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Expectations and provocations

Use of humour between researcher and participants in humour research

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address participants' humorous provocations as a part of informal interactions between participants and researcher that can be treated just like the research data. By means of autoethnographic analysis, the author explores the expectations of the researcher and participants that humour research entails and discusses how different expectations are revealed in participants' provocations.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper uses an autoethnographic approach to discuss the informal interactions between participants and the researcher gathered during research into staffroom humour. The informal interactions in general and humour specifically were recorded, analysed, coded, interpreted and theorised just like the data on humour between participants. The theoretical framework used in the study combines Goffman's (1959) version of symbolic interactionism and Solomon *et al.* (2006) idea of hybrid spaces.

Findings – The study shows the need for reconsideration of expectations entangled in humour research and proposes to be prepared for unexpected. Expecting unexpected can help stay open minded in the field and in interactions with participants and apply healthy distance towards own research and own expectations. The study shows that whenever certain behaviour was expected and different behaviour was delivered, there was a chance for certain behaviour being interpreted as provocations. Participants' provocations can result from their own expectations about the research or what they think is expected from them by the researcher and thus they remain subject to different interpretations.

Research limitations/implications – Further research could investigate and discuss the role of humour in participant-researcher interactions in different research contexts and across different methodologies. Combining and analysing experiences of use of humour from both participants and researchers could allow for creating the guidelines in the use of humour in different research situations. Ethical challenges posed by informal interactions between researcher and participants could be explored further and suggestions as to how to protect the researcher, research and participants in such interactions could be developed.

Originality/value – This paper aims to be a starting point for a discussion about the understudied relationship between expectations humour research is entangled with and participants' provocations. The study shows innovative approach to informal interactions between participants' and researcher which are treated as research data and are theorised using original combination of symbolic interactionism and hybrid spaces. The study contributes to the qualitative research methodology by discussing the ethics of both using humour with participants and recording and analysing informal humorous interactions between participants and the researcher.

Keywords Humour research, Participants' provocations, Research expectations

Paper type Research paper

Informal interactions and humour

Participants' and researcher's expectations of the research and each other are rarely the focus of academic work and are usually discussed as part of methodology rather than a research data. This papers aims to fill that gap by looking at how research process is fraught with such expectations and how these expectations determine the research. Originally, my research was set up to investigate staffroom humour at three educational settings. However, humour between participants and I gradually became another focus of the research. The informal interactions between the participants and me and the use of humour between us emerged during the fieldwork and became a crucial part of the study. This paper draws on autoethnographic analysis to foster understanding of those interactions.

Informal interactions between participants and researcher contribute to rapport which is a fundamental concept in qualitative research (Rinke and Mawhinney, 2014). Informal interactions can take up many forms and shape the research process in different ways.

They can range from strictly courteous behaviours to deep involvement and developing a real bond. "Researcher-participant relationships may fall anywhere along a continuum from distant, detached, and impersonal to close, collaborative, and friendly" (McGinn, 2008, p. 767). Rinke and Mawhinney (2014) pose important question about whether participant-researcher relationship should resemble rapport between family members, close friends or professional colleagues. At the same time, they present challenges of research relationships that result from their dynamic nature. One of the difficulties they identify in participant-researcher relationships is disparate expectations. The dynamics of research situation suggests that researchers are not able to predict the types of interactions they will be involved in or the types of relationships they will have with the participants. Although "doing rapport" is seen as learnable commodified research activity that resembles "faking friendship" to achieve participants' disclosure (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012), my study exemplifies the limits of what can be planned and prepared regarding informal interactions with participants. It shows spontaneity of informal interactions between me as a researcher and participants that apart from helping build rapport may unexpectedly facilitate participants' disclosures (Kmita and Mawhinney, 2016).

Humour being a ubiquitous form of interaction occurring in all types of social contexts (Martin, 2007) can also happen between researcher and research participants. Humour occurring between participants and researcher in the context of humour research represents particular benefits and challenges. Some humour studies show that the informal interactions between the researcher and participants including use of humour are a part of the research process. It should not be overlooked however that each study has a distinctive methodology, focus, researcher's role, length and depth that forms certain expectations of behaviours and interactions on part of the researcher and participants. Some researchers who studied humour used participant observation as method (Mawhinney, 2007; Lynch, 2005; Woods, 1979; Plester, 2007; Richards, 1996). This involved participating in humour. It is worth noting however that Mawhinney, Lynch and Richards were insiders at their research settings, Plester was a pseudo member and Woods was an involved observer. Those positions allowed them for more participant-like behaviour; behaviour different to those of participants may have meant alienation and exclusion for them. It does not mean however that researcher can only use humour with the participants if he/she is an insider but I would argue that it may pose more challenges for the researcher to use humour with participants if he/she is an outsider. Lynch (2002, 2007, in Lynch, 2012) draws on challenges in humour identification such as unintended humour, inaccessibility of humour to an outsider, not showing amusement in front of the observer, or exclusivity of humour (humour is specific to a group). Those challenges revealed themselves in my research and my interactions with participants where I as an outsider was both observing participants' use of humour and using humour with participants. However, the paradox of humour lies in the fact that although it can be unavailable to an outsider, it can also help to establish relationships with strangers. Humour can be influenced by a humour initiator's sense of sameness and difference with others (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp, 2006). For instance, Terrion and Ashfort (2002) show that teasing and self-deprecating humour can help to bring together people who are strangers to each other so may not be able to build their relationships on "sameness". Plester (2007) who was not an insider but a pseudo member of the studied settings found that participating in humour on some occasions furthered her understanding and interpretation of the impacts of humour and culture. Similarly to Plester's (2007) research, my involvement in participants' humour had both not always intended strategic aspect (facilitating data collection) and relational aspect (building rapport). In addition, it helped her to create trust relationships with participants and improved the data collection as participants more readily agreed to take part in the interviews.

