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Robert Westwood and Allanah Johnston

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# Reclaiming authentic selves: Control, resistive humour and identity work in the office

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**Robert Westwood**

University of Technology, Australia

**Allanah Johnston**

University of Queensland Business School, Australia

## Abstract

This article analyses a study that reveals employees using humour to resist an organization's normative control attempts via a 'workplace justice' program. In an interesting 'doubling', the program used excerpts from the television comedy *The Office* which were intended to provide clear examples of inappropriate workplace behaviour and foster consensual understanding. However, *The Office* can be read as a parody of the performativity of management, gender and political correctness, a reading that problematizes the organizational purposes and one exploited by employees to construct alternate interpretations. Analysis focuses on a number of intersecting areas centring on identity work and humour. Firstly, resistance to normative control and its presumed intrusions, with resistance manifest in the form of humour. Related to this are employee perceptions that the organization required the mere *performance* of 'appropriate behaviour' in conformance with politically correct, managerially fashionable and legalistically expedient expectations. This raises questions about performance, identity and authenticity. Secondly, identity work takes place within power, but operates through a series of plateaux: actions may act resistively in relation to a managerial/hierarchical plateau whilst at the same time acting to reproduce forms of heteronormative masculinity in a different, gender power plateau. Thirdly, the article examines the role of humour in the complexities of identity work and in relation to different frameworks of power. It further theorizes and illustrates the ambiguities of humour and its double-edged capacity to contribute to the maintenance of the status quo and the performance of power as well as its resistive and subversive potential.

## Keywords

harassment, humour and organization, identity work, organizational control, performance, resistance, *The Office*

## Corresponding author:

Robert Westwood, School of Management, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia  
Email: Robert.westwood@uts.uq.edu.au

Control is immanent to organization, but its modes and foci shift over time in concert with wider social values and discourses that provide the resources and legitimation for its enactment. It is argued that organizational control has become more normative (Barley and Kunda, 1992; Fleming and Spicer, 2002; Kunda, 1992; Raz, 2005), or neo-normative (Fleming and Sturdy, 2007), and encompasses processes of identification, internalization and subjectification along with normalizing and disciplinary practices (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Jermier, 1998; Pullen and Linstead, 2005; Roberts, 2005). Control has extended beyond behaviour to incorporate values, emotions and identities (Webb, 2006; Willmott, 1993, 2003). Indeed, Kunda (1992: 11–12) defines normative control as ‘the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts and feelings that guide their actions ... a sort of creeping annexation of the workers’ selves’. This affirms Coser’s (1974) observation that organizations are ‘greedy institutions’, ‘omnivorous’ in the demands they make on persons.

The ‘creeping annexations’ have become extensive and include prescriptions and proscriptions of proper ways of being and behaving, including those labelled as ‘workplace justice behaviours’; encompassing harassment, sexual harassment and bullying.<sup>1</sup> Such notions are embedded in recently emergent wider legal and ethical discourses—civil/human rights, racism, sexism, multiculturalism, diversity, feminism and equal opportunity—which have been an impetus for organizational policies and practices that seek to proscribe particular behaviours as inappropriate. This article concerns one such attempt, but one with a particularity that adds theoretic interest.

The wider discourses within which ‘workplace justice’ is embedded are all putatively concerned with the transformation of social structures and relationships, including those of gender. However, these remain contested discursive spaces, some of which manifests around the notion of ‘political correctness’. The issues located in such spaces have high community valence and have been subject to various modes of representation, including within popular culture and in particular, in situation comedies. Within that genre the highly successful BBC series *The Office*<sup>2</sup> has such issues, including the notion of ‘political correctness’, centre stage. In an interesting act of ‘doubling’, this article’s case study organization deployed excerpts from *The Office* in its ‘workplace justice’ training program. The apparent intent was to induce employee awareness and a modification of behaviour. However, the excerpts did not generate such responses; rather the employees, using humour, responded in ways that challenged and subverted the program’s promoted meanings. The article reflects on this ‘double movement’ and examines how employees exploit the ambiguity and incongruity inherent to the comedy and parody of *The Office* in order to locate meanings and pleasures resonant with their preferred identities. Their ‘unruly’ behaviour undoes the narrow meanings and subject positions constructed by the organization and resistively reasserts alternatives. Rather than providing consensual meanings, the use of *The Office* introduces an open text into the organization’s ordered discourse that employees use to disorder it. Much of this dynamic circulates around gender politics and identity: employee sense-making resists the reconstitution of gender relations the organization seeks and tends rather towards the reproduction of certain hegemonic gender positions and identities.

In broader terms the case provides resources for discussion of some important and interrelated theoretic themes centred on identity work and humour. Firstly, *The Office* can be read as a parody and critique of the performativity of management, gender and political correctness, a reading that problematizes the organization’s use of it in its program. In an ironic parallel, the interactional dynamics of the case study also reverberate around the same aspects of performativity. The program participants see the organization as requiring them to merely perform ‘appropriate behaviour’ in conformance with politically correct, managerially fashionable and legalistically expedient expectations. Further, they see this as requiring the adoption of identities at odds with their established and ‘authentic’ identities and what they consider as ‘normal’. This raises questions about organizational intrusions, through normative control interventions, into identities and subjectivities and employee

resistance to that as well as the broader relationship between identity, performance and authenticity. Secondly, in enacting these resistive responses some participants engage in identity work that serves to protect other identity locations and perform a type of heteronormative masculinity (and femininity) that reproduces the status quo of traditional gendered structures. Humour is used as a resource in this identity work, and the case contributes to an understanding of identity work in organizations. It also shows how acts of resistance take place within power circuits that are complex and multi-faceted. Thirdly, and in an ironic parallel with the *The Office*, much of the challenge to organizational imposition is in the form of humour and so the case provides further analysis of the use of humour as a form of resistance. However, as previous work has indicated (Collinson, 1988, 2002; Grugulis, 2002; Holmes, 2000; Westwood, 2004), humour can be subversive and resistive, but it can also serve to support the status quo and 'perform power' (Holmes, 2000, 2007).

The article proceeds as follows. We firstly briefly discuss organizational control, and in particular the relatively recent turn to more intrusive normative modes. We then relate this to organizational specifications of appropriateness focusing on the current tendency to proscribe a range of inappropriate behaviours under the umbrella of 'harassment'. The discourses surrounding these behaviours include a legal one, and organizations have increasingly sought to respond to that. One form of response has been the mounting of harassment training programs. Next, the field study which documents one such attempt by an organization and employee responses to it is described. The following discussion focuses on those theoretic themes outlined above, namely: resistance to forms of normative control that intrude on people's sense of authentic behaviour and identity; identity work, particularly in sustaining particular gendered identities; and the use of humour as a mode of resistance and identity work.

## **Organizational control, appropriate behaviour and political correctness**

Organizational control might be immanent, but it is often contested. Contestation is more likely when control extends into domains considered private or not work-related. Contemporary forms of normative control have fomented critical discussion, particularly when it is deemed to intrude into the domains of peoples' thoughts, emotions, values, identities and life-world (e.g. Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992; Parker, 2000; Willmott, 1993). Such modes of control are seen by some as excessive and damaging: a form of 'organizational totalitarianism' (Schwartz, 1987), 'colonization of the self' (Casey, 1995) or 'tyranny' (Kunda, 1992), impacting identities in dysfunctional ways (e.g. Kondo, 1990; Kunda, 1992) and participating in Foucauldian normalizing and disciplining practices (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994; McKinlay and Starkey, 1998). Such intrusions are deemed to generate anxiety, stress, anomie and other psychological and existential disturbances. For instance, Garrety (2008: 93) argues that 'employees subjected to "cultural engineering" become anxious, fragmented, burnt out and prone to inauthentic play-acting'. The reference to 'inauthentic play-acting' implies an affront to an authentic sense of self and this is central to Garrety's thesis and the concerns of this article.

