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

A Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
University of Missouri

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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May 2013
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"IF YOU DON'T LAUGH YOU'LL CRY": THE OCCUPATIONAL HUMOR OF WHITE AMERICAN PRISON WORKERS AND SOCIAL WORKERS

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For my family and friends who work so hard for so little thanks.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have to thank so many people for their help and encouragement: my wonderful co-chairs Elaine Lawless and Anand Prahlad for sharing their time, kindness, insight, and expertise; John Foley, whose enthusiasm for my work as a medievalist, oral traditionalist, and folklorist and unexpected parenting advice are, and will continue to be, deeply missed; Dr. Johanna Kramer and Dr. Chip Callahan for graciously and good naturedly joining me on this weird dissertation ride; my generous, thoughtful and insightful collaborators, whom I dearly wish I could name and thank individually but it would violate anonymity and IRB approval; Lisa Higgins for her wisdom; Darcy Holtgrave, Constance Bailey, Jenni Spitulnik and most particularly Sarah Heston for the writing moral support; Laurel Schmidt for her tremendous and incalculable gift of time and energy and insight; Shelley Ingram for being the best EGSA mentor long after her obligations should rightfully have concluded, along with Willow Mullins and Todd Richardson, whose willingness to help and encourage a junior colleague is downright humanitarian; Rebecca Mouser, who has been there since the very first day; Anne Barker, for her expert and enthusiastic assistance in libraries and archives; Dr. George Justice, whose stint as DGS made all of this possible; Dr. James P. Leary and Dr. John D. Niles, who sent me down this road in the very first place; my wonderful colleagues in the Student Folklore Society and the English Graduate Student Association and the faculty of the University of Missouri Department of English, for all of the encouragement, kindness and support (both financial and moral!).

I have also to thank my husband, Tom Heitmann, my daughter Olive Heitmann, my parents, Mark and Ann Schmidt, my sister Laurel Schmidt, my grandfather Richard Meyer, my grandfather Richard Schmidt, my sister-in-law-and-heart Laura Heitmann, my uncle Paul Meyer, my grandmother Joan Schmidt, my grandmother Judy Meyer, and my dear friend Christina Mattson, for their time, energy, and above all, their patience with me.
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Humor and Gender in Social Work
“IF YOU DON’T LAUGH YOU’LL CRY”: THE OCCUPATIONAL HUMOR OF WHITE AMERICAN PRISON WORKERS AND SOCIAL WORKERS

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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, disenfranchized “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.
This dissertation is a comparative exploration of the occupational humor of prison workers and social workers. As Chapter 2 demonstrates, little scholarly attention has been paid to the ways these two professions use humor to negotiate their jobs. In fact, neither Folklore nor any other scholarly discipline outside the fields of Criminal Justice and Social Work have considered the occupational folklore of these groups.

In this dissertation, I argue that the lack of critical scholarly attention to these fields stems from the historical preoccupation with people and occupations outside of the “mainstream” dominant culture. Thus, while physical jobs like lumberjacking and commercial fishing have received a great deal of attention from scholars (as have high-risk occupations, like firefighting and police work, and racially segregated workers like Pullman Porters), white collar, middle class professional jobs have been overlooked by scholars concerned with occupational folklore. As I will argue throughout this project, the failure to look critically at the folklore of the educated, professional “mainstream” reinforces the historically racist and classist ideology that folklore is something that “other people” have, not something that “normal” people have.

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1 I use the term “prison workers” in concert with the term “correctional officers” because while many of the people I interviewed for this project were correctional officers, others were not. I have interviewed doctors, nurses, secretaries, social workers and administrators in addition to correctional officers, and since many of these individuals used the term “prison” to describe to me, an outsider, where they worked, I have come to the conclusion that this is one of the ways that people who work in prisons describe their work to those who do not work in prisons.
As a folklorist, I engage with the folklore of the occupational groups that surrounded me in my childhood and continue to shape my worldview today. As the preface explores in much greater depth, I chose to work with these occupational groups because I come from a family and community made up of unusually high proportions of social workers and prison workers. Both my grandfathers worked in prisons: one was a white collar social worker, the other was a blue collar correctional officer, or “guard.” My mother’s best friend is a correctional officer; my godfather is a correctional officer; my uncle is a parole agent and former “guard;” my sister is a social worker, as is my sister in law. My parents have an extended network of friends around whom I grew up, and that network contains even more prison workers and social workers, all of whom contributed to the development of my own personal sense of humor.

I have chosen to interview individuals to whom I have social ties. Thus, I interview family members and friends, and the friends and family of my friends and family. I have endeavored to maintain a limit of one degree of separation between me and my collaborators. Thus, I interview people that I know, as well as the people they know. Often interviewing one person leads to interviewing half a dozen more. Over and over, my collaborators tell me, “Oh, well if you think that’s funny, you gotta talk to so-and-so—he’s got some real stories!” So then I meet so-and-so and the chain continues. Throughout the last ten years I have become convinced that it is important to study “my people”—white, lower-to-middle class people—for two reasons. First, by only collaborating with people to whom I have social responsibilities, I ensure that I write in a way that respects and acknowledges the authority, experience, and knowledge of those I have interviewed, and it reinforces the importance of sharing my work with those I have interviewed, and to incorporate their reactions and
interpretations of their words into the final project. Thus, my methodology is strongly influenced by Elaine Lawless’s theory of reciprocal ethnography. Second, by collaborating with “my people,” I seek to undermine the historical conviction that folklore is something that belongs to immigrants and poor people of color, and that “culture” is something that belongs to the educated, professional classes. My collaborators all self-identify as “white,” most have graduated high school, many have attended some college, some have college degrees. All consider themselves to be intelligent, well-informed people, and I agree with this self-assessment.

The stories and jokes that I heard (and continue to hear) from prison workers and social workers convinced me that these occupations have a complex and important relationship to humor. I went into this project wondering if social workers and prison workers are just funnier than most people; in the final stages, I am still wondering. Because of the ways I have intentionally limited the pool of collaborators in this project, it very well may be that I happen to know a lot of very funny people who spend time with each other because they appreciate the ways their family, friends, and colleagues use humor. Perhaps these individuals have created a social circle based on mutual appreciation of a similar level of humor. It is possible. However, my interactions with social workers and prison workers in the broader community and in chance encounters around the country indicates that social workers and prison workers are by and large funny people, and that they integrate humor into their daily and professional lives in creative ways.

Few outsiders seem to think that social workers and prison workers are funny people. From many years of conversations on this topic, I believe that few outsiders think, “huh, prison workers? Social workers? Sounds hilarious!” I, however, think this. Thus, part of my
intention for this project is to question the preconceptions that outsiders hold about prison workers and social workers, and the functions that these preconceptions perform in the larger context of social justice and institutional concerns.²

As I will discuss in much greater detail in the later chapters of this dissertation, prison workers and social workers are aware of the ways their professions are depicted in popular culture (such as movies and television and books) and the ways that outsiders view their professions. The social workers I have interviewed feel they are viewed as “a bunch of people who just sit around talking to people all day—how hard is that!?!?” (according to my collaborator XA) or, conversely, as “babysnatchers.” They described to me the ways they felt outsiders saw them as ineffectual, naïve, and that their jobs were both “sad” and “fun” and “easy.” Prison workers, conversely, seem aware that popular culture depicts the prison guard as a racist sadist or a bumbling idiot, and that as state workers, many outsiders believe they are lazy and spoiled.

I think it is important to consider the popular representations of these groups, because these beliefs can tell us a great deal, and part of the impetus behind this project is to use my own semi-insider status to show a side of prison work and social work that few outsiders get to see. I find prison workers and social workers to be very funny, very thoughtful and very irreverent people. Without degenerating into unreflective praise of these workers, I do hope to show a more complicated and difficult face of corrections work and social work to a wider scholarly audience.

I would like to suggest here that prison literature and popular representations of prisons and prison workers uses the trope of “the sadistic guard” as a perhaps unconscious

² See William Hugh Janson, 1959, for his conception of the esoteric factor in the folklore of groups.
way to avoid talking about larger institutions of oppression, injustice and racism. The focus
on the guard as violent, oppressive sadist keeps the focus on underclass individuals and
shields the larger culprits of oppression from public scrutiny.

Popular representations of social workers are more benign than popular
representations of prison workers because, in part, of the American blindness to the middle
class as unworthy of attention because it is supposed to be the default and the unexamined
norm. As middle class professionals with education working often invisible jobs, social
workers are not titillating to outsiders in the way that prison workers are. However, the
popular perception of social workers as “baby snatchers” and “lazy liberals” performs a
similar function in deflecting frustration and hostility with larger unjust institutions onto
individuals whose work requires they employ tactics to negotiate within those institutions.

Prison towns are different from non-prison towns, and they contain a lot of social
workers as well as correctional officers. As both sides of my family transitioned away from
agrarian life to semi-urban service careers in the 1930s-1950s, they met in Waupun,
Wisconsin. My parents both grew up in and around Waupun. The stories my parents and
grandparents tell are shocking to outsiders. My dad told me,

Mark Schmidt: Well, I remember when I was in grade school, the social organizations
– for example, we used to go, there was a bowling alley where the prison guards used
to bowl at Central State, so there was bowling leagues for the staff. I'm sure the
prisoners used 'em, too, but there were social organizations where the staff would
bowl for fun, and the inmates would do the pin setting. They would have holiday
celebrations where the kids of the prison guards would go for Christmas trees and see
Santa Claus and watch movies, and I know that my parents tell me I got my first
baseball that was hit over the fence of the big prison, where we lived across the street. And I do remember when I was in grade school I played Little League games in the prison, and the prisoners would watch the Little League games we were there to play.

Schmidt: So you would go see Santa inside the prison?

Mark Schmidt: Yeah.

Schmidt: Which one?

Mark Schmidt: Well, that was at Central State where they had, where the kids would come for holiday get-togethers.

The prison in the center of Waupun, The Walls, was at the center of my father’s family life, as was Central State, the Wisconsin State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Just as my own childhood was shaped by prison work, my father’s entire world growing up revolved around prisons. He played baseball in prison. He went to see Santa in prison. He went to church in prison. None of that seems weird to him.

My mother’s family has slightly deeper roots in Waupun than my father’s family. My mother’s grandfather moved to Waupun in the 1930s to open a law practice. For reasons that are still not clear to me, my grandfather Richard Meyer and his sister, Barbara, were babysat by the warden’s wife at Central State. Their parents maintained an active night life, and so they frequently dropped my grandfather and his sister off at the mental institution on their way out on Saturday night. The part I still don’t understand is the part where they were babysat by an ax murderer from Milwaukee.

Over and over, I have asked my grandfather, “Tell me again how you were babysat by the ax murderer. Was that really true?” and he tells me, “Oh hell, it wasn’t that big a deal at the time. We loved him, especially Barbara!” And then he launches into stories about
noisy Saturday nights spent running laps around the warden’s circular apartment, grabbing handfuls of popcorn at every lap—popcorn made for them by this ax murderer. He would read them stories, play games with them, put them to bed. And incredibly, my grandfather and his sister both insist that when Barbara pulled a kettle of boiling water off the stove onto herself (in her mother’s kitchen, not at the mental institution), the only person she would let near her to change her burn dressings was this man, this ax murderer, and so once a day her father would have to go to Central State, get this guy, and bring him to his daughter’s bedroom. She trusted him more than she trusted her own parents. “Really?” I ask, skeptically. “You’re not making this up?”

In Chapter 1, I summarize historical and theoretical trends in the study of humor, occupational folklore, and the literature of prison work (and to a lesser extent, social work), concluding that these areas are under studied and ignored because of historical and cultural biases that normalize the white, middle class American experience and exoticize the experiences of those who do not fit into this category. And so while a great deal has been written about prison inmates from a variety of disciplines, hardly anything has been written about prison workers and social workers outside of these disciplines.

Chapter 2 introduces the occupational humor of prison workers. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to prison work, followed by a selection of responses to three contextual questions I asked every collaborator: 1) what does it take to be a good prison worker? 2) what are the challenges of working in correctional settings? 3) How do you think outsiders perceive correctional work?

Chapter 3 explores the form and function of practical joke narratives among correctional officers. Chapter 4 analyzes verbal and performed humor among correctional
officers. Chapter 5 focuses on the phenomenon of unlaughter, social class, and boundary maintenance, and Chapter 6 concentrates on the role of humor in correctional work during the holiday season.

Chapter 7 introduces the occupational humor of social workers. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to social work, followed by a selection of responses to the same three contextual questions I asked every collaborator: 1) What does it take to be a good social worker? 2) What are the challenges in being a social worker? 3) How do you think outsiders perceive social workers? Chapter 8 explores the form and function of practical joke narratives among social workers; Chapter 9 analyzes the function of “sick” humor for those who practice it, and Chapter 10 explores the relationship between “telling people” humorous social work stories and long-term success in the field.
I have a walk-in closet in my apartment and it is filled from top to bottom with kitchen equipment. To the right, I store bulk beans, grains, sugars, dried Asian vegetables in packets. I keep my rice cooker in there, along with my mixer, my blender, my salad spinner, and a plastic contraption to help you slice bread evenly. To the left I have rows and rows and rows of mason jars full of beans, cucumbers, raspberries, beets, carrots, blueberries, okra, onions, garlic. If society collapsed tomorrow, we could last for months, maybe years. This is my pride and joy.

I love to preserve food. No, that’s not strong enough. I need to preserve food. When I lived in Syracuse, I went to the farmer’s market every Saturday and when I had to pass by the incredibly cheap pecks and bushels of crimson sweet Italian frying peppers, or the luminescent Hungarian wax peppers, or the rich, dark green poblanos, it was like spitting in the eye of fate. A voice in my mind says, “you will never see more beautiful peppers than these. If you don’t act now you will never get the chance to touch these peppers, to take them
through the changes that will make them immortal, that will introduce them to strangers, and without your appreciation the peppers are lost.”

Produce must be seized; wrested from the jaws of time—and converted with holy labor into beautiful captivity, signifying food, security, economy, industry, and, of course, domesticity. Allowing gherkin season to pass without a mad lunge at those fleeting, delicate cucumbers is irresponsible and slatternly, or so it seems to me.

My husband makes fun of me for this behavior. He has known me long enough to know when I am going to try to borrow money off him so I can buy twenty gallons of cherries. He watches me at the farmer’s markets and knows when I’m about to start an incredibly obvious rationalization of why we should really buy fifty pounds of irregular tomatoes. He knows I want them, because of how I grab and twist my lower lip in these situations. He knows it will take all afternoon, and I will be hot and tired at the end. He, personally, does not enjoy canning as much as he enjoys the idea of canning. He mocks me often, and then gives in with semi-good grace. This summer I started to get irritated with his mockery (perhaps because I canned more things this summer than ever before) and he said, “I think that I make fun of you because I’m afraid that if I don’t, this will get completely out of hand.” He’s right, it would.

My upbringing sowed the seeds for this compulsion. I grew up in a homemade, earth-sheltered house in the middle of the woods, and the woods were surrounded by fields of cows and sheep and corn and alfalfa and conservation easements. Southern Wisconsin is rich in many ways, and a resourceful person could still live off the land, or so we believed. We kept a large garden, chickens (during my very young years), and my dad had his own beehives. There were no neighbors for almost a mile. Our closest neighbors were my grandparents, and
I grew up solitary with my only and beloved sister. Our games were fed by the woods that surrounded the house and the books we read. We loved the “classics” of white, rural childhood: *Little House on the Prairie* (and all companion volumes), *Caddie Woodlawn, Little Women, The Five Little Peppers, Anne of Green Gables*, and my favorite, *Jane of Lantern Hill*. These books extolled the virtues of physical, domestic labor. Food was central in these kinds of books. It was often endangered and uncertain, and survival required the combined efforts of an entire community. Food raised with your own hands was more nutritious than food from the grocery store. Hard work could save your soul. Despite my atheist mother, my father’s lapsed Lutheran sensibilities allowed the possibility of the soul, and I knew enough to hedge my bets.

These books fed the narrative that my family told about itself. We were people who loved the land, who took care of themselves. My parents built our house themselves; during the initial stages of construction they lived in a broken down bread delivery van in the middle of the grown-over field and cooked over a campfire. When they moved into the house on Christmas Eve of 1975, the house was little more than a hole in the ground with a roof over the head, dirt under the feet, and some passive-solar dumpster-dived windows. My parents’ brothers and sisters and friends all helped build the house, and I grew up envious of the stories of the wild parties during the house-building summer. There are pictures of beautiful women in overalls with long hair, and beautiful men in overalls with long hair and beards. Everyone held a hammer or a guitar. When I was born several years later, my parents got electricity. When my sister was born they built an upstairs, since three rooms was a little tight for a family of four. We told ourselves that we lived in this house because we had a vision of a good life, away from the prying eyes of The Man, where we could live wild and free. We
told ourselves we were the kind of people who could survive anything. We were a fusion of Gonzo and Pollyanna. Huge drunken weekend parties followed weeks of wholesome bread baking. We heated with wood because we were strong and skilled. We had a garden because we loved the earth. We built our home from rocks that my father hauled in a wheelbarrow or a truck bed from the corners of the parcel of land. We were here to stay. We were the kind of people who dug a deep, deep well so that we never had to fear Atrazine poisoning or other agricultural pollutants. I say we, but I actually had very little to do with the dream until I became old enough to carry it myself.

I carried it for a year; moved back to the house with my friends and we grew food on the land, but then my parents lost the land, the house, and everything, and I don’t know who I am, now that I don’t have that story to tell about myself. When the economy tanked after 9/11 my father, the architect, had made so many bad business decisions that he could not pay the mortgage. My mother, who, it turns out, had always loathed our rustic, inconvenient and isolated house and home with a viciousness that still shocks me, had moved up to the cabin where her grandparents retired. When push came to shove, my parents didn’t get a divorce, but retrenched to the flimsy five-room ranch-style house on a lake, surrounded by republicans from Chicago. But when I pickle beets or make jelly, I imagine truth again in our failed family narrative and it helps me.

As a child I had to go out to the woods in July with my mother and pick blackcaps (wild black raspberries) into an old ice cream bucket. It takes an ice cream bucket to make a batch of jam. Like my mother, I would put on a bandana, slap on bug spray, and stomp my way into the brambles to find the best berries hidden under the leaves. This was a chore but it
made sense in the context of those pioneer books for children. I was working to help ensure my family had food for the winter.

When I think about wild plums and how I missed the season this year, I feel anxious and guilty and upset. All those beautiful drupes gone to wasps and waste because I was not there to catch them. I think of the groves along the field edges of my home county and I think of all those years that I did capture them and I want to cry in vexation. How could I miss the plums, those amazing fruits that make the best jam—everyone’s favorite jam. They don’t come in every year. Wild plums where I’m from follow a three year cycle. One year on, one year off, and one poor year in between. The fruits themselves are unbelievably sour, particularly the skins. They are more sour than Sour Patch Kids. They are more sour than anything except lemons, and often lemons are sweeter than the skins of wild plums. But when you cook them down and put them through a strainer and heat them with pectin and ten cups of sugar the sourness becomes secondary, and the flavor of wild plum becomes prime. And every year that I fail to go home and make wild plum jam is a failed year where I threw away the sweetest part of life. My grandmother calls me: “I just thought you might like to know the plums are ripe, in case you were planning to come up and pick.” No, I wasn’t, I can’t afford to, but now I am sickened with guilt.

Food preservation has become a semi-conscious obsession for me. Perhaps it comes from growing up broke, teetering on the edge of financial solvency, fearing the unstoppable calamity that finally claimed our land. Or maybe it’s because my formative years were spent in a back-to-the-land household with mandatory wild berry picking, homemade ketchup, even homemade horehound candy (the cruelest excuse of a treat). Maybe it’s because I’m from Wisconsin, and my grandmother cut and froze gallons of creamed field corn (never to
be confused with sweet corn) in a hot, crowded kitchen full of aunts and neighbors and flies and dogs. Or maybe because my childhood was spent alone in the woods with my sister, and we entertained ourselves by pretending to be starving pioneers. Our games revolved around the uncertain issue of food.

Sometimes I feel like my job is to run around and gather up all the food that others ignore. I never realized I had this tendency in such an obvious way until a know-it-all friend and roommate looked at me, diligently grating overgrown zuchinni in preparation to freezing it, and said, “you’re a provisioner, aren’t you?” He said it like it was an amusing character flaw, one of those harmless but silly personality traits that everyone can easily identify. I felt peeved that he so glibly pigeon-holed me. Who wants to be a provisioner, I thought. It made me feel like some kind of dowdy gramma figure, at a time in my life when I was particularly committed to being seen as wild, punk-rock, and out of control. But I still couldn’t allow that overgrown zuchinni to rot unused. If I grated it, I could fill quart ziplock bags with an even two cups of the stuff. If I froze it we could eat zuchinni bread in February, cream of zuchinni soup in March, zuchinni enchiladas in April. Those trace nutrients would go into our bodies and lodge in our bones and we could be stronger and better grounded. How can you throw away strength? Plus, throwing away the zuchinni was like throwing away a quarter. Sure, I’d gladly accepted a 30-pound box of the monster squash from my housing co-ops’s CSA farmer. It was free, a gift in exchange for my regular Monday afternoons of semi-skilled labor on his farm. Why wasn’t it totally awesome that I was so thriftily arresting the decline of the zuchinni and thrusting it into suspended animation in neatly measured flat ziplock bags? This wasn’t funny at all. Or, not at the time.
Canning is about memory, too. Pickled peaches are that August night when Kyoko and I, roommates for that year back on the homestead, blanched a box of Colorado peaches and the skins wouldn’t come off and we had to use our fingernails. The juice from the yellow peach meat stung the cuts from intensive gardening on our hands and arms and the blanching water turned a delicate, well, peach, color. Peach melba, actually. While we struggled with the hard peaches and boiled sweet vinegar brine and crammed big, naked, glistening golden peaches into regular-mouth mason jars, our boyfriends watched some “based on a true story” movie about Afghani women under the Taliban. While the men surreptitiously sniffled and choked, Kyoko and I looked on from our bright kitchen and made rude comments. Several months later the peaches went bad and we had to throw them all out. It was like that scene in that dreadfully racist movie *Holiday Inn* where the jars explode and peach guts rain down from the ceiling. It was the only thing I’ve ever canned that went bad. I think it was either the assault we waged on the peach skins with our fingernails, or else bad karma from being disrespectful about the well-intentioned but regrettable movie.

Peeling garlic is repetitive and soothing and allows for good thinking. It’s intricate enough to offer a mental reward when the paper skin comes cleanly away from the clove but it’s simple enough to permit meandering thoughts, in a way that filling hot sterile jars with boiling, blinding pickle brine is not. Peeling garlic, slicing cucumbers and onions for bread and butter pickles, gives me a lot of time to think about the career path I’ve chosen. When I think about work and cooking, I have to think about my actual field and the career I have deliberately chosen. As I worked my way through this summer’s produce, I found myself
thinking more and more about a different kind of preservation. I’m a folklorist, right? I’m supposed to care about cultural preservation. I’m supposed to believe in it, right?

My compulsive food preservation sits uneasily next to my ambiguous feelings about cultural preservation. As a folklorist I spend a lot of time thinking about dying traditions. This used to make me very upset. Reading about the dying-off of the last few well-known American ballad singers whose repertory traced back to medieval Europe used to make me want to grab a banjo and hustle down to Appalachia to save that poor tradition. I would imagine those toothless mountain grandmas, standing over their stoves, canning their green beans, and belting out “Omie Wise” or “The Two Sisters” from beginning to end, all fifty verses learned from their grandmother’s memory seventy years ago when they were tiny girls. Their own grandchildren, more interested in Eminem than their own essential mountain culture, would fail to pass on these ballads, and someone needed to step in. I would do it—I would learn these songs, sing them and record them. I would instill pride in these people for their precious folk culture. These people would like me, and thank me for my work, and I would take their songs to the Library of Congress, and enshrine them for Future Generations. I might also perform some of these songs, and when I did, I would make it clear to the audience that I had learned this song from a traditional American ballad singer, which would clearly make my performance authentic and real.

I also worried about folk dancing. I think I became a folklorist in part because of those “pioneer days” units in grade school, where we dressed up like imaginary rural 19th-century white people. I really got into it. I felt passionately about learning to schoodish and polka, feeling certain that it was far more meaningful and wholesome than dancing the hammer dance, courtesy of MC Hammer, which is what girls did during recess when it
wasn’t “pioneer days.” Ruffled skirts and blouses, “slacks” and western shirts—surely that was just plain *better* than Zubaz and crop tops? It never crossed my mind that this was, perhaps, a piece of racist thinking quietly instilled into my receptive mind. That, perhaps, I was clinging to a piece of the past, nostalgically longing for an imagined “good old days” when white culture and values were unquestionably dominant.

I worried about lutefisk and drinking songs and riddling contests and blacksmiths. In college I was saddened that our bars had no traditional midwestern bar foods—no pickled eggs, no pickled pigs feet—just frozen pizza and “warm nuts.” I was depressed that no one sang “Show Me the Way to Go Home” at bartime anymore. I didn’t notice all of the contemporary traditions happening around me, and maybe that was the problem—I was only looking for the romantic dying or endangered traditions. I was focused on the need to *preserve*. I needed to *save* traditions, ways of life, in the way that I now save food.

Now, I just can’t muster up grief for a dying tradition. I can’t get worked up the way I used to. In an oral tradition class last year a PhD journalism student let it be known that it was his goal to keep a particular epic tradition alive in a city in Kyrgyzstan. He was so passionate, so concerned for someone else’s tradition that he felt was so precious that I almost didn’t contradict him. But all I could think of was, who cares? Apparently the Kyrgyz don’t, so who was he to insist that they must keep practicing this epic tradition? So I said (ostensibly to the class, but really to him): “But to play the devil’s advocate, is it really a good idea to try to save a dying tradition? Isn’t it dying for a reason? It wouldn’t die if it was fulfilling some kind of function, or meeting some kind of need, so isn’t it purposeless to the community?” I kept my voice neutral and friendly and offhand, didn’t say the word “orientalism.” I was very passive-aggressive.
And he said: “But it’s this rich cultural tradition, and if it’s lost, it’s lost forever. It’s this incredibly intricate art form that takes a lifetime to master. Kids are turning to graffiti and pop music and just ignoring their own heritage. I think it needs to be preserved for the greater good.”

And I kept my mouth shut. But I still think about it.

As a folklorist in a graduate program, I know that folklore does not exist in a vacuum. I also know that folklore is “artistic communication in small groups,” according to Dan Ben Amos’ definition, the one most commonly used here at Mizzou. I know that every piece of folklore fills a need, and performs a function. When a piece of folklore ceases to meet a need or fill a function, it either evolves, or disappears from everyday use. I know that folklore is not dying—not remotely! As a folklorist, I know that folklore is not static, and that we ought not to expect to find eighteenth century traditions in twenty first century America because those traditions have evolved to fit changing needs. But I also know that the field of folkloristics is heavily invested in cultural preservation.

My own investment in preserving has given me a perspective on cultural preservation that begins to disturb me. Preservation is preservation, and these two practices share some commonalities. I am troubled by what I found.

When you preserve fruit, let’s say preserved plums, you must take every precaution against spoilage and bacterial growth. You must sterilize the mason jars, as well as your instruments. Each plum must be perfect—no bruises, no insect damage, no splits. Bruises and cuts can harbor bacteria that can quickly blossom into deadly botulism. You must wash the fruit carefully so that no residual germs on the skins go into the jar. The syrup in which you pack your plums has to be very sweet, and very very hot. You must move quickly at all
times. Plums should be preserved the day you buy them, preferably the day they were picked. Every hour you wait is an hour for your plums to degrade, an hour for bacteria to multiply. During the preserving process you must be attentive and swift. You must fill the jars, add the syrup, and cap the jar with the hot, sterile lid before a critical mass of airborne contaminants can settle onto your fruit. You must fill all your jars quickly so that you can get them into the canning kettle, where the jars will be boiled (“processed”), which facilitates sterilization and promotes the all-important vacuum seal.

I started to feel troubled about my field when I realized that cultural preservation can be a lot like canning. Cultural practices can be canned—arrested in their development, scrubbed clean, doused with sugar, and crammed into a package, making them consumable for the desired audience. Great care is taken to select the best, most perfect specimens for display. Consider institutions like Colonial Williamsburg or Wisconsin’s Folklore Village. Artists, musicians, cooks, livestock experts, and storytellers are put on display in order to preserve their particularly traditional art forms. These art forms are culled from largely dead traditions, and they don’t change. They are removed from their evolving context and will remain static. These individuals on display are highly selected—they are the most attractive, undamaged, undiseased (and I mean that in many senses), unblemished specimens to be found. Human forms of rot and insect damage like mental illness, addiction, poverty, hatred and ignorance are carefully avoided in this packaging of culture. Nostalgia sweetens the package and smoothes over issues like domestic violence, racism, a history of slavery. Like my mason jars, these institutions for cultural preservation are sterile. They are free from the bacteria that will cause growth and spoilage and potential death.
Perhaps some kinds of preservation just shouldn’t happen. Take my pantry, for example. No one wants my pickled turnips, especially not me. This jar has been hanging around for years. Pickled turnips are strange to me—bitter, sour, salty—and when you open the jar they smell like farts. I’ve had delicious pickled turnips, and these are not delicious to me. It’s an adapted Korean recipe and somehow there is simply no cultural context for these pickled turnips in my Midwestern life. Pickled beets belong on festal tables in cut glass bowls or in salad bars. Bread and butter pickles belong on ham sandwiches, and in tuna salad. Pickled peppers belong on antipasto. Dilly beans belong in bloody marys, along with the pickled onions, which can also go on a relish tray or in a martini. But in my world, pickled turnips have no cultural meaning attached to them. They’re too weird by themselves and I am ashamed to open a jar in front of other people because of the fart smell. I made them in a fit of optimism. I had turnips, they were in season, and I had jars and salt and vinegar. I couldn’t let them go—even though I hate turnips I couldn’t bear to exclude them from my shelves. Clearly, though, it was a mistake. Liking the idea of pickled turnips was not a sufficient reason for pickling them. Trying to preserve a traditional practice for which there is no cultural context, no cultural need, seems as risky as pickling turnips beyond your level of experience.

You might ask why I’m a folklorist if I am so negative about all of this. Folklorists have often been guilty of a romanticism of the “folk,” which more and more scholars are thankfully debunking for its racist, paternalist baggage. We are the folk, as folklorist Alan Dundes reminds us. All of us. You, me, the gas station attendant, the realtor, the professor and the social worker. These days, folklorists don’t get to tell groups what folklore is worth preserving and what is worth pretending never existed. We try to accept the fact that quilting
and anti-Semitic jokes are both forms of contemporary folklore. I’m a folklorist because I love folklore—live folklore, dead folklore, any kind of folklore. Which really means that I love thinking about how groups of people make meaning in their lives. And I love folklore because it consistently resists the normative, dominant mainstream. I love folklore because it can show us the best sides of ourselves and the worst sides of ourselves. What I don’t love is unexamined nostalgia.

Preserving food is safer than preserving culture. Despite the compulsive aspects of my food preservation work, I think it is healthier that I expend my desire to capture, freeze, exhibit and consume on fruits and vegetables, rather than somebody else’s culture. It’s better for my fantasy life to be about saving nectarines and roma tomatoes, rather than an imagined, impoverished, eternally grateful Other.

But in the meantime, I have “discovered” my own blemished, imperfect culture and I’m going to tell you why I study it. Prisons brought my family to Brooklyn, Wisconsin, to that temporary way of life that shaped me forever. Were it not for prisons, I never would have grown up where I did. And If I hadn’t grown up where I did, I wouldn’t be me, and I wouldn’t be telling you this.
Whenever I hear someone say, “Yes, Virginia, there really is a Santa Claus,” I blush. Here’s why:

At Christmas, when I was about nine, I was sitting around my grandparents’ kitchen table, listening to the adults talk. My sister and I were the only children in the extended family at that time, so we spent a lot of our time listening to adults talk. My mother must have brought up *Miracle on 34th Street* (her favorite) and uttered that accursed, obligatory line. This sent my grandma Dick and Uncle Paul down the rabbit hole of Christmas-time reminiscence into a very special world: Wisconsin’s Central State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

“Remember whatshisname? With the postcards?”

“Oh hell! Virginia!”

“Because every time he wanted to write “vagina” he wrote “Virginia”!

“Vagina! Bwahahahaha! Yes, Vagina, there really is a Santa Claus”

And they were off. Moving eventually from the man who wrote filthy (but easily identifiable) anonymous postcards to female employees, to the couple from Oshkosh who built a sound-proofed shed behind their house where they raped, tortured, and killed young women for years before they were caught, to the ex-boxer who’d “had his bell rung too many times” and suffered from some kind of racist tourettes syndrome, causing terrific racial unrest on the ward floor.

My two main responses to this talk, as I remember it, were embarrassment and laughter. Embarrassment at my grandfather’s liberal use of the word “vagina,” embarrassment at hearing my grandfather, uncle, mother, father, step-grandma, talk about
violent and deviant sexual behavior. And laughing, laughing, laughing, at the elegently timed
punchlines, the elaborate imitations of inmates’ tics, speech patterns, facial expressions…

I remember coffee and pumpkin pie with Kool-whip and the ticking of the clock; I
remember crumbs on the tablecloth and the chlorinated city water that always tasted so
foreign to me; I remember an immense sense of Christmas-time well-being that probably
only exists in retrospect.

I remember other times, alone at the farm with my other grandfather for two hours
every day after school before my grandma got home from work, playing endless games of
crazy 8s (all we ever played), watching him light, and re-light and re-light his pipe, and
listening to him talk about the times before he retired. Listening to his stories about messing
with authority—embarrassing the sergeant, playing a joke on a lieutenant—and the sad stuff,
about girls who set themselves on fire in protest, or the Christmasses he missed because he
was working.

I remember “family campouts” back when that was still said ironically, back before
most people had families yet, when my parents’ friends would descend on an unsuspecting
county park, set up camp and drink, smoke pot, listen to loud music, play guitar and sing, and
tell stories.

I was surrounded by prisons and stories about prisons.

My mother’s father worked as a social worker for the Wisconsin Department of
Corrections, specializing in work with violent sex offenders. My mother’s brother, my Uncle
Paul, worked as a corrections officer since he was 19 years old. My mother’s best friend
worked as one of the early ground-breaking female corrections officers, getting fired,
contesting her firing on grounds of sex descrimination, getting her job back and working for
25 more years before retiring in 2011. My father’s father worked as a corrections officer until he retired unwillingly at age 64. My erstwhile godfather, my Uncle Paul’s life-long best friend, like my uncle, has been a corrections officer for his entire working life.

...

Prisons are a way of life in my family.

Here is an illustration. When he was a kid, my father and his family used to go bowling at “The Walls” in downtown Waupun, Wisconsin. The inmates would set the pins; the officers and their families would bowl. My father also went to church at the Fox Lake Correctional Facility because Ozzie, the chaplain there, was the son of the Lutheran minister who ran the orphanage where my grandfather was raised; my father was named after the Ozzie’s brother and my uncle Jon was named after the Ozzie’s other brother. This was done out of the respect and love my grandfather had for the man who ran his “home” institution, but my grandfather, who really liked Ozzie best out of the three brothers, couldn’t bear to name a son “Oswald.” My dad used to hang around the walls of the prison waiting for fly balls to come over the prison walls during daily exercise. My father and his family, along with dozens of other officers and their families, square danced at this prison, as members of “the Prison City Squares.” In Waupun, Wisconsin, Fox Lake, Wisconsin, Oshkosh, Wisconsin and Oakfield Wisconsin, prisons are a way of life.

I never really understood the disconnect between prison guards in movies (Cool Hand Luke, etc) and the prison guards in my family.
As an eight-year old insomniac, I used to kneel on my bed at three, four, five in the morning, watching through the deep country dark across the slope of the lawn, down through the trees, across the fields and out to the highway, half a mile away, watching headlights on highway 92. I rarely felt isolated by how far out we lived, by how far away the nearest neighbors, my grandparents, were; instead, I felt protected and sheltered from the eyes of the outside world. I had a buffer of forty acres, wrapping me in the safety and security of the trees and grasses and rocks and berries, between me and the road, that first bastion of the loud, aggressive, world of people beyond my immediate family, people who judged and did not understand. But on rare occasions, mostly when I couldn’t sleep or had had nightmares, I would stare out through my fear, searching for pinprick headlights, imagining my grandfather driving to work. On those nights the woods were very deep, the dark was hiding unknown violence and danger, I wasn’t even safe in my safest of havens—the bed I loved, in the room I loved, in the house I loved like I loved my own body, in the yard that was a capacious, wild kingdom that my sister and I ruled like wild and despotic monarchs, surrounded by the woods and fields that I knew, I knew as well as I knew the pathways of my repetitive, racing mind.

I knew my grandfather worked as a guard at Oakhill; it wasn’t until I was practically a teenager that I realized the word “Oakhill” had a meaning beyond the name of the prison, that it meant “Oak Hill” and was, in fact, a slope of oak trees that housed the minimum security correctional facility. As a child, it was just “Oakhill,” a word that sounded like “Oh,
kill” and contained a smack of wearily controlled violence that did not disturb me any more than anything else, dangerous or otherwise, disturbed my anxious childhood.

My Grandpa Richard went to work very, very early (“Way before you even wake up,” my mother said), which was why I watched for distant, sparse headlights. Each moving speck of light, glimpsed flickeringly through gaps in the intervening trees and hills might have been him. I, awake in my bed in the dark at the top of the house on the hill, was watching out for him, who was surely equally lonely and wakeful, hating to get up in these dull, endless hours before dawn. (After he retired, my grandfather slept until 9, even 9:30, every morning, unless he was dragged from bed by my vigorous, manic grandmother.) If I watched for him from my bedroom window, it must be some kind of comfort for him, even if he didn’t know it. I was a lonely guardian, watching through the night, sharing my grandfather’s pre-dawn penance as he drove to prison.

Oakhill, where my grandfather worked, wasn’t always Oakhill. It was founded in 1941\(^3\) as the Wisconsin School for Girls, and that was what it was when he transferred there in 1970. He transferred there from the Fox Lake Correctional Institution; for the first two years he lived in an apartment in Oregon, while my grandmother and four of the five children stayed back on the farm in Oakfield. My grandmother tells me he wrote her passionate letters during that time of separation, though I find this hard to believe. Maybe I will see those letters some day; part of me wants to, and part of me hopes I never see them. My father remembers his father’s apartment in Oregon, because my father was a freshmen in college at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Sometimes he would borrow his father’s car. Sometimes it feels uncomfortable to think of my domestic, homebody grandfather living

\(^3\) http://www.wi-doc.com/oakhill.htm
alone in an apartment (an apartment! That urban symbol of decadence and freedom! We are house-dwelling rural people with heavy agrarian responsibilities; we don’t have apartments, even if we live in shacks.) and uncomfortable for me to think of my father, 18 years old, seeing his father in an apartment (my father, who was living in the same dormitory, Ogg Hall, where I would live, thirty years later when I was a freshmen at the UW-Madison). But then, I remember when my father was living in an apartment with my sister, during the upheaval between losing the house and my parents deciding to live together again.

I don’t know why my grandfather transferred, exactly. More money, a move up the DOC ladder, my father says. But my father also says they were happy in Oakhill, his brother and sisters didn’t want to leave. My grandfather told me, over and over, that one of the biggest regrets in his life was that he moved the family before his oldest daughter graduated. She would’ve been the valedictorian of her class in her old high school, but her new high school was much, much larger, and so she wasn’t the valedictorian; she didn’t graduate with her friends, and she spent a miserable year in Oregon High School, alone and resentful. He should have waited, he said. He should have let her stay.

But when my grandfather transferred to the Girl’s School (as he always called it), he bought a new farm (without his wife’s permission). It was 250 acres of woods, fields, even a marsh. Sure, the house didn’t have running water or electricity, and sure, it was falling apart and filthy after having been inhabited by Norwegian Bachelor Farmers (my family said these words like it was a genre or species, a classification of person easily recognizable by their clothing, customs, and living conditions), but it was cheap, and my grandfather, denizen of the Lutheran orphanage, child of the Depression, liked things that were cheap.
That move, that farm, shaped my life. My parents bought the back 10 acres of that farm for $250 an acre in 1975. They lived on that land, first in a bread truck, cooking over a campfire, then in a hole in the ground covered by a tarp. Then, by Christmas of 1975, the hole in the hillside had a tar paper roof and rock walls and glass windows facing south. My mom and dad, aunts and uncles, friends and acquaintances, built the house by hand. They planted apple and pear trees; they got dogs (the Bad Dogs, Megan and Grace, who were expelled from our Eden before I was born for chasing cows and eating chickens). By the time I was born in 1980, my father had built a wooden floor, my uncle Greg (the husband of the sister who didn’t get to be valedictorian, who never finished college) had built beautiful kitchen cabinets and a butcher block counter, there was a bathtub (originally a bathtub, then converted to a stock watering tank, then converted back to a bathtub), and, when I arrived, they had electricity run the half-mile from the road.

That house, that land, shaped me. The story of building the house (all those beautiful long-haired, half-naked men and women with their shovels and hammers and guitars and flutes) shaped me. The rocks—huge, colorful, hauled in wheelbarrows and pickup truck loads from the corners of the property—that formed the walls of the earth-sheltered downstairs, shaped me. The floor I played on was laid board by board by my father and it shaped my hands and knees as I crawled and walked and played and danced on it. The woodstove that kept us warm in the Wisconsin winter shaped me—and shaped my sister, who was named Laurel, subliminally, we think, because the name of the stove in raised letters was “Wood Laurel!” but no one noticed it until she was two years old. We had no neighbors except for my grandparents. No other kids to play with, no stores to walk to, no sidewalk. We lived an iconoclastic, back-to-the-land lifestyle and I took it seriously. The
person I am today is the person who was shaped by that weird homemade house (it ultimately looked like a pagoda; red, and multi-roofed), by the huge lawn and fierce garden and the woods. The stories my family told themselves about themselves were the stories I used to shape my beliefs about myself and about my family. And since many of those stories were funny, and since many of these stories were about prisons, I now find myself trying to explain my worldview to outsiders, without much luck.

... 

Being surrounded by prisons didn’t seem weird to me, growing up. I never saw the inside of a prison, I only heard about them. I’ve still never been inside a prison. I think about prisons, I talk about prisons, I ask questions about prisons, I read about prisons, I write about prisons, and I know a lot, but I don’t still don’t know prisons.

Most afternoons between the ages of 7 and 14 I got off the school bus and sat with my grandfather. We would sit at the table with its ragged vinyl tablecloth playing crazy eights or just talking. The way I remember it, my grandfather talked and I listened. He would smoke his pipe and talk, and his talk was inextricably wound tight to the maintenance of the pipe—filling, tamping, lighting, sucking, knocking out the ashes, cleaning, refilling, relighting. He told me stories mostly about his work and his childhood and my father’s childhood. Most of his work stories were funny; he told stories about getting the best of his bosses, he told stories about “good guys” he worked with, and “real knuckleheads” who made his life difficult.
The work stories he didn’t tell me until I asked for them: first responder and cutting down three hanging suicides, getting attacked by an inmate, trying to save the life of a young woman who set herself on fire. My grandmother told me that some days he came home and went straight to bed. Didn’t eat, didn’t talk, just went to sleep. She perceived this as “a bad time at work that day,” but I now want to link it to what I recognize as his anxiety and depression.

Why did my grandfather work in prison? I asked my dad why:

Mark Schmidt: Yeah, I think he was a smart guy but he was working in the system. I don’t think he was ever very opposed to it, but he chose that career and he chose security. I think that's one thing he did not have growing up, was security in his life, and so security was a big issue. And so in my own life it's almost just the opposite. You're probably the security-minded one because of your insecurity. Olive⁴ is going to be like me, she's going to go out there and do something different instead of looking for security.

…

My paternal grandfather died in the summer of 2007, and his absence changed the way we saw the world. When Wisconsin’s anti-union governor Scott Walker set out in 2011 to eliminate collective bargaining for state workers, a lot of us in my family thought about my grandfather and how furious he would have been. My own father is not entirely pro-

⁴ My two-year-old daughter, condemned by her grandfather to a life of creativity.
union, but he still believes in unions. Thinking about his father and thinking about his father’s union, my dad told me,

Mark Schmidt: I don't know, I just – I think, you know, I've been thinking about this a lot lately, in the last couple of months, with the ending of the Union collective bargaining stuff, because when I want to talk to people about the benefits, you know, it really – I think it was really clear that my father was not working in the prison because he enjoyed the work. He was doing his due diligence to take care of his family by providing a reasonably decent wage with benefits like health care that took care of his family. He was willing to be a prison guard because of the benefits that were extended to his family. I think he found that being a prison guard, having that job, was a way that he could do that for his family. I don't think he ever enjoyed that work, and that was – to me, that's a little inspiring on my end. I don't think I quite live up to that, but it's something to aspire to, working at something you dislike just for the benefit of someone else. That was his life. So I'm surprised that more people in the state don't appreciate that effort by state workers. I don't think that there's that many guys that really like driving that snow plow, sometimes, or the garbage truck. And they don't do it just because of the wage. They do it for the other benefits that come from that. So that's my political thing. I think that stretches to even some things like working in the automotive factories, for GM or Ford, you know. You work, and you do that job for the benefits as much as it is for the wage that you get. And so I think it's a sad day in American politics when the benefits disappear from peoples' employment. I think it's retreating in social organization. You know, severely.
I, too, think it is inspiring to think about how much my grandfather gave up in order to make a steady living and provide health and life insurance and a retirement pension for his wife. My father, in opposition to his father’s stolid insistence on security, has taken risks and chances and gambles, and on one hand, these choices have put financial and emotional pressure on our family. But on the other hand, despite his steady job, my own grandfather’s family was always broke and in debt, too—just as my parents have always been. Only in their late 60s did my grandparents become debt-free. And ultimately, I think I’m glad for my father that he chose freedom, rather than prison work. What my parents’ free-wheeling lifestyle cost us in security was more than made up by the exhilarating possibilities, choices, and dreams they hung onto and shared with their daughters. If my grandfather had dreams, he kept them locked away.

…

We have many social workers in my family, as well. Not only my maternal grandfather, but also my sister-in-law and my sister. They all work in mental health, which is funny, since our family has plenty of mental health issues. They know it’s funny too, and they joke about it. And although they don’t really “need” me the way I’ve decided prison workers “need” me to publicly redeem them, I think their humor styles are risky, problematic, artistic and fascinating, like prison workers’.

My own choice to become an academic who studies the labor of others is influenced by the institutions that shaped my family. Because my grandfather was an orphan who grew up hungry during the depression, he sought the stability and security in institutions that he
first found in his final orphanage. His wife, my grandmother, who was raised by a violent and sadistic tavern-owner, saw stability and salvation in my steady grandfather. Because their son, my father, is on a lifelong quest to change the world and express himself through architecture, he chooses risk and rebellion and experimentation and aspires to live entirely outside of institutions. Because my paternal grandfather was forced to go to college by his upper middle class parents, he chose a low-status career in social work in retaliation, while retaining the middle-class individualism they espoused. Because his wife, my grandmother, was chronically depressed and under employed, my mother seeks fulfillment and happiness in individualism that has no room for steady employment. My parents’ continuous financial instability makes me crave the security of an institution, while my own middle-class individualism refuses to labor on behalf of someone else’s pocket book. Academia gives me the confinement and security of a correctional institution with the status of education. I’ll never get rich, and I’ll never make anyone else rich, but I can preserve, and I can can, and I can write about the people I love within the discipline I also love.
Chapter 1: Occupational Folklore and Humor: The Field as it Stands

At the outset of this enterprise, it is necessary to define the terms that will be used throughout this dissertation. I will draw on several definitions of humor (notoriously difficult to define), beginning with Mahadev E. Apte’s holistic definition of humor from *Humor and Laughter: an Anthropological Approach* as

First, a cognitive, often unconscious experience involving internal redefining of sociocultural reality and resulting in a mirthful state of mind…second to external sociocultural factors that trigger this cognitive experience; third, the pleasure derived from the cognitive experience labeled ‘humor’ and fourth, the external manifestations of the cognitive experience and the resultant pleasure, expressed through mirthful laughter and smiling. (Apte 14)

In addition to this definition, since I find humor to be a distinctly communicative form of artistic expression, I draw on Elliot Oring’s definition of humor in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, which describes humor as “a distinct form of communication involving comical or amusing ideas and situations” (374). For the purposes of this essay I will define the practical joke via *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia* as “based upon the creation or exploitation of a situation in which participants have differential access to information about what is going on” (587).

In this dissertation I will define occupational humor as those forms of humor, including joke-telling, observational humor, humorous anecdotes, mimicry, art and material culture (i.e. gag gifts, improvisational sculptures, etc) that are performed in the work
environment, or that relate to the job in imaginative content. When I use the term “power,” I am referring to force, generally psychological but at times physical, exerted by means of authority, control, or influence, exerted on an individual or a group by another individual or group, or by a social institution. When I use the term “work” I am referring to labor (physical, clerical, creative) performed by an individual or group of individuals, most often, but not necessarily, for money, within an economic system. I use the occupations of social worker and prison worker to illustrate many of the examples in this essay. I will use the term “oral performance,” noted by Foley, to entail oral composition, oral performance, and aural reception (2002 39), to describe the communicative interactions (in this exploration, often humorous, including jokes, mimicry, impersonation, “shaggy dog stories,” or observational humor, as well as less humorous forms, including urban legends and other cautionary tales, proverbs, etc) that are both traditional, emergent and immanent in their performance and reception. Finally, for the purposes of this dissertation I will define folklore broadly as “artistic communication in small groups,” per Dan Ben Amos, but will also draw upon Jan Brunvand’s clumsier but more specific definition found in The Study of American Folklore. Brunvand asserts, “Folklore is those materials in culture that circulate traditionally among members of any group in different versions, whether oral form or by means of customary example, as well as the processes of traditional performance and communication” (15).

My own project emphasizes the significance of occupational humor, a frequently overlooked category, and suggests that the performance of humor is quite serious in its effects and in the powerful roles that it plays in an occupational context. Power is often at the heart of humor, along with anxiety and ambivalence, and I contend that participation in
workplace laughter—or “unlaughter”—is a significant factor in occupational processes of power, authority and control.

**Occupational Lore**

Scholars of occupational folklore often take the work of legendary labor-lore expert, Archie Green, as their starting point. Green’s important work (including *Only a Miner* [1972] *Wobblies, Pile Butts and Other Heroes* [1993] and *Tin Men* [2002]) has shaped the current field of occupational folklore. Other influential studies of occupational folklore include Pat Mullen’s *I Heard The Old Fishermen Say*, Tim Tangherlini’s *Talking Trauma*, Jack Santino’s *Miles of Smiles*, Robert McCarl’s *The District of Columbia Fire Fighter’s Project*, the collection *By Land and By Sea* edited by Abrahams, Goldstein and Hand, and Robert H. Byington’s *Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklife*. Given the clearly acknowledged political agendas of many scholars of occupational folklore, most studies of occupations tend toward the (at times uncomplicated) celebratory. Certainly the majority of studies of occupational folklore are written by men, about stereotypically male occupations, and tend to be uncritical celebrations of American working class masculinity. While Santino and Tangherlini endeavor to complicate their studies in terms of race, class and gender, there is a great deal of room in this sub-field for development. Currently, there is still a strong tendency of scholars to focus on the traditions of physical labor performed by working class men. Much of Green’s work, and that of the next generation of occupational folklorists (including Toelken, Leary, Tahgherlini, McCarl), examined the ways that big business and bosses exert power over workers, and celebrated the ways those workers have employed folklore to fight exploitation. It is important to approach, study, and present
occupational culture with respect but I think studies of occupational lore need to be more nuanced and complex. While it is certainly important to interrogate the ways folklore can empower “the little guy,” to me a more interesting and less studied (as well as less romanticized) question is, in what ways is folklore used to control that little guy/gal? One might also ask, in what ways do “rank and file” workers of middle class jobs use folklore to exert power over others in their occupational setting? This setting could involve managed populations like patients, inmates, or students, sub-groups of workers with similar occupational status, or bosses who represent the face of the institution (both the commercial office or government institution, as well as the more all-encompassing social institutions of capitalism and modernity that produce established order and attempt to regulate all aspects of the worker’s life). My own research focuses on the occupational traditions of social workers and prison workers, and this essay reflects that focus.

It is important to note that when one group maintains power over another group, this can be a physical action, in occupations such as prison work, military work, police work, or childcare, where bodies are physically restrained or constrained, or it can be a psychological action, in occupations such as social work, teaching, government, or organizational supervision. Obviously, the distinction between physical and psychological control is not always clear, and some occupations, like prison work, teaching, police work and social work use both physical and psychological methods to maintain control over populations. In all of these situations, however, folklore is an under-studied tool in how groups maintain power over other groups, particularly in occupational settings.

In my efforts to understand how individuals wield power over others in occupational contexts, I have turned to writings of Michel de Certeau, focusing particularly on *The
Practice of Everyday Life. Certeau usefully delineates the ways in which the individual employs “popular” tactics (recognizable to the ethnographer as folklore) to resist ultimate control by institutional processes. Certeau observes the ways that “order is tricked by art” (26)—or, I would suggest, folklore—to allow the economic diversion of time and intellectual loyalty away from the institution, and redirected toward the worker’s chosen community.⁵

Certeau describes this practice as *la perruque*:

*La perruque* is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job… *La perruque* actually divest time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit. In the very place where the machine he must serve reigns supreme, he cunningly takes pleasure in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his *work* and to confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family through *spending* his time in this way. With the complicity of other workers (who thus defeat the competition the factory tries to instill among them), he succeeds in “putting one over” on the established order” (26).

Within this practice, Certeau finds social exchange, technical invention, moral resistance, aesethetics, and a refusal of living beings to be treated as objects. I do not want to uncritically embrace Certeau’s at times over-convenient conceptions of modernity and everyday work,

⁵ Most supportive for this dissertation is Certeau’s call upon the “authority of ethnological or folklore studies” (26) to collect and study the linguistic and material artifacts that people within governmental and commercial offices, as well as museums and academia, produce in their efforts to divert their time and intellect from institutional order, thus becoming active producers rather than passive consumers of corporate goods.
but I think that his understanding of *la perruque* is useful when considering the ways folklore relates to issues of power in the workplace. When the power is exerted by the worker against the institution, *la perruque* can be a communicative tactic of artistic refusal, which I would describe as folklore. When power is exerted by one worker over another worker, *la perruque* can become a weapon, since one employee can turn in another employee for misuse of company or institutional time. When power is exerted by a worker over a member of a managed population, *la perruque* may function as an act of performed solidarity with the managed population, rather than with the institution responsible for the managing. This may occur in a shared recognition between an inmate and a prison guard, for example, that both individuals use artistic tactics to steal their time from the institution—perhaps the prisoner in manufacturing alcohol or drugs, and the guard in writing elaborate Christmas cards or comedy routines for the consumption of his/her fellow officer or family members. Whether or not the inmate and the guard see themselves as in alliance doing these things will, of course, depend on the institution and the individuals involved.

When maintaining power over a group of people is a physical process, as in prison work, folklore at times functions to reinforce institutional control (the opposite effect of *la perruque*), and at other times, to ease institutional boundaries. Folklore can work both ways—as a tool of resistance and escape, but also as a tool of social conformity—as Bascom points out in his “Four Functions of Folklore.” Traditional stories of violence or consequences—cautionary tales or urban legends—and other forms of oral folklore circulated among prison guards, low-ranking social workers, and even inmates and mental health clients, can work to encourage individuals to manage themselves out of fear or accommodation. These types of folklore may help an inmate or a client to internalize forms of control and see them as
natural, normative, or common-sense. Other forms of artistic communication, such as individual manipulation of regulated dress (uniforms), can reinforce the ability of a prison guard or a soldier to intimidate others, or can permit an inmate to perform an illicit gender identity, which resists authoritarian power. Individuals often use folklore to manipulate their experience of power, as Certeau argues.

Institutions and offices “work” because they are based on relationships between people, and the difference between official rules and actual practices often identifies the territory of folklore. New prison employees must learn to differentiate which rules are actually enforced and which rules are bent in order to fulfill their function of maintaining order in the prison; actual practices are communicated through stories, cautionary tales, coded speech, and by example, not through official lines of institutional communication. In most prisons, guards tell stories to other guards; inmates tell stories to other inmates; guards also tell stories to inmates, and inmates also tell stories to guards. These processes, certainly artistic communication in small groups, allow the institution to continue to function, and allow the prison workers to perform their job—keeping inmates under institutional control. As scholars like Bruce Jackson and Gresham Sykes note, inmates, of course, also use stories and traditional practices to achieve a sense of a modicum of control in the prison setting, by making guards and other staff the butt of jokes.

