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ABSTRACT

The article examines Swedish police students’ and officers’ situational use of irony as a resource for engaging in workplace resistance. Through irony, managerial discourses and policies are destabilized, giving voice to an alternative reality. The resistance towards the police’s official discourses reinforces a gap between the management and officers in the ranks, strengthening in-group autonomy and norms among the rank and file, but also disrupting organizational control. Irony was restricted to, but also opened up for, ‘safe spaces’, suggesting that counter-hegemonic discourses among police employees are constrained by contextual factors such as their socio-political environment and organizational culture. Irony also helped to promote social harmony and sustain ‘conflict-free venues and encounters’, and the double nature of irony should be seen as a powerful resource for expressing criticism while avoiding sanctions. The article suggests that ironically expressed resistance towards institutional conditions is enabled and created by the very same conditions.

Introduction

When conducting fieldwork in various police settings, I have frequently noted how significant a role humour plays in the everyday praxis of the police institution. Analyzing the everyday talk of which the humour forms a part has then helped me to learn much about the norms and values held by the members of that institution and what is constitutive of police culture (Wieslander 2014). In this article, I examine a specific kind of humour a little more closely, exploring irony as a lens through which to interpret organizational values. Although the functions of humour have been widely explored in various settings, including the police, less attention has been directed to the use and functions of irony. Irony commonly makes fun of a person or a situation by portraying these in an unfavourable way by stating the opposite of what is meant in a humorous or exaggerated tone, such as commenting on a badly performed work by uttering ‘Well done, really, well done!’ As organizational research on irony argues, irony is a specific kind of humour that provides a useful device for understanding institutional life in settings in which multiple realities can be simultaneously constructed and maintained: ‘its epistemological characteristics … make it possible to acknowledge and report important (multiple) features of organizational reality that otherwise may be lost’ (Johansson and Woodilla 2005, 26). So how can we understand the use and functions of irony, and what does irony say about the specific institutional setting in which it is used? The overall interest of this article is to explore the use of irony within the police: what is accomplished with irony and what can it be used for?
While theories of ‘safety valve’ have dominated the functions of humour as tension-releasing, especially within the police (e.g. Holdaway 1988), the parodic features in irony often contain criticism that also has the potential to be subversive in its character (Kenny 2009). From organizational theories on workplace resistance, we learn that critique can take various shapes and be either formal or informal (also known as routinized) (e.g. Scott 1985; Prasad and Prasad 2000, 2001). It is suggested that irony can function as a tool for sense-making, and as a way of handling multiple and contradictory realities (Johansson and Woodilla 2005). This means that the critique proposed through irony can even destabilize the hegemonic, or taken-for-granted, reality in the context in which it is used, leaving it open to question and suggesting an alternative, or counter-hegemonic, reality (cf. Kenny 2009). Thus, this article proposes that vis-à-vis cultural norms, criticism can be implicitly expressed by framing accounts in a humorous ironic frame. This article examines how norms are maintained and disrupted through irony, and it places emphasis on how the use of irony can be understood in terms of more everyday or informal resistance within an institution – in this case the Swedish Police.

The article first outlines research on humour and irony in relation to institutional settings, and then presents an overview of the literature on the use of humour within the police. I thereafter propose a theoretical approach that examines irony as a discursive resistance device, and I suggest how this use of irony can shed light on the official and unofficial norms prevalent in the setting in which it is used. The article concludes by presenting the findings on the multiple functions of irony, and suggests how these findings can be significant in understanding processes of power and resistance in the workplace.

**Humour and irony in institutions**

Humour has been studied in many academic disciplines and from different theoretical perspectives, showing how its function and nature vary across contexts. A variety of classifications of it have been put forth as a result (e.g. Raskin 2008; Butler 2015). In the 1980s, however, as part of the rise of psychological and management research, humour’s importance for organizational (corporate) cultures began to be more generally emphasized (Raskin 2008). Beyond the general function of humour to amuse, many studies now emphasized how humour could work as a managerial strategy to increase creativity and improve teamwork, job satisfaction and communication (e.g. Holmes 2000; Kangasharju and Nikko 2009). On the other hand, however, interest began simultaneously to develop in the subversive power of humour (Kenny 2009), in humour as something that could, at least potentially, undermine managerial power when co-creating autonomy in different working groups (e.g. Collinson 1988; Strömberg and Karlsson 2009). Humour was also emphasized as important in organizational identity work (e.g. Johansson 2009; Schnurr 2009; Strömberg and Karlsson 2009), and as something giving rise to gendered practices (e.g. Collinson 1988; Wahl, Holgersson, and Höök 2005; Johansson 2009). The picture that emerges of humour from all these studies is, accordingly, that it is, even in the limited context in question, multifunctional: ‘a humorous utterance may, and typically does, serve several functions at once’ (Holmes 2000, 166). Examining how the various functions of workplace humour contribute to social cohesion, Holmes (2000), for example, has identified how it can be used not only by those in authority to conceal power relations, but also by subordinates to challenge the same: ‘contestive humour’, for instance, enables subordinates to express risky opinions (or repressive discourses) in unequal power relations in a socially acceptable way. Also Billig (2005) has looked at how humour often thematizes power relations, distinguishing between disciplinary humour, which ‘mocks those who break social rules, and thus can be seen to aid the maintenance of those rules’, and rebellious humour, which ‘mocks the social rules, and, in its turn, can be seen to challenge … the rules’ (Billig 2005, 202). However, the distinction is nearly always not clear-cut: humour can be ambivalent and contradictory, especially when relying on irony, sarcasm and satire. Butler (2015) questions the duality between contestive ‘humour as workplace resistance’ and repressive ‘humour as a management resource’ forms of workplace humour found in
organizational research. Instead of viewing humour as either challenging authority or maintaining order, Butler proposes a theory on laughter in organizations that acknowledges the simultaneous collective and corrective functions of laughter and humour.

