

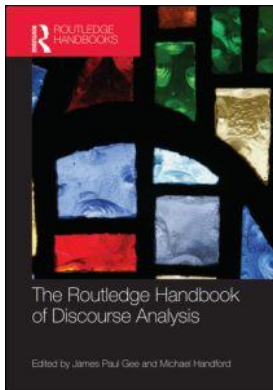
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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## **The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis**

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### **Ethnicity and humour in the workplace**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203809068.ch35>

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**Published online on: 16 Nov 2011**

**How to cite :-** Janet Holmes, Julia de Bres. 16 Nov 2011, *Ethnicity and humour in the workplace* from: The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis Routledge

Accessed on: 30 Sep 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203809068.ch35>

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# Ethnicity and humour in the workplace

*Janet Holmes and Julia de Bres*

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Humour is a very broad and well-researched area.<sup>1</sup> Studies of humour range from those attempting to explain what we find amusing and why, through those examining the functions of humour, to those providing typologies identifying different categories of humour.<sup>2</sup> There is also a considerable amount of research examining linguistic features of humour (e.g. Attardo, 1994, 2001; Görlach, 2000; Norrick, 2003; Kotthoff, 2006; Morreall, 1991; Raskin, 1985, 1987; Ross, 1998). However, relatively little research has focussed on the way humour is interactionally achieved in spoken discourse; even less has examined humour in workplace discourse, and very few researchers have examined the way different ethnic groups use humour in the workplace, which is the focus of this chapter.

In this chapter, we first review research that has explored the social functions of humour in workplace discourse. We next consider what constitutes ethnic humour, focussing in particular on Māori humour in the New Zealand context. We then turn to the analysis of spoken discourse, approaching humour as an interactional achievement and illustrating it with data from New Zealand workplaces. Finally, we consider what further research is needed to extend our understanding of some of the issues raised in this chapter.

## **Humour in the workplace<sup>3</sup>**

As many researchers have noted, humour serves a wide range of functions besides its core function of providing amusement. Focussing just on its social functions, humour can create, maintain and strengthen solidarity between family members, friends, and colleagues; it may emphasize or attenuate power relationships, provide tension release in social groups, and contribute to the construction of a particular type of social identity, including ethnic or cultural identity (e.g. Duncan, 1985; Hay, 1995; Holmes, 2000; Rappoport, 2006). Unsurprisingly, all these functions prove relevant in workplace interaction.

Research on humour in the workplace is steadily increasing, but much of it has been undertaken from a management perspective rather than from a sociolinguistic or discourse analysis point of view.<sup>4</sup> One strand of this research presents the argument that workplace humour benefits employment relationships, job satisfaction, creativity, and even productivity (e.g. Morreall, 1991; Caudron, 1992; Clouse and Spurgeon, 1995). Humour, it has been argued, can increase employees' morale by reducing tension, defusing conflict and spicing up routines, and may help them deal with stress and change (Morreall, 1991; Ehrenberg, 1995; Plester and Orams, 2008). In contexts as

diverse as hospitals (Pizzini, 1991), paramedical departments (Rosenberg, 1991), hotel kitchens (Brown and Keegan, 1999), police departments (Pogrebin and Poole, 1988) and IT companies (Plester and Sayers, 2007), humour has been shown to have beneficial effects.

On the other hand, while humour may promote ‘a healthy exchange of ideas’ (Barsoux, 1993: 112), it may also serve to ‘bring [...] people back into line’ (Barsoux, 1993: 95) and help to control subordinates’ behaviour (Clouse and Spurgeon, 1995; Terrior and Ashforth, 2002). Pizzini (1991), for example, found that doctors used humour in consultations to control their patients’ discourse. (See also Linstead, 1985; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999.) Humour may thus be an effective means for asserting authority or ‘doing power’ in the workplace. Taking an explicitly critical perspective to the analysis of workplace humour in a lorry producing factory, Collinson (1988, 2002) also identifies humour as a control mechanism, encouraging conformity to group norms, but also as a strategy for expressing resistance to management. Similarly, in a white-collar, commercial context, Rodrigues and Collinson (1995) demonstrate that telecommunications employees in Brazil not only used humour (and particularly cartoons) as a safety valve for channelling emotions and expressing dissatisfaction, but also as a weapon of contestation and a means to effect change. These studies indicate how different types of humour contribute to the construction of particular kinds of workplace cultures and to enhancing particular aspects of an organisation’s culture (see also Berger, 1976; Duncan and Feisal, 1989).

