

Laughing along? Negotiating belonging as a workplace newcomer

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Abstract

Successfully joining a new workplace community is demanding, especially when this involves crossing national boundaries in addition to team boundaries. For outsiders, humour is an area that arguably presents a challenge to full participation, particularly when local understandings are not shared, nor even recognized as distinctive. Newcomers face the challenge of navigating the trajectory from legitimate peripheral member towards core status (adopting the terms of the Community of Practice model). This involves cooperating with others in interaction, including engaging with humour and laughter as a way of indicating belonging. Here belonging is operationalized using the two dimensions proposed by Antonsich (2010), namely (1) a sense of belonging and (2) the politics of belonging as evidenced through negotiation with others. Applying an Interactional Sociolinguistic approach, I offer analysis of naturally occurring workplace interactions and reflections from skilled migrant interns in New Zealand workplaces. I discuss the place of laughter in attempts to demonstrate team membership, arguing that these attempts at belonging require the cooperation and endorsement of insiders. The findings indicate that, however benevolently intentioned, the local colleagues' use of humour, and their reactions to the humour and laughter produced by the skilled migrant interns, often results in a sense of othering and exclusion. This is keenly felt by the interns who note the difficulties that taken for granted practices create in their acceptance and progress. In many cases the result is laughing along, as an outward signal of fit, rather than laughing with which suggests a deeper sense of belonging.

Keywords: workplace discourse analysis, belonging, laughter, Community of Practice, group identity

1. Laughter and belonging

Successfully entering a workplace community is demanding. Newcomers must grasp new information, develop new skills, and display an ability to navigate the trajectory from outsider to insider. This includes understanding and enacting the expectations around humour in the new environment. As a qualitative researcher of workplace discourse, the close analysis of

naturally occurring talk conducted in collaboration with my research team over twenty five years has regularly highlighted the important role played by humour in meaning making between colleagues, especially when establishing who belongs and who does not. Approaching interaction as a site in which ingroup membership is negotiated between interactants, my ongoing goal is to gain intensive understanding of the processes that shape and are shaped by interactional context. In this paper I make use of rich data sets of naturally occurring talk collected in workplaces in which skilled migrant interns were being socialized into their workplace teams, focusing specifically on the place of humour and laughter in these processes.

Humour is seemingly omnipresent in workplace contexts (Holmes 2000), yet its off-record status can lead to its importance and idiosyncrasies remaining ‘below the radar’ for insiders. Ingroup members are likely to simply take humour practices for granted. Joining a new workplace means discovering what is ‘laughable’ (Jefferson et al 1977, Glenn 2003), ascertaining what might be considered funny and why (Holmes and Marra 2002a), and even noticing when laughter occurs at times that seem otherwise inappropriate (Warner-Garcia 2014).

A core understanding within Interactional Sociolinguistics, the analytic approach I take, is that shared norms are largely unrecognised by in-group members as distinctive to the community, at least until things go wrong (Gumperz 1982); people typically assume that those around them share their understandings. Demonstrating we belong in the ways in which we communicate, and having those interactional strategies recognised by our colleagues, is a feature of team membership. In terms of the focus of this special issue, knowing how to interpret and produce appropriate humour – in particular knowing when and what to laugh at – is one aspect of the implicit norms of being a member of the group. As a component of the sociopragmatic competence that we are expected to demonstrate at work (the ability to interpret social meaning in context), those who do not meet the tacit standards risk exclusion.

For outsiders, navigating team humour is an area that arguably presents a marked challenge to full participation. While humour is already regularly used by workplace scholars to explore and compare workplace cultures (e.g. Holmes and Marra 2002a, Schnurr 2009), as noted above in this article I focus specifically on its place for those joining new teams. How important is laughter and humour to everyday workplace communication for these newcomers and how does it impact on their belonging? To investigate these issues, I describe the experiences of skilled migrant interns who have received explicit pragmatic instruction aimed at empowering them in their attempts at participation in New Zealand workplaces. I focus on the role of laughter as a humour response in naturally-occurring workplace interactions involving these interns and their workplace colleagues, as well as the migrants' own reflections on these experiences. I demonstrate the subtle and nuanced ways in which a lack of shared sociopragmatic understanding, despite shared laughter, impacts on their belonging.

The article begins with an overview of the literature on humour and belonging, followed by discussion of the theoretical stance I adopt. Next I provide analysis of five illustrative data extracts drawn from the wider data set, building to an argument about the complexity behind ‘laughing along’ and the importance of awareness of sociopragmatic difference for the successful inclusion of newcomers.