Ethnographic studies (Mawhinney, 2007; Woods, 1979; Richards, 1996) require an immersion from the researcher and thus justify researcher's informal interactions with

participants including their use of humour with the participants. What justifies the fact that the aforementioned ethnographers as well as case study researchers (Plester, 2007; Lynch, 2005) took part in some of the humour of their participants is their studies' intensity, depth and time spent at each setting. The level of involvement in humour exchanges may vary and can depend both on researcher's strategies/methods and participants expectations towards the researcher and their invitations for the researcher to take part in their humour. For instance, Plester (2007) was expected by her participants to join in humour and was included in much of the joking. Woods (1979) thought that sharing the company of participants was the most important aspect of his involvement with the research setting. I believe that Woods' idea of being a fellow human to participants justifies my use of humour with participants.

"Whether reliving 'laughs' or sharing boredom with the pupils, partaking of the staffroom merriment or exchanging grumbles, drinking in the pub with various groups of staff, chatting with pupils in playground, corridors and some in their own homes-in all these aspects, I felt very much 'involved' in the scene and, in the action" (Woods, 1979, p. 262).

Humour between myself and participants during the research process reflected the various expectations both participants and I had regarding humour research and our roles in the research.

This paper does not seek to analyse any specific type of humour but adapts Mullany's (2004; in Schnurr, 2010) definition of humour as amusing communication between parties that embraces both successful and unsuccessful, and intentional and unintentional humour. Schnurr (2010) sees this definition as comprehensive, covering even failed humour attempts and unintended humour. In addition, Schnurr (2010) shows that this definition takes into account such humour instances when only one interlocutor is amused and acknowledges that responses to humour may take different forms. This broad definition is particularly helpful in the analysis of humour between participants and researcher where humour due to disparate expectations may be on occasions unintended or unsuccessful.

Methodology

The study used two series of methods: the initial case study was followed by autoethnographic study. The data discussed in this paper draw on the autoethnographic approach that explores the interactions between myself and the participants.

The initial study: teachers and staffroom humour

The initial study was conducted in three educational settings in England[1] and investigated teachers' interactions and use of humour in a school's staffroom. The purpose of the exploration was to show the importance of staffroom humour in teachers' professional lives. The research questions concerned the details about staffroom humour, workplace culture and workplace relationships. Specifically, there were three overarching questions that guided the study:

RQ1. How do teaching staff use humour in the staffroom?

RQ2. What influences staff use of humour in the staffroom?

RQ3. Are there inter-school differences in the way that humour is used?

To conduct the research, I used an exploratory multi-case study method and what Bryman (2008) calls a comparative design. Following Yin's (2009) terminology, the "case" in this research was the use of staffroom humour and the "units of analysis" were: observed behaviours of teachers of three different educational settings, the staffrooms' funny artefacts[2], and group and individual interviews with the teachers.

Having taken that into consideration and also understanding the neuralgic nature of conducting research into teachers' privacy zones (i.e. staffrooms) that is expressed in the literature (Kainan, 1994; Mawhinney, 2012; Richards, 1996), I decided that conducting a relatively brief and, therefore, not too intrusive study would be most considerate in terms of participants' well-being. Thus, I conducted three semi-structured group interviews with teachers at three different education settings in England. Subsequently, I conducted staffroom observations at all three schools. I visited each staffroom four to ten times at intervals between 55 minutes and 1.5 hours. These visits were structured to be brief with a purpose. The observations were unstructured participant observations recorded by means of extensive notes. However, I also tried to take some notes during or after those observations.

Autoethnographic approach: participants' humour targeted at the researcher

At each of the settings, I was an outsider as I did not share with my participants the experience of working/teaching at those educational settings. I was not involved in any events, tasks or meetings at those settings. I was neither insider nor ex-insider therefore teachers and I did not have routines, memories, problems and joys in common. However, what we did have in common were the moments spent together in the staffroom during lunch breaks, during informal interactions and interviews and shared laughter and humour from time to time. Those moments of togetherness temporarily moved us beyond the Plester and Sayers'(2007) "in-group" and "out-group" humour workplace divisions and situated me in what I would call "in and out" dimension of the researched setting. By "in and out" dimension I mean the temporary unity, sense of belonging and togetherness-subjective impression of being a part of the studied world that lasted the length of the joke and joint laughter. Although originally this research was set up to investigate humour among teachers, humour between the participants and the researcher gradually became another focus. Therefore, humour between me and participants was analysed, coded, interpreted and theorised just like data on humour among participants. Similarly to Reger (2001), I believe that researchers must document, investigate and analyse their emotions along with their data, using reflexivity as a method for combining subjectivity and analytic rigour.

Using fieldnotes and memos, I conducted an autoethnographic analysis in order to understand participants' use of humour with me. Earlier autoethnographic analysis helped me to explore humour initiated by me and directed towards participants (see Kmita and Mawhinney, 2016). This paper completes the analysis of my informal interactions with participants by focusing on participants' humour directed towards me as a reaction to my use of humour.

I used autoethnographic method for two main reasons. First, it provides an opportunity to study researcher's experience along with other participants (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) and second, it shows that "as communicating humans studying humans communicating, we are inside what we are studying" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 743). In this analysis, I pulled sections of my fieldnotes and memos from the initial study that outlined participants' use of humour with me. All the instances of participants' humour directed at me (when the joked about my work, my role as the researcher or about other more general issues) were coded as "participants provocations". After the initial analysis I decided to look at participants' provocations in the light of Goffman (1959) in-character and out-of-character behaviours to explore the expectations the research was entangled with. Goffman's (1959) theory complimented by Solomon *et al.*'s (2006) idea of hybrid spaces helped me to investigate and understand the dynamics of my interactions with participants and facilitated self-analysis of my role as the researcher. One detailed example of the analysis looked as such: after coding an instance of informal interaction

with participants as "participant provocation", I wrote a reflection on the code that included answers to four questions:

(1) Who was in-character in this situation and why?

(2) Who was out-of-character in this situation and why?

(3) What expectations regarding research and researcher's role were at play in this situation?

