Teasing, laughing and disciplinary humor: Staff-youth interaction in detention home treatment

Anna Gradin Franzén and Karin Aronsson

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Abstract

This study explores how *disciplinary humor* is deployed to shape and reshape social order in inter-generational encounters. Data are drawn from an ethnographic study of staff-resident encounters at a treatment home for boys (including about 30 hours of video recordings), focusing on sequential patterns in the local design of jokes and teasing, analyzing language and multimodal interaction in detail. It was found that staff and boys recurrently laughed together and teased each other by invoking local hierarchical positions such as child-adult. The intrinsic ambiguity of humor and teasing allowed staff members to engage in temporary breaches of social order, while simultaneously enforcing local rules of conduct. Similarly, the boys would joke with the staff, exaggerating or transgressing institutional and generational divides. But ultimately, the joking could also be seen to remind the participants of the very hierarchies that separate staff from residents, and men from boys, or adults from children.

Keywords

Disciplinary humor, teasing, laughter, social order, discipline, youth, detention homes

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Introduction

Humor, discipline and social order

This article explores how disciplinary humor, and particularly teasing, is deployed for creating social order in an institutional setting. Humor has the power to both disrupt order and to impose order. Prior work has often highlighted this ambivalent aspect of humor. For instance, joking can be both aggressive and promote rapport (Norrick, 2003). Similarly, Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) show that joking in conversation might take the form of either bonding or biting, and Holmes (2000) documents that humor can be both repressive and subversive. It can be deployed both as a means for superordinates to maintain control, and as a mean for subordinates to challenge or subvert authority. An example of this is the case of mock-impoliteness (cf. Culpeper, 2011; Haugh & Bousfield, 2012) where different forms of impoliteness (for example insults, teases) are interpreted as non-aggressive because of the context, and may even have bonding qualities (Culpeper, 2011). This does not mean, however, that impoliteness does not convey criticism, rather, it renders it in a socially acceptable form (Holmes, 2000).

Michael Billig (2005) has outlined a discursive model of humor, where he argues that humor is essential for social life, and that it is in profound ways connected to social order (particularly in the case of ridicule). He claims that (i) laughter is rhetorical and (ii) that there is an under-analyzed relationship between humor and embarrassment. What is embarrassing is typically humorous, and people do not only laugh *with* others, but also *at* others, and take

pleasure in breaches in social order. Drawing on Bergson (2008; French original 1900), he shows that humor has a corrective function in that the prospect of ridicule ensures conformity to social norms, and he especially argues for the importance of ridicule in the socialization of children. Billig distinguishes between *disciplinary humor*, which ‘mocks those who break social rules, and thus can be seen to maintain social order’; and *rebellious humor*, which ‘mocks social rules, and, in its turn, can be seen to challenge [...] the rules’ (2005:202).

Many scholars have pointed out disciplining aspects of humor. Tholander and Aronsson (2002), for example, describe humorous teasing as a kind of norm control; an important aspect of socializing practices. In joking events, irony or sarcasm might be delivered within a play frame, that is, on a non-serious footing (Goffman, 1981). This makes humor useful in that it makes it easier to bring up complaints or other delicate matters in a conversation, as it allows potentially offensive topics to enter in a ‘disguised and deniable form’ (Crawford, 2003:1420). The play frame also makes humor powerful; it should not be taken seriously and is therefore difficult to resist (Watts, 2007:260).

Drew (1987) claims that a basic social skill is to take a tease without showing resentment. In everyday interactions, comebacks, second teases or other non-serious types of uptake are to be preferred, unless the recipient of the tease wishes to come out as pitiful or as something of a bore. It has also been found that an important feature of (male) identity construction is to be able to take a joke and ‘fight back’ (Evaldsson, 2005; Haugh and Bousfield, 2012; Milani and Jonsson, 2011, Schnurr and Holmes, 2009). Drawing on a study of pre-adolescent boys, Evaldsson (2005) shows that insults are important in the production and negotiation of a local social masculine order in which positions of, authority and solidarity are enacted and contested. As a part of participants’ ways of positioning themselves and others within local *age* and *gender hierarches* (cf. Ochs, 1992), teasing and humor thus become important semiotic resources.

While there is a number of studies on humor in various institutional settings, such as therapy talk (Buttny, 2001), workplace team meetings (e.g. Holmes and Marra, 2002) and school settings (Tholander and Aronsson, 2002), there are only a few studies of humor and laughter in penal settings. These studies primarily show that humor is used for coping under difficult conditions in prison, both by staff members (Crawley, 2004; Nylander et al, 2011), and residents (Geer, 2002). Nielsen (2011) argues that humor is inextricably linked to prison officers' identity work, and their management of relationships with colleagues and residents. Humor creates a temporary social space, where play frames enable staff members and residents to bracket traditional social positions. Terry (1997) similarly found that humor is used for managing conflicting identities among prisoners.