2. Joining a new workplace: navigating belonging

Humour is understood as a feature of relational practice within workplace interactions (Fletcher 1999), one of the people-oriented functions of talk that sit alongside task-focused

activities and which together contribute to inclusion/solidarity and exclusion/othering. The asymmetric power between dominant, majority group insiders and the newcomer has long been of interest to workplace scholars operating in the sociolinguistic tradition, from the early explorations of cross-cultural miscommunication resulting in discrimination in the UK job interviews outlined by Roberts, Davies and Jupp (1992), to discussions of the unrecognised barriers to employment masked by benevolent racism (described by Lipinoga 2008) and benevolent patronage (described by Holmes 2014).

Most recently, research in the area of workplace discourse analysis has focused on the relevance of transitions and boundary crossing as inherent to modern working lives (Angouri et al 2017). This trend recognises the salience of increased mobility in employment, whether the transition is across national borders, across professions or simply across teams. Each transition has its challenges and brings the issue of “belonging” to the foreground (Kirilova and Angouri 2018). Crucially, belonging is not something we can simply assert. Rather it is an ongoing identity project that involves co-construction with others.

Amongst a range of research from across many disciplines, Antonsich (2010) offers a productive analytic framework for operationalising belonging, challenging us to critically engage with two complementary and co-dependent dimensions: (1) the sense of feeling ‘at home’ (place-belongingness) and, importantly for my analysis, (2) the negotiation of belonging through discourse (political belonging), represented by the claims, ratifications, challenges and resistance that this entails. A person’s sense of belonging, their identification, may be accessed through research instruments such as interviews (albeit remembering the normal caveats associated with self-reported data). The micro-level attention provided by a discourse analytic approach offers the additional opportunity to explore the enactment of the negotiation of this belonging in interaction. Antonsich approached the politics of belonging through the lens of a human geographer (extending the earlier discussions of Yural-Davis 2006 who importantly argued that we recognise that belonging is dynamic). Here I offer a discourse analytic approach in the form of Interactional Sociolinguistics that allows for the negotiation of social meaning at a micro linguistic level.

Appropriately contributing to humour according to group norms (whether as initiator or collaborator through laughter) is central to the relational skill set of effective communicators (Holmes and Stubbe 2015, Schnurr 2012). There are countless discussions of the complicated and non-direct relationship between laughter and humour, largely from those working with Conversation Analytic traditions who look to laughter as a signal of the organisation of talk (see overviews in Glenn 2003, Partington 2006). Within sociolinguistic approaches, however, laughter is more regularly investigated in terms of its function as a humour response (Hay 1996, 2001), as a recognizable indicator of solidarity, and as a signal of shared values and understandings.

Early research focused on the boundary creating role of humour, highlighting an ‘us and them’, those who belong and those who do not (e.g. Holmes and Marra 2002b). More latterly the concept of a Community of Practice (CofP) has come to dominate this research, encouraging us to investigate the repertoire of shared resources developed over time. This repertoire comprises a resource to be drawn upon in order to demonstrate membership of the group, and includes the range of humour strategies used to negotiate insider status (see also Schnurr 2009, King 2019). So, for example, adopting a mixed method approach, Holmes and Marra (2002a) investigates the amount, type and style of the construction of humour as a way of characterising a team’s culture. The findings indicate that the factory teams in the data set had very high levels of humour and that this humour was often contestive in style, taking the form of quips or one-liners; by contrast the teams in government departments were characterised by much lower rates of humour, and the humour was more likely to be

supportive in tone with its construction involving collaboration between team members. Showing you belonged meant contributing and responding in ways which aligned with your team. Even though all teams were in the same national context, and some had shared contextual influences based on industry and organisational objectives, the ways in which the groups made use of humour was distinctive reflecting the ongoing negotiation of the norms that the team was in the ongoing process of (re)negotiating.

The role of humour as an in-group/out-group marker is thus well-established in the field and has been a regular focus of workplace discourse research. For 20 years workplace discourse analysts have investigated the function of humour in workplace talk, from its role in expressing power and politeness (Holmes 2000) to its place in the enactment of leadership (Holmes and Marra 2006, Schnurr and Omar 2021), as well as the use of humour to construct gender, ethnic and professional identities (Holmes et al 2011, 2012). The focus on identity conceptualises humour as an index of group membership and a salient signal of shared understandings. For example, balancing the potentially conflicting demands of a leadership role with gender expectations and the ‘cultural’ orientation of your workplace regularly involves humour and humour responses that are appropriate for the layered norms within which participants operate. These layers of contextual constraint are made accessible through the emic understandings captured by researchers during ethnographic work to support the interpretations of the naturally-occurring talk which is the primary data source used by humour scholars within the area of discourse analysis. This focus on appropriacy of the humour and humour strategies becomes even more significant with changes within the specific area of discursive politeness where being ‘politic’ or unmarked became a central focus in the analysis, following the influential work by Locher and Watts (2005). Again the CofP offers a lens for recognising the role of team norms that impact on what is expected in a particular group.