In his study of Pullman porters, *Miles of Smiles*, Jack Santino explores the ways porters navigated a racist job context, using folklore to mask the ways that the porters exerted the power that came with the job description. By interposing folklore (including the deployment of traditional occupational verbal art, jokes, performance of an assumed persona, mimicry, and other strategies) between customers being managed and the porter, doing the
managing, the porter retains his ability to perform his job—to be in charge and wield institutionally sanctioned power within the occupational context—while blinding the potentially racist white customer to this fact. The need to use folklore to hide one’s power is, of course, a testimony to ingrained institutional racism, but as Santino notes, the porters were in charge, and certainly did wield power over their white clients, even though the white customers would say, if asked, that they were in power, managing the black porters. The oppositional dynamic between the powerful professional forced to earn a living within the racist institution contributes to the need for the performance of folklore to act as a dynamic mechanism by which occupational power can be wielded.

Many occupational folklore studies, like Santino’s *Miles of Smiles* could benefit from postcolonial analysis, although few, if any, have done so. Issues of power and control, domination and resistance are critical factors to explore. As postcolonial scholars like Fanon, Bhabha, and McClintock have shown, wielding unjust power affects not only those who are ruled unjustly, but those who rule. Thus, the psychological damage of colonialism and imperialism acts both on the colonizer and the colonized. This dynamic of psychological impacts may serve to illuminate issues of suspect power in occupational contexts. At times, occupations demand employees to exert power over other people in ways that may be ethically or morally unjust. I contend that at these times, folklore often assumes a coping function (or, in Bascom’s words, an “escape in fantasy from the repressions imposed…by society” [343]). Forms of folklore such as jokes, storytelling, mimicry, occupational material culture (cubicle art, etc) can, I suggest, work to allow the employee a temporary escape from the position of being the person in institutional power wielding questionable authority with potentially unethical results, and allow the individual to temporarily be excused from these
duties and assume an alternate identity, or to rationalize their use of power. An example of this may be found in Ted Conover’s journalistic participant-observer study, *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*. Conover observes prison guard occupational humor, exemplified in the joke, “How do you know an inmate is lying? When you see him open his mouth.” As I will discuss in greater detail later in this dissertation, I contend that this particular joke allows prison guards to temporarily imagine themselves in a world of binaries, where all inmates are guilty liars, and all guards are their moral superiors. This instance of occupational folklore allows temporary psychological escape for the employee and relieves some of the societal pressure to perform a job that many agree is ethically ambiguous at best.

**Ethical Ethnography**

Ethnographic studies that involve fieldwork with family might include Anand Prahlad’s essay “Getting the Butter From the Duck: Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions in an Afro-American Family” which draws on interviews with the author’s mother and grandmother, as well as much of Barre Toelken’s work with the coyote stories told to him by Yellowman, his uncle by marriage. The scholarship of Margaret Yocum, Karen Baldwin, Steven Zeitlin, and Kathryn Morgan, beginning in the 1970s has demonstrated to the academy that there is nothing “lazy” or unscholarly about studying one’s own family folklore, contrary to early twentieth-century anthropological convention. By “friends” I am speaking about individuals connected socially by mutual affection. Falling within this

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6 Before attempting to resolve this question, it is necessary to explain what I mean by “family, friends and community.” By “family” I am speaking about individuals that may share blood ties with the ethnographer, but also share emotional ties that reflect a shared family worldview. This definition includes synthetic kinship ties that are more intimate and based in mutual acknowledged responsibility than conventional “friendship.”
category is Karen McCarthy Brown’s ethnographic study of Vodou in Brooklyn (Mama Lola), which involves a sort of friendship with her informant, Mama Lola; however, this friendship was clearly complicated by the economic dimension of their relationship as collaborators, in addition to their disparate social class. Finally, I will use Dundes’s definition of “folk group” as “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor…a member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity” (1980 7). Dundes’s definition is quite broad but provides a place to start talking about insider/outsider status and responsibility during ethnography.

What does it mean to conduct ethical ethnography? This question is two-fold, involving ethical behavior in the “field” and ethical behavior in the writing and publishing forum. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will focus on ethics in fieldwork, recognizing that the ethical issues raised in ethnographic writing are too numerous to do justice to here. I contend that it is possible to ethically conduct ethnographic research and writing among one’s own family, friends and folkgroup, but that this raises a set of unique challenges for the fieldworker. In this section of the essay I will briefly summarize some of the scholarly currents that have led to this question, then I will discuss some of the ethical quandaries in doing ethnography with one’s friends, family and folk groups, and describe some of the ways scholars have wrestled with these problems. Finally, I will briefly discuss how these issues of ethics drive my own ethnographic fieldwork.

Doing insider ethnography and auto ethnography can be one way to usefully address ethical quandaries when studying and, historically thus inadvertently or intentionally “othering” groups of people. Barre Toelken encourages, “we should start with our own
people first: even there, we may risk embarrassing or endangering our informants, but since we ourselves are part of their picture, we may hope we can be more responsive to the ethical issues, more quick to recognize insiders’ perspectives and values; less ready to play the romantic jungle explorer” (1996 16). Studying one’s own folklore by ethnographically studying one’s own family, friends and community demands that the folklorist more or less publicly confront his/her motivation for the study. Doing so requires the folklorist to don and perform the perhaps uncharacteristic role of investigator, as well as participant, in community, and forces the folklorist to deal with the consequences of asking his/her community to see their own traditions through the eyes of academia. Doing so may cause profound conflict with lasting social and familial impacts if the folklorist and his/her collaborators disagree about the final product of this work, as the folklorist remains the author.

Historically, Western folklorists, like Western anthropologists, have studied the folklore of other groups (frequently, tribal, immigrant, or poor people, often of color), focusing on groups with traditions viewed and interpreted academically as exotic, and fundamentally different, from mainstream Western culture. Some early anthropologists and folklorists in the nineteenth century chose to work in a “field” close to home, such as upper-class ballad collectors Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Percy, but these folklorists confined their collecting to the servant and peasant classes, and did not see their own class’s folklore as such. Bronislaw Malinowski, with *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and Margaret Mead, in *Coming of Age in Samoa*, so influential in shaping a Western understanding of what it means to do fieldwork, continued, and reaffirmed, a tradition of “the field” as distant and foreign to the academic centers of the Western academic tradition. During the sea change of the 1970s
and 1980s, however, Western folklorists began to consider the opportunities offered by studying one’s own culture. As James Clifford observes, “Insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways” (9). While Clifford seems to assume that these “indigenous ethnographers” are non-white and non-western, the possibilities and drawbacks, over simplified here, are important. As Barbara Meyerhoff articulates in Number Our Days, the impossibility of “getting inside the head” of an informant from another culture (a move much more about the imagination of the researcher than actual understanding), is partially solved by studying a culture in which the folklorist is a member. This move not only signaled a change in folklore methodology, but also reflected the growing awareness that “the folk” means everyone, regardless of race or class, and that everyone has folklore, not just illiterate “peasants.” As late as 1994, Kamala Visviswaren demands, “Why is it that despite recent critiques of place and voice in anthropology, we have yet to turn to our own neighborhoods and growing-up places?” (104). Of course, Visviswaren ignores those studies that had already made this turn in order to reinforce her point, a necessary call that my own work responds to. One of the advantages offered by insider ethnography is the possibility that its very existence can make more visible the historical relationship between anthropology/folklore and the colonial project. As Visviswaren writes, “Anthropology at home…was not acceptable until the move to decolonize anthropology arose; a decolonized anthropology assumed that a critical eye would necessarily be cast on a whole range of practices at ‘home’ that authorized American intervention in the ‘Third World’” (101). By undermining notions of who studies and who is studied, one can, in an admittedly small way, kick the rotting imperial underpinnings of the field.
One of the challenges facing all ethnographers, not just those who work with family, friends or members of their own folk groups, is the issue of interpretation. Traditionally, ethnographic fieldwork consisted of observing, interviewing, following up with final questions, and then leaving the field to go home and interpret the information collected. This methodology results in the unquestioned privileging of the ethnographer’s interpretation over the “native’s” interpretation. Elaine Lawless, building from Dennis Tedlock and Jeff Todd Titon, argues in her essay, “‘I was Afraid Someone Like You. . . an Outsider. . . would Misunderstand,” that in order to really do an effective job of interpretation, the fieldwork must not stop at the point where the ethnographer begins to interpret but must continue through the process of interpretation. Continued dialogue between the ethnographer’s interpretation of the cultural practice and the informant’s own interpretation of the ethnographer’s interpretation not only breaks down the fiction of the ethnographer’s superior knowledge, but also yields a much more nuanced, if unresolvable, understanding of the cultural practice. This means that fieldwork continues beyond “follow up” and requires the ethnographer to listen to “native” interpretation of his/her work and to deal with that interpretation in writing. When doing fieldwork among family, friends or members of one’s own folk group, this necessary dimension to fieldwork requires that one draw upon one’s own experience of the culture, as Lawless does in her essay. Lawless demonstrates the need to “insist on the credibility of my own interpretations even when they are different from hers” (313) while presenting the dialogue between ethnographer and informant as part of a whole picture of reciprocal ethnography. Visviswaren describes the promise of this practice: “holding these two terms in tension—the desire to know and the desire to represent—gives us the means, as Spivak suggests, to ‘question the authority of the investigating subject
without paralyzing her, persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility’” (100).

Another issue of ethical ethnography is how to deal with secret information. While an insider ethnographer may have a “right” to certain types of information because of their insider status as a family member or an initiated member of a group, that “right” becomes complicated by the individual’s status as ethnographer. Does that “right” extend to the ethnographic? Just because one has access to certain information as a group member does not mean that one has the right to share that information through subsequent ethnographic writing and publication.

Ethnography that takes participant-observation beyond imagined “scientific” boundaries into intimacy can create dilemmas of personal identity and ethical considerations. For example, Zora Neale Hurston’s exploration of hoodoo in the American South led to her close working relationship with hoodoo doctor Luke Turner. After undergoing an initiation ritual with him, about which she is evasive in *Mules and Men*, Hurston spent five months studying under the doctor. At this point Hurston writes that he wished her to be his partner and inherit his business after his death. “He wanted me to stay with him to the end. It has been a great sorrow to me that I could not say yes” (205). Hurston has become an officially recognized insider through ritual and daily experience, but she is still a professional folklorist/anthropologist. She chooses to stay on her academic course and relinquish both her friendship and her business relationship with Turner, perhaps causing him to feel used or manipulated, and almost certainly rejected. On one hand, for Hurston, this decision has apparently caused pain and regret, which she is candid enough to show in her writing. On the other hand, however, Hurston is not clear in her writing about what she told Turner or any of
her other hoodoo mentors/informants about her goals—we don’t actually know how she has presented herself in the field and we do not know how candid or honest she has been with her informants.

How honestly the ethnographer represents him/herself in the field has ethical ramifications, whether or not one is doing ethnography with one’s own folk groups. During his fieldwork as a participant-observer in a black South Philadelphia neighborhood Dan Rose studied his coworkers, neighbors and friends without ever informing them that his choice to live in that neighborhood, work that job and be friends was part of his work as a graduate student in anthropology studying the underground economy of black urban Philadelphia (34). Rose represented himself as an individual without an agenda, as a drinking partner with no strings attached, then turned around and constructed his friend Boycie on the page as an irresponsible alcoholic, a schemer, a manipulator, without Boycie’s knowledge or permission.

Honesty with one’s collaborators or informants about “undressing” one’s folk group and/or self on the page is necessary in order to do ethical ethnography. Probably Rose’s informant Boycie did not want to be “undressed” on the page in front of a largely white, outsider readership, and, had he been given a choice, would have said “no.” Similarly, in *Mother Camp*, Esther Newton walks a fine line between accurately explicating drag and gay culture in order to understand the construction of “America” for an academic audience, and having her work unintentionally become a titillating voyeuristic sensation. The difference is that her informants, unlike Rose’s, were able to submit their own photographs for Newton’s book, able to respond to interview questions knowing that their words, however revealing
may become public property. For Newton, herself a member of the gay community, revealing insider information meant unmasking certain rituals and codes of her own folk group.

Scholars have also wrestled with the problem of “giving back” to collaborators whose participation gives ethnographers so much. Barbara Myerhoff’s informant Basha asks her at the beginning of their relationship, “What will you do for us?” (14) For Myerhoff, the ethnographic work that became *Number Our Days* brought recognition and awards, making her an essential scholar for all subsequent ethnographers. What could she give back? While she responds to Basha that she could teach a class, she also made her book film into something that she “gives back” to the larger folk group of aging Jewish people and their families, which has results that are helpful to her collaborators—money, attention and visibility (30).

What happens when one’s fieldwork turns up things that are illegal, unethical, or unpleasant, yet are still related to one’s research? Just because one does fieldwork within one’s own folk group or family doesn’t mean that one is going to rejoice in everything one learns. As Laura Bohannon so succinctly puts it, “It is an error to assume that to know is to understand, and that to understand is to like” (qtd in Visviswaren 27). There can be a greater degree of emotional distancing when working with strangers who do or say or believe things that one dislikes (see, for example, Malinowski’s diaries) but when one encounters behavior in one’s own folk group that is illegal or unethical, one has to decide where one’s loyalties lie, (see, for example, Dennis Covington’s *Salvation on Sand Mountain*). Does one report this behavior in published writing? Ought this behavior to be concealed? Myerhoff chose to report “unflattering” things but used pseudonyms to prevent “embarrassment” for the informants and to avoid endangering her relationship with the community (31). This seems to
have worked for her, but may not work in all situations. If the ethnographer has made it clear that he/she is a member in this community, it may be pointless to pretend that this behavior was done by that convenient and necessary fiction, “anonymous,” since that person could be easily traced. The very fact of being an insider places informants who may or may not do illegal or unethical things at the mercy of the ethnographer, while simultaneously placing the ethnographer in a morally ambiguous position. In a caution that can be applied to many dilemmas of ethical fieldwork, Toelken offers this advice: “Just as a moment of enlightenment may lead a scholar to pursue a subject further, so enlightenment may clarify the need to call a halt” (1996 12).

During the course of my own fieldwork I have met and interviewed many social workers and prison works in Wisconsin, Missouri, and the upper Midwest, but the bulk of my collaborators are people from my own family and circle of friends. This perspective has some advantages—I know who to talk to; people trust me; I have a head full of stories and memories; I can go places emotionally and intellectually that a stranger could not. On the other hand, there are disadvantages. The demographic is limited. My collaborators often assume I know more than I do. They assume I have remembered everything they have told me, from my childhood onward, and they assume that I understand their work and their humor the way they understand it; at the same time they warn me that I will never really understand because I haven’t lived that life or done that work. Understanding is never a given. Jackson and Ives warn, “there may be less danger of self-deception working in a truly exotic culture, where one knows the old ground rules don’t apply, than in an environment near at hand, where one is apt to make the assumption that they do” (xii). My collaborators know me; we share certain rules, but not all rules. They are invested in my academic success.
at the same time they may be perplexed, or even at times disturbed by my interest in what they do at work and why they laugh. My collaborators may not tell me things they might tell a stranger (see Ives 29).

Taking my fieldwork back to “the field” of family and friends and sharing it is very hard for me, although I know it is essential. Reciprocal ethnography, proposed by Elaine Lawless, involves the research participant in the shaping of the final project in terms of methodology and interpretation of meaning. Doing so identifies and challenges the hierarchy that places the researcher at an apex of knowledge, and the “subjects” of that research in an inferior, less knowledgeable position. Sharing the production, as Lawless has reminded us, and although reciprocity becomes more inevitable when doing “insider” research with one’s own folk group, as in my case, it also gets weirder and harder. Showing my work to my family and friends is harder for me than showing my work to collaborators with whom I have no prior relationship. I fear negative reactions; I fear that I may inadvertently hurt people that I love.

Equally important for me in my work is the question of when collaboration on a project of insider ethnography becomes coercive? At times the researcher may make his or her participation in family or community events contingent on his or her research. In my own work, I have run the risk of appearing only to care about certain types of narratives, perhaps leading my collaborators to question whether I would even be spending time with them if they refused to participate in my project. Factors like familial love and the desire to see a loved one succeed may impose demands on a collaborator that may be experienced as emotionally coercive.
The ambiguity and ambivalence of doing fieldwork with my close family, friends and acquaintances has made me shy of the traditional ethnographic model of certainty and authority. I can never speak for my collaborators, no matter how much I try to privilege their words over my interpretation. Unless I become a social worker or a prison guard, I will never be a true insider. I am not sure I can look my grandfather, godmother or sister in law in the face and say, “This Is Why You Do What You Do” as if I somehow know them better than they know themselves. I can, however, say, “this is what I think is going on, and this is what my collaborators have to say in response. What do you think?”

**Humor Studies**

There is a dearth of nuanced humor scholarship, not only in the field of folklore, but in the humanities and social sciences as well. This is largely because the subject of humor has been trivialized as frivolous—an accusation only partly allayed by the development of serious humor scholarship in the twentieth century. John Morreall critiques this historical bias: “The fact that laughter and humor involve a nonserious attitude does not imply that we cannot adopt a serious attitude toward examining them. Nor does the nonserious attitude in laughter and humor render them somehow unimportant as features of human life, and therefore unworthy of our attention…to understand our laughter is to go a long way toward understanding our humanity” (ix). Humor is important, and folklore provides a useful methodology to its study.

Humor has been studied in the western tradition since Plato and Aristotle (Morreall 4). The study of humor in modern western cultures is often traced to Thomas Hobbes’
Human Nature (1651), Henri Bergson’s Laughter (1900) and Freud’s early works, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious and Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious (1905 and 1912). Inherent in this triadic approach is the potential to overemphasize the role of aggression, hostility and pathology at the roots of all folk humor. The three primary western theories of humor are: 1) Superiority theory (emotional), which argues that laughter results from a person’s feeling of superiority toward another person or persons, proposed by Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Rapp; 2) Incongruity theory (cognitive), which claims that laughter is produced as a reaction to something that is incongruous or illogical, proposed by Kant, Schopenhauer, and Oring; and 3) Relief theory (emotional) which argues that laughter is a reaction that allows the individual to transcend constraints, whether social, political or psychological, proposed by Schopenhauer, Spencer, Freud, Legman, and Dewey. All of these theories have something to offer, but are overly simplistic and not universally applicable. Although each theory addresses important aspects of humor as a topic of inquiry, such a complicated and ambivalent subject as humor is by necessity more complex in its workings. The mid-twentieth century work of independent folklorist and “dirty” humor scholar Gershon Legman formed a bridge between the theories of Freud and the more sophisticated approach to folk humor and psychology championed by Dundes and Oring. Legman’s exhaustive collections, No Laughing Matter and The Rationale of the Dirty Joke were groundbreaking in a time of censorship (and are still unmatched today) and his vehement demand that folklorists stop ignoring the sexual and scatological in folklore was needed; unfortunately, Legman’s racism, misogyny, homophobia and blind adherence to Freudian psychology have left his (minimal) analysis and arguments as relics of a fascinating but misguided mind. Legman’s contribution to the study of folk humor is vast, but by no
means thorough, sound, or conclusive. Recent humor scholars, including folklorists Bauman, Bronner, Dundes, Fine, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Goldstein, Leary, and Smith have endeavored to complicate our understanding of the performance of humor by bringing together the discourses of psychology, sociology, philosophy, performance studies and critical race theory to build a more nuanced, though less definitive, understanding of how humor works. Oring asserts, “humor is crafted ambiguity and ambiguities do not easily yield certainties” (1992 ix).

Humor has a widely recognized capacity to help people cope with anxieties. In dangerous jobs (physically or psychologically) where workers are responsible for the well-being of others—whether that be in a prison context, a construction work setting, a military context or medical setting—humor may work as a coping strategy to help workers deal with the anxieties surrounding danger to themselves or others, as Toelken suggests (1996 66). By articulating anxieties through verbal or physical joking behavior, workers may derive a temporary sense of control over the ambient danger inherent in the job. This temporary, and perhaps only imagined, sense of control may allow the worker to continue to function psychologically, and thus remain a potent force of authority and skill. One of the major gaps of Tangherlini’s occupational study, Talking Trauma is his failure to explore the way joking and black humor function within the job setting. Tangherlini reports instances of humor and joking, but never seems to consider the ways that joking as a special category of speech may function to help paramedics perform their work. Had he analyzed humor performance, it would have made the book far more complex.

As Folklorist Moira Smith notes in her 2009 article “Humor, Unlaughter and Boundary Maintenance,” the sense of humor in American culture has become intensely
valued as part of moral and psychological character. Persons who are deemed to lack a sense of humor are viewed as immature and developmentally arrested (Smith 158). In America, one might argue that the failure to laugh at oneself has come to represent mental illness, given the importance that humor has assumed in everyday life, political performance, and the presentation of the self. In this climate, the butt of a joke must laugh at herself or be labeled psychologically inept, or, crudely, crazy. A person may thus exert power over another person by making them the butt of the joke. If the butt of the joke laughs, he or she becomes complicit in the joke’s negative assessment of himself/herself. If one refuses to laugh, one marks oneself as humorless, unable to take a joke. Thus, if a worker jokes with a member of the population they control, they exert implicit, largely unexamined power over the managed individual. This control is internalized by the butt—they must choose between two bad choices, and by making that choice, the individual applies one or another label to him/herself. Either they accept themselves as humorous objects to others, or they accept themselves as crazy or at best, intellectually lacking.

As has been noted by many humor scholars (Smith 2009, Oring 1992, Basso 1979), humor often acts to reinforce or police boundaries (physical, emotional, social or behavioral). In the occupational context, boundary maintenance can be particularly important with regard to the exertion of power. Using humor to reaffirm occupational identity, and thus group boundaries, can legitimize the way power is wielded. For example, social workers may joke verbally that they themselves are in crisis. This joke reinforces the occupational identity of the social worker as the person who is not in crisis. In turn, this legitimizes the allocation of power to the social worker because they are not in crisis, over those who are controlled—those who are in crisis.
At the same time, the boundary maintenance function of humor in the work place may help the worker test and retest the strength of a shared (occupational) identity. As Keith Basso explores in *Portraits of the White Man* (1979), humorous Navajo impersonations of whiteness test the boundaries and strength of friendship and shared cultural identity (which of course includes values, morals, and aesthetics) by their highly disturbing and culturally transgressive nature. Barre Toelken finds a similar function in pranks (practical jokes) performed by lumberjacks and other people who do jobs where workers must rely closely on each other (1996 70). Insulting, offensive, highly inconvenient situations, instead of driving coworkers apart, reaffirm mutual dependence between employees, which in turn sets boundaries between those upon whom jokes may be played, and those upon whom jokes are not played. When one employee’s safety is in the hands of another employee (as in medical work or prison work), humor may appear to an outsider as a divisive, hurtful or hostile, but to an insider as a test of loyalties and an affirmation of mutual aid.

Earlier in this chapter I have called attention to the ways that occupational humor has focused on men’s physical labor; it is important to consider the ways that folk humor functions within other work contexts, specifically, within domestic labor. Folk humor can become a tool of power and authority in contexts of domestic work. In her article “Burning Dinners: Feminist Subversions of Domesticity,” Susan S. Lanser observes how women use witty strategies and verbal coding to excuse themselves from certain types of domestic labor, and she cites multiple humorous anecdotes and folk tales. Unfortunately, Lanser does not consider the necessary role that humor plays in the successful deployment of these narrative strategies. The stories mentioned in Lanser’s article are about women who use their wits to control their labor—whether centuries old or contemporary—and contain the common
element of humor, indicating that humor is a necessary component of this type of narrative. The humor here seems both subversive and protective, allowing the stories to be told and the strategies to be redeployed in new contexts. The humorous narratives discussed in Lanser’s article work to create anti-authority, lack of power and lack of control, by inscribing incompetence as a strategy. The refusal of power and authority in labor through humor differs from the instances cited above. While Lanser is concerned with the ways competency and incompetence code resistance in domestic labor, the unaddressed issue of humor aids in the construction of authority, or negative authority, as well as constructs the power of refusal of certain types of work.

Scholars of humor, as well as psychology and medicine have long noted the power of performed humor as a coping mechanism, particularly with regard to stress release. For particularly stressful jobs, the ability to be “literate” in the organization’s humor culture allows the worker to participate in-group stress relief. While laughter permits release of tension, joking behavior also can permit the release of aggression. Particularly when aggression may be toward a group of clients, patients or inmates, that aggression is socially inappropriate. The act of making fun of a client, patient or inmate, because of its very social inappropriateness, can at times act as a stress reliever. Coping with the anti-social desire to exert hostility on managed, disadvantaged populations, particularly those which the worker is required to express compassion, understanding and patience, as in the social work field, can be very stressful. The act of transgression—performing a socially unacceptable thought, feeling or desire through the permissive medium of humor—may release tension and ultimately allow a worker to better perform his or her job. In order for this to work, however,
this must be some degree of potentially unspoken group consensus that certain types of joking may go on.

Ritual humor is an important aspect of success in many occupations. As anthropologist Mary Douglas notes, initiation practical jokes perform a transformative function of turning outsiders into insiders (374). Before one can contemplate long-term success, one must first pass initiation. In the same vein, new insiders must be made in order to maintain a successful, thriving work environment; performing or orchestrating the initiation ritual is a necessary and learned job skill to ensure continuity of occupational identity and status. In her article “Humor, Unlaughter and Boundary Maintenance,” Smith correctly observes that not all initiates respond appropriately to the ritual, and thus remain outsiders and victims (161). Thus, as I will discuss at greater length later in this dissertation, I contend that the ability to respond or participate appropriately in an initiation ritual plays a role in future occupational success.

Practical jokes, as a genre of folk humor, can be used to exert power over groups in occupational contexts. Influential scholarship on this understudied genre include Richard Tallman’s 1972 article, “A Generic Approach to the Practical Joke,” J.R. Bowman’s “On Getting Even,” (1982), Richard Bauman’s “We Were Always Pullin’ Jokes” (1986) and Moira Smith’s “Jokes and Practical Jokes” in The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life (1990). Moira Smith’s anticipated monograph on practical jokes is expected imminently from the University of Utah Press, but until it comes out there is a serious lack of contemporary folklore scholarship on practical jokes. While it would be simplistic to argue that practical jokes are solely tools to express aggression or social control, some forms of occupational practical jokes allow one occupational sub-group, for example, senior employees, to exert
power over another occupational sub-group, new hires. Smith defines this type of practical joke as “esoteric,” involving “tricksters and targets who belong to the same personal group” (2009 588) but who may have a gap in social status. Practical jokes between classes of employees can work to reinforce boundaries between groups of employees by affirming group identity or affirming non-status. Hazing of new employees by senior employees can force an acknowledgement or performance of inferior status.

While this dissertation often conceives of humor as a tool of power and anxiety, it is important to note once again that humor can also be a cohesive, positive force and an agent of “friendly social gesture” (Morreall 115). Humor is not always about power, anxiety and control. The ability to speak the occupational language, to “speak the job,” as Tangherlini describes it, is necessary for occupational success. Successful long-term employees must be literate in their ability to interpret the verbal register of the community. Part of this occupational literacy is being fluent in occupational humor. Literary journalist Ted Conover worked as a prison guard at Sing Sing for nine months before he wrote Newjack; he was barely able to stand the prison work for that long, but had originally planned on holding the job for a full year. Though he does not explicitly consider this in his writing, I suggest that one of the things that prevented his coping better with the job was his incompatible, non-participatory sense of humor, which did not find corrections worker humor funny. Although he never directly says so, Conover seems to find CO (corrections officer) humor unfunny and offensive; he never depicts himself laughing at the jokes, and his reportage implies disdain.

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7 By the phrase “occupational success” I mean the worker’s ability to successfully perform the tasks required by the employer while at the same time maintaining sufficient job satisfaction (including self-respect, manageable stress levels, and tolerance for the terms of the job) to ensure that they can remain in that job without rapid burnout, or even advance within the profession/organization/institution.
for this branch of humor. Although his situation is unique (he doesn’t have to be a prison guard; he is a journalist on a secret mission to document prison worker culture from the inside), his failure to participate in the culture and performance of on-the-job humor correlates with a failure to perform the job with long-term success.
Chapter 2: The Occupational Humor of White Wisconsin Prison Workers

Working in a prison isn’t funny; that’s what I was told over and over. “Prisons are not funny,” my grandfather told me. “Prisons just aren’t funny places,” echoed my uncle. Yet, from my personal experience growing up around prison workers, there is always laughter surrounding these people, particularly when they talk about their work. Every corrections worker that I interviewed told me, “If you don’t laugh, you’ll cry,” or, “If you don’t find something to laugh at, you’ll go crazy yourself.” Why does such an unfunny profession require so much laughter? In this chapter, I develop answers to this complex question, beginning with a brief introduction to prison work, then sharing a selection of answers to three questions I posed to each collaborator, and concludes with a discussion of performance arena in correctional occupational humor.

The groundbreaking nature of this research project demands original fieldwork. My ongoing fieldwork has been done in collaboration with employees of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. My background growing up in a prison-centered community gives me the knowledge and tools to obtain interviews with individuals and to (I hope) write responsibly on the topic. Between 2003 and 2013, I recorded more than sixty hours of interviews with Wisconsin corrections workers and their families, and this project is an extension of previous scholarship presented at the 2006 Missouri Folklore Society Meeting, the 2008 American Folklore Society Annual Meeting and conference, the 2009 International Society for Humor Studies conference, and published in *Oral Tradition* (2011). Among those interviewed were retired correctional officers and social workers, current COs, staff members
at reform schools and women’s prisons, nurses and doctors, and probation and parole agents.
All of my collaborators self-identify as white and are between the ages of 30 and 80. I interviewed roughly twice as many men as women. The interviews took place in my home, in my grandfathers’ homes, in collaborators’ homes and in my parents’ home. I chose to interview only individuals who were known to me in my everyday life, as I felt it was important that my collaborators would know me and feel comfortable giving me feedback and comments on my research and writing. Barre Toelken encourages, “we should start with our own people first” (1996:16) and it is my hope that by studying my “own people,” this study will contribute meaningfully and responsibly to a growing body of American occupational folklore.

As scholars like Bruce Jackson have amply demonstrated, prisons contain a lot of folklore. Rather than study the folklore of inmates, I focus instead on the paid employees of correctional institutions—correctional officers, social workers, doctors, nurses and administrative staff. In prisons, folklore is often employed to enforce and reinforce institutional control. Institutions “work” (to the extent that they do work) because they are based on relationships between people, and the difference between official institutional rules and actual practices often falls within the territory of folklore. New prison employees must learn to differentiate which rules are actually enforced and which rules are bent in order to fulfill the function of maintaining order in the prison; actual practices are communicated through stories, cautionary tales, coded speech, humorous speech and by example, not

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through official lines of institutional communication. In most prisons, guards tell stories to
other guards; inmates tell stories to other inmates; guards also tell stories to inmates, and
inmates also tell stories to guards. These narrative processes, certainly artistic
communication in small groups, allow the institution to function, and allow the prison
workers to perform their job—keeping inmates under institutional control. As one
correctional officer told me, “Being here is the punishment for them. We’re not here to
punish them—we’re just here to make sure things run smoothly.”

At the same time, the boundary maintenance function of humor in the work place
may help the corrections workers test and retest the strength of their shared (occupational)
identity. As Keith Basso explores in Portraits of the White Man, humorous Navajo
impersonations of whiteness test the boundaries and strength of friendship and shared
cultural identity (which of course includes values, morals, and aesthetics) by their highly
disturbing and culturally transgressive nature. Barre Toelken finds a similar function in
pranks (practical jokes) performed by lumberjacks and other people who do jobs where
workers must rely closely on each other (1996 70). Insulting, offensive, highly inconvenient
situations, instead of driving coworkers apart, reaffirm mutual dependence between
employees, which in turn sets boundaries between those upon whom jokes may be played,
and those upon whom jokes are not played. When one worker’s safety is in the hands of
another worker (as in prison work), humor that may appear to an outsider as divisive, hurtful
or hostile may function for an insider as a test of loyalties and an affirmation of mutual aid.

Scholars of humor, as well as of psychology and medicine, have long noted the power
of performed humor as a coping mechanism, particularly with regard to stress release. For
particularly stressful jobs like prison work, the ability to be “literate” in the organization’s
humor culture allows the worker to participate in group stress relief. While laughter permits release of tension, joking behavior also can permit the release of aggression. When aggression is toward disempowered people, that aggression is socially and institutionally inappropriate. The act of making fun of an inmate, because it is so inappropriate, can at times act as a stress reliever, in addition to reinforcing group identity for the corrections officer. The act of transgression—performing a socially unacceptable thought, feeling or desire through the permissive medium of humor—may release tension and ultimately allow a worker to better perform his or her job. In order for this to work, however, this must be some degree of potentially unspoken group consensus that certain types of unacceptable joking are permitted.

Prison work is a complicated and stigmatized profession that remains integral to contemporary American life. According to the United States Department of Labor’s U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, correctional officers’ annual median pay was 39,020, or $18.76 per hour. There were, in 2010, 493,100 correctional officers in the United States. No work experience is needed, according to the BLS, and the only educational qualification is a high school diploma or equivalent, except for those applying for work in a Federal prison, which requires a bachelors’ degree, three-plus years experience in “counseling, assistance or supervision to individuals,” or a combination of the two. While 95% of correctional officers work for the state or federal government, 5% are employed by private prisons, and this percentage is growing as the push to privatize prisons continues. According to a 2011 report by the Pew Center on the States, total state spending for corrections is about $52 billion, and has quadrupled in the last twenty years (1). Correctional officers (COs), social workers, administrators, clerical staff, nurses, doctors, and the host of other individuals whose labor
keeps correctional facilities running, perform difficult jobs without much social caché. Prison work in the early 21st century is marked by low pay, steady erosion of benefits, suspicion of outsiders, sensationalized representation in popular media, and high stress levels. Folklorists from Alan Lomax to David Cohen and John Eilertsen to Bruce Jackson have been fascinated by prisons and prisoners, but few ethnographers have looked to prison workers—a decidedly un-romantic, mainstream, middle class group of professionals. 9

When I asked what her favorite part of her job was, one of my collaborators told me, “The people I work with. Joking around with my coworkers. We have fun.” This woman’s response indicates the need to understand the role of humor in the correctional officer world; stereotypes cannot contain a response like this, and the complexity of having fun on the job as a prison guard seems incomprehensible to most outsiders.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked my collaborators to tell me what they thought it took to be a good prison worker, what they felt were the particular challenges of their jobs, and what they thought other people (non-prison workers) thought about prison workers. I use these three questions to establish the context of these occupations and develop an understanding of how the social workers I interviewed perceive themselves and their work.

9 The thriving field of occupational folklore, including important scholars like Archie Green, Patrick Mullen, Jim Leary and Timothy Tangherlini, has not yet explored the occupational traditions of prison workers. Ted Conover’s Guarding Sing Sing (2000) and Kelsey Kaufmann’s Prison Officers and Their World (1988) are important contributions to the growing ethnographic body of knowledge about prison workers, and George Gregory’s rather sensationalized book Alcatraz Screw: My Years as a Guard in America’s Most Notorious Prison (2002) provides some insight into the profession.
Being a Good CO

My paternal grandmother, Joan Schmidt, never worked for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, but she was married to an employee for more than fifty years, and because of this, was immersed in the community of corrections work and has definite opinions about what makes a good correctional officer. I don’t think many outsiders would point to empathy as an important job skill for correctional officers, but this was Joan Schmidt’s first response. When I asked her about my grandfather Richard Schmidt’s career, she told me what she thought about the importance of empathy and fairness.

Schmidt: What do you think made a good guard?
Joan Schmidt: Understanding, a little sympathy for what they were. Respect ‘em.
Schmidt: Respect for the prisoners, or respect for each other?
Joan Schmidt: I think for the prisoners, too, because they're still – they made a mistake, but I think Richard was always, stood up for them when he thought they were right. I don't know, I think he was a good guard.
Schmidt: What do you think about him made a good guard?
Joan Schmidt: Just that he was fair. I don't think that he was ever abusive.
Schmidt: Would he talk about other people being abusive?
Joan Schmidt: I think some of the guards were pretty rough, but I think he was really – but he believed in discipline. I mean, you got punished if you didn't do it right, but he respected ‘em, and they knew he would never be unfair. I mean, when he made, when he got the, a higher, they'd have to walk around and check that the guards, the night shift were really tired, he'd take their place and have 'em take a break and walk around.
Schmidt: He'd stand in for them?

Joan Schmidt: Yeah. I think he was really, I think he was a good supervisor.

Schmidt: He was pretty loved by his employees, right?

Joan Schmidt: I think he was, because [when he retired] they got him a gold watch and a pair of barn boots and a pitchfork and said he was all ready for his new boss. So they gave him that, all those people that were, that he was in charge of.

Joan Schmidt immediately identifies sympathy and empathy as part of what makes a good correctional officer. Understanding and respect were, for her understanding of her husband’s job, essentially important. She contrasts this with potential abuse, when she says that my grandfather was fair, never abusive. It is clear from her mental leap from fairness to abuse that she, as another semi-outsider, is well aware of the stereotypes outsiders hold about prison guards, and she wants to establish in the interview that my grandfather was not abusive, unlike some who she describes as “pretty rough.” Joan Schmidt highlights the importance of inmate perception of guards—“they knew he would never be unfair” seems to establish that fairness is important in the context of inmate perception. As classic prison studies like Sykes’ *A Society of Captives* argue, prisons cannot function without the consent of at least some of the inmates. Part of ensuring the continued functioning of the prison is maintaining a reputation for fairness.

Empathy for the inmate is also combined with empathy for the guard, according to my grandmother. She describes how her husband would stand in for his staff so that they could get up and walk around in an effort to stay awake. Boredom and sleepiness are dangers of prison work, and part of being a good supervisor is to respect the fallibility of the staff and
to support them, rather than punish them. By helping his employees succeed, my grandfather is honored at his retirement by his staff, rather than his superiors.

The respect of one’s fellow employees as well as the inmates is also important in being a good correctional worker. When I asked him the same question I had asked my grandmother, my other grandfather, Richard Meyer, (a social worker with the Wisconsin DOC) told me “Ah, but I think that, yeah, a good supervisor has to have the respect of the people who're working for you. And if you don't have, there's something wrong with you. And you better figure out what it is.” When I asked him about what it took to be a good employee at a correctional institution he told me how he worked to train the social workers he supervised at correctional facilities, and emphasized the importance of self-awareness and self-respect.

Schmidt: What would you say, what qualities do you have to have to work successfully in an institution, correctional institution?

Richard Meyer: [sigh] I think you have to have respect for yourself. You have to recognize your own abilities. The social workers who have come to work for me, one of the first things I did, and I had a lot – well, a number of women. And they'd gone on to get rather high ranking positions in the state. Not because of me, but maybe I recognized their ability. But, now students, I had a lot of students and I enjoyed working with students. And one of the first things, when it was determined they were going to be there for a while, I'd say, “now, what I want you to do, you go home tonight and in the confines of your room, take off all your clothes, stand in front of the mirror and look at this person in that mirror, and say to yourself, honestly, “What do I not like about this person?” Maybe you got big ears that stick way out, maybe
you don't—something about you that you don't like. And be willing to admit that you do not like this particular feature. Maybe it's your voice, maybe—something. Because I will guarantee you that these patients are going to find out what this thing is, what weakness you have, and boy are they going to use it. They know where your points of vulnerability are, and they will exploit that.” I said, “they have grown up on the streets. This is how they survive. By finding the weakness of others. So if you know your own weaknesses, and admit to them, then they lose their power over you.”

Many of my collaborators agreed with Richard Meyer’s assessment of inmate behavior, and pointed out that while guards are busy supervising hundreds of inmates, every one of those inmates is focused on watching that one guard. Each inmate has plenty of time to study the people who run the prison to learn about their weaknesses and strengths and habits and personality. Because prison workers can make inmates lives more difficult or more tolerable, it is to the inmates’ benefit to know the workers to the best of their ability, and my collaborators emphasized that inmates will manipulate and exploit prison staff, given the opportunity.

The importance of fairness and consistency in correctional work was reinforced by many of my collaborators, including Judy Meyer, my step-grandmother, as was the necessary commitment to the job, like it or not. My step-grandmother’s father was a captain in the Wisconsin DOC and her first husband was also a correctional officer. Now, she is married to my grandfather, a retired DOC social worker. She has lived in a town whose economy is based on three area prisons and thus her adult life has been influenced by the correctional institutions that surround her. When I asked her what she thought it took to work in a prison she told me,
Judy Meyer: I think you have to want that kind of a job. You know, with – it's not an easy job. And I think the first maybe two months you're there can make or break you. And you just wanna treat everyone equal. And then they will treat you the same.

Schmidt: Staff, or inmates, or both?

Judy Meyer: In the prison, you have, like, your, often – you have three different groups of women. This group does not talk to that group. This one doesn't get along with either one. And I think you have to be fair. You can't say one thing and do another-

Richard Meyer: That, yeah –

Schmidt: That's different from other work settings?

Richard Meyer: You can't be a hypocrite.

Schmidt: Why not?

Richard Meyer: Not and be successful.

Schmidt: Why? What's gonna happen?

Richard Meyer: If you're a hypocrite?

Judy Meyer: Then you get labeled.

Richard Meyer: Well, for one thing, as I mentioned before, these inmates, who have lived by their wits, are going to recognize that. And you have to – for instance, there's a set of rules, and you must, even if you don't agree with 'em, you must abide by the rules. Because if you don't, there's going to be one or many more of the inmates who are going to know that. And as soon as they know that, they've got ya. I remember one fellow out there at Fox Lake. He – it's very - some of these inmates, they charm the birds outta the trees. And this fellow had a girlfriend. And there were some
problems there, and he was writing a letter to this girlfriend. *Had* to get this letter out, because they were having these problems, this and that. So he said to this officer, he says, “you know Suzy, you've seen her.” “Yeah, I know her. I've seen her.” He said, “I've gotta get this letter to her. We've had this misunderstanding, etc, etc, etc. The mail was already gone out. Will you mail this letter for me, when you go off work?” Aw, he's a nice guy, blah, blah, blah; the officer talked himself into doing this. He took this letter and mailed it. And the inmate said, “I've gotcha.” He brought contraband in to him, he was workin' for this inmate. And ultimately lost his job.

While Judy Meyer answers my question by articulating the difficulty of working in corrections and the importance of understanding the job, when she articulates the importance of fairness (echoing Joan Schmidt’s claim), my grandfather jumps in to illustrate the essential importance for correctional workers to define and maintain their own reputation in the face of moral ambiguity. He points out the importance of consistently following institutional policy, because if inmates notice deviation, they will try to exploit that inconsistency. Richard Meyer makes it clear that it isn’t easy to like the rules of correctional work, but emphasizes that part of the job is following the rules. Those who don’t follow the rules, like the officer in the narrative, eventually fail at the jobs. In both of his above narratives, Richard Meyer emphasizes the role of the inmate in the success or failure of correctional staff. From his perspective—a perspective shared by all my collaborators—inmates will try to manipulate prison staff and control them. Part of being a good correctional officer is resisting the manipulation and exploitation of inmates.

Another part of being a good prison worker, according to my collaborators, is the ability to think quickly, problem-solve, and work with people. My collaborator TI told me:
TI: You always have to be constantly thinking on your feet. I don't want to compare us to police, but one of the things they talk about in police departments is that, you know, a big part of the job is that you're constantly confronted with situations that nobody has the answer for, but you gotta come up with the answer and find a way to make it work. And that's where you really have to use your interpersonal relationship skills. And sometimes its within your boundaries and sometimes its out of it.

TI points out the correctional officers must solve problems on the fly, and that there are rarely easy or simple answers for these problems. As he says, “nobody” has answers, but the correctional officer must find a solution to a problem quickly, and that solution has to work, at least to some degree, for all the parties involved. I don’t think that many outsiders think about interpersonal relationship skills when they think about prison workers, but this is something that TI and others emphasize throughout this narrative and others throughout this chapter. TI also points out that another part of being a good correctional officer is being able to tolerate things that are outside of the officer’s personal boundaries. This suggests that often correctional officers must compromise to achieve success, and this compromise is not always easy, but is often necessary.

TI reinforces the importance of communication and interpersonal skills to resolve conflict as part of what makes a good correctional officer, specifically in opposition to brute force or violence. However, he also points out that part of being a good correctional officer involves being aware of the constant possibility of violence, and that involves being aware of one’s surroundings at all times:

TI: I think a more practical application is using your interpersonal relationship skills to dial things down, not to challenge people. Be firm, but not aggressive. Practice de-
escalation techniques. Try to appeal to their reason. Assess every situation. You know, as you get there. Don't go rushing into anything blind. If I'm responding to the guy the office down, I get as far as the door, stop, look around. Be aware of your surroundings. Who's there? Start taking mental notes right away. You know. So, yeah, I think that your guard is definitely up more. I think that a lot of prison guards, when they go out to the bars, they'll point a booth so they're back's up against a wall. They'll park their car so the front is pointed out and they don't have to back out, should they have to leave in a hurry.

TI’s narrative moves from the importance of interpersonal skills in deescalation of potentially dangerous or volatile situations to some of the coping mechanisms that correctional officers employ in order to deal with work stress. As I will return to later in this chapter, the constant threat of violence, even in the absence of actual violence, is incredibly stressful for prison workers. Part of doing a good job as a correctional officer is to prevent violence from taking place. Part of preventing violence is being aware of potential threats and dangers. This constant vigilance, as TI points out, becomes ingrained in the successful CO, to the extent that it becomes a recognizable part of their personality off the job, as well as at work. Protecting oneself from an attack from behind and ensuring a quick escape are important not only for the individual CO, but also for the ultimate safety of the CO’s colleagues and other inmates.

Part of being a good CO is recognizing the relationship between an orderly institution and treating inmates with respect. CH described this to me over email:

CH: These men know they are guilty and belong in prison. They ask for very little. Near the top of their list is to be recognized as a man and be treated with a modicum
of respect. I do that. I keep it light and am very proud of the style I employ. I always get Exceeds Standards on my PPD's for the category for polite and professional when dealing with staff and inmates. I keep it light with the boys for 3 reasons. 1. It makes it allot easier for me to get them to do what I want them to do. 2. is Self preservation. In such a tense and stressful environment why would I employ a strategy that increases the tension.? It is stunning how many CO's have not yet figured this out. They continue to badger inmates subsequently raising tension and possibly sparking a major disturbance. More that one full blown prison riot has started as a simple fist fight between two people. The third reason I do it is to be professional. It is no accident that I put self preservation ahead of being professional. Survival is a game played by both the inmate and CO.10

CH points out that inmates deserve respect from the guards, and that this recognition of manhood11 and respect is essential for both the inmate and the CO. Throughout this narrative, CH points out the similarities between the inmate and the CO, which I think demonstrates his awareness of the irony of his job. CH is clearly proud of his measured and demonstrated success in communicating politely and professionally with inmates, and he points out that this personal success is part of what makes an institution a safe place for both inmates and prison workers. As my collaborators point out, not all prison staff are good at their jobs, and

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10 Here, as with all subsequent excerpts from CH’s written narratives, I have quoted directly, using copy-and-paste.

11 As I will discuss in chapter 4, gender in prisons and prison is complicated. While the majority of inmates and prison workers are male, women work in male prisons, and men work in female prisons. Women COs work with male COs, and there is constant negotiation of gender awareness and taboo.
failing to be a “good” correctional officer means an increasingly unstable and dangerous work environment.

The criteria for being a good officer are different for different ranks, as the earlier narratives demonstrate, and sometimes being a good supervisor means being willing to make a fool of oneself in front of others. My grandfather, Richard Schmidt, was known as a good supervisor because of his loyalty to the officers that he managed. My collaborator TI, who worked under my grandfather for many years at Oakhill Correctional Institution in Oregon, Wisconsin, remembered his qualities as a supervisor fondly.

TI: But he was a good guy. He really had the officer's backs, everybody really appreciated him. They had a party in a unit one night, it was somebody's birthday, somebody brought in a cake and all the officers congregated in this one unit. I guess they got a little loud, and the inmates filed a complaint. Dick was on the hot seat for that one, because he allowed this party to take place. He stood up for everybody.

Couldn't remember who was there! [laughs]

TI identifies “having the officers’ backs” as the key to being a good supervisor. Richard (TI calls him Dick; apparently he went by “Dick” at work, though I always knew him as “Richard”) allows a birthday party among the officers to take place. This indicates a commitment to employee morale and strong relationships between employees. When the party gets loud, the inmates complain, exercising their official modicum of control over their environment, and the administration comes down on Richard in their efforts to punish the offending officers. Richard claims he cannot remember who was at the party, and refuses to name names to administration. He would certainly have recognized and appreciated the absurdity of his claim that he “couldn’t remember” who was there, but I think he would have
relished the opportunity to play the fool in opposition to management. Acting a fool and claiming obviously false faulty memory is both a silly and defiant act. Aligning himself with his fellow officers over the inmates and over the administration made him, according to his fellow officers, a “good” sergeant. Certainly he was unresponsive to inmate concerns in this instance. Similarly, he was obstructive with the administration—something he was well-known for in every institution he worked in.

**Job Challenges**

While TI describes the importance of being alert to the potential for danger and violence, one of the most-cited difficulties for prison workers is managing boredom. Over and over, my collaborators told me, “this is a boring job.” Prison is boring for the inmates. Prison is also boring for those who work in prisons, especially those in supervisory capacities. As I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, coping with boredom and sleepiness is extremely important for correctional officers, particularly during evenings and weekends when there is very little inmate activity in the prison (no school, no visits, no doctor appointments, etc).

Perhaps the most obvious challenge to working in a prison is learning how to work with inmates. My collaborator CH told me over email,

CH: Biggest challenge in this job is learning how to talk to inmates. Corrections is not rocket science. It is simply to get inmates to do what you want to them to do. I consider it a mental chess game. You cannot pick a style you like in other Co's and adopt it. Thru time, experience and maturity you must find the style that best suits your personality. But it also needs to be one that is effective. Since I am a nice and
sociable [person] it only makes sense for me to be cordial with them. You catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar. If an inmate sees me as possibly someone they can play, I give them a friendly reminder that they should not mistake my kindness for some kind of weakness. I remind them of my 24 years of experience and my super-human capabilities to have them taken to the hole if the situation dictates.

CH considers learning how to verbally communicate with inmates as the biggest challenge for a new correctional officer. Since the correctional officer’s job is entirely focused on getting inmates to follow rules and orders, the CO must learn immediately how to convince inmates to do what he or she wants them to do. CH argues that each individual CO must figure out how to meet this challenge based on their own communication style. He also quickly points out that being cordial can be interpreted by inmates as a willingness to be “played” or manipulated, the CO must also learn immediately how to invoke authority. CH jokingly describes his authority as “superhuman” and points out that he has 24 successful years behind him to back up his authority.

New prison workers must learn how to deal with upsetting interaction with inmates. Many workers describe an adjustment period when they had to learn to listen to frightening or sickening things without internalizing the horror and without failing to perform their job. XA, a social worker, started her social work career at the Moberly Correctional Center in Moberly, Missouri. While she did not love working in the prison, she spent six years working there in various capacities. XA described this to me in a joint interview with XY:

XA: I mean, just, you know, some of the things that you seen and you heard, and you had to – it was a whole learning experience. I did the sex offender's group. Big eye opener to the world.
XY: Oh yeah [laughter]
XA: Big eye opener. I went sick about the first month and a half, to my stomach, and went home and felt sick. And then I, it was an alarming experience. And now I've come to understand it a lot more, but it took a long time, cause I had just graduated from my Master's program, and written my, you know, our thesis was on our theory of change, and how we believe that people change through therapeutic process [general laughter] and I went in there and I was like “fuuuck that, people don't change! [general laughter] It's over, it's just jacked up, that's it!” [laughter]
XW: “I'm not making a difference here!”
XA: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

XA’s worldview is shaken by her interactions with incarcerated with sex offenders. She describes this as an “eye-opening” process. During her time leading a sex offenders’ group therapy, XA receives information that makes her feel physically ill. Her world has expanded, and she is now forced to see the world in ways that most people have the privilege of remaining ignorant. Part of what she learns during this process changes her fundamental beliefs as a social worker. Part of being a social worker involves at least the theoretical belief that a person can change if they choose to. However, what she learns is so “jacked up” that it makes her question her deepest held professional conviction—that people can change. She has just written her entire MSW thesis on her theory of change, and her first job after her MSW forces to reconsider everything she has learned in school to be true.

12 Though, as I will discuss in later chapters, another important part of being a social worker involves learning to cope with the reality that many people will not change, and that a social worker cannot make a person change.
Thus, one of the challenges for those who work in prisons is the question of whether their work makes any difference or not and how their theoretical training will relate to their everyday encounters in the field. XA says, “Fuuuck that! People don’t change!” If people don’t change, then there is no point in her doing her job counseling sex offenders. Her colleague XW says, “I’m not making a difference here!” and this laughing reply underscores the desire most social workers have to make a difference (for the better) and the fear that they are not actually making a difference. This same fear that one’s work does not make a difference occurs over and over throughout the narratives of prison workers I interviewed. Many employees feel their work is pointless, futile, even counter-productive; yet, they must continue to this work. Some work because they feel that they might make a difference, and others work because they originally hoped to make a difference. Still others work with the hope that the difference they make is real, however small. Prison work sometimes feels pointless, and coping with this fear can be a major challenge for some correctional workers.

Working with inmates can be extremely challenging, particularly for new employees. Inmates often target new employees for harassment in an effort not only to relieve boredom, but also to ascertain whether the individual can be manipulated to elicit a reaction. TI told me about being harassed when he was a new CO:

Schmidt: Did you get hazed?

TI: Oh, yeah. Oh, definitely.

Schmidt: Like what?

TI: Definitely, like, by the inmates. When I worked in Segregation, you know, the inmates that are in Segregation, a lot of ’em spent like, years, there, because that's where they're comfortable. They're always in trouble, one time after another. Once
you're in Segregation, there's not much more that you can do to them in Segregation. I mean, you can write them a conduct report, and they might, you know, recreation taken away. They don't care. They're inside, and they love it there. So there's this one guy who zeroed in on me almost from the get-go. And this guy was a strong-arm homosexual. That's what he did when he was in the general population: he'd find some young guy and make him his punk. So he liked to talk that way to officers. I'd have to, like, go up and put handcuffs on the guy, and, like, escort him to rec or wherever, and he'd go “Oh, TI, you're looking awful choice today. You and me, TI, let's put the peg in the hole, boy!” And, you know, he'd be carrying on the whole time, and it's just kind of like jailhouse banter. And so, uh, yeah, a lot of that.

The inmate has nothing to lose and focuses on harassing the young employee and terrorizing him sexually. TI must adjust to being seen as a sexual object by an older, physically violent man, and he must maintain authority over this man while he adjusts. As in XA’s narrative, many inmates challenge established mainstream sexual norms. Learning to interact with individuals with entirely different sexual worldviews is challenging for correctional employees.

Like TI, my collaborator CH points out that there are many challenges for new employees. Over email, CH told me:

Early career challenges revolved around trying to understand extremely dysfunctional staff, administrators inmates and the over all environment. It is a huge adjustment. Once you start to understand it the next challenge becomes one of self preservation. How do I stay who I am and rise above the absurdity of your 40+ hour a week job. Nobody does. It is a matter of degrees as to how far a person falls. Rates of
alcoholism divorce and suicide are very high among CO's. I believe that I have maintained as well as most. But I do drink more that I should to escape mental and emotional pain. While I have maintained healthy relationships with my wife, children and friends, I can see where my alcohol use has caused me problems that not need be there.

CH points out that the new employee must adjust to an institutional job that forces the employee to change his behavior, deal with absurdity, and maintain some semblance of self. I’m not sure how much CH is joking when he talks about escaping mental and emotional pain. I think part of him is being sarcastic, and part of him is being deadly serious. Interpreting humor and tone over email is, as has been noted by many, notoriously difficult, but I think that CH is being both flip and sincere simultaneously.

Prisons are usually uncomfortable environments, and the prison employee is often subjected to uncomfortable temperatures, inconvenient workplace design, and sometimes a lack of sufficient equipment. XA felt that the employees at her institution were treated like inmates and that they were also being punished by the lack of comfort and adequate supplies.

XA: I don’t know--they treated us like inmates. We had a computer, we had a desk in the cell. It was hot -

NE: Yeah, that's crazy!

XA: No ventilation, no – air, heat, it was all jacked up.

NE: Yeah.

XA: So in the winter you might burn to death, because they're trying to get the heat to work. And then you have prison windows, so…
Working in a prison means dealing with some of the same physical discomforts that inmates face. Many institutions are old and budget constraints prevent updates to heating and ventilation. The current public trend is the punitive desire to punish the inmate with physical discomfort. This plays a role in the difficulty to improve living and working conditions in correctional institutions for both inmates and workers.