Modes of normative control can be seen as extending to notions of appropriate organizational behaviour and civility and judgements pertaining to these matters have come to incorporate behaviours labelled as harassment. With the development of a strong legalistic discourse, organizations have come to feel obligated to manage 'harassment' (Heames and Harvey, 2006; Rau-Foster, 2000). However, there are competing legal, moral and pragmatic discourses leading organizations to adopt competing goals reflected in intersecting legalistic and human resource responses (Dobbin and Kelly, 2007). Such responses encompass all manner of policies and practices including provision of training/education programs. It is assumed that such programs result in a reduction of 'inappropriate' behaviour; an assumption infrequently challenged since research has focused on the causes and consequences of harassment and less on the efficacy of training programs, and then the results have been

equivocal (Dobbin and Kelly, 2007; Goldberg, 2007). Within organizations ambiguity often surrounds the imperatives driving such programs with suggestions that legalistic motives predominate, aimed at meeting liability obligations and managing risk rather than actually changing behaviours (Ganzel, 1998; Hemphill and Haines, 1997; Nemetz and Christensen, 1996). The efficacy assumption is not empirically borne out nor shown in the 'anecdotal literature' which suggests that 'such programs garner negative reactions from participants'. Nemetz and Christensen, 1996: 434; see also Kaufman, 1994; Lunt, 1994). Reflecting on the related areas of diversity and multicultural training, Thomas (1994) argues that it comes across as too 'politically correct'.

Nemetz and Christensen (1996) believe that much of the controversy surrounding diversity and multicultural training stems from organizations' failure to 'understand the most fundamental differences about how individuals view ideal or desirable states of multiculturalism ... [and that] organizationally sanctioned diversity programs *are only one source of influence on individuals*' (p. 435, emphasis added). They remind organizations that how employees respond to diversity initiatives is shaped by their own fundamental beliefs in conjunction with a range of other influences, and not just through the 'paradigmatic biases of the trainer' (p. 453). In saying this they signal two important things. Firstly, responses to workplace civility/justice matters are densely embedded in a range of discourses that have evolved over recent decades. Secondly, that organizations appear oddly blind to this embeddedness; acting as if the issues can be managed hermetically within the organization and thereby detaching employees from their complex and interrelated life-worlds and the multiple discourses that both constitute them and in which they participate. The case organization appears to make the same presumptions; seemingly unwilling to take account of the conceptions of inappropriate behaviour and its boundaries held by its own members and the sources that have informed such conceptions.

It is apparent that meanings related to harassment and inappropriate behaviour continue to swirl within multiple discourses, including those of popular culture. Hence, whilst organizations may introduce specific policies and practices this does not guarantee consensual meanings. Indeed, studies reveal lack of consensus, particularly along gender lines (Dougherty, 2006; Goldberg, 2007). Such dissensus is partly attributable to shifts in discourse and meanings over time. As Ganzel (1998: 86) notes, in 1963 'your employer could legally fire you if you got pregnant, or even if you got married ... (your boss) and his colleagues could make crude observations about your looks; you were supposed to smile and consider them compliments'. That much has changed over the last half century is reflected in popular culture and in this sense it is a valuable critical resource for organization studies (Rhodes and Westwood, 2008). One illustration is the BBC drama '*Life on Mars*' in which protagonist Sam Tyler, a detective inspector, apparently goes back in time to be part of a police team in the early 1970s.<sup>3</sup> We witness the confrontation not only of 21st century technologies, styles and policing methods with those of three decades earlier, but also with social attitudes, mores and behaviour. The sexism, homophobia, racism, crudity and bullying of the 1970s 'cops' is in stark contrast to Tyler's contemporary standards and more 'politically correct' approach to things.

The notion of political correctness (PC) is apposite here. The range of discourses within which 'workplace justice' issues emerged collectively work to redefine the nature of relationships, behaviours and norms of appropriateness. This is an enormous discursive space and PC functions as a signifier for portions of it and certain reactions to it; specifically, for that part that insists on 'appropriate' responses to race, culture, gender and other identity locations and differences. However, in popular usage PC has acquired pejorative connotations of unnecessary and intrusive imposition, particularly when the impositions are seen as excessive and/or extravagantly doctrinaire—to the extent that they are read as slipping into the comedic and absurd. The ambiguities surrounding PC have been a rich vein for popular culture, for example in the laddism of *Men Behaving Badly* or the 'mock-macho' sitcoms of *The Coach* or *Home Improvement* (Hanke, 1998). However, they have not been treated with greater parodic subtlety than in the work of Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant and their

satires *'The Office'* and *'Extras'*.<sup>4</sup> Although PC has developed negative connotations, this does not imply that inappropriate responses to matters of difference are not still rampant, problematical and in need of action. It does imply that initiatives that become labelled as PC often encounter cynicism and resistance and may lose their transformative capacities.

The issue of PC is inherent to the case organization to which we now turn. The organization introduced a 'workplace justice' program to raise awareness of harassment and its consequences. Excerpts from *The Office* were used to enliven the sessions, but also as a device to identify inappropriate behaviours. The organization apparently presumed that a consensual view of harassment and appropriateness could be communicated, received and responded to by employees. However, employee reactions did not conform to these expectations and the intended meanings and interpretations were challenged and resisted, as we will see.

## Field study: controlling inappropriate behaviour at Lucky Treasure

### *Research site and design*

The field study features a state-owned lottery corporation, herein called *Lucky Treasure*.<sup>5</sup> It employs over 350 staff, mostly located at its head office within an Australian metropolitan centre. The organization has relatively equal numbers of male and female employees although men dominate senior positions. The study is based mainly on observations of a series of 13, two-hour 'workplace justice' workshops, which were compulsory for all staff and which were developed and facilitated by two of the organization's HR managers. Each workshop was composed, by HR, so as to have a mix of people in terms of gender, department and hierarchical position. The HR managers explained that they wanted to ensure that participants interacted with staff with whom they were not necessarily familiar. The intention was to break down anonymity since anonymity was believed to provide a seedbed for inappropriate behaviours. However, despite this, people from the same department or hierarchical position still attended the same workshops and people still tended to sit with people with whom they were familiar. The workshops were, thereby, a mix of familiar and (relative) stranger sub-groups.

One of the authors attended all the workshops as observer. All participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form and told that the researcher would be observing the workshops and taking notes. From the HR managers perspective the researcher's role was to observe the workshops in order to help assess content, effectiveness and alignment with the 'fun and benevolent' culture of the organization. For participants the researcher's role was also one of assessing the workshops and staff reactions to them, including the use of humour. The researcher was not always merely a passive observer, she participated in some exercises and group activities making this a form of quasi-participant observation study. In terms of the researcher's subject position, at one level her personal and social demographics were aligned with those prevailing among workshop participants—between 30- to 40-years-old, Caucasian, female, middle class. As noted, the organization's gender mix was balanced, albeit with hierarchical asymmetry. Ethnically the vast majority of participants were white Australian, some with European ancestry. The researcher had to make a decision on how to behave and act during workshops when in other than a passive observer role. It was decided that it would be least problematic if she responded in a natural manner and so she interacted as she might normally do and if she found something humorous responded in her normal way. Notes were taken throughout—focusing particularly on instances of humour and responses to it—and extensive field notes completed immediately after the workshops. The study forms part of a larger project exploring the relationship between humour and identity construction in organizations.

