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# "I was pissed off at her ignorance": when an international student protests against racist humour in a university tutorial

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Abstract

*This paper will discursively examine the complex power structures involved in the university setting, as exposed by a student's verbalised objection to a tutor's racist humour which targeted Asian international students. By speaking out, this student then became the target of censure from another student who defended the tutor's use of humour. Such an incident illustrates the dilemmas presented by the (inappropriate) uses of humour in the educational setting, in the context of increasingly literate and confident challenges to such uses/abuses of humour. Using various Discourse Analysis approaches, including Face Theory, this paper will demonstrate how this instance of failed humour invoked many competing social aspects of power, collisions of literacy, hidden institutional assumptions, and emerging notions of how humour can be identified and resisted.*

*Keywords: international students, power, face, failed humour, discursive defence mechanism.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper's titular quote - "I was pissed off at her ignorance" - is taken from a PhD thesis researching Chinese international students' experiences while they were studying at an Australian university. One of these students reported that during several tutorials, an educator used racist and sexist humour which targeted Asian females. At first, the student was reluctant to voice her objections, being unsure of expressing herself in her second language, and fearing repercussions. When she did summon the courage to speak out, she was surprised – not by the tutor's reaction, which she did not report – but by the reaction from another student, who accused her of failing to get the joke because of her young age and lack of sophistication. Effectively

silenced in front of the whole class, the student reported her feelings of frustration, not just with the tutor's humour, which remained unaddressed, but at the intervention from another student whose "ignorance" had "pissed [her] off".

Clearly, the international student *had* indeed 'got the joke' over a succession of tutorials. The problem was, therefore, not a deficit of literacy at the semantic or pragmatic levels, but rather a rejection of objectionable humour at the discursive level, i.e., the student was effectively saying "I get it, but it's just not funny" (Hale, 2018, p. 36). Such an example of failed humour was complicated by the polarising intervention of another student in support of the educator, and this indicates that the tutor's production, and the student's positive reception, of this humour were also tied to discursive levels of humour processing: they 'got the joke' and found it funny. It also provides an example of a power differential being imposed on a student already experiencing vulnerability due to being away from home, performing tertiary study in a language that is not her mother tongue, having limited access to resources as a visa-dependent student, being an ethnic minority, and still adjusting in the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

While the literature on failed humour, racist humour and sexist humour has been rapidly developing in recent decades, much of this research tends to apply straightforward, even narrow, frames of analysis to these issues. This paper will attempt a more complex analysis, with a synthesis of various approaches, to examine the multi-level experiences, discourses, and systems at work in such an event. It is hoped that such an approach will foster a greater understanding of the general operation of humour, and aid in the 're-personalisation' of individuals who assert their right to be *free* from such humour.

## 2. Literature review: failed humour

Historically, the topic of failed humour has been under-researched (Attardo, 2008; Bell, 2009, 2015; Bell & Attardo, 2010; Kuipers, 2015; Zajdman, 1995), yet in recent years, interest has been growing. Indeed, while less than 15 years ago, Bell and Attardo (2010, p. 426) noted that "there exists virtually no literature on failed humor", since then there has been research published which explores the notion in complex ways (Dore, 2020; Gironzetti, 2022; Hale, 2018, 2021; Lion & Dhaenens, 2023; Priego-Valverde, 2021). Some nuances have been explored – for example, offensive humour which can both alienate *and* foster commonality, since:

> [t]he closer to one's own identity a joke got, the greater the risk of feeling offended by it [but] it often simultaneously increased the attraction such a joke may hold. Participants frequently expressed appreciation for comedians engaging in ethnic humor and including them in the joke
>
> (Lion & Dhaenens, 2023, p.390).

This more complex understanding of humour is a welcome addition to the traditional, binary notions of failed humour as being merely a matter of miscommunication at the literacy, semantic/script, or pragmatic levels (Attardo, 2020; Bell & Attardo, 2010; Kuipers, 2020; Martinez, 2023; Palmer, 2004), or being an intentional act of aggression/offence embodying notions of power (Dynel, 2017; Gruner, 2000; Lockyer & Pickering, 2008; Priego-Valverde, 2021; Weinstein et al., 2011).