A particular challenge of prison work is negotiating between work and home. Correctional officers are encouraged not to bring their stress home, but that’s easier said than done. Part of managing the stress of the job is protecting family from the negatives of the work. My father grew up as the son of a prison guard, but he doesn’t remember some of the hard things that happened to his father while working as a guard. When I asked how my grandfather coped with things like suicide and violence among inmates, my father didn’t remember. He told me:

Mark Schmidt: I'm sure he talked to Joan [Richard’s wife] about it, but I don't think he really wanted to burden his children with gross stories, you know. Like I said, I heard more of the interaction with his coworkers, and never the guts of the prison job, you know. The prisoners that I saw were the ones who were at church singing hymns and spirituals, you know, the ones who were setting the pins when we went bowling, the ones who handed out the bags of candy at Easter and Christmas. I never, I wasn't there when they were eating and getting locked into cells, and – we didn't hear a lot about that, unless it was a really unusual situation.

Schmidt: Like what?

Mark Schmidt: Well, I didn't hear about the suicides, but I might have. I did hear about the guys who got bit, you know, the guys who got conked over the head with
something. “Oh, one guard went to the hospital,” or something. I might hear about that. “Oh, now some guy's in lockdown for a week, in isolation, cause he got violent.” Those things happen from time to time and they would come up in conversation. Especially if you were in the room where two prison guards were talking to each other, you're more likely to hear that than one guy just coming home and telling his family about it. We didn't hear that much from my dad, at least.

As my father points out, COs are more likely to talk about the bad things with each other than with their families. Part of this reticence comes from a desire to separate the realm of home and work, but I think part of it also comes from the difficulty in communicating about the job with outsiders, no matter how close those outsiders may be.

Hours and scheduling can be a difficult challenge for many corrections workers. Prisons must be staffed 24 hours every day, 365 days a year. Outsiders may not appreciate the demands placed on correctional employees by seniority-driven scheduling. When I asked my paternal grandmother what the hardest part of the job was, she told me:

Joan Schmidt: The hardest part? Swing shifts. Getting used to going split shift, you know. What do you do with four hours in the middle of the day? Get up early.

Schmidt: How many hours - ?

Joan Schmidt: It was four hours in the morning and four hours in the evening, and back to work from two to four. No, two to six.

Schmidt: What would he do with those four hours?

Joan Schmidt: I don't – Richard had a big garden in the summer. I don't think we ever had a garden like we had when we lived by The Walls.
Perception of Outsiders

Prison workers face stereotypes and negative portrayals in popular media, and while they must be aware of these stereotypes, few of my collaborators chose to speak about the ways that correctional officers are depicted in movies and television, and few dwell on the stigma of the job. Sometimes I think I am more sensitive to the stigma of prison work than my collaborators are. Perhaps I am defensive when I imagine outsiders’ thinking that my family and friends are bad, racist, violent and ignorant. Perhaps outsiders are more comfortable expressing their ideas about prison work to me, another outsider, than they are expressing their ideas to actual prison workers. Maybe my collaborators do not take these stereotypes seriously because they feel that they are so blatantly untrue. And maybe they choose not to talk about these perceptions because they make them uncomfortable. I still don’t know. Whatever the reason, my collaborators did not tend to dwell on the worst of the negative stereotypes of prison workers. When I asked TI and BI how they feel COs are perceived, they responded this way:

BI: Well, you're a bunch of state employees. There's that.

TI: Lazy state employees. Overpaid.

BI: Everybody that I work with [at the University of Wisconsin], when they find out that TI's a correctional officer, they're just kind of freaked out by it. You know? Like, that you're really scary people and that every day your life is in somebody else's hands, so I don't know.

TI: It's weird, I know. Mike Nelson is in a similar situation; he's in corrections, his wife works at the UW, and he'll be at one of his wife's work parties, and rather than talk about the UW System, everybody's on the edge of their seat about the kooky
stories about what goes on at prison. Everybody's very interested in it. For starters, a lot of people think that what goes on at prisons is what they see in movies, which is very Hollywood-ized and the very worst of the worst, and bad situations [...] some of it's realistic, most of it's bullshit. People are just very interested. And a lot of people don't know what goes on. They're interested in learning how it really works.

Here, TI and BI use words like “lazy,” “over-paid,” “really scary” and “kooky” and “bad” to describe how they think outsiders view correctional officers. TI points out that most people have little understanding of what working in a prison (or being incarcerated) is like, and that outsiders form preconceptions based on representations of prisons in popular media. TI emphasizes that the bad things, the “very worst of the worst” is the default image for most Americans when they consider what it is like to work or be in a prison. While TI doesn’t say so, and neither does BI, I think that many Americans immediately imagine the sadistic and violent prison guards immortalized in Cool Hand Luke and similarly iconic prison movies. However, TI focuses on the positive in this narrative—outsiders are “interested”—both in the “kooky” stories, and in learning what prisons are really like.

My collaborator XA echoed this perception of state workers as lazy; she described her days as a prison social worker with great sarcasm, drawing heavily on the stereotype of the ineffectual state worker.

XA: It was a state job, so literally, I'd get there at 8 in the morning, we'd have break from like 9 to 10, goofing off, and then from like 10:30 to 11, we'd do Tai Bo with the psychiatrists in between their appointments. Then from like 11 to 1 we had lunch, and then from like 1 to like 2:30 everybody worked. That was our working time in the afternoon. Then at 3 we had a snack til about 4. [general laughter]. I'm not kidding
you. And then from 4 to 5 we just kind of hung around, you know, watching the clocks. It was like literally watching paint dry. I could not do that any longer. No internet, no nothing. And that's what, that's one of the things that was hard, was just sitting there watching the time go by. It's like – and we'd just sit around and goof off half the day.

NE: They're trying to integrate you into the prison lifestyle. Watching time go by. XA’s narrative indicates that she has internalized the stereotype of the lazy state worker. She describes this schedule with mock solemnity, insisting that she is “not kidding” and that this is really what her days were like working as a prison social worker. XA says, “it was a state job, so” which indicates that everyone knows what state jobs are like. She describes having a break, then goofing off, then doing Tai Bo, then having lunch, and then working for an hour and a half, before going on to having a snack and then watching the clock for an hour. XA’s narrative depicts a state job as tremendously wasteful in time and resources. State workers are depicted like children, with constant breaks and snacks.

The stereotype (and often joke) of the lazy state worker is sometimes carried to the extreme when comparing state workers with inmates. My collaborator CH told me, “One of my all time favorites occurs when someone complains about the poor work an inmate did. I love to respond with, ‘I don't believe that you can realistically expect inmates to develop a solid work ethic when they are surrounded by state employees all day!’” The very nature of the state worker makes them unfit to foster a reasonable work ethic in inmates, according to the joke. The many state workers I have interviewed make jokes about being state workers, and seem to find the jokes funny, although they also seem to sometimes feel obliged to
explain to me, the outsider, that these are just stereotypes, and should not be taken too seriously.

Certainly, different communities view the prisons they house differently. This particular study focuses on Wisconsin prison workers, many of whom worked in the many prisons located in south-central Wisconsin. For my family, Waupun, Wisconsin is a prison town, and my parents both told me that they felt that their fathers were respected for their jobs at the prisons. When I asked my father, Mark Schmidt, how he thought the communities he grew up in perceived prison work, he told me:

I think Waupun was a prison town. They had two kinds of employment there; you worked for the prisons, the DOC, or you were a farmer. Or you supported one of those two groups. And so, I think prison guards are reasonably well-respected. I don't ever remember that being a degrading job. It was a respected position, and the management of those prisons was, the hierarchy and the local – we all lived in the area, so they were part of the local community, too, and all their social clubs and stuff. And I think state employment has a lot of respect for them. As a stabilizing element in society. Nobody gave a crap about who was inside those walls. They were, like, invisible, nonexistent. You heard a few bizarre stories, but those people essentially did not exist, you know, to the outward community. My father was growing up in and around Waupun, Wisconsin, in the 1950s and 1960s, and so his understanding of the way prison work is and was perceived is based in a post-war, rural, agrarian context. According to my father, one third of his classmates’ fathers worked in prisons, one third worked on farms, and one third worked in town at the businesses that catered to farmers and prison workers.
When I asked my grandmother how she thought being a prison guard (her term) was perceived when her husband started out as a guard she told me:

Joan Schmidt: I don't know, it was certainly a good income for everybody that lived there. And they were respected. It was a good job to have. I don't know how he ever got, I guess he just saw it, and somebody just said “why don't you put your application in there?”

Schmidt: And he got hired?

Joan Schmidt: Yeah. Hadn't planned on that. It was just, certainly wasn't the best paid, but it was good retirement.

Schmidt: Do you remember how much he made starting out?

Joan Schmidt: $300 for a month.

Schmidt: $300 a month, in 1952.

My grandmother articulated the importance of benefits, not salary, in prison work, and this was emphasized by nearly every prison worker I spoke with. Although the job wasn’t the “best” paid, it was a “good income” for the time and place.

My father’s claim that prison workers were respected was contradicted by my step-grandmother. Judy Meyer argued that at one time, the prison workers in Waupun were seen as outsiders, second-class citizens, to the core of “Hollanders” who had founded the town and formed its social and religious elite. State workers were often outsiders because they could transfer in from other institutions. The prisons drew a specialized work force that perhaps threatened the religious majority, who in turn saw state workers as privileged people who could be taken advantage of because they did not really belong.
Schmidt: How did people in the community, how did they then, how do they now, look at corrections officers? How do they see them?

Judy Meyer: Years ago, forty, fifty years ago, they were not respected in Waupun.

Richard Meyer: They were strictly second-class citizens. In fact-

Judy Meyer: And yet, it's the correctional officers, actually half the town.

Richard Meyer: What did you say?

Judy Meyer: I said that correctional officers support the town. Housing and –

Richard Meyer: Well, certainly to a great extent. But at that time we had industry, we had Shaler Company, which was a big operation. We had two or three shoe factories –

Judy Meyer: Two shoe factories, bottling works-

Richard Meyer: Yeah. There were a number of industries. But it was – it reached the point, a long time ago, where the officers, correctional people, opened the grocery store right across from the front gate of the prison, because they were charged, there were two sets of prices. There were community prices and the state prices.

Schmidt: Why? Why did people feel like that?

Richard Meyer: You know, people always like to have somebody they can look down on. If you picture yourself – okay, if you are sitting here as an individual, and you very honestly say to yourself “there is no one in this world about whom I can say, “I am better than that person,”” what's that gonna do to you? You're gonna suicide.

Well, this town, being very God-fearing, religious, etc, they love to have somebody to look down on. And the state workers, they were very identifiable.

My grandparents point out that prison workers and their families were a huge percentage of the town, but they were looked down upon by the Dutch Reformed community. Part of this, I
think, stems from my grandparents’ outsider status. Neither of them were raised in the Dutch Reformed church and were both made to feel like outsiders by “holier-than-thou” neighbors and associates. Their hostility to this religious group is very long standing. However, since both have lived in Waupun for more than fifty years (my grandfather has lived there 80 years), they maintain a long-running knowledge of social trends, and their memory of the officers-only grocery store is interesting to me. My other grandmother, Joan Schmidt, told me that she had been told about it, but that it had become a thing of the past by the time she and her husband moved to Waupun. Clearly, attitudes toward corrections work are always in flux, depending on the social and cultural trends affecting a particular community or region.

**Prisons, Performance Arena, and Occupational Humor**

Q: What are the first three things you get when you become a correctional officer?

A: A car, a gun, and a divorce (Conover 89)

Prisons are stressful, exhausting, low-paid and dangerous places to work, and correctional officers must find ways to negotiate occupational stressors. Humor is an essential multi-tool for correctional officers. Joking behavior claims to disavow seriousness and it is this masking of serious discourse that allows humor to do its very serious work under the cover of frivolity and laughter. Correctional officers use occupational humor to communicate nuanced meanings that may not be effectively expressed in any other mode. Correctional officer (CO) occupational humor is traditional, highly specialized, and dependent on context and insider status. The messages communicated through occupational
humor are often essential to occupational and institutional well-being, yet are rarely, if ever, studied. This section will focus ultimately on one joke, although CO humor includes practical jokes, formal jokes, observational humor, conversational humor (as proposed by Neil Norrick [1993]) mimicry, and parody. Occupational humor in correctional work takes place within a space that can usefully be understood through what Richard Bauman and John Miles Foley describe as the performance arena. I conclude this section with a brief analysis of one example of CO humor in the performance arena, taken not from my own fieldwork, but from literary journalist Ted Conover’s ethnographic book, *New Jack: Guarding Sing Sing*.

CO humor takes place within the physical and social space referred to as the “performance arena.” The performance arena, according to Foley, is “the locus where the event of performance takes place, where words are invested with their special power” (1995:47). The performance arena may be located within a correctional facility, but just as easily may occur in a bar, on the telephone, or in a state van, transporting prisoners. When one CO mimics a supervisor for the amusement of another officer, the performance and the reception of the mimicry take place within a specialized context that endows the mimicry with heightened communicative power. As Foley notes, “to be situated within the performance arena is to be alive to the metonymic referentiality that the given register institutionally encodes” (Foley 1995:28). Thus, the mimicry is performed in a traditional register and carries the gravitas of tradition. The audience understands mimicry as part of shared occupational life, and the performance communicates complicated issues of power differentials, institutional health, and moral ambiguity, at the same time the mimic demonstrates skill and individual comedic talent. As Foley observes, this “richly contexted array of meanings…can be communicated only through the special, ‘dedicated’ set of
channels that constitute the multivalent experience of performance” (1995:28). The audience and the performer collectively construct this occupational arena that makes these multiple meanings possible.

CO humor is a form of immanent art. Immanence, as Foley defines it, is the “set of metonymic, associative meanings institutionally delivered and received through a dedicated idiom or register either during or on the authority of traditional oral performance” (1995:7). When a CO jokes about the quality of prison food, the audience understands that the laughable qualities of institutional food are emblematic of the laughable qualities of the Department of Corrections. Joking about institutional food is not unique to prison life (school cafeterias and hospital food are certainly loci of American humor traditions) but within the specialized register of CO occupational humor, the performer and the audience can access a specific set of shared meanings and implications about their shared life working within prisons. The traditional discourse of food humor provides an opportunity for correctional officers to address anxieties about the interior of bodies, contamination, mental health, and a lack of meaning and rational order within the job. While the surface level of a joke about “mystery meat” allows for the pleasure of recognition of the familiar and appreciation of successful comedic delivery (and that surface level should not be undervalued), the traditional nature of the joke and its immanent meanings within the performance arena allow for specialized communication that may not take place through any other means.

CO humor is often offensive to outsiders (and some insiders, as I will discuss later in this chapter). The register of CO humor is so specialized and dependent on a shared identity and shared context that those who are not “literate” in that register are unable to receive the multiplicity of messages encoded in CO humor, thus focusing erroneously on the surface of a
joke and the often ethically ambiguous and ambivalent issues raised in the joke. I do not want to downplay the seriousness of inappropriate humor about homosexuality, violence against inmates, women and children, but I do want to emphasize that these are real topics employed in the CO joking register. A joke may simultaneously be funny to an insider because it feels “true” and morally reprehensible to an outsider because it feels hateful.

I would like to conclude this section with an exploration of one joke told by a CO to a group of correctional officers. This joke was told to Ted Conover during his short stint as a CO at New York’s famed Sing Sing prison. This is the joke: “How do you know when an inmate is lying? When you see him open his mouth” (Conover 100).

The joke can be understood as a discrete unit, a “word,” as proposed by Foley (2002). Although it is not from an oral epic or performed by a poet, the joke functions as a piece of oral art and as a speech act. The audience and the speaker recognize the joke as a joke—it is not everyday speech, but spoken within a joking register. Thus, as “a unit of utterance, an irreducible atom of performance” (Foley 2002:13), this joke or “word” carries meanings “larger and more complex than the literal sum of [its] parts, meanings that enrich the story being performed by reference to the implied…tradition” (Foley 2002:18). The audience members receive this joke within the performance arena and the meanings that are transmitted and understood range well beyond the literal level of the words. However, it is important to emphasize that not every audience member understands the joke in the same way.

The officers who laugh at this joke signal much by their laughter. First, the laughter indicates appreciation of successfully delivered verbal humor. The joke succeeds through the laughter of the hearers. The performance arena, including the performer, the audience, the
institutional setting, and the joke-telling register, allows for a set of meanings to be carried through humor. The laughter aligns those who laugh with the teller of the joke. The joke asks its audience to identify themselves with officers and against inmates, reinforcing occupational identity. Those who laugh may understand the joke as a statement about shared identity. It also establishes COs as moral arbiters—those who are responsible for decoding and judging lies. This responsibility resonates with the responsibility for the safety of their fellow officers as well as the safety of the inmates within the correctional facility and the safety of the general public, whom incarceration of inmates ostensibly protects. The joke also highlights the function of speech and its reception. By discounting everything that comes out of an inmate’s mouth as “lies,” the joke minimizes the inmate’s access to communicative strategies.

In contrast, Conover’s implied hostile silence, rather than laughter, sets him apart from the teller and the laughing audience, marking him as rejecting this attempt at communication of shared meaning. In this joke, all inmates are homogenized as untrustworthy verbal con artists. Conover resists the homogenization of inmates by means of CO humor throughout New Jack while simultaneously emphasizing (though unanalytically) the importance of humor in corrections work (2001:87).

It is important to note that this joke is taken out of context; Conover’s journalistic style omits much of the performance context that a scholar of oral tradition looks for and documents. Similarly, in my own ethnographic fieldwork, I encounter context second hand: my collaborators tell me about jokes and joking behavior that happen at work, and due to the controlled environment of correctional facilities, I will never see the inside of their offices, or witness an on-the-job joke telling session. But, I can ask questions about the original
performance arena, and I can draw preliminary conclusions, and I recognize that context is critical. Ultimately my ethnographic research relies on a second-hand understanding of the original performance arena, and a first-hand understanding of a new performance arena—that which includes me as ethnographer, and my collaborators as performers.
Chapter 3: “If We Like You, We’ll Mess With You!”: Practical Joke Narratives Among Prison Workers

It is my contention that practical jokes among prison workers allow jokers to communicate affection and solidarity without using words, help victims and jokers to release stress and cope with boredom, initiate outsiders into closed groups, and temporarily wield power over institutions and administrators.

Affection among correctional officers is often displayed through humor, often in the form of practical jokes and physical performances of mimicry. According to one collaborator, a white woman in her fifties, “If we mess with you it means that we like you.” Humor functions to move the emphasis from negative associations of the job (incarceration, verbal abuse, stress, recidivism) to positive interpersonal interactions. Not only do practical jokes allow for expression of affection, but they also keep the focus of the interaction on themselves, on prison workers. The interaction creates a group dynamic—it builds an identity separate from the institutional tasks of the job. Humor between employees allows the formation of an identity that belies the unfunny nature of the job.

Certainly, hostile pranks also occur between employees. One correctional officer I spoke with reported spitting in the lunchbox of a hated fellow officer—an overtly hostile act with little apparent relation to the creation of positive work relationships--but the same officer also described another officer “sticking her tongue” into a piece of chocolate silk pie belonging to another colleague (with whom she carried on a friendly back-and-forth of pranks and practical jokes) and then telling the owner of the pie what she had done. The
difference between these incidents seems to be that in a friendly joking situation, the butt of the practical joke was meant eventually to find out about the prank and suffer publicly for it, allowing for shared workplace laughter; in an unfriendly situation, the butt of the joke is more often kept ignorant that a joke has been played on them at all, and all laughter happens behind the disliked employee’s back. This of course reinforces relationships and a shared identity among those who laugh, and further isolates the butt of the joke.

This chapter endeavors to answer questions about the function of practical jokes in a particular occupational setting. Scholars agree that practical jokes are significant and worthy of study (Bowman 1982, Dundes 2008, Tallman 1974, Hunt 1992, Harlow 1997) but aside from Moira Smith’s ongoing work and my own, practical jokes remain generally under-studied and under-theorized.13 Because of the sensitive nature of correctional work, my primary material consists of after-the-fact narratives of past joking incidents, elicited during interviews conducted outside of the work place. I am concerned with the ways narratives of practical jokes are told and retold among colleagues, friends and family, and during occupational training, official and informal. I have selected representative examples to illustrate four categories of practical jokes played by employees of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC). The first category of jokes contains three examples of jokes played by employees on a supervisor or boss. The second set of jokes contains two examples of initiation jokes—pranks played on new employees by senior colleagues. The third set of jokes contains three jokes played between close friends of similar rank, and the final set of two jokes illustrates practical joking that takes place among correctional officers (COs, often colloquially referred to as “guards”) outside of the workplace, but still depends

13 Richard Tallman’s 1974 article “A Generic Approach to the Practical Joke” remains the standard text for all subsequent folklore research on practical jokes.
on the occupational context for efficacy and meaning. I conclude this section with two joke narratives as examples of jokes played on inmates by correctional staff, and one narrative of a joke played on staff by inmates.

I interviewed individuals who were identified as practical jokers, as well as individuals who have observed practical jokes. I have not and will not observe practical jokers in the workplace due to the restrictive nature of prison work. My goals during the fieldwork were to investigate who plays practical jokes, and on whom the jokes are played. I also gathered information on perceptions of how jokes were received by victims and audiences, and whether practical jokers in this occupational group confine their joking behavior to the workplace. My investigation was concerned not just with the narrative “text” of practical jokes, but also with the contextual setting of these jokes. Throughout the research and writing process, I have shared my work with collaborators and their feedback has helped guide my understanding of practical jokes in corrections settings.

The hypothesis that guided my research is the following: For employees of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, practical joking functions as a way to initiate new employees into the group, to express veiled hostility toward the populations under their control and the arbitrary rules that confine employees as well as inmates and clients, and to cope with day to day stress and frustration. Under the guidance of this hypothesis, I was concerned with the following questions: 1) What are the interactional dynamics of practical joking behavior in this occupational context? 2) What elements of performance are found in practical joking behavior? 3) What are the factors that lead people to perform practical jokes within certain contexts and not others? 4) What role does occupational context play in
practical jokes? 5) How do gender, race and class influence the dynamics of practical joking in prison work? 6) What makes practical jokes funny to COs?

Not surprisingly, there are unspoken rules guiding practical jokes among corrections workers. Staff tend to play jokes on other staff or their superiors. Supervisors rarely play jokes on their subordinate employees. Though for obvious reasons some of my collaborators were reluctant to talk about it (and I chose not to push), there are instances of staff members playing practical jokes on inmates. This behavior was generally ascribed to lower-status, knuckled-head, foolish, employees and was frowned upon by other staff members because it created an unpredictable (as well as deeply unethical) work environment. From time to time, I was told, inmates play tricks on the staff, though often, according to my collaborators, as retaliation. My collaborators frowned upon joking behavior between COs and inmates, though all acknowledged that this happens at times.

**Joking on the Boss**

Practical jokes targeting superiors seem to be common, according to my collaborators. In corrections work, bosses or supervisors play crucial roles in the success of the institution or agency. Choices made by leadership impact workers and inmates in physical, emotional, and psychological ways. Prison work is intensely hierarchical, due in large part to the influence of the military system. My father told me,

Mark Schmidt: But there was really a social hierarchy in the prison system between Union members and the non-Union members. So there was the people at the bottom end, the prison guards, they were Union members. If you were, like, a social worker, the administrator, you were in a different social class within the staff organization.
You were not members of the Union, you didn't negotiate with them. That was always a big issue in my dad's life, because when he got a promotion he got promoted out of that group of being Union and then was more of an administrator, and that always was a difficult thing for him, cause he always identified with that social group that he started with. And I think, you know, even with - Ann's [my mother] dad [Richard Meyer] was always in the administrative-type position, so it was a real – I'm sure that dividing line is still there today. It's really sharp.

Supervisors are connected to the correctional system, which is often denigrated and berated by employees, inmates and the general public for being broken, impossible, or fundamentally unjust. As representatives of a higher power of authority, supervisors are in obvious control of the lives of their subordinates and inmates. My collaborators often pointed to humor as a way to work with supervisors.

In the following scenario, the boss who is targeted is carefully specified as a “good” boss, or a “fair” person. When I asked about the rules governing jokes played on superior officers, one collaborator told me jokes were only played “under the right terms and conditions. You know, if you have a friendship with them. Not if you're adversaries. But if you have a friendship with them, then, yeah.”

The joke was played by low-status employees on respected and valued members of the work place. According to my collaborators, lower status employees were more likely to be practical jokers than high-status employees. This may be due in part to the divisions between ranks of officers. According to my paternal grandfather, Richard Schmidt, the sharpest divide in prison work is between high ranking officers and low ranking officers. In 2003 interview he told me, “There used to be a line between inmates and officers; now it
seems like the low-ranking officers get classified with the inmates.” Awareness of personal responsibility for one’s colleagues’ wellbeing was cited for the reason that bosses tended not to play jokes on each other or on their staff. Lower status employees have less to lose, and are less likely to face serious consequences unless they play jokes on vulnerable populations, like clients or inmates, which was viewed by my collaborators as unethical, in concert with Jeannette Bicknell’s 2007 argument of offensiveness among jokers.

The following story was related by PA, a member of my family, formerly a parole agent in northern Wisconsin, and currently a part-time employee at Gordon Correctional Center, a minimum security facility originally known as the Gordon Camp, which prepares inmates for reintegration into the community. He began work with the Department of Corrections in 1981 at the age of 21. PA has a reputation outside of work for being a seriously dedicated prankster. According to him, he has a reputation at work for being “something of a hardass” and not very funny. This incident occurred when he worked as a guard at a high-security prison in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. This story, recreated here from my field notes14, was told to me by PA in 2003.

At this institution there was a sergeant who was known for his strictness and discipline. Everyone lived in fear of this sergeant, although he was recognized to be a decent and fair man. One night while the sergeant was away from this desk making his rounds, lower ranking officers loaded his desk with all kinds of items he wasn’t supposed to have, including pornographic magazines, novels, food, coloring books (in which the officers colored, writing derogatory phrases about the warden) and an entire game of solitaire laid out on the desk. They filled every drawer of the desk with forbidden items, then called the

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14 Unfortunately, the original recording has been lost and the following highly edited version is all that remains.
warden of the prison and asked him to come down because “Sergeant So-and-so has some things you may want to see.” When the sergeant came back from making his rounds, he found the warden sitting at his desk, reading through the derogatory remarks written in the coloring books.

In the example above, the jokers draw on outside elements to make their joke. The jokers bring in materials specifically forbidden in that institution. Items like food, coloring books, pornography, and crayons are linked to the “normal” world outside of the prison and are, as such, incongruous under the circumstances. Not only are these items designed to make the supervisor look silly and infantilized, they also represent connections to a world that is mentally and emotionally distant from the stressful and often dehumanizing work of the CO. By using items that connect a boss to the world outside of an institution, the employees draw attention to the disconnect between private life and work life. The prison workers chose instead to focus on the things the supervisor particularly hated, namely contraband, used by some officers willing to break the rules to keep boredom at bay. This appropriate incongruity (see Oring 2003 for an in-depth exploration of appropriate incongruity in humor) makes the joke successful—if the supervisor had not been strict about contraband the officers would not have chosen those items to embarrass their sergeant. Thus, the sergeant’s success as a supervisor is what makes the joke successful. It reinforces his identity as an effective employee. The items used in the joke are connected to pleasure and fun, not work and seriousness. The often “deadly serious” nature of corrections work does not often permit play, particularly for officers who are also supervisors and bosses. Targeting silly and pleasure-oriented items highlights and disrupts the somberness of the job. The emphasis in
these jokes on props with origins outside the workplace indicates that the jokers find the disconnect between their work and their home uncomfortable and paradoxical.

The “contraband” joke was played by a group of individuals upon a single individual. The group prank may indicate employees’ feelings of vulnerability at the hands of their supervisors. Bosses wield so much power that one boss is more powerful than a group of employees. Banding together to inflict temporary discomfort on their boss may be a tool of resistance through humor. This attitude may also arise from the bureaucracy inherent in both the Wisconsin Departments of Corrections and Justice, where even a large mobilization of workers fail to effect significant change on the systems.

The “contraband” joke has two victims. The primary victim is, of course, the sergeant, whose desk is defaced and cluttered with forbidden items, but the warden is a secondary victim. He becomes the unwitting force of censure when he is called down to punish the sergeant for the staged infraction, which is obviously not his fault. The warden is targeted through the derogatory phrases in the coloring books and he becomes trapped by having to be both the punisher and the punished. The involvement of a third person indicates of the serious nature of the prank. By bringing in the warden, the jokers call the sergeant’s reputation into question; the sergeant is made to suffer the embarrassment of being caught with quantities of blatant contraband that clearly doesn’t belong to him. Rather than actually hurting his reputation, however, the manufactured infractions may reinforce his reputation as a person who does not have contraband. The incongruity of contraband at his desk signals to the warden (and to the sergeant himself) that this man does not generally break the rules. Through a Bakhtinian carnivalesque inversion of the work space from dignified and orderly to disordered and out of control, the jokers communicate to the warden that the sergeant is so
far above reproach and suspicion that the contraband can be nothing but a joke. In this way, the practical joke may, to some extent, serve to reinforce the sergeant’s reputation as a “hard-ass” and a strict disciplinarian. The absurdity of the content of the contraband creates uncomfortable juxtapositions—pornography contrasts painfully with coloring books and crayons, near-universal symbols of childhood activity—which serve as reminders of the absurdity and contradiction of the job. Correctional officers and inmates alike are acutely aware of the child molesters in their facilities. Interacting with convicted child-rapists every day creates an ongoing painful reminder of the reality that children are raped and abused, whether or not the general public wants to think about it. Combining pornography and coloring books draws attention to this reality with which correctional officers cope as part of their job.

The next practical joke narrative draws on sexuality and creativity also, but includes elements of gender conflict and veiled hostility toward workplace rules that restrict personal expression. This joke was related in an interview with a CO and his wife, both white and in their early 50s. They had been telling me about changes in the correctional system, and the banning of pornography in Wisconsin prisons under the authority of then-governor Tommy Thompson in 1984. The officer’s wife brought up the following prank, which was made possible by the designation of pornographic materials as contraband in prison.

BI: Did you tell her about the sock?

TI: Which sock? Oh yeah, this is really funny. Ah, so, I'm searching a guy's property that came from Black River Correctional Institution. And I'm going through his stuff, and it's like, “What? what is that?” He makes hobby projects, and one of them was knitting. Well, what this guy had knitted was a cock sock. It's a cock and ball holder
knitted...it's all fuzzy, and that sort of thing. And I confiscated it. I told the guy, I said, “look, this is contraband, obviously.” He said, “The guards at Jackson thought it was hilarious.” I said, “Well, that's their opinion, but there's no hobby director in the state of Wisconsin that approved for you to make this project.” And then I wore it around the office for like a week, like til the guys were sick of it. And I started showing it to other people. I, actually, I showed it to other people outside of work, and people started telling me stories. Your boss –

BI: My boss made them for some of her friends. She's a big knitter, and I'm like, “Really? Oh my god.”

TI: I showed it to a female correctional officer, and she said, “wait a minute,” and she went to get one of the catalogs that's got, like all the goofy gadgets and stuff. They had 'em in the catalogs! You can buy 'em. And it's a cock-sock. And so that was just hilarious. We had a lot of fun with that. And then I could not wait, cause the warden'll bring up her administrative team and meet with the property department once in a while. We'd gotten done with all of our regular agenda items, and I said, “Warden, I want to prove to you that I work hard every day to make sure that all kinds of contraband are interdicted.” My coworkers are going like..[gasps] and I brought it out, and she's just like “Ohh…my god.” But I was completely within rights to show it to her, 'cause it's contraband! I intercepted it; I'm helping you out! So we had a lot of fun with that. That was hilarious Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy.

In the above narrative, the officer switches personas several times, and each persona change allows for different performative possibilities in different contexts. When he confiscates the sock from the inmate, he portrays himself as strict, firm and righteous—a representative of
the Wisconsin Department of Corrections—a person who upholds regulations and does not find a “cock-sock” at all hilarious, regardless of the attitudes of the officers at Black River Correctional Institution. However, once he leaves the company of the inmate, he assumes the persona of a joker, and wears the “cock-sock” in his office for a week until his coworkers cease to find it amusing any more. By wearing the “cock-sock,” the officer tears down his public persona of authority, and in the context of his immediate coworkers, he violates official workplace norms and professionalism. He continues to push back against authority when he shows the “cock-sock” to a female coworker. This action appears to anticipate a vehement, negative reaction from the female coworker, and the officer is thus perhaps thwarted when the female coworker fails to be shocked, and instead turns out to have a greater knowledge of “cock-socks” than he does, by virtue of her catalog. Perhaps because of the lack of “appropriately” female reaction from the female coworker, the officer “could not wait” to spring the “cock-sock” on his boss, the warden. In the above narrative, it is clear that the officer is aware that he is pushing the limits of acceptable behavior in this prank. When he plays the joke, however, he assumes a third persona—the over-the-top “suck up”—when he tells the warden he wants to prove to her how hard he works to confiscate contraband. He relies on the official rules and professionalism of the job to make the joke permissible, when he says, “But I was completely within rights to show it to her, ’cause it’s contraband! I intercepted it; I’m helping you out!” He plays the part of a helpful, responsible and conscientious officer—which, in fact, he is—in order to get away with showing an overtly sexual object to his female superior officer. The boundaries that he pushes are the boundaries that allow him to make the joke without punishment. That sanctions are a possibility is clear from the reaction of his coworkers—his secondary audience.
This joke, like the previous joke, is perpetrated on the warden—the highest authority within the institution. The fact that the warden is female in the second joke seems to indicate that there is a heightened awareness of gender in the Department of Corrections. Both of the above practical jokes question the authority of the warden by putting the warden in a position where he or she might have to punish their subordinates. In both scenarios, neither warden chose to officially reprimand the officers. It appears that the subordinate officers use these practical jokes to exert some control over the warden. By invoking a humorous situation, they put the warden in a position where he or she perhaps technically ought to punish the COs, but cannot do so without looking mean and punitive. In this way, the officers force the warden to betray his or her own professionalism (something very important to a warden’s workplace success and the safety of the inhabitants of an institution) and, for just a moment, fail to uphold the rules of the Department of Corrections. This temporary carnivalization of authority and control may act as a release valve both for the jokers and the victims, and the larger audience of both jokes becomes witness to the wardens’ willingness to “take” a joke with good humor, as well as bend the rules slightly in appreciation of well-played comedy. This reaction may be more important for a female warden; as Joanne Gilbert notes in Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique (2004), a perceived “sense of humor” in women often means something very different than a perceived “sense of humor” in a man, and Moira Smith points out that indeed, the notion of the “sense of humor” itself is a historical phenomenon integral to contemporary American culture (Smith 2009:157-158).
Initiation Pranks

Just as bosses are forced by practical jokers to react to jokes that challenge their professionalism and authority, new employees are frequent targets of pranks that challenge their qualifications and question their group membership. As noted by Tallman, practical jokes often function as initiation into a group, and this function can be seen in the following narratives.

Becoming a correctional officer is a process that includes formal schooling, informal advising, and on the job training. There is often a difficult adjustment period and inmates frequently take advantage of rookies’ inexperience. According to my uncle, Paul Meyer, a retired DOC officer, “they say it takes six months to feel confident and at home at work. It took me two years.” My collaborator TI told me that he felt more authority as soon as he was no longer the newest employee on a shift. During this period, new officers and staff can be targets for practical jokes that function as initiation.

The first I will explore was collected in December 2003. As the collaborator preferred not to speak on tape, I took notes of her words and reproduced the following highly edited narrative in response. This particular story is very popular among my uncle and aunt and their corrections worker friends. I have heard it told on multiple occasions, by a variety of tellers, to a variety of audiences (though nearly always including other COs). The fact that the story was told by my aunt, who was not herself a corrections worker, but rather a medical secretary in northern Wisconsin, indicates that the joke has left the confines of the inter-group corrections worker repertoire, and become the shared property of those who have outsider/insider status by means of family ties, and are permitted to joke about insider matters.
My aunt VQ told me about a new officer, a friend of hers, who transferred to a maximum-security institution. His new co-workers, also recent hires but with slightly more seniority, told him that in order to get the key to the tower during the changing of the guard he needed to use the password “rosebud.” So when he went to start his shift he went out to the base of the watchtower and started yelling “rosebud!” up at the guard sitting in the tower. After this had been going on for a while, the guard in the tower finally leaned out the window and yelled, “What the fuck is your problem?”

This joke is a clear-cut example of an initiative practical joke, as defined by Tallman (262). Experienced colleagues put their new coworker into an embarrassing position to reinforce his newness, and ritualize his membership in the group. According to my collaborators, inmates tended to haze and harass new officers more than colleagues tended to haze and prank new co-workers, though of course not all hazing qualifies as practical joking behavior. My collaborators acknowledged that initiation pranks happen, though verbal teasing is more common than elaborate practical jokes. One collaborator told me, “Make the new guy do it! That’s just how it goes. You get the worst jobs, the worst shifts; you have to clean up a lot of shit.” Some collaborators indicated that new employees were already nervous, so practical jokes were reserved for a time when the new employee was more established and confident. Other collaborators described themselves as naive and idealistic when they started the job, and indicated that their idealism was worn away by the job itself, as well as mocked by officers with (often marginally) more seniority.

The “rosebud” joke relies on public embarrassment to create humor, as do most practical jokes. The new officer is humiliated by yelling “rosebud” in front of other officers. The officers who played the trick knew that their new colleague would be publicly
embarrassed and derived humor in advance from fooling him, and afterward from ribbing the new guy, and for years to come by telling and retelling the joke to an ever-widening audience. The new officer is coerced into serenading a more senior officer in a tower, invoking ideas of lovesick suitors, howling for the attention of their unheeding beloved. The feminized, floral fake password creates homosexual overtones that strip the officer of the masculinity afforded by his job.

The public nature of the joke permits a wide audience; this may indicate that the jokes are playing a role for more people than just the jokers and the butts. Thus, this joke may reinforce professional identity for experienced prison guards. By observing, either first hand or from a distance in time, the discomfiture of the new officer, more seasoned guards can feel a sense of psychological satisfaction that they, themselves, would never be so easily tricked and humiliated. Their identity as knowledgeable, competent employees, and consequently, the distance between themselves and new employees, is thus reinforced.

As in the “contraband” joke, the “rosebud” joke involves an unwitting third party. Like the warden in the “contraband” joke, the guard in the tower is a necessary, though involuntary, normalizing force of authority and control, who has been unwittingly drawn into the realm of play. It is, perhaps, significant that both jokes involve a third witness in order to make the joke. In prisons, officer solidarity is crucial to the safety of prisoners and guards alike. DOC institutions rely on military training, terminology, and ranking, and because of this, some of the relational behavior of the military can be seen in corrections officers. This emphasis on group mentality may explain why corrections workers tend to involve groups of people in their jokes. The guard in the tower reacts with hostility (“what the fuck is your problem?”) to the joke. Since I have recorded many instances of gay jokes told or played on
fellow officers, I would argue that the homosexual overtone of the joke is characteristic of
corrections worker practical jokes. Why corrections workers make so many homosexual
jokes is a matter for exploration later in this essay; for now I will suggest that the male-
dominated nature of the job probably plays a role in the prevalence of gay jokes among
corrections workers.

Another initiation practical joke story was told to me by TI. The joke was played on a
recently promoted officer by senior officers who felt the new guy needed to be humbled. The
joke draws attention to the employee’s unfamiliarity with the institution; a more experienced
officer would immediately understand the joke and fail to be taken in by the prank, but the
“new guy” was fooled, and his discomfiture was made public through the radio he carried—a
common tool in workplace humor in prisons.\footnote{One collaborator described the humorous use of radios at his institution:}

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TI: When I worked at Waupun, it was all about seniority. You know, how much time
you had in as an officer. And the older guys definitely ruled; you followed their lead,
you took their instructions, you did what they said. And, ah, if there was, like, a
younger officer that promoted maybe a little bit too soon, the older guys liked to mess
with him, and I remember this specifically happening. The tiers in the cell hall – they

We’ll all have radios on our belts, and a lot of the radio responses are anonymous.
Like, my friend, the other day, got called by the security director to report to his
office. And so I got on the radio and I did the Darth Vader theme song, “dun dun dun
dun-duh-dun, dun-duh-dun,” and everybody broke up about that. Little things like
that that you can do that are anonymous, because you're not putting yourself out
there. They don't know what radio that's coming from. Officers will fart into their
radio, they'll flush the toilet into the radio, you know. They're constantly – they'll be
in the bathroom, going to the bathroom, and keep the mic keyed. Lots of stuff like
that that they can get away with cause they know its anonymous. And it just breaks
up what would otherwise be a boring day.
were four tiers high, and they were always lettered, okay? And so one of the older officers called this new lieutenant into his office and said “you gotta get down to the north cell hall right away, somebody just jumped off “A” tier.” And so the Lieutenant like, grabbed his radio, and put out an alert, and ran down there, and then realized A tier was the bottom tier, he couldn't possibly get hurt, it's the ground level tier [laughs]. And they do that to mess with somebody that promoted a little too soon, just to kind of have some fun with them.

This joke is described as “fun” by the teller, and that it was done in order to “mess with” colleagues. By framing this joke as “fun,” the teller assigns it a benign status, rather than a hostile one. The joke is intended, at least overtly, to be understood as play—something to be enjoyed, at least by some. The enjoyment derived from this “fun” is likely greater for the audience than for the butt of the joke. Since the new lieutenant used his radio to put out an alert to other officers, everyone in hearing distance of a radio (including inmates) becomes a part of the audience for the joke. Those officers who didn’t immediately realize that a joke had been played and consequently responded to the radio alert may also find themselves to be victims of the joke; they, too, show themselves to be unfamiliar with the nomenclature of the institution, or at least to be slow-witted enough to be taken in by the prank. These secondary victims, like the warden in the earlier joke, can choose to align themselves with the jokers and bystanders or with the victim; their understanding of the prank as “fun” may thus be determined by how they choose to position themselves within the realm of the joke.

“Messing with” co-workers in this situation seems to be an informal way of expressing group boundaries. Because the new lieutenant was promoted too quickly (at least, in the opinion of older officers) he has crossed a boundary. The older officers “mess with”
him to make the distinction between him and them visible. The joke highlights the distance between his level of experience and the joker’s level of experience. The boundaries between junior and senior officers are important because they demarcate the division of pay, first choice at vacation time and overtime, as well as the right to call oneself a lieutenant.

TI states that, “it was all about seniority. You know, how much time you had in as an officer.” Seniority, more than education or training, determines the official hierarchy and TI draws attention to how much time an officer has “in.” Some COs, including an uncle of mine, express their tenure in the DOC as “time served,” as if the officers saw themselves serving a sentence, much like the inmates they oversee. At one point, this uncle had calculated the years, months, days, hours and minutes until he could retire and receive full pension benefits from his time with the DOC. When I asked TI about this, he laughed.

Schmidt: “So do you consider time on the job as time served?”

TI: That's a funny question! [laughs] Like I said, I enjoy it; I don’t think it’s a chore. I think every one of my different jobs in the Department of Corrections has taught me different things.

TI’s initial response was laughter; he neither confirmed nor denied that time on the job felt like time served. Instead, he focused on the positives in his experience. Himself a senior officer of 34 years with the DOC and 26 years “in” at his current institution, TI has demonstrated success at his job and is now a senior officer in charge of reinforcing boundaries and affirming occupational identity for the younger officers under him. This response indicates conflict, as he laughs, describes my question as “funny,” and moves on without answering it directly. Instead, the answer he provides reconfigures my question and his answer: my question implies negativity, but TI uses laughter to transition from that
negativity to a positive response, as befits a leader and responsible high-ranking officer of the Wisconsin DOC. Humor is thus frequently used as a means of transition from a negative situation to a positive situation, and this often happens within small groups of friends within the Department of Corrections, as I will show below.

**Jokes Between Friends**

According to my findings, practical jokes tend to happen under circumstances of affection, rather than obvious hostility. My collaborators repeatedly told me that joking occurs more often between friends than enemies. This is resonant with Keith Basso’s 1979 findings among the Western Apache jokers, who engage in joking behavior only when the relationship between joker and receiver is sufficiently familiar and thusly pliant enough to withstand abuse. My collaborators stressed that practical jokes are most often played among friends, and that pranks, although frequently leading to escalating joking behavior that could be perceived as hostile, were a sign of close friendship. According to my collaborator BO, practical jokes (which she separated from harassment) were generally indicative of friendship. She told me, “Yeah, it’s about friendship. If we like you, we’ll mess with you!”

Practical jokes among friends, particularly those who are of similar rank in the DOC, demonstrate a shared awareness of the difficult parts of the job, and through this demonstration of awareness, contribute to a sense of shared community. The first joke I will explore here demonstrates that the joker is aware of the difficulty his colleague is experiencing in his attempts to quickly handle many tasks by himself, and by using a practical joke to point out this difficulty, the joker expresses veiled sympathy under the cover of harassing behavior. In the second joke I will explore in this section, the joker exploits his
own boredom to violently interrupt the boredom of his friend, in a joke that became a cautionary tale for incoming trainees. In the third joke I will explore the anxiety surrounding food and contamination, demonstrated by two correctional officers’ violation of each others’ lunch. In all three practical jokes, the jokers highlight the anxieties, dangers and difficulties of correctional work, and in playing these pranks, the jokers communicate their awareness of their colleagues’ work struggles. I argue that this joking behavior ultimately reinforces solidarity and shared occupational identity.

The first joke between good friends was played on a correctional officer by a colleague of equal status. Related to me by TI, this joke demonstrates the mundane reality of prison work. As a CO of more than thirty years experience, a practical joker both on and off the job and a semi-professional stand up comedian, TI had an extensive repertoire of practical jokes and a facility for storytelling. As the victim of the joke, TI was working the lobby at Oakhill Correctional Institution outside of Oregon, Wisconsin, letting in family and visitors on a particularly busy visiting day. He was processing people on one side of the portal, opening and closing the doors for officers, answering the phone and dealing with paperwork in an effort to keep everything under control. His coworker, observing this challenging work environment, decided to prank call him to add to his misery and stress. TI himself told me the story:

TI: I used to work in the lobby at Oakhill, where I’d check in all of the visitors and everybody that’s coming through the front; I’d operate the gates, okay? And, again, the lobby’s a type of position where it’s either feast or famine. There’s either nothing going on, or it all happens at once. And, ah, there was one day I was working by myself and everything was happening at once. The phone was ringing, people wanted
to get through all six gates, ah, I had to check in construction workers, and get ‘em IDs, and so I’m just like Oz, pulling all the cords behind the curtain and make it all work. And I got this phone call, and it sounded like…the person identified themselves as the grandmother of an inmate, and they had to travel from Minneapolis to come and visit this inmate at Oakhill, outside of Oregon, Wisconsin. And so she wanted directions. And she was hard of hearing. And I had to repeat everything like three times to get it straight, and I’m like going nuts, cause I’m like trying to operate the gates, and do everything else at the same time, while I’m trying to be polite, and maintain a level of professionalism on the phone, and about three minutes into the phone call, the elderly lady said, ah, “Young man, can you turn around?” I said, “what?” and she said, “Young man, can you please turn around?” and I turned around to look, and it was a coworker in an office that had dialed my number on an outside line. He saw I was busy, and had tied me up doin’ all this, and I’m like, “hmmm.” It was a great gag. I enjoyed it. I was the subject of it, but I was good with it.

Prank phone calls like this one constitute an important sub-genre of practical jokes, and I have recorded many instances of prank calls during my fieldwork. I have recorded stories of correctional officers being called into work to deal with escaped prisoners, and one instance of a parole agent who was prank-called on a Sunday morning by a colleague who claimed that a convicted child molester on the victim’s caseload had been spotted at a park, surrounded by children, carrying balloons and covered in candy, and that he (the parole agent) had to come get this man right now. These prank phone calls tend to be made on holidays and weekends when an officer has been working particularly hard, and will be particularly devastated to be called back into work. The desire to elicit the biggest negative
reaction seems to drive these prank calls, but I would like to suggest that this is not entirely hostile, and may encode a coping function.

Prank phone calls made to stressed officers appear to increase stress up to a point, but also ultimately produce relief, and, I would argue, a release of built-up stress. When an officer is prank called at home, in his or her safe, personal, private space, that safe space is invaded by the job. This is an obvious and overt invasion of the home by the job, but it accompanies pre-existing work stress that the correctional officer brings home. CO workplace stress affects home and family life, as noted by many scholars, including Cieslak, et all (2008) and Lambert, et all (2008). By making a prank call, the CO’s colleagues demonstrate an awareness of the difficulty of keeping work stress out of the home. The prank call temporarily exacerbates the stress, making the victim think he or she will not only have to deal with a difficult, stressful work situation, but, to add insult to injury, they will have to do this on their day off. After the prank caller has let the joke run its course, either revealing the prank over the phone or waiting to reveal the prank at the CO’s office, the victim of the joke ideally experiences relief and a temporary absence of stress, in this case finding out that a convicted child molester, for whom the officer was responsible, is not stalking children was a relief, eliciting brow-wiping and relieved chuckles from the victim, in this case. For a moment, when the officer realizes that he or she does not have to deal with a dangerous, stressful, or frustrating situation, I would argue that the victim feels an absence of stress in the face of the rush of relief. Whether this momentary release of stress is worth the anxiety and frustration that precedes it is debatable, and probably varies from person to person and joke to joke, but I think it quite possible that these joking behaviors are used by colleagues to help each other acknowledge the difficulties of the job and manage the stress and anxiety that
these difficulties produce. Thus, these jokes give officers a way to transition from a position of stress to a position of appreciative (if rueful) laughter, however temporary.

In the preceding narrative, TI notes that the job “was either feast or famine,” and this sentiment was expressed by many of my collaborators. Most of the time, my collaborators told me, there isn’t much going on in prison. This produces boredom. However, apparent calm can escalate into serious violence and danger without warning. As TI told me,

TI: One of the things that they teach people at the academy is that you’re going to be going through long spells where nothing is going on. And then, you might have a fight, or you might have a scenario that you have to respond to, and then all of a sudden, boy, you earn your money on that day. But, for those long spells you have to try and use your time constructively and not get bored and not do goofy stuff!

The spike of stress, interspersed with long periods of lassitude, makes the stress of the job more difficult for employees, because it is impossible to anticipate when boredom will suddenly transition into short periods of adrenaline-filled chaos and danger. This feels unhealthy to many of the COs I spoke with, and many of them connected this pattern to the high rate of heart attacks among COs.

The second joke narrative I will explore in this section draws upon boredom juxtaposed with sudden shock, as discussed above. Like the “Rosebud” joke, this incident involves the guard tower. According to my collaborators, working night shifts in the guard tower is one of the hardest jobs in corrections because it is so boring, and there are few permissible ways to ease the boredom:

Schmidt: Yeah. How do people stay busy in the tower?
TI: Well, you're not supposed to, but some people bring up a radio. Some people bring up little portable TVs. You're not supposed to have that stuff, but I'll be honest with you; it happens. People talk on the phone. You do have a phone there, so you can just call people that you know that are in the institution. No computers in the tower spots, but there are computers at most workstations these days. So if you're at a workstation that has one, you can do email, you can always do work stuff on there. A lot of people continue to make rounds; you know, just get up and be active. Make a lot of rounds, get some exercise in.

Working in the tower involves watching often-empty space for eight hours at a stretch. During the nighttime, there are no inmates outside for recreation, there are few people entering and leaving the gates, and so there is little to see, making the job sometimes feel futile. Several of my collaborators pointed to time spent in the guard towers as the direct genesis of practical jokes, citing “too much time on your hands” as a factor in elaborate pranks.

The following joke narrative, told to me by TI, has become legendary in the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. I have heard several officers tell versions of the story during the course of my fieldwork, and one collaborator told me that “everyone knows this story.” He said that it has become so emblematic of a prank that got out of hand but was handled with such responsibility, that it is used as a teaching tool in officer training. This cautionary tale contains both the official protocol and unacceptable rule-breaking, and so is particularly relevant for officers who must follow the rules sometimes, but feel compelled to break the rules at other times, either for their own sake, for their colleagues’ sake, or for the greater good of the institution.
So. Okay. This happened when your uncle was the union steward. Probably one of the most boring jobs in the DOC is working an armed tower, when you’re just up in the tower, by yourself, overlooking a certain section of the institution, and for eight hours, you’re just scanning and checking, and checking and scanning and making sure that everything is okay. Now, on third shift, you can imagine, it’s even more boring, because it’s nighttime, no inmates are out, it’s just you and a lit-up portion of the yard.

So, this one officer who was working one of the tower positions got bored. And he had a friend that worked in the exterior perimeter car vehicle that would make rounds around the institution. He would bring the night tower officers their meals, if they needed anything he would bring it to them, and the officer that promoted the practical joke was working in the tower. His buddy was working the car, twenty feet below. So the officer brought in a rubber balloon, filled it up with water and thought, “when my buddy comes around, I’ll drop the balloon right on the front of the vehicle, and it’ll shock the heck out of him!”

So, ah, the plan came off beautifully. He went to drop the balloon onto the car to shock his friend; unfortunately the balloon went right through the windshield of the patrol vehicle and he went, “oh my goodness…”

I mean, a) he could have caused an accident, b) he certainly caused damage to a state vehicle, and c) there’s no way it can go unreported. So, they did the right thing; They
contacted the third-shift supervisor and he was very up-front, told him what he did, told him what happened, and ah, the management team at Oshkosh was actually very good about it. He got the lowest level of discipline, which is a letter in his file that he could pull in one year and he also had to pay restitution for the windshield. And all parties involved were flippin’ cartwheels that that’s all that happened. No accident, nothing worse than that. So, yah, that’s a great practical joke.

That was used in teaching at the Academy; it’s being used today, for the brand new officers that go through the academy. Because, one of the things that they teach people at the academy is that you’re going to be going through long spells where nothing is going on. And then, you might have a fight, or you might have a scenario that you have to respond to, and then boy, all of a sudden you earn your money on that day. But, for those long spells, you have to try and use your time constructively and not get bored and not do goofy stuff like send a water balloon through the windshield of the patrol vehicle!

TI describes this as “a great practical joke.” Like the “Contraband” joke discussed earlier in this essay, the “Water balloon” joke depends on an item brought into the institution from the outside—in this case, a water balloon. As a toy, the water balloon contains elements of hostile play. Water balloons are thrown at people, usually in an aggressive way. In this practical joke, the water balloon is dropped from a high height, onto a state vehicle. This toy becomes a weapon and breaks the windshield of the car. When the windshield breaks, the joke leaves the control of the joker, and he finds himself with far more severe consequences than he had anticipated. Because the joke passed its intended boundaries, the humor becomes
more expansive—there are now two victims—the initial intended victim, and the perpetrator himself. In an act of solidarity and responsibility, both victims present themselves to their supervisor for punishment, thereby reinforcing their occupational identity as reasonable men who know when to stand up and take blame. The union steward (my uncle, and a frequent teller of this joke) and the third-shift supervisor become the initial audience, and they are able to laugh at both victims.

I recorded several stories of practical jokes involving state vehicles. The following example also indicates the potential for retaliatory pranks, as I will discuss shortly.

TI: A lot of times, like, one officer will be in the Interior Perimeter Vehicle, where he's gotta make rounds constantly, but then he's gotta go and eat. So somebody will relieve him so he can eat. So the officer that's leaving the vehicle, before he shuts off the vehicle, he'll turn the radio all the way up. He'll turn the windshield wipers on, he'll turn the lights on. So when the other officer comes out to get in the car, he just turns it on and all of a sudden the radio's blaring, and the windshield wipers are going, and it's like, “thanks a lot, buddy.” So that guy might get his sleeves sewed shut later on.

According to several CO collaborators, sewing the sleeves of an officer’s coat shut was a common practical joke, inspired by a surfeit of time alone in an office while the other officer on duty makes his or her rounds.

Sewing the sleeves of a coat shut fits the ongoing pattern of pranks that draw from the complex intersection between work life and home life. For many months in Wisconsin, a coat is necessary in order to go outside, even if one is just walking from a building to a car. Thus, one puts on a coat immediately prior to leaving work at the end of a (perhaps) long and
difficult shift. The coat itself is a transitional object; it goes to work with the officer, and it comes home at the end of the workday. In such a cold climate, the coat is an expensive and vital article of clothing, and perhaps serves additionally as a visible marker of one’s sports allegiances, recreational hobbies, or sense of personal style in a work place marked by sober uniforms or severe dress code. Sewing shut the sleeves of a coat is an act of domestic sabotage. Instead of a productive act, sewing the sleeves shut is domestic, feminized labor that is useless, save for the purpose of irritating a colleague. It forces the butt of the joke to spend time unpicking the stitches before he or she can put on their coat and go home. By preventing the officer from leaving work on time (or forcing them to be cold, if they don’t want to take the time to un-sew their sleeves), the joker draws attention to the end of a shift, and the officer’s desire to leave the institution, whether to go home or to a bar. This hindrance takes place at the threshold of the shift and inspires a short span of liminal labor while the butt fixes his or her sleeves. He or she is working, but not on the clock, and for no good reason.