The scope of most studies on humour has been broad, although some studies have directed their attention towards irony. While theories of irony have focussed on the multi-functional and indeterminate nature of irony, the perspectives dominating the research area have nevertheless for the most part treated irony as either a form of a psychological safety valve aiding the handling of ambiguous values, or as implicit criticism or an expression of resistance that serves to facilitate change. Others have suggested that irony has a ‘distinctive edge’ that is used to establish political positions, and to legitimize or undercut a wide variety of interests (Johansson and Woodilla 2005, 34, referring to Hutcheon 1994). At the same time, research has also illuminated how the complex and multi-layered nature of the discourses that structure societal norms gives rise to ironic conditions in organizations (Trethewey 1999). Elsewhere, dramaturgical models of irony have been developed (for an overview, see Clift 1999).

Studies that have explicitly discussed irony in the context of organizational research include studies on the forms and functions of irony among workers and managers (Johansson and Woodilla 2005), and studies on organizational humour. These have found jocular irony to sustain group membership, a sense of identity and autonomy in relation to organizational values and hierarchies among workers (e.g. Collinson 1988; Pogrebin and Poole 1988). Elsewhere, organizational humour more generally has been suggested to constitute a device for handling multiple realities within organizations (e.g. Johansson and Woodilla 2005). Studies on irony, more specifically, have shown that it is often directed at specific work tasks (e.g. Collinson 1988), and resorted to in order to criticize institutional values (Willis 1977; Rodrigues and Collinson 1995; Bolton 2004), workplace hierarchies (Pogrebin and Poole 1988; Holmes 2000; Bolton 2004; Strömberg and Karlsson 2009), or other hierarchies in society (Wahl, Holgersson, and Höök 2005; Johansson 2009). In such uses, irony often functions as a tool for (covert) resistance, as in the case of women in Nicaragua who, in one study, were found to deploy irony and laughter as an important strategy of resistance against patriarchal power relations (Johansson 2009). The same quality of irony is also highlighted by Scott (1985) in his influential study of informal ‘routine resistance’ among peasants, which, moreover, showed that resistance towards oppressive conditions is articulated most often off stage and in the absence of authority. Laughter and irony can, to be sure, also be used to undermine, not express, resistance (Kangasharju and Nikko 2009), as demonstrated also by Piirainen-Marsh’s (2010) study of teachers’ use of irony as a disciplining tool when pupils challenged their authority in the classroom.

Some organizational studies have looked at the uses of irony in situations characterized by cemented power structures, in which cases irony has also shown itself to have a preservative function, rather than constituting a liberating device. In such circumstances, irony may be resorted to by workers to cope with their subordinate situation, by establishing, with its help, a discourse community of their own within the organization (e.g. Collinson 1988; Rodrigues and Collinson 1995; Holmes 2000; Bolton 2004; Strömberg and Karlsson 2009). Nevertheless, in its use as a destabilizing and liberating device, irony tests the actual limits and possibilities for change. Satirical cartoons and irony in a labour union magazine, for instance, can both reflect and reinforce workers’ counter-cultural values (Rodrigues and Collinson 1995). Nurses can use irony as a weapon with which to practice resistance to institutional hierarchies and patriarchal structures, providing them with an important form of misbehaviour and a means by which to vent aggression and frustration in a manner that also lends itself to the subversion of the established order (Bolton 2004). In management studies, irony as a liberating device has been found to constitute a feminist strategy for women managers. Wahl, Holgersson, and Höök (2005), for instance, showed this quality of irony to be linked to its function as a source of power for the acquisition of collective energy (e.g. among feminists or women in management positions) or for the undermining of gender or sexual hierarchies, even if irony, in their study, could also help to stabilize the status quo (cf. Bolton 2004). Thus, irony has at least the potential to have a transformative effect in organizations.
All in all, previous research has shown how organizational actors use irony (and humour) as a resource that enables them to confront, cope with and potentially change the organizational reality they find themselves in. At the same time, however, irony can also have the function of (and be intentionally used for) helping to preserve that reality.

**Humour in police culture**

While research highlights the significance of humour in police work, no one has directed its scope exclusively towards the functions of irony in police settings. Rather, irony has been included in many studies as a form of humoristic lingo.

Just as in other professions, police officers develop a particular, profession-specific manner of speech. Among police officers, humour is highly valued, seen as having an important role in helping to affirm and re-affirm one’s collective professional identity (Sefton 2011; Granér 2014; Wieslander 2014). In some police contexts, delivering and receiving humorous commentary is even considered a fundamental aspect of the police work done (see Holdaway 1988; Pogrebin and Poole 1988; Granér 2004, 2014). As Clements (2008, 164) reports, when he himself began working as an officer in England in the 1970s, it was common to remind people in the force that ‘If you can’t take a joke, you shouldn’t have joined’. As terms such as ‘blue jokes’ (Holdaway 1988) suggest, the humorous jargon employed by the police rank and file also has characteristics that make it highly particular to its context. It has been argued, for instance, that humour constitutes the main part of the informal language police officers use to interpret formal internal rules and policies governing their work, and to articulate resistance (e.g. Loftus 2009; Sefton 2011). Through humour, the street-officer culture bends and compromises official rules, laws or guidelines, contrasting these with the realities of police work. Thereby, a gap is created between street officers and management, one that in turn establishes and strengthens group autonomy, and promotes individual discretion among the rank and file (e.g. Pogrebin and Poole 1988; Granér 2004; Reuss-Ianni and Ianni 2005).