So, for instance, Palmer defines failed humour as occurring because of a "mismatch between repertoire and audience" (2004, p. 161), while Attardo refers to it as a failure of communication because "systems powerful enough to express what humans need to express cannot be failsafe" (as cited in Bell, 2015, p. vii). On further investigation, these systems of language competencies needed to process humour include grammatical-functional literacy,

semantic-pragmatic literacy, script-recognition, "sociolinguistic competence [in] communication strategies [and] strategic competence" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 27). Bell and Attardo expanded on Raskin's (1985) original script-based theory of humour, known as the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH), and identified seven levels of competence determining the success or failure of a humorous act, including: the locutionary or utterance act level; the meaning, or lexical knowledge level, including connotations; the pragmatic force level; applying the humorous frame; the incongruity level; the joke appreciation level; and the support/mode adoption level (Bell & Attardo, 2010, pp. 429-441). The traditional distinction between the levels of competency enjoyed by native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) includes the belief that "NNSs do not fail differently, they just fail more" (Bell & Attardo, 2010, p.441), and this presupposes that NNS will therefore fail at humour transactions more than NS.

Whatever merit there is in this argument, it does not allow for the fact that NNS may very well also be expert users of the language, with competencies well in excess of NS (Hale & Basides, 2023; Kintsch, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Rampton, 1990) and that therefore many NNS expert users are perfectly capable of understanding humour across multiple competencies and registers. Regardless of background, the expert user of language is equipped to manage complex "[p]rocesses at many different levels [including] reading or listening, syntactic and semantic analyses, knowledge integration, as well as reasoning processes" (Kintsch, 2005, p. 127). This includes the learned ability to recognise and decode unique combinations of "script-schemas which overlap and conflict in ways not required of more streamlined, or directly propositional-content/communications" (Hale, 2016, p. 6), including *intentionality* of humour (Hay, 2001). Correctly perceiving intentionality is complicated by the differences in humour styles, production and reception which distinguish speech communities, and which generate "symbolic boundaries" delineating "different notions of what good and bad humour is … stylistic criteria and standards, and different ideas of what humor is, or should 'do'" (Kuipers, 2009, p. 220).

Allied to this notion of being able to decipher intentionality is the ability to interpret motive and to identify the joke's intended target. That is, if a joke has an identifiable 'butt' or target, it signifies that the humourist is *deliberately* producing an act of aggression towards that target (Gruner, 2000). The idea that "innocent humor" – i.e., humour without either a target or aggression – exists, is a "mirage" (Gruner, 2000, p. 147). Additionally, humour which is sexist or racist is not only employing aggression, but it also constitutes an act of disproportionate power, because it targets those who are marginalised socially in an act of further destabilisation, where power is defined as the ability to act, contingent upon "resources or facilities that are differentially available to social actors" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 41). As for motivation, the appeal of "hostile" or "disparagement" humour lies in its ability to provide "enjoyment" for its producers, who "feel superior [by enhancing their] negative attitudes or feelings toward the humor target" (Weinstein et al, 2011, p. 1044). As an equation of power, the racist/sexist joke as told by a person in an authoritative position – such as a university tutor – which targets persons either present at the time, or targeted in their absence, diminishes the social capital-status of those persons, rewarding the joke-teller with laughter and augmented social capital-status. The 'cover' of humour is used to minimise the impact of such aggression, but they are still acts of aggression: "Sexism, racism, homophobia, and other kinds of prejudice and bigotry are not exonerated by their appearance in comic discourse" (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008, pp. 817-8).

Further, the idea of humour as aggressive or disaffiliative is tied closely to the idea of belonging in a community where humour can create solidarity or exclusion, especially where humour is collaborative. Arundale (2010, p. 2090), for instance, considers the operation of humour as an "interactional phenomenon … as participants conjointly co-constitute interpretings of meaning and action across the three position architecture of communication".

However, such a formulation is best suited to positive interactions where power relations are jointly negotiated. It does not adequately apply to interactions where power outcomes and utterances are negative and which start from, and perpetuate, asymmetrical interpersonal relations. By contrast, Willis (2005, p. 131) notes that, "[a]s power is unevenly distributed throughout society, it becomes highly significant [as to] who is telling what kind of joke to whom at what time and in what place". Similarly, the reception of humour is often understood as being conditional upon what Carrell (1997a, 1997b) refers to as "humour communities", namely people who are aligned to laugh or otherwise enjoy similar types of humour because of mutual discursive connections.