(4) What was my reaction to this situation and interpretation of the humour?

Similarly to Mendez (2013), I think that the use of autoethnography allowed me as a researcher to draw on my own experiences to understand the phenomenon I studied and possibly will make other researchers reflect on and empathise with the narratives I presented. In addition, autoethnography helped me to remedy and learn from the research that did not go as planned (acquired a new focus). Similarly to England (1994), I believe that "failed" research can be used to reflect upon the research ethics and relationship between the researcher and participants and as Reger (2001) shows "failed" research can also help researcher reflect on his/her emotions.

Theoretical perspective

My study adopts Goffman's (1959) theatrical version of symbolic interactionism complimented by Solomon *et al*'s (2006) idea of hybrid spaces. Goffman's idea of backstage to describe staffroom is useful when thinking of teachers entering the staffroom to drop their frontstage masks, relax and joke with their colleagues. Teachers can behave, in Goffmanian terms, "out of character" in the staffroom. Out-of-character behaviour goes against the official expectations (social or/and institutional) of how one should behave in the frontstage (e.g. in the classroom). This looks fairly simple and obvious until a researcher-outsider arrives into the backstage wishing to observe behaviour "out of character" but herself being "in character" (handing in consent forms, observing and taking notes). I was in the research settings doing my frontstage in teachers' backstage by studying their backstage behaviour (humour) without belonging to either their frontstage or backstage. In this research when observing teachers in the staffroom, I was not having a break from teaching like them and I had little idea of what happened outside of the staffroom unlike them. My research did not involve classroom observations or participation in staff meetings; therefore, I was partially involved in the scene. In order to be closer to teachers' backstage and minimise own frontstage, I used humour with participants. Using humour (that belongs to out-of-character behaviour) while being in character as a researcher challenges the notion of backstage. What fosters the understanding of such complex situation are both Solomon's *et al.* (2006) idea of staffrooms already being hybrid spaces and researcher's presence adding to the hybridity of the space. Staffrooms are hybrid spaces as people are neither working nor not working; they are neither just workers nor just social beings (Solomon *et al.*, 2006). To put it in Goffmanian terms, staffrooms are spaces for out-of-character behaviour but it does not mean that the in-character behaviour is non-existent. Solomon *et al.* (2006) suggest that such spaces allow for temporarily suspension of what Goffman would call "frontstage". This paper shows how researcher's unexpected out-of-character behaviour (use of humour) leads to unexpected participants' out-of-character behaviour towards researcher and contributed to hybridity of the research process.

Research expectations

When talking about different expectations entangled in the research process, it is important to start from the very premises that the subject of the research, i.e. humour, is something

that goes against expectations. In humour, expectations go like a bubble as it involves bringing together two normally separate ideas, concepts or situations in a surprising or unexpected manner (Martin, 1998, p. 25). Thus paradoxically one can expect anything from something as unexpected as humour. This very nature of humour resulted in interviews on and observations of humour presenting unexpected challenges. It was quickly apparent that neither interviews nor observations about humour can be conducted in a stiff manner; on the contrary, there was an element of performance required on my behalf. The expectation of the use of humour on my part had two sources – one inner and one outer. The inner source was my own need to prove my suitability for this kind of research to the participants. The outer source was the different signs I received from the participants that I interpreted as an expectation from the participants in the study that I could take a humorous role.

The following example illustrates specific expectations humour research can be associated with and thus its distinctive nature. Robert and Luke (Alabtros) recall their first reactions when they heard about me coming to conduct humour research at their school:

> Robert: You've been the source of some of our conversations (Luke laughs) and, when we heard you were coming the first time of course we started trying to tell jokes to each other (Luke's laughter), that didn't work well.

> Luke: Apart from the wheely bin joke[3], I did like that actually (Joint laughter) (Group interview at Albatros).

The example from Albatros shows that my arrival was preceded by humour preparations. It reveals some expectations participants had with regard to the research and their role in it prior to the pilot study. They felt that they were supposed to perform their funniness or maybe felt stressed about appearing not funny enough in front of the humour researcher. The fact that they admitted that those attempts were rather unsuccessful suggests that they reflected critically upon their actions and possibly understood that the research goal was to observe natural, spontaneous humour (their everyday unrehearsed backstage behaviour).

Other reactions to the subject of my research included smiles, laughter, expressions of disbelief and surprise. Participants suggested that some of their colleagues should join the research because they were funny. Clearly the participants considered the idea of researching humour amusing. At Devon College, I was called a "humour lady" which resembles the experience of Plester (2007) who was called "the fun fairy" by her research participants. In addition, during my observations at Albatros, I was constantly asked to tell jokes and I felt that I should participate in the joking banter. This went beyond friendliness and openness, and it became apparent that these attributes were not sufficient when conducting research into humour. When asked to tell jokes, I always dodged such requests smiling and returning to doing my frontstage, e.g. either formalities such as consent forms or noting down my observations. I was not prepared for telling jokes on request, I did not remember many and those I remembered were in Polish[4]. Besides, I felt much more confident in using spontaneous humour:

> I missed one joke at Albatros, being so preoccupied with writing down my observations. Archie (teacher) shouted at me and asked Luke to replay the joke. Seeing the expression on Luke's face, he decided to replay it himself (Unstructured observations, Albatros).

The hilarious scene of replaying the joke so that I could have a material to work with introduced new level of humour, namely meta-humour (humour about humour). This indicated that participants' awareness of the research process and ironically the replay might have been a way of participants ensuring that I had a full picture of their "spontaneously" occurring humour or making sure that I do not miss any of their "performance".

Being aware of the focus of the research, participants may have felt that they were expected to present themselves as funny, to joke and laugh. The nature of humour research that entails being exposed to humour, tickles and itches a person that is naturally humorous.