Internationally as well as in Sweden, a dominant characteristic of police occupational humour is that it has been viewed as something functional and even necessary in light of the tasks performed (Holdaway 1988; Pogrebin and Poole 1988; Waddington 1999; Reiner 2000; Granér 2004, 2014; Loftus 2009; Uhnoo 2015). This safety-valve theory, which highlights the significance of humour for expressing social frustration, reducing hostility and maintaining social order, has been widely espoused by policing actors themselves and it, perhaps for that reason, remains dominant also in police research. In the latter, the psychological value of humour has been highlighted, along with its importance as a coping mechanism necessary in a stressful and dangerous profession. In both of these regards, it is assumed, humour works as a means for collectively defusing both boring and dangerous situations, reinforcing fellowship constructed on shared experiences and helping to establish group identities and handle conflicts. As Reiner (2000), among others (e.g. Pogrebin and Poole 1988), has stressed, humour has a tension-relieving function that fosters solidarity in a profession in which actors are at high occupational risk for cynicism towards certain groups in society. A common feature of police talk is its employment of a ‘raw but cordial’, often ironic, style that can sometimes blur the line between humour and harassment (Pogrebin and Poole 1988; Granér 2004; Sefton 2011; Wieslander 2014; Uhnoo 2015). Indeed, whether and in which circumstances such ‘humorous’ talk amounts to discriminatory practices, such as vis-à-vis ethnic and religious minorities, has increasingly become a topic of interest to researchers, and an important theme in recent literature (e.g. Holdaway 1988; Waddington 1999; Sollund 2007; Loftus 2009; Wieslander 2014; Uhnoo 2015).

In the aftermath of the Stephen Lawrence case in UK and similar incidents elsewhere (e.g. in Norway and the United States), a new focus on police talk has led to an increased awareness of institutional racism along with efforts, through organizational reforms, to promote equality and social inclusion in the police corps. Research has brought a more critical perspective to bear upon the derogatory (and often humorous) language and verbal styles in use in police departments, highlighting how, in the 1990s, these transformed from being openly derogatory (and racist) to being only
covertly so and restricted to what Holdaway and O’Neil (2007) label ‘safe places’. As studies of police ‘canteen banter’ (Waddington 1999) and the ‘tin bubble’ speech of officers (Uhnoo 2015) have shown, police humour differs depending on whether it is resorted to in ‘safe places’, such as debriefing rooms, the canteen or the police car, and that this humour deviates strongly from the kind of humour (or the absence of humour) verbalized in public or in the presence of a critically minded audience (see also Pogrebin and Poole 1988; Holdaway and O’Neil 2007; Loftus 2009; Wieslander 2014). Loftus (2009) labelled such safe places ‘white spaces’, looking at how in them derogatory and even directly racist police talk can be openly expressed, sustaining unequal power relations both among police employees themselves and in police encounters with minorities. In previous research, I have developed the understanding of the concepts ‘safe places’ and ‘white spaces’, bringing into relief the significance of the conditions of language used within different areas in the police (Wieslander 2014, 2018, 2019, see also Sefton 2011). I have used the term ‘safe (discursive) spaces’ to point at these spaces as contextualized and regulated beyond only race, and shown that language and humour are conditioned differently in relation to different people, groups, times, locations and occasions. These studies on humour among police recruits and personnel showed how derogatory humour works as a positioning device, establishing divisions between various ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ in the police depending on the matter discussed, while simultaneously being perceived as a functional necessity (safety valve) that creates friendship. Altogether, then, humour and the way it is used among the police can be said to offer the latter both a socializing and a disciplining device that both reflects and reinforces the governing occupational norms and values of the workplace.

**Irony as resistance: a theoretical perspective**

In this present study, I utilized a discourse approach on irony that looks upon it as a social practice that shapes, creates and defines reality, thus giving importance to everyday talk in organizations (cf. Prasad and Prasad 2000, 2001). A discourse approach to humour shifts focus from intentions, attitudes and mental states, to the functions and consequences that humour can have for people and institutions. I used discursive psychology as a theoretical lens through which to understand language use in situ. The perspective is concerned with activities done through talk and texts, and with this action-orientation, it treats discourse as both constructed and constructive (Hepburn and Wiggins 2007). For this study I aligned with the tradition in the early field of discursive psychology that draws both on the rhetorical tradition of Billig (e.g. 2005) and the early works by Wetherell and Potter (e.g. 1992), by studying both ‘the way discourse is embedded in and contributes to social practice’ (Hepburn and Wiggins 2007, 11). This implies looking upon micro practices in talk, but also considering the institutional context (Edley 2001). Accordingly, the emphasis was laid on the examination of language in use in specific settings, which implied analyzing the way organizational norms and values are created, sustained and reproduced through talk and conversation. The point of departure in the examination was a post-structuralist view of individuals as active subjects not only acquiring and reproducing power through the use of discursive formations, but also practising the possibility available to them to express and enact resistance through, for example, alternative discourses and rhetorical resources (Edley 2001). In this study, the rhetorical resource in focus is irony.

The post-structuralist approach I utilized in this study centres on the capacity of hegemonic discourses to condition agency, while also acknowledging the ways in which resistance may be productive and co-constitutive of power. Research on resistance, overall, has engaged several different disciplines, resulting in various definitions of the term. In general, however, resistance may be described as referring to oppositional action – activity engaged in and pursued in an oppositional relationship to power (e.g. Johansson and Vinthagen 2016, 418). Although there is disagreement on whether resistance is always oppositional to power, a general consensus in the field is that both power and resistance can assume various forms of expression (e.g. Hollander and Einwohner 2004). The examination in this study proceeds from a conceptualization of resistance as a practice historically entangled with (everyday) power and intersectional with it. Resistance, for its part, is taken
to be heterogeneous and contingent due to the changing nature of contexts and situations (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016, 418). This study focuses on the everyday or ‘micro resistance’ (here in terms of irony), which, as a social phenomenon, is subtler in both its expression and impact than organized resistance (Scott 1985; Johansson and Vinthagen 2016). Typically, this kind of resistance avoids any direct confrontation with authority, due to its risk and dangers. In fact, workplace resistance is not always easily identified in organizations (Prasad and Prasad 2000, 2001). For instance, Scott (1985) shows, with examples from Malaysian peasants, how subordinates can question authorities through disguising (ideological) resistance in various everyday practices or routines, from dissimulation and noncompliance to foot dragging, in order to voice political critique in a safe manner. So while everyday resistance can be intentional and lead to politically motivated or more organized forms of resistance, the everyday resistance in this study appears spontaneous, less visible and more indirect, and is thus characterized as ‘informal’ (Prasad and Prasad 2000, 2001) or ‘routinized’ (Scott 1985). Even so, it is suggested that multiple forms of everyday insubordination can create instability in organizational control (Scott 1985; Prasad and Prasad 2000, 2001).