People who are outside these humor communities may be deliberately, or unconsciously, based on their ability to decode or actively participate in these communities' notions and performances of 'acceptable' humour. Indeed, Billig (2005, 2018) investigates the dual nature of humour, arguing that positive, or "affiliative humour" can also be aggressive, because "groups draw together by laughing at outsiders, foreigners or even scapegoats within their midst" (Billig, 2018, p. 9). This can be used *against* the majority (Gasteratou & Tsakona, 2023), but it is probably more likely to occur in targeting the minority, as the power imbalance fosters such targeting without the fear of recrimination or protest. In a high-stakes context where the power imbalance is accentuated, such as entertainment or a higher education lecture, the target is unlikely to protest or retaliate because the "high salience … makes it very difficult for targets to neutralise them" (Culpeper, 2005, p. 69). Thus, a targeted use of humour which is perceived as aggressive by the target is unlikely to achieve anything except a diminished social position or status for that target. The effects of this targeted humour, of course, are contingent upon the power relationship between the interlocutors, the exact utterance/utterances, and the literacies possessed by the target.

Therefore, when analysing an interaction where offence is registered by the target, we can view the person who is offended by racist/sexist humour as, by definition, an interlocutor who is not only literate enough to process the humour for its grammatical-functional requirements, its semantic-pragmatic components, its script-recognition and cognitive processing requirements, but also a user of language who can identify the discursive elements of aggression and motivation. Humour fails, therefore, at the discursive level, because "disagreement with the message is strong enough to eclipse any mirth a hearer might feel [and it] instead causes only feelings of offense" (Bell, 2015, p. 32). Face Theory is useful at this point in explaining how these elements are personalised in response to the face-threatening act of racist/sexist humour. Building on Goffman's (1967) original formulation, as developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), a person's 'face' is "the public self-image that every [person] wants to claim for [themselves]" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61), and it is sensitive to humour which targets a person for, for example, their sexual or racial identity. Racist/sexist humour destabilises a person's dignity and social standing, and it thus constitutes a Face Threatening Act (FTA), especially when a person is 'othered' in a public setting. Indeed, such FTAs can exacerbate whatever marginalisation already exists for a person, since "face is extremely sensitive, volatile and vulnerable" (Partington, 2006, p. 87) to public humiliation.

## 3. Analytical frames

Partington identified two core expressions of Face Theory: 'affective face' and 'competence face', where "competence face [seeks to convince] others that we are capable, authoritative, and in control", while "affective face" is achieved by "persuading our peers that we are … nonthreatening … congenial and good to be around" (Partington, 2008, p. 787). The application to humour analysis is that participants in a humorous transaction are under pressure to *conform*;

if they laugh at a racist/sexist joke, they are signalling competence face because they are literate and capable members of a speech community, and they are also signalling affective face by being congenial and non-dissenting. Social pressure to conform, to express solidarity, to be in alignment or affiliation, especially if the joke-teller is in an authoritative position in the speech community, can be enormous:

> Recipient laughter [signals] affiliation [i.e.,] the expression of solidarity [and] alignment means communicating agreement … that is, approval of the opinions and sentiments … expressed. The power of … affiliation, and especially the group-bonding effects of shared laughter [promotes] in-group solidarity. In contrast … disaffiliation can project an individual … as external…and is a significant way of shaming and performing [aggression]
>
> (Partington, 2006, p. 19).

The resultant tension experienced by a person who objects to racist/sexist humour is a matter of competing social and personal Face needs. The desire to not 'stand out', especially for a person who, as an international student, is of lower social status, far from home, and potentially disadvantaged by second-language ability and minority ethnic difference, is related to the social need to appear competent and aligned with the group. To signal disaffiliation from the group based on the group's shared humour is to risk asserting variance from affective and competence face conformity. There is also the risk of triggering an FTA for the educator producing that public act of humour who enjoys institutional authority, and who has the backing of the group. Little wonder, then, that an individual asserting their right to be *free* from racist/sexist humour, is at an extreme disadvantage, risking whatever capital they might have in the very institution which bestows academic/educational capital by way of tertiary qualifications.

