore. I never make any comments" other than in a professional manner. It's a "politically correct environment." As if wanting to purge the guilty and embarrassing incident that galvanized his reluctance to use humor among subordinates, this supervisor recounted the gleaning moment:

> A new lieutenant was walking by my office. The lieutenant was in civilian close and wearing orange sneakers. So I said to him "hey ***, does your wife know you're wearing her sneakers." Now I thought it was funny as hell, but he turned red, and when pasty white, and he walked away. I thought "wow," maybe I shouldn't have said that.

It is important to restate that every officer, at some point in their career, participated in humor and joking, which suggests there is a connection and admiration for all members within the "fraternity" of policing. Though some officers are connected more than others, it is nonetheless suggested here that humor bridges and ossifies kinship and the organizational community.

Humor was also an underlying tool to mentor and align officers into acceptable collegial practice. A senior officer commentated that "rate-busting," or overzealousness on the job, is not an acceptable practice among colleagues. The officer's personal occupational lesson came shortly after he joined the department. While he was writing a traffic ticket, a senior patrol officer with 35 years in the department, happened to drive by and shouted from his patrol car, "Hey, quit writing f*cking tickets." The officer who was the brunt of the humorous, yet embarrassing public jab, noted that the older officer spoke from his patrol car, clear enough for the offending driver to hear. The junior officer further stated to the second author that this "[…] was an indication that a young officer should not be too enthusiastic, and possibly make the older officers look bad." The deviation from normal practices by rate-busters, as Van Maanen (1973) noted, can provide friction among institutional actors. Given the potential dangers that police encounter, the ossification of ideals and practices among colleagues are important for officers (Herbert, 1998).

Another incident hits the point that humor is a way to teach and align skill-sets. During a routine exchange of police swapping out of vehicles, one officer questioned another about a radio message from the dispatcher that he had to respond to. Before words were spoken, the first officer made the sign of the cross, which was meant as a joke to the second officer, as he would have to be "religious" in nature to deal with the fundamental, occupational inaccuracies that the dispatcher often makes. Though the exact criminal act was not ascertained, both officers appeared to be at wits-end with the dispatch officer's apparent frequent misunderstanding of NYS penal code. The first officer rhetorically questioned to the second, "Isn't that a larceny?" The second officer responded by answering, "Yea, that was a larceny." The first officer stated after revisiting his computer screen in his vehicle, "Well he sent it [via the computer system] as a criminal mischief." The second officer immediately responded, "He's always f*cking things up. Call him on it." The first officer contacted the dispatcher by radio and asked for clarification on the call. "Was it a criminal mischief or a larceny?" "It's a larceny" was the dispatcher's reply. Both street officers, after hearing the dispatcher's response, shook their heads in disbelief of their colleague's misinterpretation of basic criminal violations and by extension, his lack of attention to detail. The collateral damage of not understanding the depth and breadth of one's role in an organization can have important consequences (Van Maanen, 1973), including impinging upon the reputation of the organization[4].

Coping

Humorous anecdotes among officers in this small police department were apparent and free-flowing when with one other, yet sparingly used among a group. Given the intertwining of the masculine and self-help culture of policing, observations in the department diverged from existing policing scholarship (Paoline, 2003; Terpstra and Schaap, 2013) by detecting how officers utilized and sought assistance from one another through humor. This functional use of humor was akin to a secret code. The officers knew when to access humor to share individual or collective experiences, prepare for, or decompress from stressful situations.

Similar to a bulletproof vest, officers would provide a quick joke, as to cast a spell or incantation to purge the internal obstacles that holds one back from danger. While responding to a residential suicide call, with little information to go on, two officers entered the home of the suspect. Upon entering the residence, one officer said to the second author, "Can you hear the music? It sounds like a funeral home." The second officer responded, "Maybe he's getting in the mood." Though dark, this humor wards-off negative emotions that could impinge police work, or, more importantly, put themselves and others in danger. This seemingly ritualistic practice aligns with scholarship that posits humor is a tool that brings forward the realities within the profession (Holdaway, 1988; Terrion and Ashforth, 2002).