Our own previous research supports the view that humour is an important feature of workplace culture, which may contribute to distinguishing different communities of practice. Holmes and Marra (2002a) compared the amount of humour, the type of humour (supportive or contestative in content) and the style of humour (collaborative or competitive in expression) in four different workplaces; the results suggested that each workplace had its own distinctive mix of features. Each workplace team created its own particular combination from the discursive resources available, within the parameters acceptable at that workplace. So, for example, meetings of a team within a large commercial organization produced a high level of sparky humour, which was frequently contestative and expressed in a competitive style more often than in other workplaces – possibly one enactment of the more individual values and orientations, as well as of the pressure on team members to perform in these meetings. By contrast, the more formal meetings of teams in a government organization had the least amount of humour of all those analysed, and the humour was predominantly supportive in content and collaborative in style. Our analysis of humour thus provided another layer of support for our ethnographic observations regarding the different ‘systems of shared understandings’ and ways of doing things which obtained in the different communities of practice. Using these dimensions, the Māori workplace on which we focus in section 4 under the pseudonym ‘Kiwi Consultations’ was characterized by a high frequency of humour that was often collaborative and overall supportive in content, though a considerable amount of contestative humour also occurred.

One further strand of research that adopts a discourse analysis approach to humour in the workplace focuses on its role in constructing leadership identity. Holmes (2007a) and Schnurr (2009) examine how effective leaders use humour in white-collar professional New Zealand organizations. Humour provides a team leader with a valuable discursive resource for interactively achieving workplace goals, since it makes it possible to ‘do’ both power and politeness, and accomplish both transactional and relational objectives, often simultaneously (Holmes, 2000; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Holmes and Marra, 2006). In sum, as an interactive strategy involving all participants, humour is often an important component contributing to the construction and maintenance of a particular type of workplace culture or community of practice, as well as to the construction of a type of leadership identity appropriate to that culture. These points are illustrated in the analyses in this chapter.

## Ethnic humour and Māori humour

The appreciation and enjoyment of humour generally requires, among other things, shared cultural values and assumptions: different cultural backgrounds and beliefs influence what is perceived as amusing. There is an extensive literature on the relationship between ethnicity and humour, which involves the analysis of ethnic jokes (e.g. Davies, 1990; Nilsen and Nilsen, 2000) or of different cultural styles of humour (e.g. Ziv, 1988, 1997). Most relevant from our perspective in this chapter, however, is the spontaneous interactional humour which arises naturally in informal conversational contexts.

In New Zealand, there are significant differences between Māori and Pākehā culture, and hence it is not surprising that there are also differences in the ways in which Māori and Pākehā use humour. Pākehā culture, a culture derived from Europe, and from Britain in particular, is the dominant one. The indigenous Māori people constitute only 14 per cent of the New Zealand population, and over the past 150 years their language and culture have been steadily eroded (Metge, 1976, 1986). The Māori language is in very real danger of disappearing (Benton, 1996; Te Puni Kokiri, 2007; Bauer, 2008), and, despite some improvement over the last three decades, the culture of the indigenous Māori people is still much less prominent than Pākehā culture, so that it is not well understood by many Pākehā New Zealanders.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, and especially of greater relevance in relation to the analysis of the functions of humour, Māori culture emphasizes the group over the individual and places a high value on humility and avoidance of self-promotion (Metge, 1995), points we return to in section 4.

The research most relevant to our concern in this chapter examines the function of humour in maintaining and reinforcing ethnic boundaries and constructing solidarity and cultural identity in social interaction (Lowe, 1986; Holmes and Hay, 1997; Holmes and Marra, 2002b; Holmes, 2007a; Kell *et al.*, 2007). An analysis of 259 examples of everyday humour in conversations between Māori and Pākehā participants (Holmes and Hay, 1997) indicated that Māori participants were much more likely than Pākehā to engage in both boundary-marking humour (constructing and maintaining group boundaries) and in solidarity-building humour (emphasizing cultural identity and similarities between members of a group). These findings suggested that the ethnic boundary between Māori and Pākehā is more salient to Māori as a minority group than to the dominant Pākehā. By constructing those who fall outside the group boundary as 'other' and as outsiders, the beliefs and values that the speakers share are emphasized, enhancing solidarity among the group. Conversely, the Māori participants often also used humour to highlight similarities between themselves, establishing connections and explicitly emphasizing shared interests, ideas and values. Moreover, Māori participants in conversation with each other used many more items of Māori vocabulary, and made more frequent reference to Māori cultural concepts than Pākehā participants did. While closely related, the two functions of maintaining boundaries and constructing solidarity can be distinguished in the data we have analysed in our corpus of New Zealand workplace interaction, as illustrated below. First, however, we provide a brief overview of research on ethnicity and humour in the workplace.