Disciplinary power in total institutions has been explained as a minute control of bodies in spaces and time, in order to shape 'docile bodies', useful and compliant subjects (Foucault, 1977, p. 211). But Foucault (1991; 1997) has also argued that in present day post-industrial society, governing not only happens top down, but people also govern each other and themselves through acts of subjection (internalizing norms and regulating behavior). Governing thus also involves a structuring of the mind and the will.

In line with prior work on detention homes (Price, 2005; Wästerfors, 2009), the detention home is an ideal site for a study of disciplinary humor in at least three ways. First, it is a kind of *total institution* (Goffman, 1961), located somewhere in between a 'private home space' and a workspace. Second, it is an institution whose purpose is to work on the subjects' 'selves', which involves their everyday conduct (on technologies of selves, see Foucault, 1997), where 'troublesome youth' are to be transformed into 'normal youth' (Emerson and Messinger, 1977). Third, in these settings, staff members and residents tend to have strict behavioral guidelines to orient to (cf. Kivett and Warren, 2002; Price, 2005). This means that

there are clear authoritative norms that might be broken, ridiculed or dealt with in different ways.

In the following analyses, we explore how disciplinary humor and related disciplinary practices are deployed by staff and residents in creating social order, including the shaping and reshaping of gender-, generation-, and age hierarchies.

Data and setting

Theoretical basis for methodology chosen

Methodologically, this study involves an ethnographic approach with a fine-grained focus on language and interaction (cf. Duranti, Ochs and Schieffelin, 2012; Wetherell, 2007). It also draws on Foucauldian perspectives on discourse, situating discourse in a historical and societal context (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). Our analyses both cover how humor is performed, and how institutional culture ‘both impinge[s] upon and [is] transformed by those performances’ (Edley, 2001). This involves paying close attention to how institutional positions are invoked and negotiated in humor events in ways that both draw on and transgress institutional discourses.

In line with discursive psychology (Billig, 1991; Wetherell, 2007), the analyses primarily explore *the participants’ own perspectives* as revealed through talk and social interaction. Together, these perspectives (Miller and Fox, 2004) provide a useful way of studying institutional discourse that reveals the paradoxical nature of discourse, for instance, that people both produce, and are products of discourse (Billig, 1991).

The setting

The present article draws on an ethnographic fieldwork at a youth detention home (Sw: *särskilt ungdomshem*) in Sweden; a type of residential institution where young persons might

be placed through court orders or municipal decisions because of troublesome behavior (e.g. drug abuse or criminality) or difficult home conditions.

Stillbrook¹ admits boys between ages 13 and 16 years old, that is, young males (here referred to as boys (Sw: *killar*). The institution houses up to eight boys at a time, and about as many treatment assistants (the study includes ten staff members, four female and six male staff members). This study covers two time periods, involving a total of fourteen boys. Their periods of placement varied between a couple of months and more than two years. But, the boys normally do not know for how long they will stay.

Except for occasional weekends, the boys are not permitted to leave the premises where they eat, sleep and go to school. The institution features a 'token economy' (cf. Kivett and Warren, 2002) where staff members monitor the residents' conduct through points, tied to various rewards. Similarly, 'bad' behavior may result in point deductions (fines).

Video recordings, interviews and observations

The fieldwork (spread out over a period of two years) involved extensive video recordings and participant observations of everyday interaction between boys and staff members, as well as semi-structured interviews (all by first author). This entailed many hours of listening to, and partaking in daily conversations. In all, more than 30 hours of encounters were video recorded. This allows for detailed analysis of interaction, as it offers possibilities of viewing and reviewing events. All examples have been transcribed (cf. Appendix) in Swedish and later translated. The analyses are based on the original videos.

Analytic units

Drawing on Billig's (2005) notion of disciplinary humor, the analytical focus is on joking events between staff members and residents that involve both disciplinary features and

laughing/teasing. We have identified these events through the participants' orientation to *laughables* (Glenn, 1989); particularly their laughter, smiles, second jokes or verbal acknowledgements of humorous material (e.g. exaggerations, incongruity or absurdities, see Buttny, 2001). This means that our analyses of joking also covered parodic gestures and other imitations of physical action (cf. Bergson, 2008). In line with *proof procedures* (Sacks, 1992), our analyses were thus guided by the participants' own orientation to something as non-serious or humorous.