Making sense of the data involved constant comparative analysis (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992) using an inductive approach to categorizing incidents based on commonalities and/or differences

(Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The method enables distinctions between patterns or themes to be identified and distinguishes which new emerging themes warrant further investigation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Briefly, the key themes to emerge revolved around humour as a form of identity work for different organizational groups, but the relevant aspects of the analysis here concern the way humour was used as a way of 'making sense' of, as well as challenging and questioning, the messages/interpretations being conveyed by the organization's program and how this served to sustain and protect certain identities.

According to HR personnel, *Lucky Treasure* prides itself on having an 'open', 'collaborative' culture and very low rates of harassment and discrimination.<sup>6</sup> Despite this the organization felt the need for a workplace justice program. Indeed, the organization had conducted such programs before, but after staff surveys suggested these were perceived as 'overly legalistic' and a consultant concluded that they did not fit with the organization's 'benevolent, spirited and prosocial culture',<sup>7</sup> changes were made—including seeking to make them more interactive and fun. The HR managers tried to do this most obviously through the use of excerpts from *The Office* in which the main character, David Brent,<sup>8</sup> commits numerous 'inappropriate' gaffes in relating to his employees. They felt this would be a great way to introduce the topic of the workshops and provide the basis for an exercise through which participants could identify 'inappropriate' behaviours.

*The Office* is a popularly and critically acclaimed documentary style 'situation comedy' known for its parody of populist management, gender politics and political correctness. Indeed, as Brabazon (2005: 113) suggests, 'Throughout *The Office*, women, gay men, black communities and people with disabilities are continually ridiculed, categorized and implicated in the patriarchal project'. She relates this to the heteronormative masculinity held to be pervasive in modern management culture and which is parodied by *The Office*. It is also very much about performance, the performance of comedy, but also of gender and management. It is worth noting that *The Office* has been screened on Australian television and is widely available on DVD. It was very apparent from reactions, comments and conversations with participants that many were familiar with it.

### Case narrative

The showing of *The Office* excerpts and related exercises was central to the training program. In the excerpts, Brent is managing the influx of staff into his area from the merged Swindon branch. Throughout he makes a series of 'politically incorrect' comments relating to race, disability, gender and sexual orientation; made more acute by the presence of a black male and a female in a wheelchair in the Swindon team. Much of the awkwardness in series 2 revolves around a joke initially told by Gareth, Brent's 'team-leader' and sycophantic neophyte:

Gareth: It's Christmas dinner, Royal family having Christmas dinner, Camilla Parker-Bowles goes, 'OK, we'll play twenty questions. I'll think of something and then you have to ask me questions and guess what it is'. So what she's thinking is ... a black man's cock.

Brent: Oh, trust Camilla ... (softly and to the camera) not racist is it?

Gareth: So Prince Phillip goes, 'Is it bigger than a breadbin?' She goes 'yeah'. Prince Charles goes 'Is it something I can put in my mouth?' She goes 'yeah'. Queen goes 'Is it a black man's cock?'

Brent (laughs): She's guessed it. From those clues.

Gareth: Straight away.<sup>9</sup>

Later, Brent is making a welcoming speech to the Swindon team, trying desperately to be funny through a series of bad, 'scripted' jokes that fall flat. His opening gambit is 'I'm not gay. In fact I can honestly say I've never come over (gestures masturbation) a little queer'. He continues in that vein with a speech 'full of inappropriate humour and facile attempts to secure recognition of his status in a scene that evokes simultaneous empathy and repulsion' (Tyler and Cohen, 2008: 123). Shortly after, he's standing informally with some team members still trying to win them over with his 'humour' and he attempts Gareth's joke. Just as he gets to the line 'a black man's cock', the black employee approaches. An interactional hiatus ensues as Brent squirms, unsure whether he should complete the joke or not. The issue continues to reverberate; for example when Brent is summoned by his new bosses and told that a complaint has been made about his racist jokes. In his defence he says: 'It's not an insult is it—if anything it's a complement'.

To many, Brent's behaviour might be read as ineluctably inappropriate and offensive, out of alignment with the expectations of a contemporary organizational environment. The HR managers seemingly expected just such a reading, but it quickly became apparent that this was not the case.

While the excerpts were playing, staff frequently made humorous comments about the behaviours on-screen, such as: 'Just like my last workplace!', 'Oh, he is a problem child isn't he?', and 'What a jerk!' accompanied by smiles and laughter. People winced and smirked as nearly every variety of 'un-PC' behaviour was shown to comic effect. After the excerpts the facilitators split the participants into small groups and requested they complete a brief questionnaire and identify different forms of discrimination and harassment, and to sum up: 'What is inappropriate behaviour—what does it look like to you?'.<sup>10</sup> Participants called out behaviours they had identified and facilitators recorded responses on a white board. This all afforded occasions for more mirth and typically evolved into a discussion about what constituted inappropriate behaviours, centring particularly on sexual harassment. This is when employees, both male and female, began to open the text up and construct alternative readings and challenge those presumed by HR, mostly using humour to do so. For example, in four of the workshops someone reflected on a comment made in an excerpt about a woman's legs. In one Jack joked 'But I comment on Jenny's legs everyday!'. Jenny is seated next to Jack: they work in the same department and seem very comfortable with each other. Jenny laughs loudly, as does the rest of the room. Another employee chips in asking: 'what if 'Lisa with the long legs' doesn't find that offensive? What if she's flattered?'. Another female employee adds: 'yeah, it's a compliment!'. The HR manager quickly responds by asking: 'How does the manager know she is flattered? What if she wasn't?', and continues, 'It really is inappropriate to make a comment on a person's appearance like that, not something as personal'. Jenny then jokes 'Oh jeez, I've been commenting on Jack's butt for ages' to which Jack pretends he's deeply offended and the room laughs again. The HR manager tries to return to a more serious tone saying 'It's really pretty risky' to make personal, appearance-related comments that could be interpreted as suggestive or 'lewd'. Using 'risk' here re-surfaces the legalistic motive.

At another workshop an employee commented that he felt sorry for Brent because everyone misunderstood his jokes and 'he was just trying to be funny'. The HR manager interjected that it was 'dangerous territory' to tell jokes to employees because you could never be sure of their reaction. Seemingly agreeing, an employee added: 'it's better to just tell jokes to the people you know'. The HR manager agreed, but then quickly added that other employees may still hear and be offended. This was met with signs of annoyance and comments such as 'Well, isn't that their bloody problem?' and 'They shouldn't be eaves-dropping anyway!'. The room, including the HR managers, laughed. It is, of course, ironic that employees were being advised to be 'careful' about the use of humour in the context of the HR managers' lack of reflexivity regarding the possibility of alternative 'reactions' to intended humour.

The control of jokes and behaviour continued to be questioned by employees as the workshops progressed. The harassment behaviours identified ran the gamut from 'posters, cartoons, emails,



screensavers'... 'smutty jokes, comments or off-the-cuff remarks' and 'offensive jokes ... or practical jokes'. Employees either teased each other about these examples (e.g. 'Looks like you're in big trouble, mate!') indicating how ludicrous they found some of them, or directly challenged the facilitators. For instance, one woman interjected: 'Hang on, I sent a funny email this morning. I thought it was pretty harmless ... well maybe you'd need to be a woman to find it funny ...'—to which a male colleague teases 'Oh, here we go'—and then questioned the HR managers: 'are you saying we should just stop sending *anything* we find funny?'. Another says 'Yeah, sometimes that (receiving a funny email) makes my day'. The HR managers seemed to struggle to respond, but said that while the company couldn't ban employees from sending amusing emails or making jokes, they needed to be 'very aware' that 'what might be funny to you might not be funny to someone else' and that they should be 'very cautious' about any jokes or humorous material within the organization. The other HR manager added that she had to 'watch herself sometimes' and that 'I might send things to Sally [her HR colleague], but I know her very well, but even then there might be jokes I wouldn't share with anyone in the workplace, I might share them only with friends or family outside of work time'. The employees looked sceptical. The comment about having to 'watch herself' is, of course, highly resonant with normalizing and disciplinary practices.