It concerns both participants and the researcher. The very participation in such unique endeavour as qualitative humour research causes temptations to joke and laugh in both parties. The presence of researcher alters the situation as participants may wish to avoid, impress, direct, deny or influence the researcher (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). Participants' awareness of their humour being studied may have resulted in participants performing for the research project (Plester and Orams, 2008). This awareness could have resulted in the staffroom backstage being turned back into frontstage where particularly funny teachers performed for me. Although I did not expect the participants to behave funnily and use humour continuously, I hoped to record examples of real-life humour during the observations and I hoped to learn about the workplace humour by means of interviews and funny artefacts. In other words, I hoped to see their usual backstage, out-of-character behaviour. Whether and to what extent participants may have acted upon such non-verbalised expectations is difficult to establish. Similarly to Plester and Orams (2008), the data gathered by other research methods as well as informal conversations with participants confirmed that teachers' humorous behaviour were natural or in other words that teachers were naturally humorous and not just performing for the purpose of the research. However, it could be that those naturally funnier were more active humour-wise than others when observed by me.

The participants in my study were not asked about the effect of my use of humour on their interactions and it is not certain that they would have always been able to recognise a direct link between my use of humour and their interactions. However, it is worth noting that any research by means of its focus and choice of asked questions reveals the researcher's expectations as to what he/she wishes to find out in the research setting and so may influence participants' behaviours. Unintended bias, called expectancy bias, can occur in many ways often very subtle and researchers do not know all of the circumstances that foster expectancy bias (Suter, 2012). Both participants and the researcher try to read each other expectations. Confronting those expectations and constantly reminding participants of the research goals and the researcher's and participants' roles in achieving those goals may be the way of minimising participants guessing the expected answers and expected behaviours. Some of the perceived expectations and thus actions on part of the researcher may arise from seeing the research as potentially creating certain problems for the participants. In case of this research, I quickly realised that the freedom of being in an adult-only, less formal environment than classroom reveals itself in teachers' use of humour. Teachers were exposing themselves in the staffroom and by that I understand revealing own personality, opinions and values by means of humour. By nudity elements, I understand revealing own personality, opinions and values by means of humour. Humour has potential of exposing, unmasking our feelings, emotions, opinions. Humour being a backstage behaviour allows for dropping of the mask and revealing a different self to the one used in maintaining the frontstage (Goffman, 1959). Joining in, as a researcher, is therefore being "plugged into" the context and "tasting" the atmosphere of a particular staffroom. In this particular field, the application of humour on the part of a researcher may be necessary. The researcher can feel obliged/ expected to expose his/her humour in return for being allowed to observe and enquire about the humorous exposures of the participants. Entering teachers' backstage where they perform backstage behaviour and maintaining an unshaken front may be difficult to manage. In addition, it may make participants switch to frontstage behaviour which could be far from desirable in their back time (free time) and backstage. Had I forestall the demand for the research to be humorous, I would have organised a meeting with the participants prior to research including a discussion about their expectations and perceptions of the research. This could have led to clarification of the research goals, perceived participants' and mine behaviours/roles and possibly even the development of a more detailed consent form. Some of the expectations and behaviours on both parts may have arisen from the close physical proximity between me and participants. For instance, in all three staffrooms I sat with the teachers and not away from them. In two small staffrooms (Albatros and Lingua), limited space

meant not having other choice but to sit next to them. At Devon College, I could have sat away from the participants but then I would not have heard what they were saying. In addition, participants at all three settings encouraged me to sit with them. Taking different observational position like standing could have been read as patronising or distancing from the participants. I would argue that the space between us influenced our interactions and behaviours. It is more difficult not to engage in a conversation when sitting among participants, at the same table (Devon College and Lingua) or in the same row of chairs (Albatros) and almost rubbing one another. Lack of physical distance enabled and facilitated interactions and thus use of humour between myself and participants. However, it also made the lunch break situation unnatural and thus different to what I wished to observe.

What is also worth considering in terms of expectations is what is expected from not just researcher but the work he/she produces. I wanted my research to be serious and participants probably had the same expectations, so were the expectations of my university and more generally scholar profession. Any researcher is expected to represent a frontstage and stay in character when at work and representing university. According to Kadushin and Kadushin (2013), one of the caveats of interviewer's use of humour with clients in social work interview may be perceiving interviewer as frivolous, insensitive or even unprofessional. In context of humour research, use of humour by the researcher may also cause such feelings in participants. In addition, it may introduce some confusion on their part as to researcher's intentions. However, it is not obvious whether even if perceiving researcher's behaviours as unconventional means that participants have doubts about the work researcher produces. One could say that there is a conflict in me introducing my humour to the research (bringing back to front) and at the same time wanting it to be treated seriously (as frontstage and not backstage) by participants and prospective readers. However, the fact that I used humour with participants while in the field does not mean that I treated my work such as data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing-up carelessly. Use of humour on the part of the researcher and professionalism are not mutually exclusive terms just as I would not treat professionalism and lack of use of humour on part of researcher as synonyms. The serious conduct of the humour researcher does not guarantee that his/her work will be deemed professional. Kadushin and Kadushin (2013) prove that the use of humour on part of the interviewer does not need to affect the professionalism of the interviewer or his/her work. Looking at the examples they provided, one can see that interviewers can act professionally when using humour with the clients. However, Kadushin and Kadushin (2013) also state that humour and professionalism in social work are perceived as antithetical concepts and that there is a feeling that humour may trivialise the nature of social work and seem unprofessional, potentially even denigrating and alienating people (Kadushin and Kadushin, 2013). This is in line with Raskin (2008) argument that for humour research to be treated seriously it cannot be confused with funny activity.

Participants' provocations

This paper discusses participants' provocations as a reaction to the researcher's use of humour and expectations entangled in humour research. In other words, I or the subject of my research might have provoked the participants with my use of humour and they provoked me back. Participants' provocations include examples from the data that show how the researcher was teased, subverted or provoked by the participants by means of humour. The humour concerned the researcher's role, her work but also covered more general topics. An example of general topics was when Michael used humour directed at me to illustrate his point about what things would not be discussed in public Devon College:

Michael: Well I don't know if there's a policy but obviously in terms of our discussions on confidential information about students and things is always discussed in a confidential environment, that's the only one I can really think of. I haven't seen a specific policy about chatting,

it's kind of assumed that as a professional I won't stand in a corridor and say, 'oh you won't believe it the interviewer phoned in earlier and she's got diarrhoea (I laugh) just you wouldn't do that.