Findings

Humor and discipline

Joking and teasing is an essential part of everyday interactions at the detention home. The staff members prided themselves of providing a warm and familiar atmosphere, in which humor plays an important role. They recurrently talked about how the boys have to learn to laugh at themselves, and to be able to handle others' teasing as important aspects of their learning experiences at the home. Several of them actually see humor as a key quality for working with troublesome teenage boys. But, on another note, humor is of course also a type of disciplinary action (Bergson, 2008; Billig, 2005), a corrective device:

Therefore society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for the one against whom it is directed, laughter is really and truly, a kind of social "ragging" (Bergson, 2008:65; French original 1900)

Below, we present six episodes that illuminate ways in which the staff members and resident boys deploy laughter and humor through invocations of local authority positions (e.g. adult:child; staff:resident; Examples 1- 6), and through the ways that the participants ironically position each other within local hierarchies (for instance how staff members and boys implicitly or explicitly invoke age or generation differences).

Enforcing local rules of conduct

Many of the boys' and the staff members' daily routines and activities adhere to a strict time schedule and to a number of specific rules of conduct (e.g. no swearing, good table manners), tied to a token economy. This complex reward system requires staff members' continuous surveillance and evaluation of residents' behavior throughout the day to determine how many points each boy should receive. The rewards are tied to pocket money and various privileges.

Kivett and Warren (2002) claim that such behavior modification systems epitomize a totalizing institutional gaze, controlling bodies in time and space. However, despite the intention that nothing is supposed to 'go unobserved' by staff, forbidden behaviors are often ignored (Kivett and Warren, 2002:7). Humor has been found to be one method of deescalating trouble, and, a way for staff members to avert the disciplinary gaze (c.f. Emerson and Messinger, 1977). Here, we will show instead that humor is not always a way of averting the monitoring gaze, the gaze is still upon the boys, the staff members are 'getting things done' and humor can instead be understood as a refined way of making the residents follow norms.

In line with Foucault's (1991) discussions of governmentality and technologies of selves (1997), an important goal of modern discipline is to make subjects, not only do what is demanded by society, but to do so voluntarily and without coercion. Ultimately, the goal of the treatment is for the boys to voluntarily adhere to the local rules of comportment. In the

following two examples, the staff could have handled the situations through coercion, but instead, they deployed humor.

Excerpt 1

Two staff members (Per and Henke) and some boys (Jesper, Markus, and Tadek) are seated at the dinner table. Later, the staff members will take the boys to a local youth club, a rare treat.

1 Jesper Hello (can) I leave the table? Yeah but like I know-
2 I could- like no- ah one portion after eh the first
3 portion you can leave?
5 **Henke*** We can bring that up if you want to but bring it up at
6 the student conference
7 Markus Hehehe
8 Jesper → The time is ten past five ((looks at his watch)) and
9 I'm gonna talk to you ((points at Henke)) and I'm gonna
10 [((Looks at his watch and counts using his fingers))]
11 **Per** → [((Imitates Jesper's gestures in an exaggerated way))]
12 Jesper Get fixed up
13 Tadek I have to shower
14 Jesper And I have to
15 **Per** → Check one more time wait ((grabs Jesper's arm and turns
16 it so that Jesper can look at his watch)) now- yea good
17 Jesper What else do I have to do?
18 **Per** → Yea cause it takes a while to fix it up ((lightly
19 strokes the stubble on Jesper's head)) get it to lay
20 just right
21 Jesper °Yea° ((faint smile)) it's usually (difficult) ((smiles
22 towards Per))
23 **Per** → Hehehe shave it off ((touches Jesper's chin)) 'pling
24 pling pling' ((animated voice))

25 Jesper → Yea I have to do that too ((smilingly touches his chin
with a similar gesture to that of Per; looks toward
Henke))