The examination is further inspired by Rubin (2017, following Giddens 1976), who incorporated structural determinants in her analysis of institutional behaviour not as something separate from, and contrasting with, agency, but rather in a mutually constitutive relationship with it. As Rubin points out, resistance is not only a reaction to the dominant institutional regime; that regime also always enables, constructs and shapes resistance through the influence of the structural conditions it imposes. Accordingly, when investigating the uses and functions of irony from this perspective, it needs to be addressed as a phenomenon that is context-specific, relational and situated. Thereby, the role of organizational norms, values and routines in the understanding and interpretation of irony as used in institutional settings comes to the fore.

Irony as a discursive resource – implications for the analysis

If the use of irony can be understood as an act of resistance to the hegemonic norms that shape a context, the content of irony can reveal both the hegemony and counter-values in that context. I focus this analysis on the use and functions of irony in a specific setting, and what irony accomplishes in that setting. This means examining when and how irony is practised among individuals sharing the same understanding of their context as members of a joint (discursive) community. In other words, irony in this discussion is viewed and analyzed as a discursive resource or device that is both social and rhetorical (Billig 2005).

Analyzing irony as a social device means analyzing not only the content of what is said, but also what is put down in the ironic remark and made implicit. Towards this purpose, Clift (1999) has proposed a framing model of irony in conversations, one in which irony is characterized by its double perspective revealing both a standard assumption and its incongruity. In irony, the negative evaluation is put forth implicitly, pointing towards what irony can be used for and what it can achieve. An ironic statement or a joke commonly makes fun of, or puts down, the person(s) or the situation(s) talked about, these being typically portrayed unfavourably using expressions and characterizations otherwise not possible to resort to. In doing so, however, irony makes itself ‘recognizable because it relies on common understandings and assumptions and on accepted standards of behaviour to which the speaker makes appeal’ (Clift 1999, 538). Simply put, analyzing irony makes visible the social norms that are maintained or disrupted through the ironic remarks (cf. Butler 2015). A key feature here, however, is always ambiguity, behind which it is possible to retreat (by naming the said as a joke) when criticized or challenged for having uttered an untruth or an insult (Kenny 2009). Ironical utterances are typically exaggerated in their content, to enable the speaker to deny them the status of a factual statement. It is only by its reference to a commonly held, shared norm that the irony can be understood, and also appear as funny, which then renders irony context-specific and more difficult to comprehend for outsiders: in order for the irony to be understood, one must also know and understand its referents.
In the sections that follow, I explore jocular irony among Swedish police officers and students as a form of resistance practised through everyday institutional talk. An ironical statement can mock and attack, but it can also tell several stories at once, given that it relies on ambiguities and paradoxes. While the intentionality of the discursive stances taken could never be ruled out in the uses and expressions of irony analyzed, the intentionality of the statements put forth and the degree of hostility possibly involved in their expression are not central to this study. Accordingly, the analysis below also includes fragments of sarcasm and satire. Instead, the analysis concentrates on the stories themselves, their employment and their consequences. This article extends the insights of research on irony in organizations and workplace resistance by examining the discursive (re)production of resistance through irony, thus providing knowledge on what is accomplished through the use of irony and what it can be used for.

**Methods, data and analysis**

Data from two police institutional contexts in Sweden were included in the study, so as to allow for exploration of irony in use at different organizational levels (police education and training, rank-and-file officer corps) and in two different groups of police employees (police students, uniformed officers). Firstly, data from a field study was gathered at the Swedish National Police Academy, as part of a larger study on diversity in police training. As ‘observer-as-participant’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), I studied interactions in two separate police academy classes (45 police students in total) and audio recorded them over a period of six weeks in 2010 towards the end of the police students’ fourth and final semester at the academy. Following this fieldwork phase, five focus groups were set up, with a total of 27 fourth-semester police students interviewed in May 2010, followed in turn by three sets of focus group interviews in December 2010 with a total of 11 fifth-semester police students completing their traineeship at different police stations. While the point could be made that focus group discussions do not constitute naturally occurring conversations, and thus fail to exemplify everyday talk, they, in this particular study, could still be defined as contexts of such talk since the discussions in them were between classmates who had spent much time with one another on an almost daily basis over a period of more than two years by the time of their interviews.

Secondly, I conducted a field study in three different police stations in a Swedish police district during 2016. The study was primarily an investigation financed by the Swedish Police into the possibilities and obstacles police officers encounter when expressing themselves in their organization. The data drawn from this study consist of 104 h of scheduled participant observation (observer-as-participant) as well as handwritten field notes and memos from field conversations with over 100 front-line officers involved in their daily work. Besides talk of and among officers embedded in their everyday work situations, I also obtained informal workday chatter among officers from a wide range of operational units over a period of seven months at one police station where my field office was located.

While undertaking these two different projects, I complied with the Swedish Personal Data Act 1998:204, and the Swedish Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act 2009:400, in addition to the ethical regulations of the Swedish Research Council (2011). For instance, this implied full disclosure of research identity, and I obtained informed consent from all participants and from the Police authority to use the data for future research.

Ironic utterances and artefacts were analyzed from both these data sets. They included utterances from field notes and recorded talk in interaction at work and at school, and from group interviews. Artefacts contained humoristic/sarcastic pictures and notes, found on the wall in the stations, or showed to me by officers from their office or from a closed Facebook group for officers. The data relied on linguistic resources, which, apart from words, also included the use of silence, satirical pictures and body language such as smiles and grins that accompany, for example, an ironic remark. These ironic remarks were analyzed as instances of ‘micro resistance’, and contained overt and
covert expressions, put forth both individually and collectively. In taking various forms of ironic remarks as the unit of analysis, the questions guiding the analysis were centred around content and function: what hegemonic and counter-hegemonic content is deployed through irony and what does it accomplish in the specific setting?