Thus, Face investment risk can be considered as a crisis of capital. The risk for the student who speaks out against an educator's racist/sexist humour is immediate, in that the student risks losing Face in the group and with the educator, with the implication that longer-term capital investments are seriously at risk also. The student typically associates their financial investment in a foreign educational institution to be tied to their academic advancement and career prospects. Risking social, financial, educational and career investments of capital, places the international student in a subservient position relative to the educator, and thus any act of aggressive humour by the educator can be seen as a powerful form of symbolic violence towards that student to which the student has no recourse (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). To assert offence at an educator's act of humour constitutes a challenge to the hierarchal order of the academic social space (Bourdieu, 1985, 1989, 1992) – a space that is not easily challenged by *any* student (Hale, 2016), least of all the international student, whose relative capital is typically lower than that of local students. This concept of international students' weaker capital position relative to local students and educators in the use of humour, is supported by a study of Asian international students in an American university, which found that even the *generic* use of jokes by local (i.e., US) students and academic staff left Asian students feeling marginalised due to cultural and language barriers (Sato & Hodge, 2009). The use of deliberately 'weaponised' humour, *targeting* international students, is therefore even more subversive of their weaker relative capital position.

Exacerbating these elements of the experience of being othered by racist/sexist humour, is the keen awareness that international students have of being rendered 'invisible'. That is, when they are alert to humour which targets them, but which they feel powerless to counter – whether for reasons of weak capital, weak language ability or weak self-confidence in speaking out – they have the debilitating experience of feeling like outsiders, or passive observers of their own humiliation. We can render this experience along a continuum of discursive sensitivity and literacy. So, for instance, a student with lower literacy levels in English may still be able to

decode sufficient lexical items to become aware of other people 'joking about them', and observed non-verbal clues such as facial expressions, laughing and directed eye contact will reinforce this interpretation. For another student, with higher-level literacy in English, there will be no barrier to understanding the meaning of jokes, standard and non-standard collocations, and a greater awareness of non-verbal clues will narrow down any interpretations of the humour. But for all students, the presence of humour in a classroom – especially by an educator – will trigger what has been referred to as the "Discursive Defence Mechanism (DDM)" which is that:

> there exists a default setting…for people in the reception of humour…until people can determine whether an act of humour is benign or aggressive…they automatically treat the act of humour as a threat, and they act defensively. If they have decided that the act of humour is in their interests…even if it attacks a third party…they accept it as successful humour
>
> (Hale, 2018, p. 51).

Thus, there are two parts to the action of the DDM for humour which are relevant to this case study. The first is the "default setting" of self-defence, such that any act of humour is automatically interpreted as an act of aggression, until it can be assessed as benign or aggressive. The second is that we are constrained to *decidability* – that is, we are 'programmed' or acculturalised to decide quickly what the intentions of the humourist are. We can surmise that a person's literacy levels across communication – e.g., expertise in semantics/pragmatics or non-verbals – might be linked to their ability to discern and correctly process humour. That is, an early learner of language will not be able to process humour, with all of its cognitive and literacy demands, to the same extent as an expert user of that language.

Nevertheless, it is also logical to assume that any person can be *intuitively* aware of being mocked, regardless of their language ability, and that they can be offended and feel isolated by the action of humour directed at them in a public setting, especially if non-verbals such as laughter and eye contact accompany the verbal joke. In such cases, the *repeated* targeting of a person through humour is a form of *bullying*, as defined by various educational and governmental authorities, because it constitutes "persistent, repetitive negative activity [where targets] perceive themselves as having less power than the bully and who, as a result, experience negative psychological and/or physical repercussions" (Plester et al., 2022, p. 120). Interestingly, the official consensus of what constitutes bullying recognises that it is not necessary for all participants and bystanders to *agree* that an act of bullying has occurred. It is enough for the target to feel isolated and/or humiliated by the verbal/non-verbal exchange, where "some sort of power differential is at play and the target feels unable to retaliate or protect themselves" (Plester et al., 2022, p. 122). Such a situation is exacerbated for instance, when the target verbalises a protest, only to have one or more bystanders defend the perpetrator – further marginalising and disempowering the person who is already bullied.

This is not to say that all humour directed at a person *deterministically* comprises grounds for offence. Some researchers have investigated the contested dichotomy of offence, where, for instance, it is noted that assuming that *all* people of a particular religion or culture will be offended equally by humour targeting those groups is in itself, reductionist and othering, relying "on presumed rigid cultural identities" whereas "[r]eactions on the 'targeted side' should not be regarded as a unified and coherent whole" (Lion & Dhaenens, 2023, p.387). Other factors, including intersectionality, multicultural experience, intentionality, and power differentials are regarded as far more important for people negotiating humour and potential offence. This includes the potential for humour to be valued for being 'transgressive', 'edgy', subversive, or rebellious (Fearon, 2015; Lion & Dhaenens, 2023). This relates quite closely to the idea of the DDM, such that people individually and discursively negotiate and process humour for intentionality and potential aggression or benignity, before deciding if the humour is in their

interests. Intentionality seems to be key here. When friends or work colleagues employ humour in collaborative teasing, if a target perceives the humourist as having their relationship prioritised, racist/sexist humour can be not only tolerated, but even welcomed, especially if it is seen as levelling hierarchies and establishing rapport (Holmes, 2006; Lion & Dhaenens, 2023; Partington, 2008; Schnurr & Chan, 2011).