Just as the domesticity of unnecessary needlework calls attention to the transition between home and work, food in prisons can also serve as a reminder of this uneasy juxtaposition. As evidenced in movies like “Cool Hand Luke” and “The Shawshank Redemption,” there is a great deal of anxiety surrounding food in prisons, both for guards and inmates. When I asked BO, a white woman in her 50s who works at a minimum security women’s facility, what she and her coworkers laughed about at work, she told me,

BO: Well, the meals are pretty funny. Prison food is pretty funny! Hotdogs show up in everything, from the meatloaf to soups [Schmidt: Chopped up like pennies?] No,

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16 I have never heard an instance of a female officer sewing sleeves shut, but I hesitate to draw conclusions from this, since I have interviewed far more men than women.
still pretty identifiable…they try to hide it a little better. But this is the civilian workers that are in charge of that! Trying to save money, I guess, for the state. Occasionally, though, they produce some really good food. We have a really good bakery, for instance. But, all in all, prison food…they buy it on the cheap. And you can only do so much with cheap stuff.

Inmates, certainly, have reason to fear and dislike poor-quality or contaminated food, and since officers generally eat the same food as the inmates, many COs express the belief that their food has been tampered with by the inmates who work in the kitchen. TI told me, “You’re always thinking, you know, when you work in an institution where the inmates prepare and make most of the food… you have some questions there. When they know a tray’s going to an officer, does he get extra spit today? And then there’s the old joke: don’t eat the tapioca in prison.”

Most of my collaborators, however, agreed that prison food is miserable, and that they preferred not to eat it, in part out of the anxiety that the inmate-cooks had tampered with the officers’ food and in part because of the general disgust at poor quality food or lackluster institutional preparation. My collaborator BO told me, “We don’t really have a break, so we eat our meals on duty.” She described how the inmates she works with will often express jealousy of officer’s homemade lunches, saying “oh, steak! That’s not fair!” and telling her to “oh look over there” and pretend that they will steal food from her lunch. When I asked her if inmates had ever actually tried to trick her into looking away so they could steal her food in reality, BO responded, “Oh no, they wouldn’t actually do that; they’re too polite.”

BO describes the inmates as “polite” which I think is indicative both of the respect she holds for the personhood of the inmates under her guard, but also the very real differences between working with female inmates and working with male inmates. Gender and sex
However, in contrast to the general distaste expressed toward prison food, several of my collaborators spoke glowingly about gifted inmate cooks and my grandfather Richard Schmidt claimed to love prison food, particularly when the Wisconsin Department of Corrections grew most of its food on the prison farms.  

Food is intensely personal and cultural and as a symbol of identity and culture, can reinforce boundaries between groups as well as in-group status. In addition, food penetrates the body, and makes the transition from external to internal. Food becomes a part of the body, and so contamination of food can be a serious offense, as at times it equates to penetration and violation of the body. TI told me, “That’s, ah, pretty much verboten. You don’t mess with somebody else’s food.” However, my fieldwork indicates that at least sometimes, officers do mess with each other’s food.

Many COs bring their own lunch, and lunches are a target for practical jokes in many occupations. Bag lunch provides a link between the home and the workplace; it is a reminder of one’s life outside of work, and this reminder is particularly vivid for home-food brought into a prison. Tampering with, stealing or mocking an employee’s personal food is a common occurrence in many workplaces, including prisons. Movies like “American Pie” point out the anxiety of violating food, and this joke resonates with the rape of the pie in the film. The following narrative was related to me by BO, who witnessed, and at times, contributed to, an ongoing campaign of food pranks between two same-status co-workers.

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matter a great deal to prison workers; every DOC employee I spoke with had very firm opinions on whether working with men or women was harder (though there was no consensus on this point). Certainly the male and female prison populations face highly gendered challenges and these challenges affect the COs. For in-depth discussion of gender, sex, and prison, see Brooks 2007 and George 2009.

18 My older collaborators, those working in the Wisconsin Department of Corrections in the 1950s and 1960s, often spoke highly of the prison farms.
BO: I work with some of the younger officers; I just happen to be older and like working second shift. They’ll do stuff to each other all the time. The control sergeant is a young mom; her name is Laurie. She and one of the young guys on our shift are always…He hit her in the face with a spitball the other day. And then I came up into the control center the other day and she was doin’ something with his pack of gum, and I said, “what the hell are you doing?” and she goes “it’s Robb’s gum—I got it out of his coat!” I said, “What are you doing to it?” and she says, “I’m licking it!” She opened up every piece of gum and licked it and wrapped it back up and put it back in his coat! So yeah, anything goes…The week before that, he had…he’s allergic to eggs, so um, one of the food service people is related to him or something, and she made special eggless chocolate cream pie and he had a piece of that in a little container and he went to eat it and he’s like, “What happened to my pie?” and Laurie’s like, “I stuck my tongue in it!” She like, stuck her tongue in it and gouged out the center of his pie—pissed him right off. And then the other day, I think she got black jelly beans in her cereal and she didn’t realize it until she got to the bottom of the bowl…I saw Robb do it…well, I might’ve suggested that he put them in there…cause she walked out of the control [center] and I said, “you’re passing up an opportunity?!?” and so he grabbed the jellybeans and put ‘em in her bowl of cornflakes and I went back to control and sat down next to another officer and I said, “Count to ten,” I said, “cause you’re gonna hear a scream in a minute!” Sure enough, about ten seconds later we hear “COCKSUCKER!” (laughter) I said, “I think she found the jelly beans.” It’s all in good fun.
In this situation of retaliatory food-related pranks, BO positions herself both as an audience member and instigator. She attributes the joking behavior to “younger” employees, but she herself appears to appreciate the practical jokes, to the extent that she suggests to her colleague that he is missing a good opportunity to mess with his co-worker. BO, who has since retired from the DOC in the year since I recorded this interview, recounts the hostile reactions of the victims with glee. She, like nearly every DOC employee I interviewed, is a gifted verbal artist; in the above narration BO employed vocal mimicry, acted out vigorous physical reactions, used carefully and creatively crafted phrases like “pissed him right off” and gleeful understatement like “I think she found the jelly beans” to ornament the story. Her evident joy in the interchange indicates that practical jokes that take place among friends are appreciated for their currency as stories among friends. My mother, who was present during this interview, had already heard this story, which demonstrates that those who occupy an insider/outsider position in the DOC—the children, spouses, friends, and family members of officers and other employees—are often considered appropriate audiences for stories of workplace pranks.

BO indicates that Laurie and Robb, the alternate victim and perpetrator of food-related practical jokes, are close in age and close in rank, and she carefully separates herself from the “younger” employees she works with. This indicates that practical joking that violates certain social taboos (like putting one’s saliva onto another person’s food without that person’s prior knowledge) is of a more intense level than prank phone calls, and thus needs additional layers of closeness between victim and perpetrator in order for it to be considered “fun.” Thus, BO, because she is older and has decades more experience in the
Wisconsin DOC, is only an observer and an instigator in this food-related series of practical jokes, neither the victim nor the perpetrator.

**Practical Jokes Outside the Prison Walls**

Correctional officers occupy a socially ambiguous place in American cultures. They are not police officers, though they wear uniforms and use handcuffs. They are not members of the armed forces, yet they hold job titles like “lieutenant” and “sergeant.” Through television, fiction and film, correctional officers are represented in the public imagination as unfunny sadists, racists, and sociopaths, as worthy of incarceration as the inmates they guard. In Wisconsin, public employees have become political targets, and this additional stigma contributes to an already complicated professional identity.

Correctional officers must integrate this already complicated occupational identity with their other identities—father, daughter, mother, brother, friend, husband—and their occupational world touches their family and friends. This sometimes-uncomfortable juxtaposition is visible in practical jokes played by and on correctional officers outside of the work setting.

Officers often drink together after work, and this can lead to practical jokes that often push the boundaries of kindness, safety and manners. Some Wisconsin residents take a certain amount of pride in the stereotype of the drunken Midwesterner, and many of my collaborators acknowledged that COs are often stereotyped as problem drinkers, in part due to the high levels of stress they experience. Alcohol consumption is an important part of

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19 See Leary 1998 for a discussion of Midwestern stereotypes.
many subcultures, and there are many traditions of drunken pranks in many diverse groups of people. TI, who heard the story from colleagues, told me the following narrative:

TI: Okay, so, outside of work there were some practical jokes. When Stanley Kowalski was a new lieutenant, he was known as a tough-as-nails kind of supervisor and nobody to mess with—and a big drinker. So the sergeants on second shift took him out, and there’s this resort out on Green Lake, and the big drink was the hurricane? And if you drink seven of these ridiculously strong drinks you got a t-shirt that said “I survived the Hurricane.” And so they were all eggin’ him on to you know, drink seven, drink seven! And they’re shootin’ pool and you know, everybody’s drinkin’ heavily and they’re having a grand old time, and the new supervisor was really holding his own, and then just BOOM, he just hit the floor, passed out. They loaded him into the car. They took him back to their apartment, and where he was still passed out. They hiked down his pants and got out a hoover shop vac and hooked his penis up to the vacuum cleaner end of it and then started taking Polaroid pictures! (laughter) And then they left him there. And everybody split. So when he woke up by himself, you know, with the shop vac still hooked up and pictures in his hand of himself! Argh! So he got up and he was drunk and all in and he went home and he got a handgun and he came back and he got all the pictures. I mean, it was…

BI: He was serious!

TI: He was serious. He was not in a playin’ around kinda mood.

This prank, as well as the final joke I will discuss below, indicate the possibility for serious consequences of practical jokes. The officer who has been humiliated does not react with laughter. As Smith notes, “Practical jokes often give rise to unlaughter, especially from their
victims, because they violate everyday expectations of politeness and ask victims to laugh at their own discomfiture” (Smith 2009:153). This practical joke results in conspicuous unlaughter—the failure to laugh in a situation when laughter is expected according to cultural rules.20 Both tellers, TI and his wife BI, call attention to the absence of play. The officer’s choice to go home, get a gun, and come after the jokers, is described as “serious” and that he was not “playing around.” Thus, this indicates that this practical joke might have been considered “play” by the jokers but the joke itself was received as “serious” by the victim, so the play-arena must be discarded. The jokers give the embarrassing photos to the victim, which is in itself an act of serious capitulation; the gun causes the situation to become serious, and while a different reaction from the victim might have allowed the “play” to continue, the gun puts an immediate end to the situation.

I have heard this story told several times over the course of several decades by several different tellers, and as such, I think it has become a legend among DOC employees of a certain age. I think the story is frequently told for two reasons. First, because it is an outrageous story but one that can be appreciated by outsiders as well as insiders. This gives the legend additional currency and allows it to be used at mixed parties and other social events. The story contains a known person, a known location, and elements common to many popular narratives, and is closely tied to the regional identity of many Wisconsinites. Second, I think this story is frequently told out of appreciation tinged with hostility toward Stanley Kowalski for breaking the rules of practical jokes with such force. By using the threat of deadly force and bringing a gun into the situation, Kowalski takes control away from the jokers. In retaliation, the jokers tell the story of Kowalski’s embarrassment and concurrent

20 For a thorough discussion of unlaughter, see Moira Smith’s 2008 article, “Humor, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance.”
revenge to other coworkers. They, in turn, tell the story to friends, family, and finally, on tape to me, a folklorist. Though Kowalski put a stop to the spread of the photographs, he has no control over the humiliating power of narrative which the jokers continue to wield.

The threat of violence in the above story draws attention to the potential serious consequences of practical jokes, and I think that is one function that this after-the-fact narrative performs for the people who tell it and the people who listen to it. The jokers could have been shot. The victim could have become a murderer. By telling this story, the COs call attention to the dual nature of practical jokes—they are funny but they are potentially dangerous, often cruel, and nearly always transgressive. This story highlights the possibility for dangerous repercussions, and acts as a cautionary tale for prospective jokers, as well as indicates to the listener that the teller is aware of the consequences of joking.

As in the “shop vac and gun” joke, the final joke I will discuss marks the ambiguity of correctional work within American middle-class culture, and draws attention to the potential disconnections between work life and home life. The officer playing the prank relies on the public perception of a uniform as fear-inspiring and dangerous, and then deflates that fear through incongruous activity. This, I argue, is a deliberate act to undermine the authority of the DOC and to assert individuality and personal freedom.

According to one of my collaborators, the following practical joke took place in the early 1980s in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. A CO, young and in his 20s, had gotten off of work at 11 p.m. and, still wearing his uniform, went straight to a party thrown by some of his friends. When he got there, he noticed that one of the party goers, a young, recently-hired Pakistani assistant professor at a local university had passed out in an arm chair. The CO and this young professor had never met before, and the CO and his friends decided to play a trick
on him. They placed a marijuana pipe in the young man’s right hand, and a lighter in his left hand. Everyone hid, and the CO stood over the sleeping man, tapping his shoulder and saying “Sir? sir?” until the assistant professor awoke, staring up into the face of a looming white man in a uniform. The CO said, “Sir, I’m gonna have to ask you to give me what you have in your hand.” The young professor looked down, and saw with horror that he was holding a pipe containing illegal drugs. Wordlessly and tremulously he handed the marijuana pipe over to the CO. The CO said, “Sir, I’m gonna to have to ask you to give me what you have in your other hand.” With silent horror the man handed the CO the lighter. Without cracking a smile, the CO solemnly stood up, put the pipe to his lips and sparked the bowl with the lighter, to the roars of laughter of his friends. The CO who told me this story said, “Oh, he about shit his pants when he saw me.”

This story draws attention to the dual roles played by correctional officers. They enforce the law at work, but when they are not at work, they may choose to break that law. In my experience, many correctional officers break the law in ways that they consider to be minor. During my field work, many of my collaborators, both old and young, lamented the punitive justice system and disagreed with incarceration for what they considered minor offenses. Since, in my experience, a significant portion of COs consider American drug laws to be ridiculous, costly and ineffective for the prison system, some of these COs choose to break the laws that they find unhelpful and problematic. This officer, by smoking marijuana in uniform, acted out his belief that marijuana laws were not compatible with his job. The incongruous juxtaposition of the official uniform and the illegal behavior is certainly not uncommon, given an American appetites for movies and television shows about corrupt authority figures, but it still carries a great deal of cultural baggage. The CO in this joke is
playing out the anxiety surrounding the rule-following expectations of the job, and the desire to break rules in one’s personal life. In the grand scheme of things, the uniformed man smoking marijuana is hardly a serious offense, given the potential for violence or abuse of hard drugs, but it embodies the conflict between correctional work and home life, the desire to strike back at a job that takes a heavy personal toll from employees, and the desire to assert one’s individuality, whether by breaking the law or violating social norms.

Perhaps the most serious violation of social norms in the above joke is the cruelty of the trick played on the visiting assistant professor from Pakistan. The practical joke placed the man in a position where he thought he might be fired, deported, and incarcerated. His fear was real and reasonable. This joke violates some of the rules of hospitality; guests in one’s home (or one’s country) ought to be treated with respect, kindness and deference. Hospitality dictates that guests should not be terrorized for their status as outsiders, but this joke targets the man’s status as an outsider and a guest. In addition, the joke invokes American authority over powerless foreigners in an apparently aggressive way. I have no way of knowing how the victim felt, but it seems reasonable to infer that he was acutely aware of his status as an outsider, and of the CO’s status as a figure of American force. Thus, the joke clearly demonstrates the ambiguity inherent in correctional work, as well as that inherent in practical jokes.

**Practical Jokes Played on Inmates by Officers:**

I have only recorded a handful of narratives of practical jokes played on inmates by correctional officers. My grandfather Richard Meyer tells the following story often—perhaps it is the story he tells the most often about jokes and prison. I think part of why he tells it is
that it encapsulates his conception of Central State—held by both of my grandfathers to be the best institution either of them had ever worked at. The narrative features inappropriate behavior by both the inmate and the prison workers—the recreation director and a nurse—and the acceptance of personal responsibility for one’s poor choices.

Richard Meyer: This was at the mental hospital for the criminally insane. We had a number of patients there who were—all had some kind of criminal activity that could get them into an institution, but they were found not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect or unable to stand trial, or—generally one of those two. We had a recreation department and a recreation director, a man. He was an avid golfer, and he was a bachelor. But he would, every year on vacation, go to Hawaii. So he had a friend who happened to be, who was a nurse, male nurse. And they had been there for quite some time. They knew all of these patients. Well, there was one patient there who had some money because, see, a lot of these patients would be getting Social Security benefits, and they wouldn't have any place to spend it, so it would accumulate. This particular fellow had been a professional boxer, and, as they say, he had had his bell rung too many times. So there was definitely something wrong in his head, but they experts, quote unquote, had never really decided what was wrong with him. And the superintendent of the institution was waiting for this fellow to die because he wanted to do an autopsy on him, find out what was goin' on in his head. Well, these two staff members would, they would tease this guy. And the nurse suggested that since this rec director was going on vacation, that it would be nice if this patient contributed some of his funds toward this guy's vacation. And [laughs] the patient vehemently turned down this proposal. Well, then the guy went to Hawaii and
he sent a postcard back to this patient, thanking him for this vacation. And of course the inmate knew that he'd taken some of his money. The guy got back, and he did not see any humor in this thing at all. They were takin' his money. And – the institution, you have to understand, was built on a long corridor, a real long corridor with various wings going off of that corridor. And this guy, the rec director, was walkin' down the corridor toward the gymnasium. And this patient very quietly crept up behind him and came up with his fist right off and blindsided this guy. Knocked him flat. Broke a couple of teeth. Just really creamed him, and took off. The outcome of the thing, of course, was that the rec director went to his dentist, got himself patched up at his expense, never said a word to anybody about how this patient had decked him.

Because he recognized he had it coming.

The narrative emphasizes the fairness of the inmate’s retaliation for the perceived theft of his money. The recreation director hadn’t actually stolen the ex-boxer’s money, he had just played a prank on the ex-boxer. But, as the narrative points out, to even joke about appropriating an inmates’ funds was such a breach of etiquette that the ex-boxer is justified for retaliating with physical violence. Joking with inmates about the abuse of power is taboo, as I will discuss later in this dissertation.

While the previous joke narrative contains an emphasis on justice and retribution, the other example of practical jokes played on inmates is darker and much more hostile. My collaborator PA told me a story about correctional officers supervising the transport of an inmate from one institution to another. As they were packing his belongings, apparently they filled his scrap book with pictures of little boys in underwear, cut out of the JC Penney catalog. PA did not say whether the inmate was a convicted child molester, and he didn’t say
whether the inmate was liked by the staff. However, this joke, for him, was funny but crossed a very serious line.

**Practical Jokes played on Officers by Inmates:**

I have recorded few instances of practical jokes played on COs by inmates. I think one reason for the scarcity of this type of narrative is due to nomenclature. For an inmate to play a practical joke on an officer is a serious violation of prison rules, and so these actions aren’t considered “practical jokes” but rather “harassment” or “infractions.” However, my grandfather Richard Schmidt told me about a “joke” that inmates played on him on his last day working at that institution. Since this project is driven by my desire to understand my own family members, I think it is important to explain the context of this practical joke fully, since it is a significant part of my own family folklore.

This instance took place during the 1970s. My paternal grandfather Richard Schmidt was a dedicated thorn in the side of institution management. After years of working as a guard, he eventually (and somewhat reluctantly, though he needed the pay raise for his family of seven) became a supervisor and thus part of “management” but he never changed his allegiances from blue collar to white collar. He often said, “I was no white shirt,” and “I was always for the little guy.” His combative attitude toward administration earned him a reputation as a troublemaker among management, but he was, according to many collaborators who recounted fond memories of him to me, a beloved and bull-headed advocate for his officers. When I was reminiscing about spending every afternoon with my grandfather with my collaborator TI, TI gave me his assessment of my grandfather’s advocacy.
Schmidt: Cause I would just get off the bus and go there [to my grandfather’s farm] and until my grandmother got off work I would sit at the dining room table with him, and he would smoke his pipe and we would play Crazy 8s and he would tell me stories. I think that's part of why I'm interested in this, because two hours a day for many years...he would just talk. And so he talked a lot about work, and talked a lot about how he liked to mess with the higher-ups, and how he was a blue-collar, he was for the blue-collar no matter what, through-and-through, and he was always going to be for the underdog.

TI: Even though he was part of the management team –

Schmidt: Right!

TI: He took on management. He wasn't one of those guys that just did what they said. He questioned authority, he tried to explain the reasonableness of the way he wanted to do it. Sometimes he just did it his way anyway, and that's all there was to it. He was gonna do it his way, and they could deal with it, like it or lump it.

Schmidt: He was a very stubborn man.

TI: But it was grounded in common sense, and it was grounded in protecting the employees that worked for him.

Schmidt: Mhm. You worked with him?

TI: Yep.

Schmidt: Was he your boss?

TI: He was the third-shift supervisor while I was on second shift. We had some contact, because I worked some third shift, he worked some second shifts. So we worked together for a couple years.
Richard Schmidt frequently fought management on behalf of officers. In the 1960s, inmates of the DOC were allowed to wear beards, but officers were not—only trimmed mustaches were allowed.  He told me, “I didn’t like the principle of the thing—why should inmates have rights we didn’t have?” He launched a battle for the right of officers to wear beards, growing an impressive beard and refusing to shave despite disciplinary action, until the rules were changed to his satisfaction. He wore the beard for the rest of his life, in part, I think, as a triumphant symbol of his victory over dictates he found arbitrary and unfair.

When Richard Schmidt started as a guard, officers’ meals were provided—a privilege negotiated by their union—and consisted of the same food that inmates ate, since officers did not get a lunch or dinner break. During political changes in the 1970s, officers were asked to buy tickets and pay for their meals. My grandfather found this insulting and unjust, considering the low rate of pay, lack of lunch breaks, and scant respect already accorded to low-ranking officers. As a protest, he began ordering the largest meals he could possibly eat. Every morning he ordered and consumed 12 eggs for breakfast. After a week of ignoring his ostentatious eating, management made a new rule that officers were restricted to four eggs per breakfast. He launched a letter writing campaign (carried out in part using green pen, which he used for all official business as it was institutional regulation that all official writing must be done in blue or black ink) with no success. A few years later, when Richard Schmidt retired, the inmates brought him a platter of 12 eggs for his final breakfast at the institution.

21 This was a vestige of the Wisconsin DOC’s historical outgrowth from military systems; other remnants from the military style include the use of military time, military ranks, and other terminology.
My grandfather told me this story, among a handful of similar stories of combative advocacy in the DOC, dozens of times since I was a small child. He always laughed when he told this story; his laughter was at the discomfiture of the administration at his prank, as well as in appreciation of the affectionate trick the inmates played on him for his last day. Richard Schmidt always spoke respectfully of the inmates he worked with. He proudly told me over and over about how one particular inmate wrote to him after he was released and asked Richard to sing at his upcoming wedding, which my grandfather gladly did. Richard Schmidt’s allegiances were to officers first, then his union, then inmates, then institutional management, then the Wisconsin DOC as a whole. As a storyteller, Richard Schmidt primarily focused on humorous stories, and avoided speaking ill of people. When he was in a reflective mood, he might talk about the sad things that happened to people in prison, but he spoke very little about violence. Richard Schmidt, like so many of my collaborators, disagreed with the laws that put people in prison for marijuana, failure to pay child support and drunk driving, and this, I think, lent sympathy to his attitude toward the inmates in the minimum security institutions where he worked at the end of his career with the DOC. Thus, the fact that inmates played a small joke on him on his last day demonstrated to him that they felt affection, rather than dislike for him, and I think this mattered to him. He courted the dislike of his superiors, but valued the trust and affection of those who were under his control.

He told this and other stories of his harassment of authority so many times that we, as his family, often stopped hearing his words, but now I think I begin to understand that every time he told a story about defeating and outsmarting management, he was reenacting this temporary grab for power, and the telling of the story briefly gave him power that he had
taken away from the powerful white-collar management by means of his wits and humor.

Every time he told the story to me, or former colleagues, or friends, or members of the family, he was taking power and control from the management. They couldn’t control his stories, and he was, come hell or high water, going to tell stories that made management look stupid, and this made him happy. When I asked my father about his father, my father told me Richard Schmidt caused strong reactions, both positive and negative.

Schmidt: Do you think he was a good manager of people?

Mark Schmidt: That's a value judgment, because I think his supervisors thought he was a poor manager and the people he managed, they thought he was a wonderful manager. You could just tell who you were talking to, when you talked to another person that my dad was working with. Is he the one who's real good buddies with Schmitty, and really thankful about all the stuff he did for him, or is he the guy that's just causing problems, and making it tough on everybody? [laughs]

My father highlights the disconnect between the goals of management and the goals of rank-and-file employees. Since my grandfather maintained the goals of rank-and-file employees even after crossing over into management, he posed continual problems for his superiors. Why he chose to do this has always fascinated me. I’m not sure whether I agree with my father, but he answered this question in this way:

Schmidt: I was going to ask – why do you think it was so important to him to mess with the men in charge?

Mark Schmidt: Well, that was just part of his nature, you know.

Schmidt: Why?

Mark Schmidt: [sigh] I think part of it is boredom on the job, you know. It's an
administrative position, and so what do you have to do? Expound and manage, you know [laughs] You have to do - provide services with the tools and the people you've got. And I truly think that he thought his superiors were not doing a very good job on their own management on the next tier up, you know what I mean. I think he thought that most of them were arbitrary and petty. And I think that they thought he was. [laughs] So, you know, and I think also that is, again, I think, part and parcel of bureaucracy. I think there's that tension between the different management layers, and the workers are always gonna to be irritated with the foreman, and the foreman's always gonna be intimidated by the plant manager, and the plant manager's also, he's gonna be by the CEO, all the way up there they just bitch and moan, and that's what it is running big human organizations, I think.

My father sees his own father’s behavior as part of working within an organization. He sees the “little guy” as fundamentally in opposition to his higher ups, and people as “bitchers.” I think that this attitude is in part due to being raised by his father, who always saw the interests of the “little guy” in contradiction to the interests of management and more powerful people. This, in turn, may come from Richard Schmidt’s institutional childhood, or, of course, it may not.

**Why Practical Jokes?**

When I asked my collaborator BO why COs play practical jokes, she said, “It’s a boring job—we have to entertain ourselves!” When I asked TI why he and his colleagues play practical jokes, he said, “It’s a way to pass the time.” Both responses were made in a flippant tone of voice, and in a joking manner, but I think that both collaborators were also
very serious. Joking is a result of boredom, at least in part. I have been able to relate here only a tiny sample of the practical jokes I have collected over ten years of fieldwork with correctional officers, and a lifetime of listening to family and friends tell stories. Practical jokes at work pass the time, and they also allow for complex communication that would not otherwise be possible. 22

This study is a preliminary exploration and as such suggests some meanings behind occupational joking behavior with the hope that other scholars will continue this conversation. Certainly social control and reinforcement of work identity are crucial. Practical jokes allow officers to demonstrate their awareness of their colleagues stress in an unemotional, sarcastic way, that may be felt to reinforce masculinity and diminish femininity (for both men and women) and may allow for a temporary release of stress. Practical jokes help workers define the division between work life and private life, and stories of practical joking may help COs build narrative bridges of laughter between their work and their homes. The frustration and hostility present in correctional work is acted out in practical jokes, perhaps sublimating aggression that may otherwise be taken out on the inmates and other individuals under their supervision.

Finally, I do not want this study to create false assumptions about prison workers. It is important to acknowledge that this study is driven by my own interests, sparked by my love of family stories and my appreciation for practical jokes, and does not necessarily correlate with the interests of my collaborators. It is important to emphasize that practical joking is certainly not the only way these professionals create meaning for themselves in their work.

22 For a more in-depth exploration of the communicative properties of practical jokes among correctional workers, see Schmidt “Prisons, Performance Arena, and Occupational Humor” (2011).
life. It is not my intention to prove that corrections workers are defined by their practical jokes, nor that practical joking is unusually common among these workers. Instead, I have sought to explore the context and function of a set of practical jokes, which occurred under very specific circumstances, and became popular narratives among the social groups associated with the jokers.

Practical jokes matter. If we are to understand how employees make meaning in their work life, it is necessary to consider how and why workers play practical jokes, and on whom those jokes are played. As Tim Tangherlini so aptly demonstrates in his book *Talking Trauma*, employee behavior makes or breaks an organization.

In many cases the stories employees and their managers tell play a major role in the functioning of the organization. Workers rely on stories of coworkers’ experiences, coupled with their own narratives about work, as a guide to day-to-day life. Indeed, the manner in which workers “speak” the organization can be more important than how managers have codified the structure of that organization. (Tangherlini 1998:xx)

Practical jokes are not codified in the structure of Midwestern prisons, yet they are one way that prison staff “speak” their organization. The jokes they play reflect the staff’s understanding of what the institution is, how it affects the people it houses, and the ways it is functioning inappropriately. Prison workers communicate through practical jokes, just as they communicate through humorous stories and other kinds of performed humor, as I will discuss next. The ways that prison workers use and re-use practical jokes on the job, whether in storytelling sessions or in formal training are reflective of the ways that these particular employees and managers participate in the functioning of the institution.
Chapter 4: Humorous Verbal Communication Among Prison Workers

Prison workers and, as I will discuss in later chapters of this dissertation, social workers, tend to be gifted verbal artists. My collaborators have strong communication skills. This is not surprising, given that both professions involve working closely with other people, often people in crisis. In addition, both professions wield power over vulnerable populations—the poor, the incarcerated, the mentally ill. The power they wield is real—prison workers have the power to detain, incarcerate, and withhold privileges that outsiders would see as basic human rights. However, this power often sits uncomfortably with those who wield it. I argue that prison workers use communicative humor, written, spoken and performed as part of effective verbal communication; to push boundaries, question authority, and transgress without punishment in an effort to take back power from the institution; to cope with horror; to transition from chaos to normal; to diffuse conflict with inmates and coworkers; to manage their own discomfort with their jobs; to appreciate inmate verbal artistry and communicate the humanity of those they supervise; and as a way to get things done without having to invoke martial law. Because of all of these factors, verbal humor is a way for both prison workers and social workers to construct and police occupational identities and achieve long-term success in the profession.

Now I would like to return in more detail to the question I posed in Chapter 2: What makes a good prison worker? When I asked my collaborators nearly every collaborator told me that communication skills were essential. As the following narrative illustrates, verbal
and nonverbal communication skills maintain working relationships with inmates, and prevent conflict that is dangerous for inmates and officers alike.

Schmidt: What do you think it takes to make a good officer?

TI: Being able to think on your feet. Being able to, you know, being very verbal. Being able to use your verbalization skills and your de-escalation techniques. Just being able to use your verbalization skills and your de-escalation techniques. Just being a good people person is the biggest thing, is how to deal with people. Even back at Waupun before this big gang-bang thing came around, it was always about a way to show inmates respect. If you had to counsel a guy, or tell him he was in trouble, take him away from his buddies. Get him one-on-one. Don't put him out on front street; don't make it so that he feels he's gotta react in front of his buddies to save face. There's always that. And so it's just, think on your feet, and having common sense.

For TI, a seasoned correctional officer with experience at multiple types of institutions, thinking quickly and verbalization go hand in hand. TI makes it clear that one must be very verbal to be a good correctional officer. He identifies the relationship between verbal skill and conflict resolution, and uses a heightened professional register (“de-escalation technique”) to describe conflict resolution. Part of people skills, according to TI, is the ability to show respect to inmates. This sounds simple, but I think that being able to identify when it is important for a CO to publicly show an inmate respect is related to empathy, which my collaborators emphasized, though not necessarily in those terms. The CO must be able to identify the ways that the inmate will be forced to react in order to maintain his or her own self-respect, and so if the CO wishes to avoid potentially violent conflict, the CO must be able to see things from the inmates’ point of view and not exacerbate a situation which is
already inherently inequal. Being aware of how inmates save face influences the ways that the CO uses verbal skills to resolve conflict with an inmate. TI describes this as “common sense” but it seems to be a much more complicated phenomenon than TI’s term makes it sound. These people skills are complex; they depend on the ability to empathize, to use one’s imagination to anticipate consequences, to verbalize difficult requests in a way that maintains authority while showing public respect to the inmate—all very quickly.

The C.O.s I have worked with have often pointed to quick thinking and decision-making abilities as crucial to performing their jobs successfully and safely; the ability to think quickly and the ability to speak quickly seem to go hand in hand for many correctional officers. Being able to respond to an inmate or colleague with quick wit and effective timing seems to be a helpful job skill, according to my collaborators. When I asked TI whether he thought correctional workers were funnier than other people, he and his wife told me that they thought quick wit was important for COs, but that not every CO developed this skill—a sentiment that is echoed later in this study. TI’s narrative alludes to the function of humor in the Wisconsin recall election gubernatorial debates that took place in the summer of 2012. TI appreciated Tom Barrett’s witty rebuttal of Scott Walker’s far less witty attacks, illustrating how TI is acutely aware of the political and social functions of humor, as his heavy presence in this chapter demonstrates.

Schmidt: Cause it seems like, like you, and PA, and BO, and CH... you're all very verbally quick, and you have really, really good timing, and you don't get stuck for something to say, or a way to respond. Do you think that that is something that has been fostered by your job? Is that useful, to be able to make a quick comeback?
TI: Oh, absolutely. I mean, look at the debate the other night, between Walker and Barrett. When, ah, Walker was jabbing at Barrett for the Milwaukee Police Department's reputation, and Barrett came back real quickly with “My police department is used to arresting felons. Your administration hires them.” You know, boom. It was a huge impact, when he did that, and it kind of turned the tide in the debate. So, yeah, if you can be quick on your feet, it does make a big impact when things are going on.

Schmidt: You [BI] knew TI in high school, or before.

BI: Yeah, no, that's TI. It wasn't his job that made him that way. You've always been very quick with it, very humorous.

TI: Well, thank you. Wow, that's a rare remark coming from BI-

BI: I know. Not so funny all the time [laughs] Because you have a lot of officers that just never get there.

TI: Mhmm.

BI: But it is – you do have a lot of humorous officers, so what do you think it is? It's not that it makes you humorous. Do humorous people go into corrections?

TI: Well, I don't know. I think it goes back to having a lot of time on your hands during the slow times. I mean, something we always say about our teenage boys – they've got nothing better to do than to kick back and think of snappy remarks to what we say, or to check everything that we say, or to put a different angle or spin on it.

BI points out that TI has always been very quick verbally. His ability to make quick comebacks and have a witty response predates his career in corrections, but she also agrees with my assessment that there are an unusually large number of humorous COs. The lack of
intellectual demands means that COs are able to practice and study and develop their timing, repertoire, vocabulary and storytelling abilities. The job needs quick wit, and the conditions of the job fosters the development of this talent.

As TI is a semi-professional comedian, he has a wide repertoire of CO humor. He gave the following example to illustrate the importance and aesthetics of quick wit in correctional work:

TI: There was another time when we were, this was a great correctional officer joke that just happened on the fly. We were in institution lockdown, where all the inmates are confined to their cells. We search the entire institution, so it's me and a senior officer searching this guy's cell. I'm stripping the bunk, and right in the middle of this guy's foam mattress there's a hole. He's obviously been dating the foam mattress. And Bob Zelinsky said to me, “whatcha got there, TI?” And I said, “I think we got sexual assault of the second degree of a mattress.” And he looked at the tag, and he goes “No, it's first degree sexual assault of a mattress; it's under ten years old.” And he just had it [snaps fingers], just like that [snaps fingers]. He related something that was funny, that was just right on the spot.

In the narrative, TI uses euphemism—the inmate “has been dating the mattress.” Perhaps he uses this term because he is uncomfortable saying “masturbating” in front of me, a woman twenty five years his junior, but given previous conversations, I doubt it. This choice of words is creative and evocative, and probably part of a crafted routine. The appropriate incongruity of “dating a mattress” creates the humor. It is incongruous—one cannot actually date a mattress—but it is also appropriate—the inmate has apparently engaged in sexual activity with the mattress. The absurdity is tempered with recognizability and discomfort
with the pathos of the situation—the man is lonely and sex-starved and has nothing but a prison mattress—further adds to the humor. TI uses hyperbole when he says “I think we got sexual assault of the second degree of a mattress;” this is an over-the-top statement. One cannot actually assault a mattress, but if one could, this would be an example. TI uses mock formal language; he overemphasizes his professionalism. The absurdity of taking seriously a sexually assaulted mattress is heightened by the specificity of the observation—not only is it sexual assault, but it is sexual assault in the second degree. Officer Zelinsky’s response is lavishly praised by TI; Zelinsky’s ability to recognize TI’s verbal register and respond in an appropriate (though incongruously formal) way marks this exchange as successful to TI. The context of the joking exchange adds complexity to the humor. The men are in a prison; prisons contain many child molesters and many rapists; the men joke about the rape of an underage mattress, knowing full well that many of the men under their charge have raped underage children. The assault on the mattress is treated with mock solemnity and seriousness, which underscores the need to cope with individuals who have committed horrifying sexual crimes.

TI told two other stories that are legendary among correctional staff in central and southern Wisconsin prisons. I have heard both of these narratives from multiple tellers, and I think they are both emblematic of the need for COs to be verbally quick, and also emblematic of the aesthetic appreciation that COs have for their colleagues verbal art.

TI: But oh boy, back in the bad old days. I remember Waupun being a prison city. There were still stories floating around the prison about old-timers that were my neighbors. [Story 1] And Chet Clover was this tough-as-tacks, hard-as-nails Lieutenant at work, and he ruled with an iron fist with the inmates and the officers
alike. And, like, today, if we have to remove a guy from a cell because he's at risk of hurting himself or others, we give 'em the jumpsuits, we have all the protective gear, we do all the talking first, we bring in a crisis intervention worker, maybe the chaplain, just try to get other people to talk him out of it before we have to resort to force. Well, back in the bad old days, if there was somebody that had to come out of that cell, the shift Lieutenant would pick one officer, like “Brown, go in and get 'em.” And so Eddy Brown, he actually worked at Waupun while I was there; he was a Lieutenant by the time I got there. Chet had retired and died. But Chet's like, “Eddy, go in there and get him.” And so Eddy went running in there, like gangbusters, and the next thing I know Eddy comes sprawling out ass over tea kettle; the inmate just laid into him and wiped him out. And Chet Clover said “Brown, what're you doing out here?” and Brown got up and said “Just came out for a breath of fresh air, sir.” [laughter] And then, back in. You know, it was just all real, you know, it was all real matter-of-fact.

[Story 2] Years before I started, inmates had to walk side-by-side, two at a time, silent. They didn't talk unless they were spoken to, and they followed hand signals. So a typical officer's job was to escort them from the cell hall to the chow hall, and the guys would split along long tables. They'd face each other, and they'd all remain standing until the officer gave the hand motion to sit down. And so about five minutes into a meal, while the inmates were all still eating, Eddy Brown, his ear itched, so he raised his hand up to itch his ear, and all the inmates stood up. And Chet Clover came over and said “Brown, why're all your men up? They're not done eating.” And Eddy
Brown said “I don't know, I just itched my ear and they all stood up.” And so Chet Clover said, “Well, why don't you scratch your ass and see if they all sit down?”

For some C.O.s, verbal art includes the use of humor to push boundaries and allows behavior that would not be acceptable with a straight face. Pushing official institutional boundaries is important for many prison workers, I think, because they must cope with some of the same social controls and constraints that inmates do, though the staff are not there to be punished. The desire to push back against authority comes out frequently in humorous prison narratives. My collaborator TI and his wife described this:

BI: Well, the other thing that you use humor for is to push the boundaries. Totally.
And you do that all the time with the Warden.

TI: [laughs] Yep, yep.

Schmidt: How does that go?

TI: Oh, very well, for me. [laughs] Not always for her. We have a female, black Warden, and she likes to participate with our Armed Response unit, so she'll go out to the rifle range, shoot the rifle, the shotgun, the handguns, that sort of thing. And on those days, she'll be dressed up in a black jumpsuit with a big Sam Brown, like, gun belt, with a big gold badge on it. And she'll come into the institution. As I'm checking her in, I'll say, “Come on, Warden, say it one time.” And she says, “what?” and I said “You busted, sugar!” Just like Jackie Brown.

Schmidt: Does she do it?

TI: No; she'll go “TI! Knock it off!”

BI: You hear that a lot.

TI: Yah
BI points out that her husband uses humor to push boundaries “all the time.” TI agrees heartily with his wife, and illustrates her claim with an example of what he perceives as pushing the boundaries at work. TI identifies joking simultaneously about race and gender with a black, female, superior officer, as pushing the boundaries. For him, and for his institution, the boundaries lie along lines of gender, race, and authority. By asking his boss to do a line from *Jackie Brown*, TI is pointing out her race and gender to her. The joke makes it clear that while he recognizes her as his boss (and, from everything he says, as a good, fair boss that he likes to work with), he also associates her with a character in a movie. She is, according to the logic of the joke, black and female first, and his boss second. To allude to her race and gender is, I think, considered rather indelicate in institutional terms. I think that part of why TI does this is to demonstrate to his boss that he is not cowed by her authority—that he dares to poke fun at her and treat her power lightly. I think another reason TI does this is to show affection to her. He demands that she notice his sense of humor, and he forces her to react to it in some way. She, of course, must immediately slap him down when she says “TI! Knock it off!” The warden refuses to play along or laugh, but she also does not punish him. Thus, TI maintains his reputation as a daring and funny guy, and the warden maintains her reputation as a reasonable and authoritative boss.

In addition to using inappropriate conversational humor, telling inappropriate jokes is one way that COs push boundaries, according to TI:

TI: Well, one of the boundaries at work, when it comes to jokes, is that really, any inappropriate jokes, you just tell in your certain circle of friends. And officers love to shock each other; they go for jokes with shock value. And while a lot of people would not like *any* jokes about child molesters, I feel there are some very funny jokes. And
your uncle told me one that I thought was just absolutely hilarious, and goes like this:

“What did the mother say to the child molester on the beach? “Pardon me, sir, you're in my son.”” [laughs] That's awful! *Awful* funny! And then people will take it another step further, and they'll say, ah, “There's a little boy and a homicidal pedophile in a park late at night, and the little boy says “it's dark, I'm scared out,” and the homicidal pedophile says to the little boy, “you're scared? I gotta walk outta here by myself!”” [laughs] That's awful! I heard this one from a Madison cop: “What's the best part about showering with a nine-year old boy? When his hair gets wet he looks like he's a seven-year-old boy.” And these are jokes they've gotten from the business.

TI describes these jokes as coming from “the business”—in this case, correctional work and law enforcement. TI’s circle of friends is made up of lots of correctional officers and some police officers, and he associates transgressive humor with these professions and these social circles. I think TI told me these jokes for two reasons: 1) because he finds them genuinely funny and representative of the kind of jokes he and his colleagues tell, and 2) because he wants to see what I will do. Will I be offended? Upset? Will I laugh? Will I *pretend* to laugh? How am I going to handle jokes that break the rules of good taste, and derive amusement from violent sexual abuse of children? As I always do with TI, I respond in the register he has established, though I am not as verbally quick as he is, and I tell him one child molester joke, and then two more dead baby jokes. TI laughs and says those are good jokes that he hasn’t heard before (which, of course, gratifies me). He has just told me that his coworkers like to use jokes like these to shock people and push their boundaries, and then he has demonstrated that with me—an outsider with certain insider privileges. There is only one way I am capable of responding, which is to retaliate with jokes that are sicker, more violent,
and (I hope) more shocking because they come from a younger woman and a mother. I’m not sure if TI was testing me consciously, or just curious to see what I would do, but I suspect that a variety of things were going on not only in his head, but my head.

Using humor to push boundaries is transgressive, and I think pushing peoples’ boundaries using humor is a technique for many COs to identify what kind of person they are dealing with. While this is certainly manipulative, I think using humor to gauge an individuals’ ability to deal with transgressive behavior is probably very essential to everyday life in a correctional institution. When I asked TI about how he uses humor to push boundaries, he told me:

TI: Yeah, you gotta know your audience and, you know, you can kinda put people in a tight spot, telling them a joke you know they won’t appreciate, but put ‘em in a tough spot and how are they going to respond to it, you know?

Schmidt: Why do you do it?

TI: Why do I do it? Shock value. And to see what they’re all about. To see whether or not they could be part of the inner circle that you could tell god-awful jokes to. And again, it’s something that you might do on the job, but you do it around a coffee clutch with your four best friends, so you know it’s not going anywhere and the door’s are shut and nobody’s going to be offended. Hopefully. (laughs)

Schmidt: Have you ever been written up for telling inappropriate jokes?

TI: No, but I’m sure it’ll happen someday! And I look forward to it…”Got banned from the Institution for telling a bad joke…”

Schmidt: You could work that into your routine.
TI: [laughs] Yeah, that's right. Exactly. Well, you know recently, we had to sign, you know, new work rules with the new administration, and I wasn’t gonna sign the work rules. I never have in the past. But it got down to the point where my supervisor told me, “Well, you gotta sign ‘em or you’ll be disciplined.” I thought to myself, “well, it’s stupid not to sign ‘em; I’m gonna end up getting disciplined for something at some point in time—why give ‘em a freebee? So I did. Cause I’m confident that I will, at some point in time. And at work, a lot of times we chide each other into doing something that’s inappropriate, just to see whether or not they’ll get in trouble for it and how far it’ll go. And it’s like, “Hey, you’re a candy-ass and a light-weight unless you’re part of a pre-disciplinary investigation at least once every couple of years.”

Schmidt: Is that a common sentiment?

TI: Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely.

TI acknowledges that deliberately telling a person something he knows they won’t appreciate puts that person in a tight spot, and he points out that to do this is one way to figure out what that person is all about. The way that person responds to a joke that the teller knows they aren’t going to like will tell the joke teller something useful about that person.

When I ask him why he does this to people, TI immediately says he does it for shock value. I asked him the question in part for the purposes of this study, but another part of me asked him because I want to know why he has done this to me all my life. Part of me really wants to know, why do you put me in such uncomfortable positions? TI says shock value, and I think what he means here is that he values shocking people—both the person he has told the joke to, but also the general audience. I think part of the joy of shocking people is the joy of attention, and part of it is the accumulation of respect for ballsy verbal behavior. It is
important for COs to command respect, just as it is important for inmates to command respect. Since part of the function of correctional institutions seems to be the erosion of self-and-societal respect, maintenance of the respect of others is essential.

TI indicates that telling inappropriate jokes is not only a way to break rules and push boundaries, but also a way to identify “insiders”—those who can become part of what he describes as the “inner-circle.” He immediately deflates some of the mystique of this “inner-circle” by putting it into geriatric and feminized terms—the “coffee clutch”—but it is clear that he is using humor that pushes boundaries to differentiate between insiders and outsiders, and that for him and his colleagues, there are different degrees of being an insider. There is the circle, but within the circle, there is an inner-circle, reserved only for those who respond positively to humor that transgresses boundaries.

Part of pushing the boundaries for TI involves a refusal to toe the line and follow orders blindly, but he communicates the ways that he selectively follows orders in order to get away with other transgressions, and that he (and his coworkers) finds all of this transgression funny and emblematic of their manhood (what Freud would term “the phallus”). TI has historically refused to sign the work rules set out by the state government. He particularly does not want to sign these new work rules, since they have been issued by a governor who has made it his mission to eliminate the collective bargaining rights of TI’s union. However, the new administration is more punitive than previous administrations, and TI will be disciplined. He is saving up disciplining for future infractions, and he sees signing these rules as a way to buy himself some future transgression down the road.

Masculinity seems tied to transgression. When TI says, “Hey, you’re a candy-ass and a light-weight unless you’re part of a pre-disciplinary investigation at least once every couple
of years,” he is joking, but he has just described how COs egg each other on to break the rules and encourage each other to transgress in order to see how far they can be pushed, and what punishments will ensure. Part of the respect of one’s colleagues and oneself seems tied to one’s willingness to take part in rule-breaking and pushing back. My fieldwork indicates that this rule-breaking is nearly always done with humor and a desire to make others laugh. Masculinity seems tied to self-respect, because TI describes someone who doesn’t break the rules as a “candy-ass.”

TI also described “sick” humor as a way of processing horror for correctional staff. In the following narrative, TI describes how sick humor can act as a transitioning and processing strategy, as well as a coping mechanism:

TI: We need to rely a lot on gallows humor in order to cope with the things that we see, you know, all the time. There might be a situation, like, where, I don't know, there might be an accident down in the kitchen where an inmate gets cut cause he improperly used a piece of equipment. There's like, a lot of blood, we have a specific response we have to take. Somebody, get the first aide kit and be the first responder. Somebody, call the health services unit and gets the nurse there. Somebody call control and order an ambulance. There are very specific things that we do. And when it's go time, we're ready to go. We have an awesome response team all the time. All right? So there could be a situation with a lot of blood and gore, and then once it's all taken care of and the inmate's in the ambulance and he's on the way, we've handled the situation – you know, like, there'll be this bloody, gory situation and it's like, “anybody hungry?” [laughs] You know, something like that.

Schmidt: Why?
TI: Why? Because it's a relief. It's like, we just saw something that was horrible, we dealt with a tense situation, now we need comic relief to just dial it down. You know, a lot of times you talk about, you know, red light, yellow light. If there's a situation that you're concerned about, you're kind of on yellow light, and then you go to green light, and then you need to dial it all the way back down to red and get back to normal.

Schmidt: So it's a way to transition between normal and chaos?

TI: Absolutely. There was a situation recently where I was on foot patrol, and there was, ah, a call up. An officer was down in a unit, and you never know what you're going into. And I was one of the first responders there, there were actually two other officers there, and I was the third one on the scene. There was a Housing Unit Sergeant that was flat on his back, unconscious, and we don't know how it happened. We don't know if he was attacked, we don't know if he had a cardiac situation or whatever. It turned out he did have a cardiac situation. So, again, you know, we secured the unit, we did a count, we called the health services nurse, we got the ambulance, and then after it was all done and over with, and he goes on his way to the hospital, I said to one of the guys, “I had two really sick thoughts. One, I could have had a heart attack running to respond to this situation [laughs], two, gee, wouldn't a cigarette be great right about now?” [laughs]

While “chaos” and “normal” may look very different in a prison setting than they do in (for example) a community mental health setting, as I will discuss later, both professions use humor to re-order frightening, dangerous or upsetting experiences.
According to my collaborators, prison workers use verbal humor to diffuse conflict, although this requires the ability to gauge what kinds of humor will work and what kinds will only exacerbate a situation of conflict. TI and his wife reflected on this:

BI: Well, don't you also use humor to diffuse situations with inmates?

TI: Mhmm

BI: All the time.

TI: Yeah, yeah, you definitely can.

BI: And you do it.

TI: Yeah, you can. You can have a tense situation, and one of the things we really have to be careful about is any humor that might be racially tinged. You know, you have to be really careful with that. But there are some safe things that you can do. You can have a situation, a situation with a guy, I'm white, he's black, and I'm saying “All right, now let's look at another possible, you know, alternative on how we can handle this situation. How can we come to a conclusion, how about we sing “Ebony and Ivory”? [laugh] “How about if we hold hands and sing “Kumbaya'? Will that do it for you” You know, and a lot of the thing it's like “Ok, all right, you know, let's take it easy.”

This narrative draws attention to the potential for effective communication and conflict resolution using humor, but also the potential for disaster. TI makes it clear that he understands that joking about race with inmates is recognized as risky and often inappropriate. TI frames the narrative with a clear statement of his understanding of the ramifications before moving on to describe joking about racial conflict. He posits a hypothetical situation, one that his wife and I assume he has been in before, and performs the
kind of dialogue he would use in this situation. In this dialog, TI uses friendly, professional but not overly-formal words like “alternative,” “situation” and “conclusion” while using the word “we” repeatedly. He caps this friendly professionalism with an incongruous “How about we sing ‘Ebony and Ivory’? How about if we hold hands and sing ‘Kumbaya’? Will that do it for you?” Moving from the professional conflict-resolution speech to invoking the #1 charting Stevie Wonder/Paul McCartney duet diminishes the dignity of the conflict. Offering to take part in a saccharine duet temporarily diminishes the authority of the officer, making him seem silly and naïve. Likewise, “Kumbaya” has come to represent an overly optimistic, over-simplified and frequently ignorant approach to race relations. This temporarily puts the inmate in a restricted position of rhetorical power. If the inmate were to continue the conflict and ignore the joke he would miss the opportunity to perceive the C.O. as silly and naive. Both parties have the opportunity to laugh while reaffirming the very serious and complicated nature of power relations of race and incarceration. The C.O. remains the white man in power, while the inmate remains the black incarcerated man, but both parties collaboratively use conversational humor to acknowledge complexity and conflict while choosing to move on from the moment of conflict.

My collaborator MJ told me that part of the way she uses humor in her job as a nurse in a correctional institution is to diffuse sexually inappropriate inmate behavior, and to deal with her own discomfort with inmate sexual misconduct that cannot be usefully handled any other way.

MJ: So I would say for nurse humor…The other thing I say to them is “do you see these lines on my face? I could be your grandmother.” Cause they want to show me their dicks down in Segregation. “Would you diss your mother like this?” Cause they
think, you know, they want to get a reaction. I don't know. They can hear you
coming, so of course they want to expose themselves, have a big erection or whatever
it is. The black guys especially, that's what makes them men is, you know, fathering
children. It's just 'hood and uneducated.

Schmidt: Like you've never seen it before, like you're going to faint –

MJ: Well, it is kind of a shock. You know the ones that – and there's no point in
ticketing them, they're already in Segregation. So now I'm kinda used to it.

MJ’s narrative identifies humor specific to her occupational identity as a prison nurse, and
describes how she verbally rebukes inmates who expose themselves to her in segregation. By
responding with a flip comment about her visible age (as a woman in her early 50s) she
mocks the inmates. She also positions herself as a correlary to the inmates mother and
grandmother, in the effort to juxtapose images of the mother with the cultural unsuitability
that she finds in their behavior. She explains that she makes joking or humorous comments
like these, rather than responding with punitive measures because those measures would be
pointless. She says, “there’s no point in ticketing them, they’re already in segregation.” There
is no logical institutional means to respond to this harassment, and thus humor becomes a
defense mechanism against the “shock” of such a taboo violation. It is important to note that
MJ makes a distinction between racial categories of self-exposers, and deliberately interprets
and explains inmate behavior for me, the outsider. She identifies masculinity at the heart of
the behavior, and clearly has constructed her understanding of this behavior. Her means of
dealing with this behavior undermines inappropriate masculinity, by insinuating through her
comments that by exposing themselves to a woman the age of their grandmother, they are by
extension guilty of exposing themselves to their grandmother. Similarly, by saying “Would
you diss your mother like this?” MJ aligns herself with the inmate’s mother and suggests that by violating MJ, they have violated their own mother.

While humor can be effective communication strategy for C.O.s working with inmates, the inequality of power creates the potential for conflict. One collaborator described an instance of joking with inmates and the need for an awareness of the joking context:

A smart remark I made to inmates…two inmates were having a minor dispute, but they were friends. They're in the front of the line in the chow hall, everybody's behind them, and they're arguing. And one says “you're an idiot,” and the other one says, “no, you're an idiot.” And I said, “well, I'll settle this discussion. You're both right.” [laughs] So, you can get by with little stuff like that, but you don't want to push it too far, cause you never know when somebody's going to have, like, a bad day, and all of a sudden it's not ok to joke with them.

This sentiment is echoed by collaborator KY. She told me that in her job at a state mental facility working with criminals with severe mental illness, the one thing that she can never joke about with inmates is loss of freedoms or privileges, because drawing attention to the very real power imbalance would be perceived as bullying and cruel on her part, as the practical joke narrative with the ex-boxer and the vacation fund illustrates in Chapter 3.

Prison workers do humorous impressions of inmates, in part I think to cope with boredom, in part to cope with hostility, and in part out of genuine appreciation for inmates’ comic timing and verbal artistry. Growing up in a prison-centered family, some of my fondest memories are of the stories and imitations my grandfather and uncle would do of inmates that they worked with at Central State, the Wisconsin State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. While I never heard my paternal grandfather, a guard and supervisor,
make fun of inmates or do impressions of inmates, nearly every other CO I have met has done this. Perhaps my grandfather, Richard Schmidt, was an anomaly.  

When I asked my mother about the stories of inmates she remembered, she told me:

Ann Schmidt: Anyway, I think that they got a kick out of those guys at Central State.

Schmidt: Why?

Ann Schmidt: Cause they did funny things 'cause they were crazy [laughs].

Schmidt: Like what?

Ann Schmidt: Well, that's the thing, I remember hearing the stories, I don't remember the details. But there was one guy I know that once in a while, he'd just go off and he'd go down into the moat, and it would be filled with leaves and water, because they didn't ever really fill it – it was a concrete moat, but after rain, and stuff. He'd just be a perfectly normal go-along, get-along kind of inmate, but then once in a while he'd just go crazy and go to the moat, he'd just be trying to escape and couldn't do it, and they found that amusing.

Schmidt: [laughs] Why?

Ann Schmidt: Why did they find it amusing? What else is there to watch and do and stuff?! What always amazed me was the prison guards in the towers. How you could sit in a tower and watch the perimeter for an eight hour day. What a boring job, you know?

My mother cites boredom as the motivation for making fun of inmate behavior, and I think that this is in part true, but that there are a great many other reasons why prison workers make fun of inmates.