Missing from many of these discussions, however, is interest in the challenges facing those who cross from one group to another. The CofP was originally proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991, Wenger 1998), and integrated into linguistics via the work on gendered discourse and gendered contexts by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992 see also Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999). This approach affords attention to the practices and ‘modes’ of belonging enacted by those of varying group status: those who engage in shared practices, those who show alignment and those who are imagined as part of the group. The defining characteristics of a CofP proper are a joint goal, regular interaction and a repertoire of shared resources negotiated over time through which members demonstrate their status as in-group members, both by indexing group norms and by actively participating in the ongoing (re)negotiation of shared practices. Importantly, the CofP explicitly allows for newcomers as “legitimate peripheral” members. Through participation peripheral community members may move towards the status of core membership, although this is not required, nor a foregone conclusion over the lifetime of the CofP.

As a site of situated learning, the CofP lens highlights the ongoing negotiation of these practices which become more stable as in-group markers only as they are used by members. While the CofP label has often been misassigned in research (see discussion in King 2019), where the group does indeed meet the criteria, it offers a useful heuristic for accessing the linguistic and communicative practices that the group understands as relevant for displays of membership and belonging. The model is not unique to linguistics and is popularly applied in both management and education settings, often with different motivations and emphasis (see Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015 for an overview). Within my own field, it is regularly used for discussions of humour at work as noted, especially in terms of how the use of humour for identity claims is embedded with the repertoire of practices developed by the CofP (see Holmes and Marra 2002a, Schnurr 2009).

These identities are signals of belonging, the very belonging that Nural-Davis (2006) refers to in her original proposal of the politics of belonging. She similarly lists gender, ethnicity and nationality as important groupings to which we claim attachment, but like Antonsich does not offer access to examining the process of negotiating belonging through micro interactional practices that the linguistic approach allows. In sum, in terms of belonging, which is my focus here, members of CofPs signal their community status through the indexing of shared norms and in the enactment of shared practices. This aligns with the stance that our identity work is co-constructed with others and negotiated in interaction on a minute-by-minute basis and in all interactional contexts, including our mundane everyday talk. Consideration of the newcomer's role and affordances in this negotiation, especially as it relates to humour/laughter is central to the analysis I offer.

3. Skilled migrants negotiating belonging through laughter

I draw on data collected during the work placement component of a full-time three-month course for skilled migrants who are unemployed or underemployed despite highly valued qualifications, experience and appropriate English language competence, even if this is not always recognised by majority group members. Course members are the anecdotal lawyers, accountants and executives who work as taxi drivers and supermarket stockers, failing to gain access to job interviews or be offered appropriate appointments because of a lack of familiarity with local norms, lack of local job experience, and the lack of recognition of their skills and expertise by gatekeepers.

The course draws on insights about communication in New Zealand workplaces resulting from the data collected and analysed by the Language in the Workplace (LWP) team for which I act as Director. The overarching goal of the LWP team is to analyse effective workplace communication in New Zealand workplaces, with the intention that our findings support opportunities for improving practices. The Workplace Communication for Skilled Migrants Programme has been running since 2005 and more than 30 cohorts have now graduated with high levels of success in securing employment that recognises their expertise and experience. The class materials (see Riddiford and Newton 2010) offer explicit pragmatic instruction and a focus on analytic skills. Rather than suggesting a single 'right' way of interacting, the goal is to prioritise understanding of the key dimensions of interaction, to support recognition of norms, and to ensure class members are empowered to choose how to proceed knowing in which ways adherence to and deviance from the norms might be interpreted by others. The course comprises 6 weeks of classroom activities, and 6 weeks of an internship in an industry closely related to their expertise.

In order to evaluate the success of the programme from a teaching perspective, we have asked some participants to record their workplace interactions following the same methods that we use for all our data collection. With the approval and support of all involved, we give participants recording devices to turn on and off as they feel comfortable and ask for a representative sample of their daily workplace interactions (see Holmes and Stubbe 2015, Vine and Marra 2017). Participants are free to decide what is collected, to listen to all their recordings, and, if they so wish, to ask that material is redacted. The skilled migrant participants have regularly taken up this offer and embraced the advantage of the learning opportunity as well as the chance to reflect on their own practices (see Marra et al 2012).

My primary data set in the analysis that follows is recordings made by the class members during their internships, especially interactions involving their colleagues. The interns represent legitimate peripheral members of the established teams in which they are placed with

core members assigned as their mentors to help them learn the practices of the team while gaining the workplace experience they seek. All placements follow job interviews as a gatekeeping strategy which signals some level of “fit” has already been established (see Kusmierczyk-O'Connor 2017) and all are well aware that many internships develop into contract work and ongoing employment. The stakes thus resemble standard employment in many ways. Using audio recordings of naturally-occurring talk, I examine the interactions of these skilled migrants as they enter the New Zealand workplace and negotiate their belonging with their local mentors, colleagues and employers.