Incidents that officers "have to come down from" run the continuum of benign to severe. For less serious situations, such as encountering unruly citizens, officers would jokingly complain to colleagues after the incident. This routine, yet often light-hearted humor, was a frequent occurrence when dealing with citizens. Humor, in this context, was a way for officers to maintain their professionalism, yet acknowledge their frustrations with particular citizens. The most overt and public instance of this coping humor was during a mid-day traffic accident involving two motorists. Upon arrival at the scene, the lead officer defused the situation (the female and male drivers were arguing with one another) and promptly conducted the required police work when

dealing with a minor traffic accident. The male driver was a not-so savory resident of the township that was well-known to the department. When the officer returned to the patrol car where the second author was standing, he commented, "He's got flies […] He's like Pigpen from Charlie Brown." As if needing to further qualify and reinforce the less than appealing nature of the male driver, the officer further stated, while mimicking swatting bugs in the air, "He's one of the biggest slum lords in the city. He stinks AND has flies." The lead officer then turned to the second officer who was nearby, exclaiming, "Did you see all the flies? You're supposed to help me. I could'a died." Comical jabs like these, as Wright *et al.* (2006) purported, becomes a valued commodity when maintaining a light-hearted disposition at work.

For serious encounters where officers used humor to decompress, coworkers, including supervisors, would collectively and seemingly innately understand the scripts and roles that were to be played out for the benefit of their colleague. If an officer initiated a story, the others would listen intently and provide additional humor to offset the main officer's discomfort. Depending on the coworkers present, additional humor would be added to further deflect from the intensity of the scenario. This additional assistance to "emotionally reset" the traumatized officer, allows for, as Vivona (2014, p. 13) reported, the "worker[s] to continue to perform their tasks at a high level." For instance, after a public suicide attempt at a restaurant, a number of officers ceremoniously huddled together to discuss the incident. The officer who responded to the suicide call reported that after the danger was over (the worker who was attempting suicide threatened the officer with a knife), customers jokingly stated to him, "Why didn't you just shoot the guy?" The officer responded to his colleagues, almost in disbelief of the citizens' humor, "These people just don't understand." Another officer, as to provide positive feedback commented that shooting the offender could have harmed others, as there would be the possibility of ricochet with all the metal in the kitchen area of the restaurant. A lieutenant followed up by closing out the assembly, commenting that if the officer did shoot the offender, "some of the guy would have ended up in the spaghetti sauce."

Demarcating of authority

Among the officers and the citizens they serve, humor, here, was not necessarily fixed in any one person or position. Rather, humor was contextual and circumstantial – yet functional.

Within the department the use of humor was a barometer of where one fell on the administrative hierarchy, or the years of service to law enforcement. It is important to note here that there is a disproportionate number of supervisors to street-level officers. In fact, there are approximately 20 supervisors (including administrative and patrol lieutenants) and 24 street-level officers. This "top-heavy" imbalance of authority within the department was a central angst among street-level officers. Barring the occasional traumatic incident, as noted in the prior section, for most street-level officers, there was a clear message that supervisors joke infrequently. As one officer commented, "Some were the biggest jokers when they worked the street, but when they became lieutenants, it's like -'You can't talk to me like that!' " The lack of instigating humor among supervisors was a clear way to maintain authoritative status. This disposition by supervisors was a balancing act, however. An officer stated:

> I think there's a dynamic where a lot of the newer [lieutenants] are still trying to establish themselves as supervisors. Some are very young and they don't want to come off […][sic][…]

> if you've become a lieutenant after 5 years on the job and you're trying to tell a 20 year old timer his business, he'll do it but he'll do it not to get suspended.

This obedience to the institutional structure by the 20-year veteran of the department reinforces the hierarchy and authoritative relationships in place (Pogrebin and Poole, 1988).