## Ethnicity and humour in the workplace

As mentioned in the introduction, relatively little research has explicitly focussed on the variable of ethnicity in the analysis of workplace humour. Rogerson-Revell's (2007) analysis of how humour contributes to the power play in business meetings in intercultural contexts provides useful insights into the potential contribution of ethnicity to intercultural misunderstanding. She analysed meetings between Anglophone expatriates and ethnic Chinese employees in a south-east Asian airline corporation and found that humour was a recurring interactive strategy that characterized

the style of particular groups of speakers and was used by them in a range of ways. Specifically, she demonstrates an interesting contrast between two meetings: in one, humour was used positively and collaboratively by a group of Anglophones; in the other, the same group used humour to collude against the (Chinese) chair. Despite attempts to align with the Anglophones, the chair was clearly uncomfortable with their contestive, adversarial style and ‘highly-contextualised humour’ (Rogerson-Revell, 2007: 18–19), characterized by witty quips that interrupted or subverted the on-going talk, by exaggeration, by prosodic intensity and highly contextualized lexis, including metaphors, and by frequent swearing (2007: 20–21). Her analysis thus demonstrates how humour can be used ‘subversively to mask aggression or frustration and also to signal distance between the focus or butt of the humour (in this case the [Chinese c]hair) and the in-group’ (2007: 20). Clearly, humour can simultaneously serve to construct in-group cohesion for members of one ethnic group, while distancing another.

The disharmony illustrated in Rogerson-Revell’s analysis of intercultural meetings in a south-east Asian context provides an interesting contrast with the way humour functions in meetings in the New Zealand multicultural communities of practice that we have analysed. Marra and Holmes compared the use of humour in two different workplaces, and, while the preferred styles of humour differed, it was notable that both workplaces illustrated the significance of ‘the shared cultural knowledge, values, and beliefs which underlie the appropriate use and interpretation of humour ...’ (2007: 153). In one workplace, where the organization was committed to the promotion of Māori objectives, Māori ethnicity was foregrounded: Māori ways of behaving and interacting were the norm, and there was considerable use of the Māori language (Marra and Holmes, 2007: 157). In this workplace self-deprecating humour was often used to manage the pressures of conforming to Pākehā business norms while incorporating Māori values into workplace interaction. In the second workplace, a team comprising employees from four ethnic groups formed a particularly cohesive community of practice with a strong sense of group identity, ‘a strong orientation to team morale, and a very distinctive sparky communicative style’ (Marra and Holmes, 2007: 161). Expletives and jocular abuse, in particular, distinguished this team as a community of practice from others, both within the organization and outside. Given that a third of this team identified as Samoan and that Ginette, the team leader, was Samoan, it is unsurprising that Samoan styles of humour appeared to predominate (Marra and Holmes, 2007: 162). Overall, Marra and Holmes point to the contrast between the direct, robust and confrontational nature of the style of this community of practice and the much lower-key humour of the Māori team. While workplace culture is clearly a contributing factor, ethnicity also seems a crucial component in the ‘interactive mix’, which results in different styles of humour (Rogerson-Revell, 2007: 23).

Drawing on data gathered in two Māori communities of practice, Holmes (2007a) examined the ways in which humour serves as a useful strategy to enable Māori leaders to manage workplace conflict. Most relevantly, this involved conflict between the need to demonstrate leadership by being authoritative and decisive on the one hand, and the need to behave in a modest, humble and self-deprecating way, in conformity with Māori values, on the other. The analysis demonstrates how humour enables Māori leaders to ‘walk a tightrope between the demands of their position and the need to demonstrate their *mana*, on the one hand, and the requirement of modesty or *whakaiti* on the other’ (Holmes, 2007a: 20–21).<sup>6</sup> In sum, this research illustrates how humour can be a valuable discourse strategy enabling minority group members to ‘do’ ethnicity, while nevertheless operating successfully according to norms that are not always in line with traditional ethnic values.

This potential for humour to serve a range of functions simultaneously is illustrated further below, where we examine how humour functions to construct, maintain and reinforce ethnic boundaries at a New Zealand workplace, whilst also constructing solidarity by emphasizing shared aspects of cultural identity in social interaction.

## Using a discourse analysis approach to analyse humour

In this section we first describe our data collection method, then we provide the definition of humour used in our analysis, and finally we illustrate our approach with data from participants in one particular Māori workplace.