Antonsich (2010) makes the important point that to focus on the politics of belonging (his second dimension) without recognising the twin nature of the sense of belonging (dimension one) means ignoring half the picture. Heeding this logic, I augment my analysis with interview data. The participants engaged in reflexive interviews with their class teacher on their experiences in the internship, their interactional difficulties, the day-to-day challenges they faced, and the (lack of) belonging that areas such as humour can represent. I begin however with examples collected by the interns in their everyday activities during their internships.

4. Everyday workplace talk during the internships

As noted above, humour is ubiquitous in the workplace, a finding that has been repeated across the many workplaces with whom we have collaborated in New Zealand since the mid 1990s. The interns are prepared for this when they go into their new teams, and it is of no surprise to us that the recordings they make include many instances of humour, often accompanied by laughter.

I begin my analysis with an example recorded at the end of the internship of Ava, a migrant who had moved to New Zealand from China and who had extensive experience in the financial area. The extract captures a conversation about an upcoming (but unexpected to Ava) morning tea celebration that is about to take place to thank Ava for her contribution to the workplace during her time as an intern. We have noted elsewhere that discussion of food often relegates interaction to the periphery, co-occurring with people-oriented, relational features of talk like small talk and humour (Holmes et al 2013). This despite the fact that we might argue that the traditional New Zealand “morning tea shout” which is being organised is a reasonably significant event in workplaces (Marra et al 2014).

Example 1¹

1. Chris: um so what will you be doing between now and the end of the day?
2. Ava: er
3. Chris: other than cooking
4. Ava: [laughs] I don't know [laughs]
5. Chris: yeah () I think what we need to do is coz you're cooking lunch today
6. Ava: er
7. Chris: did I tell you that
8. Ava: [laughs] it's i it's part of the [company] culture? [laughs]
9. Chris: yeah well if you're part of [company] you //have to do the cooking part\
10. Ava: /yeah I like it\ yeah I'd like to but yeah () [laughs]
11. Chris: okay so we need to um go and organise um some some food eh?
12. Ava: okay

¹ See appendix for transcription conventions

13. Chris: so you come back and cook it
14. Ava: oh thank you
15. Chris: coz we'll be hungry
16. Ava: yeah thank you [laughs]
17. Chris: yeah we better do that no that's excellent
18. alright ...

The example begins with some understandable confusion on the part of Ava: Chris, her mentor, announces in line 5 that she is *cooking lunch today*, an idea that seems to come out of blue and seems mismatched to the corporate environment in which they are interacting. Ava hesitates in her response twice with a verbal filler (*er*) and then quickly links the idea to the *company culture* (line 8) suggesting she recognises that what he is talking about could have something to do with the kind of expressions of gratitude she has been prepared for in class. Chris is being indirect and couching the introduction of the lunch in her honour in humour: a rhetorical question (line 1) to hint at something she is not expecting but which he suggests she should know about, mention of cooking when the event will be a barbecue (line 13), and finally suggesting that she is in charge of the purchasing and organising of the food for the team when it is Ava herself who will be the recipient of the honour. This ironic introduction requires a considerable amount of contextual knowledge to be understood as it is presumably intended, from the cultural knowledge about the role of this kind of event for birthdays or when someone leaves, through the notion of barbecuing as cooking, to the idea that everyone is equal and responsible for contributing to these events in New Zealand (c.f. the ‘tall poppy syndrome’ and the myth of egalitarianism described in Nolan 2007).

For Ava’s part, we see evidence that she recognises the humorous tone in Chris’ delivery. In line 4 the laughter appears to be the kind of coping laughter described by Warner-Garcia (2014) as she tries to navigate the confusion around the incongruence between her workplace tasks and the cooking Chris raises. By line 8 she laughs as she tests her guess that Chris may be referring to the “morning tea shout” idea she has heard about in class, and by line 10 the laughter seems to indicate relief at having successfully navigated her misunderstanding and positively responding to the suggestion that she will be celebrated via a barbecue: *yeah I like it*. Arguably Chris is trying his best to offer *manaakitanga* (reciprocated hospitality and respect) to Ava as a core cultural component of New Zealand society (Holmes et al 2011), both in terms of the literal hosting and in terms of using humour to raise the celebration with her indirectly since he expects her to know that this would occur because of convention.

Here we can recognise elements of benevolent patronage (Holmes 2014). One the one hand, Ava could be conceptualised as a guest (rather than as a fully-fledged team member) who needs to be explicitly thanked for her short time working with the team. Alternatively we might see the coyness from Chris at raising the celebration as signalling Ava’s inclusion in the group as someone who has made a valuable contribution during her time as an intern with them and should recognise and expect that this event was coming. This is seemingly how he frames things when he asserts her belonging: *yeah well if you're part of [company] you have to do the cooking part*.