*Staff members' names in bold

** Arrows indicate jokes/teases

According to the rule 'exhibit good table manners' (specified in the local version of token economy), nobody is allowed to leave the table until everyone has finished. All are about finished when Henke begins to serve himself a second helping. Jesper, who has long since finished eating, suggests an adjustment of the local rule: no one should be allowed to leave until all had completed their *first* plate. Henke suggests that Jesper could propose this at the weekly student conference (Sw: *elevkonferens*). But Jesper continues to make a case why he should be exempted from the rule, and enumerates all the things he has to do before the youth club. He does this somewhat theatrically, looking at his watch and counting on his fingers. Per simultaneously begins to imitate his gestures in a parodic, exaggerated way; (lines 11, 15-16). Per's detailed mimicry of Jesper's gestures can be seen as a type of corrective work, displaying to the target person what is seen as alien or ridiculous (Bergson, 2008:19). Through the exaggerated imitations of his gestures, Jesper is cast as laughable in his attempt at being something else than what he is (somewhat older?) But Jesper plays along by attempting to list things to do (lines 14 and 17), responding with a *po-faced receipt* (a serious uptake) to a non-serious tease (Drew, 1987). Per then escalates the teasing, ironically mocking Jesper's desire to fix himself 'Yeah cause it takes a while to fix it up, get it to lay just right'. As part of his playful teasing, he touches Jesper's closely cut hair that obviously cannot be 'fixed up' (lines 18-20). Jesper responds with a second joke, smiling and facetiously confirming that it usually takes a long time. This is a successful move in that Jesper turns the

mocking from being laughed *at* to laughing *with*. If at first, he was being teased for acting like a girl, he is here able to turn it around.

Per continues his teasing, ironically noticing that Jesper also needs to shave, saying ‘pling, pling, pling’ as he touches his chin (lines 23-24), drawing attention to the fact that the young man has not yet grown facial hair, thereby reminding him (and the audience) of his subordinate position in the local age and generation hierarchy (as a boy, not a man). Again, Jesper again responds with a po-faced receipt, agreeing that he needs to shave. Humor involves a basic duality in that participants may respond humorously or seriously (Buttny, 2001; Drew, 1987), and the po-faced receipt ‘handles’ the ambiguity of teasing, in that it allows a simultaneous distancing and acknowledgment.

Example 2 shows how staff members use humor to enforce local rules of conduct, while simultaneously commenting on these very norms.

Example 2

It is almost four o’clock and Joel and Thomas have just had their afternoon tea and are seated on the living room couch before their afternoon rest (Swedish: *vilotimme*). The staff members, Nilla, Lars, Britta, and Jens, as well as another boy are also present during this episode.

1	Nilla	A:right my friends(.)
2	Thomas	No: there’s three minutes [left]
3	Nilla	[Up you go
4	Thomas	Three- OH no (.) you say [(up)] when we’re f=
...		((dispute about time, Thomas and Joel with Nilla))
22	Britta	((approaches Joel who’s on the couch))
23	→	Now this [(xxx) old lady’s gonna carry you upstairs]
24	Thomas	[(Every time you get here earlier] you
25		[don’t say anything)]
26	Britta	[((grabs hold of Joel by his legs and back))]

27 Joel [No na-] na- NO::

28 **Lars** Hehehe

29 Joel [No don't carry me up no:! (.) No:! (.) Ah! (.) No

30 don't carry me up! No!]

31 **Britta** [((struggles to carry Joel))=

32 Joel =[A:h! (.) A:h! What the he:(h)ll!]

33 **Britta** [((lifts Joel up and carries him towards the stairs]

Nilla enters the room and summons the boys 'a:lright my friends' to go to their rooms. Two boys then initiate an argument with her about the local rule of being in your room at four o'clock, and how long it actually takes to get from the couch into their rooms. As on many other occasions, the boys teeter on the verge of rule breaking, and the staff members have to make them comply or they will have to either deduce token economy points or ignore the situation (being inconsistent with rules). Both Britta and Nilla speak in a playful tone (lines 18-20), positioning the boys as younger children as it were, co-creating a local hierarchy where they are playfully positioned as subordinate children. The joking escalates as Britta says that she will carry Joel upstairs. When she grabs him by putting one arm under his legs and another behind his back, he plays along by protesting (lines 29-30), but in a smiley voice and without any attempt at breaking away. After a few attempts, she succeeds in carrying him towards the stairs, while the other staff members and boys laugh out loud.

As highlighted by Vine, Kell, Marra and Holmes (2009), an individual may use humor to draw on different identity constructs. Britta's joking is built on hierarchical positions; first, the age difference where she is exaggerating both her own age as a middle-aged woman, when calling herself an old lady (Sw: *tant*), and playing down Joel's age, lifting him as if he were a baby, when he is actually a teenage boy, taller and probably stronger than herself. Through using, and exaggerating, her own position as a middle-aged woman, assuming a kind

of mock maternal stance, her disciplining move comes across as funny and friendly, rather than as harsh, and all involved apparently take delight in her playful ironic performance.