Though rare, there were a couple of officers who would joke with supervisors. These individuals were considered veterans in the department and had carefree attitudes about the ranks that were occupied. This relaxed disposition, as an officer admitted, is based on knowing stories on supervisors' early days in the department. Armed with the knowledge of past mistakes of supervisors, these veteran street officers were comfortable with challenging certain departmental polices – notably the long shifts and often forced overtime. Accessing humor to neutralize the discomfort of confrontation, as Holmes (2000, p. 179) noted, is "[…] an acceptable form for a challenge to the status quo, questioning the validity or accuracy" of institutional practices.

Humor with citizens at the street-level was more apparent than in the police station. Humor found its way in new interactions and established relationships with citizens. For the former, officers would take the cue from citizens' disposition. For example, if an intoxicated citizen would act in a humorous manner (e.g. slurring of words), the officer would use levity to lighten the seriousness of the incident. For established relationships with other social service workers, for example, conversations tended to be longer, filled with more laughter. It is not clear if the relaxed demeanor between citizens and police officers was a product of community policing efforts or the nature of a small rural township.

Still, humor was a functional tool to transform relationships with citizens. On one occasion, an officer was patrolling and passed by a convenience store where several people were standing. A female citizen called out to the officer, "Hey, I've been looking for you." The officer called back, "How you been?" The officer pulled over and both exchanged some humorous pleasantries before the citizen stated that she needed to speak with the officer about her son. The officer parked, exited the vehicle, and spoke privately with the female. Upon returning to the patrol car the officer explained that the citizen's son was having problems with gang members and she wanted the officer to provide information on how to mediate the issues. The officer further explained that he had requested the citizen to come to the police station the next day so they could discuss the situation further. The key to this conversation was the initial humors exchange between the citizen and officer.

Another demonstration of the functional qualities of humor in police-citizen encounters occurred just after midnight when several officers were investigating a disturbance. One particular patrol officer was using his spotlight to search alleyways and noticed several people walking on the sidewalk. The officer stated "I think I know her," and then called to the group "Hey, is that *** over there?" The officer stopped the car and the female called back, "Hey ***. I haven't seen you in a while." The female walked to the patrol car and they chatted in a friendly manner for a few minutes. A few friendly jokes were exchanged and after a moment, the citizen asked, "So what ch'a doing out here?" The officer explained he was looking for an unknown disturbance and asked if she had seen anything. While nothing formal was developed from this exchange – informally, the officer and citizen interaction further galvanized their positive relationship with each other.

Conclusion

The current research adds to the fertile ground of humor and policing scholarship by reporting on how humor, in the context of socialization, coping and demarcation of authority, exists in a small, rural, police department in Western New York.

Results provide a rich understanding of how complex, yet functional, humor can be in law enforcement. Before a discussion ensues, it is important to first examine the limitations of the current study and the importance of future research.

Limitations and future research

As is the case with field research, there are several methodological limitations to this study. First, based on the convenient and small sample size, findings cannot be generalized to all police agencies. Findings in this research could be unique to the participating agency, its gender and racial diversity (or lack thereof), its location in NYS, its proximity to an international border, and the local and departmental politics. Similarly, application of these findings to law enforcement agencies outside of the USA is not likely. Leveraging research from Waddington (1999), if the culture among law enforcement agencies varies across the USA, it is almost certain that the nexus between humor and policing will look differently across the globe.

The second limitation centers on respondents' interviews. Though most of those interviewed were open to discussing the role humor has in their profession, memory played a factor for some officers when attempting to recall-specific details. Additionally, a few officers appeared to be guarded in their responses. Though it could not be ascertained exactly why this was the case, it appeared that these officers were either not very sociable or they did not want to divulge too many "department secrets."