**Findings: destabilizing official discourses through irony**

In this research, police employees’ use of irony as a means of expression of resistance was analyzed in two specific settings (workplace and education) and in the context of two distinct change initiatives currently influencing police work; organizational change and new diversity and equality guidelines being introduced. Despite this diversity of settings, a common feature among all the police employees in the sample was criticism put forth about official directives and police management strategies, which were perceived as ‘non-realistic’. In this section, I first look at the way in which the officers used irony to express their resistance to, on the one hand, their organization’s dominant or governing values and norms and, on the other hand, their working conditions, blamed in many key aspects on a major re-organization of the Swedish police force launched in 2015 (entailing, among other things, the merger of 21 regional police authorities into one national authority). After that, the use of irony among the police students is examined, highlighting how it could serve to destabilize the language of political correctness and the official diversity and equality agenda promoted at their institution.

**At the stations: resisting managerial messages**

Contextual knowledge is required to be able to recognize irony, which means that it is sometimes difficult for outsiders to recognize it as such. By spending time at the station and becoming familiar with the forms of expression and the institutional culture, this became easier for me with time. However, as Johansson and Woodilla have reminded us, irony and humour ‘not only draw upon the speech community, but also create and shape it’ (2005, 34, emphasis added). As illustrated in the following, irony helps to establish a community of shared understandings and meaning in a specific context while, paradoxically, at the same time creating tensions around the boundaries across which serious talk is employed (in this study, the boundary separating officers from the management).

When launching a study on the conversational climate in a police district, the officers working there repeated ironical utterances about their possibilities for, and obstacles to, speaking out in their organization, utterances that clearly were meant for my ears. The expression **högt i tak** (literally, to have ‘high ceilings’) is commonly used both officially by the police management and among officers themselves to indicate a high level of tolerance for freedom of speech and expression in the ranks (Nylén 2012; Svensk Polis 2012). Playing on it, the officers I encountered bantered about their workplace atmosphere: ‘The ceilings are high, but the exit is near’; ‘The ceilings are high if you lie low’; ‘The ceilings are high for a dwarf’. According to these officers, one was to keep criticism to oneself or face reprisals. The latter were described as entailing ‘ending up in the freezer’, suggesting that those not careful enough could end up being reassigned or risk their promotion. This form of routine resistance to the managerial discourse on freedom of speech constituted not only a counter-discourse of a suppressive conversational climate, but also characterized the management as sneaky, giving reprisals to the employees while proclaiming freedom of speech. The cynical punchlines served to inform other peers and me about the perceived working conditions, and thus also constituted a truth very few dared to challenge (see Wieslander 2018).

Another area subjected to widespread and severe criticism couched in a humorous form was the 2015 police reform, which led to the centralization of the police institution in Sweden along with various measures to improve its efficiency. Officers in this study pointed out what they saw as the reform’s adverse effects, including resource waste, the dismantling of well-functioning special
units, and a betrayal of the commitment to bring the police closer to the citizens. Instead of the latter, for instance, police presence was removed further away, the opponents claimed, through personnel cuts and the closing of police stations in more sparsely populated areas and neighbourhoods. Such expressions of discontent among the rank and file, along with management’s official statements about it or the reform itself, were routinely drawn upon or cited in everyday talk at the stations – but only when there were no managerial personnel present. While on a broader national level this criticism was publicly articulated by the Swedish police union, individual officers, as a rule, put it forth in an indirect or disguised implicit form only (cf. Scott 1985). An ironic expression was usually resorted to when describing one’s experience of the presumed improvements from the reform, as in the following incident.

A group of patrol officers have a meeting of their own without their supervisor present. During the meeting, the officers express discontent about several aspects of the new police reform and the new working conditions it had created. Every critical remark put forth in the group is replied to in an excessively soft tone parodying that of the officers’ supervisors, accompanied by an ironic smile: ‘By 1 January 2015, everything will be fine.’ (Field note, meeting room, Spring 2016)

The irony tells us that the improvements were said to happen a year earlier, posing criticism not only of the reorganization but also of the management’s promises regarding it. By adding a soft tone of voice to the statement, the officers created a ridiculing situation, which increased the gap between the management and workers. It also enabled the group members to address and create a unanimous picture of their working situation, generating autonomy among officers. Except for this autonomy, the irony did not create any concrete change in the specific working situation, but it questioned the credibility of the management and the reform. The expression, said as a punchline, also worked as a ‘topic-closing device’, as it served as a parodic echo of an answer from the supervisor and ending the matter just discussed.

In another ridiculing conversation, irony was used by officers to mock the police reform work being carried out, which, according to them, despite the promise of increased police presence given to the public, had resulted in its decrease and made it more difficult for the officers to achieve the goals given them by their organization.

I’m joining six officers sitting around a cup of coffee in the police station canteen who just arrived from a meeting. Alternatingly sighing and laughing, they talk about how impossible it was for them in their new situation to live up to the police’s commitment to the public. They respond to one another with comments such as ‘That’s just sick’ and ‘So disturbing’. Expressing disappointment at their supervisor (who again had failed to join them for lunch), one officer jokes that maybe they should just all smile, as perhaps they were really on Candid Camera instead of some actually operating police unit, given how ‘ridiculously bad’ and ‘inadequate’ their leadership and staffing situation was. More satirical comments were made, this time about ‘lipstick on a pig’, accompanied with laughter. The conversation went on in a bantering mode, with many sarcastic comments, until the pig has so much lipstick on as to now ‘look like a transvestite’. The officers laugh and snicker. One of them googled a picture of the Muppet character Miss Piggy with heavy make-up on, smiling, and wearing a blue dress; everyone laughed. (Field note, police station cafeteria, Spring 2016)

The main thrust of the criticism put forth in this example of sarcastic humour and satire use was directed, first of all, at the way the re-organization of the police in the country had been handled and what the changes implied for officers on the ground and their ability to carry out their mission, and, secondly, at the official accounts of the reform in the media. The image presented to the public of a well-functioning organization was unrecognizable to those working within the police. The use of the pig metaphor for the police authority, combined with laughter, created distance from the official discourse about the organization and from the managers reproducing it. The ironic bantering about the top leadership of the organization reinforced an us-against-them attitude vis-à-vis the latter, strengthening group solidarity among the subordinate officers based on their shared experiences at and of work. By extension, and since the criticisms put forth were never questioned, the banter, through shared laughter, also helped constitute and sustain membership norms and values. The in-group norm here had to do with taking a critical stance towards organizational
reforms on a national level, including the accompanying new policies, visions of reform outcomes as well as the changed working conditions resulting from the reform; and indeed, none of the patrol officers in this study challenged this stance. These examples, moreover, illustrate how one was shown what to laugh at, and how the disciplinary function of irony in use works in re-creating social order (cf. Billig 2001, 2005): showing support for the reorganization among peers would be out of the question.