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23 He never made fun, or did impressions of people in his life outside his prison work either, so it seems that just wasn’t his style.
Another instance of mimicry suggests that part of the taboo of making fun of inmates is reenacting any taboo-breaking that the inmates themselves perform. Part of the discomfort for me in the following narrative for me is my grandfather Richard Meyer’s willingness to say the word “nigger” out loud—a word he never uses under any other circumstances (at least, never in front of me), yet uses in this narrative every time he tells it. He also never uses the word “fuck” except in quoting another person, but I think breaking this taboo is of far less psychological weight than using the word “nigger.” I think part of the function of telling this story for him is breaking the same taboo that the inmate Conan breaks. He is doing an impression of the inappropriate behavior of the inmate. By performing the story, my grandfather breaks the powerful taboo for a white liberal to use the word “nigger” in front of another white liberal, me, his granddaughter. By doing something as deviant as saying this word, I think part of the function of the story for him is to express some of the ambiguity, hopelessness, and hostility he feels after a lifetime of working with incarcerated and frequently recidivist, black men.

Richard Meyer: Yeah, they had some times. This patient had a friend who was really not very much with it. But he would punch him, like a punching bag. But nobody else could touch this guy. He was very protective. Well, the friend died. And it was interesting, 'cause this patient's name was Taylor. And the staff, a number of staff members, would say, “well, how's your sister, Elizabeth?” And he would just get furious, “aaahh ooooh, that hooooor! she is not my sister!” Oh, he'd rant and rave, and of course they liked to get a reaction out of him. Then after this friend of his died, they'd ask “Conan, where's Frances?” And he'd look up in the air and say “Frances is a star.” [at this point my grandfather is acting out Conan’s gestures and tone of voice]
They'd tease him, but you wanted to be kind of careful, 'cause you'd get your comeuppance, you know. A lot of these – a lot of professionals determine that this individual is insane, and therefore cannot be held responsible for his actions. And these patients, they're not stupid. They realize that, and they can get away with anything. And this guy, Conan, he hated blacks. And he – of course there were a number of blacks in the institution.

Schmidt: Did they segregate, before integration?

Richard Schmidt: No, no. And he loved to just rile 'em up. He'd walk onto the unit and say “Where'd all these fucking niggers come from?” And of course the whole place would just be riled. Conan, Conan, Conan... and he loved to stir people up. They transferred him to a minimum-security institution because they closed this maximum one. And Conan went right on with his stirring-up activities. And the social worker on the unit where he was knew him. She had worked in his maximum-security institution, so she knew Conan. Well, at the minimum, medium security institution, they could take patients out on daytime activities. And one of the things that they would do sometimes is they would go to McDonalds. And Conan walked into this gal's office and had a can of Coke. And he slammed the thing down on her desk, and said “I love you.” “Well, that's nice, but -” “I want to go to McDonalds.” “Well, Conan, you know, you're just – you raise too much hell on the unit. You can't do that.” “I want to go.” And she said, “All right, Conan. If you behave yourself for 90 days, and you do not stir up any trouble, I will take you to McDonalds.” Well, Conan wasn't stupid. And he had a calendar. So at the end of 90 days, he walked into her office, and said “I want to go to McDonalds.” And she – sure enough, he had behaved
himself. He had not stirred up anything for 90 days. And, you know, she said that's what she'd do, so she did. She took him over to McDonalds. She was telling me about this, said he was a perfect gentleman. He was nicely dressed. Came in, sat down, had their lunch, and came back to the institution. Walked onto the unit, looked around, and said “Where'd all these fuckin' niggers come from?” The point is, of course, that he knew exactly what he was doing. He knew – he had to be responsible for his own behavior. “But they said I'm crazy. You can't do anything to me. You can't expect me to do anything, because I'm crazy.” Well, that's a lot of nonsense. Now, I grant you that there are a lot of patients there that were – who had brain dysfunctions, you know. And they weren't responsible. But more than not, they knew and they used it to do exactly what they wanted to.

This narrative illustrates Richard Meyer’s belief that inmates should be held more responsible for their behavior, and that inmates are inherently manipulative. Conan understands that he has a diagnosis, he is “crazy” so he cannot be held responsible for his behavior. Conan then takes this opportunity to be socially inappropriate and racist in his behavior on the unit. Because he is huge and physically strong (and a trained ex-boxer), he does not fear reprisal. He also knows that the guards and other staff will immediately quell the beginnings of a race riot. Thus, Conan takes advantage of his diagnosis and manipulates the institution’s employees by stirring up trouble. The narrative illustrates Conan’s ability to control himself when something he wants is at stake—in this case, a trip to McDonalds with his caseworker. After 90 days of good behavior Conan is a “perfect gentleman” on the trip to McDonalds and then demonstrates by his immediate reversion to using the n-word the minute he returns to the unit that he is able to control his behavior. The narrative concludes
with Meyer’s evaluation that some mental illness diagnoses are valid, but that more often than not, the patient takes advantage of a diagnosis and uses it to manipulate those around him.

The performatve quality of the imitation and in the telling of the story is hard to convey on paper, but Meyer uses a very particular inflection and tone of voice; he elicits humor through timing, unusual cadence, facial expression and physical gestures, all of which are part of the tradition of imitating inmates, but which are very difficult to communicate on the page.

Sometimes COs do impressions of inmates that I think demonstrate their appreciation for the inmate’s comic timing, wit or other skills. This appreciative imitation of an inmate’s impression of Diana Ross occurs in the following narrative told to me by TI, which appears homophobic to outsiders but is, I argue, far less homophobic than it seems.

TI: Yeah. I was working in one of the Housing Units, and there was a very flamboyant homosexual inmate that liked to draw a lot of attention to himself. To be honest with you, he was very funny. He was very over the top with his actions and his voice inflections, and he came by my office one day, and he said “Sergeant XX, are you aware, sir, that the lock on my cell door is not operating properly? I would certainly hate to have someone come by in the middle of the night unannounced and come into my room and violate me against my will.” And I said, “Okay, Abernathy, this is what I want you to do. I want you to go up to your room, wait for me, and when I come by on rounds, stop me and I'll take a look at the lock in your door.” And he goes, “Oh, I'll do more than that, Sergeant XX. When you come by my cell I'll tell you to [singing] stop! in the name of love.” And, you know, he's doing the hand
motions, and going through it. And I said “Ok, Abernathy, now what I want you to do is go up to your room, get in the closet where you belong, and wait for me there!”

While Richard Meyer’s imitation of Conan demonstrates the manipulative and trouble-making tendencies of an inmate, TI’s imitation showcases the inmate’s vocal, verbal, and performative skills. Abernathy is clearly depicted in the imitation as smart, funny, and talented. Of course, the imitation isn’t entirely laudatory; TI makes it clear that he is censuring Abernathy for acting so gay, but he is also demonstrating his appreciation for Abernathy’s comedic talent. Abernathy is teasing TI, and TI’s mimicry communicates Abernathy’s appreciation for and communication of irony and absurdity, as well as his performance skills. This narrative is equally difficult to commit to the page, because while I am aware of how TI communicates his appreciation of another person’s comic talent, I am also aware that this narrative can easily be interpreted as homophobic, racist and hateful. TI’s appreciation of gay comedy is substantial, and is represented by his status as MC for Madison’s amateur drag and comedy nights. His authority as a judge and presenter of gay and transvestite comedy on the stage colors my own interpretation of this narrative as primarily laudatory. By telling Abernathy to “get back in the closet where you belong,” I think TI is pushing the boundaries of his unequal power relationship with Abernathy. If TI did not feel friendly and appreciative of Abernathy’s talent as a comic, he would not be mock-abusive of his authority and censure Abernathy’s performative gayness.
Gender behavior and humor are complicated issues in prisons; thus there is a great deal of humor that surrounds gender and sexuality. As discussed earlier, the desire to transgress and push boundaries often falls along lines of gender and race:

TI: And, I don't know, it is a bit of a competition to one-up each other at work. We're always – people that are in your inner circle of friends, you're always giving 'em a hard time. Questioning their manhood, questioning their, you know, say “you keep that up, and you're going to be found guilty of impersonating an officer,” or “what, we've got women in corrections? When did this start? Next thing you know, you're going to get a library card, for crying out loud, or you might be able to vote, who knows!” Ah, I might see a core of minority officers sitting there talking at one table. It's like “look at the diversity!” [laughs] And you can pose a lot of things as questions, and get away with it… But you have to be careful with, you know, the different groups of people that you deal with.

Part of joking with friends involves questioning their gender and sexuality; another part involves pointing out unequal treatment of women. TI’s narrative shows that the jokes that correctional workers make are reflective of the anxieties of correctional work. The CO’s manhood is questioned (and I would argue that what TI refers to as “manhood” could just as easily be designated as the “phallus,” according to Freud, and is thus applicable for female officers as well as male officers). One’s authority and one’s right to be seen as an officer, both for men and women, are constantly under question by inmates, and so officers joke about it. Women’s place in corrections is historically recent and still somewhat tenuous; women are treated differently, and so officers joke about it. Officers of color are often treated differently by white officers and by inmates of any race, and so officers joke about it. TI
points out that through joking, one can express anxiety without punishment, but that it is still a risky business.

One collaborator told me a story that corresponds with MJ’s earlier description of male inmates who insist on exposing themselves to her. One social worker who had worked in prisons for six year before changing to mental health practice described her experience as a woman working in a prison.

XA: Well, in the prison, they'd send what they call an MSR, a medical service request, and so you'd go up to their cell, and they might be locked up or whatever, and they'd talk about, “well, I'm seeing things, I'm hearing voices,” but all they want you to do is stand there and talk to ‘em. So eventually you kinda caught on, and you just moved on.

XY: Just moved on, right.

XA: But occasionally they'd whip it out, and put it on the thing, and there's no, you know – [laughter] and then a female working in a prison, I mean, it was, I mean, you've seen things, it's like - and I was younger, and so it like, freaked me out. I mean, they did it on purpose, you know.

Like MJ, XA experiences sexual harassment from inmates that is very specifically targeted at her because she is a woman. Certainly men are also sexually harassed in prison, but the gender difference and the power differential between men and women means that harassment takes different forms and occurs for different reasons. As authority figures, women working in mens’ prisons face different challenges to their authority than their male counter parts do.

There was a great deal of hostility toward women who attempted to integrate the workforce in the Wisconsin DOC in the 1970s. My collaborator BO was one of the first
generation of women to work as guards, and one of the first to be fired unjustly for being a woman. BO fought her termination with lawyers, and after several years of legal wrangling she won her case and was re-hired. BO went on to work another 30 years in the DOC before retiring in 2012. She described how she had to work harder and be stronger and more impervious than the men she worked with. When she was pregnant with her first child, she continued to be a first-responder during institutional disturbances and violent scenes. After rushing to scene hugely pregnant and out of breath so many times was finally taken to task by her supervisor, who told her, “Okay, we appreciate that you’re doing your job so seriously, but do you have to always be the first one on the scene? You’re making the rest of us look bad!” BO felt that she needed to continually prove and re-prove that she was capable of being a CO and protecting her fellow officers despite being a woman. I have heard stories of women COs deliberately hired because of affirmative action policies in order to fail spectacularly, and in doing so, put their fellow officers at risk. My own grandfather made it clear that he felt not all women were qualified to be prison workers.

Richard Meyer: When I worked at the mental institution, we had two women on the security staff. I had no problem with that, because, quite frankly, either one could beat the hell out of me with one hand. Later on, when it became necessary to give advantage to any woman who applied for a job – we had one situation over there. On the ward, there would always be two officers on the ward. The entrance to the ward was off of this big long hallway. On the opposite end is a dayroom, and if you're gonna have problems on the ward, it'll be down in the dayroom because that's where everybody was coming together. And every time there was some kind of a problem down in that dayroom, this gal suddenly found something very important that she had
to do up at the front desk. She was not going to get involved in anything like that.

Well, you know, that puts the other officers at a decided disadvantage, and in a lot of
danger. But that's the way they are.

This narrative demonstrates hostility toward policies designed to protect women's position as
equals in the Wisconsin DOC. Most narratives of incompetent women COs involve the
woman panicking and behaving irrationally and dangerously out of cowardice, or failing to
perform their duties and asking for outrageously special accommodations because of their
gender. Richard Meyer says he has “no problem” with the two female COs in the institution
because he felt they were able to easily beat a man. If they had not been able to beat a man
“one-handed,” he might have had a problem with them. Thus, the ability to dispense violence
seems to be held as a criteria for women who work in correctional facilities, although this
same criteria does not seem to apply to men. Violence (as opposed to force) is rarely a
legitimate solution to conflict in prison, but a common complaint about women in prison is
that they’re not able to be violent enough to work with men. While most of this attitude
seems to be dissipating, there is still a clear memory of the way things used to be, and a
general lament for the “bad old days.”

Why is it important to study the often-inappropriate verbal and performative humor of
prison workers? I think the short answer is that humor at work, particularly in the case of
corrections work, is a risky and often misconstrued phenomenon, which is often at odds
with the professional goals of a workplace. This is particularly true with correctional work,
which has a heavy official emphasis on professionalism and very little official leniency
toward joking. When I asked my collaborators why humor is important at work, one
collaborator told me:
Well, first off, I should probably give you some background, is that there's very strict guidelines about conduct at work. You know, there's the big push, and rightfully so, for professionalism. You should always be professional on the job. And, and, like, even amongst, like, correctional officers, you're not supposed to tell any joke that's off-color or misogynistic or racial in any way. Even if I were to tell you a joke, you're a coworker of mine, and this person’s not – you know, they’re a friend of mine, if she were to overhear that joke, that would be considered an offense and a violation. So you have to be very careful at all times.

I think a renewed commitment to sick and inappropriate humor is a reaction against the strict code of conduct and emphasis on professionalism. The more the DOC demands professional behavior from COs, the more COs will want to push back against this demand. The DOC is exerting power over something very personal—humor—and COs use inappropriate humor to steal back some of that power from the DOC.

**Humorous Retirement Rituals**

Like many professions, correctional officers celebrate retirement with humorous verbal and physical abuse. Retirement parties generally involve humorous gag gifts and humorous reminiscences about the retiree’s failures and foibles.

Retirement brings complicated stress for COs. There is a great deal of anxiety about adjustment to a world outside of the Department of Corrections. When I asked my collaborator TI and his wife BR about the health and psychological costs of prison work, BR immediately responded:

BI: Well, then, what is the average lifespan after you retire?
TI: Nationally it's like a year and a half. I like to think that our stress is a lot lower because Wisconsin has a very good prison system, and if you work minimum security the stress is a lot lower. But, you know, as your uncle Paul will tell you, you talk to retired guys and what you don't hear is “gee, I should have stayed on the job longer.” It's like, “why didn’t I retire earlier? Cause it's great.” You can retire, you can go and get a half-time job, you maybe just get a different job outside of corrections, and it's a big relief just going and doing something else.

While TI remains positive in his description of the joys of retirement, his wife pushes him to acknowledge that on average, American correctional officers only live a year and a half after their retirement.

Retirement also brings a great deal of sadness at leaving valued work relationships. My collaborator TI told me, “I know that your uncle Paul, when he retired, once of his main concepts at his retirement party was “I'm not going to miss the work, but I will miss the people.” When my grandfather, Richard Meyer, retired from the Department of Corrections, he maintained regular lunch meetings with his favorite staff members for years—decades—because the ties he had formed in the workplace were so strong, though his loathing for the system was equally great.

Retirement parties use humor to ease the transition between correctional work and the new life of retirement. My fieldwork indicates that for some officers, the retirement party is the culmination of the career, and many retirement parties live long in legend. Every time I meet one of my grandfather, Richard Schmidt’s old colleagues, they
inevitably bring up his retirement party. Recalling my grandfather and his retirement, my collaborator TI told me,

That was a good retirement party. I remember, it was at the steakhouse in Oregon, and the big basement was packed. They had a big dinner and the officer that came into work with the tuxedo [mentioned earlier], he showed up in the tuxedo for Dick's retirement party! People loved your Grandpa Dick. He was a very, very officer-friendly supervisor. He definitely had our back.

In addition to gag gifts and verbal roasts, this retirement party was an opportunity to continue the long-running joke of the champagne-pink tuxedo. My grandmother told me that when my grandfather retired his employees celebrated his new life of farming exclusively by giving him gag presents to celebrate his return to “shit shoveling”: “They got him a gold watch and a pair of barn boots and a pitchfork and said he was all ready for his new boss. So they gave him that, all those people that were, that he was in charge of. It was just the private guards got him the gold watch, because, I mean, his supervisor didn't like him.” It is important to my grandmother that I recognize that my grandfather’s staff gave him the watch—the coveted emblem of a lifetime of appreciated service. If my grandfather’s supervisors had given him the watch, it would have meant he had failed in his mission, but the fact that the employees recognized him as a success was the important thing. Equally important is the joke part of the gifts—Richard Schmidt’s new boss is his wife, and his new career is shoveling shit on the farm—supposedly a step up from his work in corrections.

My collaborator MJ described her former colleague, Sergeant Kirk, who retired from the Red Granite Correctional Institution. MJ talks about how funny this sergeant was, and how her predilection for fancy pens was humorously acknowledged at her retirement party.
MJ: So here's Sergeant Kirk, Michelle Kirk. And oh my god, she'd be like “ok, guys, Camp Cupcake has just begun.” She gave the meds, and they come to us. She calls it Camp Cupcake and she's, some days she's – we're worn out. And she'll be a little, like, “okay, that's it, I'm bitch slapping you today.” But it's always the same guys that are on the anticonvulsants, used for bipolar and schizo, not so much schizo, but – antidepressants, anticonvulsants. Even benadryl, we control it, because if it has any kind of side effect – and, of course, the narcs. They have to come up to the window. They have to take those orders off as we – it's still our ass. Our officers are passing meds now. Just think of that.

Schmidt: So you're responsible for what they're doing.

MJ: We're still responsible because we're taking the orders off. But that's a lot of – it shouldn't be officers. A lot of them have no idea what they're giving these guys. And I can give you a perfect example when I work – now that's why we like that they come, we don't go out in the units. We like that they come to us. Because then our chronic condition guys, and our little manipulators, we can see. If we're there – we're not always able to sit there at those pill lines. We have three pill lines, 7AM, 11AM, right after count. We have count, so right after count they come. So 7, 11, no, we have no morning, noon, PM, and four, four - And of course the nighttime is the longest. So here's Michelle Kirk, she's like “Camp Cupcake. Here we are at Camp Cupcake, all right, guys.” And she had cool little pens. She loved these pens. I would find these funky pens, I know she had the flamingo pen. I mean, you know, when she left we gave her a whole – and when I was around, any kind of funky pen, like I had for Christmas at the mall, in the kiosk. It was just this round red ball. You hit it and it
lights up, you know. It was kind of like, a little bit for the boys. “Ok, you mess up!”

And she would use her pens kind of like, “you see my little fuzzy here.” She had the
most incredible pens, I can't even tell you. Her sister, I think it started out, her sister
was vacationing somewhere and got this pen where it had this whale. It was like a
piece of art. And, you know, they don't last very long. I wish I could remember all her
pens. But those were always her pens, and she would use them, and the guys would
know it. And she would get on them, though.

MJ goes on to describe how she and her colleagues gave Sgt. Kirk a lot of fancy pens for her
retirement. Because the Sergeant is recognized as a good and funny officer, she is recognized
by the staff with a gag gift that points out her quirks and foibles—in this case, her love for
goofy pens.

Retirement rituals change insiders into outsiders again. In order to change a
correctional officer into an outsider, many employees of varying ranks come together in a
group to demonstrate the ways that the officer has failed on their job, to give them humorous
gifts that poke fun at the weaknesses of the officer, and to laugh collaboratively at that
officer. The humor comes from affection, but also carries a sting of jealousy, hostility and
competition. Not every CO wants or has a retirement party.
Chapter 5: Unlaughter, Class, and Boundary Maintenance

Occupational humor can at times act as a unifying force across social and economic boundaries but can also be a tool of division and a marker of conflict in identity and class. This section of the chapter argues that occupational laughter and its correlate, unlaughter (as proposed by Michael Billig and employed by Moira Smith) can serve as predictors for occupational endurance in corrections work. Using Ted Conover’s ethnographic book *Newjack: Guarding Singsing* and my own fieldwork among Wisconsin corrections workers, I explore the relationships between class identity, prison work, and the choice whether or not to laugh. This project suggests that unlaughter is at times motivated by class identity, and that mutually successful fieldwork relationships may be predicated by a need to laugh.

Corrections officers stand at the borders of class war: in prison but without a sentence, their humor reflects this conflicted, liminal space. Many studies of prisons point out this paradox, dedicating the study to both the inmate and the guard as victims of an unjust system.²⁴

Conover and I are interested in similar questions, but our methodologies are quite different. Ted Conover’s *New Jack: Guarding Sing Sing*, is a 300-page work of literary journalism, based on a nine-month undercover stint as a prison guard at Sing Sing prison in New York. My own research project has its roots in fieldwork beginning in 2003 and a lifetime and worldview shaped by the influences of correctional institutions. Ted Conover says he undertook his book project as a participant-observer. He says,

By combining journalism with anthropology, I’ve tried in previous writings not simply to observe but to participate in the lives of railroad tramps, illegal Mexican immigrants, Kenyan truckers, and even the elite of Aspen, Colorado…Short of becoming an inmate, I thought, how could you ever learn what that world was like?...I wanted to hear the voices one truly never hears, the voices of guards—those on the front lines of our prison policies; society’s proxies…This stereotyping of guards was particularly interesting to me. Was it true? And if so, was that because the job tends to attract tough guys predisposed to violence? Or, were guards normal men who became violent once enmeshed in the system? If the stereotype was false, why did it persist?

I, on the other hand, have undertaken my project because both of my grandfathers worked for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. My uncle, my ersatz godfather, my mother’s best friend were correctional officers. My parents both went to school in Waupun, Wisconsin—known as “Prison City” because of the two prisons within city limits and correctional facilities in nearby towns. I grew up eating Thanksgiving dinner with prison workers, going camping with prison workers, babysitting their children and being babysat by them. Thus, I grew up laughing at their stories, and thinking that prison guards were funny people. Like Conover, I, too, am interested in stereotypes about prisons and prison workers. I am interested by the American appetite for stories about prisons, particularly stories and jokes about anal rape and vicious guards. Given the high cost of prisons to federal and state budgets—now 52 billion dollars a year, according to a 2011 report by the Pew Center on the State—understanding how prisons work, and how those who work there manage and make meaning on a day-to-day basis, is, I think, a good project for a folklorist.
Just as “messing with” fellow employees can indicate affection, a lack of joking behavior can indicate dislike, distrust or fear. One of my collaborators described a “problem” employee whose multiple failures at work included “no sense of humor.” The collaborator reported that this employee is humorless and her refusal to laugh forces her colleagues to suppress their own joking behavior. This in turn has had a negative impact on job satisfaction; describing the time working closely with the problem employee, my collaborator said, “I hated my job; I dreamed about her at night. I dreaded going to work.”

The lack of a sense of humor—itself a loaded term, explored more fully by Moira Smith in “Humor, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance,”—or failure to laugh when laughter is expected can be perceived as an expression of social class status as well as a significant on-the-job failing. I turn to Conover’s ethnographic study, Newjack, for an illustration of this phenomenon. Though he does not explicitly consider this in his writing, I suggest that one of the things that prevented his coping better with the job was his incompatible, non-participatory sense of humor, which did not find many instances of corrections worker humor funny. Conover seems to find most corrections officer humor unfunny and offensive; he rarely depicts himself laughing at the jokes, and his reportage implies disdain for humor that targets inmates and other vulnerable populations. Although his situation is unique (he doesn’t have to be a prison guard; he is a journalist on a secret mission to document prison worker life from the inside), his failure to participate in the culture and performance of on-the-job humor correlates with a failure to perform the job with long-term success.

Conover implicitly and explicitly critiques corrections officer humor. This begins early in the book with his first days at the training academy. He describes a situation during
his training when a trainer came into the room, and asked the recruits if they knew how to do inmate CPR. When the class said no, the instructor “placed his boot on the chest of an imaginary prone inmate, pumped five times, then straightened up, looked down and blew five times loudly toward the floor. He repeated it—to titters, then laughter” (2001 37). This passage deliberately removes Conover from the scene. As ethnographer, he suddenly becomes absent, despite continual reflection on his own reactions, feelings and impressions in passages before and after this scene. Conover describes neither his reaction, nor his opinion of the joke, and the laughter (described dismissively as “titters”) is distanced in the narrative. Later, he observes that a trainer is not very good at telling jokes. This evaluation sets Conover up as someone who can competently evaluate successful joking—as someone qualified to judge the performance, and perhaps also the performer. Thus, the absence of his laughter seems significant and loaded. Conover describes a fellow trainee as “fond of gay jokes” and immediately contrasts himself as “counting among my friends many who are gay” (44). For Conover, having gay friends seems to exclude the possibility of laughing at gay jokes. His social milieu is related to his willingness as an audience member to laugh.

According to my own fieldwork, joking about homosexuality is extremely common among prison workers (both gay and straight) and indicative of a great deal of anxiety surrounding homosexual sex. Conover considers whether he will have to fight this fellow trainee, who has singled him out for abuse in the form of a barrage of “sick jokes” (45). Conover never reports laughter and implies that the “gay” and “sick” jokes the fellow trainee tells are meant to elicit conspicuous unlaughter. Humor is used to emphasize the difference between Conover, an upper-middle class white man apparently posing as a lower middle class man, and the hostile trainee, who is coded as white working class, uneducated and morally bankrupt, and
throughout the narrative, Conover associates aspects of poor rural life, especially pursuits like hunting with sick and “unfunny” humor.

Conover frequently follows up a descriptive passage depicting an ethically questionable scene with an example of humor. Conover describes an officer, “a big pugnacious slob…who told jokes such as “How do you know when an inmate is lying? When you see him open his mouth” (100) and describes how he feels affection for another officer who describes how much he hates this “slob.” After hearing a instructor describe hearing ribs crack from baton blows “with satisfaction”, Conover describes the instructor joking about carrying a wounded inmate: the officer says, “you can just stick the baton up his ass and carry him that way.” (49). Again, Conover doesn’t laugh. The narrative again becomes distanced and Conover’s reader never learns whether this instance of humor was successfully received by the larger audience.

I would suggest that the “stick the baton up his ass” joke functions, in part, as a test of worker loyalty to their fellow officers. The joke asks, who are you going to side with in a riot—innates or fellow officers? If one laughs at the idea of a beaten inmate being further violated by an officer, then one aligns one’s sympathies with the officer; one has publicly confirmed one’s allegiance to one’s colleagues, and reaffirms one’s status as a person who can be trusted. Laughter denotes a lack of empathy for inmates as a group and a willingness to entertain the idea of violence toward inmates. These instances of corrections officer humor are presented with little to no evaluation or analysis by Conover, who seems to assume that his readers will reach their own conclusions, and that those conclusions do not need to be guided by the authorial voice. The reader is encouraged by the narrative to feel distaste toward these correctional officers. Refusing to laugh is a deliberate choice. By refusing to
laugh, a person indicates that they have used abstract thought—they have considered the joke, but choose not to act. Exerting choice in this way indicates a level of self-control and moral superiority.

However, when an officer, described by Conover as “a natural comedian,” gives an impersonation of an inmate who the day before had tried and failed to hang himself by tying his shoelaces to the bars, Conover laughs “in spite of myself.”

The imitation is delivered immediately after Conover has lost his keys during a violent incident—a serious and dangerous infraction. The other officer distracts Conover from his own feelings of inadequacy and shame by performing an insensitive and cruel though extremely funny, impression of a strangling man. Conover laughs, “in spite of” himself—in spite of his initial impulse toward unlaughter. His colleague has distracted Conover from his shame at losing his own keys by employing humor that breaks social norms and rules—thus he is able to help Conover dispel some of the stress and cope with his failure to uphold the rules of the prison and keep his fellow officers safe. The officer giving the parody of a strangling man seems to have done this impression as a gesture of affection and sympathy. He jokes with Conover, showing trust that Conover will react to the joke in a positive way, and thus puts himself temporarily into Conover’s power. By making Conover powerful for a moment, he reduces some of the failure Conover feels.

It would be incorrect to see Conover as without humor, or without appreciation for the function of humor within corrections work. Conover describes a successful officer and notes the importance of laughter:

It seemed to me that Smith succeeded because he viewed the inmates as human beings and was able to maintain a sense of humor in the face of the stress of
prison life—traits that are two sides of the same coin…at the root of the job was the inevitability of a kind of relationship between us and them—and that the officer played a larger role in determining the nature of that relationship.

(Conover 87)

Just what that coin was, Conover does not describe, but he does recognize the importance of humor. Over and over, and in apparent contrast to his unlaughter, he associates being funny with being a “good” officer, just as over and over he associates un-funny humor with officers from “white trash” and low social status backgrounds.

Conover’s observation that “good” officers are funny and use humor successfully correlates with my own findings in interviews and group observation. My collaborators speak of humor as a necessary job tool, and when they speak about unsuccessful, inappropriate and harmful humor, they usually accompany the story with an evaluation of that officer’s failings and often illustrate the story with an example of how that inappropriate joke backfired, ultimately hurting the joker. My collaborators distance themselves from “those people” whose humor is harmful—those who play tricks on inmates, or otherwise humiliate disenfranchised populations under the control of the COs.

From this, I’d like to draw some conclusions about the shared identity expressed by corrections officers through humor and unlaughter, and discuss the limits of that shared identity as expressed through the failure to laugh. Very, very few people work in prisons as a first choice of occupation. Most prisons are located in rural communities with scarce job opportunities and corrections work may be the only viable option. Among my family and other research collaborators in Wisconsin, many, including my paternal grandfather, chose prison work as a way to keep farming. Over and over my collaborators told me that they
never imagined they would spend the majority of their lives working in prisons. As the correctional officer I have quoted above told me, “This wasn’t what I thought I would do with my life” but she kept her job and endured the stress because of the benefits—insurance for the kids, sick time, job security. One collaborator, a nurse working at the Red Granite Correctional Institution described the reasons her coworkers had gone into correctional work: “a lot of the people work there for the Cadillac of health care plans. And the benefits.” Later in the interview the same collaborator returned to the issue of benefits and told me, “Some of those benefits are great, but it ain't worth my sanity anymore.” Another correctional officer, CH, told me over email, “It is pretty hard to like anything about working in a prison. You like your union protection, benefits, pay check and some people that you work with. Job security was huge when you had a family counting on you. Because of Scott Walker and his Act 10 Union busting we now feel very naked in a dark room.”

Corrections work is perceived by many of those who do it as a necessary evil in order to provide for a family, and time spent in the profession is often expressed in terms of “time served”—a sentence. When I asked my father why he thought so many of his family and friends chose to work in prisons he told me,

Mark Schmidt: I've been thinking a lot about that lately, and I think, from my perspective, most of the prison workers, DOC workers are not particularly fond of their job. And I think they are working there for the security, mostly the security of their families. And I think they see it as a sacrifice that they make, to take that job, even though they have – it's not like a calling that they have to do that. It is a job, and it is justified because of the benefits that come with that employment. I really think – and probably that perspective comes mostly from my father. But we also have a
whole range of other family members and friends and I think they have that essential
same attitude.

My father does not explicitly say that prison workers choose prison work because their social
class leaves them few other options, but I think that is what he means. For whatever reason,
most people who work in prisons do not have many other employment options. Maybe they
don’t have a high school diploma; maybe they had children very young. Maybe they had
serious financial responsibilities for family members. But generally, correctional workers
seem to stay in the profession because they don’t have many other choices. I think this lack
of options is associated with poverty, and in Wisconsin, that poverty is often rural. Taking on
the identity of a prison worker is a serious endeavor, and it is unthinkable for me to combine
that occupational identity with the privileges of the upper class.

Corrections officers know that their occupation is looked down upon by many, and
they know that it is not associated with prestige or intelligence. “Christ, some of these new
guys can barely read,” one collaborator told me. They simultaneously distance themselves
from, and identify with, their profession. As Margaret Mills has so aptly discussed, to
ourselves, we are the unmarked category, we are uncatagorizable.25 Thus, in my fieldwork, I
have found that many corrections workers see themselves as the exception to the rule, as
being somehow atypical of prison workers in general. Belonging to this profession demands
identification with and rejection of the occupation. Therefore, to do fieldwork in this area
requires awareness of these contested boundaries that are often expressed through humor.

Laughing at offensive humor seems also be a learned behavior for many correctional
officers. What is funny to a veteran CO may not be funny to a rookie like Ted Conover. My

25 Margaret Mills (The Ohio State University), "Achieving the Human: Strategic
Essentialism and the Problematics of Communicating across Cultures in Traumatic Times"
collaborators generally agreed that their sense of humor changed during their career, and also agreed that Conover’s stint as a CO was so short that his conclusions about CO humor and behavior were insufficiently informed. When we discussed *NewJack*, TI and his wife responded in this way:

BI: I think that part of the prison guard humor comes from longer than 9 months.

Schmidt: Yeah. [laughs]

BI: Well, because I was telling you that, you know, TI had changed once he started being an officer. And I saw this change, where, when he first started, they weren't as funny. Those jokes weren't as funny; you felt more, not necessarily on the inmate's side, but you had the perception that people from outside of the institution have. Maybe it's “treat em with respect,” everything like that. Gradually, your humor changed, and those jokes became more acceptable.

TI: Yeah, well. You always start out as the knight in shining armor, being very professional, and then as you get into the job, you know, you find different ways to find levity and cut corners on professionalism within your circle, and that sort of thing. And, you know, like the guy telling me “you and me, TI, you and me! You're looking awful fine today; let's put the peg in the hole” What do you do? Laugh at it! I mean, you can get real serious about it, and have your stress level go up, or you can just let it roll like water off a duck's back. There's this one inmate that was, like, really good. He was a Spanish guy. And a lot of the Mexican Americans are very religious, very Catholic. And this guy, we were convinced, was stone-cold crazy, because he firmly believed that he was Jesus Christ. And he would go about his daily activities like he was Jesus Christ, and he'd tell people parables, and he'd refer to the
Good Book, and he just lived that, all the time. But then, once in a while, when you got down just one-on-one with him, taking the handcuffs off, he goes “you know, I am Jesus Christ, and TI, I want you to be the Virgin Mary” [laughs]. And then you'd go “Damnit! He's foolin' 'em all!” And he'd show a little chink in his armor like that, and that was funny. I found that just hilarious.

BI: But you wouldn't have found it funny when you first started.

TI: No. No, I would have been off-put by it, wrote him a conduct report, been by the book.

In this narrative, TI and his wife BI discuss the ways in which TI’s sense of humor changed during his career in corrections, and BI is firm in the way she points out that change has occurred. During the interview, I had the impression that this was something that BI had thought a lot about, and something that TI had perhaps not thought about as explicitly as his wife had. However, both individuals showed a great deal of self-awareness about humor and ethics.

TI describes his rookie self as wanting to be a “knight in shining armor” and I think this optimism and commitment to goodness as an abstract constant is (perhaps not surprisingly) resonant with Conover’s attitudes toward prison humor. It is easy for outsiders and marginal group members to make clear and simplistic distinctions between what is offensive and appropriate and what is not. The more experience C.O.s have, the more willing they seem to become to laugh at things which would be considered frightening, offensive, or unethical by outsiders. This more expansive sense of humor is the result of a career full of ambiguity. Just as humor is ambivalent and complicated, balancing one’s personal ethics and one’s cultural worldview against the violence and sorrow of incarcerated populations.
requires the ability to accept conflict and contradiction. While popular media tends to portray C.O.s as either “bad” or (less frequently) “good,” the real lives of real C.O.s do not fall into these binary categories. As C.O.s learn to live with themselves as ambiguous figures, they also learn to laugh at threats of rape (“You and me, TI, let’s put the peg in the hole!” and “I want you to be the Virgin Mary”) that complicate their ideas of themselves as saviors and their charges as those in need of salvation. And, just as one’s self-perception changes through occupational experience, one’s sense of professionalism as a constant also changes. The contradictions between protocol and actual practice yield humor, as does an emerging understanding of the fluidity of “professionalism.”

For me, as a fieldworker, whether or not I laugh matters and is read by my collaborators, I would argue, as an expression of my own class status. But for me, as a PhD candidate, not to laugh at statements and performances obviously intended to elicit my laughter would be interpreted as an expression of my superior class status. As someone whose roots are in the same community, even in the same family, but whose education has removed me from the home sphere, were I not to laugh, were I to register disapproval of their jokes, I would be considered to be getting above myself and looking down on them with a moral superiority based in my upward mobility. And, of course, this would jeopardize my fieldwork, as well as my relationships with people I love and respect. But to me, this humor is funny; it is a style of humor and verbal artistry I have been conditioned by my family and social group to appreciate. At times, my laughter is probably unethical; certainly, I laugh at things that would appear to an outsider as inappropriate, but while there is ambivalence, my choice to laugh is also an expression of my own identity as belonging, in a tangential way, to this folk group.
Correctional officers (COs) face painful, dehumanizing situations every day at work. They are asked to perform tasks that shock and horrify the general populace. My own CO grandfather cut down three suicides in eleven years with his own hands. He knew the inmates, liked them, even. My grandmother told me every time it happened, he went home and went straight to bed without speaking to his wife and children, and stayed there until he had to get up and go to work all over again. Ted Connover writes about his experience of the shame and humiliation of having to do “nuts and butts” duty, where a corrections officer must randomly examine the anus and testicles of inmates to maintain control over contraband in the prison. Connover likened the task to institutional rape. When Wisconsin serial killer and rapist Jeffry Dahmer went to prison, COs at the institution (and all over the state) knew he wasn’t going to last long, and his murder in prison, it is suspected, was managed with the assistance of the COs. Responsibility, helplessness, and guilt often haunt prison employees. The men and women who spend their careers inside prison walls experience unusually high levels of stress, both physical and emotional. According to a recent study, “Correctional officers have a higher than expected likelihood of hypertension, heart attacks, and other stress related illnesses…correctional officers die far sooner than average, and stress was the leading reason for this shortened life expectancy” (Lambert, Hogan and Griffin 664). Work stress and the institutional environment leads to conflict and contradictions between the
officer’s every day life inside and outside the prison. Holidays, religious or secular, can be a particular site of contradiction and conflict for prison workers. The weeks between Thanksgiving and New Years are a high point for crime, depression, and family violence. Normal holiday stressors, combined with the inherent conflict between the lived expectations of prison work and the Christian doctrines of peace, love, understanding and forgiveness can render holidays a site of particular personal stress for prison workers. However, working on a holiday may, in certain circumstances, actually help the worker cope with his or her own stressors.

I have brought to this section an approach informed by theories of reciprocal ethnography, pioneered by Elaine Lawless, and an emphasis on every day life and lived religion, informed by Michel de Certeau, and Robert Orsi. As Henri Lefebvre reminds us from Hegel, “The familiar is not necessarily the known” (qtd. in Gardiner 1). The additional level of closeness and familiarity in doing ethnographic work with close relatives gives me an insight into the everyday life of these collaborators. This insight helps me see the “unexpressed and contradictory,” (Orsi 11) in the conjunction between work, religion, and family holidays. As Michael Gardiner observes,

[Everyday life] is the crucial medium through which we enter into a transformative praxis with nature, learn about comradeship and love, acquire and develop communicative competence, formulate and realize pragmatically normative conceptions, feel myriad desires, pains and exaltations, and eventually expire. In short, the everyday is where we develop our manifold capacities, both in an individual and collective sense, and become fully integrated and truly human persons. (Gardiner 2)
Holidays, whether the Christian Christmas or the ostensibly secular Thanksgiving, are sites where the everyday carries extra meaning. Everyday relationships are heightened, as are anxieties. Expectations change, and the “fully integrated...human” performs specific rituals and roles. By approaching the subject of prison work humor from a lived religion perspective, I hope to show how corrections workers negotiate conflict, manage anxiety, and cope with the collision of their multiple worlds of experience.

Christmas in Prison

My grandfather, Richard Schmidt, was a corrections officer in Wisconsin for nearly forty years. He began as a guard and ended as a supervisor. Throughout the course of his working life he transferred from institution to institution, moving his family from town to town as he climbed the ladder of advancement. He worked in many institutions, from the Central State Hospital for the Criminally Insane (now closed), to the Oregon Girl’s School (now converted to a prison farm), to the Fox Lake Correctional Facility. Central Wisconsin is home to many prisons, and the towns that house these prisons are deeply connected to the Department of Corrections.

My grandfather had to work on Christmas Eve, 1967. According to my father, “Christmas Eve was the high point of the year in our family,” and one significant part of that family festival was Christmas Eve services at church. Richard was the adopted son of a Lutheran minister; when he and his twin brother were fifteen their father went to prison for forgery, their mother was committed to a mental hospital, and they went back into an institution. Because they both had unusually fine singing voices, they toured the country with
the head of the Homme Home for Children, singing Bach duets to raise money for the orphanage. Singing church music was, for Richard, the pinnacle of his religious life. As the choir director for his own church, and a frequent invited soloist and wedding singer, Richard was widely known as a guy who loved to sing, often with little provocation. On Christmas Eve 1967 he had to work, but his wife and five children were attending services at the Fox Lake Correctional Institution anyway. Probably Richard planned to sing, but he was unable to get coverage to leave his desk. Mark, my father, as the oldest child, had organized all his little brothers and sisters into a group to perform Christmas music during the church service. Richard was tied to his desk, and unable to see his children or sing at the service himself. It was the first time he’d ever had to miss singing at the program. He was very upset, but there was nothing he could do; Fox Lake, a medium security prison, was laid out in a large, sprawling campus and the chapel was in a distant building from his office. My father, who does not remember this incident, says that he couldn’t imagine his father missing them playing music, because Richard was always there. For him, it was unfathomable that Richard would have missed this opportunity to perform with his children. To comfort Richard in some way, the minister, through some ingenuity, used the prison’s loudspeaker system to pipe the church service directly into Richard’s office so that he could at least hear, if not see, his children. The minister was a very old friend of his, the Reverend Ormond Oswald “Ozzie” Anderson, the son of the man who ran the Homme Home for Children where Richard lived as a child. Richard named his sons after the elder Reverend Anderson’s boys, Mark and John, but balked at naming any son of his Ormond Oswald. Ozzie was his favorite, though, and they had grown up together in the institutional home that Richard loved, where
his twin Robert even returned to be married. Reverend Ozzie’s action was that of a friend, as well as of a coworker and spiritual advisor.

My grandfather told me this story over and over and over. I know he told it to other people, because I remember overhearing it. Although my father remembers neither the story nor the occasion, my grandmother confirms this story, as does my fieldwork interviews with Richard Schmidt from 2003. There must be something important in this story for Richard to tell it to me so many times. I think it holds keys to his relationship to his work, his relationship to his coworkers and inmates, his relationship to God, and his relationship to his family. Being a deeply religious man in a prison was not easy, and I think the stories he told about his life and his work helped him make sense of the conflict between prison work, religion, and family.

While I thought through this story, I asked my father, “ Didn’t it seem weird to go to church in a prison?” He said no, that it was pretty much like going to church anywhere. There was, according to him, “a lot of baloney to get in” because of all the gates and fences, but the church was pretty standard. My father remembered it as modern and austere, with wooden pews and lots of plastic laminate; “it didn’t seem out of the ordinary.” As an architect, my father paid attention to these things, even as a child. Although his family regularly attended a church in town, my father said they went to church in the Fox Lake prison “every couple of months or so,” and most often for Easter and Christmas, where Richard would sing “ How Great Thou Art,” solos from Handel’s Messiah and other traditional Lutheran Easter music, and his particular favorite Christmas piece, “Oh Holy Night.” Since Richard knew Reverend Anderson, he was often asked to sing. Despite all this, I still couldn’t fathom going to prison in order to go to church. “Where did you sit?” I asked,
“Where did the inmates sit? Were there lots of guards?” My father said he was “sure there were a few guards, but nobody was too worried about things going too wrong,” and they sat right in the pews with the inmates, whom he described as “real friendly.” I immediately think of sex offenders, but before I offer this comment, my father tells me that the people in prisons who go to church are usually on their best behavior; they’re working on early release by hanging around the chaplain and demonstrating ostentatiously good manners. According to my father’s memories of his father’s work, church in prison was “a good place to go hang out if you were an inmate.” This is where my family went to church. I try to imagine it in my mind; my grandmother, only thirty-three but her hair is prematurely white, harried, probably with a migraine, surrounded by five children, each two years apart in age. She would be disheveled, her mind moving too quickly to always deal with the insignificant details of hair, nails, hats, shoe polish. She and her children probably smelt faintly of the farm. My father, ever the eldest, know-it-all child, elbowing his younger siblings. My grandfather, facing the pews, singing his heart out, communing with God the only way he knew how.

This story reflects my grandfather’s deep commitment to Christianity. He worked in a prison for economic reasons, but he constantly struggled to maintain his humanity and sympathy. He was an “officer’s officer,” meaning that he fought constantly with management to ensure that his officers were treated fairly. Richard formed long-term relationships with inmates he worked with, and invited released inmates to visit him at his home. He sang at their weddings and treated them like human beings. Richard saw this as an essential part of his daily, lived, Christianity. He never spoke ill of anyone, never seemed to covet, controlled his anger, and coped with stress through sleep, rather than alcohol or violence. His work life was an expression of his Christianity. His home life was as well. He had five children, who
were all raised to be devout Lutherans (though this didn’t work out in the long run). His wife taught Sunday School, and he went to church every single Sunday. Once he was promoted he had to work on Sundays which meant he had to give up choir directing. Having to make this choice between money and religious duties hurt him deeply. The Christmas service at Fox Lake was a culmination of his daily work responsibilities as a humane Christian, and his daily family responsibilities as the protector and teacher of his wife and children. Torn between the two, he had to rely on his brother officer, Reverend Anderson, to negotiate between the two contradictory religious responsibilities. As Certeau notes, “a way of using imposed systems constitutes the resistance…A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference” (18). While I doubt my grandfather would have described sitting helplessly in his office, listening to his children perform without him as “utopian,” Richard was, with the help of his colleague, manipulating the system constructed by management. The loudspeaker, intended for broadcasting orders and alerts, was turned into a transmitter of religious and family content. Richard turned his stint at his desk into a moment of relaxed listening. By maneuvering within the system, my grandfather and his friend were able to exert enough force to win a little victory in the face of his oppressive work hierarchy. This action is connected both to labor and religion. Richard strove to make holidays a reflection of his faith, insisting on long graces before holiday meals even when each of his five children grew up to reject the church. Since Christmas was, as my father said, the high point of the family’s year, the festival was by nature entwined with Richard’s work.
My family also went to Christmas parties in Waupun’s institutions. According to my
grandfather Richard, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Waupun prisons (there are two; one historic
one downtown—“the Walls” and one on the edge of town) would throw Christmas parties.
Inmates would help plan, organize and set up the parties, and both officers and inmates
attended. I wish now that I could ask my grandfather what this was like, and feel that this is
an important future area of research. How different this must have been from the 1960s office
Christmas party of popular imagination. Did my grandfather stand around the water cooler,
watching inmates eye his wife? Were there guards watching the guards and inmates? Was
there alcohol? A Christmas tree? Were there presents? Was there singing? How did religion
fit in? Did inmates actually enjoy the parties or did it feel like another sick part of
incarcerated life? My grandfather said they liked it, but he was a man who preferred not to
talk about unpleasant things. I can hardly imagine this phenomena, but my grandfather
insisted, over and over, that working in prisons used to be like family, that the officers, even
the inmates, were like his own family, especially at Central State. Given his tumultuous
childhood family situation, I can understand that he might have an expanded view of what
constitutes family, but still. Inmates?

As many scholars and popular authors have observed, Christmas can be a very
difficult time for inmates. Christmas, Thanksgiving, Halloween and birthdays continue to
come around on the calendar, even for those who are incarcerated. COs are, according to my
collaborators, keenly aware of the activities of inmates (though this contradicts popular
depictions of prisons and prison workers), and my collaborators had many stories about how
inmates observe holidays:
TI: Yeah. And how the inmates celebrated the holidays was a little bit weird and kooky by itself, too. Ah, I'm sure you remember, in Fond du Lac on Halloween that one year, Gerald Turner kidnapped his fiancée’s daughter, raped her, killed her, went to prison for life. I mean, forever, and he's known as the Halloween Killer. And he worked in the kitchen at Waupun, and every Halloween the rest of the guys would bake him a cake that was kind of like a sharp stick in the eye to him, you know - “you pervert, you child molester.” Or when I worked at Oregon Correctional Center we had this really good baker. It was another younger guy, and it was his birthday in prison, and so he baked a really nice birthday cake and then he decorated the top of it, and said “Happy Birthday, Bobby, you broken-dick dog.” [laughs] It was just like, “birthday in prison!”

Both examples that TI gives are deeply, painfully ironic. In this case, inmate humor, such as the cruelly ritualized Halloween cake baked every year for Gerald Turner (whose crimes prompted the Wisconsin Sexual Predator Law) by inmates, and the self-made, self-decorated birthday cake for “Bobby” have entered into the CO repertoire of seasonal humor. Cakes, ostensible symbols of celebration, seasonality and ritual, become sites of hostility, censure and disgust.

This same irony is evident in the following narrative of collaborative inmate and officer humor. At the instigation of inmates, Santa Claus, as a symbol of goodness, kindness, generosity and plenty, is assaulted by correctional officers and forced to suffer the indignities of an inmate, while the correctional officers are coerced to perform a ritual violation of this holiday figure.

Schmidt: Do you think Christmas is hard to work for officers? Is it a hard shift?
TI: No, for the most part it's an easy shift. It's an easy shift because, since it's a holiday, there's hardly anything going on around the institution except for recreation, and that's it. The rest of the institution is shut down. There's no social services, there's no school, there's no work, except for the guys that work in the kitchen, so it's pretty easy time. And, you know, sometimes you have guys that are very upset. You might have to take them to Segregation. But for the most part guys are just moping around, burning time. I remember at Waupun the inmates had their own institution newspaper that they ran by themselves. They had an advisor and that sort of thing. But they included a picture in the Christmas week edition of the newspaper, where we used to have one inmate dress up as Santa, and then he'd go up to the visiting room, and he'd give all the kids that were visiting their dads a Christmas gift that was approved by the administration; some candy or nuts or something like that. And then when Santa came back to the cell hall, they talked the guards into putting Santa up against the wall and pat-searching him. Another guy's going through the bag, and it was something that everybody just went along with. It was kind of a moment of levity in an otherwise kind of somber time of the year.

Schmidt: So they wanted you to do this?

TI: Oh, yeah.

Schmidt: They wanted you to stage, like, this fake authority, fake abuse –

TI: Yeah, the shakedown. Even Santa's getting shook down. And inmates would write Christmas poems about Santa, like “The Night Before Christmas,” and they talk about
how Santa was hanging the stockings by the chimney with care that were loaded with
joints and rocks of crack and, you know, they'd make it rhyme, and it was hilarious.

BI: So even they use humor.

TI: So, yeah, they'd find some way to kind of lighten it up. But yeah, holidays are
hard cause you miss a lot of them.

TI moves from a discussion of inmates who act out or withdraw from the pressure of being in
prison during Christmas to several instances of how inmates use humor to take control and
manipulate the circumstances to lighten the pressure of incarceration during the highest
holiday of mainstream American culture. By convincing COs to “shakedown” Santa, the
inmates place the COs in a position of mock authority, imposed upon their very real
authority. By going along with this fake abuse, the COs signal that they recognize the
contradictions of their jobs. For a moment, they temporarily and voluntarily assume a
persona whose sadism and hard-headedness goes so beyond the boundaries of decency that
they would shake down Santa, the epitome of human kindness. By acknowledging that this is
a joke, the CO may be able to communicate, “This isn’t me, this is just my job.” In addition,
by convincing COs to abuse Santa, inmates may then be able to temporarily align themselves
with Santa—an unjustly harassed innocent.

TI argues that Christmas is not a particularly difficult shift for COs (in contradiction
to Connover’s claim), and BO agrees with TI’s assessment, while maintaining a high level of
irony and sarcasm:

BO: I think most of them make the most of it. They do. They appreciate the
trimmings that we do have. We have choirs come in, and quite a good number of
them are religious, so we'll have church programs, church people that come in on a
volunteer basis. And they love to decorate, especially the ladies, just love to throw tinsel on everything [laughs]. And there's always a tree in the visiting room, and on their visits they have their picture taken by the Christmas tree with their family and stuff. I always like working holidays because it's very relaxed. People are generally in a good mood. There's no bosses there. There's less activity than normal, even on a weekend. And they usually make really good meals [laughs]. So yeah, now that I'm old I guess I like working holidays. Most people are a lot more family-oriented than I am. Most of the people I work with, you know, prefer to work first shift so they're home in the evening with their families, and stuff. I never really cared much about my kids [laughs]. I mean, I loved 'em, but summers were enough for me [laughs].

Like TI, BO’s narrative moves from the difficulties inmates face during the holidays to ways that the inmates find to cope. She says that they “make the best of it” and emphasizes this to me. She makes it clear that there isn’t much to make the best of, but that the inmates make use of the few “extras” that BO’s institution has. She jokes about how the female inmates in particular go overboard with their love of decorating.

BO points out the ways that prison staff copes with working on the holidays as well, and jokingly undermines her own commitment to celebrating the holidays with her family. The lack of activity and authority figures, combined with “really good meals,” makes the day easier for the prison staff, as well as for the inmates. BO claims that she is not as “family-oriented” as most people and in front of her daughter, says “I never really cared much about my kids!” Her daughter HA laughs with her mother at this, because she recognizes that BO is not serious. BO and HA are actually very family oriented; they still live together even though HA is in her early 20s and has a live-in boyfriend. They talk on the phone during the day, go
shopping together, and appear to have a closer and easier relationship than many. By
belittling her love for her children and her desire to be with them, BO temporarily pretends
that the institution she works for has not put tremendous pressure on her as a mother. She
takes control of the pressures that are on her, and by verbally disavowing her love for her
children, temporarily makes that pressure disappear with the laughter she elicits from herself
and her audience.

CO Christmas Letters

Every year in the weeks before Christmas, my family receives a handful of Christmas
letters that deviate sharply from the rest we receive, and seem more closely related to David
Sedaris’s piece, "Seasons Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!
from Holidays on Ice.
These letters are written by friends of the family who are corrections officers. The letters are
usually typed in Microsoft Word and photocopied onto colored paper. Sometimes they
contain photos of the writer’s family; more often, they contain cartoon images pasted in from
newspapers or found on the internet. The letters are usually folded up inside a Christmas
card, usually an irreverent and humorous Christmas card. The card-and-letter that remains
most firmly in my memory is a card in the shape of a grinning Victorian Santa Claus in a big
red coat. The card opened in two panels down the middle rather than on the right side,
revealing a naked Santa Claus whose genitalia were masked by a banner bearing the motto:
“Flashing Through the Snow.” These Christmas letters are the most coveted of the Christmas
letters in my family. Whenever a Christmas envelope from CH, TI, or PA arrived, my family
would hang around the kitchen listening while my mother read it out loud to us, often
laughing so hard she cried.
These corrections officer Christmas letters are always funny and always transgressive. As Robert Orsi notes, “Religion, commonly seen as the binding element of American society, turns out to be one if its solvents; religious practices and imaginings constitute one of the primary sites of transgression in American history and culture” (13). These Christmas letters become a religious site of boundary crossings and taboos. They are subversive in several ways. First, they always purport to be written on state time. Certeau describes this type of labor as la perruque,” as “the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer” (25). As the COs sit at their desks in windowless offices or guard towers at midnight, they pretend to be working, but really they are doing work for themselves and their friends and family. As Certeau theorizes of other laborers, “the worker who indulges in la perruque actually diverts time (not goods) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit;” the workers are taking pleasure “in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his work and to confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family” (25). While factories emphasize profit, prisons emphasize control; the act of writing the letters on the job celebrates an out-of-control, carnivalesque mental freedom that directly subverts the desires of the DOC. The letters emphasize the boredom and perceived meaninglessness of the job and the abundant opportunity to waste time in pursuits other than work. While newspapers and magazines are contraband in many prisons, guards can write by hand or by pencil, and thus escape the monotony of long shifts spent staring through windows or sitting at a desk. The letters flagrantly describe the writing process, and the process of hiding the writing from their superiors, at least to the extent necessary for mutual accommodation. This may, as Certeau suggests, build solidarity between workers and families.
Secondly, these Christmas letters subvert the control of the job by frequently including a count-down to retirement or other numerical barometers registering the CO’s dislike for the job. About ten years ago, my uncle Paul began keeping a running count of the days until he could retire. He would include these figures in e-mails, phone calls, Christmas letters and all other communication. Because the DOC offers relatively generous family and individual benefits, including health care, life insurance, retirement, sick time, and vacation time (or at least, generous in comparison to other jobs which don’t require a GED or high school diploma), many COs feel they cannot quit their jobs and sacrifice their family’s health care benefits. Retiring from the Department of Corrections brings many advantages; for example, when my Grandpa Richard died, twenty-two years after he retired, he was making more money each month than he had ever made when he was actually working for the DOC. His health care benefits covered both his and my grandmother’s care, and when he died, he was secure in knowing my grandmother would continue to receive spousal benefits until the end of her life. Giving up these advantages is not easy. The men who write these Christmas letters have two or three children each; their wives hold modestly-paying jobs, and never went to college. Feeling trapped into an abusive job by the need to provide for their families causes stress, which often finds release in humor, like the Christmas cards.