Future research will account for these limitations by conducting longer periods of fieldwork and report on police agencies at all levels. Longer periods of ethnography will expose researchers to more data and galvanize trust with officers, which will ideally translate into less-guarded responses. Additionally, follow-up studies would benefit in ascertaining how common or different levity is across all types of agencies (i.e. local, state and federal). Comparing and contrasting the various forms of humor paints a comprehensive picture on how levity impacts law enforcement.

Discussion

Despite the above limitations, findings in this research supports and builds upon prior scholarly works that humor is an important lens to view police behavior. Past research has reported that humor bonds officers. At one-level, we found similar results. Mining deeper, however, it was observed that bonding through humor largely was located in occupational status. The functional framing of humor strengthened the social bonds of street officers, and enhanced occupational standards within the department. Supervisors, however, largely refrained from initiating humorous anecdotes, such as joke telling. This disconnect between street-level officers and supervisors appeared to be rooted in departmental politics and culture. The great equalizer, as it was reported, were traumatic events. The realities of danger was central to pulling all ranks together for the well-being of the responding officer.

Additionally, it was observed that depending on circumstances, the demarcation of authority could lie with supervisors, street-level officers or citizenry. The utilization of humor and levity by citizens and street-level officers, in particular, highlights the current era of law enforcement: community policing. Officers' use of humor to diffuse conflicts or simply interact with citizens humanizes them to the public, which can only foster positive relations between the two parties. Additionally, given the increased militarization of local-level law enforcement (Kraska, 2007), utilizing humor may soften interactions between officers and citizenry. Similarly, if citizens employ tasteful-humor with law enforcement, this may be an indication that community policing efforts are working.

Other benefits of the current study are observed at the departmental and individual levels. It is well-documented that police work is filled with monotonous and repetitive activities (Bayley, 1994; Bouza, 1990; Reiner, 2000). Boredom subsides, as humor and workplace research has indicated, when employees interact and joke with one another (Roy, 1959). In smaller police departments, in particular, officers tend to not have contact with coworkers, unless at the station or assistance is needed on patrol. Management may find it beneficial to schedule more interactions with patrol officers to decrease occupational boredom. This would increase job satisfaction, as Roy (1959) would comment. Preplanning humoristic episodes through work-related activities, as Dandridge (1986) noted, allows for "functional outcomes" (Duncan *et al.*, 1990, p. 269). This is proffered with a caveat: workplace humor can lead to legal recourse. Duncan *et al.* (1990) reported that employees have brought forward lawsuits against organizations, where supervisors, for instance, went too far with derogatory jokes about women and racial minorities. This is important, as policing has a documented history of discriminatory practices with women and racial minorities, with regards to hiring and promotion (Crank, 1998).

At the individual level, humor may provide an indication of the personal well-being of officers outside of the profession. Research has shown that there are a number of social and psychological problems, such as high divorce rates, substance abuse and suicides that are correlated with the policing profession (Stack and Kelley, 1994; Alpert *et al.*, 2014). With suicide deaths among officers, for example, they outnumber on-duty fatalities (Deal, 2014). Humor can be a gauge of officers' emotional and psychological health. As humor can be a tool to challenge hierarchy within policing (Pogrebin and Poole, 1988), it can also be utilized to contest the engrained "self-help" mentality that can plague intervention techniques.

Notes

1. Our title is a play on Roy's (1959) "Banana Time," and alludes to the stereotype of police officers socializing (i.e. joking) with one another at a local donut shop.
2. It was suggested by officers that ride-alongs not occur during this time, as this was the slowest time for police work. In fact, policing scholarship is clear that police work during the early morning hours and particularly during the week-nights, are times of low activity for most departments (Taylor and Huxley, 1989).
3. There are five female officers in the department. Only two female officers were observed as part of this study. Thus, it is difficult to ascertain if some forms of humor are censored around women.
4. Describing a humorous incident in writing does not always get a laugh. Several incidents often include back-and-fourth conversation, facial expressions, body-language and other components that, while garnered during observational research, do not "translate" in written form. Therefore, while several events described here are clearly humorous, for other incidents to come across as funny, "You had to be there."

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