The reflections on emails and computer 'harassment' were sparked by one excerpt wherein Brent is showing new recruit Donna around the office. He is patronisingly explaining the email system and stops in front of someone's computer to demonstrate. He says 'Oh, here's a new email', and hits a key. Donna, who is looking at the screen (not visible to the audience), suddenly laughs and covers her mouth in surprise. On the screen is a doctored pornographic image with Brent's head superimposed on a woman's body. Highly embarrassed, he says:

Brent: Not funny because ... (trails off). Donna should not have to see me naked, as a woman, with two men doing that (illustrates masturbation) all over me.

Female employee (whose computer it is): You've got nice boobs.

Brent: (to the whole room): Who else has seen this filth?

Everyone raises their hands.

Brent: I'm angry—not because I'm in it, but because it degrades women, which I hate (looks directly at camera) ... Whoever did it; could be a man or a woman. It could be a woman; women are as filthy as men ... women *are* dirty (looks directly at Donna when saying this).

## Discussion

Before we go any further, and lest we be misunderstood, let us be clear that we are not suggesting that harassment is not a problem or that organizations should not try to do something about it. The evidence clearly shows that harassment and discrimination are detrimental to both victims and the organization (Jackson and Newman, 2004; Lim and Cortina, 2000; Rau-Foster, 2004; Schneider et al. 1997). We take at face value the organization's claim to a good record in terms of harassment and discrimination and that it is genuine in its desire to limit and control harassment. However, it is also clear that it is impelled by other motives, specifically to protect itself from litigation. This organization would not, of course, be unusual in seeking to pursue multiple, even incompatible/conflicting, goals. Nor need it be assumed that organizations are always able to rationally reconcile different or incompatible goals. Indeed, as has been recognized (Clegg, 2002; De Vries, 1980;

Lewis, 2000), organizations are not best conceived of as rationally ordered entities, but rather characterized by inconsistencies, paradoxes and contradictions. Significantly, part of what humour accomplishes is the surfacing and exposure of inconsistencies, paradoxes and contradictions (Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993). In this case, employee humour exposes tensions in organizational goals—legalistic, pragmatic and ethical—around harassment.

The article *is* seeking to question a number of things. Firstly, it questions whether requiring people to merely perform (appropriate behaviour), violates a sense of authenticity and whether that matters. It does so in the context of also questioning normative organizational control and intrusions into values, self and identity and the organizations' apparent assumption that a singular discourse and consensus about what constitutes inappropriate behaviour can be constructed and that people can be required to adopt specific modes of behaviour in response to that. Secondly, it examines the role of humour in the complexities of identity work and in relation to different frameworks/plateaux of power. Thirdly, it examines the ambiguities of humour and its double-edged capacity to contribute to the maintenance of the status quo and the performance of power as well as its resistive and subversive potential. We address these three questions in the following three subsections.

### *Performance and authenticity*

The existence of multiple organizational motives and goals notwithstanding, organizational rhetoric suggests an aspiration to generate homogenous meanings around harassment behaviours and engender a consensual acceptance of inappropriateness. Indeed, it could be argued that the very lack of homogeneity in the organization in relation to these matters was what was deemed to be in need of control and a motivation for the training. A further assumption seemed to be that *The Office* excerpts would provide not only a light-hearted way to address the issues, but that participants would read them as instances of indisputably offensive behaviour, facilitating consensual understandings. They may have served the former purpose, but not the latter. Employees questioned the behaviours shown, related those to their own experiences and interpretations in particular ways, and undercut the organizational assumptions. Significantly, the HR managers declared themselves surprised at how much 'feedback' staff provided on the excerpts. Rather than offering clear and unambiguous instances of inappropriate behaviour, the excerpts fuelled debate and dissent. Employees signalled that they considered some of the 'questionable' behaviours as normal, not particularly offensive and not in need of external control. This put HR under pressure and they responded by telling staff that many of the behaviours they deemed acceptable were 'too risky' thereby invoking the legalistic imperative.

*The Office* material, as with all popular culture texts, is polysemous (Fiske, 1986). Furthermore, as comedy and parody, it actually rests on incongruity and ambiguity. Like all humour, it intrudes possible alternative realities into the mundane understandings people make about their life worlds and thus is inherently subversive or disordering (Berger, 1997). The employees responded to such features in ways not anticipated by the HR managers, relating excerpt material to the varied and ambiguous popular discourse surrounding inappropriate behaviours and resisting the unitary interpretations the company wanted validated. To read *The Office* as presenting a series of unambiguously 'inappropriate' behaviours that it condemns, ignores not only the polysemousness of popular culture texts and the variable pleasures sought therein by audiences, but also the parody, ambiguity and nuance invested in the program's scripts. Gervais and Merchant are problematizing and parodying notions of performance—the performance of 'political correctness', the performance of management and the performance of masculinity.

The employees use the opportunity afforded by the polysemous comedic excerpts to resist and challenge the proffered meanings and construct alternatives, mostly in a joking manner. They signal

their negative reaction to the putative imposition of rules of behaviour and constructions of proper persons and challenge the notions of appropriateness. For example, one male staff member jibed the HR manager saying ‘So, if I give a woman a compliment at work, am I going to be clobbered over the head or somethin’!?’. The room laughed, but the comment ignited debate about what was appropriate. His is a common type of male response, one based on the perceived unreasonableness of the boundaries being imposed and the threat to ‘normal’ mundane interactions. Much of the resistance to PC rests on this perceived stultifying effect; that presumptively normal behaviours are prohibited and people have to be self-monitoring and self-restraining to an unacceptable degree. The resonance with *The Office* is delicious since it is precisely this self-conscious and self-monitoring that we witness in Brent at every turn until his behaviour appears as entirely corseted and inauthentic. What is parodied and critiqued by *The Office* is not inappropriate, non-PC behaviour per se, but Brent’s knowing and studied attempt to *perform* political correctness; its inauthenticity. It is Brent’s obvious ‘performance’ of appropriate behaviour, and his criticism of others for failing to perform when his own words and deeds undercut this ‘performance’ revealing his persistent transgressions into the inappropriate, that is at issue.

The notion of ‘performance’ is apposite since Brent often expressly plays to camera when wanting to signal that he is being PC—note the examples reported earlier such as when Gareth begins his joke and Brent looks nervously at the camera and asks ‘It’s not racist is it?’. He invites the audience to monitor his performance and validate his appropriateness and political correctness. As Tyler and Cohen (2008: 115) maintain; ‘The documentary style of *The Office* means that there is a discernible difference between the way in which the characters behave when they are seemingly being “caught” on film as opposed to when they are purportedly playing to the camera ... directly’. Indeed, the *documentary* style draws attention to its own performative aspects and induces a certain audience postionality.

*The Office* also parodies a particular way of ‘performing’ management, one that again relies on studied artifice and second-hand scripts. Brent trades in the language and ideas of populist ‘new’ management (Brabazon, 2005). Again, however, his doing of management is revealed as inauthentic performance as his own behaviour undercuts these pretensions. There is also the performance of a form of ‘new’, pro-feminist, ‘PC’, masculinity. As performance, this again veils a more hegemonic, misogynistic, ‘laddish’ masculinity, of which more shortly. *The Office*, then, can be read as a critique of the artifice of PC and of the inauthenticity involved in peoples’ mere performance of what is expected of them or as dictated by certain prevailing fashions and fads.