### *Collecting workplace data*

The data used to analyse workplace humour in the various studies undertaken by the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) team has been collected from a wide range of New Zealand workplaces, including government departments, commercial companies, small businesses and factories. Our ethnographic methodology was designed to give participants maximum control over the data collection process, whilst also allowing workplace interactions to be recorded as unobtrusively as possible (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). Typically, after a period of participant observation by one of our research assistants to establish how the workplace operates, a group of volunteers from the workplace record a range of their everyday work interactions over a period of two to three weeks. Some keep the recorder and microphone on their desks, while others carry the equipment around with them. In addition, where possible, a series of regular workplace meetings is video-recorded.

Over the recording period, people increasingly ignore the microphones and the video cameras (which are relatively small and fixed in place), and consequently we have collected some excellent examples of workplace interaction that are as close to ‘natural’ as one could hope. This database provides a rich resource for analysing humour in the workplace. The analysis below focuses on interactions recorded during work time in a Māori organization which we refer to using the pseudonym ‘Kiwi Consultations’ – a place where Māori cultural values, attitudes and beliefs are regarded as fundamental to the work being undertaken, Māori ways of doing things are the norm, and the objectives of the organization encompass achieving good outcomes for Māori people in general. Since humour is the focus of the analysis, a definition of what counts as an instance of humour is a necessary starting point.

### *Defining humour*

Even if we focus exclusively on verbal humour and exclude practical jokes and non-verbal humour, defining humour is not straightforward. Workplace humour is often extremely context-embedded, and evaluating an utterance as amusing frequently depends on shared experience, assumptions and values. For our purposes, humorous utterances have been defined as those identified by the analyst, on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discursal clues, as intended to be amusing by the speaker(s) and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants. (See Holmes, 2000, for a fuller discussion of this issue.) We use a wide range of linguistic as well as contextual clues to identify instances of humour, including the speaker’s tone of voice and the audience’s auditory and discursal responses. Laughter, and, where video recording is available, facial expression, including smiles, are also helpful indicators. When more than one person contributes to humour on a single topic, we generally treat this as one collaborative sequence of humour, i.e. one instance of humour for the purposes of quantitative, comparative analysis. In the next section, however, we illustrate a qualitative approach to workplace humour by using discourse analysis.

### *Analysing Māori humour in the workplace*

Workplace humour functions to construct, maintain and reinforce boundaries between Māori and Pākehā, whilst also constructing different aspects of Māori identity in social interaction, as we will

illustrate. First, however, we provide a very brief summary of some salient distinguishing features of Māori culture.

For Māori people, establishing connections and areas of shared cultural knowledge is a core dimension of communication.<sup>7</sup> This is especially evident in Māori views of the value and function of talk, which is often oriented to sharing knowledge and achieving consensus (Metge and Kinloch, 1978; Metge, 1995). Moreover, in general, verbal interaction is other-oriented and characterized by high involvement between speakers and their addressees. This is an aspect that Māori culture shares with other Polynesian cultures, and more generally with cultures based on an oral tradition (e.g. Ito, 1985; Besnier, 1989; Edwards and Sienkewicz, 1990). Researchers investigating pragmatic features of New Zealand English have suggested that this emphasis on connection provides one explanation for a preference in the speech of Māori New Zealanders for pragmatic features which serve to construct solidarity. These include more frequent use of the pragmatic tag *eh* (Meyerhoff, 1994), and high-rising terminals (HRTs) among Māori than among Pākehā speakers (Britain, 1992). These pragmatic devices are means by which Māori express rapport in New Zealand society. As they become associated with Māori ethnicity, they may also be used as social indexes of Māori identity and indicate positive attitudes to Māori values. Another means of expressing rapport and solidarity is humour. Our analyses suggest that, like other pragmatic devices, humour may be used to express a distinctive ethnic identity, both by drawing clear-cut ethnic boundary lines and by dynamically constructing in-group solidarity and ethnic identity.

### Boundary-marking humour

Our first example focuses around humour arising from a very explicit acknowledgement of the differences between Māori and Pākehā formal meeting behaviour. In Pākehā meetings, people are usually silent while someone is contributing to the floor; in Māori meetings, however, it is common to hear quiet background talk and regular affirmatory feedback while someone is talking (Metge and Kinloch, 1978; Kell *et al.*, 2007). Background talk can be heard in most of the larger meetings in our Māori organizations. For Māori participants, this functions as a signal of engagement and attention. In other words, this Māori communicative norm typically overrides the expectation of silence as a signal of attention where Māori participants are involved.

Familiarity with this norm provides the basis for a humorous exchange between Frank and Steve, two Pākehā participants in this excerpt from a meeting at Kiwi Consultations.

Example 1 [For transcription conventions see below, p. 505]

*Context:* Regular staff meeting of 16 participants in a Māori workplace. All but three are Māori. The Chief Executive Officer, Daniel, and senior manager Frank have been talking quietly, and on topic, in the background while Steve is making his presentation.