Nevertheless, while people can welcome humour despite, or *because*, it is racist/sexist and targets them personally and/or the people they care about, it seems to be more logical that if people decode the humour as being motivated by negative/aggressive intentionality, they are more likely to respond *negatively* to such humour. They do so, not at the semantic or pragmatic levels, but at the deeper, discursive level where the act of humour is linked to similar, previously experienced texts, their competence and affective Face needs, and their social position relative to others (Bell & Attardo, 2010; Fominaya, 2007; Hale, 2018). It is precisely this discursive appraisal of humour which the international student in this case study performs, and which she decodes as a competent user of English, and which she speaks out against – after fully weighing the potential risks of capital loss and social status demotion.

## 4. The original study, and the student's reporting of racist/sexist humour in the classroom

The incident which this paper investigates is selected from a PhD thesis, and as a case study, it focuses on an international student, who is represented by the pseudonym 'Wei'. She was one of fifteen participants recruited from a Sydney-based university in Australia, to be involved in a short-term longitudinal study of Chinese international students' adjustment to Australian academic and sociocultural milieus. These participants were all in the first year of their residence and study at this Australian university, and all had previously resided in China, which includes Macao and Hong Kong. Institutional human ethics approval was obtained prior to the study's commencement. Participants supplied journal reports documenting their experiences and feelings/impressions, and completed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews on several occasions during the research period.

It is important, at this stage, to consider the relevance of utilising one participant's responses from the larger study, and to justify our interpretation of these responses as being reliable, credible and illustrative of that person's experience. We also infer from this one set of responses that it is feasible that it reveals patterns of behaviour which other participants did not report on, but which they very well may also have experienced. We argue that the expert user status of this one participant, along with her high-functioning intercultural integration, endows her reports with high credibility, since she was more alert to nuances of humour, racism and sexism. This is consistent with stablished procedure in ethnographic studies, as recommended by Hale and Napier (2013, p. 90), who state that "[a]s long as the participants are representative of the group and its culture, then there is no fixed criterion for the number of participants. Sometimes a single case study will reveal a lot about a culture." Of course, we make no claims to "generalisability of [our] findings", letting "others decide to what extent the findings might apply to other groups of contexts" (Hale & Napier, 2013, p. 91). Nevertheless, we feel that this case study is important for revealing the experiences of a Chinese international student who is on the receiving end of racist-sexist humour, and that this is a good starting point to consider the operations of humour in such a context, and to begin a conversation in the literature about the extent to which international students might be experiencing such treatment. As for the viability and credibility of a single case study relying on self-reported accounts by one participant, there is a general consensus that such research, particularly employing qualitative or mixed-methods, is valuable (Creswell, 2014; De Vaus, 2001; Priya, 2021; Yin, 2014). This also addresses any concern that

we do not have corroborating evidence from the other students and tutors, since we can cautiously proceed on the assumption that the participant is being honest and competent in her recall of events and conversations.

As a participant, Wei stood out not just for her high language proficiency (including having an IELTS score of 8.5) but also for having strong intercultural communicative competence from her exposure to expatriates from the USA and Europe while at high school in Taiwan and Shanghai, before she came to Australia. It was also observed during the original research that Wei spoke with a Standard American English accent, which presumably she had picked up or learnt while at high school with American students and teachers, and she demonstrated near-native speaker rapidity and cohesion. Her high level of cross-cultural exposure and in-depth intercultural engagement compared to the other Chinese international students who participated in the study indicated that she had greater discernment of, and sensitivity to, the nuances of cross-cultural differences – including, potentially, the uses of humour.