Related to the retirement countdown and the elaborate descriptions of why these men hate their jobs, the Christmas letters often contain narratives of disciplinary action and subverted authority. Several years ago CH, a family friend and correctional officer, included in his Christmas letter a transcript of recent communication between himself and the mental health board at his central Wisconsin institution. Due to insubordination CH had been reprimanded by his supervisors, and eventually convinced management that he was not fit to
work and needed to be put on mental health leave. His Christmas letter for this particular year was written, he said, at home in his sweatpants, watching porn and football at the expense of the DOC. In his letter, CH took great pride in his ability to convince the experts that he was mentally unstable enough to warrant an extended leave of absence with full pay. When my mother read that letter, she sighed and said, “CH, that weasel…He thinks he’s so smart.” Since CH is her younger brother’s friend from childhood, my mother has great affection for, but also great exasperation with, her brother’s cohorts. CH’s supposedly faked stress-related breakdown is not uncommon among corrections workers. As my grandfather Richard Schmidt told me several years ago, the number of mental health leave applicants has skyrocketed in the last twenty years; when he was a supervisor he saw relatively few stress-related mental health leave situations, but at present, due to changes in the correctional system, mental health leave due to stress is almost the norm, he told me. Other letters from other friends and relatives alluded proudly to the CO’s refusal to follow rules and conform.

Often low-ranking officers take pleasure in confronting or harassing their superiors, and incorrigibility is often admired by fellow officers. My grandfather Richard Schmidt told me that in the 1950s through the 1970s, “there used to be a line separating officers and inmates. Now that line separates low ranking officers and high ranking officers. Low ranking officers get classified with inmates.” Resentment at poor treatment by superior officers who equate low ranking officers with criminals has caused a great deal of friction, frustration, and distrust within institutions, and led to a worker culture of defiance. As my grandfather Richard Schmidt observed, “Officers looked up to you if you got into fights [with supervisors]. It was just the way it was.” This defiance is expressed through glorification of disciplinary action. My grandfather Dick Meyer told me he quit striving for promotions
because “I could never burp the party line.” My uncle’s own recent run-in with management for his inappropriate use of state e-mail was broadcast proudly and enthusiasm. The feeling expressed in the Christmas letters is that being a rabble-rouser, and a repeat offender is preferable to sucking up for a promotion, and is supported in earlier sections of this chapter.

Not only do these letters subvert the power of the institution over the individual, but they also subvert dominant social norms. The letters are usually extremely inappropriate in content and presentation. As a very young child, it was suggested to me that I not read these Christmas letters. When I read them anyway and was embarrassed by the explicit sexual content, my parents told me “well, what did you expect?” I learned about blow-up sheep, cross-dressing, sex-change operations, sodomy, cunnilingus, alcohol poisoning, necrophilia, and other adult topics from these letters. In this explicit content, the letters sharply contradict expectations for Christmas letters. Rather than listing familial accomplishments, the letters relate stories of drunk driving tickets, embarrassing sexual predicaments, failures, and political rants. One collaborator, TI, told me, “There are a lot of jokes about anal rape. I remember my wife, one time when I was writing the Christmas newsletter, BI said, “can there be fewer Deliverance and Broke Back Mountain jokes in the family Christmas newsletter?” It's like, well, that's a completely unrealistic approach!” [laughs] Although he was kidding when he described his wife’s suggestion as “unrealistic,” he wasn’t kidding about the sheer volume of anal rape jokes, in relation to the amount of traditionally celebratory Christmas and family material. The letters emphasize sick work humor and low achievement humorously, in part due, I believe, to a defensiveness of their low-status jobs in the face of supposedly more successful siblings and friends.
These transgressive letters also subvert traditionally defined gender roles. Christmas letters (and cards) are traditionally seen as women’s work. In my own family, my mother bought, wrote, signed, addressed, stamped and mailed Christmas cards, and in my own household I have taken on this task for my own friends and family as well as my husband’s friends and family. Christmas cards are gendered labor. Advertising and media assume that the Christmas letter is written by a wife or mother because she has more time than her husband, and because she is the one responsible for forming and maintaining social connections. In contrast, this group of DOC Christmas letter writers proudly announces that they have *far* more time for this kind of social activity than their busy wives who have demanding jobs and responsibilities (unlike their husbands, it is claimed). The form is appropriated by this group of men, who gleefully portray their wives and children in comic terms as far more responsible and mature than themselves. They satirize their own feminization through their work, which they perceive as meaningless, soul-sucking, and unimportant. This satire is reflected in the text of the letter, but also in the gendered production of the letter itself.

Christmas itself is often satirized in these letters; most of these men were raised within a traditional Christian faith, and the Christmas letter becomes a forum for the humorous expression of religious anxiety and frustration. Most letters deride conservative Christians, and one particular letter that I remember contained blasphemous suggestions for how one might “keep Christ in Christmas.” When the Catholic church sex scandal was at its most frenzied pitch, TI, who is a church-attending Catholic despite a mildly “gonzo” lifestyle and worldview, got a lot of comic mileage out of priest jokes in his Christmas letter. I would argue that working for the Department of Corrections heightens anxieties about Christmas
and other religious holidays because there is such a contradiction between the reality of prison work and the rhetoric of peace, family, innocence and love associated with holidays. Prison guards work with some of the saddest, most abused people in or out of society; being faced with the reality of loneliness, neglect, abandonment, violence and despair contrasts sharply with the purported “meaning” of Christmas. These tensions between institutional work, public holidays, and private home life are expressed through the humorous, blasphemous, and subversive Christmas letters.

**What If You Want to Work on Thanksgiving?**

One of my earliest memories is of Thanksgiving, 1983. I had just turned three years old. The memory is brief but vivid and has often come to the surface of my mind. In this memory I was standing or sitting in the doorway that connected my grandparents’ kitchen to the dining room in their wood-frame house on Bronson Street in Waupun, Wisconsin. In front of me, my mother stands at the stove with her back to me. She is banging pots and pans, and taking whole baked sweet potatoes out of the oven. The aluminum foil holding the sweet potatoes is blackened with the burnt sugars of the potatoes, and I felt anxious that the potatoes had burned and would be inedible. Sweet potatoes were a rare and seasonal treat in my family. My mother is angry; she is talking to someone else in the kitchen. It may have been my blind great grandmother, called Opal by her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Opal always sat perched on a folding kitchen stool with a glass of beer swaddled in a cocktail napkin in her hand. Or my mother might have been talking to my father, who I can imagine lounging in the other doorway of the kitchen, always leaning on something, getting in the way of people wanting to get to the bathroom. I’m not sure who she
was talking to, but she was talking angrily about her brother, my aforementioned Uncle Paul, who had failed to get off work for Thanksgiving. Paul had recently started working as a guard at the Central State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Before that, he had been a bartender. Rebellious but sweet, Paul refused to conform to his parents’ wishes; he had dropped out of school at seventeen, and was sent, unemployed, to live with my parents, with the hope that they might have a good effect on him. It was unlikely that my parents, living the bohemian life off the grid in a very rural, earth-sheltered, dug-out owner-built home, with all the typical vices that attend back-to-the-landers, would have any such effect on Paul, but at least it got him out of his parents’ house. After plenty of risky behavior and run-ins with the law, Paul had recently settled down, married his coke-dealing girlfriend (in pure defiance of his parents’ wishes) and gotten a steady job at the DOC, where his own father worked as a social worker specializing in dealing with inmates who had committed violent sexual crimes. It was not necessarily surprising that Paul had to work on Thanksgiving. As a recently-hired guard, he was last in line to get his pick of days off; somebody had to keep the institution running, Thanksgiving or not, and new meat was fair game. This Thanksgiving was special, though. Everyone knew that this Thanksgiving was likely to be his mother’s last. She had fought cancer for seven years, and would indeed end her life that following April, rather than die in the hospital. My mother resented Paul’s absence. She was angry that he was at work and that she, as the only other child, had to put on Thanksgiving dinner for her ailing mother Greta, Greta’s parents Gene and Lydia, and her father’s mother, the feisty and political Opal, not to mention my father, myself, and her mother’s aunt and uncle. My mother felt that Paul had weaseled out; at least, that was the feeling I get from my memory.
When I asked my mother recently about this memory, she didn’t remember it at all. Neither did my father. This is not unusual; my parents don’t always remember the same things I do. Oddly, though, my grandfather, Dick, Paul’s father, didn’t remember this either. I want to attribute my grandfather’s forgetfulness to his recent desire to excuse his son’s mistakes; I don’t want to think that my grandfather is getting old, or that I made up this vivid memory. There’s no one else for me to ask; everyone else that was there is dead now, except my Uncle Paul. I won’t ask him now because his own wife (his second wife, who is not a coke dealer) has cancer, possibly terminal, and I don’t want to remind him of his own mother’s untimely death. So for now, the memory remains unsubstantiated; my family agrees it was possible that things happened the way I remember them. So ultimately, even if this memory is just a product of my imagination, it’s a likely, and logical scenario that reflects the reality of prison work.

My uncle’s Thanksgiving absence can be read as a different kind of coping strategy—one where the job, frustrating as it may be—is actually the preferred holiday option. Paul may have preferred, however consciously, to avoid this emotionally fraught Thanksgiving. Watching a parent coming to terms with death, and watching that parent’s parents coming to terms with their child’s impending death, in addition to normal Thanksgiving anxiety and conflict is extremely stressful. My mother may, in fact, have been angry that she was left to bear witness to this difficult family event, while her brother was able to escape with a ready excuse. In this case, the family holiday stress may have been more emotionally exhausting than working in prison.

Corrections work during the holidays isn’t necessarily all bad. Just as one cannot oversimplify corrections officers as “bad” or “good” people, having to work during the
holidays cannot be assumed to be “bad” or evasive of family expectations. Holidays are
difficult times for many people and being scheduled to work on a holiday can remove social
and familial pressure from an individual. Whether or not a worker has a family to go to for a
holiday gathering, having to work can have psychological and economic benefits.

Schmidt: Do some people like working Christmas?

TI: Well, you get paid time-and-a-half when you work a holiday, and if you work a
double shift you get paid double time. We had this one guy that was a real overtime
hound. I mean, he loves to work overtime, even though he's got a family. And one
year on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day both he worked double shifts. And as you
can imagine, his wife was not happy about it. So she had him sign a contract that he
would not work both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day that next year. Now that's
weird. Why would you want to be away from your family just to make some extra
money, on the holiday that you're already working one of the shifts? But-

BO: Maybe there was a good reason.

TI: Maybe Christmas wasn't so happy at their house.

BO suggests, and TI agrees, that this particular officer may have had personal reasons to
work double shifts on Christmas, aside from the need for more money. Not wanting to be
home on Christmas may be antisocial, and failing to be home on the holidays can be
frustrating for family members, but work can provide a convenient excuse. TI finds this
desire to be away from family on Christmas as “weird,” but he is also quite aware that this is
a real desire for some people. The officer who TI describes as an “overtime hound” is forced
by his wife to sign a contract, and this seems to indicate the very serious conflict between
two institutions—the family, and the prison. The wife resorts to official and institutional policy—she produces a contract—in order to maintain the functionality of her family.

COs struggle to maintain holiday traditions with their family while managing to meet institutional demands on their time. Meeting institutional demands often means changing how a family celebrates holidays. When I asked BO and her daughter HA about this, they told me that when the children were little, BO tried to get Christmas off work, but now that the kids are adults the family rarely celebrates holidays on the actual days. My mother, Ann Schmidt (AS) chimes in to remind BO that her life wasn’t always so detached from Christian ritual and church. While my mother’s family was always vehemently atheist, as a child my mother went to church with BO’s family. However, as her narrative demonstrates, while BO still celebrates Christian holidays, her celebration is deeply affected by her job, and her link to the church has long been severed.

Schmidt: So, ok, HA, you might have thoughts about this, too – how does your job affect how you celebrate holidays, like Christmas, Thanksgiving?

BO: Oh, we, ah, we rarely have Christmas and Thanksgiving on the holiday. Once I had – we'd have to have an alternate day. Once I had some time in, and I could take Christmas off and get it, I made sure that I had Christmas off for some of those years. But in the early years I didn't. And now because of my children's schedule and them having – sometimes not being available on the holidays, we don't really care what day we celebrate it on. We get together one way or another, some day. But when they were little I wanted to be home on Christmas morning with my kids.
Schmidt: Was it Christmas morning that was most important?

BO: Yeah, we never made a big deal about most of the other holidays. When they were little, Christmas and Easter were a big deal, but –

Schmidt: Did you guys go to church?

BO: No. No. We're not religious. We were just in it for the presents! [laughs]

AS: There was a time that we did go to church, though. Not for Christmas.

BO: When we were children. My kids never went to church. In fact, I don't think—

HA – when was the first time you were ever even in a church?

HA: Grandpa's funeral, at which I was 15. I've only been in a church twice and the other time was XX’s baptism.

AS: Weddings, funerals, yeah.

Schmidt: Do you sometimes deliberately work Christmas, holidays for-

BO: Now I do, because I like the extra pay. [laughs]

BO points out immediately that in her early years as a CO, she was unable to get Christmas off. Once she had achieved some seniority—“had some time in” as she and many others describe it—she was able to get some Christmas mornings off, but it is clear that she didn’t get every Christmas off. Just as BO laughingly belittles her commitment to her children in her narrative earlier in this section, she belittles her commitment to the social ritual of Christmas, saying, “we were just in it for the presents.” My mother breaks in at this point to disagree with BO’s assessment of her own Christianity, and I think part of my mother’s reaction is born out of her knowledge of how much BO cares about Christmas, and what a struggle it has been for her to raise two children in a holiday tradition that is in direct opposition to the demands of her job. She needs the job in order to provide healthcare and
financial stability for her children, yet that job undermines her ability to care for her children according to the demands of holiday and seasonal ritual.

My collaborator TI and his wife, BI echo BO’s discussion of the difficulty of scheduling and holidays, particularly with a family of young children:

TI: Yeah, and again, it has a lot to do with seniority. When you're low-on-the-totem-pole seniority-wise, you just have to work holidays. And a lot of times you get forced to work on a double-shift on a holiday. If alls you gotta do is work one shift, you can adjust your family celebration to when you're not on that other shift. But I remember one time I got ordered to work a double shift on Christmas. I called Brenda to let her know; she always got a phone call, “not gonna make it home.” And you were furious.

BI: I was!

TI: It's like, “what? You can't even get your shift off for Christmas?” And she was mad, I understand that. But on the flip side it's like “What's she mad about? She gets to celebrate Christmas with whoever's around. I'm the one that's gotta work.” And that's just part of the reality. Happened to a friend of mine yesterday. Beautiful summer afternoon, him and his wife are going to go to Italia Fest after work, there's an emergency trip to the hospital, he had to go on it. Plans are scuttled.

BI: It was hard, for a long time. You know, cause with the kids, you were still working the “seven days, two days off, no weekends, no holidays,” and so, yeah, you had to plan everything on that one weekend that you had off.

Corrections work often attracts young employees with families because of healthcare and retirement benefits. However, the job can be hard for parents with small children. BI’s past frustration is clear in her voice; she has not forgotten how hard it was to celebrate Christmas
without her husband. TI’s remembered frustration is also evident. He considers himself both a wronged and a wronging party—a very complicated position.

When considering the effects of holiday scheduling in prisons, it is essential to consider the financial aspect. Prison workers are rarely connected with the elite. My uncle joked that you didn’t need to know how to read or write to get a job at the Wisconsin DOC, you just had to be breathing, and even that was negotiable. His father, my grandfather Dick Meyer, told me a story about a pedophile with multiple convictions who was able to get a job at a state institution because they failed to run a background check. Prisons are often desperate for staff because of high turnover, public stigma, and the stressful nature of the job. Prisons are often the only thriving industry in rural areas of America. Many Wisconsin farmers work night shifts in prisons to supplement their farming income—my grandfather Richard was one of these workers. He said everyone at the Oregon Girls School wanted vacation during haying season (June through October) and if it happened to rain during your two weeks of vacation, you were out of luck. My uncle became a prison guard because it was one of the few options open to people with no high school diploma. My grandfather Richard originally planned to be an English teacher but had to drop out of college because he couldn’t afford tuition. He worked as a farm hand, thanks to his agrarian training at a children’s home, then in a cement factory until he damaged his knee and could no longer work safely in the factory. The Department of Corrections was his best option for a regular paycheck and health care for his wife and children. He told me that during the Great Depression, prison work was highly respected because it was such a steady job, but today it’s looked down on because the wages are lower than jobs in the private sector. Because prison workers rarely come from privileged backgrounds, making ends meet is a primary concern.
While prison scheduling appears complex, punitive and arcane to the outsider, many people who work in prisons appreciate being able to work fewer days with longer hours. As one collaborator told me, if a person can work two 16-18 hour shifts, they have put in their week’s benefits-eligible hours. This is especially important for many who live in rural areas and have long commutes to rural prisons. My collaborator MJ described her vision of who works long hours and why. This interview was conducted on my mother’s back porch, and my mother, Ann Schmidt, was actively participating in the interview, as MJ is her personal friend.

MJ: Okay, the Sergeant who retired, she was our main funny. She was fabulous. I miss her so bad. And she was doing 16 hour shifts. She wanted to leave anyway, Claire, because she's in Iola-

Schmidt: What does that mean?

Ann Schmidt: It's a town.

MJ: How far away? That's an hour drive or so. You know, she's 50 plus, so she decided she would – plus, if you do 16 hours, then two days, you're done. But to keep that up – but she had, you know, one of the other Sergeants who lived right there in Red Granite would let her spend the night. And you have to find somebody who is willing to do the other 16 hours shifts. And there's quite – it's usually the women. The women want to do that stuff. We're the toughest.

MJ, herself a nurse, describes one of her favorite correctional officer colleagues, recently retired, and the ways she used her schedule to creatively accommodate her rural commute. MJ describes this woman as “fabulous” and tough. By working 16 hours a day this sergeant can pack a week’s worth of work into two days and has to make only one two-way 60 mile
commute each week. MJ associates the willingness to work double shifts with being a woman, and associates the desire to double shifts with being tough.

Working on holidays could actually ensure a merry Christmas for many prison employees. Working overtime during the holidays meant doubled time-and-a-half pay. Officers working a double on a holiday could make as much in one day as they could make in a week. There is an enormous financial incentive to work during the holidays, in addition to the serious consequences of calling in sick, which could result in firing, or at least disciplinary action.

Working in correctional institutions is difficult. The difficulties in negotiating between the very different everyday worlds of work, religion, and home are accentuated during the holidays. Tensions within institutions, both among inmates and guards, are exacerbated by the emotional and mental stress of the holidays. Managing these tensions and anxieties often draws upon the opportunities for subversion and resistance in every day life. The unacknowledged flexibility in how one fulfills ones responsibilities, as Certeau has shown, allows the worker to employ tactics for living.

Prisons and prison workers are important in American society. Whether or not this profession is functioning appropriately, or whether the system is fatally flawed, does not change the fact that prisons and social agencies affect millions of people, and operate using federal and state tax dollars. As folklorists, I believe we have a responsibility to help policy-makers understand the folklore of institutions in order to facilitate meaningful change in public policy. Understanding how employees “speak” prisons (or how they perform them, in the case of practical jokes) is a necessary step before making judgments about employees and institutions.
Chapter 7: The Occupational Humor of White Midwestern Social Workers

In this chapter I turn from prison work to the occupational humor of social workers and those performing similar tasks in other “helping professions,” many of whom work in prisons and other institutions in the American Midwest. These jobs demand great responsibility, regularly place workers in high stress situations, and require almost superhuman compassion, all for abysmally low wages. The particular forms of humor unique to these professions fulfill significant psychological and physical functions for the workers and their colleagues. Social workers have highly dynamic occupational folklore that deserves thoughtful consideration. My ongoing fieldwork with social workers, in which I have been engaged since 2003, has led me to propose that at times social workers use humor, including practical jokes, to subvert and re-channel aggression away from their clients and consumers and toward themselves, to reaffirm occupational identities and boundaries, and to temporarily achieve an imagined sense of control. Studying occupational humor of social workers allows us to see folklore as something we all have, and have a stake in, not just something marginal that colorful exotic, historic, or somehow “backward” poor people have instead of having “the real world.” This chapter begins with a brief introduction to social work, then explores a selection of answers to three contextual questions I posed in each interview.

The bulk of research into humor and social workers focuses on the role of humor in therapy and the ways patients may benefit from humor. Max Siporin’s essay “Have You Heard the One About Social Work Humor?” is one notable exception. Siporin finds social
workers to be reluctant to use humor and suggests that social workers lack self-confidence and self-esteem to make light of themselves and their work. My own field research disagrees with Siporin’s claims, as does my sister (a social worker) who feels that Siporin’s article is more indicative of his background in English literature, and does not accurately reflect the complex and meaningful ways social workers use humor. While social workers may not have a reputation for humor among outsiders, my own collaborators overwhelmingly acknowledged the prevalence of humor among social workers.

Fieldwork with Social Workers

I began conducting fieldwork with social workers in 2003. Since then, I have recorded more than fifty hours of interviews with social workers, both one-on-one and in groups, and I have spent hundreds more hours talking with social workers about what they do, how they use humor, and the joys and challenges of their jobs. My extended family circle, which includes social workers throughout the Midwest, has brought me into dialogue with a wider group of social workers, many of whom were gracious enough to be interviewed by me. I interviewed (and continue to interview) individuals who were identified as practical jokers, victims of practical jokes, and innocent bystanders; I have interviewed individuals who consider themselves to be funny, and I have interviewed individuals who describe themselves as “not very funny,” but who turn out to have marked skill at making others laugh. I have not and will not observe social workers at work with clients, due to the private nature of social work, although I have on rare occasion interviewed social workers in their offices. I have endeavored to elicited narratives about humor in the workplace in safe interview spaces—frequently my home, my collaborators’ homes, or in bars and coffee
shops. On some occasions I have interviewed individuals over email, when time and space have prevented me from meeting with the individual in person. While this preserves the privacy of vulnerable populations of consumers and clients of the organizations where my collaborators work, it presents a challenge in that these narratives are mediated by time and space; they are reconstructions of remembered past incidents, and thus are divorced from their original context.

My reasons for studying the humor of this occupational group are many; first and foremost, as I discuss elsewhere, I was raised with an appreciation for the under-paid, over-worked social workers in my own family—my grandfather, my sister-in-law and my sister, as well as many family friends. Next, I knew that as a folklorist, I wanted to study people that I already knew, people to whom I would be accountable in my everyday life; finally, it became very evident to me that there are critical similarities among prison workers and social workers, as well become evident in this comparative chapter. This has allowed me to discuss my work with many of my collaborators over the course of years, hopefully yielding more nuanced, informed fieldwork. Like prison work, social work isn’t funny. That’s what I was told, over and over, by my collaborators. “This isn’t a funny job,” said my sister-in-law told me. Yet, in a lifetime of personal experience, I have found that there is always laughter surrounding social workers, particularly when they talk about their work. Time and again at parties, in bars, and on Facebook, I have observed social workers with the comedic skills and timing of a professional. Being funny is a learned skill, and you don’t get this good for no reason. Every social worker that I interviewed told me, “if you don’t laugh, you’ll cry,” and “if you don’t find something to laugh at, you’ll go crazy yourself.”
According to the US Department of Labor, there are about 650,000 social workers in the United States. Median pay in 2010 was $42,480 per year, or $20.42 per hour. Social work is broadly divided into two categories: direct-service social workers, who, according to the Department of Labor, “help people solve and cope with problems in their everyday lives” and clinical social workers, who “diagnose and treat mental, behavioral, and emotional issues.” The main areas of social work include child and family social workers, school social workers, healthcare social workers, and mental health and substance abuse social workers.

The majority of social workers in the United States are white; the National Association of Social Workers estimates that about 85% of American social workers self-identify as white/Caucasian, 6% self-identify as Black/African American, 3% self-identify as Hispanic/Latino, and 2% self-identify as Native American/Alaskan Native.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked my collaborators to tell me what they thought it took to be a good social worker, what they felt were the particular challenges of their jobs, and what they thought other people (non-social workers) thought about social workers. As in my work with prison workers, I use these three questions to establish the context of these occupations and develop an understanding of how the social workers I interviewed perceive themselves and their work.

**Being a Good Social Worker**

When I ask social workers what it takes to be a good social worker, “communication” was the most common initial response. One social worker, a supervisor at Great Circle (a Missouri child welfare agency) told me, “Communication is a big piece, any social work job seems like communication is a huge part of the job.” This focus on communication was
echoed by many collaborators, who affirmed that communication between client and social worker was vitally important, but communication between staff members, regulatory agencies, doctors, parole agents, other social services, law enforcement and other institutions was equally essential to successful performance the job.

Making sense of conflicting institutions and asserting the needs of the individual who is often in conflict with the institutional ties the essential social work skill of communication to the skill of working with people. One collaborator described the challenges of navigating these systems:

XA: And you do work with so many different systems that it sets a lot of rules and different parameters that you have to follow, cause you know, there's the legal system expectations, and there's gonna be the state guidelines, and there's so many different guidelines and rules and red tape all there for different reasons, but you really have to find a way to be able to do your work, be creative about it, you know, cause this is peoples' lives. It's not gonna fit into a category, you know, like she said, computer programming is very set. People aren't, but you have to make it fit into some kind of set parameter that you're given.

XA identifies the challenges in negotiating bureaucracy, and situates the “guidelines, rules and red tape” in the context of individuals when she says, “this is peoples’ lives. It’s not gonna fit into a category.” Of course, as I will discuss later, being a “good social worker” requires the worker be both a representative of rigid institutions and an advocate for the individual person or family, and this dichotomy places a great deal of stress upon the individual social worker, who must be creative, as XA notes, in order to successfully perform his or her job.
During the same interview, XW described the challenges that a good social worker must learn to cope with, and that separating the personal and professional is part of what dictates the way the social worker communicates.

XW: There are times when things don't go our way, or we feel very strongly, or we became personally involved with the kid or a case, for whatever reason, and we can't see outside of the box and we argue and fight for something and it doesn't happen that way because of the courts or other things. It is very heart-wrenching or very hard on us and I think that's why, over time, you start to build up, you start to build that skin of “this is a professional job, I can't necessarily put those personal, what I feel, into it.” It's not about that, it's not about me, it's not about, the way I feel is nowhere important in this. It's about what's in the best interests of that child, and sometimes taking myself outside of that box to look back at it, so that I can see other peoples' perceptions is important. And it does make it hard, cause sometimes we're the ones that work with the families, the kids, we're the ones that's working really hard to make things happen, and sometimes things don't go our way. If you take that personal, it's gonna hurt. Bad. So I think it's a hard job in that sense, child welfare, because I think some people come into the job saving the world, help all these kids, and when it doesn't happen that way it's like, “what just happened here?” You know, as a new worker coming into it, I think it's like, this is not what I envisioned, this is not what I signed up for. But then I think as time goes, you start to build that, and start to understand it more, and I think that's where communicating and all of those things come in, because sometimes to get what you want or to get things to go the way you
want, you have to make sure that you're clear in your communication and that people understand you, so that you're not just, “I feel this way.”

XW emphasizes that solely being “in touch” with feelings and able to express one’s feelings is insufficient in social work communication; rather, she argues that one must be able to communicate clearly in order to “get what you want, or to get things to go the way you want” in a case. Being able to communicate the needs of a client in a clear and understandable way to other agencies, judges, or families means good advocacy for the welfare of that child, and making decisions go the “right way” is ultimately essential for the emotional well-being of the social worker. Thus, effective communication maximizes one’s chances for success, and success minimizes the chances that one will be hurt by the serious consequences of a failure to advocate effectively.

A sense of humor can be part of being a good social worker. Walter Manning’s 2009 book *Clinical Decision Making in Fluency Disorders* contains a chapter, “Humor and the Clinician” in which he argues that humor is an important skill for being a good social worker. He points out that “individuals with a sense of humor tend to be more imaginative and flexible and correspondingly less likely to become obsessed with a particular issue or approach to a problem. In addition, a person with a sense of humor is more likely to be open to suggestions from others and more approachable” (32-33). Manning connects the shift in theories of treatment during the 1970s and the call for flexible, empathetic, creative and self-aware clinicians with an increased awareness and appreciation of the function of humor in social work settings.

Building on XW’s discussion of learned coping skills for “good” social work, XA reinforces that social work is rarely what one expects it to be, and that part of becoming a
“good” social worker involves a great deal of learning, particularly with regard to humor. She points out that appropriate use of humor with clients is a skill that is learned and continues to develop with time, but that it is essential in navigating what she describes as the ironies of her profession—building relationships with people who have good reason to perceive the social worker as an enemy, rather than an ally.

XA: The humor that kind of insulates you and protects you also does you favors in how you interact with people and how you, you know, help people. Cause I think those kinds of skills are what has helped me learn how to interact with people in a more disarming way. And that's a skill that's learned over time, that you don't walk in with. [murmurs of assent] Cause, you know, we're also encountering people for the first time at the worst moment of their life. I mean, we've just had a court hearing, and we said, “you're not capable of taking care of your kids, but here, form this really good relationship with me and let me convince you that I'm the one that's gonna help you get them back. I mean, the irony of all that is kind of crazy, too. But those same kind of skills, of protecting yourself, will also help you build relations with people that you normally wouldn't.

XA points out that while humor has more obvious coping functions that involve distancing and separation between the person who laughs and the object of that laughter, humor helps the social worker build relationships. Describing this type of humor as “disarming,” XA indicates that the clients she works with are often “armed”—hostile and angry—for many reasons, but particularly angry with authority figures who have taken away their children. XA points out that her clients often meet her at the worst, lowest point of their lives, and that XA and child welfare social workers like herself are often seen by parents as “baby
snatchers.” XA is well aware that to testify in court that a parent should lose custody of a child makes it very hard for that parent to trust that social worker. XA feels that humor can build a bridge between the angry, defensive client (who may also be suffering from addiction, mental illness, PTSD, and a host of other challenges) and the social worker whose job it is to facilitate the process of reuniting parent and child.

XA, along with XW and XY explained that self-deprecating humor is, in their experience, an effective type of humor when attempting to build a relationship with a client. They explained that telling stories on themselves—silly or foolish or embarrassing things they had done—made the humanity of the social worker more apparent, and lessened the difference between the “messed up” client and the “put together” social worker. By telling a humorous story that shows a social worker in a silly position seems, at least to the social workers, to diminish the power differential between the social worker and client, and to put the client more at their ease. XY described the process: “I mean, just telling a silly story about myself, or something that I did, or something that happened to me…I mean, that helps them see that, you know, this may be my job, but I don't have everything in my life all together any more than you have everything in your life all together, and I think that kind of humor tends to be more responsive to people who are, you know, in a tense situation.” While Mik Meyer argues that this type of humor does not necessarily work in the ways it is intended (as I will discuss later), I think that it must work at least some of the time. I have encountered this same type of narrative in multiple interviews, and in other situations, including Kenneth Smith’s narrative in Days in the Lives of Social Workers, wherein he writes, “I am an energetic speaker who likes to use humor. When appropriate (and I, like other therapists, must be careful about this), I will share vignettes from my life as they
pertain to the topic…Clients seem to benefit from the practical, life-skill based information they receive” (97).

When my sister Laurel Schmidt, who is a social worker at a community mental health organization, read the above paragraph, she pointed out to me that the use of humor that suggests the social worker knows where the client is coming from or can relate to the client can be offensive to that client. She told me,

I agree that it doesn't always work - while this type of humor can be valuable and useful in diffusing a situation, it can also rile up clients, if they think that you are trying to compare your situation to theirs or if they think you are implying that you “know them” or “know their situation.” From what I've observed, nothing upsets clients more than when a worker implies that they know all about or understand all about the client and their life.

Laurel Schmidt’s assessment agrees more with Mik Meyer’s argument that much humor that social workers use with clients puts the client in a defensive position. So, while humor can help resolve conflict, humor that suggests that the social worker really understands the client’s situation is a risky proposition.

XW articulated this process a little differently; when I asked specifically how social workers use humor to disarm clients, she told me, “I think it just shows them that you're a regular person. I mean, you're doing your job, and it sucks because you're made out to be the bad guy, but it shows them that you get it. You know.” She argues that using humor humanizes the social worker and shows them to be “regular” rather than institutional or robotic. I have noticed that many social workers alter their speech patterns and dialect when they model interactions they have had with clients; they can switch between a “regular”
working-class vocabulary and a professional vocabulary. Much of this code-switching happens in these kinds of humorous discourse. Part of being a “regular” person for a social worker is speaking in a “regular” way, using “regular” humor, and the impulse to act “regular” frequently occurs in difficult client interactions. In Grobman’s 1996 collection of social worker narratives, this phenomenon of emphasizing the social workers “regular” speech in an effort to lighten difficult reactions appears frequently. In one example given in Ogden Rogers’ narrative of a difficult interaction with a recalcitrant and hostile patient in the E.R., Rogers switches from standard written English to spoken informal English in his written narrative, when he tells his client that he’s “gotta” come closer to telling the whole truth (Grobman 2).

Not surprisingly, many of my collaborators told me that interpersonal skills, which they often discussed as a separate category from communication, were important in order to be a good social worker. SA, who works in child welfare and has been licensed for two years told me, “I think what it takes to make a good social worker is someone who is understanding and personable. So, sometimes a difficult mixture.” Her answer was succinct and direct, as though she had considered this skill at length already. SA’s response points out that social work, like any other profession, requires a suite of skills that each individual must cultivate, and that each individual worker may not always have the mixture of skills needed in a particular situation. By calling it “sometimes a difficult mixture,” SA’s words suggest that being understanding may come into conflict with being personable, as well as the possibility that it can be difficult for the social worker to continually be simultaneously understanding and personable. During one group interview, a collaborator told me:
XW: You have to be able to work with all types of different personalities. I think you have to be, just really open to people as a whole. You have to just really enjoy being around people, both good and bad. Cause you're gonna run into all types, but everybody has their own story, and everybody is their own story, so it's really interesting.

As a folklorist, I could hardly miss the way that XW conflates individuals with their stories. When she says, “Everybody has their own story, and everybody is their own story,” she unites communication (storytelling, listening), complex personalities, and narrative art. XW’s phrasing suggests that this is one strategic phrase she uses often she talks about her job. Thus, I would add that storytelling and story-listening are part of what it takes to be a good social worker. There are, of course, dangers of essentialization in equating a person with his or her story (or trauma or medical history), but for many social workers, this is a practical and pragmatic approach to grasping and communicating the essentials of a person’s need for care, especially given enormous caseloads, and the multitude of individuals involved in each client’s care. These thoughts were built upon by WX’s co-worker, who went on to say:

WY: Yeah, and you have to have some type of passion for people, for, I mean, I think especially in child welfare, you have to have a passion for kids and families, because if you don't, you'll burn out quickly. And, you know, I mean, I do think that having a sense of humor really helps. Cause my husband is the polar opposite in terms of jobs. He's a software developer, and does computer stuff, and I think some of the stories that I tell him and, like, just being around groups of friends and the things that you say, that people are like “how can you laugh about that?” Well, how can you not? [murmur of assent] I mean, you have to laugh or you'd cry your eyes out if you didn't.
WY quickly moves the conversation from interpersonal skills to sense of humor. Part of this shift is, I suspect, a response to the group’s awareness that I was visiting them in their conference room to discuss their use of humor and their thoughts about their use of humor. However, this narrative pattern of moving from people skills to trauma to burnout to humor and laughter was typical of the narratives I have heard, both in interviews and in everyday interaction with social workers.

Social workers are keenly aware of the ways they use humor at work, with coworkers, with clients and consumers, and in the community with outsiders. My collaborators pointed to a sense of humor as something necessary to be a good social worker. One collaborator told me, “I think you have to find humor in a lot of things to get yourself through it, because you'll deal with a lot of stress, a lot of disappointing things, and you really have to have a passion to help others even though on some days you may not feel like you've done a thing. But sometimes a week later you'll feel like you made a big difference.” In this interview, the collaborator links a sense of humor with a passion for helping people. She indicates that a sense of humor is perhaps a sister skill to the passion for helping others. In this narrative she associates stress and disappointment to humor, suggesting that humor is related to her management of job-related stress and disappointment. Similarly, she associates the sense of having accomplished nothing with the passion for helping others. Laurel Schmidt agreed with this assessment of the relationship of empathy and humor. She told me:

I would definitely agree. I think humor is linked to empathy, which is a necessary component of successful social work. Clients can tell whether or not a worker actually cares about them or is interested in them – I've had residents come up to me
and complain about other staff, the “higher-ups,” because they don't feel like they're actually being heard, that the CSS worker/counselor, etc is just paying lipservice to their issues and that they are not legitimately invested in helping them. So I think a strong feeling of empathy helps a worker connect to their clients, and that this empathy is strongly correlated to the worker's sense of humor and vice versa.

Susan Dodd Gaylor echoes the importance of humor to being a good social worker. In her words included in Grobman’s collection, Gaylor writes, “My advice to someone who wants to work in the inner-city or to work anywhere in child protective services is an always and a never—ALWAYS recognize and hold onto the “goods” [good things] and NEVER lose your sense of humor!” (51).

In her remarks, Angela Marie Brinton begins by saying, “Patience, tolerance and a sense of humor—the three virtues for working with the mentally ill population. I say this because in the past year, I have been called every name in the book, spit on, hit and, on occasion, threatened by clients who were decompensating, mad, or just having a bad day. It’s all part of the territory, but I love my job” (Grobman 109).

Finally, in addition to communication, interpersonal skills and a sense of humor, my collaborators argued that strong relationships among coworkers is important to being a good social worker. One collaborator, a self-described “rank and file” case manager told me, "I think the relationships, like with your coworkers in a job like this is just so key in terms of other, you know, professional offices, because you do rely so much on the people that you work with, and they have such unique understanding for what you do that other people don't have.” This collaborator points to the disconnect between insiders (social workers) and outsiders (non-social workers), which I will discuss more later in this chapter, but it is important take note that she locates the importance of work relationships precisely in this
disconnect. Because others lack understanding for what social workers “do,” insider relationships are additionally important to maintaining success in the job. Another collaborator described to me the importance of supporting her colleagues and being supported by her colleagues, because “we do for everyone and nobody does for us.” Thus, work relationships contain an element of ministering to colleagues, as well as serving clients.

**Challenges of the job:**

Many of the challenges inherent in social work are raised in the narratives about what it takes to be a “good” social worker, as meeting these challenges successfully often determines career success or failure.

Kenneth Smith, in his narrative in *Days in the Lives of Social Workers*, explains his stressors as a licensed clinical social worker:

The stressors I face on my job generally fall into three broad categories: (a) clinical stressors, which all therapists face, such as burnout, responding to client transferences, dealing with my own countertransferences, and frustrations with clients who choose to sabotage their or others’ treatment; (b) programmatic stressors, involving staff relations and management of staff, satisfying psychiatrists’ expectations, satisfying third-party payors’ expectations, monitoring program quality and effectiveness, and abiding properly with state mental health laws and requirements; and (c) industry stressors, mainly keeping current with the trends and changes in mental health care and nationally accepted standards of PHP\(^{26}\) care.

(Smith 101)

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\(^{26}\) PHP: Partial Hospitalization Program
Smith’s summary of social work stressors is supported by my own fieldwork. The challenges of responding appropriately to clients, managing time, balancing programmatic needs with clients’ needs, and maintaining the clerical nuts-and-bolts paperwork, permissions, authorizations, and other requirements all must be maintained while staying current in education and licensure.

Burnout is a very common challenge for many types of social workers. When I asked KW about it, she told me that it is a problem at her agency (she works in occupational rehabilitation) but not as serious a problem as it is in other kinds of agencies with different kinds of caseloads.

Schmidt: Do you see burnout as a problem in your specific agency?

KW: Yes. Only mostly because we had a lot of pressure put on us to meet production goals. The counselors sit down and work with people and they love their clients, try to help them, want to help them, want to do their best for them, but they have these numbers to meet. Like, they have to have a certain number of cases closed a year. Sometimes it's hard to do that. I mean, it's just – you're working with people and if this person didn't get a job, well, there's nothing the counselor can do about it, but yet they're expected to have a certain number. They're expected to – they have several different kinds of goals like that, and so it's hard and there's a lot of pressure from that, and I had some people in the last few years maybe quit and take other jobs because of that pressure. But in the big scheme, I think our agency is probably less prone to burnout, because we have such successful outcomes with our clients. I mean, we don't have people for twenty years that we're seeing for the same problem; we
help them get in, get a job, close their case, move on. And we work with such a wide
spectrum of people, you really get to meet people and help them accomplish really,
really cool things. And then you move on. You don't have to have the same caseload
for year after year after year. It's constantly changing, and I think that keeps the
counselors motivated and less burned out, probably. It's the *system* that causes the
stress and that does happen now, more than it used to.

KW argues that the pressures of working within a state or federal system put more stress on
the social worker than working with clients. She emphasizes here, and goes on to reinforce,
that working with people is rewarding, and that the social workers she manages love working
with the people on their caseload, but the sheer size of caseloads is the biggest challenge for
her staff.

Schmidt: What do you think are the biggest stressors in your office for the counselors,
or secretaries, for you?

KW: For the counselors, for sure, its the high case load. We have counselors in my
office with over 200 clients. And that's a *lot*. Probably a hundred would be pretty
manageable, and would keep you relatively busy, but yet you could pretty much do
what you wanted to do to help those people. When you get up to 140 or 50 or 60, and
the average caseload size in my average is 160, I think. And we have someone with
200, and you almost can't do it. It's pretty much physically possible, you just have to
learn to juggle and make it work, but you're never really getting it all done. So that's
the biggest stressor for sure. It's not the clients, it's not helping people, it's not the
problems that they bring in. I mean, we've pretty much seen it all, done it all. You
can't hardly stump us on a problem, or, like the oddball people that come in; we've
seen it, done it. It just makes the day more fun to have one of those. It's not really a stressor at all.

KW describes the clients—even the “oddball people” as “fun” but that the number of clients each social worker must help is too high. She argues that for some of her staff, their caseload is so heavy that it is almost impossible for them to do their job. KW mentions that it is impossible to get “it all done” and this is a sentiment that is supported by other narratives throughout this chapter. One of the challenges of being a social worker is that it is impossible to finish everything one has been assigned. Thus, for the social worker, something is always being left undone, and I think adjusting to this reality can be very difficult for some people.

**Perceptions of Outsiders:**

Social workers are highly aware of the stereotypes associated with their profession. The awareness of this stereotype comes up over and over in Grobman’s collection. Alfreda Paschall Gee, at the beginning of her narrative on working with pregnant women in public health in Grobman’s collection describes how it differs from her previous work in child welfare. “I work with pregnant women. That is an easy, safe, and accurate assessment of my job that works well in most settings. It immediately distances me from the ‘I take children from their parents at my own whim’ stereotype that I used to live with a few years ago” (Gee’s narrative is humorous throughout, and her description of the stereotype reflects a penchant for saying hard things couched in creative and witty language that is evident throughout her narrative. The same stereotype of the babysnatcher is demonstrated in the subsequent conversation from a group interview I conducted at a child welfare agency.
Schmidt: Well, one thing I want to ask is how do you think that outsiders perceive you and your jobs? You talked a lot about the disconnect between like, “people just don't get it.” What do you think people see you as, outsiders?

XW: It depends on what people you have in mind. “Baby snatchers.”

XY: I was gonna say, I've been called that more than once.

XA: Those people that – or “hippies.” What'd you get called?

XW: [laughs] Last – the “putting kids first initiative” that was on the ballot last week, we were out and I was working at the polls. I was just standing there with my sign, didn't even speak to – this guy said “you're just a liberal hippy -” I can't remember the whole quote that he said. “Who wants to steal all my tax dollars.”

NE: Oh, he said “welfare” –

XW: Oh, I was a “welfare-loving hippy who wanted to steal all his tax dollars.”

NE: That's right.

XW: And I said, “sir, I'm a social worker. That's not even the worst thing I've be called this week.”

XA: Yeah!

[general laughter]

XW: And he said, “well, sounds like you have good thick skin.” And I do.

[general laughter]

XY: Yeah, I think social workers as a whole, I don't know, I think you do get put into that, “you're those liberal, bleeding-heart,” you know. Which, I don't know, sometimes I think that's further from the truth, but I think if you put us in a generalization –
According to this group of social workers, part of the job is getting used to being called names, and many outsiders perceive social workers in negative ways. The first stereotype that many social workers point to is the stereotype of the “baby snatcher.” This is particularly common for social workers who work in child welfare or deal in any way with children. XY reminds her coworkers of XW’s interaction with an irate voter who called her a “welfare-loving hippy.” The group laughs about this accusation, and particularly laughs at XW’s witty parry of the man’s attack and the apparent congenial outcome of the originally hostile interaction. They demonstrate an appreciation for skillful handling of ignorant and hostile attacks from outsiders. XY does not agree with the generalized perception that social workers are liberal bleeding hearts, and this is something that I have noted in other interviews. While many social workers are vigorously liberal in their politics, even to the dubious extreme of being “bleeding hearts,” many other social workers are social and political conservatives. The belief held by outsiders that all social workers are liberals seems frustrating to many conservative social workers, who are often influenced by religion in their decision to enter a profession where they serve others.

The same group of social workers pointed out that many outsiders feel that social work is an easy job, and that working with children is fun. While they were also quick to point out that their jobs are difficult, draining and challenging, they do not see their work as sad or depressing, as I will discuss shortly.

XY: I think a lot of people view social workers as being “oh, you just go talk to people all day.”

XA: Yeah.
XY: “You know, your job's not hard. You just go talk to people all day. How hard can that be?” You know, without really –

XA: “Oh, you're just seeing kids?”

XY: “See kids? What fun!”

XW: “Yeah, you're not doing a whole lot, what do you mean?” I think that's the perception of what we do, in a lot of ways. We don't really do a whole lot. I think even professionals we work with have the view that, “oh, you've got all the time in the world, you don't really do anything. You just talk to a bunch of people,” not knowing the logistics of what it is we do, and how draining and emotional all of those phone calls can be in a day's time.

The group argues that outsiders perceive talking to people, particularly on the phone, as easy. Working with clients, consumers, agencies, and on the phone is a large part of what social workers do, and outsiders are able to understand that a lot of phone calls are involved in the work. However, outsiders see these phone calls as not much work. Outsiders also see interacting with children as “fun,” probably because many people work jobs that do not involve working with children; being in contact with children during the day becomes a privilege for those whose jobs take them away from their children. For the child welfare social worker, working with children is a job, and meeting the needs of that job is more challenging and less “fun” than outsiders may realize.

While they argue against the misconception that social work is easy and fun, XW and her staff also take exception with the outsiders’ belief that social work, particularly social work with children, is sad or depressing work.
XW: And, well, I think just the perception, too, of just, you say you work with kids and families and foster care, and, you know, people have this idea of what foster care is, and, you know, that kids are just being bounced from place to place, being abused everywhere they go, and never treated right, you know, and not seeing all of the amazing positive things that happen to kids and families. Some families even the parents would say “this is the best thing that's ever happened, because it allowed me to turn my life around,” or-

XY: No, that's true, a lot of different people – and I've had this said on more than one occasion, where they say “what do you do?” “I do this.” “That must be so sad.” I've heard that a lot - “oh, that must be really sad. I bet that's really hard.” It's not really that sad, not the part that we do. We kinda get the after and the putting it back together, so. I think that's it, too; “oh, that's just depressing. That's a depressing job.”

XW: Well, and this is a terrible thing, too, that people say, “oh, don't you want to just take them all home with you?” Nope! [general agreement, laughter] Some, yes. All, no. There are plenty that I'm happy to send right on home to their foster parent or back to the residential facility. [laughter]

To perceive working in child welfare as inherently depressing or sad implies that the work is pointless and fruitless with few rewards, but SW and her staff are quick to point out that their work can be extremely joyful; they get to help people “put it back together.” They smile and nod when XY points out that her work isn’t really that sad—that instead, she feels the work she does is constructive and productive. To imply that this work is depressing suggests that there is no success in child welfare social work or in foster care, and this is something that XW and her staff vigorously disagree with. XW emphasizes that “amazing” and “positive”
things happen in child welfare, both for children and for families, and that these good things are rarely seen by outsiders, who are aware only of the negative, the deviant, and the sensational as reported in mainstream media. While the job can be rewarding, XW and her colleagues do not, as outsiders suggest, want to take all the children home with them. They indicate with their laughter that not all children are the same—some are nice, and some are difficult. Ultimately, XW’s humorous refusal of the desire to take all children home with her reinforces her identity as an experienced professional with a nuanced and self-aware understanding of children and families, rather than as someone with the luxury of easy, unreflective sympathy.
Chapter 8: Practical Joke Narratives Among Social Workers

When I began my fieldwork with social workers I was looking particularly for social work stories about practical jokes, and I found them. I was searching for narratives of practical jokes because I wanted to compare the types of practical jokes played by corrections workers in prisons to the types of practical jokes I had heard about among social workers in agency settings. Although I found many instances of practical joking among social workers, indicating that this is a significant form of artistic communication, my collaborators were not as interested in this genre as I was—a sentiment I will discuss in the following chapter.

Like prison workers, social workers play practical jokes on each other and tell stories about past jokes, successful and failed. These narratives are often performed in groups of friends and coworkers, and as such, form a genre of humorous folk speech among social workers. These practical joke narratives fall into a set of categories similar to those in Chapter 3. First, I will explore practical jokes played on bosses; next, I will explore practical jokes played among same-status employees and friends.

**Practical Joking and Patients**

Not surprisingly, there are fairly strict rules regarding the playing of practical jokes among social workers. Staff tend to play jokes on other staff members of similar status or their superiors. Supervisors rarely played jokes on their subordinate employees. Though for obvious reasons my collaborators were at times reluctant to talk about it, there are instances of staff members playing practical jokes on their clients, consumers or patients. My
collaborator KY does not hold the title of social worker, but her job at a state mental institution demands she perform tasks commonly performed by social workers. When I asked her about practical jokes between staff and patients, she told me that the most forbidden practical joke for a staff member to play on a patient is any joke that takes advantage of the patient’s lack of rights and freedom in the institution:

KY: Ok, the cardinal joke not to play on patients. You can find a lot of things humorous and a lot of things to joke about with patients, but the one thing I think that just rubs them universally the wrong way is to do any kind of, like, teasing withholding, you know? 'Cause, like, for me and you it might be funny to be like “No, I'm not gonna let you in,” you know. But you do it with a patient, it feels like flexing your muscles. And they get this look on your face right away. Every time I've seen it happen, it's like, that tenseness.

My collaborators agreed that practical jokes and humorous discourse with patients has the potential to destroy a social worker/patient relationship because it directly draws attention to the inequality of power between the social worker and the client—a factor noted in Mik-Meyer’s 2007 study of clinicians unsuccessful use of humor. Since social workers have authority to withhold privileges, any joking about this power is powerful in itself. The patient or client may have no recourse in this situation but to withhold their laughter and refuse to comply with the jocular performance arena forced by the social worker, thereby exerting social discomfort on the joker.

Laurel Schmidt described a similar phenomenon at her job. If residents at her facility need to use a knife in the kitchen, they have to ask a staff member to unlock the drawer and give them a knife. Withholding kitchen knives in play suggests to the resident that the staff member either doesn’t trust or fears the resident, or that the staff member is exerting inappropriate control over the resident, thereby undermining the resident’s ability to be self-sufficient, and reinforcing the unequal distribution of power between staff and resident.
Practical Jokes on Bosses

I have recorded a variety of narratives about practical jokes played on bosses or supervisors in social work settings. Jokes targeting superiors seem to be common within the realm of social work practical jokes, for several reasons. In social work, bosses and supervisors play crucial roles in the success of the institution or agency. Choices made by leadership can impact both workers and consumers or clients in physical, emotional, and psychological ways. Supervisors are required to interpret, enforce and communicate the institutional system to their employees, a system which is often denigrated and berated for being broken, impossible, or fundamentally unjust. In Grobman’s collection of social work narratives, one managed care supervisor described his feelings of conflict as a go-between, managing corporate responsibility and provide responsible care. “I feel conflicted, torn between opposing the profit-driven corporate greed that drives the managed health care industry, and supporting the need to screen out unethical, inefficient, ineffective treatment, that at its best does no harm to clients, and at its worst creates considerably more distress and forstser unhealthsy dependence” (35). As representatives of a higher power of authority, supervisors are in obvious control of the work lives of their subordinates and the organization or agency’s consumers. In this joke, the boss who is targeted is carefully specified by his employees as a “good” boss, and a “fair” person.

The following narration was performed collaboratively by two co-workers who are also close friends; each woman’s narrative was affirmed and expanded by the other, and they worked together to recreate the incident in a way that Erving Goffman analyzes in The
Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. This collaborative storytelling behavior seemed to be a common feature of their narrative style and was indicative, I think, of the importance of supportive colleagues in this particular work environment. Laura is a licensed social worker and director of a dual diagnosis program. Andrea is a licensed nurse practitioner and therapist at the agency; previously she worked as a psychiatric nurse at a county hospital. Both women are graduates of Truman State University and hold advanced degrees from the University of Missouri at Columbia. They are both white, from rural working class backgrounds. This is their collaborative narrative:

AN: There were a lot of practical jokes there, even between staff there. Like for Jim’s birthday...was he 40? Our boss Jim? [LA: Mmmhmm...] Do you remember what we did for his birthday?

We filled up his office with balloons and we poured out...and we got all of the hole punches, [LA: ohhhh!] from the whole freakin’ place [laughter erupts] and we emptied ‘em all over in his desk drawers, all over his desk, all over the floor...

LA: Cause he fuckin’ hated ‘em! [AN: He would be freaking...] He would see ‘em on the floor...

AN: Oh yeah, he would pick up one, and we got every one of them and we just trashed his office with paper punches! And then we drew his daughter to be a devil on the picture frame!

LA: Oh! Oh! And then we kept... We kept fuckin’ with him! All his little cars? Didn’t he have all those little cars...Or were those Dave’s?

AN: No, they were Jim’s
LA: They were little motorcycles? Or cars? I think they were maybe little motorcycles, *everywhere*. And then, I think it was maybe Betty, kept stealing one a week…until he noticed? And we would all flip ‘em upside down, so they were all upside down…and that was the first time that they were all flipped upside down in his office. And he was like, ‘Ugh, goddammit!’ He was all mad... But then it just kinda got outta hand.

AN: He was easy to rile up, Jim was.

LA: Mmhm. He was a good boss, though. He was fun.

In the previous scenario, the staff members performed a practical joke as an unwanted birthday gift to their boss. Both informants noted explicitly that they were fond of their boss; that he was a “good” boss. Practical jokes tended to be played on well-liked coworkers as an apparent expression of affection, rather than abuse. This joke correlates with my findings in my larger body of fieldwork, that practical jokes among social workers (as well as practical jokes among prison workers, teachers, and nurses) tend to happen under circumstances of affection, rather than overt hostility. My collaborators repeatedly told me that joking occurs more often between friends than enemies. In her response to this chapter, my sister found this conclusion to be true to her own experience in social work, telling me, “I think this applies both to practical jokes and other types of humor used, both between coworkers and by consumers/residents on staff.” That humor, both practical jokes and other genres, is found most commonly under affectionate circumstances and strong relationships is resonant with Keith Basso’s findings among the Western Apache jokers, who engage in joking behavior only when the relationship between joker and receiver is sufficiently familiar and thusly
pliant enough to withstand abuse. Whether practical jokes constitute abuse is subjective; certainly some jokes fall within this range, while others may not.

This joke was played by low-status, young employees on an older, respected and valued member of the workplace. According to my collaborators, lower status employees were much more likely to be practical jokers than high-status employees. Awareness of personal responsibility for one’s colleagues’ well-being was cited for the reason that bosses tended not to play jokes on each other or on their staff. Lower status employees have less to lose and are less likely to face serious consequences of their actions unless they play jokes on vulnerable populations, like clients or inmates, which was viewed by my collaborators as unethical, in concert with Bicknell’s theories of offensiveness among jokers. Both women were low status employees at that time; they were in positions without much respect, and the agency for which they worked was troubled by insufficient funding and staff. Interestingly, the women focused their attention on objects from their supervisor’s life outside of the office, perhaps out of recognition for the inherent flaws in the organization. Now that both collaborators are themselves “bosses” and supervisors and considered by their colleagues to be “good” bosses, both women report that they can’t play jokes in the same way anymore. Thus, a history of practical joking seems not necessarily to indicate a future of this type of joking behavior.