1. Steve: one of the important things in communication is
2. not to talk when others are talking
3. Group: [loud laughter]
4. Steve: I hope that the cameras picked up (that)
5. Group: [loud laughter]
6. Frank: Steve this indicates a need for you to be out in hui ['meetings']
7. Group: [laughter]
8. Frank: one of the things that you learn very quickly
9. is that a sign of respect is that other people are talking about
10. what //you're saying while you're saying it\

11. Group: / [laughter] \ [laughter]
12. Steve: I see I see
13. Caleb: //good recovery Frank good recovery\
14. Dan: /that's right Steve Frank is \ \ bicultural
15. Group: [laughter]

During Steve's extended contribution to the meeting many participants make quiet remarks to each other, but, when Frank makes a comment to Daniel, Steve reacts by humorously reprimanding them, *one of the important things in communication is not to talk when others are talking* (lines 1–2). For the participants, this is amusing since Steve is reprimanding his superiors. Furthermore, Steve is inappropriately asserting the Pākehā communicative norm in a workplace where Māori ways of speaking obviously prevail, as is evident from the fact that others have been talking quietly during Steve's contribution.

Frank responds (line 6) by challenging Steve's rebuke as inappropriate, implying that Steve is not yet familiar enough with Māori interactional norms: *Steve this indicates a need for you to be out in hui* (i.e. to attend more Māori meetings). Frank then spells out the Māori communicative norm: *a sign of respect is that other people are talking about what you're saying while you're saying it* (lines 9–10). Caleb laughingly compliments Frank on his riposte to Steve's scold, using a repetitive pattern, very typical of Māori discourse (Metge, 1995; Stubbe and Holmes, 2000), *good recovery Frank good recovery* (line 13), and Daniel adds *that's right Steve, Frank is bicultural* (line 14), a comment that is almost certainly contestively ironic, since Frank's very self-conscious Pākehā identity is something that Daniel is very aware of, as he has indicated in interview.

Paradoxically, as a result of drawing attention to the quiet side conversation, Steve causes an even bigger interruption to his presentation and attracts (good-humoured) critical attention to his own cultural ignorance and insensitivity. Ethnicity is suddenly a workplace issue influencing what is considered effective and appropriate communication. This excerpt thus provides a clear example of boundary-marking humour, and, interestingly, it is a Pākehā who draws attention to the different interactional norms of the two ethnic groups, demonstrating that Māori-related humour may be used to good effect by Pākehā in appropriate contexts.

Our second example again makes very explicit reference to ethnic boundaries, but also illustrates the very collaborative style typical of in-group humour. This group of senior Māori managers jointly constructs a humorous fantasy that indicates its members' attitudes to being patronized by those they regard as well-to-do and hypocritical Pākehā.

#### Example 2

*Context:* Meeting of senior management team in a Māori organization

1. Cal: multimillion dollar properties up //() \
2. Dan: / [laughs] \ \ oh they'll have a happy weekend then won't they
3. Har: yeah
4. Dan: [laughs]: the neighbours hey:
5. Cal: // [laughs] \
6. Har: /that's good \ \ they love it eh
7. Dan: [laughs]: yeah: I bet they love it
8. Har: they love they love that stuff //that Māori dynamic \
9. Dan: /that cultural colour \ \
10. Har: yeah
11. Hin: [name] was //saying that they've been \



12. Har: /the property values go up\\
13. Hin: coming round to offer offer what they can do
14. whether they can bake or
15. Dan: //[laughs] [laughs]: yeah yeah choice\\:
16. Har: /yeah oh yeah yeah straight up eh\\
17. Māori is the new black eh Caleb?
18. Cal: yeah it is
19. Group: [laughter]
20. Cal: it is it is the new black bro [laughs]
21. Group: [laughter]

At the beginning of this excerpt, Daniel makes explicit fun of rich Pākehā who find they have new Māori neighbours: *they'll have a happy weekend then ... I bet they love it that cultural colour* (lines 2, 7, 9). Hari's comment that *the property values go up* (line 12) is especially telling, since the traditional cultural stereotype entails depressed house prices in Māori neighbourhoods. He follows this up with another witty comment: *Māori is the new black eh Caleb* (line 17), which gains its effect not only from the enduring fashionability of the colour black in the clothing industry and the associated expression 'X is the new black', but also from the irony of the fact that Māori, who are a brown-skinned people, have long been perceived and labelled as 'black' in Pākehā eyes. The contributors in this example are all Māori, with Daniel leading the humour and encouraging his team in mocking Pākehā hypocrisy. The example is marked discursively as Māori interaction through features such as the pragmatic tag *eh* (lines 6, 16, 17), which, as mentioned above, is strongly associated with Māori ethnicity, and the address term *bro*, which is also associated with Polynesian identity. Again, there is repetition (lines 6, 7, 8, and lines 17, 20), a well-recognized characteristic of Māori discourse. And the syntactic apposition evident in Daniel's comment, *they'll have a happy weekend then won't they ... the neighbours*, is another feature that tends to typify Māori English discourse.