Additionally, Wei *voluntarily* reported on instances of tutor-generated racist/sexist humour which she asserted as being significant, not only for their unprofessional nature, but also for their frequency and pedagogical disregard for the well-being and educational needs of the international students present in the classroom. The fact that Wei offered repeated, largely unprompted accounts of these experiences is an indication of how emotionally and educationally affected she was by these experiences. The first example of her reporting was in the second interview:

Extract 1: Wei, Interview 2

> *But another tutor…was asking at what point in time when you go to the supermarket…that a contract is made…for purchase.*
>
> *And then I said…like maybe when they scan the barcode or whatever? And then he said, oh, yeah. Well… you know there are some international students who are so rich that they don't go to the supermarket. They have servants doing their own work. So, they don't know what a supermarket looks like, they don't know what to do.*
>
> *And that's what made me want to say, like, hey! I'm going answer this question…correctly [Laughs]. Because I go to the supermarket, I buy my own stuff [Laughs].*
>
> *So, like, I'm internally debating whether or not to report these tutors. But I also don't want to go through the trouble. Like, is it really worth it in the long run, as long as I pass the course?*

When reporting this one example, the student mentioned that "tutors" (multiple) had made racist/sexist jokes on other occasions, and suggested that such jokes were a regular feature of tutorials:

Extract 2: Wei, Journal Week 6

> *One of my lecturers often makes racist and sexist comments – in jest of course – and I'm very trouble discerning if I'm actually offended…*

Extract 3: Wei, Journal Week 11

> *…the racist tutor is still very rude and said that Asians had never seen grass. A coursemate defended the racist tutor saying that the rest of the class was too young to understand his humour. I was pissed off at her ignorance.*

## 5. Analysis of the student's reports of classroom humour

There are several salient features of these reported classroom incidents of humour, including the distinguishing racial and gender aspects relating to power and discourse. Wei is ethnically Chinese, identifies as female, and is at a power disadvantage as an international student reliant upon the Australian university system for existing and aspirational capital and resources. She has good, possibly high, literacy in English and in Western social norms and systems. We can have high confidence in her accuracy in reporting these incidents and in her self-reported evaluations of how she should respond. Likewise, we can safely surmise that the principal tutor referred to and quoted (gender identified as 'he') and the other student ('coursemate', identified as 'she') are *not* Asian, probably Australian-born, and with limited discourse/background knowledge/experience of Asians in general and Chinese internationals students in particular. There are two reasons for this assumption. Firstly, Wei does not mention that any (other) Chinese international students or Asians in general were present in the class, so the comments are more likely to have been made with the knowledge that the 'targets' of such humour were absent. Secondly, this particular campus of the university is located in an outer-suburban region of the city, an area where multiculturalism features less than in most of the city's western suburbs, where fewer international students attend, and where Anglo-Australians dominate (.idcommunity, 2021). Thus, it is likely that the tutor/s and classmates assume that Wei is *not* an international student, or perhaps that she is from the USA, or has lived in the USA, but is an Australian citizen.

Wei comments on this notion in an interview, saying, "*Like, people assume I'm American, but I look Chinese. So, I don't know what people think I am [Laughs].*" In other words, her self-confident manner, native-speaker-accented English, and social ease project a discursive appearance which is interpreted by 'locals' as being *unexceptional*. This explains why the tutor/s feel comfortable in 'othering' Asians in general and Chinese international students in particular, in classes where Wei is physically present, since they see her as 'being one of us'. That is, they expect no repercussions from such humour, because they assume that there are no Chinese international students present, and Wei's performance of English-speaking discourse makes her 'invisible' in the perception of difference. Age perception is also a factor in Wei's objection being trivialised by a classmate, who presumably is an older student, and who asserts that *'the rest of the class was too young to understand his humour'*. While the exact meaning of this utterance is not immediately clear, the inference appears to be that younger, local students are not cognizant of wider social meaning, or well-travelled enough to understand differences between cultures and racial identities, to fully grasp the humour or depth of referential commentary embedded in this joke or jokes. Apart from the irony of Wei being probably the most-experienced traveller in the classroom, the premise of such a comment is untenable: well-travelled people – including international students, and regardless of age - tend to broaden their discourse through contact with other cultures and racial identities (Forsey et al., 2012; Hu et al., 2021; O'Sullivan & O'Sullivan, 2019). Thus, such simplistic, racist, and sexist 'humour' tropes can logically be discarded as inaccurate, uneducated, and offensive.