In this practical joke the jokers draw on objects associated with life outside the workplace. His hobbies, his daughter’s portrait, became a target for their mockery. The symbols of his normality in a highly abnormal environment were turned upside down, stolen, and defaced. The jokers deface items belonging to their supervisor that have no connection to his on-the-job life, but rather the items that are connected to his private life. The jokers
disrupt the supervisor’s connections to his existence outside of the agency by defacing his (beloved) daughter’s portrait and stealing the motorcycles that represented his hobby. By using items that connect a boss to the world outside of the reality created by the employees of an institution or agency, the employees draw attention to the disconnect that occurs between one’s private life and one’s work life. The social workers attack signs of normalcy, success, and happiness in the home life of their boss. These external signs of functionality may be particularly upsetting in a highly dysfunctional work environment that encourages low-status employees to align themselves with clients, rather than with management. My sister and collaborator, Laurel Schmidt, told me, “Yes – I think there is a lot of this, especially “in the trenches,” so to speak. Especially…where the staff who actually spend most of the time working one-on-one with the residents see next to nothing of the managerial staff, except at meetings, I feel like the rank and file staff have to straddle this divide between the residents and the supervisors, and, at times, find themselves taking one side or the other in certain situations.” The employees choose to focus their possible enmity or mockery on the things to which their boss was most emotionally connected. Additionally, the items used in both practical jokes are connected to pleasure and fun, not work and seriousness. The often “deadly serious” nature of social work does not often overtly promote independent play, apart from institutionally sanctioned morale-boosting organizational recreation, such as employee picnics, holiday parties, or employee babyshowers or “biggest loser” contests. Targeting frivolous and pleasure-oriented items highlights and disrupts the seriousness and earnest nature of the work. The emphasis on props with origins outside the workplace indicates that the jokers find the disconnect between their work and their home uncomfortable and paradoxical.
This joke was played by a group of individuals upon a single individual. This group mentality may indicate employees’ feelings of vulnerability at the hands of their supervisors. This could be interpreted as hostility, but I think that that is not necessarily the case. Often bosses wield so much power that one boss is more powerful than a group of employees. Banding together to enact temporary discomfort on their boss may be a tool of resistance through humor. Resisting the hierarchy of an organization can provide the employees a much-needed, though temporary, sense of relief from feelings of helplessness or vulnerability caused by the lack of power to effect change within an organization. This temporary inversion of power allows the jokers a brief respite from the pressure to be effective, compassionate and professional despite little respect and status; as I will discuss shortly, the Bakhtinian inversion of power carnivalizes the employee/employer relationship and provides a safety valve while ultimately maintaining the status quo. L. Schmidt pointed out that collaborative joking is also very clearly related to the collaborative nature of the job. She reminded me,

Not only this, but as you already point out, social workers rely very heavily on their coworkers, and tend to have strong, positive relationships with each other. So it would be more natural to play a joke as a collaborative effort with one's coworkers rather than independently, because once someone comes up with the idea to play a joke, the most natural next step is to tell one's coworker(s) and plan and institute the joke with them. Work together, play together.
As the next joke narrative I will discuss shortly shows, practical jokes are very collaborative in social work, and some of the collaboration is emblematic of the strong relationships that social work staff need to build with each other in order to perform their jobs effectively.

Joking Between Friends

The next practical joke narrative I will analyze involves pranks played by employees on employees of relatively similar status. The following story was narrated by the same workers who narrated the previous joke. LA, as a licensed social worker and administrator (director of a program), is of slightly higher status than AN, who is a licensed nurse practitioner and therapist. LA also holds more seniority.

Schmidt: So does anybody ever do anything to you guys? Do you guys ever get fucked with?
LA: Once. Well, maybe probably more than once. I’m sort of oblivious... Once obviously, when, uhh, I have a habit of pushing up the little piece on the pen cap, you know the part that, you know, what is that piece on the pen cap, right, um... So, the little things on the pen caps? I push ‘em up, and we always had, you know, the white bic pens with the black caps...[AN:...only...] only. That was the only...I mean, those were all the pens in the whole facility, like, that was what we used. So everybody knew what pens I had used because the...things were all pushed up. And so, to other people that annoyed them, because I would use the pen, I’d push up the cap, and I’d just leave it. And...
AN: I hated it.
LA: AN in particular hates it.
AN: Ohhh...my god! [laughing]

LA: So one day I came into work and on my door were about twenty five pen caps, and pens, taped to the outside of my door. [laughter] That were all... She went around...they went around...and collected all the pens with caps that were ruined like that, and they, yeah. They taped them to my door. I was...I came in and I looked at my door and I was like, what the fuck...

AN: I just taped some pens to Katie’s door the other day, because she uses fat pens and I hate fat pens.

LA: Fat pens.

AN: Ughhh. I got a...I’ve got a million pens in my office cause I get...name the drug, I got the pen. [LA: right] Some of them are fat.

LA: You only like skinny pens?

AN: I only like skinny pens. I don’t like the fat ones. Katie loves the fat ones so I take all my fat ones and I tape ’em on her door for her.

LA: I noticed a couple pens taped to her door...

The above narrative shares many characteristics with the previous joke told by the same two women. The women collaborate to create a shared version of reality through their interaction. Since both jokes were recounted by the same women, they used similar narration styles in both jokes, drawing on mimicry, exaggerated facial expressions and other nonverbal signals to elicit humor. Their narrative styles indicate a strong sense of timing, inflection, and audience response, and highlights the importance of skilled verbal communication among social workers.
The narrative is marked by several job-specific features, particularly in this case, the pens. Through my previous work in the medical arena (as a medical secretary and transcriptionist), I have come to believe that prescription drug pens (the pens, given away by drug company representatives, that advertise particular brand-name drugs) hold a particularly potent role in the realm of medical occupational folklore. These “give-aways” from drug representatives have come to represent, for some workers, everything that is wrong with the medical system. They act as a tangible symbol of the inappropriate role that drug representatives sometimes play in deciding the proper treatment of patients. The prescribing doctor or nurse writes prescriptions with a pen that advertises the drug being prescribed, making overt the connection between marketing, aggressive sales strategies employed by pharmaceutical companies and the ambiguity of appropriate consumer care. The pens are frequent reminders not just of new available brand-name prescription drugs, but also of the great cost of these drugs to consumers, and the power of the prescription drug lobby. For some, the pens can be read both in the way they are intended (as advertisement) but they can also be read against the original intention as unpleasant detritus left in the wake of corrupt and manipulative corporations. How the pens are read depends on the reader. In the above practical joke, the pens are treated as an integral, necessary, but irritating part of the social work environment.

This joke narrative is also marked by aggression and hostility. Although the joke is being played among good friends, both the joker and the butt of the joke express their frustration and hostility through explicit language and non-verbal expressions of anger. AN groans and growls and frowns to indicate her extreme irritation with LA’s behavior. LA reacts to the pens on her door by demanding, “what the fuck?!?” Frustration and hostility with
co-workers is acted out using props rather than in face-to-face verbal confrontation. The joke is employed as a social control: LA needs to stop destroying pens because it is irritating her coworkers. Her coworker uses humor as a vehicle for the message. The humor may serve to soften the sting and allow LA to save face by reacting with laughter and exaggerated anger instead of taking the message “seriously” which might result in a confrontation that neither party has emotional energy to sustain.

This joke relies on embarrassment and public exposure for its effectiveness. In the pen joke, LA is embarrassed to be informed in public that her coworkers are aware of and irritated by her nervous fidgeting with pen caps. She reacts with verbal hostility (“what the fuck…?”). The public nature of the joke permits a wide audience; this may indicate that the jokes are playing a role for more people than just the jokers and the butts, and while there may be a range of primary meanings between the joker and the butt of the joke, there is likely a secondary range of meanings available to the spectators.

The next practical joke narrative of jokes played between same-status employees that I will explore was related to me by KA, a social worker in central Missouri. Like the previous examples, this practical joke revolves around the displacement of objects that originate in the worker’s life outside the office. When I asked KA about practical joking in her office, she told me,

I often don't participate that much, because I'm the supervisor, and I'm kind of thinking “well, I probably shouldn't condone that,” but one day the practical Joker got a shipment of beer at the office, which is probably not – I don't know, anyway, instead of having it sitting on his porch, he had them bring it to the office. Well, he wasn't there when it arrived. And we knew what it was, so we opened the box and we
took all the bottles and hid them all over the office. And then we closed the box back up, taped it up so it looked like it had never been tampered with. Well, he came in, looked at the box, he's like “this doesn't feel right.” He opened it up and there was a note that said, a poem that said something about “your beer is here, but you'll have to find it.” So he spent the afternoon finding all of that back. It was funny; when he left for vacation this time he said “Please just don't hide my beer. If a box comes, just set it in my office.”

KA frames her narration of the joke by defining herself as “the supervisor” and immediately distancing herself from the events of the narrative. This is consistent with other practical joke narratives that I have collected from social workers in supervisory positions. According to my findings, supervisors often feel that their status as authority figures prevents them from participating in workplace humor and suggests that they feel they are expected to frown on levity at work. KA expresses the concern that she should not “condone” practical joking, particularly practical joking that involves alcohol. However, the narrative itself aligns KA with the rest of her staff, when she uses “we” consistently throughout the narration. Instead of positioning herself as outside of the joke with the pronoun “they,” KA participation seems apparent through the inclusive pronoun “we”: “We opened the box;” “we took the bottles;” “we closed the box back up.”

The victim of the practical joke is discomfited because his beer—a personal item explicitly forbidden from use during office hours—has been disappeared, kidnapped and hidden by his colleagues. Although beer is forbidden, drinking is a popular topic for joking among social workers, and in her response to reading this section, L. Schmidt pointed out that the fact that the social workers target the man’s beer is related to the joking tradition
about drinking to cope with the job. She told me, “This reminded me that at one of the more recent staff meetings, we were joking about there being nothing in the...manual that explicitly forbids drinking on the job, so everyone was like ‘saaaaaay...’” In the practical joke on the beer drinker, the staff immediately establish a playful register by leaving a cryptic note that first assures the victim that his beer is safe and not actually stolen (the reason he has had his beer delivered to his office in the first place), but they prevent the victim from getting access to his beer without a prolonged and public struggle. The note is a poem—in verse—demonstrating a departure from standard office communication, further establishing that the activity connected with the poem will take place outside of official office norms. The jokers have re-sealed the box so that the victim initially assumes that his long-awaited beer has successfully passed into his possession, probably yielding a feeling of triumph, the subsequent loss of which further emphasizes the actual, though temporary, loss of the beer. The narrative indicates that the jokers are in attendance to watch their prank unfold, which demonstrates that part of the function of the practical joke is public entertainment for the audience and jokers and publicly-observed discomfiture for the victim.

Witnesses to practical jokes evaluate the response of the butt of the “victim.” The response of the butt of the joke becomes the subject of public judgment and debate, as Smith demonstrates in “Humor, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance” in her reading of a prank played on Tom Cruise. When Tom Cruise was sprayed in the face by a squirting gag flower in a public setting, he reacted in anger, shouting personal abuse at the joker. Newspapers and blogs pointed to Cruise’s “humorless” reaction as indicative of his disorderd personality. Although the narrative I collected does not explicitly evaluate the victim’s reaction, KA describes the later request upon leaving for vacation that the staff “Please just don't hide my
beer. If a box comes, just set it in my office.’” Thus, the narrative concludes with a graceful request from the butt of the joke which establishes him as a polite person (“please”) as well as a person who does not make unusually hostile demands in response to his treatment. He asks only that staff follow ordinary office protocol, which draws attention to and further reinforces the humor that has occurred from their refusal to follow office protocol. Unlike Tom Cruise, who reacted with anger and violence to the prank played on him, this victim preserves the conditions of play.

KA told me another practical joke narrative involving the practical joker in the previous instance. This narrative contains two practical jokes, and illustrates the competitive and retaliatory nature of the practical joke.

Schmidt: You said you have someone in your office right now who is a practical joker?

KA: Mhmhm, I do. He is not by profession a social worker, but he's a rehab counselor by profession, and he's about 55 or so. He's fairly close to retirement age, and he transferred in my office about four years ago from another area of the state. And he has really – we didn't have a practical joker before he came, and now we all appreciate – like, for example, he took something from one of our counselors. I don't remember what it was. Some of his paperwork, or a book, or something. And he took it, and hid it, and then he sends this guy on a wild goose-chase to find it. And he had to find clues, and it was kind of difficult. He had to go, like, to the DSM, which is our diagnostic manual, and go to a certain – he had to figure it out, “well, what is this number? Well, that might be a DSM code.” He had to go there, and then he opened the page, and sure enough, there was a note: “Okay, now you need to go, you know,
here, or there, or whatever.” So he just – he comes up with very clever things like that
that actually take a little bit of work and a little bit of thought. And he'd tell stories of
things he did as a kid, even, so he must have grown up as a practical joker. And now
we, of course, have gotten cleverer. He was gone on vacation the week of Valentine's
Day, so we decorated his office with pink curtains and pink ribbons and pink hearts
and doilies, lace doilies, all over and under his computer and it just looked so – you
know, it was funny. And he's a good sport about it. He can take it. He can dish it out,
but he can take it. So that kind of started when he came. Before that, we didn't have a
lot of it at all.

In this account, when the joker made the butt of the joke go on a treasure hunt
through the office to find his missing paperwork, the joke draws on the environment of the
office. The joker has taken something that is necessary to the victim’s ability to perform his
job. The victim must use his job-based knowledge (such as DSM codes) to solve difficult
work-based problems in order to get his paperwork back. Thus, the joke tests the victim’s
ability to navigate the office. The victim must demonstrate his intelligence and knowledge of
the office and of the profession in order to get his necessary paper back. The joke puts the
victim’s testing in public—the rest of the office watches to see how the victim will react.
Will he figure out the clues? Will he get angry? KA describes the joke as “very clever” and
does not seem to mind that it has taken up a great deal of work time for both the joker and the
victim.

Because the practical joker has introduced a retaliatory practical joking culture into
KA’s organization, KA’s staff have begun to play practical jokes on the original joker. KA
describes this process as becoming “cleverer” in order to outwit the joker. The staff targets
the joker while he is on vacation, decorating his office with Valentines Day paraphernalia. KA repeats over and over that the ribbons are pink, the curtains are pink, the hearts are pink, all of which pink contributes to a feminization of the joker’s office. His computer is covered with lace, and there are feminine colors and materials everywhere when he returns to his office after vacation. I think the fact that the joker is male in a profession dominated by women is part of the reason that the joke relies so heavily on feminizing his office. His masculine private space is violated and turned into a temple of pink.

KA went on to reflect on her own role in the Valentine’s Day joke mentioned above when I asked her about her supervisory status and how being a supervisor affected her relationship to practical joking. KA simultaneously distanced herself from office practical jokes while describing her role in this particular practical joke.

Schmidt: As the supervisor, do you get messed with?

KA: I really don't get messed with too much, actually. Now, I helped with the decorating of the office. Like I said, I usually don't, but I happened to be going to WalMart, so I bought the fabric for his curtains, and I helped 'em a little bit. It looked really good, too. I helped a little bit, but I don't really recall anybody really messing with me too much.

Schmidt: What gave you the idea to Valentine's-day-up this guy's office?

KA: Well, probably because when he was gone on vacation the last time, six months or so ago, we turned everything upside down in his office. And it was kind of like, well – and then another counselor just happened to be standing down there and she said “oh, I want to do something for Bill while he's gone,” and she said something about “pink curtains,” or something like that. I said, “I'm going to WalMart, I'll get
some.” Just kind of grew out of that, because another girl came down the hall and said “oh, I've got some pink doilies at home, I could bring those.” “Okay, yeah, that'd be cool.” So, you know, it ended up – everybody put their little touch on it; “Oh, I could do this,” or “I could do that.” We had a staff meeting and right afterward we spend the next little bit of time decorating his office, and then we all just walked away and forgot about it. He showed up a week later, and we helped him clean it up.

Schmidt: What did he say?

KA: He joked about it. He said something like, “dammit, that interior decorator I hired just really totally got the wrong theme. It's not what I was going for,” you know. So he's just funny. He's a funny guy, and he totally took it in stride. Some of it he kind of left – I mean, he took down the curtains right away, and some of the more obvious feminine touches, and then there was some that we just kind of slowly cleaned up.

The Valentine’s Day joke is preceded by a staff prank involving turning everything upside down in the man’s office. This literal inversion is similar to the series of practical jokes played by LA and AN, which included routinely turning over model motorcycles. KA denies her participation in office joking as a rule, but she also demonstrates considerable pride and enthusiasm in the joke and its aesthetic success. The office “looked really good” after it was done, and bringing off the joke must have taken an appreciable financial and time contribution from all involved. KA buys fabric, not just curtains, and so there is a lot of emphasis here on building something creative and aesthetically pleasing that is simultaneously disruptive and annoying.
The joke is described as extremely collaborative—each staff member contributing his or her “little touch” to the shared goal of “doing something for Bill.” The particularly collaborative nature of the joke reinforces the strong workplace relationships and collaborative work environment that my collaborators talk about throughout this chapter. Many people come together in the hallway and in the staff meeting and work together to build something that is meant to irritate the victim.

KA describes Bill’s reaction to the joke in an approving way. She says, “he totally took it in stride” but she also says that he took down the pink curtains immediately. Interestingly, Bill leaves up all but the most extremely “feminine touches,” and the jokers slowly clean up the mess that they have wrought. Bill’s immediate response to the prank is a verbal joke, claiming that the interior decorator has gotten his ideas all wrong. By pretending that this pink explosion is somehow his own idea gone awry ups the humor, and continues the joke. Like LA in the earlier practical joke with the broken pens, Bill reacts with obscenity, saying, “Dammit…” Thus, practical jokes give the victim an opportunity to speak inappropriately in a safe situation, which may ultimately help them speak appropriately in more volatile situations with clients, where diplomacy and kindness is necessary.

There is a distinct tradition of practical jokes that involve disrupting a colleague’s office or cubicle. In addition to recording many examples of this type of practical joke, Alfreda Gee alludes to performing this type of practical joke in her narrative in Grobman’s collection of social work narratives. At the end of a list of tasks she has performed that day, Gee writes, “Saw six other folks, including a frustrated mother about her daughter who is in need of homebound school. I made phone calls about this year’s Fall meeting with the school staff. Instigated to trash a friend’s office for her 40th birthday” (Grobman 26). Gee places the
practical joke at the end of a list of tasks—a common humorous technique of unexpected juxtaposition. Her list is brief, and the mention of the prank is even briefer, but I think it is significant that Gee chooses to include this practical joke in her narrative. For Gee, this prank is important. The prank is played on a friend, on the occasion of her friend’s milestone birthday. The present Gee and unspecified colleagues give the woman is to “trash” her office.

As KA’s above narrative indicates, the presence of one dedicated practical joker in a social work office is enough to establish a practical joking culture. This conclusion is born out by my research; collaborators often described practical joking as the ultimate result of the presence of one person, and that the removal of that catalyst individual can be enough to abolish a joking culture. My collaborator KW told me that very few people in her present office, a child welfare agency, play practical jokes, but that in her previous job at another child welfare agency in another city, practical jokes were a regular and ongoing part of her work day. She attributed this to “one or two people, well, mostly one,” but also indicated that she herself had been an active practical joker in this environment, although she did not remain a practical joker in her current job. This may, however, be because she is a supervisor in her current position.

While the previous jokes drew on outside objects, my collaborator KY, a Residential Care Technician at Mendota Mental Health Institute in Madison, Wisconsin told me about an example of a practical joke that depends on the architecture and security of her institution.

KY: We have a lot of really interesting characters, and – also just with each other, a lot of physical humor. Shutting the door right before somebody else comes through, and you have to get out all your keys and use this great big key and open it up to get through.
Schmidt: People do that to each other on purpose?

KY: Oh yeah.

Schmidt: To mess with each other?

KY: Uh-huh.

This practical joke emphasizes the small annoyances of working within a mental institution. Having to lock and unlock doors dozens of times every day is an irritation, and this practical joke emphasizes the irritation. While the behavior initially seems very rude, I argue that the joke can actually communicate politeness and consideration among staff. By shutting the door right before someone else comes through, the joker makes it clear that he or she is entirely aware that the polite thing to do would be to hold the door. The person in whose face the door has been shut and locked knows that the other person knows what is polite, and that very violation of politeness and good manners reinforces the importance of showing politeness to coworkers. It also demonstrates a clear awareness of how annoying small inconveniences can be, and by unnecessarily forcing an inconvenience on a coworker, the joker acknowledges, and forces the victim to acknowledge, how annoying this is. In addition, the joke gives the victim an opportunity to lash out and relieve some stress. By giving the joker a hard time, the victim can speak in an unguarded and mock-hostile way that may help the victim manage the levels of his or her own aggression in more critical situations. Thus, the joke is like a forced safety valve.

As KA emphasized, supervisors and managers tend not to play jokes on their staff, but I have recorded several instances of supervisors who played practical jokes among themselves. The following narrative was shared with me by XW, who told the story during a group interview at Great Circle.
XW: My old office was pretty notorious for that, where I came from before there was a lot of that. There was one particular, we had Community Support workers who were people who helped us transport kids and supervise visits, and there was one who, she just had no idea how she came off, and was just really annoying. I mean, meant well, but super annoying. She thought a lot of herself, and thought she was pretty much the best worker that had ever been brought to the office. And her cubicle, she had like a cork-board up, like that, and they were all pictures of herself that were up there. I mean, not like her kids, her dog, her family – they were all pictures of herself. There might be other people in them, but every single picture contained her in it. And she had kind of gotten passed around to each supervisor that was in that office. When I became a supervisor, they switched her to my team, and then one of the other supervisors got the idea. She, before she has stopped being supervised by them she gave them a picture of her. So then it became this joke that the supervisors would go and plant her picture somewhere in another supervisor's office. [general laughter] And so I might come in one morning and open my office, and then sit down at my computer, and there's a picture of Tracy there. [laughter] And so then I would like put it in an inter-office envelope and send it to another supervisor, so we had a lot of that kind of stuff at my last office.

Perhaps because of the large size of KW’s previous agency, supervisors formed a self-identified group with their own traditions of pranks. So, instead of having to hold themselves apart from the antics of the rank and file, this group of supervisors. Because the supervisors were of technically equal status yet had different levels of seniority, the joke reinforces the discomfort visited upon a new supervisor who has been given a “problem” employee like
“Tracy.” This situation is specific to supervisors’ workplace challenges, and they must give the outward appearance of neutrality and fairness, regardless of how annoying they might find certain individuals on their staff.

KW sets up the joke by defining the group boundaries, after establishing the context of the joke as taking place among other jokes at a different agency. The unwitting victim of this prank is a Community Support Worker, with specific responsibilities for “helping” the management. The jokers, the “we,” are the supervisors who manage the CSWs. The joke responds to a problem: “Tracy” the CSW is an irritating narcissist who is difficult to work with and gets passed around from supervisor to supervisor. The practical joke addresses the problem by acknowledging it. “Tracy” is a narcissist whose focus is on herself, rather than on her job. The supervisors draw upon the office awareness of “Tracy’s” problem and pretend to reinforce her irritating behavior. The picture of the woman, already ubiquitous, is passed around among supervisors, just as the woman herself is passed around among supervisors. Thus, aggression and frustration is expended upon the image of the woman, the frustration and aggression are acknowledged and validated, and the woman herself (we assume) remains unharmed, aside from a deepening stain on her professional character. That which is implicit in the job thus becomes explicit, and by becoming explicit is acknowledged and processed in the ongoing series of pranks using the photograph of “Tracy.”

**Initiatory Practical Jokes:**

I recorded fewer instances of initiation practical jokes among social workers than I did among prison workers. While KY herself has not been hazed or initiated by means of practical jokes, she describes an instance of initiatory practical joking among her colleagues:
Schmidt: Did anyone, was there any kind of initiation that you went through? I'm not talking like formally, but when you started did you get, like, jumped in by your colleagues, or was there a moment when you were like “ah, now I work here?”

KY: Wow, um...I can't think of anything off the top of my head. I can think of a story that I was told once by a coworker about this particularly – after a particularly rough time early in her career, they, to jab at her and to make her feel like part of a gang, they put a giant bra, an enormous bra, they stretched across the front of her car. So when she's done with work that day she goes outside and there's this triple D, 58 bra strapped across the front of her car. And that was over at the Central Center where they have an even more difficult population, physically, to deal with. So that was a bonding moment for them.

Schmidt: So that was done to make her feel a part of the gang? That was a sign of affection?

KY: Yeah.

Schmidt: Why a bra?

KY: I think just cause, like, those things are called “bras” that cover the front of your car. But this was a real bra, obviously. And I guess it was kind of like, part of their ongoing joke that tied them to it.

Schmidt: Did she already have a car bra?

KY: No, she drove a beat up old thing. A hoopt.

This joke is played on a staff member after a particularly difficult time early in her career. KY points out that the staff member had been working with the most physically difficult population at her institution in the Central Center, and thus had assumably been forced to
deal with numerous physical assaults and other painful experiences. The practical joke is played on her apparently out of a desire to make her feel like an established part of the staff, according to KY, and was part of a running joke. The staff put a gigantic bra on the woman’s car, in a physical play on the concept of the “car bra”—a luxury item akin to a doggie sweater, only for the front end of a nice car or truck. The joke highlights the beat-up nature of her car—KY describes it as a hoopty. As the Urban Dictionary describes, a hoopty “a piece of shit car, usually cheap and/or broken down” and goes on to note that the hoopty comes in two flavors, “White Trash and Black Ghetto.” Thus, the woman’s beat up old car is given an appropriately absurd car bra—an actual woman’s bra in an embarrassingly huge size. Oversize bras are popular joke material because of their essentially private nature, combined with the absurdity of a bra that is too large. The embarrassment of a gigantic bra on a beat up old car in public is designed to make the staff member feel like she has been “jumped in” to her occupational group, and that though she has had a difficult start to her career, she is sufficiently well-liked by her colleagues to be harassed and publicly embarrassed.

Another group of social workers told me that their entire job felt like one big practical joke, so they didn’t need to play jokes on each other to have the functional effects of a practical joking culture. They described it thus:

NE: You don't need a practical joke whenever it's a set up like - Like, you're on call at nights, “well, I'll just take him, it will be easy.” But then it really wasn't that easy.

[laughter]

XY: We don't need jokes!

XA: That's true.

NE: We don't need a practical joke –
XY: You just laugh about it later, like “I'm so glad I'm not on. Sorry about that, my head is gonna to explode. Have a great weekend.”

XW: See ya, sucker.

XY: That's our practical jokes.

XY: This job is just one big punk.

NE: It really is.

Often, for this group of social workers, their very jobs feel to them like a practical joke. There is no need to orchestrate a situation where one person is publicly embarrassed and made a victim of, since the job already provides ample opportunities of embarrassment. For this group, the job itself functions as a practical joke, and provides opportunity to laugh at one another’s discomfiture. Part of working that job means feeling like the victim of a cosmic joke played by some force outside the control of the workers.
For years, I interviewed my grandfather, a career social worker with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, every six months, and every time I asked him about practical jokes. He never told me a single practical joke narrative involving a social worker. He didn’t say he didn’t know about any practical jokes, and he didn’t say no one had ever played a joke on him. He just talked around my question and moved onto other topics. I couldn’t understand this, because the man is a storyteller. He has carefully honed stories with impeccable structure and timing, and he loves humorous stories. I couldn’t understand why he didn’t have any practical joke stories, especially because his son, my uncle (a correctional officer), had so many. It took me a long time to understand that practical jokes weren’t important to him. Narrative was important, but not that kind of narrative. Instead, his narratives often included words and phrases that made me cringe, like “vagina” and “nigger.” Now I think I understand a little better that his occupational humor identity, like that of many social workers, involved using words and situations that shock and challenge the easy and shallow sympathy of the outsider.

As this project has evolved, I have come to understand that practical jokes aren’t as important to social workers’ occupational identity in the same way they appear to be for collaborators who are prison workers. And, of course, I do not want this study to create false assumptions about either profession. Although I collected many stories of practical jokes, they are not the dominant form of joking behavior among social workers or prison workers—
instead, observational humor and conversational humor dominate the occupational humor of both professions. In this section I explore the “sick humor” that my social worker collaborators told me is the dominant form of occupational humor, and then I analyze the complex functions of the “sick” verbal artistry that both prison workers and social workers hold in common.

Though I went into this project intending to study practical jokes, my social worker collaborators made it clear to me that to them, practical jokes were not the important genre to their work humor identity. When she read this, my sister and collaborator wrote in big letters, “Agree!” on the page. For her, as a social worker, it is clearly important that I have finally come to recognize that social workers are generally not nearly as interested in practical jokes as I am. In response to my questions, informants would recount stories of past practical jokes but by and large, they were not particularly interested in them. Instead, my collaborators were much more interested in the verbal humor that, they told me made their job bearable. There is a vast body of verbal social worker humor, performed by and/or about, social workers, from the joke, “how many social workers does it take to change a light bulb?” (answer: Only one, but the light bulb has to want to change”), collected by folklorist Judith Kerman, to elaborate performances of imitation and reenactment, to comic essays and e-mail forwards. In my experience, social workers are extremely funny people; they are by necessity good listeners, and often very good storytellers.

An appreciation of “sick” or “warped” verbal and written humor, in contrast to performed practical jokes, is a vital, though institutionally unacknowledged, learned job skill, necessary to long-term endurance in correctional work and social work. Verbal social worker
humor often relies on inversion, or the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. I frequently observed this in verbal expressions in response to job stress. As LA noted,

LA: There’s a lot of that crossover you know, “am I the clinician or the patient today” sort of stuff. Like, you know, talking to each other about what hospitals we’d rather to go to, and ‘if you’re gonna send me, please don’t send me to this hospital or that hospital, please send me to...’ but you know, we’re not just joking. Like, I might really lose my mind some day, we don’t know! It’s real!” Another informant said, “when I worked in crisis there was a lot, a lot, of humor about “I’m in crisis today” “The crisis worker’s in crisis.”

Another informant, KY, who works at a state mental hospital, echoed this idea, describing her coworkers saying, “It gets pretty wacky. We often say ‘who should really be locked up here, some of the patients or some of my coworkers?’” Laurel Schmidt told me a similar narrative in response to reading this:

Laurel Schmidt: We joke about this at XX, as well, both amongst ourselves, and with residents. Staff will say things like this to each other. Also, I was sitting in the day room a couple weeks ago, and I thought I saw something moving around outside, so I went to check, and when I came back in I commented “I think I'm seeing things,” and one of our residents replied something along the lines of “we're the ones who are supposed to be crazy and seeing things! You can always move in here, I've got an extra bed in my room. I'm a good roommate!”

Inverting the client/social worker relationship can temporarily alleviate the emotional and mental strain of always giving, and never receiving, care. In the words of another collaborator, “We do for everyone but nobody does for us.” As anthropologist Nancy
Scheper-Hughes observes, “There would be no need for carnival in the first place if there were not monstrous things that needed to be banished and forgotten” (qtd in Goldstein 33). This carnivalizing of the relationship between social workers and their clients does not actually effect change, but it may in fact ultimately reinforce the role of the social worker as the individual who is not in crisis.

These “monstrous things” in the working lives of social workers leads me to what I will, at the suggestion of my collaborators, call “sick” humor. My collaborator KY articulated why she thinks sick humor is so important in social work:

Schmidt: Do you think it's important to find humor in your job?

KY: Oh, god, yeah. Yeah, it makes you feel human. Well, and, this one guy who was a patient, actually, he's very intelligent. He talks normally anyway. But he recommended this book that I ended up reading that talks about how humor is – it's told by the perspective of a human that was raised on Mars, by Martians. And that they don't understand humor, there's no humor on Mars. And so he's like “What is humor?” And he comes to realize that humor is just a way of dealing with pain. So everything that's funny is something that makes you uncomfortable or unhappy or physically in pain, you know. Ever since he told me about that, I haven't found one thing to disagree with that. [laughs]

KY’s conception of the role of humor in her workplace begins with a patient. She frames her interpretation of workplace humor with the narrative of the “normally” spoken patient who teaches her something. She moves from the patient to the book, and then to pain. KY’s new understanding of humor as a way to cope with pain, whether at a level of discomfort or
sadness or physical pain, also highlights the fact that her own workplace humor is based in discomfort, unhappiness, and ultimately pain.

When I asked another collaborator, LA, whether she thought social workers were funnier than most people, she responded by saying this:

LA: I think warped, maybe. I don’t know about funny. Warped. Because you just have such a skewed view of the world. I mean, you just, on a daily basis, kind of deal with the ugly underbelly...you know, you deal with a lot of stigma. And you just...It’s just kinda that whole...if you don’t laugh you’ll cry sort of thing, really. And so we make fun of each other, and our patients, our clients…Or you’ll just cry. We hear some really crazy, sad stuff. Crazy, no pun intended, just, you know, like, just bizarre things, and really sad things, and really messed up relationships between people. You know, you think you heard it all and then you’re just like, wow!

The self-perception as “warped,” and “warped” meaning a person who laughs at inappropriate things, continued through my fieldwork with social workers to date.

This awareness of sick humor, and the reasons for its popularity is an profession-wide phenomenon, according to my collaborators. My collaborator XA’s following narrative supports LA’s interpretation of the reasons for sick humor, specifically the witnessing of difficult things that do not fit into most people’s worldview. XA told me:

XA: You go to a home visit or you see something that you've never seen before in your life, and you're like “you're never gonna believe this!” And it's just one of those – and the other person's like laughing with you on the phone because you're like freaking out a little bit, but how ironic can this be, is this, I mean, you're like “seriously,” and those are how some of the office communication – all you have to
say is one little thing and it's just gonna be – you're gonna laugh about it because it's like, you freaked out about that, or, you know. Just some of those things that - in this job you never know on a daily basis what you're gonna see, what you're gonna hear, some of the stories we hear are just – you know, somebody can have ten flat tires and you're like, you hear it and you're like “oh gosh,” you just have to laugh about it. They're just so ironic that you just really have to laugh about it. I think it's a supportive thing for coworkers, I think, you know, all of us have stories and all of us have certain things, and I think the more we share those and the more we talk about those, it is also a stress relief for us.

XA points out that social workers see things that feel unbelievable. From going into peoples’ homes, or hearing narratives of violence or abuse, or from understanding the sheer volume of trouble in one small city or town, social workers see and hear things that bring the social worker pain, sadness or discomfort. As XA notes toward the end of her narrative, social workers also hear things that are frustrating, like clumsy lies. These emotions find outlet in laughter. Child abuse and neglect isn’t funny, yet social workers laugh about the horrors they have seen on home visits or heard in phone calls. XA finds irony in these experiences, and the juxtaposition between the expected and the actual yields humor that she shares with her colleagues.

**Humor Through Mimicking Clients:**

Performance of mimicry—making fun of one’s patients and clients—seems to influence the perception of oneself as sick, but it can also reinforce occupational identity. Although making fun of clients and patients is absolutely taboo and unethical for social workers, social workers still make fun of the individuals in their institutions and on their
caseload. One interview session with two collaborators (LA and AN), who were also
coworkers at that time, contained, among other things, what was essentially a fifteen-minute
comedy routine, complete with impersonations and near hysterical laughter, about how one
informant had been sexually harassed by her client that morning. The reenactment of the
harassment incident was followed up by a discussion of a later episode from the same day,
involving a psychotic client. Both women knew this client and participated in a joint verbal
portrait of the woman, her speech patterns, her behaviors, and the conversation the three of
them had shared. The story ended with the pronouncement from one informant, “psychotics
are funniest,” which was echoed and affirmed by the other woman. My collaborator KY also
described some of the roles of mimicry in her job at a state mental hospital:

Schmidt: You were talking about peoples' speech patterns and stuff. Is there a lot of
mimicry, parody?
KY: Yeah, yeah.

Schmidt: How does that go? Tell me about that.
KY: Well, there are certain patients who will, like, say the same things over and over
again, or they just have a certain style of voice, and so as soon as somebody comes in
and says something like that patient would, everybody knows it right away and just
*busts up*. And I don't think it's necessarily a degrading thing, either. I think a lot of the
time it's a sign of affection, because you really like some of these people.

Schmidt: You take the time to learn their mannerisms, and you “do” that person with
affection for them.
KY: Uh huh.
C: I feel like a lot of the social workers that I've known, and people who work with – just populations of people generally, like in institutions, no matter what kind of institution it is – people are just weird, and so you have weird people everywhere – but they wound up of being really accomplished mimics, and they do these patients for the amusement of their coworkers, like if I get together - like, I know the speech patterns of people my grandfather would work with, because he would do *them*. I don't know.

KY: And it brings us closer together, too, as a staff, because its something that you share and everybody knows together. You can share that closeness that you have with the patient with each other. There's this one guy who would go “only one, one, one, one perfect red,” and he would repeat the same word. And he had this *amazing* voice. He could have been on the radio. I was always telling him “you could be on the radio,” but he never, he didn't understand. He really was not in contact with my world at all. He would kick his feet at the ceiling fighting these communists. Everyone knew his certain inflection. It was so big.

KY describes the behavior she laughs about with her coworkers, but she also describes the way she interacts with this man, by complimenting his beautiful voice. First she tells me that he has an “amazing” voice, and that he could be on the radio, then she describes how she talks about this man’s voice to him, as an individual. Then she puts his beautiful voice back into the context of his mental illness and its potential for humor. Although the man has a voice made for radio, he is physically violent with imaginary communists, and his world does not intersect KY’s world, even when they are speaking to each other face to face.
KY argues that imitating clients brings staff closer together. She feels that the closeness that a clinician has with a patient or client is communicated to the rest of the staff through imitation and mimicry. Part of being a staff member in her institution is the shared understanding of how funny some clients are, or how weird or talented some clients are. The patient’s mental illness and visual and audible performance of that mental illness is part of the overall culture of the institution; part of working there, for KY, is an appreciation of the personalities of the mentally ill.

Like KY, my collaborator XW performed an imitation of a child and a parent, using physical gestures, vocal inflection, register change, dialect change and louder volume. This story is a frequently told part of XW’s repertoire of funny-client-stories. In the group interview when I recorded this narrative, XW’s coworker XY prompted her to tell this story, and the responses from the group as a whole indicated that they knew this story well, felt XW told it skillfully, and demonstrated their appreciation with continual laughter, additional prompting, and clapping at the punch lines.

Schmidt: Can you give an example, you know, still being confidential and all that, but of “you're not gonna believe this,” or “this thing just happened to me, and -”

XY: You've gotta tell the story of your little boy in the Kansas City ‘hood, that one's a good one.

XW: I worked with this family through Family Preservation trying to keep the kids in the home. Was not successful at that, so then I became their case manager through foster care, and this little boy was five at the time. He was African American; I am Caucasian. I went to pick him up at this elementary school to take him to a visit with his mom. He was placed in an elementary school in the southern part of Johnson
County, Kansas, which is a very white, very affluent area. And he came from Kansas City, Kansas, which is a very not-white, not affluent area. So I went to pick him up at the elementary school, and all the kids are waiting for pickup time, but I was a little early. They kept saying “is that your mom, is that your mom, is that your mom?” And we were holding hands, and he turns around, he's like “I told you that ho ain't my momma, bitch!” [general laughter] Yeah. Yeah. He – that was by far one of my favorite – [general laughter] Little shocking at the time. Take the kid out of the 'hood, but not the 'hood out of the kid. Yeah. [laughter] He was a great one.

That family was – I mean, his mom was also how I got my ghetto nickname at my old job, which was “KK” because I had gone over to do a visit with the family, and that's when I ended up removing the kids, was because their mom was naked and drunk on her – and high – on her front porch when I went over to do my visit. And I used, we used to do random UAs, there, we carried them with us, and I pulled it out of my bag when I saw her naked, drunk, high, on the porch, and she's like, she sees me coming and she's like “come on in,” and then I pulled out the UA kit and she's like “Nooooo, KK, don't do me like that!” [laughter] “I just need like two more days!” I was like, “no, we need to do this right now, because you have five children under the age of seven in your house, and I don't think you're particularly providing adequate supervision for them.” And then when she did the UA, she went into her bathroom and she had the cup, and I was in there with her, and she basically dumped the cup into the toilet and just collected toilet water and handed it to me [laughter] and I was like “now, no, no, no, that's really not gonna work, cause you see, this temperature
strip tells me it didn't come from your body, where I needed it to come from.” So, yeah, that family in particular had many good stories for me.

This narrative is marked by many occupational features of the social work profession. The first story, “that ho ain’t my momma,” revolves around the setting of the displaced foster child and the social worker’s institutional role in lieu of a parent. The incongruity of a paid social worker in the role that a parent ordinarily performs incites the curiosity of other children, and draws forth the frustration of the child in care. The second story about the UA depends on insider knowledge of urinalysis and its role in determining whether a parent is providing adequate supervision for his or her children. XW does not stop to explain what “UA” means, making it clear that it is an important feature of her job, and so familiar that she does not notice that an outsider like me might not understand what it means, also suggesting the story is esoteric and shared only with insiders. XW is casual in her mention of body temperature, as well as nudity, but her vocal emphasis and timing makes it clear that these aspects of the situation should elicit laughter from her audience.

A great deal of the humor in the above set of stories from XW derives from the incongruity of the interaction between black clients and a white social worker. In the first story, XW is careful to very clearly explain that her client was black, from a largely black urban area, that she herself was white, and that the child had been placed in foster care in a largely white, suburban community. Her careful and deliberate set up indicates immediately that this narrative is going to be about race. The punch line of the narrative, “I told you that ho ain't my momma, bitch!” hangs on the juxtaposition of incongruous details. First, the line contains the words “bitch” and “ho” which already seem to be titillating for many white audiences just as words. Many people laugh at swear words, perhaps out of anxiety at their
socially marginalized status and laugh especially hard if the words are said in an incongruous context (like a conference room or classroom). Next, the narrative is told by a white woman, to an all-white audience. When XW comes to the punch line she assumes a child’s voice, and speaks the line with well-practiced ease. XW does not laugh immediately but maintains her temporary persona while her audience laughs heartily. I would argue that at least part of this laughter arises out of the fact that XW is momentarily performing blackface. Not only is XW imitating a vulnerable client, but she is making fun of stereotypical urban African American speech patterns unavailable to middle class professional white people at work. She is breaking a double taboo with this narrative, but at the same time breaking the taboo is legitimized by XW’s proximity to the client. She is in the client’s home, with his mother, picking him up at school, and through her practiced ease imitating her client’s speech patterns, XW is demonstrating part of what makes her a good social worker.

Another part of what legitimizes XW’s telling of this narrative, I would argue, is that she herself is telling a story on herself. The punch line relegates her to the category of “that ho,” a category that is firmly resisted by her actual status as an educated professional, yet still carries significant female stigma. A final component of the humor of this narrative is that the vulgar and obscene words are spoken by a child. Children are ostensibly afforded special protected status in the United States. We intone clichés like, “children are our future” and “as innocent as a child” yet most people probably understand that children are not particularly innocent, and that many adults do serious harm to children every day. The child in XW’s story is in a child-appropriate setting; he is leaving school, and he is holding the hand of a responsible adult. The incongruity of the setting and the words the child speaks cause part of the humor of the narrative.
While it is generally considered inappropriate for social workers to make fun of a client suffering from a serious mental illness, or even to make fun of each other’s sexual harassment, this was, in my fieldwork, a very common occurrence. This observation is supported by those reported in Mik-Meyer’s 2007 study of laughter (and the lack of laughter) between social workers and clients. The incongruity of even mentioning sexuality in a patient—social worker relationship also fuels humor among social workers, as demonstrated by the earlier narrative of social work sexual harassment, and by the following narrative from KY.

KY: Uh-huh. A lot of gross humor, like odors and, um, sexual humor is huge.

Schmidt: Give me an example.

KY: “Give me an example,” hmm. Oh, the other day there was a patient who I’ve never worked with before, and he was upset because he didn't want me to be his contact. I was the person he was supposed to sit down with that day, and he didn't know me and so he didn't feel comfortable with that. And so one of my coworkers was saying, “oh well, it's just because of the sexual tension. He can't sit down and look at you in the eye because he'd constantly be staring at your breasts.” [laughs]

KY’s coworker puts the patient’s rejection of KY into sexual terms, implying that she is so attractive that the client would be unable to carry on with his treatment.

According to my research, making fun of patients and clients is common but freighted with unwritten rules and tightly policed by the workers in the office. When I asked DE, a social worker who works with juvenile offenders, about humor at his institution, he told me that who gets to tell what jokes is one of the most important and fraught issues at work. He told me that in a recent staff meeting, a colleague referred to a client as “a fucking retard.” DE told me, “And it was so shocking, because he’s like, holier than thou—I mean, not like that, but he’s just the nicest, kindest, most
professional person! And we were like, ‘oh my god!’” After the room of social workers and counselors finished laughing in horror at the taboo statement, another coworker said, “I thought for a second you [DE] had said that, and I was going to kick your ass, but since X said it…” Because DE is a relatively young social worker, and has only been at the institution for three years, he was not allowed to make a statement like this without seriously violating the established code for disrespectful speech.

When I asked DE why he thought certain people could make jokes about clients that are unethical or hostile but others could not, he explained that he thought that the distinction originated with the level of care that the joker provides for the client or consumer. Those who are deeply involved in the individual’s care are allowed to make disparaging jokes about that individual; those who are not involved in care cannot. Because a social worker may become deeply invested in an individual’s care, he or she is granted greater leeway in making taboo and inappropriate jokes than a person who has spent no time, energy or emotional capital in ensuring that a person is cared for.

The “fucking retard” scenario related to me by DE also demonstrates that well-respected social workers with long standing in an institution make inappropriate jokes about clients and consumers. DE describes the older, well-respected social worker as “holy,” giving the man respect that seems founded in DE’s own religious background.

In a later group interview, I described the above story to a group of social workers, also involved in juvenile care. I include a long transcript from this portion of the interview because it is particularly interesting to see how each member of the group responds and builds on his or her colleagues’ assessment of the ethical dilemma of laughing at or speaking disrespectfully of clients.

Schmidt: I was talking to a guy that works at Boys and Girls Town, and he was telling me this story, cause he had not worked there for very long, I think he was at Fulton
State before he was at Boys and Girls Town, and he was telling a story about in a staff meeting an older person who had worked there a long time referred to one of the kids as an “f'ing retard,” and everyone's like “What! Did you just say that?” and then they thought it was this younger guy who'd said it, and it turned out to be this older guy who'd been there forever, and they're like, “Oh! Well, ok, then. If it's you, all right, fine, you can say that. But you, you could never say that.” Is there, to say something, to speak kind of disrespectfully of inappropriately about a client, is there sort of, when do you get to do it and when do you not get to do it?

XY: Pretty much get to do it here, and in the privacy of your own home, and that's about it. Although I think probably everybody in this room has been in meetings where other professionals have spoke disrespectfully about a client, and I found myself getting on the defensive about that, even though I might have told a similar story. But then you kind of find yourself, like, aligning with them. But, you know, I think there's, that is a really interesting line, because there's some people who can get away with things that other people can't.

XW: And I think it is almost when you're in your inner circle. Here, we can joke about that, cause we all do the same thing, but if you're the juvenile officer and you say the same thing we might have been joking about, then we're like, “oh, wait a minute, you can't make -” cause you feel like you have this special bond, maybe, with these people, because we do see them a lot more than probably these other people do.

So yeah, I can make fun of them, but you can't. Wait a minute--these are my people.

XY: Yeah, yeah, definitely.
XA: So maybe that would come in, just a protectiveness, or, like with your own family, you can pick on your own family as much as you want, but by goodness, even if it's your closest friend, they're not even look at 'em wrong or you'll take 'em down.

Schmidt: This guy was saying that he thought part of it was how much are you involved in that person's care. If you're really involved in that person's care, that kind of gives you more license to speak inappropriately about them, but if you're not involved in the care, then you have no right. Do you think that's true? Do you find that - does that feel true?

XA: I think so.

XY: I think so, sometimes, cause you're just like, yeah, I know [garbled] I know, or I've seen her really be down from – so yeah, if they're saying those things, I know it's not coming from a harsh place, where you're thinking “are they really meaning that? Is that really what they think?” because they're not there with them as much.

XW: Because I think also, you know, as the, we can speak disrespectfully about some of our kids and some of our parents, you know, I think we also feel like we can do that because we spend so much time speaking the other way about them, and being there with them, and helping them, so it kinda makes you feel like you have some ownership there. But, you know, like, we can talk about that kid who, you know, terrorized the office, and-

XY: Yeah, but don't you pick on him!

XW: Don't you pick on him, yeah. He just needs some help. [laughter]

Schmidt: And it was your office he trashed.

XW: Yeah, yeah, exactly.
XY: Because I think it's also very easy, like, in our circle that the other people who are involved in, you know, the team that makes decisions, you know, the juvenile officer, the guardian, the other attorneys, with the exception of that meeting they don't interact with that family, with the exception of that meeting and court, whereas we see them in our office, doing a visit, or at their home, and see them in multiple environments. SO I think we feel like we can say things that they can't, because we know more sides of who they are.

This group collaboratively built a narrative picture that constructs firm boundaries of who can joke and who can or cannot laugh at clients. XY uses the term “our circle” to describe those in her office who can laugh or “pick on” clients under the specialized conditions of privacy and insider status. This is similar to TI’s description in Chapter 4 of his “inner circle” of prison worker colleagues with whom he can joke inappropriately. Like KA, SW refers to “our kids” and “our parents” and “my people” in a possessive way, that indicates both shared and individual ownership of clients and their well-being. XA puts the relationship between joking disrespectfully about a client into family terms when she says, “like with your own family, you can pick on your own family as much as you want, but by goodness, even if it's your closest friend, they better not even look at 'em wrong or you'll take em down.” Her comment encapsulates the complicated relationship between frustration and advocacy inherent in social work. The desire to “pick on” a frustrating individual is counter-balanced by the desire to protect that individual from all comers, including the social worker’s close associates. In addition, by putting the relationship into familial terms, XA is complicating the relationship between client and social worker, suggesting that a similar sense of loyalty exists between an older sibling and their younger sibling, and between a social worker and client. It is important to consider that it is the older, more powerful sibling who picks on the younger, more
vulnerable sibling, and that Xa is placing herself as the stronger defender and abuser simultaneously. The younger sibling/client is, in this narrative, in a voiceless position. XA’s loyalties and acknowledged frustration are verbalized, but the client’s sense of loyalty toward the social worker is not part of this narrative.

The insider/outsider boundaries that are enforced and reinforced in this group discussion about inappropriate joking about clients permit jokers to say inappropriate things without direct consequences. Those with a proven track record of advocacy for a client are permitted under certain circumstances to speak ill of a client. XY explains that “there’s some people who can get away with things that other people can’t.” Because of insider group status and deep involvement in a client’s care, certain social workers can “get away” with certain kinds of joking. The phrasing emphasizes that the Joker is “getting away” with something—that he or she is escaping consequences that should, perhaps, be enforced, but because of common consent, generally are not enforced. Thus, this Joker is privileged, and enjoys certain benefits that are not available to outsiders. This privilege comes, at least in part, from the degree to which the social worker is invested in the client’s care. XW says, “we also feel like we can do that because we spend so much time speaking the other way about them, and being there with them, and helping them.” Speaking disrespectfully is balanced by speaking positively and respectfully, by defending that client against the disrespectful speech of outsiders, and by the overall time, resources and energy invested in the client by the agency and staff.

KY supported LA’s description of why social workers laugh. When I asked her what she and her coworkers laugh about, she was candid about the ambiguity of her position.

Schmidt: So what do people laugh about? What do your coworkers laugh about?

KY: Um, it gets pretty basic and pretty – pretty nitty-gritty rude sometimes, because, you
know, it can be stressful, the job, because we're holding these peoples' hands through some pretty challenging situations in their life, and sometimes they're happy about it and grateful, but more often than not they're angry and sometimes aggressive and, you know, honestly, some of their behaviors are bizarre. KY tended to use words like, “sick,” “gross,” and “rude” to describe the humor among her colleagues.

Over and over, social workers have told me some variation of, “good lord, we’ve seen it all!” My collaborator XW told me, “I always tell people this is like the best starting place for a social worker, is working Child Welfare, because there ain't nothin you won't see.” While on the most literal level, XW is articulating the reality that social workers in Child Welfare deal with issues of abuse, addiction, mental illness, PTSD, poverty, ignorance, grief, hopelessness and injury—all social phenomena in which other social workers specialize, XW is also saying that working in Child Welfare exposes the social worker to every kind of family, and every kind of human behavior—good and bad. The social worker has “seen” everything, and they can never un-see it.

A typical instance of “sick” social work humor in internet form was given to me by a collaborator. After patiently talking with me about social workers and social work humor for months, she asked if she could observe me, and my reaction to a piece of humor. She handed me a copy of the anonymous essay, “A Social Worker Finally Snaps,” available on “the best of Craig’s List” (See Appendix A for the full essay) and asked me to read it in front of her so that she could see if I found it funny. Here is an excerpt:

After years of idealism, I have finally decided that I am sick and fucking tired of helping the disenfranchised and oppressed… I've had a number of clients over the
years that I would now like to thank for helping me come to the realization that certain people are beyond help.

1) The mother and father who forced their newborn son to nurse from the family dog: Thank you!! I thought it was going to be just another typical Monday morning. You know, examining 4 year olds and finding anal warts encrusting their little rectums, watching 7 year old little Johnny masturbate the way that Daddy taught him to, and removing little Suzie from her home so Mommy wouldn't be able to put cigarettes out on her thighs anymore. Boring, run-of-the-mill stuff. Then you two beautiful people entered my life. Just in time, I might add! I was beginning to think that abusive parents were losing their sense of creativity. Silly me! What's that? Oh, I know it wasn't your fault. Of course not. No, I agree, formula IS really expensive these days. You're absolutely right, sir, it WOULD have been worse to just let the baby starve. Can I ask you just one question though? Do you think that maybe, just maybe, you could have used your WIC voucher to purchase some formula instead of selling it so you could buy a goddam crack rock? Fuck me, you say? Nope. FUCK YOU, you smarmy pile of rhino shit! Fuck you and your crack whore "baby mama". Your child is coming with me! Merry Fucking Christmas!

2) The meth addict with Borderline Personality Disorder: Sweetie, here's a word of advice. When you are in the midst of a legal battle in which your parental rights are at stake, it is BAD for your case if you show up for your weekly supervised visits with your children spun out of your fucking mind. Also, if you're going to have fresh track
marks all over your arms, you should at least wear a long sleeve shirt so I can't see them. We talked about this before, remember? I have to write a report to the judge in a few months, and I can't in good conscience recommend that the court return your children to you when you insist on showing up to your weekly visits high as a kite, wearing nothing but a t-shirt and a toothless grin. Also, it does not help your case if you assault me after I inform you that no, you can't see your kids today due to your inebriated state and your exposed vulva. I know you grew up in poverty, and I sympathize with your plight. Hell, I was poor as fuck growing up. My family was broke as a motherfucker. We lived in the projects and never had no cheese for our hamburgers or nuthin. Somehow, though, we still managed to find ourselves some fucking PANTS when we went out IN PUBLIC!

After watching me read this piece out loud (and observing my laughter, albeit strained and uncomfortable) my informant mused on the function of the humor in this essay: “I laughed until I cried because I thought it was so funny and so dead on and yeah, that’s exactly how you feel some days. But, you know, if you think about the stories, and the stories that she’s telling are true, they’re horrible, horrible stories. But these are stories that we hear every day.” LA considered this internet essay to be “true”—not factually true, but emotionally true. The perception of emotional truth results in laughter for LA, and can be attributed to the Aristotelian pleasure of recognition. For E. B. White, humor holds deep truth: “Humor at its best is a kind of heightened truth—a super truth” (qtd. in Fry 270).

When I asked a collaborator, KW about inappropriate humor, she argued that some situations and people and behavior are inherently funny, and that it is dishonest to pretend they are not funny.
She doesn’t disagree that laughter can be deeply unethical, but she also seems to feel that it is difficult to ask people to deny their innate sense of humor.

Schmidt: Do you think that – it's hard for me to ask, because I know, obviously, social workers are people who help people, they care very much about their clients, but sometimes their clients are funny, and sometimes things are frustrating. Do you think that it's important to be able to laugh inappropriately? Do you think that there's a lot of inappropriate laughter that goes on, and do you think that's helpful?

KW: I think yes, and yes. But I would say maybe it would be politically inappropriate to laugh at it, but it just – if you're being honest about it, its funny. But you would never go and say that in public or write it down on paper or anything, that you actually laughed at this. But the truth of the matter is, it's kind of funny. And, you know, it doesn't happen, like, all the time. Like you said, we definitely care about our people, and try to help them the best we can, and – but I think you have to be able to laugh when it's funny. Funny is funny; you laugh at it. And if you couldn't, then I think people would be more burned out. I mean, I know I would.