In this example, the humour is generated by Māori people's awareness of Pākehā's discomfort when Māori 'invade' well-to-do suburbs and by their ignorance of Māori ways of doing things. The group fantasize and satirize Pākehā attempts at polite behaviour in such a situation. Similarly, in example 1, culturally different norms are the basis of the humour, which focuses on the Pākehā employee's ignorance of Māori speaking norms, and their appropriateness in this Māori organization. These examples of humour, generated from awareness of different interactional norms, testify to the salience of the ethnic boundary between Māori and Pākehā for participants in this Māori workplace.

### Constructing in-group solidarity and reinforcing Māori identity

Boundary-marking humour focuses on the differences between groups and emphasizes ways in which norms, attitudes and behaviours can be distinguished. Another type of humour very characteristic of the Māori organizations with whom we worked was humour that instantiated and enacted norms, attitudes and values associated with Māori people. This kind of humour can be regarded as contributing to the construction of a specific and distinctive kind of Māori identity, and typically served to maintain and reinforce solidarity between Māori participants. We illustrate two distinct but related ways in which this was evident in the data from Kiwi Consultations: first self-disparaging humour, and secondly group-disparaging humour.

#### Self-disparaging humour

Individually directed, self-disparaging or self-deprecating humour is very apparent in the data from all the Māori organizations with whom we have worked. The extensive influence of the

Māori concept of *whakaiti* (appropriate modesty and humility) has been discussed in some detail in our recent research (Holmes, 2005; Marra and Holmes, 2005; Holmes, 2007b), and it is particularly evident in the prevalence of this type of humour. Māori leaders, for instance, are very aware of the need to avoid being seen as boastful or self-promoting. The late Sir Robert Mahuta, a much respected leader of his people and a major figure in national life, refers to ‘the whole spirit of *whakaiti* ... being very humble’ (Diamond, 2003: 141).

In his interactions with his staff, Daniel, the Chief Executive Officer at Kiwi Consultations, uses self-deprecating humour with skill, as one means of enacting the egalitarian ethics he likes to promote. Near the start of one meeting, for example, he refers to a training course on speed-reading that he has just attended, and he deliberately downplays his level of achievement. The others respond to this by teasing him in turn, illustrating how this kind of humour reinforces in-group solidarity.

### Example 3

*Context:* Meeting of senior management team in a Māori organization discussing a speed-reading course attended by some of their members, including Daniel, the CEO and chair.

1. Daniel: I brought my certificate I brought my
2.           um we grad- [seriously]: I graduated on Friday:
3. Caleb: oh ka pai [‘well done’] what was that for
4. Daniel: certificate of attendance
5. Albert: so at least we know you attended
6. Group: [laughter]
7. Albert: we have no idea how you performed
8.           but we know that you were there
9. Caleb: no no we’ve got to chuck him this report
10. Hine: no I got dux of the class he got attendance
11. Daniel: certificate of attendance but this is just terrible
12.           am I going to put this on the wall //certificate of attendance\
13. Caleb: /I hope so\
14. Hari: go on
15. Caleb: I hope you do
16. Hari: I think you should
17. Caleb: we’re gonna throw this report at you
18.           and we’re gonna time you thirty seconds
19.           and you can tell us exactly what’s going on

Daniel sets up the humour in this excerpt by stating that he has brought along his certificate and informing people he has graduated (lines 1–2), with the implication that these are substantial achievements. Caleb then congratulates Daniel with a frequently heard Maori phrase, *ka pai* (‘well done’), and feeds him a question (line 3), which sets Daniel up for his punchline, delivered in a deadpan style, *certificate of attendance* (line 4). This clearly subverts people’s expectations and generates laughter, and the group then proceed to tease Daniel. He responds with more humour, repeating and elaborating with an explicitly self-deprecating comment: *but this is just terrible am I going to put this on the wall certificate of attendance* (lines 11–12). This excerpt again includes a good deal of repetition, as well as some parallel syntactic structures (e.g. lines 7–8, line 10), stylistic features which emphasize the collaborative discursive interactional style of this group.