As Britta made it to the stairs, carrying Joel, she eventually dropped him on the stairs and marshaled him in a playfully harsh voice ‘NOW YOU LIE DOWN!’ (not excerpted here) and the spectators exploded in laughter. When Joel laughingly protested responded ‘WHAT THE HELL’, she then chuckled ‘that’s what we do with the (children) here’. Here it becomes apparent that carrying someone to his room has specific connotations in this setting. In extreme circumstances, staff members might have to take control over a violent youth by forcing him to lie down, eventually carrying him into his room or an isolation cell (a situation which is troublesome for all involved). When Britta and Joel present their ‘performance’, the underlying joke invokes local hierarchical authority positions (staff member: resident).

Similar jokes are made on other occasions. It seems that female staff members may at times deploy a mock maternal stance where they playfully engage in acts like lightly caressing or holding a boy in mock maternal ways. In effect, Lotta and another boy, Jesper, mutually deploy mock maternal and mock filial moves as part of a joking relationship. An essential part of the humor involved thus draws on a playful exaggeration of the generational divide (cf. Bergson, 2008:61). When the staff member exaggerates and parodies her authority position, her joking can be understood as rebellious in that she comments on rule enforcement (forcing residents to their rooms), while simultaneously mocking such actions. There is an element of transgressional bonding or rebellious humor in this joke, as staff members and boys unite in laughing at disciplinary action. At the same time, however, following Billig’s (2005) reasoning on rebellious and disciplinary humor, her authoritative position and the local hierarchy is still confirmed, as, without it, her joke would not be possible in the first place. Thus, teasing may efficiently function as social control because of its intrinsic ambiguity.

‘Being able to take it’

In previous research on humor among men and boys it has been suggested that jocular mockery as well as being able to take a joke and giving back are important components of male identity constructions (Evaldsson, 2005; Haugh and Bousfield, 2012; Schnurr and Holmes, 2009). At Stillbrook, the staff and boys could be seen to orient to such identity constructions. Previous research has also shown that responding to teasing with a second tease is a preferred move in saving face (Drew, 1987; Tholander and Aronsson, 2002).

Below, a staff member, Åke, deploys self-denigrating and ironic humor, where he can be seen to show Jesper how to respond to teasing; in brief how to ‘take it’ without being overly aggressive. Both staff members and residents recurrently produced jokes/teases or responded with second jokes. It was a part of the local ethos to be able to respond to teasing in a jocular manner (e.g. Excerpts 3 and 4).

Example 3

The staff members, Nilla and Åke, are chatting with a boy, Jesper, as they are finishing afternoon tea (Sw: *eftermiddagsfika*).

1	Jesper	Doesn't- doesn't X-region have anything in speedway?
2	Åke	→ No there's not much X-region has
3	Nilla	((smiles))
4	Jesper	Alright, nono, okay we'll say so, we'll say so, what
5		does little Y-town have? ((in biting tone))
6	Åke	→ Well we have Jesper here at Stillbrook hehe (xxx)
7	Jesper	That's gotta be big for Stillbrook
8	Åke	It <u>is</u> [big] ((smiley voice))
9	Nilla	[mhm]
10	Jesper	[(xxx)]

11 **Åke** → [I think you will] end up hehe the:: (.) yea I think
 12 they're going to exchange the horse o:n the square
 13 Jesper °What horse?°
 14 **Åke** The horse on (xxx)
 15 Jesper Ah the one he sits on
 16 **Åke** [Mm so it is- so it's you who's sitting]
 17 Jesper → [I can take him down so I'll sit there all day]

They have been talking about auto racing teams in different parts of Sweden, and Jesper asks staff member Åke if his home region has a team. The boys (from all over Sweden) often argue about whose hometown 'is the best' and Åke's response (line 2) can be heard as ironic. Jesper's uptake to his teasing is also somewhat ironic when he asks what 'little Y-town' has got (referring to Åke's present hometown). Jesper sounds a bit more biting than playful, but Åke continues to engage in playful teasing. His next uptake, in the form of a joke, 'well we have Jesper here at Stillbrook hehe' simultaneously mocks Jesper (for being boastful) and plays along with the prior insult (X-town is so small that there is nothing important there). He then smilingly building up a *metaphorically exaggerated* story (see Buttny, 2001) of the boy being the most important person in X-town, jokingly claiming that he is so important that they will make a statue of him in the town square (lines 11-12). Jesper then warms up and eventually switches to a more playful tone, cracking a second joke that (as a statue) he will then sit (on the horse) in the town square all day (line 17).

While this kind of teasing may be understood as a creative resource for negotiating a 'local masculine order' (Evaldsson, 2005:764), teasing is still a delicate matter since many of the boys are placed at the youth home because of 'aggressive' or 'anti-social behavior'. In a playful, teasing way, Åke can here be seen to show Jesper how to 'take it' and fight back. Moreover, his ironic positioning of the boy on the elevated position of an equestrian statue (in

the main square) can simultaneously be seen as a reminder of his low position in the local hierarchy (a resident rather than a staff member; a child rather than an adult).