The sarcastic and ironical comments put forth by the officers demonstrate how the reality perceived inside the police organization can conflict with the organizational norms depicting a well-functioning police institution, leading to these norms becoming disrupted and challenged by the very groups supposedly benefiting from, expressing and embodying them. In previous research, this type of critical humour has been termed ‘jocular aggression’ (Pogrebin and Poole 1988), ‘contestive humour’ (Holmes 2000) and ‘rebellious humour’ (Billig 2005), indicating its function as a challenge aimed at superiors and/or guidelines that allows discontent to be vented in a safe manner, avoiding direct confrontation (cf. Scott 1985). The police organization is authoritarian and hierarchically ordered, entailing a strong perceived risk of severe negative consequences when violating the rules of organizational status or deviating from work assignments or managerial orders (for Sweden, see Stenmark 2005; Wieslander 2016, 2018). In such an organizational context, irony can be said to provide a useful resource for police officers for negotiating institutional values and norms without the risk of being perceived as insubordinate or incurring disciplinary measures, such as ‘ending up in the freezer’. In this way, irony, in its many forms, often ‘facilitates handling the complexity and interplay between multiple realities’ in an institutional context (Johansson and Woodilla 2005, 28). Thus conceived, however, resistance is not simply about reacting to institutional and working conditions; it is also itself enabled, created and shaped by the very same factors (Rubin 2017). When internal criticism is not welcomed and instead risks incurring retaliation from superiors, irony becomes one of the few available vehicles for its expression, whereby the resistance then becomes covert and shaped by the cultural and structural conditions prevailing within the organization.

The police officers’ jokes indicate resistance to the official image projected by their management of law enforcement in the country. The police’s claimed work on institutional core values and its diversity agenda, for instance, have, even more generally, received much criticism within police organizations themselves, along the same lines as in this study (see, e.g. Cashmore 2002; Loftus 2009; Sefton 2011; Wieslander 2014). The officers termed such initiatives as mere organizational window dressing vis-à-vis the media and the general public, responding to them with open scepticism that only reinforced existing conflicts within their organization and led to further differentiation between its various levels of hierarchy (cf. Rennstam 2013; Wieslander 2016, 2018). That way, the distances and tensions between the categories of employees associated with those levels (e.g. officer corps versus management) not only intensified but were also constituted through everyday talk.

At the police academy: going against political correctness

As in other countries (cf. Wilson and Stapleton 2007; Loftus 2009), the Swedish Police’s official policies regarding diversity and core values remain contested and controversially received among police employees themselves, clashing with the unofficial norms of the police corps (Sefton 2011; Wieslander 2014). In the everyday talk among police students in this study, the official values of the national police institution were often brushed off as ‘political correctness’ and window dressing, at best as high-minded aspirations difficult to implement in practice. The students referred to political correctness not as something negative, but rather as a means of regulating what could be said out loud and what could not.

Even though humour was frequently resorted to in the classrooms of the Police Academy, it, to be sure, was only seldom employed there to directly criticize official policies. In the focus group
discussions, however, irony was commonly used to negotiate or undermine the formal authority and rules of the diversity agenda, as well as the officially promulgated values. The following exchange between two police students provides an example of the kind of criticism put forth, centred on the perceived shallowness of the strategy measures adopted:

Lovisa: There's this trend now that you're supposed to formulate for yourself – all corporations are supposed to work based on a set of core values – your own key words and values, just because it sounds and looks good.

Kristoffer: We'll put a nice frame around them and hang the thing on the wall.

(4th-semester police student focus group, 2010)

Lovisa’s critique is reinforced by Kristoffer’s ridiculing of what appears as a symbolic gesture of institutional pride – that is, the showing off of central values that look good on the wall. The police management was criticized, both at school and inside the police organization, for merely reiterating the official discourse, which the police students in this study considered to be a window-dressing strategy aimed at the media and the general public. According to them, both the new diversity agenda and the core values work were little more than shallow rhetorical strategies disconnected from the actual realities of their work. Police trainees reported about older colleagues at police stations laughing at policy documents, thus undermining the legitimacy of these documents and, in turn, creating or reinforcing cultural norms specifying what counted as important and what did not. This did not, however, amount to questioning the importance of, as a police employee, performing one’s work to high moral standards: rather, it was the management’s way of formulating policies and their failure to relate the strategies created to the everyday school or police work reality that was subjected to objections.

What, each time, counts as political correctness is determined contextually, in relation to the prevailing political and social climate. For the police students in this study, it was mostly xenophobic, misogynist and sexist talk and utterances that had been declared taboo. Examples of what was expressly prohibited included expressing intolerance towards other cultures or women officers, and commenting on differences in physical tests for women and men police applicants. Tabooed talk was, in consequence, carried out in what I call ‘safe (discursive) spaces’, such as the police car and the canteen, but also the focus groups in this study, in which there were no potential critics or supervisors present. In the everyday life of the police students and officers in their organizations, an additional way to create a safe discursive space for otherwise prohibited talk was to call for what was termed a ‘core values time-out’.