I: How did you know (I laugh)?

Michael: Hopefully not. (I laugh) Don't take Imodium or anything like that, just let it go (I laugh), because then it flushes the system out you see. Don't take Imodium because it stops the muscles from doing it properly. (I laugh) Yeah (Interview with Michael, Devon College).

As the example shows, I joked back in order to prove that I was able to take a joke. Had I taken Michael's response personally, I would have showed little distance to myself and perhaps as a consequence discouraged Michael from opening up in the interview. "How did you know?" response and my laughter show that I can adapt to the narrative style and at the same time stay in the role of the researcher allowing participant to illustrate something using an imaginary conversation with me as an example. In a sense I had to apply backstage behaviours for facilitating frontstage tasks such as flow of an interview. This shows that a humour researcher needs to be ready to extend the researcher's role and the boundaries that come with it. Such boundaries may be imposed by etiquette, methodology books, own perception of the relationships in the field or fear of overfamiliarity. On the one hand, they serve to protect the image and the rights of the researcher and the university he/she represents; on the other hand, they may constrain spontaneous and informal conversations with participants. The humour directed at me whether general or research oriented may present participants as rebels against the research process and the researcher. Their suggestions, allusions and advice as to how the research should be conducted or what I ought to be finding out/investigating could be read as provocative and intrusive. By provocative and intrusive, I mean behaviours such as interrupting my work (taking notes), questioning or attempting to change my research goal, approaches or methods and so stepping into my frontstage. Such interferences may undermine the significance of researcher's work or the whole research process. This is line with Nairn *et al.* (2005) who found that interviewees' laughter and jokes served as form of resistance in the interview process but also revealed that those behaviours had other meanings such as power relations between interviewer and interviewees. I believe that participants' provocations in my study presented not just subversion for the sake of it but rather willingness to understand the research, co-construct it, personalise it and own it. Participants' attempts of personalising and owning research may have meant having an impact and control over the research. By trying to own it, participants and I entered a competition as if fighting over the research shape. This meant moving away from my quest to answer the research questions and directed my attention on participants' interactions with me. My use of humour encouraged participants to open up, to reveal what they think about the research. Participants' provocations surpassed my expectations as to the effect of my use of humour which was originally intended as a way of building rapport, negotiating access and facilitating data collection. Just as my use of humour with participants may have been seen as coming out of the character, their use of humour with me seemed like coming out of character as well. However, it only shows that humour as part of social interactions cannot be easily controlled and is not a one-directional activity. My reactions to various provocations show my alertness and awareness of reciprocal humour or laughter on her part being the "face-saving" (Holmes, 2000) devices. Humour according to Holmes (2000) can be an effective strategy for reducing potential offence, a way to soften the impact of criticism or an insult. My use of humour in response to participants' provocations shows her joke-proofness (ability to accept the jokes directed at the oneself) and joke-ability (ability to reply to a provocation/teasing in a manner similar to joke-initiator).

My research shows that provocative humour on the part of the participants directed towards me was taken light-heartedly. Other reactions to participants' provocations not

disguised in humour such as anger, disgust, disapproval or embarrassment could have damaged the rapport between the participants and the researcher and thus hinder further data collection. Humour is thus this type of backstage behaviour that can save the frontstage impression.

Since I took no offence, it is difficult to consider participants' provocations as aggression. As, on the whole, I was treated by participants in a kind and friendly manner seeing their humour as hostile that could be an unfair overinterpretation. Similarly to Dynel (2008), I believe that teases are inherently devoid of genuine aggressiveness even if ostensibly aggressive. Especially in the context of humour research where the researcher jokes with participants, participants may feel that they are given a licence to joke freely with/target the researcher.

On the surface, some of the provocations looked like showing off. It was mainly men who provoked or teased me which could be too hurriedly attributed to stereotypical male humour. Hay (1995) shows that men use more performance-oriented humour than women; however, she also notices that men are more likely to use jocular insults in a single sex groups. This is in contrast with the fact that this researcher was female. Attributing too much meaning to gender differences in use of humour may be oversimplification of the complex nature of humour (Johnston *et al.*, 2007). Especially that my use of humour was not stereotypically female-like as I was neither just using a supportive style of humour (Johnston *et al.*, 2007) and not merely acting as a humour respondent (Kotthoff, 2006). In addition, some males who directed humour at me may have simply felt confident to behave freely at their workplace due to their position/ length of service/being older than me[5] and not necessarily gender. It is also difficult to establish how much of humour can be attributed to the sense of power and how much to personality. In addition, the men in this research may have perceived me as an equal in terms of humour competences and performing skills since I was a humour researcher. They may have just wanted to impress or test me with their humour – as a newcomer or perhaps a young female or simply young person. It is possible that the staff members saw me as a "contemporary" and therefore a "fair game" for teasing. At all three settings, participants referred to me as humour lady which is similar to Plester's (2007) experiences of being called fun lady/fairy. Participants clearly wanted to be seen by me as funny:

I: I've got some questions for you, [inaudible] could you tell me about your experiences of humour at this workplace? [pause] Is there any humour at this workplace?

Robert: There is no sense of humour at this workplace.

I: No? Not at all?

Robert: That's the first joke.

(Luke's laughter)

I: Oh, ok (Group interview at Albatros).