Within everyday encounters at the detention home, gender, age, and other local hierarchies are marked or evoked through the ways in which participants interact with each other. In the following excerpt, the participants explicitly invoke such hierarchies in teasing one of the boys, Markus.

Example 4

Three boys (Markus, Jesper and Tadek) and staff members (Per, Lotta and Tor) are having afternoon tea. With support from Per, Tor has teased Marcus about his favorite hockey team.

- 1 Markus He looks old with his beard right? ((pointing towards
2 Tor))
- 3 **Per** How old do you think he is?
- 4 Markus Eh you like you're twenty six, twenty seven right?
- 5 **Tor** Thanks
- 6 **Per** Yea exactly ((smiling towards Tor))
- 7 **Tor** Thanks [thanks]
- 8 Markus [No] but seriously
- 9 **Tor** I'm thirty three
- 10 Markus → Okay (.) mm and he looks like forty fifty
- 11 **Per** ((smiles and looks around the table, stops smiling and
12 frowns when he looks towards Lotta/Jesper))
- 13 **Lotta** But that was not nice eh Markus
- 14 **Per** ((exaggerated frown towards Lotta))
- 15 Markus No b(heh)ut it is tr(heh)ue hehe
- 16 **Lotta** → No: imagine how sad you would be- said 'you look like
17 you're only seven years old'
- 18 **Tor** Hehe[hehe]

19 **Lotta** [Ah:::] huh? Fifteen years old and get- moped age
 20 Jesper Yeah[exactly]
 21 **Tor** [On Sunday!]
 22 Jesper Do you even know how to drive a moped?
 23 (1.0)
 24 Markus Yea:h
 25 Jesper → Don't go and crash now I want to see you on Sunday
 26 cause we will have cake [so I don't want you to die]

Markus responds to a prior teasing attack by teasingly attacking Tor's appearance and (old) age ('26 – 27 right?'). Tor thanks him ironically, and Per aligns with his ironic mode. After finding out Tor's real age (33 years), Markus continues his teasing attack by jokingly claiming that he actually 'looks like 40 - 50' (line 10). Lotta then corrects Markus, pointing out that he is not being nice, and she then makes a second tease on age, playfully downgrading his age to 7 years, suggesting that he would be sad if someone said that he did not look his age. Like Markus before her, she playfully exaggerates the age difference between the 'looks' and real age of the target person. Her *hypothetical quote* (Buttny, 2001) is met with laughter (from Tor) and smiles around the table. She then teases Markus about his upcoming birthday; turning 15 years, which is the Swedish age limit for driving a moped. One of the other boys, Jesper, escalates the ridicule, asking rhetorically if Markus even knows how to drive a moped (thus questioning his male maturity; to drive a moped is a marker of male coming of age). On a serious note, Markus affirms this, defending his honor as a 15-year-old to be. Jesper teasingly then tells him to drive carefully, as he does not wish to miss his upcoming birthday cake, cracking a second joke, aligning with the staff members, (but there is no uptake from Markus). As can be seen, Marcus does not manage to defend himself in the form of second jokes, neither as response to Jesper's teasing attacks nor to those from the staff (lines 16, 19, 22, 25-26). First, the original teaser is corrected and playfully reprimanded

(by Lotta), and becomes the victim of escalated counter-attacks where he does not manage to produce funny or interesting comebacks. We do not know whether this is because he is seen to overstep local boundaries for what is laughable or whether he merely lacks the required skills for joking in an artful way.

Disciplinary humor allows participants to laugh across generations, as when staff members and boys laugh together (Examples 1-6). But ridicule and teasing actually requires artfulness (cf. Drew, 1987). There is always a risk that the tables will be turned and that other participants might laugh at you.

Rebellious humor

Both disciplinary and rebellious humor should be understood in relation to social order (Billig, 2005). In rebellious humor, authority is challenged and mocked: ‘Whereas disciplinary humour mocks the powerless, rebellious humour can delight in taking the powerful as its target.’ (Billig, 2005:208). Mocking superordinates can be seen as rebellious humor, as in the following two excerpts, where resident boys engaged in playful reversals of positions in local hierarchies.

Per is one of the younger staff members, and he often jokes with all of the boys. For instance, Per and Jesper recurrently engaged in mutual teasing, and they could be seen to be involved in something of a “customary joking relationship”, where individuals routinely tease and insult each other, while simultaneously building rapport (Norrick, 1993 or ‘chumming’ (Kivett and Warren, 2002). But below, Jesper engages in a type of rebellious humor (mocking authority).

