

“IF YOU DON’T LAUGH YOU’LL CRY”: THE OCCUPATIONAL HUMOR OF WHITE
AMERICAN PRISON WORKERS AND SOCIAL WORKERS

Claire Schmidt

Dr. Elaine Lawless and Dr. Anand Prahlad, Dissertation Supervisors

ABSTRACT

Through original fieldwork, this dissertation compares narrative occupational humor of white American social workers to that of white American prison workers, concluding that both occupational groups use humor, both performed and oral, to negotiate conflict between work and home, to initiate new employees, to reinforce and police boundaries and occupational identity, to mediate aggressive impulses, and to express individual and group aesthetics that exist alongside institutional control.

Humor is ubiquitous yet frequently dismissed as trivial, and easily misunderstood by outsiders. A more nuanced understanding of occupational humor of prison workers and social workers illuminates the role of aesthetics, taboo, communication and narrative in 21st century American labor. Using reciprocal and insider ethnographic methodology, this project argues that mainstream, middle class occupations have as much folklore worthy of study as the exotic, disenfranchised “others” historically romanticized by folklorists, anthropologists and other ethnographers.

This project recontextualizes the role of art in labor by focusing on stigmatized middle-class professions, and denies “easy” understandings of prison workers and social workers. By making whiteness a visible and acknowledged ethnic category the study contributes to critical scholarship on race, humor, and work, while remaining firmly grounded in original insider ethnography.