Whatever his motivations, the humour relies on considerable shared knowledge to which Ava is unlikely to have access. Her sociopragmatic skills let her recognise that whatever he is talking about is humorous and she cooperates by laughing along as an outward signal that she ‘gets’ the humour even if she herself is not quite sure what is funny. But grasping at meaning and negotiating the appropriate reaction also demonstrates to her that she is not part of the in-group who take this kind of event for granted. Nor does she seem to recognise the routine strategy of teasing people that they will “cook” when talking about barbecues and takeaways,

something which is readily available to me to as a New Zealander, but something I would never have thought to make explicit to outsiders, even with my own expertise in this area. Ava laughs along in what must have been challenging circumstances to suggest she is aligning with the statement of inclusion from Chris. This despite the strategies he chooses, which are arguably othering (albeit unwittingly) despite the solidarity he performs.

In the following example, Andrei is less successful in his claims at belonging, as evidenced by the strong reaction he receives from his local colleague. Emma is informing Andrei of her upcoming absence and her standard working days. Andrei's expectation is that Emma's routine of a four-day week can be explained as a choice made because of childcare duties, an incorrect assumption and one which Emma seems to interpret as being based on inappropriate application of sexist gender ideologies, highlighting an outdated understanding of the gender order (Connell 1987).

Example 2

1. Emma: I won't be here tomorrow I only work- I don't work on Wednesdays
2. Andrei: never mind
3. Emma: well no that's not true next week I will work Wednesday
4. but I usually have Wednesdays- I just work four days
5. yep okay so if you do need help
6. Andrei: it's a good idea
7. Emma: [whispers]: it's a very good idea:
8. Andrei: [laughs] (otherwise you spend all your time)
9. Emma: I know at work I know //it's a really bad idea\ exactly
10. Andrei: /at work all the time\\
11. Emma: okay um so
12. Andrei: especially for women //it's just impossible\
13. Emma: /yes yes\\ yes
14. Andrei: (she's) look after the family [inaudible]
15. Emma: well I don't have a family fortunately but yes I know //exactly right\
16. Andrei: /yeah\\
17. Emma: I know what that is

For the first eleven lines of this interaction, the tone is light and it feels like Emma and Andrei have shared assumptions about the importance of a good work/life balance and the benefits of spending time out of the office. The collegiality is reflected in endorsement of the routine from Andrei, *it's a good idea*, which is whispered almost conspiratorially in reply by Emma in line 7. Andrei recognises the friendly atmosphere and laughs when Emma chooses to whisper and goes further to explicate why it's a good idea that Emma avoids being *at work all the time*.

At line 12, however, after Emma has signalled the end of the topic with *okay um so* (a group of standard discourse markers in utterance initial position), Andrei makes an interactional move that indicates the shared understandings that were projected seem not to be as shared as was thought. Andrei raises Emma's gender as a reason why a woman would choose to work only four days, because otherwise work is *just impossible* if she is to *look after the family*. At this point the conversation becomes markedly different. Rather than challenging Andrei's attitude, Emma gives a superficial concession (*yes I know exactly right...I know what that is*) while also explicitly noting that this not the rationale in her case (line 15) and ending the interaction. Andrei had laughed along and seemed to be included but Emma's reaction suggests that his belonging was temporary.

The next example demonstrates the fragility of belonging by providing an extract where Andrei's laughter reflects greater degrees of shared understanding, but where he is positioned explicitly as an outsider who needs to be provided with explanations for language use and for the humour associated with it. In extract 3 Andrei is talking with Emma again, but this time she takes on the role of language advisor and pragmatic expert. She explains the seemingly violent warning that someone will metaphorically 'shoot' you for doing something untoward.

Example 3

1. Andrei: good yes good ()
2. yes if you know som- something you just go to this site
3. Emma: just don't move anything or somebody will shoot you
4. no //I'm joking [laughs]\
5. Andrei: /what what\ what do you mean?
6. Emma: when we say somebody will shoot you
7. //[laughs]\ they will tell you off
8. Both: [laugh]
9. Andrei: (//) no no no it's\ all ()
10. Emma: /they won't really shoot you I promise\
11. Emma: [laughs]: yeah yeah and: and you and you get fired
12. if you're violent in the work //place [laughs]: won't do that:\
13. Andrei: /[laughs]\ thank you Emma
14. Emma: that's alright

In the first few lines Andrei states his (correct) understanding of how he should proceed in his task. At line 3, by way of endorsement I would argue, Emma teases Andrei that he should avoid moving anything *or somebody will shoot you*. Andrei's stunned reaction (followed by *what do you mean?*) prompts Emma to let him know that she is joking (line 4) and then to provide an explanation for the much more innocent outcome of any mistake in lines 6 and 7. Once the humorous metaphor is made understandable to Andrei, they both laugh, presumably with a little relief on Andrei's part. Emma goes on to elaborate on the humour (*they won't really shoot you I promise*) and to confirm that violence is not acceptable in the workplace, in what seems to be a reassuring manner for Andrei.