Example 5

The staff members Per, Lotta and Tor, and the boys Jesper, Markus and Tadek, are having afternoon tea. Jesper sings a (defamatory) song about a staff member, Per.

1 Jesper Lotta Lotta have you heard I have made a song about
2 Per?
3 **Per** ((Lowers the phone he is holding and turns towards
4 Jesper))
5 Jesper → 'Per you have so little hair on your head' ((singing))
6 hehehe
7 **Per** → What was that about hitting students? (°That's not
8 allowed°) ((smiley voice; to Lotta))
9 **Lotta** → That's allowed
10 **Per** That's allowed well I could [never imagine hitting
11 students]

Jesper builds up a tease by announcing that he has written a song about Per (line 1), ridiculing his age and appearance (line 5). Per responds with a second tease by turning to another staff member with an ironic question 'What about hitting students? °That's not allowed?°'. Hitting students is totally outlawed within this institutional setting. But his rhetorical question conveys a disciplinary message (Jesper has gone too far in his teasing). Analogously to the notion of hypothetical quotes, his veiled threat can be seen as what we could call a *hypothetical threat*, a non-serious threat embedded in a joking format. Britta plays along, upgrading the implicit threat by playfully and mock-seriously claiming that staff members are indeed allowed to hit students (line 9). Through their co-construed teasing, Per and Jesper can simultaneously be seen to indirectly invoke local power hierarchies. Staff members, not residents, are the ones who master the rules.

During the same afternoon tea (as Example 5), the boys talk about the evening. But during this discussion, Markus and Jesper playfully assume an authoritative (staff member) voice.

Example 6

107 Markus → You ((knocking on Per's shoulder)) what are your wishes
108 for tonight?
109 **Per** → Going home as early as possible
110 Jesper Yeah but I mean I don't get it [how can you sit and]=
111 **Per** [Naw to do something fun
112 with you]
113 Jesper =How can you sit and whine at us but still you've
114 chosen to work here
115 **Per** °What did you say?°
116 Jesper You have still chosen to work here and yet you sit here
117 and sometimes whine at us
118 **Per** °Naw (I don't)°
119 Jesper What!
120 Jesper → Learn to respect that we're retards ((Sw: *dampbarn*))
121 **Per** Yeah yeah I know that you are ((faint smile))
122 Jesper Eh yea::h then you have to learn to respect that
123 **Per** [°Yea I respect that now°] ((turns his head away))
124 **Tor** [Hehehehe]

On line 107, Markus playfully asks a staff member about his wishes for the evening (like the staff members routinely address the boys). The staff member Per can be seen to respond with a second tease when he somewhat ironically (jokingly) claims that he would like to go home.

After a few exchanges, Jesper assumes an authoritative tone of mock-anger, talking as a stern staff member in a playful exaggeration of an authoritative voice (lines 120 and 122). In brief, both Markus and Jesper can be seen to ironically take on an authoritative 'staff' voice (cf Kotthoff, 2009). Authority positions are thus reversed, as both boys act as superordinates, as it were.

In his authoritative marshaling (line 120, 'Learn to respect that we're retards'), Jesper can be seen to create a comeback or second joke, in response to the staff member's joke about wanting to go home. Simultaneously, he refers to himself and the other boys as 'child retards' (Sw: *dampbarn*), that is, in a self-derogatory way. But he engages in a subversive act in that he uses a derogatory term to his advantage (cf. Price, 2005; Wästerfors, 2009). His teasing is effective in that the staff member complies. Moreover, he makes another staff member, Tor laugh, 'winning over' someone in a superordinate position.

In actual practice, Billig (2005) argues that disciplinary and rebellious humor are not easily distinguished, and this excerpt can be seen to exemplify this in at least two ways: first, Jesper can be seen to challenge Per ('disciplining' him for wanting to go home when it is really the staff members' job to learn to respect 'us retards'). Second, the potential ambivalence of rebellious humor becomes clear as it simultaneously involves a powerful and a powerless position: powerful in that it takes away responsibility for his actions, and powerless in that it invokes a local category of deviance (and subordination). What is experienced as rebellious may simultaneously invoke disciplinary functions, as the temporary breach of order takes meaning from the still enduring constraints of social order (Billig, 2005). As Billig points out, 'the [jokers] may take pleasure in the momentary infraction of the codes [...] but they are not abandoning such codes'. In a way, both Example 5 and 6 reflexively comment on local power and control, but they can simultaneously be understood as examples of maintaining social order.