In this narrative, KW points to laughter among social workers as a political topic. She situates laughter that feels inappropriate in the context of political correctness. As an administrator, KW is careful to indicate the line that exists between ephemeral verbal expression and documentation that can bring serious legal consequences—public speech and written documentation. She thus positions inappropriate humor as something that exists in the moment, an experience between present people, rather than something which leaves tangible evidence.
By using the second person plural, KW positions the objects of social worker humor as affiliated with or belonging to the agency and its employees. She says, “we definitely care about our people,” indicating that she speaks for herself and others as a group, and that the people she speaks of are directly tied to the agency’s employees. They are “our people” rather than “those people.” She employs language that defends her and her staff against possible charges of unkindness or lack of caring. KW points to inappropriate humor, or humor that feels unethical, as part of a mechanism to cope with burn out, when she states that if people could not laugh, they would become more burned out. KW personalizes burnout by expressing that she, personally, feels that humor is directly related to her level of burnout. She also says, “you have to be able to laugh.” This phrase occurred in nearly every interview I conducted with social workers. The phrase invokes the contradiction—to laugh is unethical, yet the body wants to laugh—and gives permission to the social worker to laugh at something that feels funny to the body.

Not all social workers feel the same way about humor that makes fun of clients or patients, and sometimes the differences are dictated by employee hierarchy. When I asked my collaborator KY, “Was anyone ever like, ‘now, you can't make fun of your consumers,’ or was there an official line on that?” she responded: “Not an official line, but I think the more – the further away from actual patient interaction you get, the more judgmental the staff is about how you talk about, or talk to, patients. ’Cause its more administrative, kind of, like – they don't really hang out with them, and maybe its because of better education. They're more educated and more civilized.” KY describes her own “rank and file” humor as uncivilized, at least to me, as an outsider, whether or not she really believes this. She finds joking at the expense of vulnerable populations to be uneducated, although she herself is
quite educated and has just finished telling me about the ways that she and her colleagues mimic their clients’ behavior and speech patterns to each other. KY is able to hold in her mind the simultaneous contradiction that her own behavior is both ethical and unethical, civilized and uncivilized, and on top of this, to truly believe that she is good at her job. She works closely—even intimately—with clients and inmates, helping them with the most rudimentary tasks of toileting and eating. In return, she is authorized to joke about the people she helps, while those higher up are not authorized to do so, and seem to have no desire to laugh. By extension, this means that the most judgmental employees are also the most powerful; they have high status jobs and do not work directly with patients or inmates. I don’t mean to suggest that joking at a patient’s expense is okay or ethical, but I do want to argue that humor is often much more complicated than it seems to many outsiders.

Over time, I have reached the conclusion that social workers carry a lot of anger, like that expressed in “A Social Worker Finally Snaps” and their on-the-job inappropriate humor is an important way social workers process their anger to prevent it from harming their clients. One collaborator, PE talked to me in 2007 about her enthusiastic love for then-new show Dexter. She was delighted to find her own personal fantasies enacted in the television show—the “just” and systematic murder of child molesters and serial killers by a person with no social conscience or empathy. PE told me, “Oh my god, it’s like a social workers’ dream. Because sometimes, you just want to go all vigilante.” Her feelings of frustration with the ineffectiveness she saw as inherent in her profession had moved beyond frustration into clear anger. While this particular collaborator was more candid about her feelings of anger (perhaps because she was moving away shortly and felt she had little to lose in speaking openly with me) than may of my collaborators, I would like to give another illustration of anger. My collaborator XY told a brief narrative in a group interview of her
frustration with a runaway juvenile on her caseload, and in this narrative she expresses the desire to be physically violent with the client:

XY: This is one of those things you just have to laugh or you just want to hurt ‘em. To go out in the middle of the night and sit in the ER with him all night long, never got any sleep, leave at 5 in the morning, that kid slept the whole time. Just sleepin’ away. And I had to buy him breakfast that morning [general laughter] when I was mad. I was like, “you get to sleep this whole time, I'm sitting here watching you, struggling to stay awake, and I have to buy you breakfast? You are so lucky.”

[general laughter]

Here, XY explicitly connects laughter (forced laughter—“you have to laugh”) with a desire to physically hurt a vulnerable person for whom the social worker is responsible. The adolescent is in crisis and is in the emergency room; XY is the social worker on call, and has thus been awakened in the middle of the night and summoned to the hospital to sit with the client. This is one example of the way she and her colleagues perceive their job, particularly the on-call part of their job, as a giant practical joke. She is frustrated because he is sleeping. She must not sleep, though she has to be at work all the next day. The client has privileges the social worker does not have—he can sleep, and he is given free breakfast. While outsiders may find XY’s statement “you have to laugh or you just want to hurt ‘em” to be shocking or upsetting, my fieldwork argues that this is not an unusual reaction for a social worker whose capacity for empathy has been over-tapped to the extent that he or she must resort to laughter to banish aggressive impulses. Because the client does not demonstrate empathy toward the social worker (he sleeps), he is challenging her ability to cheerfully demonstrate empathy toward him. Of course, it is her job to be empathetic; it is not the
client’s job to express empathy. XY’s narrative seems to acknowledge her awareness of this, when she explains that laughter is essential.

KW echoes the difficulty of managing seriousness and the desire to laugh, and I think part of the discomfort of laughing arises from the discomfort with feeling anger toward clients. KW told me, “I sometimes think social workers almost don’t – don't feel okay joking about the seriousness of their job, 'cause they deal with a lot of serious issues, and not to downplay that, but at the same time sometimes it's kind of funny, you know, the stuff you see, and come across, and hear about. It can be pretty funny.” While many social workers don’t feel okay about laughing, I think for some, there is a choice between anger and laughter, and choosing laughter is more “okay” than expressing anger.

During the same group interview, another social worker gave another example of the need to laugh about frustrating interactions in child welfare, and the need to deflect the impulse to anger using humor. XW tells the story of a notorious runaway foster child, and his creative and amusing behavior, before describing one of many times her personal life was disrupted by this child. Her narrative concludes with a short meditation on the importance of laughter in this situation, and her coworker explicitly states that while laughter is one way to cope, anger is the natural emotion that they are guarding against with laughter.

XW: Yeah, I had another kid in Kansas City who I think is probably the most notorious foster child in Kansas history, for the amount of times he ran from different placements I mean, we placed him all over the state and he would run away and then we'd pick him up, and we'd take him to another place, and he – so we, one night we were at our office, which was right off of I-35, and another staff and myself we were, two other staff, we were at the office waiting for some calls back from some places who
were, we were trying to place him, cause he had run and disrupted his last placement. And he had told one of the staff that he needed to go to the bathroom. Well, this staff didn't think that “maybe I need to follow this kid,” who was notorious for running, into the bathroom, so he lets him go to the bathroom and then I'm in my office and I'm typing and I said “has anyone gone to check on him? It's been like ten minutes.” Well, he was gone. So we called the police and they came over and filed the police report, and I said, “well, if you find him, if you pick him up, here's my cell phone number, please call me.” SO we leave, I go home, I'm like just getting my pajamas on, hanging out on my couch and my phone rings. And they said “yeah, we're here at the Kwik Trip on 75th Street, we have a child who says he belongs to you, and he says that his name is Deion Sanders. [laughter] And I said “what does Deion Sanders look like?” [laughter] And they describe the kid for me and I was like, “Yes, Deion belongs to me, but that is not his name” [laughter] “I'll be there shortly to pick him up.” So yeah. Those, I mean those kinds of things, cause they're things that keep you out for, you know, hours and late at night, and on the weekends, and, like, that's the kind of stuff that you have to laugh about, because, I mean, most sane people would want to be home with their families.

XA: Or be angry [laughter]

XW: And you really do want to like the kids, right, so like, “Why am I here in the middle of the night with you again.”

Throughout the narrative, the audience laughs at XW’s inflection and tone, as well as out of recognition and appreciation of the familiar narrative (obviously an office favorite), and appreciation for the child’s assumption of an incongruous pseudonym borrowed from the
football and baseball superstar. XW’s narrative contains frustration initially with the staff whose thoughtlessness allows “Deion” to run away again. The staff assembly knows that this child has a long history of running away, yet “doesn’t think” and XW’s irritation with the staff’s failure to “think” is palpable in her ironic and tight tone of voice. When she describes filing the police report, her tone is resigned and professional; she indicates through tone that it was only to be expected that the child would run away, and having to file a police report is just one part of her job. When XW describes receiving the cell phone call from the police later that night, she is careful to emphasize that she has just put on her pajamas; she is ready for bed and she is tired. The shedding of work clothes for bed clothes indicate that she has just shed her professional persona, yet she must reassume this persona and deal with this child, who through her tone and narrative seems to be a charming, though maddening individual. He is creative and funny; “Deion” is willing to give the name of his social worker to the police, yet he refuses to give his real name, forcing XW to identify him through description. The child apparently knows that he “belongs” to XW, but puts on a new persona apparently for his and her amusement. He knows she knows him, and he knows that the police and XW will not believe he is really Deion Sanders, yet he makes them enter this realm of play with him. XW’s tone and her laughter demonstrates her appreciation of his sense of play at the same time she makes it clear that it is not “sane” to be willing to leave the comfort of one’s home and pajamas to collect and baby-sit an incorrigible child all night long.

Anger is not an appropriate emotion for social workers, and so expressions of anger or hate are rare. Only under very certain and safe circumstances will social workers say they “hate” something about their jobs. In her narrative in Days in the Lives of Social Workers,
Angela Brinton writes, “There are two things I hate about my job. Those are politicking so that our clients can receive the services they should be automatically receiving and dealing with lazy employees who hate their jobs” (Grobman 110).

I think that social workers struggle to manage their anger, and I feel that they struggle more than correctional officers. While both professions have set standards for ethical and professional behavior, I think social workers are held to far more rigid standards—and they hold themselves to far more rigid standards of empathy and compassion than correctional officers. I think the disconnect between organizational and cultural expectations for empathetic behavior is greater for social workers than it is for prison workers. Because social workers need “sick” humor to cope, they are able to deal with their anger, but not necessarily deal with their feelings of guilt for their anger. Thus, the shared joking culture that appreciates, moderates and cultivates sick verbal humor is important not only to process anger and frustration, but also to validate the very existence of the anger, and the sick humor that responds to that anger.

This style of “sick” humor appears to fill several functions simultaneously. As Donna Goldstein notes in her book Laughter Out of Place, “Humor is one way of bearing witness to the tragic realities of life, and an expression of discontent—an oppositional act of laughing directly in the teeth of suffering” (16). Freud relates black humor like this to the aggressive impulse; while I agree in part, I question whether its function is solely tendentious aggression. The “sick” humor that makes fun of clients and patients seems on one hand to act as a safety valve to let out dangerous aggression before it can harm a person under the social workers’ jurisdiction, but on another hand acts to reinforce the group or occupational identity. Verbal art is an appreciated talent in the
occupational group; it boosts status and stature, similar to that observed by Tim Tangherlini in *Talking Trauma*.

**Humor and Gender in Social Work**

Before moving to a discussion of the role of humor in long-term occupational success, I want to focus briefly on gender dynamics in social work humor. Social work is dominated by women. While men still hold many upper-level management and administrative positions, much of the “on-the-ground” micro-practice social work is performed by women. Thus, social work humor contains a great deal of “women’s humor,” and I have observed the ways that humor usage changes depending on whether there are male social workers present.

When I asked a group of female social workers at Great Circle about the ways that having a man in their office affected the way they used humor, they told me they felt they needed to be careful about how they joked in front of their colleague, NE, who was not yet in the interview room as he was with a client at the time.

Schmidt: Do you think being an office of 99% women affects what you joke about at work?

XA: We have to be, like, appropriate to where – before, we had to, when we said anything – but now, it's like, we're a lot more careful about what we say.

XW: I don't know why.

XY: I don't want to offend him, or –

[general laughter, people talking over each other]
XA: It's all up front.

XW: I don't think you can scare him, yeah.

XY: It is, but I bet it does change humor a little bit, because everywhere I work it's been predominantly women. I mean, you have your one or two token males, it seems like, there's just a couple. It is, so it is hard to –

Schmidt: To kind of watch yourself, your humor –

XA: Try not to get into really feminine discussions with a man, like – [laughter]

While XY and XA felt they needed to be appropriate and inoffensive in their humor, XW, their supervisor and direct boss, seemed at least in part to disagree with their reticence. Her tone indicated that she understood what her staff meant when they articulated their desire to not offend NE with their humor, but she questioned why she and her staff felt the way that they did. XW argues that NE is not likely to be “scared” by her staff’s humor. XA indicates that before NE joined the agency, the women could say “anything” but now they needed to tone down their “feminine” conversations around NE.

Male social workers are valued for their rarity, and I think part of the desire to not “scare” them comes from an impulse, both personal and professional, not to make male social workers feel unwelcome or uncomfortable in a female-dominated workplace. Male social workers are valued in part for their size and strength. While it is comparatively rare, certainly social workers are put in circumstances where they must physically restrain a client; conversely, at times a social worker might have to physically assist a client. Many social workers are trained in first-response techniques because the populations they serve may have medical emergencies, whether mental or physical. I have heard my collaborators say, “thank god a guy was there!” because that man was physically able to solve a situation that no one
else could. In addition, male social workers are prized because some clients feel more comfortable working with a man than a woman, for a variety of cultural and gender-specific reasons. Having men on staff makes an agency more flexible in its toolbox of approaches to any given case or client, and there seems to be a distinct impulse among female social workers to be careful about any behavior that would frighten a male staff member away from the agency or organization.

Most of the social workers with whom I collaborated were women, and they generally agreed that women’s humor was far filthier than men’s humor. For many female social workers, the presence of a man meant they felt they had to “clean up” their language and be more “appropriate” in front of male colleagues. There seemed to be a two-fold distinction between two types of humor that women censored in the presence of male coworkers: dirty humor, and “female” humor. Dirty humor seems to constitute scatology, unkind comments, and “unfeminine” behavior, such as mimicking sexual acts. “Female” humor seems to consist of joking in graphic detail about childbirth, lactation, menstruation, and heterosexual intercourse. It can also involve making fun of men, but this seems to be less a true taboo, and more something that is pretended to be taboo. In my experience, female social workers will routinely make fun of or criticize men in front of male social workers, but they will qualify their mockery and explain that it’s “not you, just other men” that are so maddening.

However, LA told me that she feels she can tease her male staff in more direct and brusque ways than she can many of her female staff. To illustrate this, she told me a story about having to help a male social worker whom she supervised in her community mental health agency. This man, “Tony” had been trying to convince a client that she needed inpatient treatment for her schizophrenia which was cycling out of control. The client agreed
she needed in-patient treatment, but a 3-month stay in a psychiatric ward would mean losing her apartment and all of her things. Tony told the client he would pack up her apartment and store her stuff in the agency’s basement if she would voluntarily commit herself. The woman agreed to commit herself, and Tony had to make good on his promise and pack up the woman’s apartment, which turned out to be a much more difficult task than he had anticipated. While he worked, LA called his cell phone, asked if he needed help, and was sheepishly taken up on her offer. Later that afternoon, LA got a call from another staff member, wondering when she would be back in the office. In Tony’s hearing, in a loud voice, LA told the staff member, “I’m just over here packing up a ton of shit because Tony’s mouth wrote a check his ass couldn’t cash!” After she delivered the punch line, LA told me, “So yeah, I don’t think I would’ve joked that way with a female staff, but I felt like I could do it with Tony.” LA’s comment chides Tony’s behavior and exposes him to the ridicule of his coworkers. It also points out to him that his rash promise, while made in the best interests of the client, was perhaps overstepping his job responsibilities, particularly since his supervisor was now having to spend her valuable time helping him make good on his commitment to the client. However, the brash and vulgar language also demonstrates a level of respect that LA has for Tony. Certainly this story illustrates one example of joking differences along gender lines, but it illustrates LA and Tony’s particular staff/supervisor relationship just as much as it illustrates management techniques and joking behavior between a female supervisor and a male staff member.

This is, obviously, in great contrast to the ways that gender plays out in prison work. While prison work is still male-dominated, just as social work has become increasingly female-dominated, the integration of women into prison work has made joking along gender
lines far more touchy and fraught with legal and social baggage. There seems to be much more at stake for prison workers, because only women seem to be allowed to laugh about the incongruities of working in a male-dominated environment. Men seem afraid to joke about this, but this may also be because of my own gender as the ethnography. Since I collaborate with workers I know, they might not want to hurt my feelings, or appear to be chauvinist pigs in my eyes, and may actually behave very differently than they indicate during interviews.
While many scholars theorize joking behavior as aggressive and hostile, others suggest that this is only one component of humor. In his important book *Jokes and their Relations*, folklorist Elliot Oring argues, “I challenge the assumption that humor is simply a species of aggression. Humor is crafted ambiguity, and ambiguities do not easily yield certainties (ix).” Instead, Oring argues that humor (or laughter) occurs when there is a perception of an appropriate incongruity. “Humor, I have argued, depends upon the perception of an *appropriate incongruity*; that is, the perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous” (1). According to Oring, laughter arises only when the two or more categories brought together in a joking instance are related in some way. There must be a simultaneous sense of fitness and absurdity in order for humor to “work.” Thus, in “A Social Worker Finally Snaps,” humor arises from the perception of truth, or fitness. The readers who find the list funny laugh, not necessarily out of hostility or aggression, but out of the appropriate, yet incongruous, images and statements.

When I asked LA if she heard stories like the ones in the essay “A Social Worker Finally Snaps,” her response was angry:

LA: Yes. [angrily] Yes, yes, yes. And worse. So, what do you do with that? I mean, why are people able to do our jobs? Because then we tell our coworkers about it. And at first it may be a very serious like processing sort of conversation, like, you’re never going to believe this. Like, I thought I heard it all. When you hear this, you kind of harbor it within you for a minute and think about how you feel about it, and where you place *your* judgment, and how something like that could come to be, and you really try to understand why someone could
treat a child like that...you try to figure out why. Then you share it with your coworker. You know, it’s one of two things—it’s a very serious conversation at first or its immediately laughing laughing laughing laughing laughing, because you know, you have to figure out a way to...somehow...assimilate that into the knowledge of the world that you know and...move on, and try to help somebody. So, that’s difficult sometimes. Humor, I think, definitely helps that. And I think that you’ll find that kind of humor more so in social workers versus...over the practical joke kind of humor because we all know that we have to hear this shit every day. And so we’re going to joke around like that more so than having a practical joke because you just may be pushing your coworker over the edge, like, you know, it might just be one of those days.”

LA’s response was full of frustration and anger. She speaks at first curtly and rapidly, and as she talks through how telling coworkers about trauma using humor helps them be able to do their job, her sentences become longer and more relaxed. By talking through the strategies she uses to move from anger and horror to reconciliation and practical on-the-job action, Laura simulates the process she is describing. She begins speaking seriously and with frustration, but she gradually begins to incorporate humor into her narrative through vocal inflection and eventually allusion and metaphor. She concludes by describing how narrative humor rather than practical jokes protects the social worker from self-harm, making the comparison between the mental illness of the social worker and the mental illness of a client—a comparison I encountered over and over when working with social workers in the mental health field. LA closes her narrative in a way that destabilizes the social worker’s position as the stable representative of authority; she suggests that the social worker is close to the edge, and that inappropriate humor can be both a coping mechanism, as well as a
trigger for stressed out social workers. By destabilizing the idea of what a social worker is, LA reinforces the humanity of her profession. Social workers are people, and they are subject to terrible stress that has the potential to affect their lives in very negative ways. By humanizing her coworkers, and reminding me, the outsider, that social workers are vulnerable people, LA gives her colleagues permission to err in a human way—to speak inappropriately, or say “some sick shit,” because that is the only thing that keeps them from going over the edge. If they don’t go over the edge, they can continue to be functioning social workers, doing a job that is necessary and meaningful.

Every social worker I interviewed emphasized the importance of “telling someone” about frightening, frustrating, or upsetting occurrences that happen on the job. As LA notes in the above narrative, “So, what do you do with that? I mean, why are people able to do our jobs? Because then we tell our coworkers about it.” She explicitly connects the ability to be a social worker with the need to tell about horrors, and she articulates the shift between serious and official processing conversations that evolve into “laughing laughing laughing!” This same process is explained by collaborators in a group interview:

Schmidt: You mentioned interacting with coworkers and how important that is, and how much you rely on each other. What are the things that you guys laugh about on a daily basis? What's funny in your office?

[general laughter]

XY: Well, just being at a staff meeting, we have some specific kids and they have specific behaviors-

XW: Or specific parents that are –
XY: Yeah, specific parents that have specific behaviors, and they might get brought up in a meeting, or you might laugh and it's not making fun of the kids, just when you're in that situation and something's happened that may have scarred you, but you've gotten over it [laughter] and so it's quite funny after that. It's a group humor that gets you through that. What could have been traumatic at one point is kind of funny when you tell it together.

XY immediately identifies staff meetings as a site for group workplace humor, and XY indicates that some of this humor is associated with particular clients. She deflects any outsider critique by quickly saying “it’s not making fun of the kids, just-.” XY couches her suggestion that staff members joke about clients in language of trauma to the social worker. She says, “something’s happened that may have scarred you” and “what could have been traumatic,” pointing out that this kind of humor takes place when a social worker has been scarred or traumatized in some way. This supports LA’s argument that a lot of social workers’ workplace humor arises from the need to process horrors by sharing them with coworkers—insiders who have a shared understanding of the world as it is bounded by their shared profession. Laughter, in this narrative, is both the transitioning force that moves the social worker from trauma to stasis, as well as an artistic forum for group expression. She says, “What could have been traumatic at one point is kind of funny when you tell it together!”

Later in this interview, the group of five social workers demonstrated how a traumatic scene becomes funny through group telling by collaboratively performing a story of trauma and scarring involving two of the five people present: NE, one of the very few men working at the agency, with about a year and a half on the job, and XW, his immediate supervisor.
The narrative is told by XW and NE, while XY and XA chime in with details and commentary, and the fifth social worker in the room laughs but is simultaneously hurrying to finish paperwork on her laptop and does not participate in the storytelling. I will focus on this story closely, as an example of how social workers use humor and laughter as a group to process difficult situations. While NE’s trauma is not life-threatening, nor does it severely compromise his understanding of the world, his job puts him in an embarrassing situation that violates social norms, and the after-affects of the incident leave him feeling traumatized and embarrassed. In addition to the difficulty and absurdity of the incident, I would like to focus in addition on the way the group narrative draws sharp lines between insiders (social workers) and outsiders (“mall cops” and police officers), and the way that the narrators communicate their frustration with ignorance and impotence using humor.

XW: Oh my gosh, JC Penney-

NE: I don't go back to JC Penney. Like, I just don't go to JC Penney. I'd hang out with him, but-

XY: PTSD from JC Penneys?

NE: Yeah. I was like, he just, there was the whole scene. I know all those workers remember exactly who we are. You don't forget that, like, having that in the store, right in front of the cash register with people walking by, and he's like spitting at them, like, cussing at me, yeah. It was –

XY: And NE was like, “you're the parent, get your kid under control.”

XW: No, cause his mom was sitting on the floor with him, he was all bear-hugged up.
NE: The mom was trying to put him in a hold - it was this little 5 year old, and this grown woman like trying to hold him, and then can't hold him, and ultimately just kinda lets him go.

XW: But NE was hilarious, though. He's always Mr. Calm. Shit's going down, and NE’s like, “hey, um, I'm in JC Penney's, and I can't get Dylan to come with me. [general laughter] Do you think you could stop by?” And I'm like “Sure, I'm on it!” I'm like, you know –

XY: Can't be that bad, he just doesn't want to go. Cause NE’s calm, it doesn't sound bad.

XW: And I get down there on his level and I'm like sitting on the floor with him, trying to talk to him, but of course his brilliant-ass mother – see, this is where the stuff comes out –

XA: Yeah, we can talk about it, it's ok.

XW: She's like, “well, you can't really do that,” because she was like, “anytime anybody says anything, he starts spittin’ on ‘em, or kickin’ ‘em.” So what's he gonna do now? And I said, “yeah, especially when you keep bringing it up. So maybe for right now, we don't talk about that, and maybe we just have conversation.” Yeah.

NE: And then the officer gets there –

XW: The fucking mall cop walks by – [general laughter] He's like, “uh, is everything okay here?” And the kid’s like, “I'm gonna fucking kill you!” He's like “Okay, I'll be standing over here...” I'm like “Thank you for your help.”

XA: “Thanks for your help. We're doing just fine.” [laughter]
NE: I think he said, “I'll take your gun and shoot you,” or something. He like, threatened to shoot him. And it's this like huge guy, he's so tall, and like, I think, “I –

XW: He took it seriously, he's like “I'll just be over here”

NE: “I'll stand behind the cash register over here.” And this little kid like wallowing on the floor and spitting and hitting everything, and –

XW: Yeah. Knocking mannequins over-

NE: Yeah, trying to kick mannequins. I know they remember, I know they have to remember who-

XA: Oh, I'm sure. [laughter]

NE: There's no way – and then when I walk in, they're like, on the radio, “he's back. Does he have his kids with him?”

XW: You felt so paranoid.

NE: It's bad, I don’t know.

XY: You're looking around, like, “oh god, they remember me.”

NE: Exactly –

XY: They're probably watching the tape laughing every day.

NE: Yeah, they're probably – there probably is a tape. I should try to find the tape.

XW: Oh yeah, there's a tape.

XA: Yeah, they're probably back there laughing about it every day.

NE: “Watch what this kid does!”

XY: Watch! [general laughter]

NE: It's their new orientation. They're like – and then the actual police get there, and they're like, “oh, he needs a butt whupping.”
XW: Oh yeah, that was like –

NE: They had, like –

XW: I was like, “oh, my gosh, don't make me-” Cause he like, “so what's going on in there?” And I was like, “well, we have this kid, and he didn't want to leave his visit with his mom, and he was, you know, couldn't be controlled.” “Sounds like to me he just needs a good ass whupping.” And I'm like “well, he's in foster care. So maybe not so much with that.”

XA: That's not gonna be a good plan. [laughter]

XW: Yeah.

NE: This kid, he's gotten a couple of those. That's why he's in our care now. That's why we removed him.

XY: Hence foster care.

XW: We're trying to find a new way to cope [laughter]

NE: It helps, like, if you can laugh and be flexible about it. It's easier to laugh about it and move onto the next thing rather than, like, having –

XW: Cringe every time he comes into the office thinking “what am I gonna do now?”

XY: Yeah.

NE: It is kinda crazy.

XA: Oh my gosh. I forgot about JC Penney.

NE: I don't think I'll ever forget JC Penney.

All the social workers in the room knew this story well; it was clear that this event, which happened more than a year previously, had become an established story in the collective repertoire of the office. Each of the individuals present seemed able to tell the story, but
ultimately supported NE’s telling of his own personal social trauma at JC Penney. Since she was also present and participating in the fracas at JC Penney’s, XW also tells the story, but it is clear that she is supporting NE’s telling, and that this is his story, just as she was supporting NE as his supervisor during the incident itself.

NE frames the story by emphasizing the physical location, and the importance that location serves for the narrative. He repeats “JC Penney” several times, always using the full name of the store, and never abbreviating it. This insistence on the formal reinforces the importance of the locale and frames the absurdity of the situation. NE is at JC Penney supervising a visit between a child, “Dylan” in foster care and his mother, from whose care the child has been removed. The very normality of JC Penney drives the absurdity of the incident. JC Penney is solidly middle class. The products it sells are sedate and restrained and can be taken as the essence of the mainstream. The bourgeois nature of the store emphasizes the unspoken behavioral code set and enforced within the store. The traditional and orderly middle class setting is disrupted by the chaos of a disordered family. Dylan does not want to end the supervised visit with his mother and he reacts in the way he has learned—with violence. He screams invectives, spits, knocks over mannequins, and frightens the sales staff. His mother is down on the floor with him, attempting vainly to physically restrain him. The behavior of the child, parent, and social workers all violate the rigid social norms of JC Penney. One does not get down on the floor; one does not use a raised voice or threaten authority with physical violence. NE’s memories of the scene are colored by his awareness of how he has been involved in such a violation of the expected behavior of JC Penney customers, to the extent that he has barred himself from entering JC Penney again.
While the setting makes the incident absurd, the contrast of the behavior of children and adults with the expected social roles for children and adults adds to the absurdity. Dylan is only five years old, but he has brought an entire department at JC Penney to a halt, and caused the store’s staff to summon both mall security and several actual police officers. The serious response from security and the police department belie the physical age and size of the child, and by responding in this way, heighten the absurdity of the situation. The child is small, five years old, and not a physical threat to anyone. Yet, by responding to the crisis with such seriousness, the figures of authority signal that a five year old is a frightening and dangerous force. The five-year-old has threatened the mall security officer with physical violence, saying “I’m gonna fucking kill you!” and “I’ll take your gun and shoot you!” While children are often imagined to be innocent, kind, and helpless, Dylan explodes this myth by emphasizing his capacity for violent thoughts, speech, and actions. Rather than dismissing the child’s worlds, the “mall cop” takes the threat seriously and goes to stand behind the cash register, not only aligning himself with the financial authority of the store, but also confirming popular imaginations of mall security as impotent and ineffective. NE and XW are exasperated by the lack of support and authority from the “mall cop” and sarcastically repeat “thank you for your help” and “thank you, we’re doing just fine here” to emphasize how much they need help, and how much they wish the “mall cop” would do his job and secure the situation, rather than take the absurd offer of violence from a five-year-old seriously and just stand back and watch the social workers struggling. NE emphasizes the size and strength and imposing appearance of the security guard to highlight the absurdity of the way the security guard takes Dylan’s threats seriously. NE, as a man, chastises the male security guard for his unwillingness to use his authority and strength to assist in the situation.
The mother’s behavior is also depicted as absurd and incongruous; XW refers to her as “his brilliant-ass mother” because Dylan’s mother reinforces his negative behaviors and the inability of authority figures to cope with him by saying: “well, you can't really do that,” because she was like, “anytime anybody says anything, he starts spittin on em, or kickin em.” XW is frustrated by the mother’s self-fulfilling prophecy, which XW sees as problematic for Dylan’s wellbeing. XW says, “So what's he gonna do now? And I said, “yeah, especially when you keep bringing it up. So maybe for right now, we don't talk about that, and maybe we just have conversation.” XW performs this narrative in a frustrated, sarcastic tone; in this narrative she is reproving the mother for her failure to parent her child effectively. Her tone is condescending and scolding and very, very funny, eliciting laughter from her audience. XW has already checked herself after saying “his brilliant-ass mother,” making an aside to me, saying “see, this is where the stuff comes out,” to make it clear to me that she knows she has spoken of her client in an inappropriate manner. She is affirmed in her speech by XA, who says, “It’s okay, we can talk about it.” It seems clear to me that XW is using a tone in the narration that she would not have used in the situation itself, but in this reenactment of the scenario, she is free to express her anger and frustration with the mother’s failure to perform her social role effectively, and by acting out what XW wishes she could have said and done at the time (had she not been under the constraint of her professionalism), she is able to release some of her frustration and her audience laughs with recognition at a situation and feeling they understand as members of the same professional field.

While the narrative initially expresses frustration toward the difficult mother and child, that frustration quickly turns to defensiveness when the child is threatened with a beating by one of the police officers. The failure of institutional authority (the police) to
behave in a professional and educated manner elicits anger from the social workers that is expressed through an immediate re-assumption of professional persona and protective stance toward the difficult clients. When the narrative reaches the point where the police officers arrive, all the social workers in the interview room immediately bristle and become more vocal, recognizing that at this point, they are telling a story about how their entire profession is undermined by the inability of outsiders to recognize the truths that form the foundation of their professional worldview. NE says, “then the actual police get there, and they’re like, ‘oh, he needs a butt whupping’.” NE’s voice reflects the frustration and disgust with the outsider who walks onto the scene and immediately offers a simplistic and useless evaluation of the situation that ignores NE and XW’s expertise and previous efforts. NE’s iteration of the police officer’s speech emphasizes the informality and casual words—“a butt whupping”—that do not befit an intelligent and articulate professional solution to the crisis. XW says, “I was like, ‘oh my gosh, don’t make me-‘” and holds up her hands in a gesture of restrained violence. She intimates with her physicality and words that she is holding herself back from violence—that the officer’s ignorant words have nearly “made” her become violent with his dismissive and condescending attitude. When XW explains the scene to the officer, she describes his response more aggressively, replacing “butt” with “ass,” than NE already has: “’Sounds like to me he just needs a good ass whupping.’” The officer’s words reduce the situation—Dylan “just” needs a beating, and so all of the ongoing efforts by NE and XW and the boy’s mother to resolve the situation on the floor of JC Penney are discredited and unnecessary, according to the officer. The police officer’s assumption that he knows enough to evaluate the situation is made fun of by all of the narrators in the interview room. XW says, “Well, he’s in foster care. So maybe not so much with that.” Her tone is exasperated
and authoritative. She speaks curtly and with comedic timing that is reinforced by the understatement of her words. XW articulates that violence is “not so much” a solution, given that he is already in protective custody under her authority. By using humorous understatement rather than responding in a direct, serious and sincere way, XW simultaneously conveys her professional disapproval of the police officer’s ignorance, and diminishes the police officer’s comment by deliberately not taking it seriously. By making it into a joke that is not only laughed at at the time, but continues to be laughed at over and over in every telling of the story, XW establishes a discourse that makes police officers laughable. This, in turn, takes some of their authority away, and by taking away their authority, alleviates some of the sting from the thoughtless and unprofessional behavior of the police toward the social workers.

Each person in the room chimes in with support for XW’s narrated response to the officer’s suggestion of violence as a solution to the child’s behavior. XA immediate responds to XW’s understatement with “that’s not gonna be a good plan.” She, too, uses understatement to downplay the authority of the police officer’s thoughtless comment. XA describes the officer’s suggestion of a beating as a “plan” but not a good one. Thus, she pretends to see the officer’s suggestion seriously, and then undermines that seriousness by speaking in an understated and sarcastic tone. XW chimes in, saying, “yeah,” to support XA’s assessment and validate XA’s support of XW’s words and tone. NE says, “This kid, he’s gotten a couple of those. That’s why he’s in our care now. That’s why we removed him.” NE speaks in a sarcastic, condescending but jocular way—he refers to Dylan as “this kid” and says he’s gotten “a couple of those;” meaning the child has already had more than his share of beatings. Though NE says “a couple” it is clear that he is using understatement to
reinforce that actually, this child has already been beaten a lot. NE’s tone conveys that the police officer’s comment makes his lack of knowledge painfully apparent, and by disabusing the police officer, NE establishes his position as a person who does have the knowledge to respond appropriately to this situation. He speaks in short, clear sentences, making it clear that he understands the situation thoroughly and is addressing it in the most direct and simple way possible. XY chimes in, building on his authoritative, “That’s why we removed him” by echoing, “Hence foster care.” XW rejoins, “We’re trying to find a new way to cope.” XY and XW speak in a tired, long-suffering way that reinforces the notion that they are experts, jaded even, in this type of situation. Their tone and words together communicate that they have already thought of these things, and that they have already rejected the idea of force as a clearly bad idea. Their tone and words make the police officer’s thoughtless comment sound worse than thoughtless—downright stupid and childish—and they don’t bother to take his suggestion seriously, but just deflect it with barely-controlled exasperation before moving on.

While NE and XW may have actually used different words and tones in the moment of the incident with the police officer, during this re-creation of the event, the narration reflects a shared worldview that agrees about the way the professional social worker speaks to ignorance in the middle of a crisis.

NE’s traumatic experience at JC Penney has left him unable to walk into the store again because of the embarrassment he feels at the scene in which he was involved. He and his colleagues hypothesize that the employees at JC Penney are still laughing at NE and XW; they recognize the humorous potential of the scene to an outsider. NE wonders aloud if there is a security tape of the incident, and his colleagues obligingly tell him that there most definitely is a security tape, and suggest that to this day, JC Penney employees watch the tape
for laughs. Thus, the group constructs the staff at JC Penney as an enthusiastic audience for
the drama of the situation, one who can appreciate the absurdity and sheer number of
shattered taboos. NE suggests that the security tape of Dylan’s breakdown has become
institutionalized in the professional world of JC Penney employees and implies that the
incident was of such great weight that it has changed the way that new employees are trained.
NE’s experience could have been much worse; he was not permanently physically injured,
nor was he subject to emotional abuse that affects his ability to function on a daily basis.
However, he still feels shame that he processes through humor with the help of his
colleagues. NE’s shame and embarrassment is regularly identified by his coworkers, and
routinely replayed. I think this periodic interpretation and re-interpretation of the incident
allows NE and XW to control it in their minds. In choosing how to perform the chaos, they
choose to dramatize it with humor, which diffuses its potential to be taken seriously. NE
verbalizes his fears—that JC Penney employees remember him, that they believe that he is
Dylan’s father—and his coworkers laugh at his fears, potentially diminishing them. I think
that social workers perform this same collective processing of work-related trauma narratives
with much more serious incidents of occupational trauma, and that this coping method is
both prized and taken for granted.

While “telling someone” is the mechanism by which humor is brought into the
context of trauma for processing an upsetting phenomenon, time is the other key factor in
turning a horrifying or traumatizing incident into a funny story. One collaborator told me,
“Yeah, it's like, things that are traumatic at the time are not so funny, but later on it's really
hilarious looking back.” The traumatic episode is not funny in the moment; time must elapse
and the incident must draw to an end before humor becomes appropriate and effective. Thus,
humor is for social workers, as for prison workers, a mechanism to transition between serious chaos and non-emergency, normal working conditions.

While “chaos” and “normal” may look very different in a social work setting than they do in a prison setting, both social workers and prison workers use humor to re-order frightening, dangerous or upsetting experiences. Although the “really sick shit” that social workers hear about on their job does not necessarily create the literal, physical chaos of an accident or a prison fight, it can create mental chaos, as the social rules by which most people live their lives are deconstructed by listening to true stories of dysfunction, mental illness, addiction and violence. “Telling someone” allows the social worker to begin to rebuild their worldview out of the chaotic rubble caused by the destructive power horrifying narratives. Humor needs an audience, and so making a joke out of a horrifying incident demands that another person participate in the horror and respond in an appropriate—i.e. humorous—way. The refusal to laugh, however, can destabilize this rebuilding process.

Joking inappropriately can be dangerous for the licensed social worker, yet according to my collaborator LA, this type of laughter was essential to job success:

LA: It’s kinda weird, because you kinda know that, when someone’s going to last or when someone isn’t going to last in this field based on how comfortable and how easy it is to get there with them. Like, if they don’t ever get there, they’re not lasting long. Once they’re able to joke about some really sick shit they’ve experienced, then you know that it’s probably gonna work. But if they never get there, they never develop that comfort level, then it’s a good chance that they never...they’re not gonna last long.
When my informant was telling me this, she was verbalizing this idea for the first time. As a recently promoted supervisor and director of a dual diagnosis program, she is an administrator with dozens of employees under her. Another supervisor, KW, came to a similar realization as we talked about humor at work. She told me:

If you don't find any humor in it at all, yeah, maybe you wouldn't last. I just haven't really experienced that in my office, but I've not really had – we did have one person come through who was really not ok with joking at all. And she did not last. She was gone within two years, to a different area. She went into individual therapy and counseling, which probably was going to be a better match for her. So maybe, yeah, I guess in that sort of sense I could say that, I don't know that that's really why she left, but I can see that she was not amused by much of anything about our office or our job.

Being able to find amusement in one’s colleagues and in one’s job seems to be essential for social workers. When I asked the group of social workers at Great Circle about long term success and humor, they agreed with LA’s assessment. XW elaborated:

XW: I think you have to redefine what “success” means to you. Because what you think success is when you start this is not what it ends up being, and - I mean, it took me forever to just feel like, okay, I'm not making the big global change that I went into social work or therapy to make, but you know, sometimes you're the person who's planting the seeds and then somebody else sees the flowers later on, because, you know, maybe the teacher is providing some water, and maybe, you know, a coach is providing some food, and then, you know, the flower happens way down the road. I mean, I just try to think about - all that I can do is run the best program that I can run,
and I do that by, I think, supporting my staff in a way that I wish I had been supported when I was a case manager, and I feel like trying to do that, and then – because as a supervisor, my definition of success is different. I mean, yes, it's achieving all the goals that we're supposed to achieve for the state, but it's also, like, trying to - not work – I mean, sometimes, work yourself out of a job. I mean, I want them to be able to do it without me and to be confident that they can make their own decisions. But then if they need something they're here, but, I mean if you define it by feeling like – cause it's also a job where you're never gonna be caught up. And that's really hard for people who are achievement-driven, to have a job where they just never feel like they're caught up. And if you just – I mean, you have to be able to have the personal balance to know when to shut it off and how to shut it off. Some people can't do that.

XW makes it very clear that the individual social worker needs to define and redefine success throughout the course of their career. Thus, the conception of success for the social worker is a continually evolving assessment, and perhaps much more modest than an outsider would imagine.

XY builds on XW’s discussion of long-term success in social work, and brings the conversation back to humor. XY brings separation, survival, and humor into conversation. Through her narrative, I find the ways that humor can become a deciding force for a social workers continued presence in the field or in an agency. While LA’s staff member didn’t find LA’s agency and the work it did to contain any humor, she was able to find a new career path without so many coworkers, and without so much trauma that needed processing through
humor. At the end of her narrative, XW points out that an appreciation for humor is, for her, associated with healthy collegiality.

XW: You have to find the balance or you will get burned out. You have to be able to disconnect and remember that this is just a job. Which is hard, because this is peoples' lives. This is their life, but this is really your job. So you really have to find that balance, and I think that's the hardest part. I think that's why a lot of people get burned out, cause you have to find that balance of being caring and compassionate and empathizing and having all that, but also distancing yourself to where you're not enmeshed in it. Their personal tragedy cannot be your personal tragedy. And sometimes that does make you look uncaring, but you really have to have that separation, that balance, or you won't survive. And the other thing is you have to have a good positive support network of coworkers. If you are not in a supportive – even though we don't get to get together a lot, do things, but to know that NE’s got my back, or XW’s got my back, or – I can just sit – I'm so stressed right now, and I want to cry, but I can sit and we can end up laughing about it. I mean, honestly, sometimes you get so stressed that you do want to cry, but you can sit and talk about it and you're laughing by the end. You need that, or else you're not gonna make it, cause if you're in those atmospheres where your coworkers don't care, or they don't, maybe, find things quite as funny as you do, it doesn't work and you get stressed and you'll feel isolated.

Over and over, the social workers I interviewed articulated the difficulty in doing a job that outsiders don’t understand, and the importance of having colleagues who do understand. Isolation, for the social worker, seems to be a serious job stressor. My fieldwork findings are
supported by Merle Edwards’ personal narrative in Grobman’s *Days in the Lives of Social Workers*, when he argues that it is lonely as the only social worker in his unit, and that he needs regular coffee meetings with other social workers to maintain his equilibrium (Grobman 11). Cami Cooper echoes this sentiment in her narrative in the same collection, writing, “Also, you are often the only social worker present on a school campus. It can be somewhat isolating not to have someone close at hand who shares the same background and knowledge. However, I meet once a month with the other social workers in the school district, which helps eliminated feeling completely isolated” (Grobman 39).
Conclusion:

So, why does the occupational humor of white, midwestern prison workers and social workers matter? A better understanding and appreciation of the folk humor of prison workers and social workers is important for many reasons, and here are two. First, it is important for folklorists to study the occupational folklore of mainstream 21st century professions in order to counteract the outdated notion that folklore is something that “other” people have. If we recognize the folklore in mainstream, suburban, middleclass America, we can then see that it’s not just “manners” or “what everyone does” or the “default-unquestioningly-correct-way-of behaving,-dressing,-or-communicating” but *artistic* communication, as worthy of respect, interrogation and study.

And, second, occupational humor matters. Humor is frequently overlooked, misunderstood, and dismissed. Humor is trivialized, minimized, and accepted; its ubiquity renders it invisible to those interested in “serious” topics of inquiry. However, humor frequently functions through its invisibility; once confronted, humor ceases to be trivial and the very real effects and ramifications of power and play become evident. Humor is a serious business, dealing with American topics freighted with the most serious taboos: sex, death, race, gender and power. Joking is often risky. Particularly in occupations that serve vulnerable populations, humor in the workplace can be dangerous for the joker as well as the inmate or client. Yet, occupational humor is necessary. Over and over my collaborators articulated the importance of humor in prison work and social work, insisting that humor
made their jobs bearable and allowed them to do their work and still maintain their sense of self. If humor is an essential job skill for these professional, necessary, but low-status jobs, we need to understand it better.28

American prison workers, including but not limited to correctional officers, are an under-studied and over-determined group of professionals. While scholars outside of their own fields of criminal justice and institution management have paid very little attention to the field of prison work, I argue that it is important for folklorists and ethnographers to study the following tragic situation only emphasizes the need to understand humor in institutional work.

In March of 2012, Phil Otto, a correctional officer at Oakhill Correctional Institution killed himself because of severe harassment at the hands of his coworkers. Otto had only worked at Oakhill for nine months, but had spent more than twenty years at the Ethan Allen School, a juvenile correctional institution in Wales, Wisconsin. According to the reports released after eight months of internal investigation, a group of Otto’s coworkers at Oakhill targeted him, along with two others—a married couple—for harassment. According to an internal investigation, the harassment began after Otto, new to the job, asked a supervisor if he should go ahead with strip searches or just do pat downs, since the officer responsible for supervising his strip searches was watching the Green Bay Packer game and not available to supervise the strip searches. The officer felt she had been “thrown under the bus” by Otto’s failure to cover for her, and the internal investigation shows that a campaign of harassment began after that incident.

The shift supervisor and three other officers were fired, another officer took early retirement, and another officer was demoted. Several of those accused of misconduct argued that the married couple was equally guilty of misconduct because they told “sexually charged” stories among coworkers. The termination letter to one of the fired employees stated, “A clear pattern emerged in which you were continually identified by nearly every employee and by several supervisors as being part of a small group of employees engaged in inappropriate and unprofessional behaviors…You partnered with Sgt. Mudd and others to demean Officer X. This included shunning him, taunting him and name calling and humiliating him in front of staff and inmates.” The termination letter sent to Sgt. Mudd, the supervisor who watched the Packer game, states, “You told others not to take Officer X’s orders, told them he was snitching on everyone and told them he was inappropriately touching inmates during strip searches.”

What the newspaper articles do not explicitly state is that a great deal of this harassment was encoded in humor, or at least comments and behavior that was intended to be found humorous. Taunting implies humor. Telling coworkers that an officer inappropriately touches inmates certainly implies the use of humor.

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the occupational lore of prison workers. People working in corrections use humor to express themselves through creative and specialized esoteric communication. The ways correctional workers use humor is artistic and creative, and worthy of thoughtful ethnographic study.

Prison workers use many genres of humor, including conversational humor, practical jokes, formally structured jokes, observational humor, humorous email forwards and other forms of internet humor. Prison workers play jokes primarily on superior officers and supervisors and on same-status employees. Practical jokes are most often played under circumstances of affection rather than hostility; pranks played under overtly hostile conditions happen, though they are rarely described by my collaborators as “practical jokes” and are more likely to be designated as harassment. Prison workers use practical jokes to negotiate the stresses of their jobs, to communicate their awareness of the pressures confronting their colleagues, to express dissatisfaction with a flawed system, to navigate the disconnect between the vastly disparate home and work environments, to communicate affection for coworkers, and to exert temporary power over bosses and the institutional powers that control the lives of prison workers and inmates. Prison workers use verbal humor, including mimicry, jokes, and conversational humor to express discomfort with occupational horrors, to maintain an unemotional affect in the face of disturbing events, to diffuse dangerous or difficult confrontations with inmates and fellow officers, to reinforce and police occupational boundaries, to transition from chaos to normal, to communicate appreciation of inmate humor, to transgress rules and professionalism without consequences, to challenge authority, to break taboos, to temporarily steal authority from institutions, and to articulate frustration and anger without reprisal.
While the occupational humor of prison workers appears hostile, inappropriate, racist, homophobic, and misogynistic to outsiders, I argue that the humor is far more complex than is apparent to outsiders, and that it performs different functions under different circumstances. Although prison worker humor is at times a social agent of friendship, occupational identity maintenance, and solidarity, prison worker humor can also be sharply divisive along lines of social class. The occupational humor of prison workers is used to identify and police class boundaries. White Midwestern prison workers use specialized humor at particular times of the calendar year to communicate complicated anxieties about religion, family, and holidays.

Like prison workers, social workers use humor in their occupational life for esoteric artistic communication. Social work theorists have explored humor in social work practice, but the actual lived, experienced, occupational humor of social workers has been largely ignored by scholars. Social workers use a variety of genres of occupational humor, just as prison workers do, including practical jokes, conversational and observational humor. Many social workers I have interviewed argue that social workers have a particular emphasis on “sick” humor. Social workers use practical jokes to communicate awareness of organizational dysfunction, to navigate the disconnect between the home environment and the work environment, to express awareness of gender conflict, and to communicate affection. According to my fieldwork findings, social workers seem to play fewer practical jokes than prison workers, and articulate a strong awareness of their use of inappropriate verbal humor. Social workers use sick verbal humor, including mimicry of clients, to release anger, negotiate the transition from chaos and trauma to normality, to cope with stress, to
communicate affection for clients and coworkers, to communicate uncomfortable truths, and challenge boundaries.

The importance of humor in American public life is vast yet infrequently explicitly acknowledged or questioned. More than ever, people from politicians to teachers are judged on their ability to use humor effectively.²⁹ If one were to say, “oh, she has no sense of humor” or “he can’t take a joke,” one casts serious question on that person’s mental and social abilities. Accusing someone of lacking a sense of humor or being unable to “take” a joke undermines their outrage or righteous anger. If we are to understand how employees make meaning in their work life, it is necessary to consider how and why workers play practical jokes, make fun of each other, pass on email forwards and share Facebook posts.

Prison workers and social workers perform work that is integral to American society as we know it. Humor alleviates burnout, allows indirect communication on touchy subjects, and permits a temporary escape from the obligation to be compassionate. And at the same time, humor is easily misconstrued, misinterpreted, or offensive, and an ill-timed crack can cost a social worker or prison worker her reputation—even her job. If we can understand how humor at work works, we can understand how real people actually do their real jobs and respect their own humorous traditions as essential, though complicated, job skills.

²⁹ See Moria Smith (2009) for a concise summary of the perceived importance of a “sense of humor” in day-to-day American life.


Davis, Angela Y. *If They Come in the Morning*. San Francisco: The National United Committee to Free Angela Davis, Inc. 1971.


Lawless, Elaine J. “I was Afraid Someone Like You... an Outsider... would Misunderstand: Negotiating Interpretive Differences between Ethnographers and Subjects.” *Journal of American Folklore* 105:417 (1992) 302-14.


Scott, Sir Walter. *Minstrelsy of the Scottish border: consisting of historical and romantic ballads, collected in the southern counties of Scotland; with a few of modern date, founded upon local tradition*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1821.


After years of idealism, I have finally decided that I am sick and fucking tired of helping the disenfranchised and oppressed. I have a master's degree in social work, and I've worked in a number of different settings. I've been a social worker for Children's Protective Services, a therapist on a psych ward, and I've worked as a case manager for a non-profit that shall remain nameless. I've had a number of clients over the years that I would now like to thank for helping me come to the realization that certain people are beyond help.

1) The mother and father who forced their newborn son to nurse from the family dog: Thank you!! I thought it was going to be just another typical Monday morning. You know, examining 4 year olds and finding anal warts encrusting their little rectums, watching 7 year old little Johnny masturbate the way that Daddy taught him to, and removing little Suzie from her home so Mommy wouldn't be able to put cigarettes out on her thighs anymore.
Boring, run-of-the-mill stuff. Then you two beautiful people entered my life. Just in time, I might add! I was beginning to think that abusive parents were losing their sense of creativity. Silly me! What's that? Oh, I know it wasn't your fault. Of course not. No, I agree, formula IS really expensive these days. You're absolutely right, sir, it WOULD have been worse to just let the baby starve. Can I ask you just one question though? Do you think that maybe, just maybe, you could have used your WIC voucher to purchase some formula instead of selling it so you could buy a goddam crack rock? Fuck me, you say? Nope. FUCK YOU, you smarmy pile of rhino shit! Fuck you and your crack whore "baby mama". Your child is coming with me! Merry Fucking Christmas!

2) The meth addict with Borderline Personality Disorder: Sweetie, here's a word of advice. When you are in the midst of a legal battle in which your parental rights are at stake, it is BAD for your case if you show up for your weekly supervised visits with your children spun out of your fucking mind. Also, if you're going to have fresh track marks all over your arms, you should at least wear a long sleeve shirt so I can't see them. We talked about this before, remember? I have to write a report to the judge in a few months, and I can't in good conscience recommend that the court return your children to you when you insist on showing up to your weekly visits high as a kite, wearing nothing but a t-shirt and a toothless grin. Also, it does not help your case if you assault me after I inform you that no, you can't see your kids today due to your inebriated state and your exposed vulva. I know you grew up in poverty, and I sympathize with your plight. Hell, I was poor as fuck growing up. My family was broke as a motherfucker. We lived in the projects and never had no cheese for our
hamburgers or nuthin. Somehow, though, we still managed to find ourselves some fucking PANTS when we went out IN PUBLIC!

3) The guy who cut his own dick off and left it sitting on the altar at the Catholic church:

Dude, the psychiatrist gave you the Haldol for a reason. You should really try taking it every now and then. You're really gonna kick yourself when you come out of this particular episode and realize that your johnson has transubstantiated into the body of Christ. Look, I agree that the Catholic church did some fucked up shit back in the day, but was this really necessary? What exactly did you think you were going to prove? Oh I know, I know, the voices told you to do it. But if the voices told you to go jump off of a bridge, would you do it? Wait, forget I said that.

4) The crackhead mother with 27 cats: I called you in advance to set up our appointment. You KNEW I was going to be at your house that day and that I would be evaluating your progress in making your home habitable so that your kids could be returned to you. So why, oh why did you answer the door with a CRACK PIPE IN YOUR HAND???? Oh, it's not yours? You were just holding onto it for your neighbor? Sure, I'll buy that. Let me ask you something though. Are those your neighbor's cat turds overflowing in the kitchen sink? No, you're right, those litter boxes ARE expensive. Perhaps you should consider getting rid of a few of the cats so there will be room for your children. Just a thought. By the way, is that your neighbor's blood coagulating over there on the couch?
5) The crack addict who prostituted her 8 year old son to support her drug habit:

Congratulations! You have just managed to turn me into a supporter of the death penalty!
What's that? You're concerned about having your little boy placed in an abusive foster home?
Oh don't worry, your son is fine, dear. He won't be going to a foster home after all. You see, we had to place him in an institution because he now likes to save his feces in plastic bags so he can use them as lubrication when he jacks off onto women's panties. He also tries to rape other children. What causes him to do such awful things, you ask? Well, I'm not sure dear, but I'll hazard a guess. I could be wrong, but perhaps his current behaviors have something to do with the fact that his MOTHER RENTED OUT HIS ASS TO HUNDREDS OF PEDOPHILES TO SUPPORT HER CRACK HABIT!!!! Bitch, I hope you get ass-raped by Genghis Khan in hell for all eternity. I'd love to beat you upside the head with a tire iron and take a big steaming shit on your chest. I'd probably lose my license if I did that, though.

6) To the woman who didn't want her child to be adopted by those "faggots": It's so refreshing to meet a woman who cares so much about her child for once! You're right, honey. The Bible DOES say that homosexuals are an abomination to God. Tell me, what does the Bible say about punishing your toddler for crying by sticking him with your dirty syringe needles, thereby infecting him with HIV and hepatitis? I know the Bible says "spare the rod and spoil the child", but I don't remember anything about sparing infectious diseases and spoiling the child. Perhaps you were reading the New International Version? Incidentally, those two "faggots", as you call them, have a few important things to offer your child that you have neglected to provide. What can a couple of faggots offer YOUR child, you ask? Well, first and foremost, they have JOBS!!!! Yes, that's right, JOBS!!!!!!! These jobs provide
them with a trivial little thing known as HEALTH INSURANCE, which will be used to cover the medical treatment your child has to receive for the diseases that YOU gave him. These abominations to God are also capable of providing something called a HOME THAT IS NOT INFECTED WITH LICE AND CRACK. Finally, and most importantly, they will give him something known as LOVE. Ever heard of it? Now, kindly go euthanize yourself you miserable cunt.

Ok, I feel much better now. I think I might go back to school for an MBA or something. I'm tired of working to help these people for 60 hours a week at $35,000/year.
Claire Schmidt was born in Brooklyn, Wisconsin and raised with her sister in an eccentric and very rural owner-built, earth-sheltered home. After graduating high school, Schmidt worked for 6 years as an environmental advocate, organizer and lobbyist for Wisconsin’s Environmental Decade (now Clean Wisconsin) and the Wisconsin Stewardship Network, during which time she received her bachelor’s degree in English Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She also worked as a cleaning lady, a vegetarian cook, a landscaper and a medical secretary before entering graduate school in Folklore, Oral Tradition and Culture Studies at the University of Missouri in 2006.

Schmidt is married to the physicist T. W. Heitmann; they have a two-year-old daughter, Olive, and a second child due to be born in June 2013.