Crucially, and in a parallel fashion, the issues of performativity and authenticity are very apparent in the *Lucky Treasure* case and employee behaviours and responses. From their reactions it is apparent that they see the organization as disingenuous and inauthentic, particularly in relation to what they see as the real motives behind the program, which for them are primarily legalistic, and in relation to requiring employees to merely perform certain behaviours. We are not suggesting that the company was necessarily disingenuous in this regard nor that they could not simultaneously pursue both ethical and legalistic goals, but rather that employees were sceptical and did not read it that way. It is worth reiterating how under pressure the HR managers foreground the risk management and liability aspects of the program. The employees’ acts of resistance through humour, if nothing else, helped surface this apparent prioritizing.

That employees read the program as an instance of PC is apparent both directly—as when one was heard to comment that it was ‘more PC mumbo jumbo shit’—and indirectly. The case represents an instance of resistance to organizational intrusiveness and of requiring employees to adopt behaviours, values and identities that are imposed, not natural, and that can only be fulfilled inauthentically—by merely ‘performing’ and adopting inauthentic identities.

The issue of authenticity is, of course, a vexed one in the light of postmodern configurations wherein “Identities” become the unstable, fluid and hybrid compiling of subject positions, perpetually reassembled around new, discontinuous narratives, rather than having a “core” of continuity through selfhood or agency’ (Webb, 2006: 18). There are, however, competing conceptions within postmodernism wherein ‘... free-flowing individualism and flux is in contrast with the use of a postmodernist perspective in other cases to conclude that identities are governed by forms of regulatory power, which exclude the possibility of authentic choice and agency’ (Webb, 2006: 18). For some, identities are power effects resultant from the operations of cultural discourses (e.g. Clegg, 1994) and the adoption of/resistance to ascribed identities moments of politicized struggle (e.g. Hall and du Gay, 1996). At another extreme, there is a libertarian, almost consumerist view of identity in which people are free to choose identities and to put them on and off like jackets, and any notion of a unified self, agential identity or coherent subjectivity is denied (Gergen, 1991). Some see this as a socially underdetermined conception that negates social and power effects and the constraints and limitations they entail for identity positions. Garrety (2008), for example, suggests that the theoretic possibility of fluidity and multiplicity can be overstated in the face of mundane and pragmatic constraints. She asserts a kind of pragmatist, phenomenological perspective arguing that the postmodern position notwithstanding, in practice people retain notions of a ‘real’ and authentic ‘core’ self and that ‘our continued discursive construction and protection of it is a pivotal means through which we constitute ourselves within power’ (Garrety, 2008: 98).

Garrety (2008: 94) suggests we need: ‘a model of the self within organizations that is both more precise and more open to possibilities, a model that does not, in an *a priori* fashion, construct the self as either fragile and insecure, or robust and resistant in the face of power’. It is a view of self that is reflexive and multi-faceted and ‘capable of adopting a variety of positions vis-a-vis organizational pressures and constraints’ (Garrety, 2008). It affirms the non-unitary nature of self and identity, but recognizes that phenomenologically people often adhere to a ‘core authentic self’ and that within particular discursive spaces and concomitant power effects there are limits to the free play of identity adoptions. It also accords with Taylor’s (1989) acknowledgement of ‘the irreducibly plural sources of modern personal identity’ (Lyshaug, 2004: 302) and its complex and multifaceted nature. The self is dialogical, constituted through an internal dialogue among the plurality of sources the person engages with (Taylor, 1991). The cultural communities to which people belong provide them with the resources needed to construct their identities and this includes, we maintain, resources from popular culture. However, as Lyshaug (2004: 310) argues, there are multiple sets of ‘backdrop meanings’ that people can utilize as identity resources and these are ‘not always clearly demarcated: they shift and converge, compete and blend together in unanticipated ways’.

Concerning *Lucky Treasure* staff, one reading sees them as resisting their organization’s attempt to construct proper persons and particular identity locations in a discourse of managerialism, bourgeois civility and political correctness. In this sense they are, as Hall and du Gay (1996) suggest, resisting the ascribed identities proffered by the employer and (re-)asserting their adopted identities. Or, as Garrety (2008: 100) puts it; ‘Resistance to organizational control can, therefore, take the form of defending and enacting putatively “real” or “genuine” selves that are set up in opposition to the “false” selves prescribed by management’. Of particular interest in this case is that the employees utilize the resources of popular culture via *The Office* excerpts; precisely the resource the organization thought would help consolidate their control attempt.

This organization’s program can be seen as an element within the new forms of normative control and what some see as their unwarranted intrusions and impositions on employees. However, it is erroneous to assume that such control attempts are uniformly successful and that employees are readily duped into accepting them (Collinson, 1992, 2002). As Garrety (2008: 99) notes, ‘the

depiction of cultural engineering as “totalizing” has been challenged’. Employees do not always meekly submit to organizational manipulations and they can and do resist assaults on their sense of self and identity. Recognizing this does not entail the reassertion of a core, stable self and disavowal of poststructuralist assertions of identic plurality and fluidity. The notion that being required to perform ‘organizational identities’ somehow negates other identities and necessarily entails inauthenticity is questionable. A protean, multiplicitous identity does not necessarily equate to inauthenticity, as Taylor makes clear. Further, employees are quite capable of engaging in ‘Goffmanesque manoeuvres in which they self-consciously present selves that are at odds with what they “really” think and feel’ (Garrety, 2008: 97). Nonetheless, there may be phenomenological limits at which violations of a ‘real self’ are not tolerated. Resistance to organizational attempts to insinuate identities and subjectivities resides precisely in peoples’ capacity to construct, protect and maintain alternative identities (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Collinson, 1994; Kondo, 1990; Robertson and Swan, 2003). The employees in this case do appear to be resisting control attempts that they read as requiring inauthentic responses in terms of both performance and identity location and in doing so are reasserting identities and engaging in the politics of identity. Part of the contribution of this article is further elaboration on resistance and identity work with the additional demonstration of the use of resources drawn from popular culture and of humour to do so.

Employee resistance is broadly aimed at organizational control and as such staff are ensnared within the frameworks of organizational power and dominant managerialist discourses. However, as we shall see they are also embedded and participate in other frameworks or plateaux of power (Fleming and Spicer, 2002), such as those related to gender and hegemonic masculinity. In the interactional dynamics that characterize the case we see employees engaging in acts of signification that both challenge these dominant frameworks, but also participate in their production and reproduction. We turn now to these matters before considering the role of humour in resistance.

### *Gender identity and performing masculinity*

During the programs both male and female staff challenged the meanings and interpretations promoted by the organization. However, much emanated from the men, particularly in relation to what was considered sexual harassment. Indeed, the bulk of the humour and discussions resided in this area and so we will focus on masculine identity work.

It seemed that the organization’s proscriptions were most often read as being directed at men and their behaviour in relation to women. The men responded by challenging the definitions of inappropriateness and the boundaries being proposed. The flavour of this is encapsulated by banter between male employees. One asks under his breath; ‘so what *can* you flamin’ do then?’ to which his colleague replies ‘not bloody much by the sound of it’. After one workshop male IT staff continued to mock the content and make jokes: one asked another if he could borrow his pen the response, in an exaggerated and ‘whiney’ voice, was ‘you’re just harassing me now!’. On another occasion, on exiting the workshop one man remarked in mock triumph ‘Yes! Free to harass!’. The proscriptions were seen as an attempt to curtail ‘normal’ male behaviour.