If the in-group perspective is our priority, the identity positioning seems to be highly relevant to the seeming success of the laughter from Andrei in this extract. Emma is positioned as the knowledgeable insider, while Andrei is constructed as the non-native speaker outsider who is in the workplace to learn, both about the use of language and also about appropriate behaviour at work and in this particular CofP. This positioning is foregrounded when Andrei ends the interaction with *thank you Emma* accompanied by laughter, and Emma's acceptance of this with the response *that's alright*.

This pair of extracts demonstrates the dynamic enactment of belonging and the relevance of co-construction of group membership. Different facets of identity are highlighted in each example, and the outcome of the negotiation changes as the interactions progress. In all three examples discussed so far, there still seem to be clear lines between who is in and who is out. The success of identity claims teeters on the brink from moment to moment. It is important to recognise that boundaries are negotiated and the trajectory from outsider to insider is unlikely to be linear.

I noted above that the analysis of Andrei's success is couched in terms of Emma's positive reaction to explaining team practices to him. Here I turn to reflections offered by members of the class in the form of reflexive interviews to consider the perceptions of the

interns as they navigated their internships. The class members are not meek, inexperienced subordinates, but instead represent empowered, experienced workers who have only gained entry to New Zealand because of their skills, expertise and ability to contribute to New Zealand society. Their self and other positioning, framed by their use of laughter, offers interesting insights into how the negotiation of an in-group identity, the enactment of the politics of belonging, is managed.

In line with the emphasis from Antonsich that we need to place importance on recognising one's sense of belonging alongside the negotiation of identity, there is an emerging trend within workplace discourse analysis for including interviews and reflections in our analysis. The aim is to embrace the value of metapragmatics, that is, talk about meaning making, for supporting our interpretations and ensuring layered access to the emic understandings we use to warrant our interpretations (see Angouri et al 2021). We strive to link metapragmatic comments and interactional signalling with ideologies (Bourdieu's (1977) doxa), to bring to the surface norms and assumptions that underpin workplace practices and to lift the veil on hidden aspects of the way we talk at work.

All class members, regardless of whether or not they have volunteered recordings for us, are invited to discuss their internships and to unpack their experiences with their class teacher, both informally each week of their internship as an ongoing class activity, and then formally at the end of the internship. Because of space restrictions I have chosen just one illustrative, but telling, extract from a class member. It demonstrates the deep thinking that is going on as the interns process their surroundings and reflect on their workplace experiences.²

In example 4 the class member talks about New Zealanders' reactions to them and their workplace experiences, especially the problems that arise due to expectations of shared understandings that do not take account of differences in social meaning. From the earliest days of Interactional Sociolinguistics it was recognised that we do not have much conscious awareness of pragmatic norms and meaning, and that people are more likely to think someone is uncooperative or rude rather than recognising that there may be different social understandings at play (Gumperz 1982). This class member seems acutely aware of these issues. Interestingly they assign the problems to New Zealanders as a whole rather than the individual colleagues with whom they have been interacting. This is hardly surprising when national boundaries create the biggest hurdles when you are confident in your technical and industry expertise. The extract takes us through societal discourses around explicit mention of status, a projection of inferiority, and assumptions about tacit shared knowledge.

Example 4

I am not sure if it is a good thing to show that you have a lot of experience in the field. I believe that it depends on people but I had a comment from my mentor "with such an experience of yours, we expected you to understand" and not much help on what is obvious to them but not to me as context.

Often, things were assumed to be a common practice and no need for an explanation... I am taking some steps to understand work culture and people first. I am trying to understand how much diversity New Zealanders can take.

² For thoroughness and to emphasise our philosophy of recognising that communication and settlement are co-constructions, the mentors and colleagues also go through debriefing sessions with experienced workplace liaison advisors who have worked as part of the team throughout the history of the course.

A lack of expectation of difference is made explicit: things are *obvious to them but not to me* and ideas are *assumed to be common practice*. It is disheartening to hear that mentors equate lack of shared understanding with technical incompetence rather than limited sociocultural familiarity. And as a critical researcher promoting the need for New Zealanders to actively recognise different understandings, as well as the responsibilities of both employers and employees, New Zealanders and newcomers to negotiate inclusion, the very believable feeling of exclusion described here is depressing.