That teasing took many forms and possibly was a sign of awareness of what was researched and of me recognising participants' comments as humour. Such humour seems aggressive but builds solidarity amongst those involved in it, and at the same time excludes those who are not taking part in humour (Plester, 2007; Plester and Sayers, 2007). Teasing is an informal initiation device employed by a team to train and test the capacity of its new members to "take a joke" which means sustaining a friendly manner while perhaps not feeling it (Goffman, 1959, p. 138). Although I was not a new member of the team, teasing may have been used to indicate in-group membership and so accepting me. As Dynel (2008, p. 258) put it "aggressive teases are the correlate of acceptance by the group". Participants also knew that my research was important to me and realised I cared about recording their authentic humour. Robert (Albatros) teased me that what I saw in their staffroom was for my benefit and then quickly assured me that it was not fake.

Participants were also very curious and asked many questions about the research and origins of the idea of conducting humour research. They offered their advice on conducting this research or shared their opinions about it. One female in Devon College suggested that I should be in disguise when observing staff in the staffroom. Ed, also from Devon College, suggested that I should link my study results to teachers' satisfaction levels. On the other occasion, Ed spotted a missed joke:

> There was one joke I missed and this was noticed by Ed (Devon College). He pulled the observation sheet I was filling in during structured observations and checked what I ticked. Ed and Dorothy complained about an empty box for "crude" humour. They said that I missed one crude joke. When they re-told the joke to me, I realised that I remembered this conversation but overlooked a sexual innuendo in the joke. The reason for missing the joke was the fact that I either was too busy recording other jokes or I did not expect to hear such a joke among those particular staff members (well-spoken using elegant language and non-sexual and more sophisticated humour). I also did not notice any clues that I associated with the sexual innuendo such as: blushing, shushing, interrupting the joker, criticising the joke or telling the joker off (Unstructured observations, Devon College).

Participants stepped out of character here. They may have wanted to subvert their expected roles in order to become partners and not objects in the research process. It may be though that they were trying to be helpful and assist me in my frontstage. Plester (2007) experienced similar situations: "Some individuals went out of their way to let me know a major incident had occurred that they thought was relevant to the research" (p. 96). After all, I entered into their backstage to observe their backstage behaviour so that they may have felt entitled to enter into my frontstage and comment on my research. How I perceived my frontstage might have been different to how participants perceived my frontstage. I wanted my research to be serious work that is publishable and respected. But for participants, humour research could have signalled some trivial light-hearted activity since it concerned such an unserious subject as humour. The very focus of my research could be the reason why participants felt invited to comment on it.

Sometimes, what I heard from participants sounded more provocative than the above examples as it was expressed in harsher words. For instance, one teacher at Albatros joked about making a paper plane out of my research letter and throwing it to the river watching it disappear. Paul from Lingua on the other hand joked about nobody reading my research in ten years' time. It was all said in jest; however, it did create a hybrid space between us. Participants advising researcher about research or ridiculing her work were acting out of character because it is not in line with mine or general research expectations. I would argue that for the researcher or her research to be questioned by the participants is a challenge to which humour can become the immediate remedy. And so I laughed along when such provocations happened even if they at the same time required protection of the frontstage. For instance, one male teacher, during the observations, questioned my ability to conduct a humour research. He asked whether I was a humour expert and why I thought I could study humour. While asking this question, he made involuntarily some amazing facial expression so I decided to imitate it and it helped to soften the atmosphere and his approach and because the focus of our conversation moved to making funny faces, I deflected answering his question:

> I took a mickey out of the teacher's facial expression and we had a quick funny face competition (Unstructured observations, Albatros).

Being openly questioned as to own abilities and qualifications could be considered harsh and unpleasant experience. However, it perhaps serves to illustrate participant's willingness to comprehend the research process and is a way of rebelling against being a silenced object of the research. As a researcher, I decided in this situation to contrarily

prove my aptness and qualification to conduct humour research by acting playfully. This immature and childish funny face exchange saved the situation and provided a "restart". That restart enabled me to restore the frontstage and to answer the teacher's initial question without feeling judged or behaving defensively. I told the teacher about my educational background, about my master's thesis on staffroom humour and about my knowledge of literature on humour. I felt obliged to inform him as fully as possible about my research competences.

The majority of participants' provocations were interpreted by me as non-threatening and good natured. However, some like an incident with one teacher pretending to speak with his bum to me made me reflect on the humour boundaries. Plester and Sayers (2007) show that familiarity plays an important role in establishing humour boundaries at workplace. The boundaries in their study were governed by individuals' knowledge of each other and this defined how such humour was used with different people (Plester and Sayers, 2007). However, humour boundaries in researcher-participant situation may be vague due to what I would call differently perceived familiarity. It is both difficult to establish humour boundaries between researcher and participants in humour research and to distinguish familiarity from overfamiliarity. The possible explanation may be not sufficient knowledge of each other leading to unclear/unknown humour boundaries.

My friendly and humorous approach to the participants throughout the research and across the settings may have encouraged participants' reflective approach to the research but also encouraged provocative behaviours that in other contexts, outside the participant – researcher roles and among ordinary strangers, could have been more difficult to justify. Participant-researcher roles imply certain power imbalance which is exemplified by the above example. Walford (2001) shows that it may be difficult for a researcher to negotiate a role that is different to what participants' expect of him/her. I could not respond to the participant's behaviour in the way he behaved as that could have jeopardised my front image of a university representative and a professional researcher and could have been seen as letting myself be provoked. The teacher who "spoke with his bum" to me may have acted for me – the humour researcher so that I could have some material to work him. I remember he justified his other physical humour he performed in front of me using exactly those words. In doing so, he was applying frontstage behaviour disguised as backstage behaviour which made the space between us hybrid.

This example illustrates the thin line between familiarity and overfamiliarity in participant-researcher interactions:

> I left the school and headed to the bus stop. In front of co-op shop I bumped into Matt who despite his height got underneath my umbrella. I commented this in the following way:' I am a real gentleman'. 'No you 're not, you're a lady ' –he replied lifting the bottom of my coat as if checking my genital organs! I stayed cold blooded and repeated that I was a gentleman for letting him under my umbrella then he repeated the "check". He asked me what I was doing there and I replied that I was bothering /annoying some teachers. He suggested I should come for a coffee one day. This reminded me of an incident I had with Matt during my observations at Lingua. He asked me whether I would come to examine him when I became a doctor (sexual innuendo). His humour was risky somehow naturally linked to him seeming to be an old self-confident skirt-chaser (Informal interactions, Notes after interview with Tony, Lingua).