Other Maori leaders in our data also use witty, self-directed quips that downplay their abilities and skills and enable them to conform to cultural expectations of good leadership (Marra *et al.*, 2008).

## Group-disparaging humour

Group-disparaging humour is more complex. When Māori people make fun of their own group, they obviously emphasize in-group solidarity; the same comments from an outsider would cause great offence (see Nilsen and Nilsen, 2000: 117). But in some cases the Māori target group appears to be treated as ‘other’ by the speakers, as a sub-group to be ridiculed. It is important to bear in mind that this may be tongue-in-cheek, an echo of the views of the wider society, rather than the actual views of those involved. Example 4 illustrates this ambiguity: it is implicitly rural, less educated Māori who are the specific target of the ridicule and portrayed as relatively illiterate – a view of rural Māori that is prevalent in the wider society.

### Example 4

*Context:* Meeting of senior management team in a Māori organization. They are discussing the issue of mailing out a consultation document to different *iwi* (tribal groups) around the country. Albert is Pākehā, Hari is Māori.

1. Albert: um so there'll be seven hundred and fifty go out
2. ten to each iwi I sort of tossed up
3. whether to send five to only smaller ones
4. and I thought no
5. it's probably likely to cause more trouble
6. even though for some of them
7. they'll be getting two each [laughs]
8. Hari: not all of them can read
9. Albert: [laughs]

In this excerpt Albert comments that differently sized *iwi* will be offended if they don't get the same number of documents. Competitiveness between *iwi* is a common theme and source of humour when dealing with Māori groups, so Albert is here demonstrating understanding of Māori inter-group dynamics, and his comment therefore functions to construct in-group solidarity. Hari's deadpan response *not all of them can read* (line 8) elicits laughter. It is perceived as amusing because it is so outrageous and insulting to out-of-town Māori. It breaks the norms and expectations that Māori should be treated with respect, especially by other Māori. Another similar example involves a member of this team referring to a need to use *tom tom drums* instead of cellphones when out visiting Māori in remote areas. This outrageous comment, which portrays rural Māori as technologically backward and out of touch, also elicits laughter, and again may parody societal views rather than expressing the views of the speaker.

Finally, it is important to note that the strong ethnic dimension in the humour used in such workplaces is further reinforced by being encoded in linguistic features associated with Māori participants and Māori domains.<sup>8</sup> These include the non-standard second person plural pronoun *you* (e.g. *and um would yous be driving there*), the pragmatic particle *eh* (discussed above), use of Maori phrases (e.g. *ka pai*) and lexical items (e.g. *hui*), as well as items associated with Māori varieties of English, such as *fellas* and *bro*, as illustrated in example 5 below (and example 2 above).

### Example 5

*Context:* Meeting of senior management team in a Māori organization. Daniel is in the chair.

1. Caleb: oh they're still going
2. Daniel: yeah another three weeks after this I think
3. Caleb: oh okay I thought it was all over last week

4. Daniel: no I think they're trying to capture
5.                   your communication styles eh bro
6. Caleb: oh bugger

At the start of a meeting, Caleb, a Māori staff member, makes reference to the continued presence of our recording equipment, and Daniel responds by teasing Caleb that his *communication styles* are the focus of the research. So here, interestingly, Daniel both explicitly refers to and uses (*eh bro*) features of a specifically Māori communication style, actively constructing his identity as ethnically Māori.

In this section we have illustrated two broad categories of ethnic humour: first, boundary-marking humour, which draws attention to differences between Māori and Pākehā interactional norms; and, secondly, humour that enacts or constructs a shared ethnic identity or a shared understanding of ethnically distinctive cultural values, thus building solidarity between participants. Our analyses suggest that both these types of humour are particularly characteristic of the discourse of Māori in New Zealand organizations.

### Future research in ethnicity and humour

Many aspects of the interaction of ethnicity and humour in the workplace context remain to be explored. In particular, the complexities of perspective and attitude suggested in example 4 deserve further examination. Members of minority groups who succeed by the criteria of the wider society (education, occupation, wealth) often find themselves in a difficult position ideologically and politically. They tread a tricky pathway, balancing the demands of integrity against the values of their ethnic group, whilst also taking account of rules that ensure continued success in the wider society. Humour is a classic means of blending disparate identities and yoking together incompatible concepts. Research exploring the role of humour in accomplishing this feat in everyday workplace interaction would be very illuminating.