It is interesting to see reference to something that is more acknowledged in society, namely the ‘tall poppy syndrome’. In terms of metapragmatic awareness, the tall poppy syndrome likely leads in New Zealanders’ consciousness about societal norms. This label is given to the national flavour of egalitarianism and the enforcement mechanism it represents whereby New Zealanders are not expected to put themselves ahead or above others, at least in the way they talk about themselves and their achievements (Lipson 1947). While the actual enactment of the tall poppy syndrome in interaction is very varied, the ideology is regularly discussed in society and invoked as an explanation for the sanctioning of others. Achievements can be recognised by others, and even admired, but flaunting them is not typically tolerated (Bönisch-Brednich 2008, Holmes et al 2017). As noted, it is not the ‘done thing’ *to show that you have a lot of experience in the field*.

Most significant is the discussion around diversity and the potential lack of acceptance of other ways of behaving that the experience of the participant seems to suggest. While sociopragmatic difference remains unacknowledged, the lip service paid to the advantages of diversity and inclusion which permeates wider social discourses does not match practices. So while the examples of interactions, and indeed reports from the migrants themselves, suggest solidarity and inclusion through laughter and humour, the darker side of the laughter and what this might be concealing deserves closer attention.

5. Laughing along or laughing with?

The analysis demonstrates both successful and unsuccessful attempts at harnessing humour, unpacking the ways in which newcomer and oldtimers (Wenger 1998) construct belonging together. In example 1, Ava navigates the teasing about her role in hosting her colleagues at a celebratory barbecue by making use of various types of laughter; in example 2 Andrei starts out with what seems like a shared understanding of the importance of time out of the office and laughs with his colleague about her time away; in example 3, Andrei’s lack of familiarity with idiomatic and metaphorical language becomes a “laughable” (Jefferson et al 1977) that both he and his mentor can appreciate. In each case, the close attention to the micro-linguistic features of negotiation illustrates the relevance of dimension two of Antonsich’s model and aligns closely with the identity work which is central to the field of workplace discourse analysis.

However, while there is evidence of the migrants seemingly “laughing along” with the humour that takes place around them (rather than fully understanding the grounds on which the humour is based), the challenge of feeling included remains. The subtle differences in discursive and pragmatic norms still have a large impact and entrenched notions of appropriacy (especially those indicated in the reflection in example 4) impinge upon successful construction of an identity of truly belonging. And as is abundantly clear from the second half of example 2, the ‘off record’ characterisation of humour belies the consequences of ‘getting it wrong’. In each of the cases I question whether the laughter was really laughing

with signalling belonging, or actually rather laughing *along* signalling temporary fit without full participation.

The barrier seems to be a penalty associated with otherness. Roberts and Campbell (2006) argue that those who do not meet our sociopragmatic expectations face the ‘linguistic penalty’ of exclusion. Speakers who deviate from well-established group communicative norms are perceived as not having the relevant communicative resources to interact appropriately. Because sociopragmatic norms are typically below the level of consciousness, at best wrapped up as ‘just the way we do things around here’, agentive deviations, such as not laughing when the group laughs, or not contributing further humour responses, may be misinterpreted. Rather than being seen as a competent, professional choice, these apparent omissions are interpreted as mistakes. This was particularly noticeable in Andrei’s attempt at humour in example 2. The response from his co-worker who shifts from a ‘play frame’ (Goffman 1974) to a serious tone and her exit from the interaction altogether marks his failure to abide by the social norms and a perception that he does not fit into the workplace team.

5.1. Benevolence and othering disguised by humour

At the beginning of this article I noted the focus on benevolence in discussions of cross-cultural differences and miscommunication which has begun to emerge in discussions of discrimination. Based on seemingly positive intentions, this benevolence has been recognised as a form of (mitigated) racism in which outsiders are kept at a distance through behaviours which highlight their otherness, however positively intentioned (Lipinoga 2008, Holmes 2014). My own research into disagreements similarly argued that majority group members were enacting an identity of welcoming ‘host’ to the outsider ‘guest’ when they avoided engaging with the proffered opposing views, instead letting a genuine disagreement pass as inadvertent (Marra 2012). However well intended, this lack of engagement operates as exclusion to participation and thwarts attempts to be socialised into the in-group. Not having the benefit of others engaging with you keeps belonging out of reach, and yet the consequences of this outsider status can be devastating to wellbeing (Moradi et al 2019, Fagan 2015).

So while in every case the mentors had volunteered to initiate and support the newcomer in their quest for belonging, and included them with morning tea shouts, conspiratorial whispering and explicit teaching about unfamiliar linguistic knowledge, all with good humour, the outcome was often lack of access to full participation. Instead the intern was someone who needed hospitality as a guest, was shut down when different gender expectations arose, and whose gaps in linguistic knowledge were highlighted. None of these outcomes was likely intentional, and indeed we might argue the opposite was the goal. But the reflection extract shows the consequent exclusion is keenly felt. Couching all of these events in shared laughter did not resolve the sense of otherness. The interns were laughing along not laughing with.