Concluding discussion

Prior work on humor in penal settings has primarily analyzed it as a way of coping (e.g. Crawley, 2004; Geer, 2002) or as a way of temporarily bracketing traditional social positions (Nielsen, 2011). Our recordings of situated interactions instead show that humor might be one

of the staff members' key resources when monitoring residents into (willingly) following norms (Foucault, 1997). The staff members themselves also talk about humor as an important social skill, and their recurrent achievement of mutual laughter and enjoyment can therefore be seen as a successful part of local micro-politics. Through, for instance, self-denigrating humor (as in Examples 3 and 4), they could be seen to demonstrate to the boys how to take a joke, an artful skill that seems to have an important role in everyday interaction in this institutional context.

(1) Humor was used in negotiating and confirming local hierarchies, related to institutional authority, generation and age. In several of the joking events, attacks were co-constructed and built up sequentially across generations (adult staff versus resident boys). In these joking events, age or generation was an explicit issue in several cases (Examples 4 and 6). But, in most cases, it was primarily evoked through the participants' ways of playfully exaggerating or playing with generational divides. The staff members deployed a number of interactional resources for building up playful teases (Buttny, 2001): such as metaphorical exaggerations (Examples 1-5), and hypothetical quotes (Example 4). In addition, the present data document the use of playful physical action and gestures (Examples 1 and 2), as well as hypothetical threats (Example 5) as resources for building up playful criticism. The inter-subjective build up of jokes is thus quite artful in that it draws on a number of resources, deployed in a step-by-step fashion, where participants carefully secure the appreciation of target recipients.

(2) Prior research has foregrounded the duality and ambiguity of humor in social life (Bergson, 2008; Billig, 2005), for example, as it allows recipients to respond non-seriously *or* seriously to open or veiled attacks (Buttny, 2001). The dialogical architecture of social encounters is an important aspect of humor (Buttny, 2001; Drew, 1987; Glenn, 1989; Sacks, 1992); what is humorous or not is ultimately revealed through recipients' and co-recipients' uptake (in the form of laughing, chuckles or second jokes). In the present data, humor

recurrently draws on such multiparty build-up and amplifications of veiled criticism. This also invokes corrective and disciplinary elements of humor. It is partly through the participants' compliant (or non-compliant) responses that we may see in what ways humor involves disciplinary action. Playing along, for example, might involve either physical action (letting oneself be carried as a child) or cracking second jokes.

(3) Last, and not least, all encounters must be understood against the backdrop of the authority positions and local power hierarchies of the institution. The boys are placed in this setting because they are seen to be troublesome and 'at risk' (cf. Kivett and Warren, 2002; Wästerfors, 2009). Conversely, the staff members represent 'normal adults', and are in a double authority position, as adults (not children) and as staff member (not residents), whose job it is to rehabilitate the young males into 'normal men'. Humor was recurrently used in enforcing local rules of conduct. It can be seen to handle an inherent dilemma, namely that of making the residents follow norms by their own free will. Rule enforcement through punishments or strict rules might create desired comportment, but staff members would then not know if the boys 'truly wanted' to behave that way (on docile minds, see Foucault, 1997). Humor is a way of creating (more lasting) social order (Bergson, 2008; Billig, 2005) in that it does not draw on coercion.

Our data confirm that disciplinary humor and rebellious humor are not easily distinguished (Billig, 2005). It is clear that rebellious humor also has disciplinary effects, as the humor itself builds on social order. While in most cases, staff members could be seen to discipline boy residents, we also found that the two parties would jointly engage in somewhat rebellious humor (Example 2), mocking the social rules of the detention home, and transgressing generational boundaries. Rebellious humor also allowed the boys to mock or criticize staff members (Examples 5-6). But the humor involved can also be seen to remind the participants of the very hierarchies that separate staff members from residents, and men

from boys, or adults from children. Ultimately, disciplinary and rebellious humor may thus at the same time consolidate or confirm the very boundaries that it apparently transgresses.

Note

1. All personal names, including that of the detention home itself have been anonymized.

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Appendix

Transcription notations

:	prolonged syllable
[]	overlapping utterances
(.)	micropause, i.e. shorter than (0.5)
(2)	pauses in seconds
(xxx)	inaudible word
(yes)	unsure transcription
° _ °	speech in low volume
YES	relatively high amplitude
(())	comments of the transcriber
?	rising terminal intonation
=	latching between utterances
<u>a</u> fter	sounds marked by emphatic stress
hehe	laughter
y(h)es	laugh particles within word
-	abrupt cut-off