It also seems worth considering a wider range of types of workplace humour. Practical jokes and tricking people are further common themes in Māori humour, and recent research on humour in New Zealand IT organizations (Plester and Sayers, 2007; Plester and Orams, 2008) identifies the same types of humour as endemic in these organizations. There are clearly interesting opportunities for exploring similarities and differences in the types of humour prevalent in different occupational areas, especially those heavily populated by particular ethnic groups. From a discourse analysis perspective, this presents an interesting challenge, namely how to integrate and satisfactorily analyse non-verbal aspects of humour. Multimodal analysis may be required (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, 2009), as advocated by researchers in areas such as the discourse of advertising (Cook, 2001).

This chapter has also suggested the importance of cultural values as contributing factors in accounting for preferences in styles of humour, using the example of the Māori concept of *whakaiti* and relating it to disparaging humour in a Māori context. There is scope for research on the use of humour to accomplish the complementary process of 'cutting people down to size' and reminding them of their place in the wider group – a type of humour that has been reported as commonly heard in Māori contexts and is also associated with other ethnic groups (Davies, 1990, but also see Billig, 2001; Laineste, 2005).

Finally, there is scope for further research on the role of narrative in ethnic humour in the workplace. In the New Zealand context, comedians often make use of narratives that create distinctive, stereotypical Māori characters and draw to a greater or lesser extent on Māori oral traditions (e.g. stories passed down over time and delivered in a characteristic style of oratory). This is a theme associated with, among others, the late Māori comedy icon, Billy T James (born William James Taitoko), who for many New Zealanders represents the quintessential style of

Māori humour. Our research suggests that traces of this style are evident in workplace humour recounting stories about colleagues (Marra and Holmes, 2008). Thus humorous narratives with an ethnic theme are another potential area for further research, not only in New Zealand but in other contexts where oral narrative is a feature of ethnic discourse.

## Transcription conventions

All names used in the examples are pseudonyms.

[laughs]	Paralinguistic features and editorial comments in square brackets
:::	Colons indicate start/finish of paralinguistic feature
+	Pause of up to one second
// \,/\	Simultaneous speech
(hello)	Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance
()	Unintelligible utterance
[ ' ]	Translations of Māori words
?	Questioning intonation
-	Incomplete or cut-off utterance

## Further Reading

There are no books specifically on ethnic humour in the workplace from a discourse analysis perspective. We recommend two articles and two books that we consider will prove useful for those interested in this area.

Holmes, J. (2000) 'Politeness, power and provocation: how humour functions in the workplace', *Discourse Studies*, 2 (2): 159–185. Reprinted in Teun van Dijk (ed.) 2007. *Discourse Studies*. Vol. III. London: Sage, pp. 76–101.

Although this paper does not focus on ethnicity, it provides a useful starting place for those interested in using a discourse analysis approach for analysing workplace humour. It has been widely referred to because it provides useful definitions and categories for analysis.

Holmes, J. and Hay, J. (1997) 'Humour as an ethnic boundary marker in New Zealand interaction', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 18 (2): 127–151.

Although this paper does not focus on workplace discourse, it provides some very useful categories for analysing ethnic humour, with examples that illustrate the concepts discussed. It also includes a useful literature review.

Davies, C. (1990) *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

While this book does not involve discourse analysis, it earns its place because of its extensive influence in humour research. Davies is the main proponent of a widely cited theory, which explains ethnic humour according to general characteristics of industrial societies, involving oppositions such as stupid–clever and stereotypical cultural characteristics. While the approach has been critiqued, it is important for researchers in the area of ethnic humour to be familiar with it.

Rappoport, L. (2005) *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Building on Davies' research, Rappoport discusses the social functions and benefits of stereotype humour. In Chapter 3, in particular, he surveys possible reasons for minority group humour in some detail, as well as examining the powerful role of irony and satire in ethnic humour.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter has benefited from considerable research assistance from Sharon Marsden, which we gratefully acknowledge. It makes extensive use of the research of the Language in the Workplace Project and has benefited from comments from other team members, and in particular Meredith Marra.

- 2 See Nilsen (1993), Hay (1995), Nilsen and Nilsen (2000), Schnurr (2010) for overviews.
- 3 This section draws on Holmes (2007a).
- 4 See Schnurr (2008, 2010) for a thorough review.
- 5 Metge (1976, 1986, 1995) provides a very thorough description of characteristics of Māori culture and society, including the significance of inherited land, the cultural significance of *te reo Maori*, the Maori language, and the fundamental importance of *whanaungatanga* or kinship in Maori society.
- 6 'Mana' can be roughly translated as 'prestige' or 'standing', though its meaning in Maori culture is much richer than these words suggest.
- 7 This section draws on Holmes and Hay (1997).
- 8 See Bell (2000), Stubbe and Holmes (2000), Holmes (2005) for a discussion of these features.

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