This indicates the operation of the DDM: Wei identified the joke/s as being an insulting threat to her Face needs, her Chinese heritage, and her internationalised discourse – all of which were more sophisticated than the humour tropes being employed. After processing the humour across semantic-pragmatic-discourse levels, she then assessed her personal power-capital equation of benefit versus loss, which was how much she might gain, or lose, by speaking out against the humour where the institutional power of the humour-producer was firmly differentiated against her. Interestingly, the reaction/s of the tutor/s is not recorded, so we cannot assume that her objections were acknowledged, but the challenge issued to her by a classmate was significant enough to warrant her mentioning it. This challenge constituted a cumulative

Face threat, which invalidated her original objection, undermined her tentative objection, and, ultimately, negated her status as a student having the right to a voiced opinion. Indeed, her emotional reaction – which seems to have included the intense frustration at being 'silenced', since she did not report making any further objections - is summed up by her comment: *I was pissed off at her ignorance.*

Single-handedly trying to counter such stereotypes, and being stymied for doing so, was context-dependent. The incident occurred in the same year that the movie "Crazy Rich Asians" was released (2018), a film in which the Asian diaspora was portrayed as having an excessive, affluential lifestyle. The popular film capitalised on wider global perceptions and stereotypes of conspicuous consumption and wealth amongst Chinese people, especially in the West (Daulay, 2021; Eckhardt & Kerrigan, 2019; Wong, 2022; Yang & Zhang, 2021). It seems evident that this context provided the basis of, and motivations for, the racist-sexist humour of tutors that Wei encountered, and presumably also the justificatory comment-challenge which the classmate used to silence Wei. There is also the probability that the tutor/s and the classmate were not reflexive enough to question their own ethnocentric outlooks, whereas Wei was more adept at intercultural awareness, and thus, highly alert to racist-sexist humour. The notion that *'the rest of the class was too young to understand his humour'* is a weak justification utilised to *minimise* racist-sexist behaviour, and it seeks to project a *non*-racist position (Grigg & Manderson, 2015), thereby enforcing social power and boundaries between differing racial cohorts (Kuipers, 2015; Pérez, 2017). In other words, by producing the humour in the first place, and then defending it, the intentionality of Wei's 'antagonists' is to consolidate their competence and affective Face capital – at the expense of anyone who questions them. Not only is Wei alert to the aggressiveness of the humour and its defence, but she is also highly sensitive to the risks of being isolated from group solidarity, alienated as an individual, and bullied/targeted for daring to challenge the situated capital of those who support and produce such humour. In such a situation, the notion of a person being 'open' to humour which targets them on the basis of race or gender is only operative if they are collaboratively *included* in the production of that humour (Lion & Dhaenens, 2023), an important distinction which was clearly absent in this case. Therefore, Wei's rejection of these humour instances was an example of a person being highly literate at the discursive level, because she was immediately alert to the intentionality of exclusion and othering, without any input being accepted from her.

## 6. Summary and main conclusions

This case study provides a counter-narrative for the common assumption, amongst humour theorists and the general population, that when someone objects to humour, it is because that person does not *understand* the humour, either at the semantic, pragmatic, or discursive level. This has been explained as being due to the limitations of the language or other communication systems employed, or because of the limitations of the recipient's literacy levels. Any of these conditions may indeed be at fault, in isolation or in combination with each other. However, as demonstrated by Hale (2018), the 'fault' in failed humour may also be the result of a person's DDM, which initially frames humour as being potentially an aggressive move against them personally, before processing it as either a threat or a benefit. This builds on, but qualifies, other theories which regard humour as *always* being an act of aggression (e.g., Gruner, 2000), and it is helpful in explaining why people reject humour which they perfectly understand, semantically, pragmatically, and discursively. This is consistent with theories of decidability and deterministic interpretation, which argue that people are typically very confident in their interpretation of another person's communication – if not, they typically ask for clarification. In the absence of doubt, people tend to be confident that they have interpreted an act of humour

correctly, especially if they are in a group situation where others signal approval to that act of humour by laughing. This also links to Partington's (2008) ideas of competence and affect Face needs, since people feel coerced into 'going along with the joke' in social settings, to protect their group status, Face needs, and solidarity (e.g., Fominaya, 2007).