The men used humour to both resist organizational power *and* defend and sustain a particular performance of masculinity, thereby re-producing a hegemonic or traditional mode of masculinity. As noted, in *The Office* such a performance of heteronormative masculinity is frequently played with, parodied and critiqued. Indeed, for Tyler and Cohen (2008: 122) parodying the ‘intersection between managerialism, hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity’, and exploring performance inherent to organizational boundaries, especially those relating to gender and sexuality, is the essence of the sitcom. They maintain that ‘Much of the humour in *The Office* ... brings this theme of

performativity to the fore, through the comically exaggerated recitation of particular cultural norms in the evocation of heterosexual masculinity' (Tyler and Cohen, 2008: 119). Certainly, humour is derived from Brent's attempt to 'perform' the modern, pro-feminist male one moment, whilst reverting to a performance of heteronormative, even misogynistic masculinity the next. For example, in one excerpt Brent is introducing the new person Donna to staff. He mentions that her father is a policeman, and says, smiling, 'so hands off'. The men in the room let out a string of sexist comments—'I've got something she can take down in evidence', 'Do you want to see some swollen goods', 'Wouldn't mind escaping up her tunnel'—to which all in the room are smiling. However, Brent responds to the final comment by sending the man from the room like a badly behaved schoolboy. He then, in justification, says: 'I will not have her tunnel bandied around this office willy nilly (looks at camera, looks at Donna)'.

However, much of the parody revolves around Gareth and his clumsy and failed attempts at performing the stereotypical 'macho male'. We say failed since, like Brent, the performance draws attention to itself as *performance*—to such a degree that it too appears as purely inauthentic and not credible. Gareth's repeated references to his experience in the (territorial) army and his absurdist 'acting out' of the machismo and stereotypical aspects of that are central. In one of his monologues to camera he comments on romantic office relationships, informing us that he has had 'loads', but they are not a good idea because they are a 'distraction'. He then equates this to gay men in the army:

It's one of the main arguments against letting gay men into the army ... I haven't got a problem with that. A gay man's not going to put me off ... I can handle myself. But if we're in battle, is he going to be looking at the enemy, or is he going to be looking at me ... going, 'Oh, he looks tasty in his uniform'. I'm not homophobic. Come round and look at my CD collection—you'll find Queen, George Michael, Pet Shop Boys ... they're all bummers.

Doing this 'to camera' is important since it signifies the performative quality of the masculinity he wants acknowledged.

It is apparent that some men at *Lucky Treasure* are also engaged in performing and reproducing a particular masculine identity and (re-)establishing identification with each other and a masculine typification. At one level these are resistive acts of masculine defiance and solidarity. The program, unsurprisingly perhaps, is not able to effectively challenge and subvert this mode of masculinity or provide the men with the means to be reflexive and engage with alternative forms of masculinity. By merely drawing attention to and raising awareness of the issue of inappropriate behaviours without doing anything to attend to the structures and processes by which they are produced and reproduced the program is doomed to failure. Furthermore, the use of *The Office* backfires since its very polysemousness and ambiguity means that the parody of heteronormative masculinity is unattended to and it becomes an open text that the men use to defend and reproduce their version of masculinity.

However, it is not only male employees who challenge the proscriptions and signal that they find some of these behaviours 'normal' and inoffensive, some female staff did too. To some extent this also mirrors *The Office* where women participated in 'inappropriate' behaviour—note for example the interchange reported earlier when women laugh and comment on Brent's doctored email image. In another example, Brent, Tim and Donna are interacting in the office. Brent makes a bad Michael Jackson joke, asking if they have heard his new song:

Brent: He's teaming up with West Ham Football Club, doin' 'I'm forever blowing bubbles'<sup>11</sup> (laughs—nods at Donna, pause) She doesn't know anything about football ... tell her later.

Brent: George Michaels' latest release ... eh, George Michaels latest release ...

Tim: Is it about blow jobs?

Brent: Yeah, uh yeah, it's that thing in the toilet. It's a handjob ...

Donna: Is it 'Wank me off before you go-go'?

Donna's comment signals full participation in this banter, and could be considered as 'inappropriate' as the men's behaviour and as contributing to the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. In the complexities of gender politics we should not be surprised that some women find reasons to support traditional gendered structures. It could also be that female staff, already located within the gendered structures and cultures of the organization, are inhibited from countering such displays of hegemonic masculinity. However, some women (and men) obviously do challenge and resist traditional gender structures and relationships and seek to construct alternatives. In many respects *The Office*, through playing with and exposing the performativity of heteronormative masculinity, contributes to this, but this is not something that most program participants make use of. Women at *Lucky Treasure* were also observed using humour to socially construct certain modes of femininity and feminine identity as well as identities related to age and ethnicity, but there is not the space here to explore these forms of identity work.

We can see the intersection of frameworks/plateaux of power here. The employees are participants in organizational power circuits and are engaged in acts of resistance to organizational/managerial power and normative control regimes. They are also participants in a gender power plateau and in this case much of the interaction can be read as male gender identity work that reproduces hegemonic masculinity. This resonates with previous work by, for example, Collinson (1988, 1992, 2002). We turn now to consider more frontally the role of humour and see that humour also participates in resistance and the generation of challenging alternatives, but can also be seen as 'doing power' and involved in the production and reproduction of the status quo and traditional power structures and relationships.

### *Humour as resistance*

Humour occupies a central position in this case. Firstly, adopting a functional view of humour the company used it in its program to 'lighten it up'. Secondly, through using *The Office* excerpts it also hoped to illustrate inappropriate behaviour through a comedic vehicle. Thirdly, the employees challenged the organization's interpretations of appropriateness mainly through humorous and joking comments. What is novel and of particular interest is that the organization's attempted functional use of humour is undone by the resistive humour of employees and that the vehicle for both is the humour embedded in a piece of popular culture.

The first and second position of humour here reflects its dominant treatment in the literature which construes it in functionalist terms (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007). It can be argued that the use of humour fulfilled the first intended function of humour, but failed in the second functionalist aim, using the excerpts to identify and get a consensual view of inappropriate behaviours. It appears that the polysemous, ambiguous and parodying nature of *The Office* was naively considered by the program designers. Rather than bringing specificity and coherence, the excerpts constituted an open text that became an occasion of 'contestive humour' (Holmes, 2000).

The third position on humour resonates with an alternative to the functionalist orthodoxy which argues that humour can be used to challenge authority and the status quo, indeed that humour has a resistive even subversive role (Collinson, 1988, 2002; Griffiths, 1998; Grugulis, 2002; Holmes, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 2003; Westwood, 2004). The use of humour by employees provides further

evidence of this position. The comedy of *The Office* provided a perfect vehicle for such challenge and resistance since they are mounted under the protective umbrella of humour. A challenge, critique or act of resistance couched in humorous mode is less likely to generate opposition, rigorous counter moves or recrimination (Grugulis, 2002; Griffiths, 1998; Holmes, 2000). As Grugulis suggests, humour is in the domain of the 'not real' and 'This "unreality" liberates the conversational actors and problematic topics may be raised with less fear of rejection, offence or recrimination' (Grugulis, 2002: 388). This is important in the context of asymmetrical power relations and is part of the dynamics in the case of *Lucky Treasure*.

In the literature there is a tendency to polarize humour as either functional and ordering or as resistive and disordering. However, even those who have focused on humour's resistive potential sometimes argue that this and its transformative capabilities are limited. There is a tradition in the study of humour going back as far as Aristotle that sees it as a necessary element of social intercourse in allowing for dissent to the status quo; but it is a kind of accommodated dissent, which through its permitted place within the dominant formation means that it is contained (Westwood, 2004). Radcliffe-Brown's (1952) notion of 'permitted disrespect' and of humour's 'safety valve' function similarly sees humour as ultimately functional for the dominant order. More recently, Collinson (1994, 2002), whilst seeing the subversive potential of humour, has described its critical but non-transformative character as a form of 'radical functionalism'. Other contemporary scholars who have argued for the resistive potential of humour have also sometimes concluded similarly, that it is a form of permitted and contained dissent that functions to let off steam and ultimately does not subvert the status quo (e.g. Fleming and Spicer, 2002; Griffiths, 1998; Grugulis 2002).