Possibly feeling encouraged by my humorous temperament, Matt felt confident to extend his backstage behaviour beyond the staffroom and to target me with sexual innuendos. Although confused and surprised inside, I felt that on the outside I should show recognition of his humorous attempt to cover up my astonishment. In such situations, the issues of unequal distribution of power between the researcher and participant (in this case also the director of the college) crept in not allowing for unprofessional behaviours on the part of the researcher – a guest at the research setting.

My study shows that workplace power relations are not just confined to the employees of a particular setting. In some sense, participants' workplaces became my work places – places where I conducted my work, my research. I observed Matt in the staffroom using sexual innuendos, and this was confirmed by Julia (Lingua) that this is the type of humour he used with his employees. It may have been simply that that was the type of humour he felt confident in, so he used it with me too or that he treated me as any other colleague which would indicate acceptance. According to National Institute of Business Management (1999), the sexual jokes or innuendos are often men's way of initiating new members into a group. It is further advised that responding to it with humour may establish woman's place in the group and move this relationship past the testing stage. However, even if it just a game, such situations may arouse feelings of insecurity and vulnerability in a person targeted with sexual humour. This incident may have challenged my role as a professional researcher if I had not laughed along. Sexual humour can be seen as provocation as I did not expect such humour to be directed at me. Especially that it happened outside of the research setting. The location of this behaviour was the main reason of my astonishment. Matt's out-of-character behaviour in the staffroom where there were others practising their backstage behaviours seemed more justified and safer. I remember when Matt joked in the staffroom about examining him when I become a doctor I did not feel that astonished because I was surrounded by others joking and laughing. Taking this behaviour out and away from the witnesses made me wonder whether Matt was still joking or already flirting. I was not aware whether this was extension of his out-of-character behaviour in the staffroom or a different out-of-character behaviour whose meaning I was not certain of. He also may have expected a different out-of-character researcher's behaviour on my part such as reciprocal flirting. The reason I would not interpret it as sexism or misogyny is that I did not feel offended by it but merely surprised. I agree with Benatar (2014) that the offence (in reaction to humour) is given too much weight and that sometimes we unnecessary attribute moral value to humour. As Benatar (2014) puts it:

> […] in the absence of a justification for the outrage, it is the outrage itself that is doing the work of (purportedly) justifying the claim that humour is wrong. In other words, it is one thing to say that humour is wrong for such and such reasons, and people are outraged because it is the sort or wrong that elicits justified offence. It is another thing to say that the humour is wrong because people are outraged by it (p. 39).

My reaction was consistent with my interpretation just as Matt's behaviour towards me was consistent with his behaviour towards staff. It could also be argued that Matt's behaviour was consistent with humour research expectation. Using Dynel's (2008) words, teasing directed at me existed entirely within the play-frame, in this case, of humour research context. In a sense, "I asked for it" i.e. experiencing the participants' humour by conducting humour research in an overt manner and by joking with participants. Interpreting humour as sexist, aggressive or misogynist means accusing the joker of being intentionally offensive, whereas in case of my research, I could not be completely certain about the intentions behind the humour directed at me and relied foremost on my subjective interpretations of the humour. I believe that even potentially aggressive humour once interpreted as non-aggressive and replied to with laughter, loses its threatening potential.

The problem of humorous sexual harassment at workplace lies in that "because the denigration occurs in a humorous rather than serious mode, it is difficult for targets to complain, since the sources can claim that they were 'only joking'" (Martin, 2007, p. 121). So in my case, I might have not only faced exclusion from the research setting, had I complained, but also turned out to lack sense of humour – an expected part of frontstage for humour researcher. As Benatar (2014) claims, humourlessness on the part of the humour recipient may be taken as offence by the joker. This leads to considering expecting and accepting unexpected interactions between researcher and participants in humour research process.

Plester (2007) talks about risks related to participants' humour targeted at the researcher in the following way:

> Although risk to participants was unproblematic during data collection, there was the threat of risk to the researcher in one of the companies where humour styles were extreme. This potential risk came from the continuous practical jokes in this organisation and I was included as a target for these jokes which were sometimes highly physical. The screws were removed from my chair on one occasion in the hope that I would sit and subsequently fall. As I had recently had knee surgery (a fact known to the jokers) this was potentially physically dangerous. Although I did not require counselling services, I did liaise closely with supervisors during this research phase and became very vigilant while in this company (p. 117).

Plester (2007), regardless of the dangers, continued with her research and so did I as I felt that the role of the researcher required both professional in-character behaviour and self-distance. In many cases, the researcher's priority is to conduct the already set-up research and not to get side-tracked by such incidents. Returning to the frontstage like to a shell protects a researcher and minimises his/her vulnerability. The safety of frontstage lies in it being official and controlled (in case of a researcher, there is always university with its norms and regulations that stands behind the researcher). Although it is humane to get side-tracked, get offended or even confront a provoker, it may be worth thinking what is safer for researcher's and the research progress. It can contribute to compromising the efforts to continue the research at a setting or making it much harder. However, what needs to be taken into consideration are researcher's personal qualities (such as assertiveness, tolerance) and individual boundaries for taking things personally. In my case, it was my personal qualities such as openness for different humour types and ability to take the joke- "joke-proofness" (see Kmita and Mawhinney, 2016) that allowed me to cope with potentially risky humour directed at me. However, researchers who feel insecure, vulnerable in the research setting or offended by participants may wish to reconsider, e.g. the research methods or the sample. For instance, instead of participant observations or individual interviews that require direct contact with the participants, they may use questionnaires, artefacts or diaries. The sample can be reconsidered too, excluding those in whose company the researcher feels insecure. This inevitably leads to changing the research focus, scope and potential results therefore such decisions might be difficult.