To signal disapproval in a group situation is to risk self-esteem, group acceptance and other forms of capital. In this case study, Wei risked multiple investments of money, status, linguistic capital, and prospects of social and economic advancement. Nevertheless, her voiced objection was clearly, as she herself says, a *considered* proposition, where she weighed the risks against her investments in self-worth, identity, integrity, and membership of the group being targeted by the racist-sexist humour. There was no indication that her semantic-pragmatic-discursive literacy was lacking, since the rather uncomplicated propositional content of the tutor/s' utterances and the classmate's utterance was reported, as far as we can tell, accurately. The fact that Wei was 'invisible' during the incidents of humour indicates the 'naturalness' of the reported utterances, surmising that the humour probably would not have occurred if the tutor/s had several 'obviously' Chinese international students in attendance; and Wei had presented as a 'local' because of her active classroom participation and 'native-speaker' discourse of accent and self-confidence. We can thus argue that Wei constituted 'collateral damage' as an interested observer who was not the direct target of the humour or the classmate's comment. That is, she was the unintended recipient of racist-sexist humour which ostensibly targeted the apparently absent 'other'.

One other feature of this incident is the discursive intermediate position which Wei occupies. By targeting the 'other' in such sexist-racist humour, the tutor/s and the classmate have implicitly built on, and instantiated, prevailing notions of cultural bias towards Chinese international students. Not only do they explicitly evidence this bias and assumptions about Chinese collectivist-Communist-cultural norms, they also, by implicitly *excluding* Wei from these assumptions, evidence Wei's cross-cultural adaptation and discursive positioning. That is, they categorise all (especially female) expat Asians and Chinese international students as wealthy elites who do not possess cross-cultural adaptation, and who are therefore financially 'aloof' from, and not well-integrated into Australian or Western society. Wei, however, presents a dilemma for this stereotyping, since she presents as a 'local', or at least a Western (American) person through accent and individualistic participation, and is attending an outer-suburban campus of the university – something that Chinese international students presumably would not do. Rather than seeing Wei as a Chinese international student who is able to freely move between languages and cultural systems, they see her as 'one of us'. Wei's ability to understand, and respond to, racist-sexist humour stereotyping as a person who can move freely between these 'worlds' provides a meaningful insight into the experiences of Chinese international students who are vulnerable to such stereotyping – and suggests that many of these students experience such treatment, but do not have the literacy, capital, or courage to speak out against it.

## 7. Conclusion, limitations, and implications

This paper expands on the literature into failed humour, a fairly recent innovation in the field. It demonstrates that while humour can fail for many reasons, including a lack of literacy at the semantic-pragmatic levels, some failed humour is only explained by a discursive rejection of humour which is understood, but rejected for its offensiveness. This was clearly the case with the Chinese international student, Wei, who in a foreign classroom asserted her right to *not* have to listen to racist-sexist humour directed against her and other international students. She also reported that the humour produced by a tutor/s was defended by a classmate, who described the humour as being too 'sophisticated' for Chinese international students, and therefore, not

offensive. Such a dilemma reveals that the increasingly literate and cross-culturally adapted cohort of Chinese international students continues to encounter stereotyped prejudices in the educational environment – which they presumably understand, but which they are powerless to object to. This has enormous ramifications for educators across the sector. It also ironically exposes the gap between these educators' *lack* of cultural literacy and the literacy of the Chinese international students they are employed to educate.

Of course, this single case study is limited by presenting the experience of one student attending one campus at one university. Nevertheless, we can argue that Wei's experience is a salutary lesson to all educators of the merits of inclusiveness in the use of classroom humour, and the extreme risks that racist-sexist humour can present. It offers the opportunity for educators to assess/reassess their use of humour in the classroom, by presenting the viewpoint of a vulnerable student who was keenly aware of the offensiveness and power differential produced by such humour. If such a case study benefits the relationship between educators and students, then it is worthwhile. This account highlights the need for enhanced intercultural communication competence across the whole academic sphere, especially to raise intercultural awareness concerning the discourse of humour as well as understanding differences in cross-cultural worldviews, especially pertaining to race. This increased knowledge should promote intercultural empathy as well as provide frameworks to mitigate against any cross-cultural misunderstandings. Further research which will add to this paper and to pre-existing studies, to investigate the implications of such educational settings failed humour, is proposed, with a highly focused research question, surveying both students and educators alike, to discover the extent to which failed humour – especially racist-sexist humour – is experienced and produced, with the effects it produces on mental health, educational performance, and future prospects of students in the educational system and employment. One particular focus would be to survey Chinese international students who graduate and who then go on to employment in the educational sector, to evaluate the extent to which they have experienced such humour, and whether it has any long-term effects on them and their careers.

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