This informal practice among both police students and uniformed officers was resorted to in resistance to the Swedish Police Core Values officially declared for the national police agency (Rikspolisstyrelsen 2009; for more on the practice itself, see Sefton 2011). It was used to signal that something was taboo as a subject to talk about, while at the same time providing an opportunity to nevertheless speak out on it. When asked about what they thought was taboo for them to speak about, a typical response by the police students was to answer the question conditionally: ‘It depends on whether we’re having a core values time-out or not’ (4th-semester police student focus group). In other words, entering the discursive space of the time-out would enable other kinds of responses to be voiced. The reply, to be sure, was also made jokingly, underscoring the humoristic language commonly used, especially in regard to the ‘core values’ of the police institution.

In addition to jokes drawing on their target’s nationality, ethnicity or religion, also gender and sexuality-related humour was very common among the police students in this study. In the following exchange between some of them (4th-semester police students in a focus group), the topic of the increased share of ethnic minorities in the police force is discussed, relating it to the development of the proportion of women in the same. According to Jon, the presence of women in the force is today taken for granted, which he then compares to the increasing presence of minorities in it as well, while David does his best to jokingly contradict him:

Jon: There will be more tolerance and acceptance of it, more understanding, but it takes time. It takes a couple of generations.
Here, a discourse recognizing diversity is resisted through ironic commentary on inequality. David’s words are received with giggles and grins, indicating the only socially acceptable way to pronounce and deal with these kinds of utterances in the police school context. The official societal and political climate coupled with the police’s diversity agenda and on-going anti-discrimination work would render any literal intention or interpretation of David’s words unacceptable in the context, and would probably lead to sanctions. Later in the course of their interviews, the participants went back to debate whether David’s comments, described by some as ‘spewing hostility towards women’, would in themselves suffice to have him suspended had they been reported to his superiors.

Psychological theories of humour suggest that humour and irony are often resorted to in order to express or vent discontent or hostility (cf. Raskin 2008), which then propel them as their suppressed motive. In this study, even without the means to access the speakers’ intentions, it became clear that irony could serve as a resource that enabled individuals to air contents otherwise contextually suppressed under the threat of sanctions. In some cases, it also provided one with a means to express values one did not want to publicly acknowledge having or adhering to (cf. Clift 1999). When framed in irony, that which was said could be easily taken back and brushed off as merely a joke when met with indignation by the audience. That irony, however, could also function a mocking device, as in the above case when opposition to equality was at once echoed and ridiculed. In any case, the ambiguity of irony among the police students enabled parallel, alternative meanings to be attached to that which was said, along with a possibility for the speaker to claim discordant positions. Thus, irony allowed the speakers to position themselves both for and against a specific discourse through just a single speech act. As Clift (1999, 544) has put it:

Through enabling us temporarily to become someone else, irony thus gives us access to subjects that otherwise might be deemed too sensitive; through becoming another, the ironist paradoxically sides with his addressee. Irony is simultaneously assertion and denial: a way of mentioning the unmentionable.

In the case of the uniformed officers in this study, irony worked to create shared counter-values in the occupational culture of the police stations. The police student David’s utterances, however, were considered taboo, and hence, in the settings of the Police Academy, too extreme in their literal sense. Nevertheless, the way David used irony for his remarks also drew upon the language of a wider (societal) discourse on diversity, blending in elements of the kind of inequality talk that sneers at women and minorities, this time in the police context. That way, the irony he displayed ultimately ambiguited and reversed what otherwise would have been regarded as sheer personal sexism, highlighting the ambivalent and paradoxical nature and function of irony.

‘Safe spaces’ and ‘conflict-free venues and encounters’

Humour and, more specifically, irony thus appear to actualize elements of resistance and give expression to and open up a ‘safe space’ for alternative and marginalized discourses. As Trethewey (1999) puts it, the double nature of irony visualizes the possibility for multiple ‘truths’. It tells several stories at once: official stories and informal counter-stories. However, even though ironic expressions can present alternatives, these can often only be expressed when couched in humour and with appeal to others’ sense of humour, given that the context of the utterings (i.e. the socio-political
landscape, the organizational police culture) prohibits them. The language of political correctness is associated by the participants in this study with regulated language use and fear of reprisals, and is in several cases manifested through what is held silent and made taboo in the police, such as questioning supervisors or diversity strategies. Nevertheless, resistance through ironical remarks makes it possible to stretch the boundaries of expressing oneself in accordance with what is regarded as politically correct in the context. Humour becomes one of the few socially accepted ways of resisting the hegemony of official policies and discourses: it expresses and gives visibility to a suppressed perspective while enabling one to label that perspective as merely a joke. Thus, irony opens up a social space, filling it with ambiguity, critique, and a humorous tone that takes the seriousness out of play – or, at least, disguises it.

It appeared to be the case that, in both contexts and groups studied (police students and patrol officers), one of the central functions of irony was to solve or conceal disagreements. On many occasions, especially during conversations felt to be sensitive or risky (such as those touching on the issue of diversity at the Police Academy), heated, even bitter debates could be brought to a congenial close using humour as a topic-closing device (cf. Kangasharju and Nikko 2009). As previous research has shown, police students and employees value humorous talk as a way to create a sense of fellowship and a congenial atmosphere, contributing to a pleasant workday (Granér 2004; Wieslander 2014). In line with this, the widespread use of humour as a device for ending disagreements that this study revealed may be interpreted as indicating that good relationships with colleagues are more highly valued or important than being able to argue a point, even in matters of significance for the profession.