Reger (2001) talks about her feelings of loneliness and confusion related to her "failed" research. Disappointed with the advice she finds in methodology books, she decides to reflect on her emotions in writing. Her advice to write reflexively about the emotions in the research project is one possibility of coping with failures and frustrations. I believe that her suggestion that researchers should create research support groups as a way to reflect on the research process with other researchers can provide more reassurance and practical help/coping techniques than sheer self-reflection.

Conclusion
Ethics of the unexpected
The research posed some ethical challenges due to its new acquired focus (participants-researcher humour). Participants were aware that I was noting down their exchanges in staffroom; however, no new consent form was issued for the purpose of recording my humour with participants. It can be justified in a number of ways. First, reporting informal interactions with participants is an integral part of any qualitative research. It serves to contextualise the research, illustrate the research issues such access problems (e.g. Lynch, 2005) or building rapport with participants (e.g. Plester, 2007). Reflexivity has a firm place in qualitative research (Finlay, 2002). Similarly to Finlay (2002), I believe that research is co-constituted being a joint product of the participants, researcher and their relationships.

Informal interactions are often a taken for granted part of the research and do not feature in consent forms or letters to participants. Second, I realised the importance of participant-researcher use of humour at early stage of analysis. I did not plan to focus on participant-researcher humour. My intended focus was participants' use of humour amongst themselves. Third, what participants consented to originally observing staffroom humour was still valid although the meaning of "staffroom humour" expanded as it included my interactions with the participants in the staffroom and beyond it. The anonymity and confidentiality promised in the consent forms was extended to my interactions with participants. As I realised that this particular area of the research might be detrimental to teachers' reputation, I made an effort to eliminate data that could facilitate the identification of particular teachers. Finally, in my research, I recognise the acquired focus of the study providing in-depth reflection and analysis of the gathered examples of my use of humour with participants. Therefore, I did not escape from this part of the research but rather confronted it using autoethnography. This confrontation acted as a "confessional account of methodology" (Finlay, 2002, p. 224) and allowed me to identify and explore different challenges of researching humour as well as reasons underlying those challenges. Reflective analysis can prove difficult as confessing to methodological inadequacies can be uncomfortable (Finlay, 2002). Although admitting to using humour with participants during humour research may position my research as vulnerable, paradoxically reflecting on it can transform the study's weakness/limitation into study's strength. My explicitness about my impact on data collection and analysis is to enhance my research trustworthiness, transparency and accountability (Finlay, 2002). However, I realise that the ambiguity and messiness of the reflexive endeavour leads to researchers being damned if they engage in reflexive practice or not (Finlay, 2002).

Expecting unexpected
Expectations those verbalised and non-verbalised shaped the research but what also influenced both participants' and my behaviours were complexity of the subject studied, i.e. humour. Whenever in-character behaviour was expected and out-of-character behaviour was delivered, there was a chance for certain behaviour being interpreted as provocations. It is important to note the relativity of provocations though. What can be seen as provocation (out-of-character behaviour) by the researcher can be a participants' way of following some expectations and seen as in-character behaviour and vice versa. It could be argued that since humour itself is born out of the unexpected, it should not provoke. Yet it does because there are different expectations of humour too. My study contradicts Raskin (2008) showing that removing researcher's humour from humour research is neither straightforward nor unequivocally desirable. Similarly to Rinke and Mawhinney (2014), I found that disparate expectations of researcher and participants regarding the research contribute to struggle with optimal rapport. Just as Rinke and Mawhinney (2014) call for reconsideration of rapport, my study shows the need for reconsideration of expectations entangled in humour research and proposes to be prepared for unexpected. Expecting unexpected can help stay open minded in the field and in interactions with participants and apply healthy distance towards own research and own expectations. Such flexibility and openness allows for a bird's eye view on own and others expectations regarding the research. Reconsidering expectations should not be confined to researcher's analysis of the data. It should first and foremost entail a joint discussion between participants and the researcher preferably prior to data collection. This paper shows that neither participants' nor researcher's behaviours happen in void. They are interconnected and both shape the research process. As England (1994) argues, researchers need to integrate themselves into the research process. Thus participants' and researcher's behaviours should not be treated as separate research data since all those participants-researcher interactions took place

during the research and not after the research. In addition, those issues deserve to be discussed to reflect particular dilemmas, challenges and requirements qualitative research can pose.

All qualitative studies are entangled with some expectations; however, expectations and provocations in a research process are rarely discussed. Thus further research could investigate and discuss the role of humour in participant-researcher interactions in different research contexts and across different methodologies. Combining and analysing experiences of use of humour from both participants and researchers could allow for creating a scholar response to the guidelines in the use of humour in social work interview created by Kadushin and Kadushin (2013). In addition, future studies could explore further the informal interactions between participants and researcher in terms of ethical challenges such as how to document, analyse and interpret such data. Presentation of different ethical challenges of such interactions should be accompanied by suggestions as to how to protect the researcher, research and participants. Finally, the use of autoethnography for deepening the understanding of such interactions could be further discussed, especially with regard to reflexive analysis as a way to enhance research transparency and trustworthiness. In addition autoethnography can be a useful tool for the researcher to "remedy" or learn from the research that did not go as planned (changed or acquired new focus, was subverted or boycotted by participants, did not manage to implement planned changes, etc.). The benefits and limitations of use of autoethnography in so-called "failed" research could be given some attention by scholars.

Notes

1. The study was conducted in three educational settings: Albatros, Lingua and Devon College.

2. The artefacts I collected were the artefacts that were visible, accessible to me as an outsider or shown to me by participants. What was considered a funny artefact was what I and/or participants found to be funny in terms of non-verbal communication (pictures, postcards, posters). There were no funny artefacts at Lingua, neither in the staffroom nor beyond it so the funny artefacts came from Albatros and Devon College.

3. Teachers laughed about the idea of hiding in the wheely bin and jumping out of it to amuse me.

4. Polish is the author's first language.

5. Majority of participants were older than me (all male participants were older than me).

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