Whether or not humour can be seen as resistive depends on how one conceptualizes resistance. It used to be that a narrowly defined conception of resistance was pitted in relation to a rather monolithic view of power. More recent formulations have greater complexity with a broader array of modes of resistance and a more intricate and interrelated relationship between resistance and power advocated (e.g. Fleming and Spicer, 2008). Fleming and colleagues (Fleming and Sewell, 2002; Fleming and Spicer, 2003, 2008) and others (e.g. Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999) have resistance run a panoply from institutional movements, strikes and other organized actions through to 'more quotidian variants like cynicism, foot dragging, dis-identification, and alternative articulations of selfhood' (Fleming and Spicer, 2008: 302). Humour, irony and cynicism, so prevalent in our case, are included as 'subtle subversions around identity and self' (Fleming and Spicer, 2008). As Fleming and Spicer (2002: 74) argue, such modes of resistance are effective against 'managerial power that specifically targets the selves of workers' and in blocking 'identity colonization'. It has also been argued that although humour may not, of itself, precipitate a transformation in the dominant order, it does expose inadequacies and problems therein and may initiate movement towards transformation via modes other than the comedic (Westwood, 2004). We have already noted humour's capacity to reveal paradox, inconsistency and contradiction (Griffiths, 1998; Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993; Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995). As Linstead (1985: 762) maintains: 'To view humour as completely subversive fails to account for its apparent incapacity to change organizations or social institutions, to dismiss it as mere frivolity underestimates its enormous symbolic power'.

Clearly there is a degree of uncertainty surrounding scholars' theorizations of organizational humour in terms of its resistant/subversive as opposed to merely 'radically functional' and recuperative capacities. Some maintain that this derives from humour's elemental ambiguity and that it needs to be theorized in a non-binary and nuanced fashion as both functional/status maintaining *and* resistive/disruptive in a very context-dependent manner (Holmes, 2000, 2007; Holmes and Marra, 2002; Holmes and Schnurr, 2005; Linstead, 1985; Vine et al, 2009; Westwood, 2004). Collinson (1988) had already gestured to this noting that shopfloor humour was used in apparent resistance



to organizational hierarchy, but also somewhat repressively and coercively in sustaining masculine sub-cultures and particular forms of masculinity. Similarly, Holmes and colleagues (e.g. Holmes, 2000, 2007; Holmes and Schnurr, 2005) have demonstrated that humour can be used 'contestively' to challenge and subvert power and authority, but also to 'do power', to assert and reaffirm power structures and asymmetries. This appears to be the case with respect to the gendered use of humour and the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity in this study. Male participants use humour to challenge the organization and its control attempt, but in so doing they also reassert certain modes of masculinity and reproduce and maintain a form of dominant heteronormative masculinity. It is feasible to further suggest that extant gendered organization structures and cultures at the company, in conjunction with traditional masculine forms of humour, serve to block or limit any alternative female modes of humour or humour that opens alternative masculinities. Fleming (2007) demonstrated how, as workers engaged in a struggle against certain economic inequalities, were at the same time involved a form of 'regressive' sexual politics that included homophobia. Work such as this shows the ambiguous or dualistic nature of humour working both as a contestive mechanism and *at the same time* as reproducing and maintaining a form of status quo. Of theoretical significance is the intersection of humour's dualism with different power plateaux. The analysis shows that uses of humour are resistive and disordering with regard to one power plateau—namely the managerial and organizational hierarchy—but implicated in the maintenance of the status quo and the 'doing of power' in relation to another—a gender power plateau. Sometimes the same instance of humour works in both plateaux and with both effects simultaneously.

It is suggested that humour's subversive and resistive potential resides in its capacity to intrude alternate meanings into social situations. For example, Griffiths (1998) analyses how in resisting the decisions of their managers, health work professionals challenge the 'definitions of reality' upon which such decisions rest and interpose different options based upon alternative definitions of reality. Similarly, Grugulis (2002) shows middle managers using humour to resist the demands of a management development program by interpolating an alternative definition of the situation. Intrusions of alternative realities depends upon conceptualizing humour in terms of incongruity, as many do (Berger, 1997; Mulkay, 1988; Nerhardt, 1996), including those in the humour in organization literature (Griffiths, 1998; Grugulis, 2002; Kahn, 1989; Taylor and Bain, 2003). As Grugulis (2002: 389) puts it 'Humour may incongruously juxtapose ideas from one frame of reference to another, mutually incompatible one ... or contrast the image of the world as it is with the image of the world as it ought to be'. Kahn (1989) expressly suggests that humour depends on the existence of multiple possible realities, echoing Berger's (1997) theory of humour. Berger argues that humour resides in incongruities between dominant or paramount reality and an alternative reality. Humour intrudes an alternate reality that challenges the presumed paramount reality by exposing its arbitrariness, paradoxes and inconsistencies. Dominant reality is revealed as arbitrary and fragile and thus humour is elementally subversive.

It can be argued that *Lucky Treasure* staff use humour to challenge the definition of reality posited by the organization and promote an alternate—one that conforms to their experiences and which is supportive of their identity locations. Organizational paradoxes and inconsistencies—for example the attempt to control humour and appropriateness through the use of humour and the exposure of legal motives which actually over-ride the rhetoric of employee well-being—are exposed and the grounds for challenge and counterpoint established. In that unusual doubling, they exploit the humour afforded by *The Office* in their challenge and resistance. However, other alternate realities that *The Office* opens up in terms of challenging heteronormative masculinity are eschewed in favour of a more prosaic reading that affirms a gendered status quo. Equally, the parody of clichéd new management is also not fully explored, but rather read as an attack on political correctness and the silliness of fashionable management rhetoric and practice.

## Conclusion

This article has analysed aspects of one organization's response to the perceived requirement to control inappropriate workplace behaviour through a program designed to raise awareness of such behaviours and their legal ramifications so as to eradicate or limit them. We locate that in the broader context of organizational control, particularly the intrusive normative forms through which organizations have sought to specify not merely norms of appropriate behaviour, but also of appropriate persons and identities (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). The employees challenge and resist this, primarily through humour and joking behaviour.

The opportunity to deploy humour resistively is, ironically, provided by the organization's use of *The Office* to surface instances of inappropriate behaviour. The excerpts failed to generate the aspired to 'common understanding' of inappropriate behaviour. In fact, the ambiguities and nuances surrounding the portrayal of the issues in *The Office* are exploited by employees, with humour, to open up alternative readings that undo those intended by the organization. The HR managers seem neither to have considered this ambiguity and nuance, nor the parody of political correctness and performance that the sitcom trades in. *The Office* is very much concerned with 'performance'—the performance of management, of masculinity, of political correctness—concerns echoed in the case. Employees interpret the organization's program as an insistence that they engage in performances that conform to politically correct values thereby protecting the organization from possible litigation. They further interpret this as requiring them to perform inauthentically and as an affront to an authentic sense of self and identity.