Thereby, humour (and particularly irony) becomes a helpful means for sustaining what I label ‘conflict-free discursive venues and encounters’, necessitated by two features of police culture. First of all, that culture’s stress on a strong esprit de corps characterized by trust between colleagues (cf. Granér 2004; Stenmark 2005) calls for an absence of disagreements, especially among officers on patrol duty. Here humour and laughter can help to create and maintain the kind of solidarity required for the vital trust to develop. Secondly, there is a risk of ending up in the freezer when challenging cultural norms or criticizing one’s organization (Wieslander 2016, 2018). Together, these two features then call for an ability to engage in covert critique in ‘safe spaces’, away from higher-level managers and the general public. At the same time, however, this kind of, what we might call ‘rebellious’ or ‘liberating’ elements that irony has vis-à-vis managerial discourses and the expectations of the public, also have disciplinary effects, as they serve to preserve or solidify in-group norms through loyalty and group cohesion among peers. The suggested need for conflict-free venues, and humour and irony as a device to establish these venues, clarifies how resistance is not simply about reacting to institutional conditions: it is also itself enabled, created and shaped by the very same conditions (cf. Scott 1985, 242; Rubin 2017). The specific forms of resistance reflect the conditions and constraints under which they are generated (Scott 1985, 242); when risking reprisals for speaking out, covert speech is needed. Based on his findings on everyday resistance among peasants, Scott suggests that these kinds of mundane covert forms of resistance become powerful since they are hard to combat:

If they are open, they are rarely collective, and, if they are collective, they are rarely open. The encounters seldom amount to more than ‘incidents’, the results are usually inconclusive, and the perpetrators move under cover of darkness or anonymity, melting back into the ‘civilian’ population for protective cover. (Scott 1985, 242)

The question is whether the ironic bantering really changes anything within the police. While it opens up a space for resisting marginalization, the criticism put forth is kept somewhat anonymous and only expressed among peers. Therefore, on the one hand, the ironical stances taken by employees towards their organizational hierarchy have been deemed to be not much more than a preservative practice, since they do not do much, really, to alter the power structure in place (Collinson 1988). On the other hand, however, the ironic tales can also serve a liberating purpose. As Johansson and Woodilla (2005, 48) have explained it:
Even though [these] tales leave the formal power structure intact and preserve alienation, using such irony can be interpreted as turning the emotional hierarchy upside down and thereby, from a broader perspective, irony is altering the power relations.

To be able to do that, irony strives to reveal a perspective that devalues or ridicules its object, such as the official discourse of the organization, placing the ironist in a position superior to the object. This way, irony disrupts the balance of power and creates a sense of autonomy in relation to official guidelines, thereby demonstrating its destabilizing function. Bolton (2004, 179, drawing on Douglas 1975) has argued that ‘each interaction that unsettles the ‘working consensus’ is a micro-revolution’. Such micro-revolutions upset and subvert the status quo, by establishing the superiority of informal discourses over formal ones. The whispers of discontent leak to the management, who become aware of the words on the floor. These many and collective forms of insubordination create instability in organizational control (Scott 1985; Prasad and Prasad 2001), as they need to be handled, or at least addressed by, the management, and thus, become recognized. But this, Scott (1985) reminds us, is not to be considered as a minor task, but a struggle of symbolic power. In Scott’s (1985, xvii) words ‘it is a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood and labelled, a struggle to identify causes and blame’. In police everyday talk, irony thus serves as a vehicle of resistance in a constant process of negotiation, helping to destabilize formal or official norms and principles by manifesting informal or marginalized discourses (cf. Kenny 2009). It serves as a means to achieve higher political goals, withholding various cultural elements and raise resistance against changes (political and organizational). Through the counter-hegemonic values of these discourses, irony then enables an oppositional subjectivity to emerge, transforming it into a resistance resource in organizational cultures.

Conclusions

This study provides further dynamics to research on workplace humour by scrutinizing the use, functions and accomplishments of irony in everyday talk in two different police contexts. The results suggest that irony works as a powerful resource for uttering critique and thus, practicing resistance within an institution. The irony employed by participants in this study could, however, also be understood more generally as a collective form of expressing discontent without incurring the risk of reprisals. While, on the one hand, it helped to preserve and strengthen social order and structures of subordination by not voicing the critique but keeping it among peers, irony, on the other hand, could also question and challenge power relations and authority through its subversive power (cf. Kenny 2009). The resistance is foremost articulated through ridiculing the management’s top-down strategies (i.e. ‘high ceilings’), creating at the same time counter-discourses of the organizational life as interpreted among subordinates (i.e. ‘low ceilings’). This caused the management to appear to lack control of the members of the organization, and to be distant from them. The widespread resistance towards the reorganization, the implementation of official policies of reform or value work, and management leadership create autonomy among workers, but also disrupt organizational order and control (cf. Scott 1985; Prasad and Prasad 2000, 2001). Posing critique embedded in irony in informal conversations between peers prevents supervisors from disciplining or punishing their subordinates, since the resistance is framed as a joke and often told in the absence of managerial personnel. In this study, the criticism of police management’s top-down policies as mere window dressing created an informal culture of resistance, which, as such, became a way of exercising power for those otherwise lacking substantial resources for this. In creating distance between street-level officers and managers, the irony employed for the purpose also helped strengthen fellowship among rank-and-file officers, and thus their in-group autonomy. This, in turn, enabled the expression of controversial norms within smaller groups in the larger community. In this way, irony also comes with a disciplinary function, since what is disrupted and put down with an ironic remark becomes difficult to sympathize with. A central function of irony is thus to function as a device for opening up a ‘safe space’ where resisting subordination and marginalization becomes possible. Irony has
the power to tell several stories at once, rendering the opportunities to resist hegemonic discourses and form alternatives or counter-truths among subgroups (cf. Trethewey 1999). Irony also has the function to sustain ‘conflict-free discursive venues and encounters’ in a setting and profession where trust among peers is considered vital, and where overt criticism is risky because of the fear and dangers of reprisals.

To sum up, the findings of this study suggest that the functions of irony are not simply tension-releasing, but multidimensional. Irony in the police context served as a resource for handling ‘multiple realities which organizational actors are confronted with and need to respond to’ (Johansson and Woodilla 2005, 27). Through their ambiguity, police students’ and officers’ ironical comments shaped and destabilized their discursive space, allowing multiple interpretations of the situation to emerge. This way, irony could open up possibilities for change, creating moments of instability with regard to the managerial discourse. The functions of irony to simultaneously describe and subvert conventional ideas or concepts thus gave irony its power to expose and liberate simultaneously.

Notes
1. All names have been changed to protect anonymity.
2. There were no women participants in this group discussion.

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