5.2. A success story

Laughter may seem trivial to the lay person, especially when they are an insider in their particular context. To an outsider it can be an enormous hurdle. Depending on the sociocultural norms at play, laughter and humour may have particularly heightened priority; my own early research outlined above indicated that different teams in the same industry, within the same city and the same country and language had different expectations around humour, something the CofP framework is particularly useful for exploring. When the migrant has crossed multiple boundaries to join their new team, the challenge of negotiating belonging in interaction can seem overwhelming.

It is, however, possible to navigate the transition into the ingroup, especially when the co-construction of that belonging is recognised as a two-way process. In a brief example, and to ensure that I demonstrate that success is possible for a newcomer, I offer a final extract from skilled migrant Helena in interaction with her colleague Edward.

Example 5

1. Helena: like yeah and um
2. and sh- () she gave me you gave me the the notes
3. Edward: yes
4. Helena: the drafts so
5. Edward: yeah you can have a read through
6. them if you want yeah
7. Helena: do I have to//[laughs]\
8. Edward: /[laughs]\\ it's really it's really quite easy
9. but er the only thing that makes it
10. hard is the volume

I have analysed this example elsewhere as an attempt by Helena to enact a refusal to undertake the task set her by Edward (Marra 2012). Helena's cheeky and light-hearted display of a refusal (*do I have to?* accompanied by laughter) allowed her to claim membership and this was recognised by her colleague who joined in with her humour and sympathised with her underlying complaint about the nature of the work: *the only thing that makes it hard is the volume*. In this case we might argue that it was both Helena's indexing of a shared attitude to tedious jobs plus the co-construction of the humorous complaint by her colleague that contributed to her success in claiming belonging and having it acknowledged. If she was intending to refuse the task, the response from her mentor demonstrates that she enacted this refusal in a way which did not exclude her from the group. While the refusal may not have been successful, Helena did not face the linguistic penalty of exclusion that she might have done had the use of humour not been attended to by Edward.

6. Humour as a core facet of belonging

Raising awareness of pragmatic differences, and the salience of these differences, can make a noticeable difference to claims at belonging. It is for this reason that the New Zealand government has invested in working with both newcomers and their employers to aid the co-construction of belonging that can support inclusion. It is important that we ensure humour is part of this discussion, especially when it is underestimated by the layperson. To make such claims, however, requires empirical evidence of both struggles and successes in relevant settings. Throughout this article my goal has been to provide in-depth analysis of naturally-occurring talk involving humour and laughter in line with a qualitative priority for intensive investigation of real-life practices. Through this process we gain understanding of the realities navigated in everyday working lives, lives which are inherently impacted by myriad contextual constraints, not least the norms of the majority group and the workplace culture of the team and organization as has been demonstrated in the analysis.

As humour scholars we are quick to claim that humour is a serious business. The data and argument presented here highlight just how important the processes of recognising and responding to humour are in the quest for belonging, and how exclusionary our assumptions around humour can be for those who lack familiarity with the sociopragmatic norms that

underpin humour. While there are times when each of us, no matter what our group status, find ourselves simply laughing along, for ingroup members this may only be a fleeting or temporary moment that passes. For the skilled migrants in the data, the lack of access that led to the laughing along may represent something with much more tangible consequences, including the financial consequences of lack of employment when seen as lacking the competence to fit in.

While the participants in this data have worked hard to find their path into the in-group, or volunteered to serve as welcoming mentors, it seems that humour has not been raised to the level of awareness required for bridging the gaps between different norms. I do not want to suggest that fitting in and doing things like majority group members should ever be considered the ultimate goal of newcomers; a commitment to empowerment guides my focus to encouraging agency and the recognition of choice in how we enact our degree of membership. For this empowerment to be realised, however, requires awareness of the metapragmatics around humour and the role of laughter as a response. This awareness is well evidenced in the interview section used here, representative of the many reflexive interviews carried out with the interns. The important next step is that majority group members share this reflexive process and understand that the norms they take for granted are not necessarily shared and the subsequent boundaries are not easy to penetrate. As humour scholars this is something we can contribute with our work, so that laughing can become instead a strategy of participation and inclusion.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions

- [laughs]: : Paralinguistic features and editorial information in square brackets; colons indicate beginning and end
- ... //.....\ Simultaneous speech
- /.....\ ...
- () Unclear utterance, transcriber's best guess
- ? Questioning intonation
- s- Cut-off utterance
- [...] Section of transcript omitted

Names of workplace participants and workplaces are pseudonyms.

To aid comprehension some examples have had minor editing.

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