This raised the whole issue of the intrusions of normative control into matters of authentic identity. Such intrusions have been critiqued in the literature before, as noted, but there is limited empirical work exploring employee challenge to such intrusions. The employees constructed a definition of the situation which sees the organization as not only inauthentic in its own motives, but as requiring inauthentic behaviours from them. *The Office* is a resource for this since the target of its comedy is not inappropriate behaviour *per se*, but people inauthentically and self-consciously trying to behave in expected, appropriate ways—in a politically correct manner—and having that undermined. It is political correctness as performance that the program, and in the case the employees, are reacting to. The extent to which organizational work can be considered as mere performance and the extent to which that is palatable for individuals has received increased attention since Hochschild (1979, 1983) drew our attention to the notion of emotional labour. Whilst people are capable of working with a plurality of identity resources and of engaging in various work-related performances, they are not dupes unable to distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic and unwittingly made to playact a self and an identity simply to comply with an organizational view of the world. There are tolerance thresholds for perceived violations of a sense of authentic identity. The theoretical disquisitions on the supposed fluidity of identity notwithstanding, it would appear that practically and phenomenologically, employees are sensitive to matters of authenticity and authentic identity. Furthermore, identity resources are multiple and include popular culture. Organizations need to be mindful of these matters and not treat employees as dupes. Nor can they assume that the discourses they construct and attend to are the only ones their employees are attending to and which are resources for their interpretations, ethics and identities.

The employees react negatively to requirements to 'perform' appropriate behaviours, be appropriate-appearing persons, and conform to political correctness. They construct an interpretation which positions the organization's expectations as out of alignment with how 'normal' people perceive and respond to the issues and reassert their extant identity locations. The case is also, then, an illustration of resistance through identity work in the workplace (Svenningsson and Alvesson,

2003). Whilst both men and women resisted the organization's interpretations our analysis has focused on male identity work, in part because that and related male humour was more prevalent— itself possibly indicative of gendered organizational asymmetries. For some men the control attempt was interpreted as an assault on their notions of 'normal' masculine behaviour which they resisted and in doing so defended and reproduced a form of traditional masculinity. Indeed, their humour use was often precisely an example of performing traditional masculinity. Some women went along with these interpretations, perhaps supporting a form of masculinity they thought appropriate, perhaps because in so-doing they sustained gender relations that enabled them to perform femininity in a particular way. In this sense both male and female employees engaged in behaviours that ultimately reproduced heteronormative forms of masculinity and gender relations (Connell, 2005), something we also witness paradoxically in *The Office*.

Both resistance and humour need to be considered contextually, and in particular in the context of power. The analysis supports the view that power and dominance structures are best not viewed as monolithic. There is more than one power frame or plateau in play within any organizational action/interaction and more than one status quo at stake. By the same token resistance is pluriform and includes the subtle subversions of cynicism and humour. In this case, for example, there is resistance via humorous reposte to one plateau of power related to the organization and its managerial prerogatives whilst simultaneously male humour participates in another plateau of power related to gender. In this domain the humour works to maintain a gender status quo and reproduces a form of heteronormative masculinity with its asymmetries and inequities. The notion of various plateaux of power and various modes of resistance within a given organizational domain means that the same set of actions might have one set of ramifications within one power plateau whilst at the same time impacting upon and having another set of ramifications within another. This case reveals these dynamics and counters the more monolithic views of organizational power and the more bifurcated views of the relationships between power and resistance.

The case analysis also reveals the dualistic dynamic nature of humour; that it has resistive, subversive and ordering effects, but at the same time has system-maintaining and ordering effects. We do not progress our understanding by adopting simplistic, uni-dimensional views of humour. We should not, for example, expect humour to be, of itself, transformative of the dominant social formation. This does not mean that it has an inconsequential part to play in resistance or the mobilization of the means of transformation in domains beyond the comedic. Humour is inherently subversive through its intrusions of incongruity and the construction of alternative realities. Furthermore, organizational paradox, inconsistency and contradiction are revealed through the resistive mechanisms of organizational humour. Hence the analysis supports and extends this particular resistive effect of humour already noted in the literature.

To be clear, we are not in this critique suggesting that simply because PC is currently unfashionable and loaded with negative connotations that non-PC and particularly harassment behaviours be tolerated, or that organizations should not work rigorously to challenge and eradicate them. Nor are we advocating the maintenance of the forms of hegemonic masculinity (and accompanying modes of femininity) apparent in the case. We are, however, questioning the efficacy of organizational efforts to control or change them. The wisdom and efficacy of control attempts such as those embarked upon at *Lucky Treasure's* are questionable for a number of reasons. In the first instance there is the presumptiveness of normative control and its intrusions and colonizations. Secondly, there is the rather clumsy and inauthentic nature of the message and its modes of representation. Thirdly, there is the naiveté of assuming that unitary meanings and interpretations could be promulgated and that employees would acquiesce to a presumed consensual view of inappropriateness. Fourthly, there is the failure to recognize that people have diverse and multiple resources for their

identity formations, including those embedded in popular culture. Finally, the training program only draws attention to inappropriate behaviour and its consequences. It offers no genuine resources for real change. It fails to address any of the structures or processes that reproduce the identities and behaviours at issue—those that reproduce, for example, gendered and racialized organizations.

## Notes

- 1 For reasons of economy we will use either ‘harassment’ or ‘workplace justice behaviours’ to cover these in what follows, and unless otherwise specified will intend this range of behaviours.
- 2 The Office was originally a UK based ‘situation comedy’, or documentary, written and directed by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant. Gervais also plays the protagonist, David Brent, the regional manager of the Slough branch of the fictitious paper company, Wernham Hogg. The show aired originally in July 2001 on BBC 2, it ran for two series of six episodes, plus a two-part Christmas special. After a slow response and niche positioning, it has gone on to garner two Golden Globe awards (2004) plus awards from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts in 2001, 2002 and 2003 and to be widely acclaimed by critics and viewers. It has been a major export success, being sold to broadcasters in more than 80 countries. So popular is the concept that versions have now been produced in a range of other countries including Germany, France, Canada, Chile and Israel. The US version has been a major success winning Golden Globe (2006), Emmy (2006, 2007) and a Screen Actors Guild (2006) awards. It was first aired in 2005 on NBC and was in its seventh season in the second half of 2010. The US version also started shakily and was unfavourably compared to the UK version—even by US critics—but has grown to become a major success with around 7–9 million viewers for most series and with good rankings and ratings.
- 3 The series ran for two seasons on the BBC between January 2006 and April 2007.
- 4 Extras is another television ‘sit com’ written, directed and starring Gervais and Merchant. It was a co-production between the BBC and HBO and ran as two series of six episodes and a Christmas special. The first episode was shown on the UK’s BBC in July 2005 and a little later that year on the USA’s HBO.
- 5 All names, including the organization and research participants, have been changed to preserve anonymity
- 6 This could not be verified.
- 7 Terms in inverted commas indicate terms used by the organization and/or from an outside consultant’s report.
- 8 David Brent, played by Ricky Gervais, is the Regional Manager of the fictitious Wernham Hogg company.
- 9 Transcribed by the authors from Series 2, Episode 1 of The Office, The BBC, 2003.
- 10 Recorded verbatim from workshop PowerPoint slides.
- 11 This is a line from the informal club song of West Ham football club. ‘Bubbles’ is the name of Michael Jackson’s pet monkey.

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## Author Biographies

**Robert Westwood** is Professor of Organisation Studies, University of Technology Sydney. He has published extensively on critical aspects of international management and organisation studies, including the recent books: Rhodes & Westwood, *Critical Representations of Work and Organisation in Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2008); Westwood & Jack, *International and Cross-Cultural Management Studies: A Postcolonial Reading* (Palgrave, 2009). Address: School of Management, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. Email: Robert.westwood@uts.uq.edu

**Allanah Johnston** recently completed a PhD at The University of Queensland Business School, Australia, which explored the role of humour in ordering (and disordering) social relations in organisations. She is now working as a Postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Business Administration at Lund University, Sweden, investigating the production and consumption of brands. Address: The University of Queensland Business School, The University of Queensland, Australia.